Sexual Orientation, Gender, & Self-Styling: An Exploration of Visual Identity-Signaling

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Sexual Orientation, Gender, & Self-Styling: An Exploration of Visual Identity-Signaling

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Undergraduate Honors College Thesis
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Spring 2021

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**Introduction**

**I. Abstract**

The focus of this investigation is the ways in which people in the West (primarily in the United States) visually signal their sexual orientation and gender identity through various forms of body modification—including tattooing, piercing, and hairstyling—and self-fashioning, e.g., selection of clothing and accessories. The purpose of this thesis is to help people comprehend the possible latent reasoning behind their choices of visual presentation and how even their conscious self-fashioning and body-modifying decisions may be influenced by historical choices of self-presentation. More broadly, this investigation aims to enhance the general (queer and non-queer) population’s understanding of the nuanced ways in which Western society codes sexual orientation and gender identity into the subtleties of people’s body modifications and self-fashioning; I look both at how the observer interprets another’s self-presentation and what the presenter meaningfully intends to communicate through their presentation. Although there is ample information about historical methods of visually signaling sexual orientation and gender identity, I believe that this study will fill the void of scant research on such phenomena in the 21st century. Furthermore, this study is unique in its inclusion of observers’ perceptions of others’ style as well as its mention of nonbinary style, which was not discovered in historical literature in the course of my research, though sources do discuss “genderfuck” and overall gender ambiguity (e.g. in the goth and punk communities). Therefore, the aim of this study is to supplement the current scholarly conversation on visual identity-signaling of one’s sexual orientation and gender identity, and to do so in language that is accessible beyond the academic realm for the purpose of the enrichment of a broad community.

**II. Argument**

**I. Part I: Reflections on Understandings of Identity & Self-Presentation**

This first part of the thesis will set the foundation for thinking about self-presentation.

i. **Chapter 1: Gender and Sexual Orientation Fluidity & Subcultural Association:**

This chapter will explore how or if people label their sexual orientations and gender identities, how tied they feel to those labels, whether they believe those identities are fixed or open to change, and how connected they feel to the communities that share those identities. It will also discuss whether respondents see a queer-non-queer divide in self-fashioning, what factors may have influenced the answers they provided when asked about their stylistic associations with certain identities, as well as theories about queer presentation in general.

ii. **Chapter 2: The Privilege to Present as You Wish**
Following, this discussion will focus on who has the option to present themselves authentically, regarding who can break social norms without facing serious consequences (such as bodily harm), if any at all, from their family and greater society.

II. Part II: Survey Results, Interviewee Testimony, and Identity Analysis

The rest of this thesis will focus on data gathered from surveys and interviews, as well as observations I have collected over the years (ethnographic data), including some of my own experiences and opinions (autoethnographic data) as a queer person, when relevant. Scholarly sources will contextualize this primary data within the history of identity-signaling at the intersections of sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as provide some sociological theories. Becoming familiar with historical styling practices can offer insight into the motivations of modern styling practices as an old signal might have morphed (e.g. been coopted by one group and then another) – or not – and still have current use today, or may have somehow influenced self-fashioning of today one way or another. Social media and popular media will then complement the primary data by offering further cultural insights.

Though this study draws subjects from University of Vermont (UVM) students and faculty, the other sources of information mentioned will tie these local phenomena to broader cultural practices across the West, comparing the findings across space and time.

The order of these chapters is intentional, as the information gathered from one builds on the next. For instance, studying cisgender (cis), heterosexual (het) men first, the population that seems to have the least stylistic leeway, can serve as a baseline definition of what aesthetic elements are not queer and/or feminine. These are important cultural definitions, as they clarify what proportions of masculine versus feminine stylistic elements the rest of the identity groups utilize, and how a person’s identity is perceived as they move farther away from this mold, or as they adhere to it, but as a woman or nonbinary person instead. Hence, moving on to learn about gay men can then offer insight into what presentation of a nonnormative male sexuality can look like. Subsequently examining cis, het women after having learned about cis, het men demonstrates how the two genders vary when they both have normative sexual orientations. Analyzing lesbian presentation next can illuminate how women with a nonnormative sexual orientation present. Continuing to bi women can then illustrate how a woman who is neither straight nor gay presents, and enmeshing bi men and bi nonbinary people in that chapter as well can compare how different genders who share the same sexual orientation self-style. At this point, bi men can then be compared to both cis, het and gay men to see where their intermediate identity fits in regarding the scheme of self-fashioning. Asexual (ace) and aromantic (aro) people can then be analyzed using the knowledge gathered on identity-signaling from the previous groups to see whether and/or how members of a group defined by a lack of sexual and/or romantic interest present themselves. Additionally, within each chapter, nonbinary people can be contrasted with those of different genders who share their sexual orientation to see how their queer gender identity affects their self-presentation. Transgender (trans) men are then mentioned in the chapter with cis, het men to see if their gender queerness affects the presentation of their normative sexual orientation. Trans women are not compared to cis, het women as all the rest of the trans people identified as bisexual/romantic.
i. Chapter 3: Straight, Cisgender Men

This chapter will analyze the self-styling practices of cis, het men, with a significant portion devoted to the comparison between them and the self-fashioning practices of gay men, explaining how the two groups are seemingly defined in opposition to each other.

ii. Chapter 4: Gay Men

This chapter focuses principally on gay male presentation across time, though referring back to the previous chapter to see how closely gay men style themselves in comparison to cis, het men.

iii. Chapter 5: Straight, Cisgender Women; Lesbians; & Femme Nonbinary Gynephiles

I have opted to combine these identities into the space of a chapter as women have more freedom of expression and style exploration than cis, het men; there is not a hard line between straight and queer dress for women. Additionally, having these identities in conversation is important to study women’s dress (and that of female-presenting people in general) under the frame of the male gaze: whether their desire to appeal to it, reject it, or ignore it influences their style.

iv. Chapter 6: Bi Men, Women, & Nonbinary People

These identities are grouped into one chapter to allow for the observation of bisexual expression across genders. Additionally, bi men will be compared to gay and cis, het men and bi women to lesbian and cis, het women, with bi nonbinary people being contrasted with bi men and women to see how their queer gender identity influences their self-presentation.

v. Chapter 7: Ace & Aro Women and Nonbinary People

Here, the information collected about identity-signaling for other sexual and romantic orientations, will be compared to these groups who identify as experiencing an absence of sexual and/or romantic attraction, and there will also be an investigation as to why and/or how these people will signal their identity, and to whom.

Throughout this thesis, I include tables and raw data to give the reader the full picture while I choose to draw on stylistic elements that I believe are most relevant based on my complementary research, what interviewees have told me, and which indicators have garnered the support. That is not to say that the rest of the data are not novel or meaningful in some way. The given timeline of this project limited the scope of the investigation, so by providing the reader with as much data as can reasonably fit into each chapter, it allows room for them to make some of their own conclusions and benefit more fully from the data, beyond what there was time to address. Further, offering a visualization of the information caters to those who process information more easily from looking at things rather than reading about them.
Additionally, as I take an ethnographic approach by drawing on respondent and interviewee testimony, I give voice to these study participants to more accurately and authentically represent their stories and viewpoints rather than to narrate everything, and potentially lose some of the value of their words in paraphrasing them.

**Methodology & Description**

**Language Disclaimer**

**Use of “Queer”**

In this thesis, I refer to members of the LGBT+ community – those with sexual orientations and gender identities that differ from our heteronormative (promoting heterosexuality as normal and preferred) and predominantly cisgender (identifying with the gender one was assigned at birth) society – as “queer.” Though this word was historically used as a slur (and is still occasionally used as such), it has since been reclaimed by the LGBT+ community. I find “queer” is a quicker and easier way to describe the community in place of saying LGBT, LGBT+, LGBTQ+, LGBTQQIP2SAA, LGBTQQIAAP, or any of the other [irrationally, in my opinion] long acronyms. I am not alone in using this moniker, as many of my friends and peers use it, as well as ample survey respondents: 38 percent of respondents with identities in the LGBT+ community use the label “queer.”

As you will see, many respondents similarly use “gay” as a catch-all term for members of the queer community, not just in reference to gay men.

**Biromantic/sexual vs. Panromantic/sexual**

In my survey questions and in this thesis, I refer to biromantic/sexual (“bi”) and panromantic/sexual (“pan”) identities interchangeably. Those who identify as pan often emphasize that they are different from bi people as they are attracted to all genders, not just the binary genders of male and female. However, bi people are not necessarily exclusively attracted to those two genders, as the “bi” label has also been used to describe the binary attraction to both one’s own gender and other genders. Additionally, if a bi person were to claim that they are only attracted to men and women, they likely mean people who look like men and women. This distinction is important to note as not all nonbinary people look androgynous; some who were assigned female at birth are female-presenting (look female) and some people who were assigned male at birth are male-presenting (look male). Thus, even if a bi person were to claim attraction to only two genders (male and female), the true nature of their attraction likely conflicts with that notion. I would also argue that if you are attracted to both masculine and feminine traits that you will be attracted to someone who embodies both (androgynous people). What could possibly be holding some bi people back from admitting such attraction is internalized homophobia: homophobic societal messages that have been subconsciously absorbed. Such messages usually associate female masculinity with lesbianism and male femininity with gayness and condemn both. Hence, these messages may be responsible for bi individuals disliking masculine female-presenting people and feminine male-presenting ones (though again, such individuals may have either binary or nonbinary identities).
Sexual Orientation / Sexuality

I use these terms as catch-alls for both romantic and sexual attraction.

Other Important Terms

- **Gender** – a personal identification as either male, female, nonbinary/agender, or other genders; ideas of gender are socially constructed – and so can change; vary cross-culturally; and relate to characteristics, roles, and norms associated with men and women
- **Sex** – a term given (male or female) to describe a person given their genitalia (and usually chromosomes)
- **“The Opposite Sex”** – a common phrase that erroneously uses the term “sex” instead of “gender,” referring to the other gender in the gender binary (e.g. “male” is “opposite” to “female”)
- **Same-sex** – a common phrase that erroneously uses the term “sex” instead of “gender”; thus, describing a phenomenon involving two people of the same gender (e.g. same-sex marriage)
- **Gender assigned at birth** – the gender assumed of a baby given its male genitalia
- **Cisgender (cis)** – identifying with the gender one was assigned a birth
- **Transgender (trans)** – identifying with a different gender from the one assigned a birth (e.g. a transgender man was assigned female at birth and is transitioning to present as a man)
- **Male-presenting** – appearing to be male, regardless of gender assigned at birth or sex
- **Female-presenting** – appearing to be female, regardless of gender assigned at birth or sex
- **Male-identifying** – identifying as male, regardless of gender assigned at birth or sex
- **Female-identifying** – identifying as female, regardless of gender assigned at birth or sex
- **Heteronormativity** – the societal assumption and promotion of the idea that everyone is straight (heterosexual/romantic)
- **Nonbinary/Agender** – a gender identity that is not included in the male/female binary, a third gender
- **Bi/Pan** – sexual and/or romantic attraction to both one’s own gender and other genders
- **Gay** – sexual and/or romantic attraction to one’s own gender
- **Asexual (ace)** – a lack of sexual attraction, though a person who is asexual can still feel sensual (tactile) attraction (e.g. wanting to kiss or cuddle) or aesthetic attraction (e.g. thinking someone is beautiful or “hot”)
- **Aromantic (aro)** – a lack of romantic attraction
- **MLM** – men-loving-men culture (bi and gay men)
- **WLW** – women-loving-women culture (bi women and lesbians)
- **Gynephile** – a person who loves women
- **Femme** – feminine
- **Butch** – (n.) a lesbian with a traditionally masculine presentation; (adj.) masculine
- **Fem** – a lesbian who presents as traditionally feminine
- **Study participants** – interviewees and survey respondents
Investigative Outline

In this investigation, I conducted research in various ways, collecting primary ethnographic (cultural) data from media representations, material from online communities, a survey, and personal interviews and additionally explored secondary, scholarly sources – in the fields of history, anthropology, and sociology – to situate my findings within a historical context of self-fashioning and body modification trends among varying gender identities and sexual orientations. Specifically, I have delved into multiple online queer message boards, popular media, and social media to see what today’s queer community members are saying about queer fashion and body modification. Similarly, I draw on autoethnographic data – my personal experience and observations – throughout. Prior to distributing the survey and soliciting interviewees, I sought and was granted approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). This thesis does not privilege and prioritize the primary data gathered through the survey and interviews, but instead supplements them with secondary sources and other primary data (e.g. social media posts, popular media articles); all of these sources are in conversation with each other in this investigation – historic cases that could be influencing modern phenomena, trends across the country and internet, and how they relate to what UVM affiliates said in 2020.

The proliferation of social media platforms has allowed members of the queer community to connect like never before – to make political statements about their rights and treatment in society and to laugh with peers about shared experience. At least in the West, queer identities are also becoming less stigmatized, so individuals are more vociferous about their identities online; they are loud and proud.

Another avenue through which I attained ethnographic data was via creating a survey on self-styling and body modifications using the platform REDCap, which I sent to the UVM community (soliciting responses from both students and faculty). The survey collected some demographic information/background questions (e.g., age, origin, race, political affiliation, affiliation to UVM); asked about the participants’ sexual orientation and gender identity; whether or not they are “out of the closet” (if queer); how connected they feel to the queer community (if queer); their family’s acceptance of their identities (e.g. sexual orientation, gender presentation); their sense of belonging due to their body modifications and self-presentation among peers, in their community of origin, in the city where they attend school or work, and in the queer community (if applicable); if they have any tattoos, piercings, and/or have dyed their hair an unnaturally-occurring color or have gotten a unique haircut (e.g. an undercut); what their everyday choices of clothing and accessories are; what their intentions behind their self-fashioning and body modification are; and what self-fashioning and body modification they may perceive as signaling queer identity in others. The survey was thorough, comprising 139 questions – though some questions appeared due to branching logic, meaning that they appeared based on a respondent’s prior answers. Hence, not all respondents were presented with all of the questions. The survey took approximately 30 minutes to complete, possibly longer if respondents answered particularly thoughtfully. Before beginning, respondents were required to read an attached consent form and check a box affirming that they reviewed it and consented to their survey responses being used in this investigation. Since all survey responses were anonymous, respondents could not request to have their survey responses removed from the study after submitting their answers, but could decide to not submit their answers in order to opt out of participation in the study. Data retrieved from the survey offered the opportunity to analyze
possible trends among queer individuals’ self-presentation as well as insight into cisgender, heterosexual self-presentation.

I sent the survey out in late September and it was open for slightly over a month. I advertised it via IRB-approved flyers which I posted across campus – in buildings frequented by UVM affiliates of varying disciplines (e.g. the library, student center, and two dorms) as well as in social sciences, natural sciences, and art buildings; and the business school. I also sent the survey link to every UVM department – in some cases, to several professors within a department, but some did not agree to distribute the link for me or did not respond at all – including to follow-up emails. Additionally, I requested that identity centers (e.g. the Prism Center – a queer space, the Mosaic Center – for people of color) and student groups (e.g. the Queer Student Union) send my flyers to their mailing lists.

As of the fall of 2019, UVM has 10,700 undergraduate and 1,627 graduate students and 1,692 faculty members – a total population of 14,019 (The University of Vermont 2019). In order to be 95 percent confident that my results were representative of the rest of the UVM population (students and faculty) with a confidence interval of +/- 4.0 (that the percentage of respondents who answer a certain way will be indicative of the percentage of the whole population who would answer that way, plus or minus four percent points), I would have needed 576 respondents. Ultimately, only 403 UVM affiliates began the survey and of those, 205 completed it. To respect respondents’ decisions to not submit their data, I was limited to reviewing and using data from the 205 responses and deleted the other 198 records. Conversely, with my given sample size, I can now be 95 percent confident that respondents’ answers are within 6.8 percentage points of those of the population. Nevertheless, it must be noted that my sample sizes for some of the gender identity and sexual orientation groups are less than ideal. For instance, I had two men questioning their sexual orientation, eight women who were questioning, nine gay men, 13 bi nonbinary people, 13 ace & aro women, five ace & aro nonbinary people, and 16 bi men. The greater-sized groups – but which were still likely not of a statistically significant size – were that of non-queer men (n=22), non-queer women (n=24), lesbians & femme nonbinary gynephiles (n=20). The best-represented demographic was bi women, comprising 78 respondents. However, looking at the non-queer and queer groups on the whole – without subcultural divisions – can potentially provide more significant findings; there are 46 non-queer individuals and 149 queer people. Notably, there are many respondents who have romantic attractions that are different from their sexual attractions – either differing by the gender of the person of interest, or a person may be romantically attracted to others, but asexual, or aromantic and experience sexual attraction. Hence, someone who is counted under the group “Bi Women” may also be counted under the group “Ace & Aro Women” – they could be both biromantic and asexual.

Throughout the first two chapters, I pair percentages with “(n=a/b).” This indicates the number (“n”) of respondents in question (“a”) and which population (“b”) they are being drawn from. As the first two chapters engage in comparisons across various groups, it is crucial to make it extremely clear which groups I am referring to. This practice does not continue past those chapters as each chapter is focused on just a few identities which are only compared to other identities in certain sections of the chapter.

Due to the great breadth of data I collected and my limited timeline, I was unable to analyze and engage with all of it. Hence, I review only the top six descriptors for clothing and body modifications and the top five accessories. However, I include all the descriptors/items that
at least 50% of respondents use. Some stylistic elements that are used by less than 50% of a group will be listed if the group is small (e.g. gay men, with only nine in the group).

One potential flaw in the study design was that I mistakenly asked respondents about their perceptions of male- and female-“identifying” people of differing sexualities, not of male- and female-“presenting” people, which could seem to exclude nonbinary people. Yet, it could be argued that people may be able to guess if a person is nonbinary based on their appearance, but not be able to determine the intersection of nonbinary identity with a certain sexual orientation. However, it is possible that respondent answers would look the same even with this distinction, as a person who looks male, but who does not identify that way, may try to demonstrate their queer sexual orientation in the way that a male-identifying person would.

On flyers and in email announcements (for faculty and student organizations to distribute), I advertised that five respondents would be randomly drawn to win a $25 Amazon gift card to incentivize more people to take the survey and made a point of clearly noting that cisgender and straight students and faculty were also invited to take the survey and be interviewed. I would have left the survey open for longer and requested that faculty send out reminder announcements to their classes in order to get closer to my goal of 576 respondents, but as I was on a limited timeline, I had to close the survey to begin analyzing the data.

It is important to note that, by incentivizing UVM affiliates to take my survey with an Amazon gift card lottery, I may have indirectly invited some people to whiz through my survey, giving made-up and/or meaningless answers for the sole purpose of completing the survey as fast as possible to then become eligible for the gift card drawing. Nevertheless, in reviewing the free-form responses to my survey, there is a nominal amount of survey records that seem rushed or unthoughtful.

Additionally, though I did my best to get the survey out to various segments and disciplines of the UVM community, I suspect that my survey results may be affected by nonresponse bias – those who decided to answer it may be fundamentally different from those who elected not to. It is possible that queer UVM affiliates and those with queer friends, connections, and associations to the queer community may have been more likely to be interested in, and thus, respond to the survey. People who often ponder gender and sexuality may find such a survey easier and more enjoyable to answer versus those who haven’t, and thus, opt to take it.

I also conducted nine interviews with individuals of varying sexual orientations, gender identities, and affiliations to UVM (undergraduate and graduate students and faculty) between October 12 and November 11 of 2020. The purpose of these interviews was to collect more data than was possible in a survey. I asked subjects to fill out the survey and then bring five to ten questions from the survey that they wanted to elaborate on (all brought five or less) so they could provide thorough responses that would otherwise be too long to write into a free-form box in the survey. I then asked my own questions, collecting demographic information (e.g. gender identity, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, personal and family political orientation, state of origin) and inquiring about their different body modifications and self-fashioning, their intentions behind their self-presentation, and when they “came out” as queer (if applicable). Overall, I asked many of the questions from the survey to paint a picture of how their body modifications and self-fashioning correspond or don’t correspond with their gender identity and sexual orientation, whether or not these changed after they came out (if applicable), and what perceived connections they may see between others’ gender identities and sexual orientations and self-fashioning.
The interviews provide something of a case study. Rather than gathering separate data points for each research question and then only seeing statistical descriptions of the aggregate (e.g. percent of respondents with traditional family-taught gender roles, percent of respondents with piercings), observing individuals provides a holistic view of the different factors that influence a person’s self-fashioning and body-modifications. I then compared subject testimony to findings from scholarly writing, popular media, and social media. All subjects bear pseudonyms and I have only included as many details in my thesis as the subjects are comfortable with, limiting the information so as not to indirectly identify an individual.

I advertised my need for interviews on the same flyers I distributed to promote my survey as well as on the first page of the survey. Though I initially requested an hour to an hour-and-a-half of interviewees’ time, interviews ranged from an hour to approximately three hours, exceeding the originally agreed time if the interviewee was interested and able. We met over Microsoft Teams – many interviewees were outside Vermont taking classes online and others may have been uncomfortable with meeting in-person (one had their camera off as we spoke).

Interested individuals reached out to me via email and I responded within a day, sending them the consent form; a brief summary of confidentiality, data usage, and the ability to pull out of the study; as well as a description of the interview format. We then organized a day and time to meet. I sent subjects the demographic questions leading up to the interview and gave them the option of answering them on their own and sending them to me over Microsoft Teams (in which case I deleted them from the platform after downloading them) or of verbally answering the questions during our meeting. On my end of the virtual interview, I was either (a) in a house by myself listening to subjects from my computer’s speakers or (b) in a house with someone else several rooms away while I listened from my computer’s speakers with the door crack sealed and a white noise machine outside my door. Shortly after connecting with the subject on Microsoft Teams, I started the recording on my phone voice recorder application and asked the interviewee to state (if true), “After having read the full informed consent sheet, I consent to be interviewed and recorded.” As all subjects [to my knowledge] truthfully repeated the oath, I continued recording the rest of the interview. At the end of the interview, I asked the subject if they had any questions for me and if there were any details they wanted left out of the thesis. I also offered to send them the transcript of the interview that I completed over the course of our meeting to allow them to carefully peruse it and highlight details they wanted left out.

I then supplemented data collection from the survey and interviews with a wealth of information about queer culture available on social media, forums, and other online platforms. Additionally, celebrities – those with significant privilege – can more freely discuss their queer identities, so referring to popular media was also helpful.

Furthermore, I drew on my observations of anonymized queer subjects from the community as well as my own personal narrative. I included details of testimonies from queer acquaintances about how they choose to present themselves to society via body modifications and self-fashioning and what I have passively noticed regarding others’ self-styling. I also necessarily incorporated my own perspective on self-fashioning and body modification – what they mean to me, how I use them to present myself to others, and my own preconceptions about their relation to gender and sexual orientation. Doing so was essential in order to acknowledge my positionality in the queer community and the fact that my own interpretations of these phenomena may unintentionally influence the conclusions I reach in my research (as much as I attempt to prevent them from doing so). Thus, I offer my perspective and experience throughout this thesis.
As I am majoring in Anthropology with a minor in Gender, Sexuality, & Women’s Studies (GSWS), my theoretical background prepared me to pursue the ethnographic data collection necessary for my thesis. My Anthropology major has taught me how important it is for the researcher to acknowledge their positionality and how this may affect their research approach (e.g. research questions). I am also aware of the ethics of finding a cultural informant – they must be willing to share their interpretation of the culture with me. It is similarly imperative that I respect the culture with which I am interacting – though I am a member of it, I don’t necessarily fully relate to it. My GSWS minor has likewise instilled relevant notions about the queer community in me, such as how it has been portrayed in the media over time, which provides a valuable background in understanding a possible source of respondents’ perceptions of different demographics’ modes of self-presentation. Moreover, I have learned about queer authors from the 1900s and how they navigated their identities through self-presentation/dress, some of whom I invoked in this thesis. Having knowledge of anthropological and queer theory from my major and minor provided me essential prior knowledge that ensured I was not “going in blind” to my investigation.

I believe that my multi-pronged approach for collecting primary research, in conjunction with prior knowledge from my majors, as well as the consultation of scholarly sources in the fields of anthropology, sociology, and history assisted me in attaining thorough answers to my research questions that are reasonably representative of the queer community on the whole as well as of non-queer demographics.

III. Positionality

At the top of this thesis, I must introduce myself to paint a picture of my identity and preconceptions of self-fashioning, body modification, gender identity, and sexual orientation. As an anthropologist, I recognize that, try as I might, my views, beliefs, and experiences have shaped the way I have conducted my research (e.g. what questions I’ve asked), how I’ve interpreted and analyzed the data, and the conclusions I’ve reached. We are human beings, and thus, nothing we do or think is truly objective. To be sure, it is not solely social sciences that are influenced by subjectivity, but the natural sciences, for instance, are neither immune, as researcher biases and opinions influence research questions asked and the structure of experiments (e.g. racist scientists asserted races were biologically distinct and that some were more evolved than others, sexism may be preventing researchers from studying the effects of various medications on women). Thus, below, I have provided – perhaps more than enough – information about myself so you can imagine how the data may otherwise be interpreted and how my investigation may have otherwise been arranged if not for my subjectivity.

Background Information

I am a senior at the University of Vermont and a life-long resident of the hyper-progressive Greater Burlington area. My parents are Democrats – as are all of the extended family that we see – and I would call myself progressive. I am a bi (meaning I am attracted to my own and other genders), transgender, punk rock, artsy, white (of European descent) man. I started my transition to appear outwardly as a man to align with the way I feel inside by using a different name in November of 2019 at the age of 21 (and legally changing my name the following October). Hence, I have lived much of my life as a woman (writing this at the age of 22), wearing as much jewelry as I please and occasionally a traditionally feminine article of clothing (e.g. dress, skirt,
peasant top). I grew up on punk rock and emo, relating especially heavily to the latter culture – many of my idols over the years hailing from that realm.

My exposure to the queer community has been minimal. My family has been friends with a gay couple for over 30 years, there was a lesbian couple in our neighborhood when I was growing up, and I knew queer people in high school – though there were many more in the closet, I am now finding out. I did not become truly acquainted with a large queer community until my sophomore year of college (fall of 2018) when I came out as bi – finally coming to terms with the identity after 10 years of trying to figure myself out and dealing with internalized homophobia.

Overall, I would say that being bi and trans are not important parts of my identity. I would rather people not know I’m trans – once I start passing; I just want to be a regular guy, though I’m happy to have the knowledge I do about the female experience to try to make life better for women. As for being bi, I identify more with the punk rock scene that the sexual identity seems embedded in (to me, as I will explain later) and the openness and healthier sense of masculinity that being queer seemingly engenders (e.g. in showing affection to other guys, wearing some more traditionally feminine clothing, makeup, and brighter colors and patterns). I have gone to drag shows and haven’t enjoy them – I feel that they exoticize fun outfits that people should be able to wear on the street on an everyday basis, regardless of gender; I went to a gay bar once and didn’t enjoy it; I dislike sweeping assumptions made about bi people in memes (e.g. about what food they like, what hand signals they do); and when I was in elementary school, I asked to leave a Pride parade because it was so colorful and loud with various costumes that it was sensory overload for me (though that might prove a different story today). Hence, I am not involved in the queer community.

**My Fashion Sense**

I have always loved fashion. For many years, starting in elementary school, I absolutely LOVED the show *What Not to Wear* – for which I nominated my mom (which I now repent); in third grade, I sewed deerskin dresses for some classmates’ history project; I designed a dress for my cousin in elementary school; throughout middle school, I had the Style Studio: Fashion Designer app on my iPod, with which you could design fabric and make clothes; I took a fashion design class my first year of high school which comprised designing and sewing all kinds of clothes (e.g. a dress made of trash and a Goodwill “bricolage” dress). Yet, I believe that my latest revival of that passion has not occurred randomly, but that it has much to do with the unveiling and self-acceptance of my queer identities.
Oddly, seemingly beyond my control, after I came out as bi, I became absolutely **enamored** with sparkly, shiny, flashy, “out-there” things. I had bought and enjoyed sparkly things before (e.g. a beaded and sequined dress I wore to my high school graduation, resin jewelry filled with cellophane, a beaded and sequined top from a thrift store), but after coming out, a near **obsession** developed and I started feverishly collecting these items – a trend which has not yet ceased. I pulled long-forgotten sequin scarves out of my closet and reversed a coat of mine so its shiny, pink inner layer shown on the outside. I started wearing sequin headbands in January of 2019, and in March of 2019, bought a black sweater with embroidered bead embellishments at a thrift store. My back-to-school shopping trip in June of 2019 comprised a metallic, bronze shirt with a funky collar; a white, woven coat filled with cellophane, a beaded and sequined top from a thrift store, and a brown, military-style jacket. During this trip, I remember thinking excitedly that I felt authentically me and that these purchases were an act of self-love and self-acceptance by letting myself be my sparkly, crazy, fancy, eclectic self.

Then, on a shopping trip in February of 2020, a few months after I’d come out as trans, I bought a red velvet cardigan; black velvet pants; a long, shiny blue coat; and a green and shiny gold top. I felt like this trip was similarly a mission of authenticity. Yet, up to this point, I’d been trying to wear primarily masculine clothing (what that meant to me was muted colors, button-down shirts, minimalist patterns, solid colors, lots of long-sleeved sweaters with argyle patterns, and leather shoes) so that I wouldn’t be misgendered. However, I began to think about the influential, nonbinary fashionista, Alok Vaid-Menon (who a friend had shown me a few months after I’d started using a different name), and I reconsidered. They wear loud, artsy clothing of any kind, including dresses, skirts, heels, and jewelry, though they are male-presenting (assigned male at birth) and dressing as such poses the risk of hurtful comments, general discrimination in everyday life, and bodily harm. I then felt with conviction that I should live my life and wear whatever clothes I want, realizing: Society genders clothes; they’re not inherently gendered.

I came to understand that fashion is political (again, with help from Alok) and started pairing “masculine” button-downs with “flamboyant”/more traditionally feminine items, like my red velvet cardigan. I did the same in styling displays inside the retail store where I work. I began to feel compelled to not only express myself freely, but to simultaneously challenge toxic masculinity – though I was not passing as a man. I felt – and still feel – the need “be ahead of the curve” on the societal change in fashion, just as Harry Styles, Alok, Jonathan Van Ness, and many others are (some of whom will be discussed later), in normalizing
traditionally feminine clothing for men, just as suits, pants, and traditionally masculine clothing became commonplace for women.

I have been striving (since the spring of 2020) to be more comfortable with wearing whatever I want and wearing it out in public (e.g. around my neighborhood, on the bike path on the side of the road). In reflection, my motivation has been somewhat subconsciously based off the notion that *the more I become comfortable with presenting my crazy style, the more I’ll be comfortable with my trans identity and being a “freak” regarding heteronormative, cisgender standards. I am visually signaling that I am not normative*. If people perceive me as a woman, I look somewhat butch, and thus, am perceived to be a lesbian. If people perceive me as a man, my clothes are bright colors with poppy patterns, some are flowy and somewhat feminine, and I wear funky necklaces, bracelets, rings, and earrings with them, so I’d be perceived as a gay or bi guy (which is EXACTLY what I’m going for). I started out only somewhat comfortable wearing fancy clothes to special events, like for dancing at bars or New Year’s Eve events. However, with time, I have incorporated such flair into my daily wardrobe, even if the only people who get to see the outfit work at CVS (my activities have been less exciting during this pandemic). As I have grown more confident dressing as I please, my inner artist began spouting a mantra I later found out that I shared with Oscar Wilde: “One should either be a work of art or wear a work of art” (Steele 2013: 20).

I not only bought fantastical, flashy clothes, but also those that I thought subscribed well to queer male norms. In April or May of 2020, I bought some preppy-/yacht-looking clothes to match the look of Province Town, Massachusetts – a gay capitol of the US where some family friends live, in order to prepare for my “debut” there as a queer man (of course, I did not take myself too seriously and had a good laugh as I thought this through). For instance, I acquired some Calvin Klein navy shorts, a salmon American Eagle shirt with projectile arrows on it (pictured at left); tropical-patterned, swim-trunk-like shorts; and a shirt that was a patchwork of faded light blue, grey, and salmon.

Occasionally, I want to look more toned-down and butch. I learned my sense of masculinity from the alternative/punk rock scene (listening mostly to punk rock/emo music, but also rock, and classic rock), and this can sometimes show through my clothes. I have quite a bit of darker clothing, some black shirts (one of my favorite shirts is black), form-fitting black and dark pants, wear necklaces more often than not, and sometimes wear pink eyeshadow or eyeliner. This sense of styling is similar to that of my punk idols. Billie Joe Armstrong, the singer of Green Day – the first band I loved, has worn eyeliner or pinkish/brownish red eyeshadow; Gerard Way, the singer of the second band I ever loved (and still do), My
Chemical Romance, has worn eyeliner, pinkish/brownish red eyeshadow, and a powdered white face (to look dead). Both have worn tight, black pants with a black button-down shirt and a red tie, as well as Jack White (of the White Stripes), another idol of mine. Many other punks, such as members of the Kooks (a punk-inspired indie rock band) also don necklaces and other jewelry (such as their singer Luke Pritchard).

I have connected intensely with Gerard Way for potentially over 10 years, admiring his shoulder-length, black hair, eyeliner, and eyeshadow, but most intrigued by his androgyny (as is typical of punk culture). Essentially, I realized nearly a year after coming out as trans, he was the bridge that brought me over to masculinity. He’s a somewhat feminine man – though punk tough, making it easier for me to become a man – a man like him. Yet, what’s rather fascinating and ironic is that – I found out in 2020 – he was androgynous because he actually felt more female than male, almost a little trans! In 2015, he said that he experienced “gender identity issues” for quite some time, and that he “always identified a fair amount with the female gender,” using his “look and performance style” to express those sentiments (Kim 2020).

Therefore, his queer identity and its corresponding presentation helped me find my own.

Body Modifications

-**July of 2019 – Hair:** I dyed my hair brown since I’d wanted to do that since middle school; I always felt more like a brunette than a blonde (my hair was blonde all my life, though light brown by high school). This was long after I’d come out as bi (September of 2018). I may have just felt enough like an adult to make – what felt like – a major decision like that.

-**Tattooing as self-care/self-love:** I drew on myself frequently in the spring of 2019 when I was suicidal. My motivation was not intentional and conscious, but I believe I might have done this because it distracted me from bad thoughts; I drew things I thought were pretty (like stars and sparkles)—I was appreciating beauty in life. Making something pretty on my skin put me in the moment and was like a demonstration of appreciation for my skin and body. I also put temporary tattoos over my wrists during a time of peak suicidality in spring of 2020 when I was suffering from a debilitating amount of transition-related stress: I intentionally put something artistic and pretty on my skin to dissuade me from defacing it through self-harm.

-**January 1, 2020 – Piercing:** I started the New Year by getting a lip ring. The piercing came not from wanting to distinguish myself, but because I had wanted it for nine years or so to signal affiliation to punk culture, to feel like a part of it, and to show that I’m not listening to “rainbows and kittens” despite my cheerful personality. I think my mindset at the time was that coming out as trans – changing your name, pronouns, clothing, and eventually your body medically – is a major, crazy change that everyone will notice and learn about one way or another. Thus, *what’s the big deal in getting a lip piercing? I’ll already be weird by being trans. Why not take another step in being who I want?*

    Dyeing my hair and getting the piercing came from starting to accept myself and feeling more comfortable moving forward with becoming who I’ve wanted to be for years. As I’d come to understand, accept, and become [slightly] more open with my sexuality, and then became more accepting—and out—with my trans identity, it was easier for me to get the piercing. The hair dye was an easier decision to make with fewer social risks, because it doesn’t necessarily signal that something is different (it wasn’t an unnatural color).
March of 2020 - **Hair**: I looked up “gay guy hairstyles” (not without a sense of humor) and found one style with an undercut that was kind of emo/punk looking with side-swept bangs hanging a little in the face. I intentionally decided to change my hair because I wanted to signal to people that I *am* in fact a guy (and a queer one at that), which they had not understood. Though I had shoulder-length hair to embody the punk/emo gods I’ve worshipped (Gerard Way and Jack White) and other musicians (e.g. BØRNS, James Bay, Harry Styles), I was – despite my best efforts – female-presenting, so no one made that connection (as a friend clarified for me when I explained my intentions). Cutting my hair this short was not only a huge victory for me in affirming my gender, but also in exerting agency in the styling of my body since I wasn’t allowed to cut my hair to shoulder-length until freshman year of high school and to this length until this point.

As I continued to wear mixes of traditionally masculine and feminine clothing, I began to get weird looks from others; my hair seemed to be saying one gender while my clothes were saying another. I felt a bit like a gender freak.

June of 2020 – **Hair**: I dyed my hair black to align with emo/punk culture. This may have also been because it revealed my mental state at the time – I was coming off a long, hard struggle with depression and suicidality, which emos know all too well. I also felt like *screw what my parents think* since we’d gone through a rough patch (true rebellious behavior).

December of 2020 – **Hair**: I bleached and dyed my hair deep burgundy for fun as a last hurrah before college is over and I have to join the professional world. This move was extremely easy, facilitated by the other things I had changed about my appearance, and was especially made possible by the increasingly colorful, loud, and eccentric outfits I’ve been wearing out in public.

January of 2021 – **Piercing**: I moved forward with my punk mission; I acquired an eyebrow piercing. This was also intended to make me look more masculine. Additionally, as silly as this may sound, since my lip ring has been under my mask during the pandemic, I partially wanted an eyebrow piercing since it would be visible, so I could regain some edginess under the given circumstances. As people reclaim land from the sea, I intended to reclaim edginess from my mask.

February of 2021 – **Piercing**: I got a second ear piercing on my right ear for the sake of artistic value.

Overall, I think that coming out as trans – something so loud and obvious (e.g. using “he/him” pronouns when I may still look like a woman, getting top surgery, developing a deeper voice and more masculine face) – has facilitated my acquisition of flashy clothes and odd body modifications. Transitioning is one of the weirdest things that you can do (socially), *so what are the real consequences of getting a lip ring? Or an eyebrow piercing? Or dyeing your hair deep burgundy?* Additionally, I would say that each body modification has greased the wheels for the next one. *If you already have a lip ring, which is pretty unusual, why not get an eyebrow piercing?* I think getting piercings in itself is also somewhat addicting, as piercings present more opportunities to display jewelry and enhance your appearance as a work of art (as I mentioned earlier). Most important of all, I would assert that all of these changes amount to taking ownership of my body from society – particularly societal gender roles: doing with it what I please after being prohibited from cutting my hair short (to my shoulders) until high school, feeling socially restricted from shopping in the boys’ and men’s sections for my whole life, and being pushed towards certain kinds of clothes (e.g. dresses for events or holiday gatherings) over
others. I think it may also be easier to unapologetically alter your body as such if you suffer from mental illness, because you already feel different from the mainstream – and don’t mind visually demonstrating that – and/or you believe that any negative social feedback you receive will be incomparable to the painful struggles you have faced due to mental illness.

**My Associations of Queer Identities & Style**

Below, I have listed the associations I have made between different queer identities and their self-fashioning and body modifications. No doubt, these preconceptions have shaped my investigation and the questions I have asked on the survey and of interviewees. I have left out some identities (e.g. transgender people, ace and aro people, and nonbinary people) as I do not have any preconceptions associated with the way they style themselves.

In general, I associate hair dyed in bright, unnatural colors with queer people – not limited to a specific sexual orientation or gender identity.

**Bi People:**

My introduction to the bi community was through the punk rock world, and more and more, I find that “punk” is nearly synonymous with “bi.” Hence, I see bi people as:

Androgynous (e.g. men with long hair and/or who wear makeup, women with t-shirts, jeans, shoulder-length hair or shorter), emo, goth, punk, associated with dark things (e.g. death, skeletons, vampires – Gerard Way wrote songs about vampires, Brendan Urie and Pete Wentz have dressed up as vampires, the movie *Alex Strangelove* (Johnson 2018) said bi people enjoy looking at pictures of vampires, Kristen Stewart is bi and starred in Twilight), eyeliner, white face powder, red eye shadow (for a creepy, tired look), black leather jackets, black clothes, red ties, red or plum/muted lipstick (on women), black skinny jeans, side-swept bangs, lip piercings (e.g. one ring, snake bites), eyebrow piercings.

**Lesbians:**

The sexist and homophobic media largely designed my picture of lesbians – no wonder I had internalized homophobia that kept me from coming out as bi and understanding both my gender and sexual orientation for a decade. However, my time at UVM among more people in the queer community has also contributed. Those two influences have painted lesbians as:

Wearing flannel, faded jeans, vests, neutral colors, working boots, Chelsea shoes, sweatshirts, sweatpants, baseball caps, beanies.

**Gay Men:**

The way the media portrays gay men has differed from the style of those I have known, though there is a little overlap. The media tends to show middle- to upper-class gays wearing preppy/bourgeois clothing (e.g. knitted sweaters, Calvin Klein, Michael Kors). I would say this is true of some I have met; Provincetown, Massachusetts sees many passerby wearing nautical, preppy brands along the lines of Vineyard Vines. Gays in the media also dress more fashionably, donning brighter colors, busier patterns, and with more eclectic layering (e.g. Eric in the Netflix show *Sex Education* (2019 – present)). I would say that I have only really noticed gays wearing brighter colors in Provincetown; tank tops are an absolute staple, sold at nearly ever shop in a
variety of colors. I think gay male celebrities—opposed to just TV characters—also dress louder (e.g. Billie Porter, Lil Nas, Elton John, Adam Lambert (though he has a more punk/bi aesthetic)). The gay men I have met in my life seem to not dress much differently from other men. Maybe clothes are a better fit (not necessarily form-fitting, though) and the outfits are more well-put-together (sometimes), but I wouldn’t say they’re necessarily eye-catching and colorful. I might suspect a guy wearing a floral pattern is bi or gay, but those patterns are becoming more mainstream for menswear, and there are plenty of men who are secure in their masculinity who will stray beyond neutral colors and prints. Overall, I’ve seen many gay men wearing t-shirts, shorts, pants, and neutral colors. A few have undercuts, but in general, they don’t stand out.

**Introduction to the Interviewees**

Below are some demographic details about interviewees; much of their queer experience and stories will be woven throughout these chapters. Some details have been left out as I believe that they could indirectly identify them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Caleb (he/him)</strong></th>
<th><strong>Ryan (he/him)</strong></th>
<th><strong>Logan (she/her)</strong></th>
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<td>Gender: Transgender man</td>
<td>Gender: Cisgender woman</td>
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<td>Ethnicity: Europe &amp; Central Asia</td>
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<tr>
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<td>UVM affiliation: Undergraduate Student</td>
<td>UVM affiliation: Undergraduate Student</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Avery (they/them)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Skylar (she/her)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Ella (she/her)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>UVM affiliation: Undergraduate Student</td>
<td>UVM affiliation: Undergraduate Student</td>
<td>UVM affiliation: Homoromantic, homosexual</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Jordan (she/her or they/them)**

- Gender: Genderqueer
- Ethnicity: East Asia & the Pacific
- Labels: Pansexual
- Identity description: Biromantic
- UVM affiliation: Graduate Student

**Meg (she/her)**

- Gender: Cisgender female, but potentially non-binary (though she doesn’t think about her gender much)
- Ethnicity: Europe & Central Asia, Latin America & the Caribbean
- Place of Origin: The US Mid-Atlantic
- Labels: Formerly identified as bi and was in a long-term relationship with a man; now identifies as a lesbian
- Identity description: Biromantic, bisexual
- UVM affiliation: Undergraduate Student

**Mark (he/him)**

- Gender: Cisgender man
- Ethnicity: East Asia & the Pacific
- Place of Origin: The US West Coast
- Labels: Straight
- Identity description: Heteroromantic, heterosexual
- UVM affiliation: UVM Faculty Member
Part I: Reflections on Understandings of Identity & Self-Presentation
Chapter 1: Gender and Sexual Orientation
Fluidity & Subcultural Association

At the crux of identity-signaling is the existence of an identity that one wishes to transmit through visual symbols. However, what if individuals feel that they have fluid identities that cannot be encompassed with labels and/or that they are unwilling to label? And what if they do not associate with those who have similar identities? What community is there to signal? Do they no longer desire to signal others with similar identities? Do they only want to signal to the general public that they are different – that they don’t subscribe to cisgender, heterosexual norms?

Some survey responses have prompted these questions which might be the beginning of a broader trend.

“I Don’t Like/Use Labels”

Of 205 respondents, 12% (n=25/205) acknowledged that they do not like or use labels. This was an option they could select following a list of labels for different sexual orientations (e.g. Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian). However, some respondents mentioned gender identity in their written explanations of their dislike of labels, so we should assume that the data demonstrate aversion to labels for both sexual orientation and gender identity. Respondents who felt this way comprised 14% (n=21/149) of queers, 30% (n=3/10) of those questioning their sexual orientation, and 2.2% (n=1/46) of straight & cisgender respondents (who I will from here on out call “non-queers” for brevity’s sake). All were college students – undergraduate and graduate.

Rather than use a specific label for their identity, 38% (n=57/149) of queer respondents choose to go by “queer,” 30% (n=45/149) as “gay” (a mere 6.0% of whom are gay men), and 4% (n=6/149) as “fluid.” It is possible that the widespread use of “gay” for a variety of queer identities is related to the media’s frequent use of the term “the gay community.”

In their free responses, 48% (n=12/21) of those who don’t like or use labels explained that labels feel confining, create [unwelcome] expectations, and/or unnecessarily provoke stress.

As a key side note, many – though not all – direct quotes from respondents are not their full responses; they are solely applicable excerpts.

One respondent explains how labeling can limit exploration of identity.

“I personally feel that there is so much pressure put on us to ‘label’ ourselves so early and I feel that this limits us from exploring things about ourselves like gender identity and expression and sexual orientation. Additionally, I feel that once you ‘label’ yourself, it would be weird to change it, so in a way, ‘labeling’ yourself kind of locks you into it.”

Interestingly, one straight and cisgender male respondent claimed to dislike labeling due to his concerns of a straight and [likely white (the respondent selected Europe/Central Asia as his ethnicity)] male stereotype. This example illustrates how stereotypes related to sexual orientation are not only limited to the oppressed identities of the queer community.

“I am straight and I think it is a good label for me. However sometimes I wish I never shared my sexual orientation because people make a thousand assumptions about you
just because of it. I want to be judged by my behavior, and not have so much assumed about me because of one category.

Another respondent lamented the nuances of expectations associated with different identities, including self-fashioning, and how labels can feel essentializing.

“labels confine you and put you into boxes and you are expected to be, dress, and act a certain way and not deviate from those and while my sexuality is a part of who i am, it does not dictate everything.”

Of respondents who don’t use/dislike labels, 25% (n=5/25) similarly found trying to label themselves as they question and explore their identities distressing or implausible.

One respondent describes the tendency of trying to find a proper label to cause them to ruminate about their identity.

“i can never be entirely sure what i am so its less stressful and i dont tend to think about it or obsess over it as much.”

Another believes that labels can’t transmit an identity that’s so uncertain.

“I don't even quite understand my identity and therefore no one else can <3”

Of such respondents, 32% (n=8/25) cited the fluidity of identity as the source of their distaste for labels.

One respondent seems to distinguish between identity and actions, claiming that one moment shouldn’t define you.

“labels feel confining as definitions for something that is so situational and experiential.”

Another echoes the triviality in locking in a title for one’s actions.

“I think that gender and sexuality can be very fluid and may change as you grow up and experience different things so there is no point in making a set in stone label.”

Twenty-eight percent (n=7/25) of those who don’t like/use labels complained that it is difficult to find labels to accurately describe their identity.

Put simply, one respondent encapsulates this sentiment in the line:

“I feel that labels are at once too descriptive and not descriptive enough.”

Another demonstrates how delineating their identities in conversation can be awkward and how even those descriptors don’t do justice in illustrating their true selves.

“to say biromantic and asexual tends to be more confusing than anything else in conversation. I tend to use either ace or just queer if i have to, since it's comprehensible to at least some people, but I'm not sure that actually captures much of my identity.”
Lastly, 40% (n=10/25) of those who don't like/use labels delineated that labels only serve for others' benefit – to make other people comfortable by having a paradigm within which to understand their sexuality or gender identity.

The following two responses clearly demonstrate that sentiment:

“I understand how I feel and labels are more for other people to understand me. Sometimes I feel like I need to conform more to a certain label so that other people can understand a fraction of my identity.”

“...I also understand that labels can be comforting to people.”

Some, like the below respondents, though not enamored with labels, describe them as convenient in social settings.

“I use them as an easy touchstone in passing for people to understand.”

“my sexuality personally is very fluid so my labels would change very often. it is often easier to just say I am bi when people ask though.”

The data demonstrate this potential for mis-matching of labels with the complexities of one’s specific attractions, as 31% (n=63/205) of respondents use the label “Straight,” but only 27% (n=56/205) of respondents are heteroromantic. Nevertheless, there is a direct correlation to heterosexuality; with equal numbers of respondents who call themselves “Straight” identifying as heterosexual. Additionally, six respondents (2.9% of all respondents) who selected “Other” for the label they use for themselves wrote in different variations of identities along the asexual/aromantic spectrum (e.g. Aro, Ace, Greysexual, Demisexual (explained in Figure 1)). Yet, as much as 8.8% (n=18/205) of respondents identify their sexual orientation as asexual, with 2.4% (n=5/205) identifying their romantic orientation as aromantic, and four respondents (2.4% of all respondents) writing in “Other” descriptors for their sexual and romantic orientations that included identities along the asexual/aromantic spectrum (demisexual (3), Greysexual, and demiromantic). Two other written-in responses for sexual and romantic leanings further demonstrate the potential for unclear gendered boundaries and preferences in attraction. One self-described “gay woman” explains being “sexually/romantically attracted to some women and nonbinary people, but uncomfortable with the common implications of the term ‘bisexual’ for myself despite its strict definition applicability.” Another writes, “I find other females attractive in porn, but not in person.” In total, 18% (n=37) of respondents have disparities between their romantic orientations and sexual orientations, which may make them cautious in committing to a label (e.g. gay), a title that could make others assume their sexual or romantic identity (e.g. homoromantic and homosexual). This could be especially worrisome in searching for partners, as saying that you’re “straight” may imply that you are also heterosexual, when you may be asexual, and cause that person to believe that you were leading them astray.
It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that a professor I know has said that he is very “cautious” in how he labels people, only using the word “gay,” for instance, when people identify that way. To play it safe, he may say “same-sex loving” instead. I have similarly heard people classify themselves as belonging to “women loving women” culture, the way one survey respondent identified.

Therefore, it seems that a small, but notable, fraction of Generation Z – people born from the mid-1990s up to the early 2010s – are moving away from labeling their gender identity and sexual orientation.

**Out in the World**

UVM affiliates’ label-rejecting sentiment is reflected in both the scholarly world and pop culture. For instance, Virgie Tovar (2018: 37), a leading expert on fat discrimination and body image, makes an argument for fluidity of sexual orientation, painting labels as a construct of coercion. She relates sexual orientation labels to her area of expertise, claiming that “‘Fat’ and ‘thin’ are (ibid.) They were brought into existence for no other reason than to control people.” Similarly, Harry Styles and Demi Lovato are label-averse. Styles is not alone in his opinions within the star world as singer Lovato also prefers to avoid labels. In a 2018 interview with
Billboard, she stated that she is “very fluid” and that “love is love. You can find it in any gender” (Reily 2020). However, Teen Vogue explained how she doesn’t want her fluidity “to take center stage,” as Lovato feels “it’s irrelevant to what my music is all about. I stand up for the things that I believe in and the things that I'm passionate about, but I like to keep my personal life as private as possible when it comes to dating and sexuality and all that stuff” (ibid.). Thus, tendency to avoid labeling one’s identities does not seem to be localized within UVM.

**Sexual Orientation: Innate, Fluid, or A Mixture?**

On a similar note, I was curious to know about respondents’ perception of the fluidity of sexual orientation. Hence, I asked the following question: “Do you believe that a person is born with a certain sexual orientation – though it may take them some time to discover it, or do you believe that a person’s sexual orientation can change over time (that sexuality is more fluid)?” I allowed respondents to select either “Your sexual orientation can change over time” or “You are born with your sexual orientation” and then prompted them to explain their answers. From these responses, I quickly learned that I had erred in thinking of the question in binary terms; many respondents openly critiqued me for this oversight. Due to the nuances of each persons’ perspective, I will be describing the themes I found looking at the free response answers rather than noting the percentage of people who chose each of my multiple choice options. For instance, someone who selects “Your sexual orientation can change over time” may actually mean that your sexual orientation seems to change as you come closer to discovering your true/innate identity.

Of all respondents, 25% (n=52/205) gave responses insinuating that your sexual orientation is innate and also able to change; 35% (n=18/52) of these subjects explicitly cited either personal experience or that of someone they know to explain their perspective. However, this is not to say that other respondents were also drawing from personal experience but did not directly mention it. Explanations for this answer vary; respondents argued the following: a fraction of people are born with their sexual orientation but most people’s changes with their environment and experiences; sexual orientation is determined by environmental, genetic, and biological factors; you’re born with an innate sexual orientation “potential” whose expression is shaped by environmental factors – thus, more people are queer than they realize; you’re born attracted to (a) specific gender(s), but can develop an attraction to other genders over time; sexuality can change through self-discovery and exploration; it’s hard to know the truth of the matter with societal influences – “if sexuality was generally accepted as more fluid and less black and white, more people would feel free to express more fluid sexualities.”

Slightly more respondents, 27% (n=56/205), implied that your sexual orientation is innate and static. Nevertheless, 13% (n=7/56) who take this position say it may seem like it is changing as it may take a person time to accept their identity, 50% (n=28/56) say discovery your true identity can be a drawn-out process, and 17% (n=3/56) say that only minute preferences may change with time – your entire sexual orientation or label won’t change. Of this group, 18% (n=10/56) explicitly claimed that they drew on personal experience or that of a peer.

To my surprise, a grand majority – 44% (n=91/205) of all survey respondents – insinuated that there is nothing innate about your sexual orientation and that it is absolutely open to change. A few from this group, 5.5% (n=5/91), frame sexual orientation as a choice; this varies from 12% of all respondents (n=25/205) who were hesitant to call sexual orientation fluid, worried of the potential harm that could be caused to the queer rights’ movement – whose platform has
often been the “born with it” (innate sexual orientation) argument – by describing sexual orientation as a choice. To support their argument for the fluidity of sexual orientation, 29% (n=26/91) explicitly cite personal experience or that of a friend.

A notable percentage of respondents, 13% (n=26/205), expressed concern that societal pressure alters how we identify – what labels we utilize, how free we are in experimenting with and exploring our gender and sexual identities, how long it takes us to figure out those identities, and whether we repress them. Within this group, 31% (n=8/26) mentioned the power of internalized homophobia to cause you to repress your identity, inhibiting you from understanding it and figuring it out. Additionally, a significant proportion of this group, 73% (n=19/26), asserted that sexual orientation is a construct and that we are only taught about heterosexuality (and/or the binary of homosexuality and heterosexuality, leaving out bi/pansexuality) so we don’t know our true selves or what we are capable of (who we are capable of loving).

Out in the World

This questioning of sexual orientation as a societal construct is not unique to these respondents, but has been the concern of feminist scholars as well. Adrienne Rich, an influential American poet, essayist, and feminist, argues that the “compulsory heterosexuality” – the paradigm of heterosexuality as the only option – hides the possibility of other sexual orientations and inhibits individuals’ agency in expressing their sexuality. She says that [female] heterosexuality is a “an enormous assumption”, and a “political institution” (Rich 1994: 312-313). In this vein, Rich (1994: 315) goes on to cite Kathleen Gough’s eight characteristics of male power from her piece “The Origin of the Family,” including in her list the power to “deny women [their own] sexuality,” involving “punishment for” and “destroying evidence of lesbianism” and the power to “force [male sexuality] on them,” such as “hetero romance in arts and media.” Restraining women as such translates to an assurance of “male right of physical, economic, and emotional access” to women, she insists (ibid.: 316). Rich’s reasoning for invoking these examples is to insinuate that “a pervasive cluster of forces, ranging from physical brutality to control of consciousness” is responsible for maintaining heteronormativity, for teaching women to “accept heterosexuality and marriage as inevitable” (ibid.). This exertion of control, she suggests, evidences that heterosexuality is not a natural phenomenon and that instead “an enormous potential counterforce” – the fight for the existence and visibility of other sexual orientations – “is having to be restrained” (ibid.). Society won’t allow heterosexuality to be understood as “preference” (ibid.: 317) and alternatively paints lesbian lives as “life styles” instead of identities, withholding evidence of their existence to further maintain compulsory heterosexuality (ibid.: 318). Yet, if an oppressed queer identity is going to be brought to light, Rich argues that it is often gay men over lesbians, as society believes that men are a necessary partner for women (ibid.: 323). Heterosexuality is maintained without question as are capitalism, the caste system, and racism, she asserts (ibid.: 317). Rich, Gough, and Tovar do not seem to be isolated in their distaste for heteronormativity, as in 1976, the Brussels International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women declared that “compulsory heterosexuality” is one of the “crimes against women” (ibid.: 324). Thus, it appears that heterosexuality as a construct – and life-long adherence to this sexual preference – is not merely a brainchild of UVM affiliates.

There were also many respondents who were conflicted as to whether sexual orientation is innate, fluid, or a mixture of both, composing 11% (n=23/205) of the entire group. Some of these respondents answered the question – and their answers are represented in the groups listed
above, but gave a tentative answer, and some said outright that they had no idea what the fact of the matter was.

**Gender: As a Fluid Identity & Societal Construct**

In their explanations for why they felt sexual orientation was innate, subject to change/fluid, or both, 9.8% (n=20/205) of respondents related gender to sexual orientation. Of these respondents, 70% took the position that both gender and sexual orientation are fluid and 30% assert that sexual orientation and/or gender are societal constructs. Below, a respondent explains their personal journey of self-discovery and how that has shaped their conceptions of gender and sexual orientation.

“I have identified as panromantic ace, ace lesbian, bisexual, and gay over the past eight years. Different labels were largely due to the experiences and influences of the different times in my life so far, but gender is a social construct, and my perceptions of myself have changed continuously; I do not think it is fair to my teenage self to invalidate her identities. If gender is a social construct, then by extension so is sexuality. With the (socially impossible, and therefore perhaps meaningless, conceptually) abolition of gender, sexuality would too cease to be meaningful. I think people may be born with a sexual orientation in the form of certain traits which are naturally appealing to them (or nurtured into them), but this only is apparent as sexual orientation because of common traits within groups that have been socialized in similar ways. In a way, I guess I believe that both are true (at least to the extent that we cannot fully know the line between nature and nurture)? Sexual orientation is both born and changeable (my emphasis).”

Another respondent mentions the tie of gender to sexuality that they’ve noticed in their own life.

“I've had periods of my life where I'm only sexually attracted to women and others where I am only attracted to men, and that fluidity corresponded with my own understanding of my own gender identity.”

Here, two respondents vouch for fluidity of sexual orientation and gender identity.

“of course gender and sexuality are shaped by society and circumstance, and so can change over time.”

“as people develop over time it [sic] make sense that sexuality and gender identity [sic] develops too.”

Further, these respondents point out the impact that society has on our understandings of gender and sexuality.

“you can't fully unpack the gender binary without recognizing that our notions of sexual orientation are equally as constructed and culturally bound.”
“social factors and life experiences so heavily impact our understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality.”

Thus, this perception of blurred gender and sexuality boundaries poses the question of the extent to which different people will associate with those who share their romantic, sexual, or gender leanings or behaviors.

Subcultural Relation:

Labels and the perception of firm vs. fluid identity boundaries can tie or separate a person from communities sharing their romantic, sexual, and gender leanings. Hence, it is important to analyze the amount of connection people report feeling to others who identify with their gender and sexual orientation.

The number of respondents who say they “relate” to their subcultural communities is comparable to that of those who say they “don’t relate”: 25% (n=51/205) and 28% (n=58/205), respectively. Following, is the amount of people who “somewhat relate” to their community, composing 24% (n=49/205) of respondents; they feel some connection but do not feel like they share an abundance of qualities or interests in common with their identity group.

This person explains the vast variance of those who share an identity and the influences subculture can have on someone.

“Yes? I think general identification based on sexuality is a slippery slope, because everyone is so different and experiences things so different. I'm bisexual, but so many other bi people experience love/sexual attraction different than me. Some people (like me) experience a ratio, some people are fluid and ever-changing. However, I do think that the way that I present myself (especially now that I'm in college) has been altered by the bisexual subculture, even if accidentally. I found myself enjoying the Lewk (slang for “look”) more when it was more stereotypically gay or bi (i.e. cuffed jeans, cons, button-downs).”

This respondent relates more to shared experience of an identity that the presentation of an identity.

“I don't feel as though I present myself in the same way with people that also identify as bisexual (i.e. the common stereotypes like cuffing jeans, specific choices of clothing etc.) but I embrace the flag and can relate to the emotions and feelings that come with being part of this identity.”

Again, we hear about minimal importance and attention paid to identity.

“I don't give it much thought, but I suppose yes. Not that I'm ashamed of my identity, but I don't focus on it too much.”

One respondent described close association with the queer community as a steppingstone towards self-acceptance in their life, a resource needed only for that critical time.

“I used to embrace the subculture heavily in the earlier portion of high school, and while
I still support it there are some aspects that I sometimes just don’t relate to amongst the younger wave of the LGBT+ community that I would be considered part of. That being said, there is no doubt in my mind that my hardcore embracing of the subculture when I was younger was directly associated with counteracting societal guilt and forming a sense of confidence as I came to terms with my identity. The environment fostered by saturating my life with queerness allowed me to not only embrace my identity but also to question it to a healthy degree. It was extremely valuable. Now that I feel more secure in myself, my identity, etc. I don’t feel the need to present in any way tied to a single subculture, though I definitely still incorporate queerness into my everyday life. More balanced now.”

Another apparent theme in respondent attitudes was the feeling of exclusion from the queer community; 13% (n=26/205) felt this way, meaning that they don’t feel welcome and accepted in queer spaces, they aren’t represented in the queer community, their identity is questioned as a “legitimate” queer identity, they don’t think their actions warrant the label they have chosen for themself, they are blatantly rejected from their own subcultures, they personally question their identity’s place in the queer community, and/or they believe they don’t have a right to identify with the queer community because they aren’t “out” (haven’t disclosed their identity) yet. The groups who most expressed these sentiments were bi – 35% (n=9/26) of those who felt excluded, ace & aro (asexual and aromantic) - 31% (n=8/26), and transgender – 12% (n=3/26).

One respondent notes the intersectionality of queer and non-queer identities and how difficult it can be navigating them.

“I identify as transgender and transmasculine. I struggle to find a way to relate to my sexuality, since it is 'straight' but because I'm trans and because of the experiences and struggles I had to discover and accept and embrace my sexuality I don't feel represented in mainstream straight culture, since it is normatively assumed to be cisgender. Within the queer community it is odd to want to embrace being straight, since it's usually framed as LGBTQ+ people vs straight people. Interestingly, it's never LGBTQ+ people vs cis people. Online I've found some blogs that talk about transhet things, but it's pretty limited. I've considered using the label queer since I don't feel like my sexuality is heteronormative, but I haven't actually used that label since I feel like that would misrepresent who I'm attracted to.”

Below are some of the common complaints of bi people.

“I am straight-passing for the most part and have been in hetero-presenting relationships in the past. I do participate in the subculture of my sexuality but I also feel as though I do not have as much of a claim to it because I am not "out" to most people in my life.”

“I would not say I am completely 'out' yet. I support all of the pride flags but I do not have one hanging in my room for example. At the moment I am in a heterosexual relationship and I do feel as if I would be judged by some if I were to tell them that I am bisexual. For those people would say that because I am in this relationship, it is not valid to be bisexual.”

“I have always had trouble expressing my sexual orientation. I never really feel a part of
the LGBQT+ community because based on just looking at me and talking to me no one ever assumes that I am Bi. I have struggled with not feeling Bi enough to be a part of the community because my attraction and actions aren't always 50/50 between genders.”

“Yeah, sometimes I feel like a "fake" bisexual because I lean more towards men and have only ever dated men so I’ve never kissed a woman or been with a woman before. Although obviously this doesn't negate my attraction to women. It's just frustrating because I feel like an imposter for being more attracted to men.”

Here are some examples of laments of ace & aro people as well, with the second one also addressing the gatekeeping within their different subcultures.

“The aromantic/asexual community is sometimes excluded from the bigger queer community, so while I identify strongly with the smaller subculture I can sometimes feel alienated from the larger community. I do embrace pride anyway, with flags and little signifiers like jewelry with the flag colors.”

“To a certain extent, I guess so. I think there’s a lot of pressure on nb [nonbinary] people to Present androgynous though and I don’t do that. I also feel like Femme bi culture has this really Toxic ideal of "I tolerate men and worship women". I also hate the gatekeeping in the queer community. People tell me I’m not a real queer person because asexuals aren’t LGBTQ+, and Theres all sorts of wlw [women loving women]/trixic [nonbinary attraction to women] gatekeeping about never having relationships with men, stuff like that.”

Perhaps reinforcing ace and aro respondents’ claims of feeling distanced from the queer community is my regrettable oversight in formulating the survey questions; I did not list “Ace/Asexual” or “Aro/Aromantic” as possible labels for participants to select. Instead, they had to select “Other” and then write their labels in. These identities did not come to mind as I was writing the questions, which I think is unfortunately representative of much of the queer community, as these UVM affiliates have asserted.

These two respondents describe restrictions and lack of representation within their own subcultures.

“I would say that I don’t necessarily embrace the “subculture” of my community as much as I could. I’ve attended pride events a few times but I didn't really feel like I fit in. I will act more open about my sexuality and won’t code-switch as much when I’m around other LGBTQ people. I do think, however, that the gay "subculture" extends just beyond what you see at a pride event. Unfortunately, the gay subculture includes several toxic ideas regarding how your body should look, how you should dress and act, etc. In some regards, I feel very out of place in the gay community due to these standards. I don’t dress how gay guys are “supposed” to dress. I’m not necessarily interested in the same things.”

“No [I don’t relate to my subculture]; I believe that this is due to my race. Much of
Some queer people feel so distanced from the queer community that they answered “unsure” – 3% (n=5/149) or even “no” – 3% (n=4/149) – when asked if they had an identity in the community. Two of the people questioning their sexual orientation – 20% (n=2/10) – also selected “no,” though the various acronyms (e.g. LGBTQ+) for the queer community include a “Q” for “questioning” (as well as for “queer”). Those who said they were “unsure” if their identities were included in the queer community held the following identities: heteroromantic & ace (n=1), biromantic & heterosexual (n=1), bisexual (n=1), biromantic & bisexual (n=2), and bisexual & heteroromantic (n=1). Those who said “no” (in addition to those questioning their sexual orientation) held the following identities: homosexual (n=1), biromantic & heterosexual (n=2), and bisexual (n=1).

A mere 7.8% (n=16/205) of people enthusiastically relate to their subcultures, 8.2% (n=17/205) relate to the broader queer community (beyond the subcultures specifically associated with their romantic, sexual, and gender identities), and 3.4% (n=7) relate to communities other than those that share their identities.

Some examples of “enthusiastic” participation and relation may be demonstrated by the following responses, which allude to using and displaying group flags/colors, online communities, exploring their identities, and self-styling.

“Ya, I curate a channel of specifically bi and trans memes, If I had money my room would be plastered in my [sic] colours.”

“I have little flag pins on my backpack and i love learning about subcultures through social media like "cottagecore lesbians" and educating myself on the history of certain terminology and subcategories and their racial importance as well. it always something i can be more educated in.”

“Oh yes definitely. I've really embraced my sexual orientation. I love both the lesbian flag and the gay/lgbtq flag. I feel as though I dress like a lesbian and try to present myself as one. As I've gotten more into the community more things about it attract me into changing how I look. Like getting a nose piercing, cutting my hair, shaving a slit in my eyebrow.”

Yet, even those who do not expose avid engagement and alignment with their subcultures embrace the flags associated with their identities; 16% (n=32/205) of respondents like the flag associated with their subculture (most specified the flag for their particular identity within the queer community, but some did not make the distinction between their specific flag and the rainbow flag for the broader queer community) and 13% (n=19/149) of queer respondents explicitly relate to the broader queer rainbow flag. One respondent voiced dislike of identity flags.

Overall, it seems that there is not a resounding consensus one way or the other as to whether people relate or do not relate with their subcultures, though it is notable how many respondents felt clearly excluded from their subculture and/or the broader queer community, and how few people demonstrated fervent identification with their subcultures.

**Bonding with Subcultures Online**
In discussing relation to their subcultures, various queer respondents – 8.0% (n=12/149) – referenced queer media consumption, using social media/online communities, blogs, and online meme-sharing channels. In fact, queer respondents were the only ones who discussed this meme and social media use.

Rather than relying on finding queer people in one’s area, online communities can foment social connection of those with similar identities which is “just as important and authentic as face-to-face relations” (Pacho 2013: 19).

Below are response excerpts that describe the particular types of media respondents use:

**Memes**
- “I curate a channel of specifically bi and trans memes”
- “I identify with the bisexual subculture, especially the memes about bisexuals”

**Tik Tok**
- “Based on what I’ve discovered from tik Tok, I definitely do feel that I act and present in the same way as a lot of other bi/pan folks (my targeted ‘for you’ page is definitive proof of this) and my friends often joke about how classic bi/pan we come off as”
- “I do spend time on TikTok and occasionally a video will pop up along the lines of ‘if you watched/did X as a kid, you're bi now,’ and a surprising number tends to fit me so I really don't know”
- “I identify with bisexual tik tok”

**Online Communities in General**
- “I love learning about subcultures through social media”
- “I consume much more queer media and participate in queer communities online”
- “Online I've found some blogs that talk about transhet [transgender and heterosexual/romantic] things, but it's pretty limited”
- “I don't strongly identify with other bisexual people. I feel like bi people (mostly online) can act a little childish/OTT [over the top]”
- “I do frequently find myself relating to and identifying with a lot of social media posts describing bisexuality”
- “I feel like social media has highlighted clothing trends among queer people that I had followed even before I recognized them as signifiers of queerness.”

**Mixed Media**
- “When I was questioning my sexuality I explored gay subculture through stuff like bestofgrindr and gay_irl which was actually pretty important in helping me accept myself/understand myself as a bisexual man. Bi subculture is more specific to my identity (we have ‘inside’ jokes about how all bisexuals love lemon bars, the song Sweater Weather, can never make decisions... etc.). I don't fall in perfectly with these stereotypes, but I think bi-specific memes are funny and create communities of acceptance/platforms for bi discourse. I definitely lean into the ‘Bi stereotypes’ when they serve me in some situations, but I don't feel any need to conform to them bc they're mostly just memes”
- “Yes, I consume mostly queer media”
Respondents who relate to these varying forms of queer media speak of differing levels of identification with their subcultures and an assortment of reasons for seeking this media and participating in these communities. Some passionately relate to their subcultures and, thus, seem to see queer media as another way to engage with and embrace their identities; some don’t think much about their identities and minimally identify with their subcultures – if at all, but do find themselves relating to queer social media (e.g. Tik Tok videos and memes); some relate to their subcultures (though not enthusiastically) and enjoy queer social media; some go online seeking community – not finding it offline; some merely reference going online and disliking others who share their identity who they find there; some used queer social media to explore and embrace their identity when coming out; and similarly, some used it when insecure about their identity and inclusion in the queer community, perhaps hinting that it served to affirm their identity and queer community membership.

The following respondent seems insecure about their membership in the queer community, but finds validation for their identity via Tik Tok:

“I definitely embrace the subcultures associated with pansexuality/bisexuality but I have a hard time doing it outwardly for fear of being deemed inadequate by the larger queer community. I’m currently in a relationship with a typically masc presenting man, which makes me feel even less adequate about my place in the queer community currently. Based on what I’ve discovered from tik Tok, I definitely do feel that I act and present in the same way as a lot of other bi/pan folks (my targeted ‘for you’ page is definitive proof of this) and my friends often joke about how classic bi/pan we come off as.”

Curiously, it seems that regardless of level of attachment to an offline community, queer people are finding some connection and relatability in online ones.

**Assigning Identity to Interests, Behavior, and Media**

One remarkable tendency of respondents was to assign sexual orientation identities to various interests, behavior, and media; 4% (n=8/205) of respondents made such correlations.

Below are excerpts from responses that reference such connections:

**Media**

Two respondents claimed that the song “Sweater Weather” by the Neighbourhood is a bisexual song.

“I'm a questioning bisexual, but I'm not too big on displaying the flag because I don't want to say something and then take it back later. I don't really fit the bisexual stereotypes (cuffed jeans, flannels, etc.) either. Sweater Weather IS a bop [a great song], however, and I will die defending it.”

“Bi subculture is more specific to my identity (we have ‘inside’ jokes about how all bisexuals love...the song Sweater Weather...)”
The association of “Sweater Weather” with the bisexual community spans far beyond UVM. The 2013 song appears all over TikTok – including among key influencers Nessa Barrett, Anna Shumate, and James Wright – in the form of lyrics in comments and in videos while users lip-sync to it as a marker of bisexual identification (Steber 2020). It arose for this purpose over the summer and fall of 2020, along with an audio clip of someone asking “Do you like Frank Ocean?” which was a specific signal for bi men (Kim 2021).

There are a few possible reasons why the connection between the song and bisexuality forged. For one, it was initially popular on Tumblr, “where so many young people who are questioning their identity go to discover new music from queer artists, like Halsey, Troye Sivan, or Hayley Kiyoko” (Steber 2020). Though none of the members of the Neighbourhood are openly queer, the song may now bear the “nostalgic” connotations of “that sense of self-discovery” (ibid.). A perhaps clearer connection may be owed to the gender neutral lyrics of the love song, such as: "One love, two mouths. One love, one house. No shirt, no blouse. Just us, you find out.” Hence, where gender specificity of the members of a couple takes a back seat, bisexuals may find refuge (ibid.). I personally delighted in this gender neutrality upon first hearing the song, myself a bisexual. However, I do not use it as a “signal” or consider it a bisexual anthem.

Another respondent, when asked if they relate to their subculture, analogously said the following:

“I identify with bisexual tik tok, girl in red, and king princess.”

Girl in Red, a.k.a. Marie Ulven, a lesbian, Norwegian, indie-pop, singer-songwriter, has become a similar marker of identity. She is known for singing songs about falling in love with girls and references to her name have become a staple in the lesbian TikTok community, though also used to signal female bisexuality (Kim 2021). In 2019, she gained incredible popularity on TikTok when lesbians, bisexual women, and nonbinary couples recorded loving videos together with her queer music as a backtrack; the most-used song, “we fell in love in october,” showed up in over 454,000 TikTok videos (ibid.). By the spring of 2020, sapphic TikTok users began asking each other, “Do you listen to Girl in Red?”; the question became a hashtag in April that year and showed up in on Urban Dictionary and Quora at the same time (ibid.). The phrase became an “open secret” for queer identity-signaling and use of the hashtag peaked at 300k daily video views in mid-September, while thousands of users tagging #girlinred or #doyoulistentogirlinred garnered over 700 million views on the platform since that time (ibid.).

King Princess is also a lesbian singer-songwriter (as well as instrumentalist and producer), so it is possible that she is something of a code for lesbian or female bisexual identity as well, though likely not one so widespread. Conversely, the survey respondent alone may personally relate to her because they’re bisexual, and King Princess may not be a known symbol.


A meme that illustrates the connection of the musician Girl in Red to lesbianism and the song “Sweater Weather” by the Neighbourhood to bisexuality.
Using songs as codes for sexual orientation may be a more covert way of coming out, recognized only by those “in” on the meaning (ibid.). For instance, 19-year-old Haley Margo of Michigan, “only through coded language” that lent her “a sense of discretion” did she “[feel] the courage and self-assuredness to step out into the world as a queer artist” (ibid.). She wrote a song to come out to her parents – whose meaning they did not recognize – and to TikTok, singing about talking to a girl on the phone all night, and wondering aloud, “Does she listen to girl in red?” She later sings that this was not a “straightforward question,” but instead a “pop quiz” (ibid.). Margo said that creating the song was “the first real push into accepting myself” (ibid.). The coded “Do you listen to Girl in Red?” language is so covert that queer Russians were able to – delightedly – display posters with the question, such as in Moscow, without explicitly violating the gay propaganda law (ibid.).

The coded use of “Sweater Weather” has likewise greased the wheels for influencers to come out on social media to their large followings, while simultaneously offering the chance for them to feel pride in their identities (Steber 2020), indulging in media they feel celebrates them. These popular faces then cause a domino effect, spreading the idea to followers; as of January 2021, there were 280,000 videos for “Sweater Weather” on TikTok (ibid.). Overall, many agree that TikTok is becoming a safe haven for queer individuals to come out, where they are “often met with a lot of respect, praise, and support” (ibid.)

Lucy Jones, an Associate Professor in Sociolinguistics at the University of Nottingham, explains the appeal that Margo and many others have felt in using this coded language. She delineates how euphemisms are a safe route in questioning someone’s sexuality, as the inquirer does not need to out themself (Kim 2021).

Queer linguistics scholar and author William Leap illuminates that such coded language was similarly seen in 19th century England in the context of anti-homosexuality mandates as gay men and some lesbians signaled identity through the “secret language” of Polari (ibid.). Comparable methods were employed in the early 20th century in the U.S. military as well, a group from which gays were excluded. In the 50s and 60s homophile movement, people would refer to fellow members of the queer community as “family,” “a friend of Dorothy,” “friend of Mrs. King,” or the then-“nascent” term “gay” (ibid.).

Ultimately, the effect of this shared language is the fomentation of a sense of community. Jones notes that “When you're young, most people are trying to fit in. The way you style your hair, the makeup that you wear, the clothes that you wear are all important. Language is the same kind of thing” (ibid.). Literary critic Terry Castle adds that taking ownership over preexisting queer “lingo” is one way that we settle into and “align ourselves” with the queer community (or alternatively, subcultures within the queer community) (ibid.).

Of course, people of the same generation with the same sexual orientation will not necessarily unanimously embrace the same media as an embodiment of their identity. Many queer TikTokers rejected Girl in Red as the representation for their identity, some put off that she’s white, as was the sentiment of 21-year-old Kaylyn Rhoad (@fatbussywetwet) (ibid.). They stated, “I thought that other people of color who are queer and make music could also be a part of [the lesbian and bisexual identity-signaling]…I feel like TikTok and everything else in the lesbian community is run by white lesbians, and I got kind of tired of seeing that” (ibid.). Some also didn’t think that they fit into the archetypal group associated with Girl in Red. Twenty-one-year-old Madison Mendes of South Carolina (@medusamendess) posed the question, “So we’ve already established that we’ve got the Girl in Red lesbians, who are the indie bitches who like to skate and stuff, and the Young M.A. [a female rapper who exclusively dates women] lesbians
who just strap bitches down and don’t give a fuck about anyone’s feelings, but where’s that happy medium, because I’m not either of those?” She then asks, “Where are my Kehlani lesbians?” (ibid.). She was then greeted with 10,000 likes overnight and ample suggestions from others users as to alternative artists to represent lesbians, such as Janelle Monáe, Syd, Willow, and Rina Sawayama (ibid.). Mendes adds that using a celebrity to represent yourself can more easily exhibit the online persona/brand that you’re going for (ibid.). Hence, Gen-Zers like Mendes and Rhoad are carving out new categories for themselves in TikTok to capture their personalities more authentically (ibid.).

Along a different strain, a non-queer respondent makes his own observation regarding the correlation of identity with music.

“I am really into electronic dance music, which has a large gay constituency, especially in Buffalo where I'm from. As a straight guy it has never bothered me, nor have I really thought too much about it. I also tried landing a DJ gig at a gay bar that fell through because of COVID, another instance in which my sexual identity did not necessarily align with my interests.”

This, however, seems to have a different flavor than what the other respondents insinuated above. This is an example of an outsider – a straight man – looking into another community – the gay community. We don’t know why electronic dance may draw that particular crowd.

These two respondents connect a certain taste in TV – and one says to music – to queer identity.

“I like similar things like tv shows and stuff to do as others who are queer. Scary stuff, dramas, anime, cute stuff.”

“I act/present in a similar way to others who identify similarly to me, particularly in the way I dress and my taste in music, TV shows, etc.”

Though artists and songs were referenced earlier as serving a communicative/coded use; they, as well as TV, can also be a bonding point that creates queer community when people share the same taste. As queer 20-year-old Sora of Illinois (@bodaciouschan) explains, “With TikTok, you’re stumbling across people that you’re very similar to, on accident” – due to TikTok’s targeted algorithms – “and you see how much you relate to things like music and style,” you can develop a quick connection with a fellow user (ibid.). Correspondingly, Castle outlines a step of the process of assimilation into the queer community (or its subcultures) as “rewrite[ing] the narrative of opera, video, or TV to try to find something in it that speaks to who we are” (ibid.). Thus, when people who share an identity find the same meaning in the same media, this overlap of interest can lead to connection.
Further, making modern references to signal identity, as Gen-Z TikTokers are doing, helps us relate to an even more exclusive community, Jones claims, one that differs from earlier queer generations and our parents (ibid.). For instance, millennial lesbians would bond over mutual interest in Tegan & Sara, the Riot Grrrl scene, or the original *L Word*, whereas Gen-Z lesbians would be less likely to know about or be interested in these (ibid.).

Hence, it is possible that artists like Girl in Red and songs like “Sweater Weather” have become online sensations and certain types of TV shows have garnered mostly queer followings due to queer people collectively finding reflections of their identities in the media of today and using it to bond with each other and covertly “come out.”

**Behavior**

Notably, and perhaps harder to explain, two respondents have associated sexual orientation with certain behaviors. One claims, “I do the ‘bisexual peace sign’ a lot.” I am unsure where this originates and Google had nothing to tell me, but I have seen my fair share of memes and TikTok references to different bi hand signals, like the peace sign and “finger guns.” Another states, “Bi subculture is more specific to my identity (we have "inside" jokes about how all bisexuals...can never make decisions... etc.).” It is possible that this second reference relates to the public criticism of bisexuals to “just pick a gender,” and how this binary perception of attraction can confuse bisexuals about their identity for years. Hence, this may be a joke stereotype that riffs on society’s misunderstanding of bisexuals and its resulting bi erasure.

**Interests**

Respondents also cite a broad range of interests as indicators of sexual orientation. While the following excerpt references media, it also mentions action (likely a hobby/activity).

“I don't consciously do anything to act/present in ways that might be stereotypical for the bi community, but I do spend time on TikTok and occasionally a video will pop up along the lines of 'if you watched/did X as a kid, you're bi now,' and a surprising number tends to fit me so I really don't know.”

This respondent, who we have heard from under other categories, makes a very specific case for bi relation.

“Bi subculture is more specific to my identity (we have "inside" jokes about how all bisexuals love lemon bars...).”

This association is a signifier of connection to bisexual social media, originating in the “r/bisexual” subreddit in May of 2018 when...
the user “u/Tuxedo-T-Shirt” commented, “Welcome to the Bi Side! Have a lemon bar!” (“Lemon Bars Meme” 2021). The post was inspired by a Star Wars t-shirt that said, “Come to the Dark Side. We have cookies.” and the 1999 South Park Movie, in which characters try to convince others to save two TV actors with punch and pie (ibid.). Therefore, social media/online communities can be an important part of subcultural identity and dialogue.

Correlating identity with interests is nothing new. Common questions used to confirm or deny someone’s identity as a lesbian have been “Does she sing in the choir?” or “Does she play softball?,” the latter deriving from the great prevalence of queer women in the sport (Kim 2021). Castle says that someone with a “Marie Antoinette obsession” could also be understood to be a lesbian (ibid.). The bottom line is that many covert/coded phrases for communicating queer identity come from certain stereotypes and shared interests among groups; Leap explains that queer people often seek pop culture as a way “describe ourselves and each other” (ibid.). Though again, one could question why those shared interests exist.

**Majors**

Going further, though technically still within the category of “interests,” there are apparently stereotypes regarding which sexual orientations pursue which majors and go into which fields. Logan said, “I feel like most art students are gay” – she means “queer,” more broadly – and asserted that this probability is higher for male art students. She also claimed that “The majors that gay people tend to pick always fall within the same spectrum. That’s why you get more of them there.” She then listed off majors that she thought straight and queer people would pursue, respectively. She believed straight people were more likely to study business (she has never met a gay business major), engineering, computer science, and other fields that are believed to lead to more lucrative careers and are more socially sanctioned. Queer people, she posits, pursue majors that people tend to avoid since they don’t promise futures of big earnings. For instance, when her bi coworker told her that she was pursuing sociology, she thought to herself, *That makes sense.*

Logan is not alone in this association. One respondent also remarked that an indicator for identifying straight, cisgender men is if they’re “in the business school.” The same idea appeared briefly in the hit show *Schitt’s Creek.* When Alexis Rose hints to her brother David that the co-owner of his shop might be gay and interested in him, David replies, “He’s a business major that wears straight-legged, mid-range denim. He’s not into me” (Peacocke 2017). Again, we hear the field of business as tied to the straight identity.

Of men who filled out the survey, only two said that they’re business majors, both of whom were straight and cisgender. Yet, this is such a small number that it would not necessarily be scientific to draw conclusions from this finding.

Along these same lines, one respondent mentions the “small pool of LGBTQ+ people in STEM fields,” which seems to speak from direct experience rather than conjecture.

It is unclear when and where these discipline-and-sexual-orientation associations were made. Perhaps this connection comes from portrayals of different sexual orientations in the media, and possibly queer identities are more often shown in artistic and less lucrative careers.

**Questions Provoked:**

I have positioned these perspectives on identity at the beginning of this investigation as they pose crucial questions that influence the lens with which we should view this study and they further complicate the current research questions.
Again, the primary research question is: How do people in the West – particularly queer people – visually signal their identities through various forms of body modification and self-fashioning?

Given what we have just learned, the following curiosities arise:

If [at least some] people:

• see identity as fluid and/or
• don’t use labels and/or
• don’t relate to subcultures associated with sexual orientation and/or gender identity, at least in-person (vs. online)

then how will people fashion themselves? Is there anyone they want to signal to? Are they looking for signals from anyone related to sexual orientation and gender identity? How can you send a signal if you don’t identify with a group?

Do people still internally assign themselves to different identity groups despite wanting to ditch labels (e.g. someone calls themself “fluid” or “queer” instead of “bisexual,” but feels bisexual attraction)? Hence, do they still believe they have enough things in common with those who share their identities to want to signal them and/or read visual signals from them?

Do people claim to believe in the fluidity of identity, dislike labels, and not relate to those who share their identities but still – perhaps unconsciously or unintentionally – self-fashion in ways similar to those who share their identity?

How do people find romantic partners?

Equally, if people associate certain interests, behavior, and media with different groups, then will visual signification become obsolete? Will a question about taste in music or hobbies suffice in signaling identity? Or will shared media preference, behaviors, and interests exist as signifiers alongside visual symbols?

In summary, identity-signaling relies on an identity to signal, so we shall in later chapters show these sentiments influence self-fashioning and body modification in reality.

**Queer Style**

Regardless of whether people feel tied to their communities or not, this is what they have to say about correlations between self-styling and queer vs. normative sexual orientations and gender identities.

**Do you believe that there is a certain way of self-fashioning or body modification (e.g. hair color or style; clothing, colors, and prints; accessory types and quantity) associated with the LGBT+ community?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic (number in each group)</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
<th>Yes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-Queer (46)</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>54%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Questioning (10)</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>70%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demographic</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Queer (46)</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer (149)</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning (10)</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>40%</td>
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Clearly, the majority perceive a connection between style, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Regardless of how well respondents go on to differentiate between the self-fashioning of the various queer demographics of focus, they clearly see a queer-non-queer divide in presentation.

Below are respondents’ answers to the inverse of that question, asking about cis, het people instead.

**Do you believe that there is a certain way of self-fashioning or body modification (e.g. hair color or style; clothing, colors, and prints; accessory types and quantity) associated with straight, cisgender people?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
<th>Yes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>48%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>35%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Queer (149)</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>60%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Questioning (10)</td>
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Though this is the same question, essentially, just worded differently, it is interesting to see that not everyone is on board with the idea of a defining cis, het style. The non-queer people themselves seem least convinced of this, while the questioning individuals, who are currently between both worlds, puzzling where they fit in, appropriately seem to be undecided as a group.

**Data Preface:**

Note that there seems to be an overwhelming majority of respondents who take the stance that queerness is visually apparent; yet, a significant amount of people, when asked to describe the appearance of a particular demographic, refuse to give an answer. A great number of people say that they choose to not make assumptions about others’ sexual orientations/that it's none of their business and some decline to mention stereotypes they've heard – though they were specifically asked to include any cultural associations they are aware of, good or bad. Many who do cite stereotypes insist that they have been unlucky to learn them. For instance, in referring to lesbian dress, Ella says, “Morally, you can’t attach one to the other. But in my mind, there’s
definitely a connection” (my emphasis). Some respondents intentionally left the free response box for this question blank. Additionally, some people said that they could tell if someone had a certain identity if that person said something to them along the lines of directly coming out (e.g. I can tell a girl is gay if she talks to me about liking other girls). I can’t tell if these respondents believe that there is no visual stimulus that could lead a person to question another’s identity or if they are trying to protect their status as someone who is socially aware and committed to social justice and, thus, they will not admit to any knowledge of stereotypes. Hence, I did not include these answers in the following chapters. It is highly likely that UVM’s social justice rhetoric/teachings in classes could have influenced survey responses.

In general, for all demographics, respondent interpretations of other groups’ styles ranged from guesses; [often reluctantly] listing off stereotypes; refusing to give examples for social justice reasons; claiming they were completely dumfounded; and most commonly, even if offering some answer, it is underwritten by uncertainty. Some people who were uncertain didn’t offer any ideas or guesses, but many did; some framed answer as a shot in the dark, some alluded to possible stereotypes. However, a small minority claimed various markers with absolute confidence and enthusiasm. Some people affirm that they can tell when someone has a certain identity, but don’t explain what that indicator is. I have labeled this category “Possible (Unclear How).”

Various respondents also listed non-visual cues in helping them determine someone’s sexual orientation or gender identity, which could include a person’s intonation, the way they carry themself, their mannerisms, vocabulary, body language in certain situations/during certain conversations, their gaze (who they’re watching may indicate attraction), and more. I will not be discussing these “tells” that respondents have listed, as they are irrelevant to this style-focused investigation and many draw on harmful stereotypes.

Theories of Queer Style

Correspondent for the website Everyday Feminism, Kaylee Jakubowski (2014), describes what she calls the “queer aesthetic,” “a collection of various styles commonly sported by members of the queer community, including vibrantly dyed hair, undercuts or mohawks, avant garde makeup techniques and colors, and genderqueer clothing combinations.” Further, a stylistic element that falls within this category is used “regardless of its apparent gendered state, marketed demographic, or stigmatized status,” she insists (ibid.). Moreover, she has heard testimony from others that this look can be an attempt at “genderless” expression, as “dressing one way would make social interactions slightly different than if a differently gendered article of clothing was worn instead” (ibid.). Therefore, this will be a useful lens in looking for specific elements of queer dress.

The societal perception of the gender of a person’s accessories, clothes, and more, and how that assessment can influence the way an individual is viewed, should be understood as a snapshot in time. As Frederick Greene delineates,

“Our identities, how we recognize ourselves and are recognized by others, is a complex construction, an articulation of historical demands on an already discursively mapped body. The most deeply experienced and personal sense of individuality and interiority is always already social” (Thorne 2019).
Thus, historical gendering of various stylistic elements is a necessary lens in viewing societal perceptions of today.

Accordingly, such gendering of items means that certain use and combinations of them can allow for the construction of outfits and styles for the specific purpose of signaling a particular identity. Suitably, Valerie Steele (2013: 12) explains how “By ‘performing’ fashion, often in such a way as to convey ‘signs of gayness’ to other gays, LGBTQ people, whether fashion professionals or not, have been instrumental in creating queer subcultural styles and a queer sensibility that have profoundly influenced mainstream fashion”; further, “some of the earliest queer styles were anything but closeted.” Though some may have been historically more conspicuous, some also have been specifically targeted at other queer people, as was the case with the writer Noel Coward; his well-known dressing gown or dinner jacket “may have sent coded messages to other gays” while “his look was unreadable to most heterosexuals” (ibid.: 34). Conversely, queer people may simply enjoy fashioning themselves in a certain way that could incidentally signal their identity and endanger them, as Coward feared in matching his tie, socks, and handkerchief (ibid.: 33). Hence, Steele has created the impression, which many respondents seem to believe, that there are distinct styles among queer subcultures, though these may be crafted to signal others or simply resulting from one’s taste.

We will explore respondent perceptions in the main body of this thesis (in Part II), but it is worth noting that one respondent’s theory seems to support the phenomenon of conspicuous queer styling that Steele has suggested can appear.

“There’s a trend going around that if you cuff your jeans its [sic] a bi thing so there is that. But there is no one definitive look for gay people like there is no one definitive look for straight people. But LGBTQ+ people often try to express them selves [sic] more through their clothing or body as society has tried to put them in a closet so they show off with their clothing and body more than straight people do.”

Yet, this respondent seems to believe that queer styling is not to visually communicate with other queers, but to make a broader statement to society. This public display of identity may be facilitated by the fact that, as E. Kennedy (2009: 4-5) explains, queer people are part of a “marked,” “deviant” class, so “It is possible that queer individuals, having broken one taboo, would be more inclined to break another.” We will review respondent and interview self-styling motivations later, though respondents might not be consciously aware of the reasoning behind this ease of presentation (if applicable to them).

**Queer Style as Art**

Queer people may also have artistic motivations for their self-fashioning. For instance, Oscar Wilde, a 19th century bi Irish poet who was a “key figure in the history of homosexuality and style,” advocated that “One should either be a work of art or wear a work of art” (Steele 2013: 20). He usually had nearly-shoulder-length hair and often wore velvet coats, 18th-century knee breeches, long capes, flowing ties, and unusual boutonnieres, most famous for his green carnations (ibid.). Similarly, Karlo Steel, a retail business owner and queer man, offers a touching explanation of his connection to beauty,

“At a very young age, people tend to create their own reality as a place of refuge. Often, it’s a place of beauty. That was certainly my story. And helping to create beauty is a part of it. I believe that fashion is a place that has been a kind of refuge [for queer people]. There is an adherence to surface values – a glittering façade – that is part of queer
culture. It might have to do with saying something about yourself that you can’t speak about. Perhaps young gay men have a greater receptiveness to aesthetics than people who are non-queer. We have to be careful, though, not to use queerness as a term that implies creativity [or] a higher aesthetic, because for a lot of queer people, it’s not part of who they are” (ibid.: 70; my emphasis).

Therefore, there seems to be a connection between beauty, “glitter,” and queer aesthetics, potentially as a “refuge,” as he says, likely from societal scrutiny and punishment for gender and sexual deviance. YouTuber Abigail Thorn furthers this association, as the title of one of her videos is “Queer✨ | Philosophy Tube,” the sparkle emoji added as “a digital gesture that lets you know I’m probably not playing a serious action, like using it as a slur” (Thorn 2019); it is a direct signal of solidarity to the queer community. Hence, we might foresee creative self-styling among queer respondents for these reasons.

Alternative Communities as Queer Safe Spaces

One faction of society that must be mentioned, as its various branches come up numerous times throughout the following chapters, is the “alternative” community. This entails people with lifestyles and self-fashioning differently from the normative one, and can include those who identify as punk, emo (standing for “emotional hardcore”), or goth, among others. These groups have appealed to different identities within the queer community and so without their mention, this investigation would be incomplete.

The precursor to punk, which must also be acknowledged for its gender-bending ethos, was known as “the glitter scene” or “glitter or glam rock,” in which it was “cool” for rock stars “to paint up and wear glitter and outrageous clothes” (Cole 2000). It grew out of the society of transvestites, transsexuals, and “rent boys” associated with Andy Warhol’s Factory, which blossomed into an “art-based music scene,” eventually becoming “the glitter scene” (ibid.). It was, according to Legs McNeil “about decadence: platform shoes and boys in eye makeup, David Bowie and androgyny” while punk “was about the apocalypse…annihilation” (ibid.). As McNeil mentions, David Bowie was a prominent face of this aesthetic; he and Mark Bolan often used those stylistic elements, donning platform boots and “exotic costumes” (Johnson and Barber 2019: 121). Homosexuality and bisexuality were tied to the “glitter and glam world,” found at its roots in the Andy Warhol Factory scene, so queer sexualities became “hip” in the music world (Cole 2000).

Punk began in 1976 in London and New York as an anti-commercial and anti-romantic (focusing on the limitations and destructiveness of humanity) counterculture reacting to widespread commercialization of music and youth style (ibid.). In Britain, it was developed by working-class youth in response to “economic depression and authoritarian ideology” and in which they incorporated materials like safety pins and trash bags into their fashion, signifying “spiritual paucity of everyday life” and converting these everyday commodities “to restate their opposition to dominant values and institutions.” (Hebdige 2005: 128). However, the US saw more middle-class involvement which seemed to preach a general upset with conventional values (Cole 2000). Nevertheless, the general the punk look of “antifashion ethos” and distaste for commercialization came to comprise torn jeans, leather jackets, bondage gear, Doc Marten boots, t-shirts with handwritten slogans, body piercings and jewelry made from various objects, such as pins, razor blades, and even tampons (Johnson and Barber 2019: 121). This clothing and these
unconventional accessories were paired with loud makeup; brightly-colored, gelled, shaved and styled hair, including Mohawks on men or women (ibid.).

The fact that this subculture celebrated and encouraged difference and individuality attracted gay men and women, who also contributed to the development of punk (Cole 2000). It offered the chance to “look different from everyone else,” as Jonathan Jackson explains, or to be “exotic and decorative,” as Joe Pop elaborates, which they clarify were the primary attractions of it, rather than to look sexy (ibid.).

Nevertheless, punk’s David-Bowie-roots “encouraged experimentation with dress and to some extent sexual identity” (ibid.). Again, punk arose from the queer glitter or glam rock scene and the name “punk” itself has queer origins, deriving from the name of men in prison who sexually submit to other men known as “wolves” [who otherwise identify as straight] (ibid.). It had “deliberate association with ‘deviant’ ‘sexualities’ with homosexuality “a big part in the early punk ideology” (Steele 2013: 48). Accordingly, a British man by the name of Malcolm McLaren witnessed one of the first glitter or glam rock bands in New York in the early 70s, the New York Dolls, who often dressed in drag that they called the “Puerto Rican sluts,” and was thoroughly impressed, and, thus, used the band as inspiration in his formation of the punk band the Sex Pistols (Cole 2000). Therefore, he proclaims to be the creator English Punk, alongside Vivienne Westwood, with the scene’s beginnings tied to drag (ibid.). Furthermore, the Sex Pistols’ early followers were known as “the Bromley contingent,” and several were gay or bi, “worshipped Bowie,” and often tried to “look as extreme as possible” by wearing fetish clothing (Steele 2013: 49). Additionally, in an effort to “confront the English Society,” as Westwood put it, about homosexuality, she and McLaren produced clothing with graphic images of gay sex, as well as clothes worn by gay leathermen, and designs from the gay sadomasochism scene (e.g. a shirt with straps to resemble a leather body harness) that they sold in their shop called Sex (Cole 2000). As Daniel Wojcik puts it, the “entire repertoire of bondage wear and sexual fetishism” of the punks served to “shock, threaten or expose culturally constructed ideas about ‘deviancy’” (ibid.). Therefore, it should not be surprising that Dick Hebdige describes the principal “signifiers of punk” as nihilism or blankness and sexual deviance or kinkiness (ibid.).

Moreover, punk style allowed for the breaking of gender roles and, hence, the blurring of gender binaries. “Themes of…gender confusion were explored by members of both sexes through their body adornment” which “upset conventional ideas about the display of masculinity and femininity” (Steele 2013: 48). Such as gender-bending outfit might include a plaid kilt over matching leggings with a punk t-shirt and Doc Marten boots, as worn by Simon Doonan, the Creative Ambassador-at-Large of the store Barney’s (ibid.). Women and men alike wore loud makeup and dyed their hair, as had glam rockers (Johnson and Barber 2019: 121). For instance, Riot Grrrls – members of a later strain of punk, an “underground 90s feminist hardcore movement” – challenged normative femininity by “parodying feminine artifice” in wearing “outrageous makeup” and dyeing their hair bright colors, attempting to “reclaim their bodies as well as their sexual and gender identities” (ibid.: 123). This alternative fashion and hairstyling aimed to “expose the commercialized nature and limitations of gender norms,” as well as “hetero-feminine definitions of appropriate womanhood that situate women as ideally desirable to cismen” (ibid.). In addition to protesting styling that women found oppressive, their self-fashioning included more “playful” elements that they believed were missing in the second wave of feminism, leading to a gendered bricolage” of studded leather gear, “girly” bows, and cheerleading skirts (ibid.). The overall effect of this gender-bending was that punks, though more
particularly men, were seen as “effeminate…some third sex…like invaders from another planet or something,” as put by a Teddy Boy in the beginnings of punk (Cole 2000).

Therefore, was an affirming scene for experimentation for queer people from the beginning, and its androgynous styles could still be used as such today.

The emo subculture is also queer-friendly, similarly allowing for gender play that breaches societal norms. The scene is “within a punk tradition,” beginning about a decade after punk began, in the mid-1980s, in urban centers, firstly in Washington, DC (Peters 2010). The kids who started the movement often wore thrifit clothes while today’s emos are more likely to don expensive labels, and the look is characterized by heavy bangs, eyeliner, and a tailored look, perhaps with blue-black hair dye and a dark, “mysterious” element (ibid.). It can come in three varieties, which Brian Peters only mentions for men: (1) a “rock star like look” with “overly dressed hair, serious facial and aesthetic expressions,” slim bodies, retro t-shirts, decorative belts, and low-rise, skinny jeans; (2) an enhanced version of the last look with longer hair, bangs that “sweep dramatically,” thicker eyeliner, tighter jeans, and Converse All-Star or Vans shoes – a version “dandy-ized” by gay emos in the electroclash subculture in the early 2000s that some confuse with Hipsters or “the edgy metrosexual”; and (3) the more clearly gay emo look that is androgynous, and which has led emo to be synonymous with “fag” (ibid.). This aesthetic allows men to pursue a form of self-presentation that does not align with straight culture, nor the similarly confining rules of masculinity in gay male culture, such as the buff gay body that seemed to communicate health during the AIDS epidemic (ibid.). Though they may be derided as effeminate by both heteronormative society and gay men, they can find acceptance among others in their emo subculture (ibid.). They communicate not only “otherness” in comparison to the gay male community, but also queer identity as “the style itself asks to be seen, unlike a sexuality that is not, usually, entirely visual” (ibid.). As one fan of the emo band My Chemical Romance describes the appearance of the singer, Gerard Way, who has often kissed his bandmate Frank Iero on stage and in music videos, “He knows what it’s like to question gender and literally break the rules of presentation. He made people literally question themselves whenever they looked at him on stage” (Kim 2020). Ultimately, Peters (2010) claims that “this stylized body…reveal[s] that emo and gender rebellion go hand in hand.”

We now know that respondents believe that there is a difference between cis, het and queer style, that there have been historical cases of queer people signaling each other – or society in general – through self-fashioning choices (discreetly or conspicuously), and that beauty can provide a haven for the queer community. These are all important lenses in moving forward with the investigation.
Chapter 2: The Privilege to Present as You Wish

A History of the Subversion of Gender Norms & Heteronormativity

In this thesis, I ask if people present themselves a certain way to display membership to groups who share their identities – whether to other members of the group or to the public at large. However, in asking this question, it is crucial to acknowledge that some people do not have the privilege to safely self-fashion themselves and modify their bodies as they please; social class, privilege, and certain contexts all determine whether nonnormative self-presentation and sexual expression are possible for some individuals over others. Of course, some individuals do exhibit bodily autonomy regardless of the particulars of these factors, knowingly putting themselves in harm’s way. Notably, ideas of normative expression vary by context, such as region of the United States, political party (e.g. progressive vs. conservative), and at the family level. Thus, we must investigate potential limitations on people’s free expression of themselves to situate what we then find out about self-styling by gender and sexual orientation. This chapter will first analyze historical examples of subversion of gender norms and heteronormativity and then move to discuss modern examples among celebrities. Following, respondents’ experiences with the enforcement of gender roles and the promotion of heteronormativity from their families growing up will be reviewed in order to understand factors that might limit respondents’ comfort in authentically expressing themselves, especially regarding modes of presentation that breach gender norms.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the upper-class has historically been able to subvert gender norms and heteronormativity over the centuries. Ultimately, “the suggestion of wealthy assurance could excuse out-of-the-ordinary behavior” (Breward 2013: 128). This idea can be clearly seen today in The Hunger Games series when people from the Capitol are mentioned. In contrast to main character Katniss Everdeen’s poorer hometown of District 12, the Capitol citizens are quite wealthy and dress in a flamboyant, almost alien way. The movie accurately transcribes author Suzanne Collins’ descriptions to a visual medium, displaying people with large, flowery, hat-like, headpiece clips, wide headbands, and even pink tutu-like tulle on their heads; bright pink, orange, yellow, blue, and metallic clothing (much of which is Star-Trek-esque); clothes with lots of ruffles, some with massive corsages; bright, unnaturally-colored (e.g. pink, orange, blue, burgundy) and styled hair (e.g. greased to a side-curl; triangular – shorter by the neck, growing like a ramp up to the top of the head; specific sections dyed); facial hair shaved into clean swirls (like Seneca Crane’s beard); tall, dramatic hats; long, metallic eyelashes; colorful eye makeup painted into elaborate designs and heavy, dark eyeshadow; massive shoulder pads; and bright lipstick (“The Hunger Games” 2015). Effie Trinket, the escort of the district tributes, is the epitome of this extraordinary behavior, often wearing a pastel wig, bright lipstick, and fashion straight off the runway that was designed merely for artistic appeal and not function (ibid.). Thus, looking at modern literature, there is a societal attitude to suspend judgment or look the other way when the rich conduct and present themselves in unusual manners, as their behavior is thought to be associated with their class and echelon.

For instance, most well-known and talked about from the late 18th century into the early 19th century, Anglo-Irish aristocrats Lady Eleanor and Sarah Ponsonby, frequently referred to as “the Ladies of Llandgolen,” were able to avoid the heterosexual marital institution by “eloping”
together (Wilson 2013: 170). In addition to defying heteronormativity, they also did not dress in accordance to traditional gender roles; both were masculine-presenting, donning riding habits (ibid.) - a riding outfit for women modeled off men’s equestrian wear with masculine military-style fastening and braid trim, composed of a jacket, skirt, and shirt which was styled like a man’s shirt, with high-standing collars and ruffled fronts, sometimes with a cravat (a male fashion accessory – a short, wide strip of fabric – worn around the neck and tucked inside an open-necked shirt) around the collar (Mitchinson 2019). They also powdered their hair and wore starched neck cloths and black beaver hats (Wilson 2013: 170). Instead of garnering criticism, they became celebrities and even had their likenesses transformed into ornaments (ibid.).

As the couple was just starting to gain fame and acclaim, in the late 18th century, Anne Lister was born (ibid.: 171), a woman who would actually come to meet Sarah Ponsonby in 1822 (Mitchinson 2019). She was a wealthy spinster living in Yorkshire and she, too, had a preference for masculine clothing (Wilson 2013: 171). Her desired look was “not all masculine, but rather softly gentleman like” (ibid.). In one of the more famous portraits of her, “Anne Lister of Shibden Hall by Joshua Horner,” she is wearing a black cravat with the frill of a white shirt peeking out (ibid.); this is indicative of her tendency to wear riding habits (Mitchinson 2019). Lister defied gender roles in various ways, such as by wearing black when women were supposed to wear white unless mourning, strong shoes and boots instead of slippers, and by eventually swapping her riding habit in for a greatcoat – a men’s garment – in 1823 (ibid.). Lord Byron may have been a role model for both style and behavior for Lister, as he was something of a womanizer and she considered herself a “masculine rake” (a fashionable or wealthy man who’s self-indulgent or promiscuous) (Wilson 2013: 172). She also may have been following the trend of new dandyism led by the creator of the modern gentleman’s suit, Beau Brummel (ibid.). Importantly, dictating this wealth of freedom was wealth. Lister’s fortune allowed her to be financially independent which permitted her to “live as she pleased” and gave her “opportunity to disregard conventions” (ibid.: 171). She was also fortunate to be tolerated by her family, friends, and neighbors alike (ibid.).

Hannah “Gluck” Gluckstein, who lived during the 20th century, is yet another name to add to the list. She was an “interwar ‘mannish’ lesbian…whose eccentric but purposeful adoption of male dress in public was seen as a privilege of her great wealth and possible outsider status” (Breward 2013: 128). Thus, she too was protected by her position in society.
Another couple of women of the 20th century who disregarded social norms without consequence were Radclyffe Hall, an English poet and author, and her partner Una Troubridge. They were born into upper-class families; Hall was especially privileged in being able to live independently from her family after inheriting a “substantial private income” at age 21 (Rolley 1990: 55). This attainment of wealth and subsequent departure from home allowed for Hall to “discard the ‘feminine’ clothes chosen by her mother in favour of tailor-made styles” and for she and Troubridge to “disregard public opinion and appear together in clothes which announced, to an informed viewer, their respective roles within a lesbian relationship” (ibid.). Hall often donned more masculine clothing like feminized versions of men’s suits and low-heel lace-ups heels (ibid.) and even embraced the male name “John” among friends (Oram 2021), whereas Troubridge had more feminine leanings, wearing dresses and high heels (Rolley 1990: 55). Despite breaching gendered clothing boundaries, their style “continued to observe the conventions of class”; one of their associates claimed that they “always dressed for dinner” (ibid.: 56). For instance, a guest at a mid-1930s party described Hall wearing a “beautifully cut man’s dinner jacket and skirt, a stiff shirt and bow tie” while “Lady Troubridge wore…an evening dress in cream coloured soft satin” with pearl earrings and “two or three strings of pearls round her neck” (ibid.). Because of the glamour of their ensembles, those who didn’t know they were lesbians, rather, “uninformed viewers,” particularly those of a lower class might have “(mis)read” their appearance “as part of the aristocratic tradition of eccentricity, especially since Radclyffe Hall was also a writer” (ibid.: 55). Therefore, the freedom and independence granted by wealth, as well as admiring gazes rewarded as a result of class status, greatly shielded Hall and Troubridge from societal consequences of breaking away from conventions of gendered clothing.

Some more-recent gender-bending icons of the past include Mick Jagger and Kurt Cobain. Jagger donned a Michael Fish white cotton dress at The Rolling Stones’ free performance in Hyde Park in 1969. Similarly, Cobain wore a “suburban-mom floral housedress” for the 1993 September issue of The Face magazine (Bowles 2020) and joined in with his bandmates for a 1993 shoot for Mademoiselle Magazine in which they donned women’s sweaters and fashioned scarves as skirts (“That Time” 2019). Cobain had commented, “I like to wear dresses because they’re comfortable. Men wearing dresses isn’t controversial” (ibid.).

Celebrities of the 21st century are similarly able to blur gender lines in their dressing, doing so frequently enough to suggest they suffer minimal lash back. Vin Diesel wore a black leather skirt to a 2003 award show in Scotland – perhaps to be respectful to Scottish tradition, but maybe because he liked the look as well; Jared Leto has worn dresses or skirts on a few occasions, once tweeting, “Real Men Wear Skirts”; Billy Porter often wears dresses to award shows; “…; 2 Chainz wore a skirt to the 2013 BET Awards in LA; Kanye West wore a leather skirt for a performance in 2014 with black jeans underneath; Keiynan Lonsdale has
been seen wearing skirts and dresses to award events, and in response to a hater tweeted, “Dude, you gotta stop tweeting me about it and just go try one on yourself. It’s only a piece of clothing and it’s fun”; and Jonathan Van Ness (a male-presenting nonbinary person) often wears dresses to the red carpet (“15 Celebrity Men” 2021).

Some stars have gone on to challenge both gendered dress and masculinity as a whole. In November of 2018, popular actor Timothy Chalamet who had a role in the gay love story Call Me By Your Name and pop singer and actor Harry Styles spoke with TeenVogue about “what it means to be a leading man” and their “responsibility” to “represent a new form of masculinity on screen” as it has “changed so much” as they’ve grown up – a question Styles prompted (Belle 2018). In response to Styles, Chalamet replied, “absolutely,” saying he wished he’d had more people to look up to like Lil B who “blurred those lines as a musician” and would be happy to hear that his characters are “instigating change in some way” (ibid.). He wants to disentangle masculinity from “a specific notion, or jean size, or muscle shirt, or affectation, or eyebrow raise, or dissolution, or drug use” as he sees his generation doing (ibid.). Styles said he feels like masculinity can be “so many different things today” – that it doesn’t have to be confined by others’ ideas of it – and that “there’s so much masculinity in being vulnerable and allowing yourself to be feminine” (ibid.). Chalamet echoed and praised Styles’ advocacy for vulnerability, “stating that he hopes people will learn from their interview that vulnerability “is not a weakness” or “social barrier…Humans are complex…We are not homogenous” (ibid.).

Styles has been putting his money where his mouth is. He cohosted the Met’s “Notes on Camp” Gala in 2019 (“camp” is embellished and dramatic style) while sporting a “nipple-freeing” black, sheer (organza material) blouse with a lace jabot (a decorative ruffle on the front), high-waisted pants, and pearl-drop earrings of “a dandified Elizabethan courtier” (a “dandy” is a man who places much importance on his appearance and a “courtier” is a member of a royal court) (Bowles 2020). Most notably, in 2020, he graced the cover and ample pages inside the December issue of Vogue with a picture of himself in a dress; he was the first ever man to be featured solo on the magazine cover (Henderson 2020). In one outfit for the shoot, Vogue writer Hamish Bowles claims that Styles strikes a pose “that manages to make ruffles a compelling new masculine proposition” (Bowles 2020). Bowles describes Styles’ fingers as “freighted with rings” and mentions that he has an “army of mini purses” and the magazine spread shows Styles’ various tattoos, including more feminine ones, such as a mermaid, rose, and giant butterfly on his chest (ibid.).

Styles’ music taste and relationship to clothes was heavily influenced by queer music idols, though he doesn’t mention these identities, such as David Bowie [a bisexual], Elvis [rumored to be bi], Freddie Mercury [bi], and Elton John [gay], whom he described as “showmen,” a “mind-blowing” discovery to him as a kid (ibid.).

Later in Bowles’ article, Styles explains his understanding of the purpose and joys of fashion.

“Now I’ll put on something that feels really flamboyant, and I don’t feel crazy wearing it. I think if you get something that you feel amazing in, it’s like a superhero outfit. Clothes are there to have fun with and experiment with and play with. What’s really exciting is that all of these lines are just kind of crumbling away. When you take away ‘There’s clothes for men and there’s clothes for women,’ once you remove any barriers, obviously you open up the arena in which you can play. I’ll go in shops sometimes, and I just find myself looking at the women’s clothes thinking they’re amazing. It’s like anything—anytime you’re
putting barriers up in your own life, you’re just limiting yourself [(the sentence that made it to Vogue’s cover)]. There’s so much joy to be had in playing with clothes. I’ve never really thought too much about what it means—it just becomes this extended part of creating something” (ibid.).

Styles has certainly received critique, but nothing that has vastly changed his life. Conservative pundit Candace Owens (2020) wrote a scathing tweet, claiming, “There is no society that can survive without strong men. The East knows this. In the west, the steady feminization of our men at the same time that Marxism is being taught to our children is not a coincidence. It is an outright attack. Bring back manly men.” In response, Styles (2020) posted a photo of himself in a pastel blue suit with the white, frilly sleeves of an undershirt sticking out, eating a banana with the caption “Bring back manly men.” Hence, rather unphased, Styles offered a comeback.

Celebrities have plenty of “haters” and receive death threats from various internet “trolls” on a regular basis, so this does not stand out. It likely won’t hinder his career, and he has received ample commendations from fellow stars. Actress and filmmaker Olivia Wilde describes Styles as “very modern” and “devoid of any traces of toxic masculinity”; further, she thinks “It’s pretty powerful and kind of extraordinary to see someone in his position redefining what it can mean to be a man with confidence” (Bowles 2020). Designer Alessandro Michele feels the same way, stating that Styles is “a big inspiration to a younger generation—about how you can be in a totally free playground when you feel comfortable. I think that he’s a revolutionary” (ibid.). Thus, Styles has the privilege to sport a dress when the common male-presenting person couldn’t.

The rich and famous of today are not only immune from societal discipline for breaching gendered boundaries in performative contexts, such as on the red carpet, in magazine photo shoots, and onstage; some live a genderfluid lifestyle without consequence. For instance, designer Marc Jacobs wore a plaid Comme des Garçons skort in 2008, liked the way it felt and said, “wearing it made me happy, so I bought more. And now I just can't stop wearing them” (“Men in Skirts” 2011). He wore a skirt to jury duty in 2010, can often be seen wearing one in New York City, and said in 2011 that he now wears “mostly Prada pencil skirts” (ibid.). Similarly, actor Will Smith’s rapper-singer son Jaden wears skirts and dresses not only on the red carpet, but casually around town. Though he has shown up in a pleated skirt, crochet top, and leather jacket for Louis Vuitton’s 2016 Series 4 womenswear campaign; worn a skirt for the 2016 Met Gala and heels for the 2017 Gala; and created a genderfluid clothing line called MSFTSrep that is for “the girl that wants to be a tomboy or the boy that wants to wear a skirt, and [who] people try to condemn” (Bhagchandani 2020), he also wears dresses and skirts outside the limelight. In 2015, then 16, he was spotted in Calabasas, California in a women’s black dress over denim shorts and has shared such outfits on social media (Wheat 2015). That same year, he tweeted about going to Topshop “to buy some girl clothes, I mean ‘clothes’” (ibid.). He likewise garnered ample attention from attending actress Amanda Stenberg’s high school prom in a black tuxedo with a white skirt under a long black tunic (Bhagchandani 2020). Smith has faced some “internet backlashes,” such as hate – alongside praise – from fans after the Louis Vuitton campaign (ibid.), but continues to stay strong for the sake of future generations, “In five years, when a kid goes to school wearing a skirt, he won’t get beat up and kids won’t get mad at him. It just doesn’t matter. I’m taking the brunt of it so that later on, my kids and the next generations of kids will all think that certain things are normal that weren’t expected before my time” (“15
Celebrity Men” 2021). Further, he states, “You just have to believe in yourself, you know. The world is going to keep bashing me for whatever I do and I'm going to keep not caring” (Bhagchandani 2020).

Attention must be paid to the fact that Marc Jacobs did not mention mistreatment while wearing skirts and the fact that the extent of “bashing” Jaden Smith mentions seems to be limited to internet comments. He is undoubtedly not facing bodily harm or other severe societal punishment if he insists that he can “keep not caring” (ibid.). Thus, he has the privilege to dress as he wants, unattainable by the average person who can’t afford to surround themself with security guards.

Even if you have fame, so long as you are outside the forcefield of wealth, the risks are real. Alok Vaid-Menon, a transfeminine, nonbinary, Indian-American writer, performance artist, and media personality (who uses they/them pronouns) mentions how dangerous living their everyday life can be. Despite showing up in friend Sam Smith’s music video for “I’m Ready,” Timothy Greenfield-Sanders’ 2016 documentary Trans List, NBC’s Pride 50, and garnering ample media attention (showcased in links plastering the walls of their website: www.alokvmenon.com/press), they report the daily struggles, particularly dangers, of being themself. In an interview with actor Eric Rutherford (2020), Alok stated, “I take fashion very seriously, as if it’s a matter of life and death, because it is.” Further, they frustratingly ask of society, “Why do I have to think about my safety every single day? Why do I live with debilitating chronic pain? [A potential reference to being beaten by spiteful onlookers.] Why do I have to navigate thinking about other people’s anxieties and projections every moment of my life? Why do I have to have the kind of assurance and comfort that comes from success that other people have…?” (ibid.). Hence, it is possible that Alok has not accrued enough wealth – via their art or writing, which they have requested followers to promote to their local bookstores – or influence (they have nearly 600,000 followers on Instagram) to be able to escape the confines of societal norms. Their lack of wealth may deprive them of the widespread dismissal of their appearance as an “eccentricity of aristocracy” and it certainly prevents them from protecting their person with bodyguards.

In the “real world,” outside the protection of wealth and stardom, even in liberal spaces like [predominantly Burlington] Vermont, seeing male-presenting people don traditionally feminine clothing is a rarity. I can count the times I have seen male-presenting people in Vermont in such clothing on two hands: one person in a dress downtown in the summer of 2018; a guy in my anthropology class wearing a dress in the spring of 2019; a person buying a “women’s” purple corduroy romper after trying it on in the fall of 2019 at the place I work; a group of male-presenting people wearing skirts to UVM’s Queer Prom in the spring of 2020, who I’ve historically seen wearing traditionally masculine clothing on campus when not attending a queer-themed event; a person wearing a skirt in Burlington that spring; and, lastly, a person wearing South-Asian-styled, flowy pants that [Western] women usually wear in the fall of 2020.

Freedom of self-expression may not only be regulated and, thus, limited by negative feedback from one’s family, friends, peers, and passerby, but in fact, remarkably little time has passed since the state could incarcerate individuals for what they chose to wear. From the 1940s through the 60s, police relied on the broad language of various laws to apprehend members of the queer community for exhibiting “gender variance” (e.g. via cross-dressing) – “increasingly considered a sickness and public offense” (Ryan 2019). For instance, “masquerade laws” that claimed to restrict “costumed dress” were intended to punish those who dressed up to conceal
themselves while committing a crime, but police attempted to use them on members of the queer community (ibid.). One such law was from 1895 and was originally meant to prevent farmers from disguising themselves as Native Americans to fend off tax collectors; it criminalized having one’s “face painted, discolored, covered, or concealed, or [be] otherwise disguised…[while] in a road or public highway” (ibid.). A case in which punishment for “masquerading” was nearly carried out was on Halloween in 1968. A police officer grabbed the collar of a man named Martin Boyce in New York City, claiming his Oscar Wilde costume was too feminine (ibid.). Boyce stated that he bought it from a unisex store and was let go, though the officer invited a nearby gang to descend upon him; fortunately, they left him alone due to his boldness in confronting the officer (ibid.). Similarly, a New York woman named Rusty Brown was arrested more than 20 times for wearing pants and a shirt, which she needed in order to work as a drag king and to get a factory job after losing her position during World War II (ibid.). Police tried to arrest [what we would today understand as] a trans man under the same legal loophole, but a magistrate acknowledged the original intention for the masquerade law (ibid.). Hence, the officers released the man, only to then charge him with “associating with idle and vicious persons,” of which a magistrate found him guilty and sentenced him to three years in a reformatory (ibid.).

A particularly notable mass arrest using these broadly-written laws was during the National Variety Artists’ Exotic Carnival and Ball in the Manhattan Center in 1962; guests were charged for masquerading and “indecent exposure” (Hugh 2019). Overall, during the era of these arrests, police even used laws to legitimize “street-level sexual assault and sexual humiliation” by checking citizens’ underwear to check for gender conformity (Hugh 2019). When the authorities weren’t disciplining gender-non-conforming people, other citizens did so through violence (ibid.). It wasn’t until the Stonewall riots of 1969 that these cross-dressing arrests ended (ibid.), though of course, the violence continues today (as Alok mentioned). Yet, as of 2011, the masquerade law is still on the books (Hugh 2019). Hence, we have not only had the judgment of our peers and the possible threat of violence from strangers to limit how we present ourselves in public, but further, historical, casual bending of the law presented real legal consequences for those who challenged societal norms.

It also cannot go without saying the limitations that many queer people of color feel to their self-expression. Randall Keenan, an American author, wrote in the Advocate, “too many queer Black men and women feel forced to choose whether they are Black first or queer first; some even opt to be only one or the other, as best as they can” (Cole 2013: 158). Correspondingly, Benoit Denizet-Lewis, a New York Times writer, author, and professor at Emerson College has reported that the past decade has seen many Black men go “Down Low,” rejecting “a gay culture they perceive as white and effeminate” (ibid.). This mirrors the comment of a survey respondent who said they didn’t relate to their subculture, believing, “this is due to my race. Much of mainstream queer/LGBTQ+/WLW [women loving women] culture is Eurocentric and the little pockets of Black queer- hood are positive and relatable to me but certainly scant.” Hence, Alphonso King details how Black and Latino men at gay club Escuelita have been transforming their looks from tight tees and “vogue” (the hot fashion of the time) to baggy clothing, becoming what he describes as “Homothugs” (ibid.). This perception of what it means to be queer seems to create the dichotomy of Black vs. white from that of Black vs. queer, making “Black” and “queer” mutually exclusive. It is worth asking how many Black queer people dislike wearing what they perceive to be “white” [queer] clothing, and how many feel
pressed by other Black queer people in their peer group to move away from those styles and join those styled like the said “Homothugs.”

To contextualize the argument of this chapter, it is essential to note that societal restrictions on self-expression don’t solely exist on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity; the struggles of Black people are a great example of collective limits on self-presentation. For instance, Black women’s hair can still have bearing on their ability to attain employment, grow their social networks, find romantic relationships, and climb the ladder (Johnson and Barber 2019: 124). A young waitress and Toronto faced losing her job if she didn’t keep her hair down by wearing a wig, weave, extension, or by straightening it daily (ibid.: 125). Further, in 2014, the US Army declared common hairstyle for Black women, such as dreadlocks, twists, and large cornrows, as “matted and unkempt” (ibid.). Thus, society sets a variety of visual limits on its citizens, whether they be race-related, gender-related, or based on stifling any other identity.

Therefore, in asking about the ways in which people style themselves, this chapter serves to remind us that not everyone can present themselves as their true, authentic selves.

Identifying Potential Limitations on Self-Expression in the Data

Family Gender Norms & Assumed Heteronormativity

Limitations on self-expression don’t come solely from broader society, but can come from within. Your family often teaches you the standard for gendered behavior (including who you “should” be dating) and dress (how to fashion yourself so as not to “look gay”), so if you’re taught traditional gender roles and are assumed to be heterosexual, you may believe variance from these norms is not permissible. You may internalize these teachings which may then prevent you from presenting as your authentic self – if you do not relate to and/or are dissatisfied with the “norm.”

Before I detail participant accounts of the presence or lack thereof of gender roles and homophobia in their upbringing, it is important that I spell out who these participants are. Where did they grow up? What’s their political affiliation? What’s their parents’ political affiliation? What are their parents’ gender identities and sexual orientations? What generations are we talking about – how many students vs. how many faculty? This information will help us contextualize the environments respondents are coming from so we can determine how widespread – across geography, political parties, and generations – gendered expectations are. We will later learn how much these stifle authentic self-presentation (or not).

Respondent Demographics

In order of prevalence (highest to lowest). Any identities that are not mentioned are not held by respondents.

Queer Identity

1. 73% (n=149/205) of respondents hold queer identities (due to gender and/or sexual orientation.
2. 22% (n=46/205) do not hold queer identities.
3. 4.8% (n=10/205) are questioning their sexual orientation.
Sexual & Romantic Orientation

1. **bisexual** (sexual attraction to two or more genders; e.g. interpreted as men & women or your gender & other genders) (89, 43.4%)
2. **biromantic** (emotional/romantic attraction to two or more genders; e.g. interpreted as men & women or your gender & other genders) (74, 36.1%)
3. **heterosexual** (sexual attraction to the opposite genders/genders other than your own) (63, 30.7%)
4. **heteroromantic** (emotional/romantic attraction to the opposite genders/genders other than your own) (56, 27.3%)
5. **homosexual** (sexual attraction to people of your gender) (38, 18.5%)
6. **homoromantic** (emotional/romantic attraction to people of your gender) (26, 12.7%)
7. **asexual** (no sexual attraction towards anyone) (18, 8.8%)
8. **questioning** (21, 10.2%)
9. **other** (9, 4.4%) – write-ins mentioned in Chapter 1
10. **aromantic** (no emotional/romantic attraction towards anyone) (5, 2.4%)

Queer Gender Identity
I am only including queer gender identities here as some respondents who did not mark “transgender” or “genderfluid” or “other” and marked a gender that matched the one they were assigned at birth did not mark “cisgender.” It is then hard to tell who is “male” or “female” and “cisgender” vs. “transgender” or “genderfluid.”

1. Non-binary (22, 10.7%)
2. Transgender (20, 9.8%)
3. Genderqueer/gender fluid/gender non-conforming (14, 6.8%)
4. Feminine or "femme" or "flamboyant" (7, 3.4%) – a term sometimes used to describe queer men, Questioning (7, 3.4%)
5. Masculine or "butch" (5, 2.4%) – a term sometimes used in the lesbian community
6. Agender (1, 0.5%) – meaning “genderless,” though this can encompass a broad range of self-identification
7. Other (2, 1.0%): demigender (partial connection to a gender, maybe a third gender), Hijra (a third gender recognized in India; this respondent is South Asian).

**Personal Political Affiliation**

1. Democrat / Liberal (97, 47%)
2. Socialist (45, 22%)
3. Independent (left-leaning) (28, 13%)
4. Communist (10, 4.9%)
5. Moderate (7, 3.4%)
6. Libertarian (6, 2.9%)
7. Other (6, 2.9%)
8. Apolitical (5, 2.4%)
9. Independent (right-leaning) (1, 0.5%)
10. Republican / Conservative (0, 0.0%): I have included this identity for the sole purpose of emphasizing the lack of representation of this party, which could have significant bearing on the findings of this study. This may be due to nonresponse bias (those who respond to the survey are fundamentally different from those who do respond) or reflective of the composition of UVM more broadly.

**Family Political Affiliation**

I have emboldened affiliations that rank differently on this list than the list above and written how their percentage compares to the survey respondents’ group.

1. Democrat / Liberal (171, 83.4%) – fewer
2. Republican / Conservative (51, 24.9%) – more
3. Independent (left-leaning) (45, 22.0%) – more
4. Moderate (29, 14.1%) – more
5. Independent (right-leaning) (23, 11.2%) – more
6. Socialist (20, 9.8%) – fewer
7. Apolitical (9, 4.4%) – more
8. Libertarian (4, 2.0%) – fewer
9. Communist (2, 1.0%) – fewer
Parental Identities

Queer identities are emboldened.

1. A heterosexual couple (180, 87.8%)
2. Both are straight (114, 55.6%)
3. Both are cisgender (86, 42.0%)
4. A single parent (13, 6.3%)
5. A same-sex couple (6, 2.9%)
6. [Only] one is straight (5, 2.4%)
7. [Only] one has a queer sexual orientation (4, 2.0%)
8. [Only] one is cisgender (2, 1.0%)
9. Both have queer sexual orientations (1, 0.5%); This is at odds with the statistic for “a same sex couple.”
10. Other (4, 2.0%); 1 – unsure if mom is straight, 1 – step-parent is bisexual and genderfluid (assigned male at birth), 1 – parent(s) asexual later in life, single dad is straight

Place of Origin

I have highlighted these states to convey their majority political affiliation, based on the way they voted in the 2020 election (“Road to 270” 2021): blue = liberal, red = conservative, and yellow = “battleground”/swing states (split more evenly by party), who are not solidly conservative or liberal for each election cycle. I did not categorize other countries as such, as I am less familiar with their politics.

I asked respondents to indicate their state of origin as the political climate of that state may be indicative of their parents’ attitudes about gender and sexual orientation, as well as how comfortable respondents feel presenting themselves as they wish in public. For instance, more conservative states may be less tolerant of digression from gender norms, hoping to “conserve” traditional practices and values. It is also possible that the discouragement and concealment of queerness may prevent people from ever questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity, and therefore, in some cases, realizing their queer identity. This possibility, again, was mentioned by respondents in Chapter 1 – the power of internalized homophobia to cause you to repress your identity, inhibiting you from understanding it and figuring it out.

1. Vermont (34, 17%)
2. Massachusetts (42, 20%)
3. New York (23, 11%)
4. Connecticut (16, 7.8%)
5. New Hampshire (11, 5.4%), Pennsylvania (11, 5.4%)
6. New Jersey (8, 3.9%)
7. California (7, 3.4%)
8. Rhode Island (6, 2.9%)
9. Washington (5, 2.4%)
10. Maine (4, 1.9%)
11. Illinois (3), Missouri (3), Virginia (3) = 1.5% each
12. Minnesota (2); Colorado (2); Maryland (4, with Washington, D.C. residents) = 0.98% each
13. Arkansas, Kansas, Tennessee, South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Idaho, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Alaska = 0.49% each

14. Other countries: Germany (2, 1.5%)

15. Argentina (Rosario), Romania (Bucharest), Russia (Kemerovo), Canada (Ottawa), the United Kingdom (Oxfordshire), China (Ningxia) = 0.49% each

Therefore, it is clear that respondents come from predominantly liberal states and are majority liberal (the four highest ranked political affiliations were all liberal), whereas their parents come from a more diverse range of political backgrounds (two of the highest ranked affiliations were left-leaning, followed by a conservative and then moderate one). Most of their parents are also straight and cisgender parents.

**Respondent Age**

It is necessary to establish the range of ages of respondents as different generations may have grown up around and been raised with different attitudes towards the queer community. Additionally, subcultural style – and style in general – changes over time, so it will be essential to distinguish what visual identity signals participants mention are currently used today and which are signals from another time.
First-year (41, 20.0%), Sophomore (41, 20.0%), Junior (40, 19.5%), Senior (58, 28.3%), PhD student or equivalent (2, 1.0%), Graduate student (12, 5.9%), Faculty (12, 5.9%), Other (5, 2.4%)
Age Range: 18 years old (5 people) – 69 (highest values: 57, 63, 67, 68, 69)
Mode: 21
Median: 20
Outliers: 25, 26, 27, 28, 30, 31, 32, 33, 37, 47, 48, 53, 54, 57, 63, 67, 68, 69

Family Sexuality Talk

When asked if their parents talked to them about sexuality, 143, 70% (n=143/205), of participants answered “yes.”

- **27% (n=55/205) had parents who displayed clear acceptance of the queer community.**

  This entails their parents explicitly telling them that they support the community and/or that they can be/love whoever they want. In some cases, parents made it clear that they weren’t assuming their child’s sexual orientation. Two respondents describe earlier interactions with queer people growing up. One has “lesbian aunts who are incredibly supportive and have paved the way in our family for queerness, though there have truly never been any negative responses/situations,” noting that their family “is super accepting and supportive; I feel very lucky.” The other explains how their parents “were friends with gay/lesbian couples and explained their relationships to us at a young age,” “always emphasized that me and my brothers could love whomever and date whomever we wanted, regardless of gender, and that they would always love and support us no matter how we wanted to live our lives.” One person references “the [sex] talk” they had with their parents, and how their parents “made it clear that they didn’t care about the gender of the person I am with (possibly some asexual erasure there but they meant well).” Two respondents’ dads not only demonstrated acceptance of the queer community, but asserted that same-sex attraction is ubiquitous (to an extent), one saying “a couple times that everyone is a little bi,” and another insisting that “sexuality is fluid.” Intriguingly, one person is surrounded by queer people within their family and actually feels less a part of the queer community than their immediate family.

  “Sexuality was explained to me earlier on because I have two lesbian moms so I had to be told that this was less common than everyone else. My younger brother is also gay. Part of me feels not "gay enough" because though I am curious about my same-sex attraction, it’s not as solidified as my other family members’ sexualities.”

Another respondent describes a free and accepting environment in almost every way.

*My parents have always been very vocal about loving who I love, regardless of anything. They never made any assumptions that I was straight or would have relationships with the opposite gender, they just encouraged me to do what made me happy and be with whoever/no one to accomplish that. The focus has always been on me making myself happy, not ever about adhering to norms or participating in heteronormative society. I never really came out to my parents because they never automatically assumed I, or my sibling, were straight. Fluidity in my sexuality, and expressing myself according to how I*
Other examples comprise parents using the term "partner" instead of boyfriend and girlfriend, discussing a queer child’s potential relationships, asking if a child likes any “guys or girls,” checking in with their child about their same-sex relationship, not assuming that their child is straight, and annual family attendance at the Pride parade. Therefore, many respondents report positive and accepting upbringings.

- **17% (n=24/143) grew up in a family that made homophobic remarks**

  This involves a household ambience of homophobic attitudes and remarks, behavior around the respondent that implies that their family does not fully accept their sexual orientation (if queer), but does not include direct clashes between queer respondents and their parents over their identities. One respondent describes how their family “has used ‘gay’ as an insult frequently and discouraged non-masculine behavior.” Another says that her parents discourage “being affectionate with [her] women friends” as it “may be perceived wrong.” Along those lines, one explains that she came out to her mom as bi, who is accustomed to her “strictly dating men,” and her mom then makes sure to mention that past behavior whenever they talk about sexuality – as if to dismiss her daughter’s queer sexuality. An additional respondent describes their mom’s hypocritical behavior. “My mother has talked about how being gay is a sin,” they say, but “She has expressed that it is fine for a cousin to be gay as long as he ‘doesn’t act on it.’” This next respondent portrays how most of their family has dismissed their attraction to women.

  “As a child there was a strong assumption that I would be interested in boys/men. As I was coming out, I had my attraction to girls downplayed to be ‘friendship.’ Even today, after having transitioned and having been open about my attraction to women for several years, my extended family still refers to any girlfriend I bring around as my friend. Some family members still seem to assume that I want to date men. Within my immediate family my mom and sister are overall accepting and have embraced the girls I have introduced to them, although my dating life is not really a subject of discussion unless I bring it up. My father only refers to the girlfriends I’ve had as friends.”

  Hence, homophobic upbringings are not all too uncommon.

- **15% (n=32/205) found their parents to be open to queer identities and/or ultimately supportive.**

  This means that their parents are open to the queer identities, open to changing their beliefs about queer identities, and/or eventually accepting upon learning that their child is queer, but they are not explicitly accepting of the queer community; they didn’t tell their kids, "You can be X and we'll love you." Their acceptance of the community comes after their child comes out – they’re reactive rather than tolerant from the outset; they weren’t initially unaccepting, but the topic didn’t arise until their child came out; or they give their child mixed messages regarding their acceptance. One respondent describes their parents as “trying to understand” their “bisexuality since they had a hard time believing me at first.” Another respondent says that their mom attempts to set them up with some of her students, “trying her hardest to appear open and accepting but she doesn’t totally understand haha.” Additionally, one man paints his parents as
“generally” supportive of him “as a gay man,” but that they “asked me to remain closeted, out of fear I would be bullied. That was disappointing, because they clearly didn't understand how hard it is to be in the closet. I did not listen to their advice.” Along those same lines, one respondent describes how his family is ultimately supportive of his queer identity, but that his has still faced some homophobic requests and comments.

“While my family openly embraces my sexuality (and marriage to my husband), I have been told to ‘tone down’ behavior that comes off as outwardly gay. This includes hand-holding, hugging, kissing, or any ‘touchy-feely’ behavior around my heterosexual family. I've been told that I should be the manly one in my partnership, while my husband is permitted to act more feminine–this upholds their idea of a balanced relationship. My husband and I have open discussions with our families regarding our individual/shared gay experience, and our families are increasingly supportive over time. These discussions can range from coming out, to the dating scene for gay men, to how we regularly borrow from one another’s wardrobe. The older we get, the more we feel the need for complete transparency.”

Another respondent’s family is simultaneously accepting and unaccepting of queer identities, like in the example above.

“I have a butch lesbian aunt on one side of my family, and a gay uncle on the other. My parents are accepting of different sexualities but tend to refer to those relatives in ways that aren't 100% understanding. For example: 'I had to share a hotel room with your uncle X, but it's okay because it's like sharing a room with a woman.' When I came out as bisexual to my mother, she was surprised, asked if I had dated any of my female friends in high school, and has not brought it up with me since.”

This next person then explains how her parents came around to be interested in her identity, though they had had a rocky start.

“When I came out to my parents, I did have an explicit conversation with my dad about 'what it meant.' And my dad has since had conversations with me, asking about who I like and who I feel attraction to. My mom and I have mostly discussed my sexuality in the context of what it would mean to come out to my grandparents (which I have basically resolved never to do). And my mom and I have also talked about my coming out (because her initial reaction/beliefs about homosexuality weren't fully accepting, but she has since come to terms with it and apologized for some of the things she said). My parents will also ask about/make comments about how many of my friends are gay and make comments about how I should spend more time with men.”

As seen, respondents’ parents can grow and learn to accept them, but homophobic behavior does not always end totally and acceptance is certainly on a spectrum.

- **10%** (n=14/143), all of whom were queer, said their parents directly derided their sexual orientation.
This response entails direct dismissal of identity, encouragement to be straight, assurance that one would eventually end up with a partner of “the opposite sex” in a heterosexual marriage, and discouragement of certain behavior that reveal’s one’s nonnormative sexual orientation. An ace person shows up in this group, upset that their parents “are resistant to” their ace identity, dismissing it, as they “often say I just haven't met the right person yet.” Another respondent, who is nonbinary, describes being told that being gay is bad, being straight was required, that they “couldn’t be a boy as a kid,” and being made fun of for being gay and pushed to date men. Additionally, one respondent received the “it’s a phase” speech, told their sexual orientation would return to straight after college and they would “meet the right guy,” so it is now “an avoided subject.” In that vein, one bi woman was told by her mom, upon coming out, “that she thought I would end up marrying a man despite being in a relationship with a woman.” Another respondent shares a similarly shocking story. “When I was around 13 I asked my mother if she would be mad if I were gay to which she responded ‘If you want to choose to lead a life that miserable, it's your decision to make.'” As demonstrated, there is a vast range of pain that a parent can inflict on their queer child.

- **8.8% (n=18/205) mentioned their parents assuming that they were straight.**

Some respondents found their parents teasing them about liking “the opposite" sex, encouraging them to date the “opposite” sex, and/or using heterosexual gendered language when describing their child’s future spouse. One person who is still closeted says that, among their family, there are “periodic mentions of ‘oh that girl is [insert adjective here]’ or something along those lines, or talking about if I'm going to marry and/or have kids.” Another respondent seemingly gets mixed messages from her mom, learning by observation that being in a relationship can be cause for critique, but is still asked about her interest in boys. “My mom mostly encourages abstinence and shames my sister, to me, for having premarital sex/ ‘sleeping around.’ She and my sister also often ask if I like any ~boys~ / have a boyfriend.” Likewise, one person describes their mom and grandma “point[ing] out different male persons in my life that I could date, presumably because they did not like that I hadn't dated a male or anyone else and were concerned.” Another respondent describes familial behavior along these lines, “My parents tend to make occasional jokes if I start talking about male friends, like teasingly asking if I think they're cute. I find it more bizarre than inherently offensive, though I do get rather annoyed that they only bring this up with [regard to] cisgender guys.” Another describes how their family has spun a straight narrative for them all along the way.

“When I was a kid, everyone assumed I would be straight: my parents told me I couldn't date a boy until I was 16; when my mother and I would talk about weddings, she'd talk about my future husband; my grandparents would ask me what kind of boy I wanted, etc. All language pointed toward me eventually being straight.”

It should be noted that these are simply the respondents who explicitly stated that their parents assumed that they were straight; others may have been raised this way but did not think to mention it – a clear possibility given that we live in a heteronormative society.
• 0.98% (n=2/205) have noticed their parents express acceptance of others’ queer identities, though have not directly stated support for the queer community broadly and/or have assumed their child is straight.

One respondent spells their situation out in saying that their parents, “don't think it is natural or right [to be queer] but are accepting of other's sexual orientation. They just don't want me to be queer or exhibit any desires or behaviors that differ from ‘the standard,’” clearly meaning the “default” of straight in a heteronormative society. Another acknowledges that his parents have “been accepting of LGBT friends' identities,” but still “say things like, 'your future wife,’” assuming his heterosexuality. Hence, queer identities may be “safer” and more tolerable when in other people’s families than one’s own, or a person may simply not consider that one could be in their family.

• One person (0.49% of the group) described their parents as being specifically unsupportive of more ambiguous queer identities.

They say:

“I'm straight, but have never had a boyfriend. My mom at one point asked me if I liked girls. I know that my family would accept me if I were LGBT+. My dad has two gay siblings, so our family is very comfortable and accepting of the topic. However, my mom has expressed some judgment towards different gender-identities/sexual orientations that are not as black and white as being gay.”

Clearly, acceptance of one queer identity does not necessarily entail acceptance of another.

• 4.4% (n=9/205) mentioned their parents criticizing or inquiring into their self-presentation for their style’s possible connotations of gender- and hetero-divergent behavior.

One person describes their parents as “Always vocalizing my future as being spent with a man, assuming when I wear make-up or dress-up it’s for a man, and telling me not to cut my hair short because it would 'look gay.’” Another respond tells a similar story, saying, “My mom once told me she didn't want any of her children to be gay because it’s a hard life to have. In high school when I began to dress more masculinely as I figured out my sexuality, she made degrading comments about queer people.” One respondent describes her mother’s strict definition of appropriate female behavior, stating, “My mother who is more moderate or even conservative, has accused me many times of being pregnant and called me different slurs/used harsh language such as 'whore' or 'slut.' She’d also encourage me to cover up when male family or friends were around.” One woman details her mother’s extensive concerns about her presentation:

My mother openly worried that I didn’t 'know how' to be a girl as I did not wear makeup or always behave in the stereotypically feminine way that she wanted to see. She didn’t want me to go to Dartmouth College because it was known for having the highest % male students in the Ivy League. However, I was attracted to and dated boys so I guess that eventually reassured her that despite my iffy, to her, gender presentation I would be able to get married (to a man, the only possible route any of us imagined at that time!).
She further clarifies, “I think my mother wasn't necessarily happy with how I dressed in oversized thrift-shop clothes that ‘hid’ my figure.”

Others describe their parents’ suspicions about the possible queer connotations of their clothes, one saying, “My mother keeps thinking that I am gay, but I just enjoy wearing clothing that happens to be feminine.” Another similarly adds, “My mom often asks if I'm ‘into girls’ because I sometimes dress in masculine clothes.” One person receives mixed messages from her family, having “Been told I ‘dress like a d*ke,’ but I can love whoever I want. It's confusing.” Likewise, this other respondent is often mocked.

“I have been teased by family about my hair choices and the way I dress. They have been saying these jokes for years, but none of them really know that I am Bi. I have discussed it with my sister a bit but it is usually in a joking manner and I don't know if she actually believes me.”

Therefore, many parents seem to have some sense of queer associations with certain styles and clothing.

All of the earlier statistics exhibit factors that could very well influence how positively or negatively respondents feel about the queer community and, thus, any resemblance they may bear to queer people – whether they are queer or not. They may refrain from dressing in ways associated with their queer subculture (e.g. that of bisexuals) or in stereotypically queer ways to cement their identity as a straight, cisgender person (e.g. straight, cisgender men staying away from vibrantly colored clothes if they believe they’ll signal queerness).

This last statistic is at the crux of the question of how much influence people’s upbringing and home environment can have on their restraint or expression of their authentic self through their self-fashioning and body modifications, as it directly addresses respondents’ parents’ perceptions of their self-presentation.

Family Gender Roles

- **44% (n=91/205) of respondents’ parents clearly and consciously enforced gender roles.**

  Parents gave explicit instructions and/or criticism; voiced concerns over their child's style, mannerisms, behavior; and more; had gendered expectations of clothing, e.g. women should dress modestly or should groom themselves to attract men.

- **28% (n=58/205) said their parents demonstrated openness to change/become more accepting**

  Not traditional gender roles, but maybe not to be progressive; maybe just arose from preference. Maybe the parents don't feel one way or another about their roles/chores. Parents don't necessarily push kids one way, but also don't voice: be/do what you want. // Not explicitly stating that they're accepting of whatever.

- **22% (n=45/205) reported their parents indirectly communicating traditional gender roles to them**
These respondents relate witnessing their parents engage in traditional gender roles, though such roles may not be consciously desired or enforced; it may be out of habit of the parents, perhaps resulting from how they were raised. Overall, the parents do not push such behaviors on their children.

- **16% (n=32/205) characterize their parents as clearly progressive**

  These parents either explicitly tell their kids that they can be whoever they want — that they do not have to subscribe to gender roles, and/or the parents’ gender roles are progressive/nontraditional.

- **16% (n=33/205) claim that their parents did not explicitly communicate gender roles or the respondent testimony was unclear**

  These respondents report that their parents did not clearly communicate gender roles to them, though they may not have considered that their parents taught them through demonstration, body language, or inconspicuous comments here and there. However, this category also includes respondents whose answers were unclear and the number of references is equivalent with the number of respondents (this group reflects 33 respondents).

### Openness with Identity

Whether or not someone styles themself how they wish, which may include fashioning themself in a way to signal those within their queer subculture, will likely depend on whether or not they are “out” about their identity, and to whom they have disclosed this information. Telling a close friend that you’re queer is different from telling your family or all of your friends. You may hold back on presenting yourself how you please to stave off criticism or questions from those who you have not yet told, or who you may never tell.

Below are some prompts from the survey and how participants responded to them.

**Have you disclosed/discussed your sexual orientation? If so, to/with whom?**

1. To friends and family – 48% (n=71/149)
2. To select friends, acquaintances, and/or family – 28% (n=42/149)
3. Only to friends - 15% (n=22/149)
4. N/A; I didn’t feel I had to – 6.7% (n=10/149)
5. No - 2.7% (n=4/149)

**Total who have disclosed their identity to someone:** 91% (n=135/149)

**At what age did you first make this disclosure to friends and/or family and/or acquaintances?**

[135 respondents disclosed their sexual orientation to someone]
Range: 8-44
Mean: 16.64
Mode: 17
Median: 16
Lowest values: 8, 8, 10, 10, 11
Highest values: 24, 25, 30, 44

Do you plan to disclose/discuss your sexual orientation to more people or at all?

1. Yes - 48% (n=65/205)
2. Maybe - 37% (n=50/135)
3. I do not plan to, for the foreseeable future, though this may change - 13% (n=17/135)
4. N/A, disclosure is unnecessary for me (e.g. people already assume my sexual orientation correctly) - 12% (n=16/205)
5. I never plan to - 0.74% (n=1/135)

Have you finished telling everyone who you want to (who's in your life currently)?
[of people who have disclosed their identity; n = 135]

1. Yes – 49% (n=66/135)
2. No – 51% (n=69/135)

Age you finished telling everyone you wanted to
[of the 66 people]
Range: 10-61
Mean: 20.5
Mode: 18
Median: 19
Lowest values: 0, 8, 8, 10, 10
Highest values: 30, 30, 40, 49, 61

In summary, most respondents (91%) have disclosed their sexual orientation to at least one other person, with 76% having disclosed it to multiple people; there seems to be a trend of people “coming out” [of the closet] in their teenage years (e.g. 14-17), over half of respondents have not disclosed their sexual orientation to everyone they want to, most people (77%) see at least the possibility of coming out to more people in the future, and those who have completed telling everyone they desire to usually wrapped up in early adulthood (e.g. 18-21).

Hence, it is possible that all those respondents who have unburdened themselves by telling several people in their life their identity (vs. one good friend) will be less hindered in expressing their true selves through their style. However, given that nearly half have not told everyone in their lives who they would like to, they may change their style based on who they find themselves in contact with.

Family Acceptance of Identity

For those who have told their parents their queer identity and have faced rejection, it is possible that such a reaction could cause a person to repress their true selves and self-expression from shame, internalized homophobia, and/or to remain on good terms with their family.

Below are more survey prompts and respondents’ respective answers.

Is your family accepting of your sexual orientation/identity?

1. Yes, they accept me, but my sexual orientation does not come up much and/or it has not been a topic of conversation - 46% (n=68/149)
2. Yes, they embrace me as I am/enthusiastically support my identity - 32% (n=47/149)
3. Yes, they have accepted me, though not enthusiastically; they do not fully understand or support my identity - 18% (n=27/149)
4. No, they refuse to acknowledge/accept my identity but still recognize me as family - 4.0% (n=6/149)
5. No, they have disowned me/we are estranged - 0.67% (n=1/149)

Is your family accepting of your gender identity?

1. Yes, they embrace me as I am/enthusiastically support my identity - 54% (n=81/149)
2. Yes, they accept me, but my gender identity does not come up much and/or it has not been a topic of conversation - 28% (n=42/149)
3. Yes, they have accepted me, though not enthusiastically; they do not fully understand or support my identity - 14% (n=21/149)
4. No, they refuse to acknowledge/accept my identity but still recognize me as family - 2.7% (n=4/149)
5. No, they have disowned me/we are estranged (the same person who said this regarding their sexual orientation) - 0.67% (n=1/149)

As answers to this question are not especially remarkable if they are asked of cisgender people (though some of those people may not fully conform to gendered style and roles), I have showcased answers specifically from nonbinary and transgender (who have transitioned to binary genders and/or who did not select the “nonbinary” option as well) individuals.

**Nonbinary Responses Only (n=17):**

Is your family accepting of your gender identity?

1. Yes, they accept me, but my gender identity does not come up much and/or it has not been a topic of conversation - 41% (n=7/17)
2. Yes, they have accepted me, though not enthusiastically; they do not fully understand or support my identity - 29% (n=5/17)
3. No, they refuse to acknowledge/accept my identity but still recognize me as family - 18% (n=3/17)
4. No, they have disowned me/we are estranged (the same person who said this to sexual orientation) - 5.9% (n=1/17)
5. Yes, they embrace me as I am/enthusiastically support my identity - 5.9% (n=1/17)

**Transgender Responses Only (Excluding Nonbinary Individuals) (n=11):**

Is your family accepting of your gender identity?

1. Yes, they have accepted me, though not enthusiastically; they do not fully understand or support my identity - 100% (n=11/11)

It seems that the overwhelming majority of respondents’ parents have accepted their queer identities to some extent. Nevertheless, notably, nonbinary individuals are the least likely to be enthusiastically embraced by their parents (5.9% vs. 32% for those with a queer sexual orientation) and a larger percent have parents who refuse to acknowledge their identity (18% vs. 4% for sexual orientation). Amazingly, all 11 transgender respondents (those who are not
nonbinary) gave the same answer – claiming to be accepted, but not enthusiastically due to their parents’ lack of understanding of their identity. An individual with both a queer sexual orientation and gender identity seems to be the sole respondent to have been disowned and/or estranged from their parents. Hence, it seems like respondents have good relationships with their parents for the most part, but that nonbinary individuals are least likely to have their identity respected by their parents.

**Gender Inversion**

When some respondents’ parents dissuaded them from presenting themselves in certain ways so as not to “look gay,” they were demonstrating awareness of “gender inversion.” This is an important theory to understand in analyzing the dress of different queer sexualities, especially in discussing the privilege that some queer people have to express themselves authentically in their self-fashioning over others. This phenomenon is partly to blame for the stigma associated with queer people: breaking gender norms.

In his 1886 text *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Austro-German psychiatrist and sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing described homosexuality as an innate and inalterable trait that he coined as “sexual inversion” (“The Well of Loneliness” 2021). This term translated to gender role reversal, meaning that female inverts are more likely to engage in activities and don clothes more typically associated with men (ibid.). Krafft-Ebing said they had a “masculine soul” (ibid.), which is an interesting parallel to what we say of transgender people today. Further, Krafft-Ebing thought that inverts experienced reversal of secondary sex characteristics (ibid.). Overall, he judged inversion to be a degenerative disorder suffered by those with a family history of mental illness (ibid.). However, Havelock Ellis, a fellow sexologist and English physician, eugenicist, writer, progressive intellectual, and social reformer, marked it only as a difference, and not a flaw, a view Krafft-Ebing came to share by 1901 (ibid.).

In 1928, Radclyffe Hall (who was mentioned in Chapter 2) published a novel called *The Well of Loneliness*, which follows an English invert (a lesbian) named Stephen Gordon (ibid.). Her inversion is clear by the masculine “timber of [her] voice,” “build of [her] ankle,” and “texture of [her] hand,” among other traits, and the book details her life from childhood to the point of falling in love with a woman named Mary Llewellyn (ibid.). The book bears one sexual line, speaking of Stephen and Mary: “‘and that night, they were not divided’” (ibid.). Due to its reference and, thus, defense of “unnatural practices between women,” a British court deemed the book obscene (ibid.); the book was censored (Oram 2021). In the US, however, Hall withstood legal challenges in New York state and in Customs Court (“The Well of Loneliness” 2021).

The book’s trial, as well as the move back to more feminine clothing for women, versus the more masculine outfits of the ‘New Women’ and service members of World War I (as will be discussed later), started to develop a societal association between a masculine appearance and same-sex desire among women (Oram 2021). Whereas such clothing had been both amusing and odd to interwar social commentators, those who donned it in this critical, post-trial period began to receive stares of a different sort (ibid.). Some women opted to verbally “come out” to the public, in addition to what their clothes were already saying (ibid.). Though many lesbians found masculine garb empowering, the continuous growth of its association with same-sex desire into the middle of the 20th century made them more prone to societal aggression (ibid.); let us not forget Rusty Brown who was arrested more than 20 times for wearing pants and a (Ryan 2019). An innocent time of gender experimentation between World War I and World War II terminated
with similar themes not to be revisited again until the questioning of gender and sexuality norms in the 1960s (Oram 2021).

The term “invert” carried into the 1950s and 1960s, used alongside “pervert,” “queer,” “pansy,” and “gay,” while “gay” entered the mainstream in the US in 1969 and the UK in 1970 with the establishment of the Gay Liberation Movement (Lomas 2009: 171).

It must be recognized that the use of the word “inversion” in this phenomenon relies on the idea of male and female genders inherently being defined in opposition to each other. Sociologist Anthony Synnott describes this as a “theory of opposites,” which, for instance, asserts that male and female hair is “supposed to” be opposite – regarding both the head on their hair and bodies (Johnson and Barber 2019: 111). Recall that gender, of course, is a cultural construct, meaning that there is no inherent or universal truth to this claim. Along these lines, Judith Butler has famously proposed that gender is performative; “will be perceived to be necessary and natural,” as paraphrased by Agata Pacho; and that each performance creates new meanings of gender, situating them in new contexts, “which always carry the possibility of subversion” – deemed inversion, in this case (Pacho 2013: 16-17).

At the crux of gender inversion is the connection of sexual acts to identity. Though same-sex desire and sexual practices have pervaded the world across time, such as in ancient Greece and Rome, courts and cities of imperial China and Persia, among tribes in New Guinea, and North America, “throughout most of recorded history, people did not think of themselves as being gay or straight or bisexual; they simply engaged in certain sexual acts,” Valerie Steele (2013: 12) states. Many cultures found it normal for adult men to penetrate other [often younger] men and as recently as the 1600s, the English Lord Rochester could write poems about same-sex encounters with his page (ibid.). If people do not connect these acts to a sense of identity they dress the same as people who share their age, gender, and class, with the possible exception of men who often assume the passive role, who might dress as women in some cultures (though these could potentially be trans women or nonbinary individuals) (ibid.). In fact, it wasn’t even until the 19th century that the term “homosexuality” was invented by Western sexologists (ibid.). Once sexual acts are connected to identity, “people follow gender roles, or perform them to secure their sexuality and social location. Defining oneself as a man or a woman imposes order upon an ambiguous social reality” (Pacho 2013: 28).

Therefore, it is important to understand gender’s quality as a cultural construction, the effect that tying sexual acts to identity can have on a person’s self-presentation, and the notion of gender inversion as a framework for interpreting the motivations of respondents in their self-styling moving forward.
Part II: Survey Results, Interviewee Testimony, and Identity Analysis
Chapter 3: Straight, Cisgender Men

This chapter will analyze the self-styling practices of cisgender (cis), heterosexual (het) men, with a significant portion devoted to the comparison between them and the self-fashioning practices of gay men. This is the first population of focus in this study as they seemingly have the least stylistic leeway and can serve as a baseline definition of what aesthetic elements are not queer and/or feminine. These will be important cultural definitions to learn, as they can go on to clarify what proportions of masculine versus feminine stylistic elements the rest of the identity groups utilize, and how a person’s identity is perceived as they move farther away from this mold, or as they adhere to it, but as a woman or nonbinary person instead.

The following is how survey respondents perceive people who identify as straight, cisgender men.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Perceived Presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50, 24%</td>
<td>Non-visual cues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37, 18%</td>
<td>Athletic clothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• athletic brand socks (e.g. lacrosse socks, Nike socks)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• athleisure (synthetic clothing worn for athletic activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>or on a daily basis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• basketball shorts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• sports-related clothing (e.g. w/ team logos)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• sports jerseys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• name-brand sneakers (e.g. running shoes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• gym shorts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34, 17%</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32, 16%</td>
<td>Looks like the “Average” Male/Absence of Queer Indicators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• no dyed hair (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• no makeup (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• no piercings (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• no tattoos (if they do, they’re “masculine: religious,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tribal, quotes/words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• no feminine clothing (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• no rainbows (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• no short shorts (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• not a lot of accessories (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “devoid of LGBT indicators” (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20, 9.8%</td>
<td>no way to know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17, 8.3%</td>
<td>masculine/gender-conforming clothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15, 7.3%</td>
<td>I assume all men are straight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14, 6.8%</td>
<td>Preppy (Vineyard Vines, boat shoes, golf style, polos,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>collared shirts, pastel shorts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12, 5.9%</td>
<td>Sweatshirt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10, 4.9%</td>
<td>Sweatpants, doesn't care much (or at all) about own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>appearance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8, 3.9%</td>
<td>Less fashion sense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7, 3.4%</td>
<td>Less-fitted and/or baggy, basketball shorts, plain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>clothes (muted colors, minimal/conventional patterns),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hair style (short, well-kept, “traditional” and</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
brand clothing,
Frat boy aesthetic:
• One respondent’s description: “sweatpants stuffed into the Nike socks, Vans or Nike shoes or something similar, sweatshirts, flannels, baseball caps. When I see a guy wearing this stuff, I don't think about their sexuality. I guess I kind of assume they're straight, or don't think about it.”
• [Interviewee] Jordan’s description: “neon shorts and polos”

sports jersey, jeans, khakis
sneakers, t-shirt
athletic socks, baseball cap, graphic tee, cargo pants
possible to tell (did not specify how), name-brand sneakers, flannel, hunting outfit (e.g. camouflage)
calf-high socks, conservative, backwards hat, flat rim hat, loud clothing, offensive clothing, streetwear, pastel shorts

I would call it the "suburban dad look" or the "sports dad look".
Kind of generic guy clothing, definitely the sports jersey hoodie combination, but more generally I feel like this depends on what the guy’s scene is
shorts in the winter

Looking over these perceived indicators, we see the following themes in descending order of popularity: non-visual cues, athletic appearance, not standing out (looks “average” and wears gender-conforming clothes), respondents assume a man is straight by default, preppy (seems to be another archetype vs. athletic), then the overall sense of prioritizing comfort over style (sweatshirts, sweatpants, less-fitted/baggy clothing, less fashion sense, lack of care about appearance, more points on not sticking out (gender-conforming hair and plain clothes)); we then see the themes of athletic and comfortable clothes come back in other indicators, with more of a mixed bag as we get to indicators offered by individual respondents. From personal experience, I can attest that the vast majority of men I pass on campus on my way to my classes and back are donning sweatpants (often brand-name, e.g. Champion), sports (e.g. running) sneakers (usually brand-name), sweatshirts, and often baseball caps (with a sports team or brand name). All clothes are baggy.

An important idea to highlight is that the third most popular determinant of whether a man is straight and cisgender, according to respondents, is whether he “dress[es] like the majority of people,” wears “clothing that may stand out less,” looks “normal,” or has an appearance that is “devoid of LGBT indicators.” First off, words like “normal” and the phrase “the majority of people” offer a sense of who holds societal power if cisgender, straight men are seen as a synonym to these terms. Further, the fact that a straight, cisgender man is defined by his close conformity to these norms, that if he happens to have a single piercing or tattoo, dyed hair, short shorts, even a slightly feminine article of clothing, or one accessory (e.g. necklace) too many, that his sexual orientation – and perhaps gender identity – is called into question. Interestingly, not even tattoos are immune from this queer designation, in spite of the motorcycle and dive bar dude cis, het stereotypes. Only one respondent said that cis, het men don’t have tattoos, but tattoos also did not come up as an indicator for cis, het men. Yet, that might be because so many
different sexual orientations and gender identities have them. Respondents seem to suggest that it is not a collection of these “LGBT indicators” that suggest a man is outside the cisgender, heterosexual norm, but even just one can trigger speculation about his identity. For instance, one respondent says that seeing a man as cis (cisgender) and het (heterosexual) is “Statistically, a decent assumption to make from the outset, unless they have any characteristics that would change that, such as blue hair” (my emphasis). Note that they say “any,” not “a collection of.” Even one’s haircut alone can turn the tide if it’s not “normal,” as one respondent describes it. Another person reiterates these ideas, saying “I usually just assume that all men that don’t specifically stand out as breaking a norm are straight” (my emphasis). Again, notice that they said “a,” singular; “norm.” Another person writes, in a way that may seem unsettling and make a man more conscious of his self-presentation, “Most men are straight, so I assume they are unless they give me a reason to think otherwise” (my emphasis). Thus, it seems like performing cis, heterosexuality is like walking on a tightrope. Cis, het men seem to be defined in opposition to gay men (I say “gay” men vs. “queer” men, as respondents – and broader society – is less sure of the way that bi men present); the two exist in a dualistic paradigm. The difference between them is not graded, respondents imply; there’s a clear break between them: you either have a piercing or you don’t.

The origins of this mindset may derive from the “Great Masculine Renunciation.” This cultural shift involved male rejection of “narcissism and decorative dress,” which arose from the Industrial Revolution’s “emphasis on work and sobriety,” as J.C. Flugel puts it (Brill 2008b). From this point forward, a “strong male gender barrier towards all paraphernalia evocative of femininity” developed, which persists into modern day (ibid.).

Though the discovery of respondent mindsets concerns me, I too am a product of this society. In mid-March this year (2021), I came across what I found to be a curious sight while on campus: I saw a male-presenting person with grey, close-cut (but not skinny) jeans; what I judged to be a traditionally male haircut – cut into almost a brim of hair in the front; and a grey, wool peacoat to their mid-thighs. I would have assumed them to be straight – and leaning towards thinking they were cisgender due to their masculine attire, but you can never be sure – had it not been for one stylistic element: a single silver earring dangling from his right ear. However, I must admit that non-visual cues and ingrained stereotypes “sealed the deal” for me; I would have thought that maybe they were an edgy skater boy type, but then heard the stereotypical gay intonation. Yet, had I not heard their voice, I still would have been on the alert (in a good way), aware of the potential for queerness being in my presence. Again, one stylistic element can turn the tables.

We can see these definitions in opposition in comparing gay (homosexual vs. the general meaning as “queer”) and cis, het men back-to-back. For instance, 9.3% (n=19) of respondents said that gay men have tighter clothing while 3.4% (n=7) said that cis, het men have less-fitted clothing, using the words “saggy,” “baggy,” “loose,” and even toned words, such as saying the clothes “fit poorly,” or are “ill-fitting”; 19% of respondents said gay men have good fashion sense (have put thought into their look, care about their self-presentation, look well-put-together, have a well-maintained appearance) while 3.9% (n=8) said that cis, het men have less fashion sense (meaning they may try, but it doesn’t come out well, e.g. “Clashing patterns in an unintentional way,” as one respondent put it) and 5.4% (n=11) said that they don’t care much (or at all) about their appearance (they give less attention to detail, and respondents use more toned language, such as saying they are “not trying to impress” and are “careless”). Though the respondents making these assertions – that gay men have tighter clothing and that cis, het men
have looser clothing, less fashion sense, and don’t care about their appearance – do not represent a majority of all the respondents and may even compose what seems like an insignificant portion of that pool, it could be argued that these points are significant in the fact that they reveal what was not said about the other group; no one said that gay men wear loose clothing or have poor fashion sense (instead, 19% say quite the contrary) or that cis, het men wear tight clothing or have good fashion sense.

Though we have yet to examine the reality of what cis, het men wear, these expectations are significant in themselves, as such men will likely format their dress along societal guidelines so as not to be teased for being gay – an all too common occurrence in our society, and/or to not make their guy friends suspect and apprehensive of romantic attraction – due to the homophobia and toxic masculinity that pervade our culture.

Mark offers a case study of straight, cisgender male style and when a man may be reprimanded for breaching the societal standards of style set forth for him. In general, he feels that he dresses the way he wants and comfort is a main factor in that. He doesn’t struggle with picking out his clothes and would be more thoughtful about his wardrobe if he had more time and money. His style changes depending on his context: home or on campus. He wants to keep his academic, professional clothing – such as collared shirts and slacks – in good condition to prevent needing to buy more later. Hence, he doesn’t wear that clothing around the house, especially when he might be doing chores. At home, he often wears casual items to lounge in, like sweatpants, and will wear slightly nicer clothing if leaving the house to go somewhere [other than campus] – he “doesn’t want to look like a slob.” In general, he says he gravitates to what is normal, fashionable, reasonable, and not sloppy.

One day, when one of his t-shirts shrunk in the dryer, his wife made him aware of the gendered constraints on his appearance. Looking at the tight and small shirt, his wife told him, “You’re not supposed to be wearing that,” claiming it wasn’t appropriate for his gender and sex. This gave him pause, and made him think, “Everything you and our daughter [wear] is super tight and snug.” If they could wear that, why couldn’t he? I pressed him to consider more deeply what may have informed his wife’s comment. He imagined that putting on the shirt would show his mid-riff, which he considered inappropriate for someone his age, and this instance was before he had lost some weight, so he wouldn’t have wanted to show off his body. He then made the connection that his wife’s reaction showed him that “it’s more socially acceptable for women to be wearing, tight, flimsy small clothing.” In that same vein, he then began to ponder if, because wearing tight clothes is more feminine, his wife thought he was projecting an image of homosexuality. By the end of this conversation, he had resolved to ask her.

Growing up, Mark was unaware of gender norms since his parents didn’t give him any pointers and didn’t critique queer people. Ultimately, he never learned a homophobic perspective. It would then follow that he does not feel limited in his wardrobe by societal gender norms and he seems to mostly agree with the statement that he dresses authentically.

It was perhaps this lack of guidance, or rather, limitation, that allowed him to embrace the bands he did while growing up in the 80s – groups that he now realizes would have made him seem gay to many. He liked Erasure (was a huge fan – they’re openly gay), Prince (who was androgynous), Boy George (who was “doing something with gender on purpose,” which didn’t stop Mark from liking his music), and Duran Duran. It was a “weird age to grow up,” he says, as “pretty boys were common/the image.” He recalls his friends showing disgust for his music taste and the great relief of “conservative, rock connoisseurs” when Bruce Springsteen came on the music scene – an “unambiguously heterosexual man” who they could relate to.
As Mark is of Asian descent, he can contrast what he knows about Western masculinity and prescriptions for male style with those of the East. In East Asia, he says, there are ample men who are “particularly stylish and pay close attention to their appearance.” He has come to know the boy band Bangtan Boys or “BTS” through his daughter – she’s a big fan – and he has noticed how “pretty” they are. Upon making this observation, he notes that “pretty” is not a masculine word you’d give to compliment a man; it might upset him, especially if he’s conservative, traditional, or old style. The members wear makeup and have piercings, which is more acceptable for heterosexual men in Asia than in the West. Thus, Mark can’t tell if the group is simply “heterosexual men being pretty” or if he should look through his Western lens, which would tell him that the members are gay and/or “too feminine.” He is aware that at least some of the members are gay, but can’t tell which. Some are “prettier than others,” he notes, but he can’t tell if those are the ones or not. A snappy, well-dressed, feminine aesthetic for men blurs sexual orientation boundaries in Asian pop culture. “That line is a little clearer in Western culture,” Mark says. In the West, Mark is inclined to assume a man is gay if he’s better-dressed than the average man of that age, with stylized hair and makeup (if he has that kind of money).

Fascinatingly, he’s seen people who are, to his knowledge, hetero men go to East Asia and come back paying more attention to the way they dress (e.g. buttons, and fashions, and pins, and makeup). They don’t end up projecting as diff sexual orientation, but project “a more stylized heterosexuality,” having marinated in a culture in which men pay more care to their appearance. Yet, that is not to say that Western homophobia is not thoroughly ingrained in other Americans. Mark remembers a time when a student – a buff guy in the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps – felt comfortable making the following remark without fear of insulting Mark or other students. In referencing an Asian actor, he said, “Look at that effeminate Asian guy! It makes me sick.” This speaks volumes of Western culture, and Marks says this is a good example of the conflation of race, gender, and sexual orientation. Mark’s testimony confirms many of respondents’ assumptions. He demonstrates that cis, het men prioritize comfort over fashion, gravitating towards looser clothing. He also reveals the societal understanding – of which his wife was aware, but not him – that tight clothing is not for cis, het men, and that it is feminine and, by association, may be a marker for gay identity.

Additionally, his experiences growing up seem to suggest that cis, het men – from what we know – in only adding one non-normative style element to their appearance cannot go without having their sexual orientation questioned, but they may not even be able to exhibit interest in music – or celebrities, for that matter – who don’t abide by the strict cis, het dress code. Furthermore, the rest of the world does not align with the West in its close association of gender presentation with sexual orientation. As anthropologists always say, nothing is natural: and as aptly implied by author David Foster Wallace in his 2005 commencement speech at Kenyon College, culture is like the water that fish swim in – always there but seldom noticed.

Scholarly literature backs up these notions as well, as Shaun Cole (2013: 138) writes in his article “Queerly Visible: Gay Men, Dress, and Style 1960-2012,” that Western codes of dress mean that cis, het men are “locked into performances of masculinity,” necessitating that they subscribe to the “traditional male norms concerning nonchalance about appearance; that [they] ‘do not notice clothes’ and ‘dress for fit and comfort, rather than style.’” He then posits that gay men “have specifically and definitively contradicted these denials” (Cole 2013: 136), while also recognizing that not all gay men are “immaculately dressed” (ibid.: 138). This potential propensity for gay men to break socially-prescribed gender norms may be due to their status as a
“deviant” class, having “broken one taboo” – of sexual orientation – making them “more inclined to break another,” as earlier mentioned (Kennedy 2009: 4-5).

It seems that we are tightening the range of expression for cis, het men if we ascribe so many styles – anything that breaks the plain, comfortable, baggy, unstylish, fully masculine norm – to queer men. Shaun Cole affirms this as the case, saying that men would like to dress well and be creative, but they won’t try flamboyant clothing or attempt to escape the cis, het style boundaries for fear of being perceived as gay (Cole 2013: 138).

Advertising has the potential to raise cis, het men’s spirits, as advertisers try to appeal to a wide range of consumers – including both straight and queer men. For instance, Calvin Klein created a historic moment in fashion when he brought to life an ad of a muscular man in his underwear the size of a billboard in Times Square in 1982 (Steele 2013: 55). Of his intentions for the ad, Klein commented, “We try to appeal to period. If there’s an awareness of health and grooming in that community, then they’ll respond to the ads. You really want to reach a bigger market than just gays, but you don’t want to alienate them” (ibid.). Here, Klein is alluding to the association of hairlessness with health – freedom from AIDS – that had come to be associated with the gay male community during the 80s AIDS epidemic (Cole 2008). Though Klein’s ads tended to be “widely perceived as homoerotic,” they were also of interest to hetero men and women of all orientations (Steele 2013: 55). Thus, gay imagery can be used in advertising without specifically targeting gay men, and as scholar Michael Bronski says, their public presence can open a door for cis, het men, offering them more flexibility in their style. In sales pitches, he says, “gay images imply distinction and non-conformity, granting straight consumers a longed-for place outside the humdrum mainstream” (ibid.). Cis, het men are in luck, in that sense, as Simon Doonan – the Creative Ambassador-at-Large of the New York City-based clothing store Barneys – says that “Fully accessorized men are now seen in all designer advertisements,” which he specifies “is a gay thing” (ibid.: 71). This could come as a great relief, as conforming to the “mainstream” is exactly the definition of cis, het men, according to respondents.

We can see many of these same themes looking at [Western] men’s fashion in the 1900s, particularly the mid-to-late part of the century. However, such perusals of historical accounts on the past are not always trustworthy as cultural theorist Jennifer Craik explains that male historians often make assumptions about men’s relationship to fashion in the past, presuming that “men dress for fit and comfort, rather than for style; that women dress men and buy clothes for men; that men who dress up are peculiar (one way or another); that men do not notice clothes” (Lomas 2009: 169). Hence, this boils down to a clear “tendency to deny men’s active participation in fashion” (ibid.). This quote is drawn from the source providing the historical insight below, so we need not worry about such assumptions.

In the early 20th century in London, class and societal status held much more bearing on men’s style than sexual orientation, and was “very rigid and prescriptive” (ibid.). The appropriate aesthetic for men at the time was “that of being smart, but of having no apparent interest in one’s appearance” (ibid.: 171).

These style prescriptions began to change from the 1950s onward. The 50s saw men’s clothing lose the formality formerly seen in going out to the theater, opera, or dinner with a move toward casual wear (ibid.: 173). This new emphasis on comfort apparently lured more men to the fashion market, as evidenced by a 1958 of *Men’s Wear*: “The acceptance of clothing that expresses a relaxed, carefree mood is widening and spreading to the older age groups. More and more men now buy clothing not merely to replace necessities, but because of a newfound
interest—an interest in fashion” (ibid.). Nevertheless, the change, as the magazine put it, raised “some highly controversial issues” (ibid.).

Men’s style made an even more drastic shift when teenagers became a larger slice of consumers and with the appearance of “fashion-conscious subcultures” (ibid.). Such subcultures included the Teddy Boys, Mods, Rockers, Skinheads, and Punks (ibid.: 169). The Mod culture, for one, derived from a small group of young men in London in the 50s who were known as “modernists” due to their affinity for modern jazz, and came to be known for “effeminate and colorful clothes” in the 60s (ibid.: 173). Further, Shaun Cole states that “It is popularly accepted that there was an element of homosexual vanity present in Mod subculture” (ibid.). Men’s clothing then transformed from “conventionally conservative” to casual and colorful, incorporating new fabrics that had been limited to women, such as velvet, voiles, and lace; designers began to get more creative and interested in men’s fashion (ibid.). One man from that time, Peter Viti, exclaimed, “things were getting very much more informal…Everybody was getting away from the grey and the brown and the beige!” (ibid.). New boutiques of the time allowed men more space to play with styles that may have threatened their masculinity earlier – and were still a test at the time – “whilst allowing them to avoid any accusations of sexual deviancy” (ibid.: 174). Thus, colorful, patterned shirts, composed of a wide variety of fabrics were worn by men of any sexuality, becoming “acceptable everyday clothing” (ibid.: 169). Though the popular late-20th century saying went that gay men were “leading the way in fashion,” as demonstrated, the reality was that the men’s fashion industry changed remarkably in the course of a few decades, which happened, apparently, in the absence of queer influence (ibid.: 176).

In looking at the Mod style, we again see societal ties of fashion-consciousness to homosexuality. Though, conversely, there is also clear evidence that men’s fashion was not always “plain” – a word that came up in the survey. It also appears that the increase in men’s casual wear in the 50s is what we are seeing today.

The 60s and 70s then saw a massive protest of gender norms from the hippie counterculture. Hippies rejected their parents’ conservative values in general, dissent that expressed itself through dress (Johnson and Barber 2019: 119). In addition to wearing “ethnically”-inspired clothing and beads, young men grew out their hair (including their beards), holding it back with headbands and/or embellishing it with flowers (ibid.). This long hair protested “constraints of respectability” that came with the traditional and socially accepted images or “ideals” of a “flannel-suited man with short, slicked back hair” (ibid.). They grew their hair out “as a signifier of feminized sensitivity and a rejection of narrow gender expectations for men to be strong and aggressive” (ibid.: 120). These style changes made publicly visible the “mundane impersonations by which heterosexual masculinity and feminity are performed and naturalized and undermine[d] their power by virtue of effecting that exposure” (ibid.: 118). Essentially, they showed society what the norm for masculine appearance was by styling themselves in opposition to that cultural prescription, which would today look like donning piercings, dyed hair, tattoos, etc. Through their public, visual demonstration, they questioned heteronormative values and revealed the “social constructed-ness of ‘truths’” (ibid.).

Unsurprisingly, these breaches of social norms experienced ample push-back. Older generations called hippies “unpatriotic or anti-American” and protested the hippie movement, with one historical photo capturing this time, involving a man with sign that says, “Long hair is communism” (ibid.: 120). In the same vein, Wayne State University frat members cut off all
their hair to challenge hippies' "softer male aesthetic," concerned with a trend they deemed the "emasculcation of American men" which they considered "an affront to masculinity" (ibid.).

Another quality of the hippie era that upset older generations was that "millions of young people began to care a great deal about looking like they didn't care how they looked" (Making Sense of the Sixties 1991). Though this aesthetic mirrors what we see in cis, het men’s stylistic choices today, the hippie code of dress was meant to be a political statement – against rigid formalwear, particularly of corporate America (Johnson and Barber 2019: 120), which does not seem to be the case with men’s casualwear today.

Today, expectations for men’s style can vary by class. Professional men are expected to stylishly coif their hair for interactions with clients while blue collar men, e.g. in construction, “eschew a sense of caring about how they look for fear of being taken by others for gay” (ibid.). This seems to mirror the earlier discussed class style divide in which richer citizens have more flexibility in self-expression – the “eccentricity of aristocracy.” It may also be part of the urban-rural divide, in which residence in cities entails exposure to a greater population with more immigrants and visitors from out-of-town, and thus, more encounters with new and different ideas (e.g. about gender expression), opposed to rural areas that may have a smaller, more static population, and hence, conservative mindset.

Being mistaken for gay is not solely a matter of inconvenience and misunderstanding, but is often poorly received by men, seen as a direct attack on their masculinity, since the societal preconceptions (illustrated by some survey respondent answers, as we shall see) about gay men include that they are more comfortable in feminine clothing and with their femininity in general. Hence, questioning a man’s sexuality is questioning his masculinity, which people can use to make a man feel insecure and to insult him. Katy Perry does this to her addressee in her 2008 song “Ur So Gay” in both the lyrics and music video imagery. She sings, “I hope you hang yourself with your H&M scarf,” “You're so indie rock it's almost an art,” “I can't believe I fell in love with someone that wears more makeup than…[me],” and “You walk around like you're oh so debonair” (Perry 2008). She then follows each verse with “You're so gay and you don't even like boys” (ibid.). Her words hint that being stylish (debonair), certain brands (H&M), and feminine accessories like makeup are gay, and also mentions indie rock, a derivative of punk rock, which may be an allusion to the queer style associated with that genre’s lineage. The music video, which is acted out by Barbie and Ken dolls, reinforces these points, depicting the man in question wearing eyeliner, a crisp, white button down shirt under a big, fluffy, hooded, designer-esque coat of a black and white houndstooth tweed pattern (ibid.). In another scene, he’s seen shirtless with two stars with compass-rose-like shading tattooed under each clavicle, and again, survey respondents have deemed tattoos to be queer indicators. He also has a black and white poster of a guy with long hair on his bedroom wall titled, “Pierre Wertz. Totally Awesome Rocker Guy” (ibid.). This is not only an allusion to rock, but possibly to punk rock, as “Pierre Wertz” bears incredible similarity to “Pete Wentz,” who is a member of the punk rock group Fall Out Boy, and who is half-gay: he’s bi (Miller 2008). Therefore, men may try to adhere their style to the “norm” so no element of their self-presentation can be used to throw their sexual orientation into question.

Social anxiety regarding men’s “feminization” is not limited to fears of projections of homosexuality, but has also recently spread into transgender politics (Johnson and Barber 2019: 120). Men are concerned with people assigned male at birth being “mistaken” for women – though trans women are real women, as they will “lose access to unfair privileges awarded to them within a gender order that devalues both women and femininity” (ibid.).
Though the preconceptions that survey respondents may have about cis, het men may be partly true and the fact that these preconceptions exist may influence these men to stay within the societal mold so as not to provoke questions of their identity, it is also possible that this is changing. Cis, het men may be starting to branch out with their style more, if not simply a few outliers, as marked by respondent and interviewee testimony that distinguishing those men from queer men has become more challenging. One respondent remarked that sometimes it “It’s hard to tell. Some straight men dress really out there with some clothing that might be considered feminine, especially in the ‘high fashion’ realm. Unless a guy is wearing very blatantly feminine clothing like rainbows or a skirt or pink dress, I will assume they're straight.” Meg said that “Men who are not straight typically dress better and look better” and that are more likely to choose feminine options and “take [them] further [perhaps in bolder ways] than straight men”; yet, she initially mistook some of her straight guy friends as gay – an assumption they get a lot. “People think they’re gay because they don’t look sloppy” regarding their clothing fit, hygiene, and the fact that they take care of themselves, she says. In general, after going to all-girls schools since ninth grade, she feels more comfortable among gay men, and that is how she came to be friends these guys. Moreover, she initially thought the guy she went on to date for three years was gay, but he’s straight. One category of men that does give her pause is the “skater bros” on campus who wear nail polish and have a single dangly earring; she speculates that those elements are more of a marker of group identity than sexuality, but is unsure. Caleb, who has the most stake in correctly guessing a man’s sexual orientation – he’s a homosexual, biromantic, male-presenting, nonbinary person, claims that he too usually looks to a male-identifying person’s clothes for “romantic-signaling” and is currently struggling. He, too, asserts that it’s harder to guess since today, “guys are more well put-together.” Years ago, form-fitting clothing was a signal. Now, that’s more of the general style. Slim pants and t-shirts might be a cue, but he’s not as confident anymore. Ultimately, he’s worried about going up to someone he thinks is queer who isn’t and experiencing backlash. Thus, his current method of seeking potential romantic partners involves fashioning himself to make queer men more comfortable approaching him.

The Survey Results

**Everyday Clothing (Top Six Descriptors):**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>68%</td>
<td>cotton, earth tones, t-shirts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64%</td>
<td>flannel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59%</td>
<td>dull/muted, outdoorsy, long-sleeves, common patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50%</td>
<td>gender-conforming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45%</td>
<td>thrifted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41%</td>
<td>modest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Other:**
- Vintage
- “I am extremely eccentric with my clothing choices and often wear traditional clothing from my own or other backgrounds (Europe & Central Asia, Middle East & North Africa)”

**Clothing effects:**
- blend in with most people on campus: 82%
• blend in with peer group/friends: 73%

From the looks of it, these descriptors imply inconspicuous clothing – no bright colors or patterns; perhaps make a nod [though likely unintentionally] to the socially acceptable, “flannel-suited man” of the 60s and 70s (ibid.: 119); and may imply less-fitted clothing, looking to the “modest” descriptor – though this could also mean no see-through clothing or deep V-necks. The descriptor that seems to paint the theme of the others is “gender-conforming,” – which 50% of respondents selected. It is important to note that this is the percentage of respondents who explicitly chose “gender-conforming,” which merely indicates that these respondents are consciously aware that they are conforming to gendered norms; the overall effect of the other descriptors that they chose may suggest that they in fact are conforming, even if they did not make that selection. Of course, there may also be men who didn’t select that descriptor because they don’t particularly feel that their style conforms to gender norms. The majority of respondents then seem to assess their style as causing them to fit in with most of their peers and others [other men] on campus. These results align with the assessment that 16% of respondents made that cis, het men look like the “average” man/blend in and that 8.3% of respondents made, that they are masculine/gender-conforming. Noticeably, there is no mention of athletic clothing, as respondents predicted.

Other motivations for wearing this style of everyday clothing (optional free response):
• comfort (3)
• exhibit interests (2)
• look presentable/care about appearance (2)
• look stylish (1)
• convenience (1)
• want to look like I don’t care about my appearance (1)
• exhibit mood (1)
• confuse viewer (1)
• “disarm” viewer (1)
• don’t care; wear what I feel like in the moment (1)
• to look warm/inviting (1)
• dress for weather (1)
• dress for activity (1)

Novel responses (my emphasis):

“I try to look at least somewhat stylish/put-[]together everyday [sic] because I care about my appearance and I want to set myself apart from other guys. (e.g. guys who show up to the dining halls in sweatpants/ workout clothes).”

“I dress mostly for comfort. I don’t like to look like I’m trying to look good.”

Nine respondents offered motivations for the selection of their everyday clothes, many of fall along the much-discussed themes of either dressing for comfort, intentionally trying to look like you don’t care how you look, and trying to look stylish. There seem to be six motivations
respondents offered that relate to convenience (dressing for weather (1) or a specific activity (1),
convenience (1), and comfort (3)). Caring about one’s appearance/wanting a desired effect from
one’s clothes is expressed in nine motivations listed (exhibit interests (2), look presentable/care
about appearance (2), look stylish (1), exhibit mood (1), confuse viewer (1), “disarm” viewer (1),
and to look warm/inviting (1)). Ironically, it is curious whether wanting to look like you don’t
care what you look like counts as caring about your appearance, because, ultimately, there is a
certain impression you are trying to make through your dress. One respondent insists that he
doesn’t care what he looks like and another wants to look like he doesn’t care about his
appearance. Three motivations fell under the category of style-consciousness (look stylish (1)
and look presentable/care about appearance (2)).

The quote from the last-mentioned respondent is shown above and contrasts with a
respondent who does want to look “put together.” The fashion-forward respondent goes even
further, to express that he is aware how other men dress, that they often wear athletic/workout
clothes, and that he consciously wants to make a different impression than them. It may be men
like him who make Meg and Caleb question their gaydar.

These two quotes seem to be what this whole discussion of cis, het male fashion has been
all about: comfort and lack of effort put into one’s appearance vs. style-consciousness, which has
been traditionally ascribed to gay men. Here, we can see examples of both, and the motivations
listed above do not seem to dramatically sway one way or the other – again, convenience
composes six motivations, appearance-consciousness composes nine, and style-consciousness
accounts for three. There does not seem to be a consensus one way or the other on this debate
thus far.

**Accessories (Top Five):**

Average number of each type per person.

0.55  name-brand sneakers  
0.36  dress shoes  
0.32  necklaces, bracelets, baseball cap  
0.27  beanie/knit hat  
0.23  earrings

**Accessory Effects:**

- blend in with most people on campus: 77%
- blend in with peer group/friends: 82%

The findings on accessories are particularly interesting. Respondents did not peg this group
very accurately when it comes to this category. Though 18% of respondents said that cis, het
men wear athletic clothing, only 0.98% said that they wear name-brand sneakers, and only 1.5%
said that they wear baseball caps. Further, most of these indicators never came up in respondent
guesses: not dress shoes, necklaces, bracelets, beanies/knit hats, nor earrings. There seems to be
room for these stylistic elements without triggering someone’s gaydar; recall that a respondent
said a man could be read as straight if he had “few accessories” (which does not translate to
“none”). Similarly, Meg and Caleb have seen straight, white boys with earrings – Caleb noted it
was usually a single stud – growing up. The cis, het men seem to know that these accessories do
not break the norm, as most claim that they fit in with their peers and most people on campus. Though necklaces may have the potential to signal femininity, it is also very possible that these men mean “chains,” a traditionally masculine accessory. The chain necklace has associations with tough, “hard”/“muscly” men and with rappers as a sign of “self-celebration” (Lord 2020) or as a “source of power” (Juan 2006). These thicker, “masculine,” changes are not uncommon across campus.

**Body Modifications (Top Six):**

L = left, R = right, number = number of piercings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Modification Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23%</td>
<td>uncommon haircut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14%</td>
<td>L ear lobe 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td>dyed hair, undercut, 1 tattoo only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>nose ring, 1-3 tattoos, 3+ tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (2)</td>
<td>&quot;I've given myself numerous bloodline tattoos, which appear as red raised lines on the skin, but fade after 3-4 weeks.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;I chose to get circumcised as an adult for religious reasons.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Uncommon haircut description (optional free response):**

- “I have long dyed black hair, to about the bottom of my sternum.”
- “It was very long for my identity as a cis male. Basically just wavy, long hair that reached 4-5 inches below my shoulders. I have also previously dyed strips of hair in unnatural colors.”
- “It's long at the moment, but I usually get a short buzzcut that fades at the top, military[-jesque. I once had a mohawk though.”
- “Military-style high-and-tight with a large, uncut beard.”

Uncommon haircuts seem to be the most common body modification and, notably, three of the four descriptions respondents offered suggest that a cis, het man’s definition of “uncommon” here means “gender-nonconforming”; they are descriptions of long hair. However, there is also mention of hair dyed unnatural colors, a mohawk, military-style hair, and a long beard. A mohawk seems to suggest previous affiliation with the punk community—which isn’t necessarily completely queer, and it is unclear if the respondent who dyed his hair believes the dye was uncommon simply because most people have natural hair colors, or if he believed it was unnatural for his gender, given that many respondents have listed dyed hair as a queer indicator.

The left ear lobe piercing seems to be an enduring trend from the past as it is the second most selected body modification and there is no mention of a right ear lobe piercing. This straight male practice traces back to at least the 80s and, since the early days of considering this thesis subject, I have heard a handful of people bring up this concept. When chatting with a fellow writing tutor about my initial plan to study piercings among the queer community for my thesis, she asked “Is that about which ear you get pierced meaning your gay?” I then heard the idea again from Logan. She mentioned the disconnect in queer signaling between our generation and that of her parents, explaining that they had to be more subtle while today’s queer people can be more open about their identities. She claimed that her parents are still “hung up” on gay signaling from the 80s. Logan referenced a time when her mom told her, “I don’t think you
dress gay,” failing to recognize today’s signals, and when Logan got her nose piercing, her mom asked her if the side of her nose she put it on signaled if she’s gay or not. She exclaimed, “That doesn’t matter anymore!” Mark then also seemed to have heard a wisp of something about this signaling, saying, “Someone told me that depending on which ear you pierce, it signals your sexual orientation.” This idea is similarly implied in a respondent’s description of her parents’ reactions to her brother’s body modifications: “They felt weird about my [brother] getting piercings, especially when he got them on both ears and wore really dangly earrings.” Though wearing dangly earrings is a clear transgression of gender norms, the respondent noted the parents’ initial panic when her brother got piercings “on both ears.” Lastly, when my dad mentioned that he once got an earring when he lost a bet in the 80s, he said he got it on the left one, and I told him that I thought I had heard that was the “gay”[-signaling] one. He corrected me, explaining that there was a common saying at the time – one that was clearly homophobic at that, going “Left is right and right is wrong.” Though only a fraction of cis, het respondents claim to have a left ear lobe piercing, it is noteworthy that this practice showed up at all.

The accessories farther down the list are not worth much discussion, as only one or two people have them.

Overall, a minority of cis, het men have body modifications, as was projected by respondents. The most common modification a cis, het man claimed to have was an uncommon haircut, which was most often described as long [gender-non-conforming], with mentions of colorful hair dye and punk-inspired styles. It is expected that these men should call such hair “uncommon,” as survey respondents described cis, het men as having short hair. A man with short hair and a long beard described his hair as “uncommon,” perhaps because it is simply not seen often and not because he believes it is gender-non-conforming and/or queer. However, it is a look some attribute to gay men in crisis (Milton 2020). The next modification on the list is a known and accepted marker of heterosexuality. Hence, this is what we expected to see.

**Intentsions of Body Modifications:**

- I feel that my body modifications do not cause me to stand out (5, 23%)
- Some of my body modifications cause me to stand out, which was not my intention (5, 23%)
- I got all of my body modifications to intentionally stand out from others (3, 14%)
- I got at least some of my body modifications to intentionally stand out from others (0, 0.0%)

**Mods gotten in order to stand out (optional free response):**

- “lots of people have tattoos mine isn’t very noticeable nor do I show it off but I would be lying if I said I got it for something other than being edgy/trying to stand out.”
- “Circumcision”
- “Ear piercings”

**Motivations to get mods (optional free response):**

- like the look (4)
- self-expression (1)
- to stand out as an individual (1)
• to show group affiliation/engage in group bonding (1)
• self-exploration (1)
• to have tattoos that remind oneself of a lost loved one (1)
• for religious reasons (1)

**Novel responses (my emphasis):**

“I've always liked the way that piercing[s] looked in my ears, so that was a personal decision, and similarly I've always wanted long black hair so I could look like my favorite musicians.”

“My intention wasn't to stand out in a crowd through body modifications, but just to have something that made me different visually at a more individual level.”

“I started getting my tattoos after [a family member died]. I like having things that remind me of her with me every day, and they give me a reason to talk about her more often because people ask me about them.”

“I paint my nails when I race, it's what my team does. I'm considered a pretty normally masculine dude.”

“I just sort of felt like getting a nose ring would be an exploration of myself, and a maturation [of] my personal identity. I've wanted one for years, despite the fact that my family and friends occasionally told me not to.”

“Body modifications in my opinion shows [sic] insecurities in the person. They are not happy with themselves and need to 'change' their appearance in some way.”

Overall, it seems that cis, het men with body modifications, for the most part, did not intentionally get them to stand out, though some do have that effect, while a minority got all of their modifications to stand out. Of modifications intended to stand out, one man describes wanting a tattoo to look “edgy” and another man mentions wanting earrings. It is important that he wrote “earrings” plural, as this does not follow the straight prescription of one piercing on the left lobe.

Regarding motivations, the majority of respondents (four) simply enjoy the aesthetic achieved with their modifications; three demonstrate a desire for their modification(s) to have some effect on the viewer (for self-expression, to stand out as an individual, or to serve as a marker of group affiliation); and three experience a deep, personal connection with their modification(s), either bringing them closer to themselves, to their family, or to their religion. Hence, there seems to be three themes guiding body modification in this group (of the respondents who decided to share their motivations).

What is unique about one of the quotes above is the mention of cis, het men wearing nail polish. Earlier, Meg expressed curiosity as to the sexual orientation of men who wear nail polish, but noted that it was not a definite indicator of queerness. She hypothesized that it might be a signifier of group identity, and in this case, she was right. It is additionally noteworthy that “painted nails” shows up as an assumed indicator of gay men, but not of cis, het men. Perhaps
few people are aware of this phenomenon. I can say myself that I have gradually become familiar with this trend among men who I’ve presumed were straight. I’ve seen my fair share of “skater bros” on campus with nail polish, a frat boy I once made music with it, as well as a guy in my philosophy class, and a cashier at City Market. It seems that, with this trend and more frequent sightings of well put-together cis, het men (according to study participants), that some gendered boundaries are beginning to be pushed.

As for the comment on getting a nose piercing, it is perhaps unsurprising that his family dissuaded him from getting a nose ring. Survey respondents did not list it as an indicator for cis, het men, but instead for gay men (2 respondents, 0.98%), bi men (5, 2.4%), lesbians (12, 5.9%), and bi women (15, 7.3%). Similarly, three interviews associated nose piercings with queerness. Logan said that septum piercings and nose rings can “get in [queer] territory,” though nose studs are more normalized. A nose piercing doesn’t necessarily “scream gay,” she states, but “there’s something there that’s different.” You may not be gay, but there may be something different about your gender identity, she speculates. Ryan is similarly skeptical. He says that a nose piercing may be tied to queer identity, but wouldn’t say so definitively; he is aware that some straight people also get them. Skylar, on the other hand, is unafraid to take a stand. When she was thinking about what kind of nose piercing she would get, she thought of a stud, because it would be easier to care for and to start off with – it’s smaller – and it would give her a chance to get used to looking at herself with a piercing. However, she insists that “hoops are gayer,” so she “might want a hoop to make that statement.” She claims, “I would want an added element to my body [to signal that I’m queer],” and in asking herself, “What screams gay?” she thought “Oh, a hoop nose piercing.” She finds that they can project queerness when on a woman – though she does not mention the implications for men, and insists that “A hoop nose piercing is gayer than a stud. I have no evidence to back this up, but it’s my own personal opinion.” As an anthropologist needing to acknowledge human’s innate lack of objectivity, I must add that I too think nose rings are queer. In fact, this entire thesis grew out of me informally making lists of people who I knew were queer, speculated were queer, and speculated were straight and cis who had nose rings; I wanted to know if there was a correlation of queerness to nose piercings. My findings were inconclusive and informal – my sample group was a mess, including both UVMers and celebrities. Nevertheless, that has been my theory all along, and I would certainly make that assumption about this cis, het guy if I ever saw him. I am curious to know if there are more like him, but also think that it is worth considering that only one cis, het man has such a piercing. We shall see if this modification arises among other demographics.

I am also interested to know what this guy means by the piercing helping with his “exploration of [self], and a maturation [of]…personal identity.” He did not indicate in his survey responses that he is questioning his sexual orientation or gender identity, but it’s possible that he is simply exploring his masculinity and perhaps that “maturation” involves taking ownership of his body, out of society’s gender-presentation-prescribing clutches. Of course, it could potentially have nothing to do with these themes. We shall never know, but it is worth pondering what meaning this purpose could have in cis, het terms.

The last quote is from someone without body modifications. From the criteria this list for someone who would be inspired to get body modifications, it seems that this person does not class it as solely a queer phenomenon. Perhaps 16% of respondents said that cis, het men don’t have body modifications (grouped in with queer indicators in general) because they believe the men who have insecurities are an outlier, and the not the norm.
Explicitly Transmitting Sexual Orientation & Gender:

Is there any way that you try to visually present your sexual orientation?

Only a sample of novel quotes included for each category.

**No (17, 77%):**
- “I don't try to present myself as gay but that's more of a result of my clothing preference than an active decision.”
- “No. I dress how I want to. I have had people make presumptions about me that were wrong but I dress the way I like.”

**I effectively do (unintentionally) (3, 14%):**
- “I don't feel like I have to, I feel like it's generally take[n] for granted that I'm straight. People have assumed I was gay a couple times though.”
- “Not at all, I think from the way I dress and act some people could definitely assume I'm not straight and I don't really care.”
- “No. I try not to intentionally express my sexuality visually. I do dress in traditionally male clothing but I'm not trying to appear more straight or gay or anything.”

**Yes (2, 9.0%):**
- “comfort and brands that I like.”
- “I try [to] look like a mature adult male student. glasses dress flannels and sweaters, fit jeans, nice khakis. I also like color a lot but most of my outfits are earth tones. I just want to look like I know what I'm doing so maybe some day I will.”

Overall, the majority of cis, het men do not make any attempt to signal their sexual orientation. It should not go without saying, however, that this has led at least two men to transmit gay signals – one acknowledging the overlap in his clothing with that of gay men, the other recalling instances of being read as queer. These two men, it seems, dress how they please regardless of if their style poses the “risk” of transgressing traditional cis, het gendered boundaries. Of course, there are also men who don’t have to “fear” that their clothing will be misread – their preferred dress transmits the intended signals; 77% of cis, het men say they don’t intentionally formulate their style to communicate their sexual orientation, while 14% of cis, het men explicitly acknowledge that their self-presentation has the desired effect.

Regarding the last two quotes, it seems that the first respondent is aware of the coded cis, het associations with comfortable – versus fashionable – and brand-name clothing (connections some respondents picked up on, as noted at the top of the chapter). Simultaneously, from the few words provided, it doesn’t seem like he feels forced into this look, at least given that he is wearing brands he likes. The second respondent’s quote is a bit concerning in that he seems to group “maturity” and “knowing what [he’s] doing” with cis, het presentation – suggesting that accessorizing, getting piercings and tattoos, dying one’s hair, having a queer haircut, and other possible queer markers – signify a lack of seriousness, immaturity, and maybe angst. He must group colorful clothing along with other queer markers or simply consider it to have the same effects as those mentioned above, as he says, “I also like color a lot but most of my outfits are earth tones.” He is likely not alone in this assumption that queer indicators are
immature and lack seriousness, as they are often discouraged in professional settings. A quick Google search of “business casual” will reveal neutral tones – or rather, earth tones; khakis – often fitted; sometimes fitted jeans – though more often, fitted trousers; blazers; and button-down shirts. Piercings, tattoos, and unnaturally-dyed hair are also major points of anxiety in applying for a job [though not so much in Vermont] as they are often discouraged in the workplace. Additionally, though it is not showing up online, I can attest that Vermont business casual – e.g. the garb of owners of microbrews, Burton, local stores – often includes flannel. Hence, this respondent is perfectly adhering to business casual, though it sounds like it is going against his [colorful] wishes, and apparently he finds this at least partially necessary to correctly transmit his sexual orientation.

Is there any way that you try to visually present your gender identity?

Only a sample of novel quotes included for each category.

**No (16, 73%):**
- “No, and I probably confuse some people sometimes.”
- “No, I wear clothes that are comfortable and that I don't look weird in.”
- “I have no desire to express any gender.”

**I effectively do (unintentionally) (4, 18%):**
- “I generally don't have a problem with these norms aside from a few, but otherwise, I don't think I do.”
- “I suppose I wear clothes that are conventionally masculine, but it's more so out of habit and comfort than it is out of intention.”
- “I don't feel like I need to.”
- “Not really, I do feel like a working man when I put my boots on.”

**Yes (2, 9.8%):**
- “haircut; short hair is more masculine.”
- “Yes, I wear gender-conforming clothing.”

In the respect of gender-presentation, most cis, het men claim that they put no effort forth to do so. Again, as with projecting sexual orientation, some men resultingy have their gender questioned. What is especially attention-grabbing for the category of men who said, “no” is that one respondent remarks that he doesn’t want to come off as one gender or another. This sounds like the perspective of a nonbinary person. Caleb, who identifies as nonbinary (and uses he/him pronouns), has described similar intentions in his daily style. He tries to eliminate gender as a factor in his interactions, taking the position that gender doesn’t influence what you can and can’t do in different settings. Moreover, he states that if there’s no sexual tension, gender doesn’t add anything to a conversation. Thus, he doesn’t feel the need to specify. It is possible that this survey respondent is not familiar with nonbinaryism (which we will discuss in a later chapter) and so doesn’t know that the term might be the correct label for them, but we should also not make any assumptions.

A notable portion of men who claim to not intentionally project a gendered identity acknowledge that their stylistic choices likely have that effect. Here, we see the notion of
comfort and convenience (habit) come up again, and, interestingly, one respondent seems to “have a problem with [a few of] these norms.” If the latter respondent feels that he does effectively communicate his clothes from his dress, does that mean that he is following the norms he dislikes in order to conform to gender roles? Or does he disregard those norms, but overall, his wardrobe suggests that he’s a cis man? The situation is unclear.

Two respondents express direct effort to appear as cis men, though it is unknown whether they enjoy fashioning themselves this way, or if they seem like necessary costume to transmit their desired image.

**Conclusion**

It seems that, for the most part, cis, het men dress alike, which – intentionally or not – helps them to successfully communicate their identities. They seldom don bright colors and patterns and often wear gender-conforming clothing. Some accessorizing with name-brand sneaker or dress with little jewelry, but if they do have jewelry, it’s within cis, het norms. Along this line, very few have body modifications. There is not a clear consensus on whether cis, het men dress for comfort and/or don’t care about their appearance or if, conversely, they do care about looking well put-together. Answers are mixed. Those who vary from this overall mold may not transmit the desired signal, as some respondents have noted; interviewees have experienced difficulty differentiating cis, het men from gay men.

**Straight Transgender Men**

Unfortunately, there are very few straight, trans male respondents to compare to cis, het male respondents. This is an important comparison, as it could reveal if straight, trans men’s gender queerness (vs. a queer sexual orientation) affects their self-fashioning. Of the eight trans men who filled out the survey, two (25%) are straight. I also interviewed a trans man, but he is bi/pansexual. I reached out to trans friends from my town, but both of them were bi/pansexual as well and said that none of their trans guy friends were straight. I considered perusing transgender before-and-after social media accounts (which feature trans people pre-transition and during/after transition) to get a gauge for body modifications, clothing, and accessories, but realized that that is not necessarily a useful data set; who knows how many of those men are straight? Even if I visited each of their individual profiles, seeing pictures of them with women is not definitive evidence that they’re straight; they could be bi. I then thought back to all the trans YouTubers I watched as I was questioning my gender and beginning to transition, but remembered many of them being either bi or gay. I checked back on some who I thought were straight, but found some of their videos critiquing straight people. Others have not specified their sexual orientation, so I will not presume that they are straight. I can say, however, that of the 20 main YouTubers I have watched, five (25%) – since I last watched their videos – have explicitly said that they have queer sexualities (gay or bi), leaving the possibility that 75% are straight, but if you deduct the two (10%) who have critiqued straight people, then it’s possible that 65% are straight. Again, I won’t make any assumptions.

In typing “straight trans guy” into YouTube (in an incognito window so as not to allow my YouTube account preferences to change the results), I found three videos that were about straight trans guys out of the first 50 videos – composing 6.0% of the results. One man, Colton Ryals
(2019), is seen wearing a white t-shirt with a backwards baseball cap and has a goatee with short hair. Again, baseball caps were one of the top five accessories that cis, het men listed that they use. There were also cases of respondents saying that they kept their hair short to communicate their gender identity and others with long hair who called their hairstyle “uncommon.” In another video, a guy named Jay (2017) wears an orange t-shirt with a grey pocket – this seems to be rather colorful, which many cis, het respondents did not report to wear (one even saying he liked color but only wore earth tones). He has metal glasses with thin, rectangular frames that don’t stand out and close-cropped hair. This gender-conforming hair and inconspicuous glasses would abide the trend of conformity we saw with cis, het men. Jay also wears a black, curly phone-cord-like bracelet. It is not unlike at least some cis, het men to have bracelets, as seen earlier, and this particular bracelet does not call much attention to itself. His friend Seamus, seated near him, has on a navy blue sweatshirt with the word “CORE” in the middle – potentially referring to the workout that strengthens one’s torso – with pointed brackets above and below it, each half white and half orange. The colorfulness of the logo may challenge cis, het styling standards, but if the logo is about a workout, it’s possible that the athletic connotations may offset this transgression of common straight style. Recall that 18% of respondents believe that cis, het men wear athletic clothing. Of course, if they see a trans man who passes for a man, they will make the same assumptions about his sexual orientation as a cis man. Seamus also has close-cropped hair with side-swiping bangs, not unlike Justin Bieber’s. As this hair is short, and thus, gender-conforming, it would help him to blend in. So far, these straight trans men conform to the cis, het stylistic standards. They affirm this, saying they both “pass” as men.

Model Julian Gavino is another story. He has ample body modifications and is often seen with feminine style elements (PinkNews 2020). Both his ears are pierced, he has a nose ring and various large tattoos on both arms, and his hair is dyed an unnatural red hue, falling past his shoulders. Thus far, he may be assessed as queer, bearing various queer indicators that respondents said cis, het men were not to have. His hair length is also gender-non-conforming, which could pose questions. These aspects are the mere tip of the iceberg regarding queer-signaling, as, throughout the video, he is seen with eyeliner; light pink, sparkly powder contours from temple to cheek with pink eyeshadow; long, decorated fake nails; a bright, striped, blue, red, and yellow shirt with a fur coat; and a white, long-sleeve shirt with a big, shimmery/large-sequin-plastered, pink bow with tight pink pants and a white and beige leather purse. Hence, these fashion choices are bright, colorful, use “unusual” fabrics for men – such as faux fur, and are overwhelmingly feminine – especially the makeup and fake nails. These would undoubtedly provoke questions about his sexual orientation and gender identity. The closest he comes to being gender-conforming is wearing a tight, white shirt with tight ripped jeans in one scene, but as the clothes are tight, he is still likely to be read as gay (from what respondents said about cis, het men earlier and what those men said about their style). Perhaps unsurprisingly, he has faced various speculations about his sexual orientation and gender identity. When he started growing his hair out again and doing feminine things, people asked him if he was gay, de-transitioning (returning to life as a woman), or nonbinary. In response to these challenges to his identity as a straight, trans man, he proclaims, “Being transmasculine means being whoever you want to be. You can be a man and wear whatever you want” (ibid.). Of course, pushing heteronormative, gendered boundaries is not unique to trans men; as we saw earlier, some cis, het men admitted to wearing what they want and having their gender and/or sexual orientation questioned.

Speaking from my own experience, transmen are more likely to be concerned with correctly presenting their gender identity than their sexual orientation. This then means a need to
“accomplish masculinity” which can be “intimately tied to body size, muscular frame, hairstyle, and facial hair growth” (Johnson and Barber 2019: 112). Jay, Seamus, and Colton Ryals all have the “necessary” masculine hairstyle and Ryals and Gavino have facial hair. The presence of facial hair may be the “key” to Gavino’s more feminine presentation. With this benchmark of sorts, Gavino can go off in whatever stylistic direction he pleases, while still having facial hair to “hold down the fort” regarding his claim to masculinity and male identity. Facial hair can be remarkably important for trans men in that sense, as well as because lacking it can deprive trans men of “access [to] the patriarchal dividends available to other men at work, such as presumed competence, authority, and prestige” (ibid.). Of course, these “dividends” may only be accessible to masculine-presenting men, as society would likely read more feminine-presenting men as gay (as has happened with Gavino) and, due to prevalent homophobia, not give him much authority in the workplace, if he was even offered a job. However, some manner of “authority” could come to trans man – feminine or masculine – with facial hair in the sense that it makes a person look older (ibid.), and therefore “wiser” and more responsible; such trans men may then be rewarded with more responsibilities. Without a beard, a trans man could be read as younger (ibid.). This idea comes up in a BuzzFeed video (2016) called “8 Things Only Trans Guys Understand,” when the trans YouTuber, Ryan Cassata, goes to a bar and we learn that one common problem for trans men is, as the caption reads, “Always getting carded.” Cassata starts to order and pulls out his license, which the bartender takes, interrupting him to say, “Hon, there is no way you are 21; this has to be fake.” “I’m 22!” he insists. “Yeah, okay,” she says with a wink. Thus, lacking facial hair can pose something of a “glass ceiling” to trans men (ibid.). I, too, know the struggles of lacking facial hair, as I, a senior in college, have been read as a first-year by at least three to four people, including fellow college students, have been assumed to be in high school, and at worst, I was once asked by new neighbors, in the voice reserved for kids, “What grade are you in?”

One trans male respondent (who’s bi) seems to acknowledge the apparent binary (no pun intended) of trans male presentation that we see when comparing Gavino to Jay, Seamus, and Ryals. “[A]s a transgender male I do not feel that I fit into this group. Everyone is either super fit and a gym rat or super flamboyantly gay in my experience.” Hence, the “gym rat” identity, which I too have witnessed all over Instagram and YouTube, is without a doubt about claiming one’s masculinity. And though people with facial hair may have a “buoy” to be “flamboyantly gay,” it is curious how many present this way who do not have that tie to masculinity. I, myself, can say that I push the gender binary in my dress without a [visible] hair on my chin, but I am also interested in seeing how many straight trans men dress in this way.

Below are survey data collected from the two straight, trans men. As this is a remarkably small sampling of this population, we should view these individuals as cases studies, rather than widely generalizable data.

Case 1

Clothing Descriptors:

flannel, cotton, earth tones, dull/muted, common patterns, modest, tight shirts, tight bottoms, outdoorsy, baggy sweatshirts, tight sweatshirts, denim jackets, t-shirts, long-sleeved shirts, cuffed pants, gender-conforming
Clothing Effects:

- I feel like I blend in with most people on campus, my peer group/friends.
- Did not say he blends in with the queer community

Clothing Intentions:

“Ever since I've been able to I've felt most comfortable dressing in traditionally masculine ways. Since transitioning and now that I pass pretty much all the time, I blend in generally. In my hometown I don't feel like I blend in, since it's known that I'm trans. I also feel like because now I appear very gender-conforming I don't appear very queer and I don't blend into the community as much as I used to.”

The clothing descriptors all seem to fit the bill for what cis, het men say they wear – inconspicuous colors, then there is the sense that this man sometimes dresses for comfort with baggy sweatshirts, as some cis, het men have reported doing (and have been assumed by other respondents to do); this person notes that they perceive their wardrobe to be gender-conforming. However, three descriptors stick out: “cuffed pants” is a presumed queer practice to respondents, 12% of whom say bi women do it, 8.8% of whom say bi guys do it, with 1.5% saying it about gay guys, and 0.49% saying it about nonbinary people. Then again, I have personally seen this trend mostly among skateboarders, which may be partly influenced by the desire to not trip on one’s pant leg while skating. The mention of tight clothing also stands out, as 9.3% of respondents expected to see that in gay men and which 22% of gay men claim to wear. Otherwise, his clothing appears to conform to cis, het norms, which seems to be reflected in the fact that he does not say he blends in with the queer community, but instead with other men on campus and peers/friends. He seems to clarify this point in the description of his clothing intentions, which also adds the information that this look is not forced – solely adopted to fit in with other straight men – but is desired and “most comfortable.”

Accessories:

name-brand sneakers

“I tend to wear vans or converse or doc martins [sic] for shoes. I usually pick dark colors, so they don't stand out much, but other queer people tend to comment on them, especially the docs.”

Accessory Effects:

- I feel like I blend in with most people on campus, my peer group/friends, & the queer community
- I feel that my accessories do not cause me to stand out.

His chosen accessories also seem similarly subtle and a common pick for cis, het men. However, as he also mentions wearing doc martens – which was listed as an indicator by at least
one respondent for each queer category except for Ace/Aro, he seems to be attracting queer notice as well, and blending in with them at least a little.

**Body Modifications:**

uncommon haircut, both ear lobes pierced

**Uncommon haircut description:**

“Today my haircut is seen as pretty normal, but when I first got it getting a very short, masculine haircut was not common at all where I lived and read as very queer. I got it when I was 13 and it basically functioned like a coming out. Everyone seemed to think they knew my sexuality once I got it. Today, since I've transitioned, my haircut looks like a traditional men's haircut and doesn't stand out anymore.”

**Body Modification Effects:**

- Some of my body modifications cause me to stand out, which was not my intention.

It is noteworthy that he has piercings on both ears, as that breaks the norm of the single left ear pierced. He also describes his haircut retroactively, explaining how it was uncommon for the gender he was assigned at birth, saying it was so divergent, having it was like “coming out.” Before transitioning, he would have been considered a lesbian, and so this haircut likely demonstrated “gender inversion,” which may have only signaled attraction to women at the time, but which came to be one step in the direction toward completely gender overhaul. Now, conversely, it helps him to fit in with cis [likely het] men as it is “traditional.”

**Is there any way that you try to visually present your sexual orientation?**

“I do purposefully represent that I'm straight in how I dress. I do that by dressing in a more traditionally masculine way.”

**Is there any way that you try to visually present your gender identity?**

“I also dress in a traditionally masculine way to represent that I am a man. Overall, I try not to signal that I'm trans, but I've been trying to be more open about that lately. I've started wearing trans-pins on my backpack, and I've tried to signal that I'm not as cis/[heteronormative as I might seem with some jewelry. But so far I'm new to trying this out since until recently, my goal has been to blend in at all costs after many negative situations from before I began passing.”

Again, we hear echoes of emphasis on dressing in a traditionally masculine way to effectively signal both sexual orientation and gender identity. Yet, there is now the introduction of slight variance in self-fashioning to show that there is more than meets the eye with his gender, through jewelry, he now mentions (though did not mark earlier in the survey).
In his response to the question asking whether he relates to his subculture, he seems to explain more about why he feels the need to differentiate himself from cis, het men – what has made him digress slightly from his normal goal of blending in:

“I identify as transgender and transmasculine. I struggle to find a way to relate to my sexuality, since it is 'straight' but because I'm trans and because of the experiences and struggles I had to discover and accept and embrace my sexuality I don't feel represented in mainstream straight culture, since it is normatively assumed to be cisgender. Within the queer community it is odd to want to embrace being straight, since it's usually framed as LGBTQ+ people vs straight people. Interestingly, it's never LGBTQ+ people vs cis people. Online I've found some blogs that talk about transhet things, but it's pretty limited. I've considered using the label queer since I don't feel like my sexuality is heteronormative, but I haven't actually used that label since I feel like that would misrepresent who I'm attracted to.”

Hence, it seems that the lack of struggle experienced by cis, het men, as well as some unclear implication that heteronormativity has on his sexual orientation, seem to propel him to visually differentiate himself in some way.

Case 2

Clothing Descriptors:

dull/muted, sweatpants, t-shirts, long-sleeve shirts, gender-conforming

Clothing Effects:

- I feel like I blend in with most people on campus, my peer group/friends
- Did not say he blends in with the queer community

Clothes Intentions:

“Growing up I gave a lot of thought to how I dressed and enjoyed it. I wore collared shirts, suits, engaged in style trends, etc. Post transition, I wear sweatpants[s], jeans, and t-shirts. I have a notion that spending energy on how I dress is feminine or gay which as a stealth trans guy, I'm hyper aware of.”

No accessories or body modifications

Is there any way that you try to visually present your sexual orientation?

“I dress uninterested (sweats, t-shirts, jeans, dull colors, etc.).”
Is there any way that you try to visually present your gender identity?

“I try to present myself in a way that wouldn't let anyone question my gender identity.”

Relation to Subculture:

“I identify as a trans person, but not openly, therefore I don't really take part in or associate with queer/LGBT groups or subcultures. I also identify as a straight man, so I have few ties to the queer community and present as an ally more than anything else.”

The muted colors, comfortable (e.g. sweatpants), and conventional style he describes would most likely cause him to blend in with cis, het men. This is absolutely intended, he explains, as he has purposefully sacrificed his pre-transition, enjoyable activity of putting stylistic effort into his appearance in order to pass, to be “a stealth trans guy” and avoid any outwards signs of femininity or gayness. This echoes of one cis, het respondent who said he liked colors but wore earth tones to correctly transmit his sexual orientation. However, this particular case – being outed as trans - could potentially have more serious consequences. It could repel potential love interests or provoke violence, as happened in the case of Brandon Teena, which was reenacted in the critically-acclaimed movie Boys Don’t Cry (1999). Further, in his attempt to prevent anyone from questioning his gender identity, he also elects not to accessorize nor get body modifications. Apparently, his attempts to blend in have been successful, as he doesn’t feel connected to the queer community.

Comparison

In both of these cases, there are clear, conscious efforts to blend in with the cis, het community. One man even goes so far as to suffocate his passion for fashion in order to dress as if “uninterested” in clothes, and has no accessories nor body modifications (though he could imply be uninterested in these). The other man has also put in great effort to “blend in [with cis, het men] at all costs” due to negative experiences, but also naturally feels most comfortable in traditionally masculine clothing. Yet, this second man is starting to accessorize with some jewelry – a more traditionally feminine addition – to ever so slightly differentiate himself from the cis, het crowd. Though both these men are gender-conforming, they both seem to want to express some element of traditional femininity – either in jewelry or through taking an interest in fashion.
Chapter 4: Gay Men

In the last chapter, we made several comparisons of cis, het male style to that of gay men and discussed how the two groups are seemingly defined in opposition to each other. We will now more thoroughly explore gay male fashion.

The following is how survey respondents perceive people who identify as gay men.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Perceived Presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>76, 37%</td>
<td>non-visual cues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38, 19%</td>
<td>Good style (Nice clothing, thought put into look/cares about presentation, well-maintained appearance, clean), Feminine style (either gender-non-conforming/traditional women's clothing or clothing with feminine elements) • “Pretty much anything that breaks with the cold, impersonal expectations of male gender.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21, 10%</td>
<td>unsure, bolder fashion choices (conspicuous, unique) • bright colors – 9, 4.4% • patterns – 4, 2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19, 9.3%</td>
<td>tight clothes • tight pants - 7, 3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18, 8.8%</td>
<td>no way to know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17, 8.3%</td>
<td>clothing (not described)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15, 7.3%</td>
<td>dyed hair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14, 6.8%</td>
<td>Earrings • both lobes pierced (2 earrings) – 12, 5.9% • dangly earrings (3) • single ear piercing (e.g. in “left ear”) (2) • other types: feminine, “fun,” “specific kind” (doesn’t elaborate) Piercings • nose ring (2) • nipple rings (1) • “facial piercings” (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12, 5.9%</td>
<td>makeup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10, 4.9%</td>
<td>possible to tell (not explained how)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9, 4.4%</td>
<td>rainbow imagery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8, 3.9%</td>
<td>Hairstyle • well-maintained hair (2) • “adventurous haircut” (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- “unusual” hair
- “little or no facial hair”
- “Neat manicured hair on blonde men”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>7, 3.4%</th>
<th>painted nails</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6, 2.9%</td>
<td>not in sports clothes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “A particular interest in fashion of any kind outside of explicitly branded sportswear”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• [can tell their identity by] what they’re wearing (sporty looking clothes or not)” – <strong>likely meaning if they’re not wearing such clothes, since that descriptor is often used for cis, het men</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “if he has a good fashion sense (not in athletic clothes 24/7)”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “not athleisure”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “if he was well-dressed (not wearing slides/basketball shorts)”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “Isn’t wearing basketball shorts”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jewelry (e.g. lots of jewelry, feminine jewelry, shiny jewelry)

| 5, 2.4% | crop tops |
| 4, 2.0% | pride merchandise |
| 3, 1.5% | cuffed pants, short shorts |
| 2, 0.98% | pastels, rings, androgynous/fluid, glasses (“designer” (1) or specific type “accompanied by at least 1-2 other [gay] indicators”) |
| 1, 0.49% | socks (unspecified), beanie, unbuttoned shirt (likely layered over something – they didn’t say just the top few buttons), preppy, Doc Martens, brimmed hat, t-shirts of female pop artists, leather vest, handbag, heels, fishnets, wearing glitter |

**Specific Case**

- “I can usually tell by their body mods, haircut, and clothing. If all those boxes are ticked than most likely the guy is gay.”
- “Men who wear more feminine jewelry, like dangly earrings, or who dress [in] bright and feminine clothing often make me think they may be gay. I also tend to think that for men who wear bright and tight more masculine clothing if they have an obviously well-maintained appearance, like their hair.”
- “jeans cuffed or tucked into their shoes”

*(#) = number of respondents who made this assertion.

Looking at respondent perceptions of gay men, non-visual cues predominate, followed by good style (nice clothing, thought put into look/cares about presentation, well-maintained appearance, clean), and feminine style (either gender-non-conforming/traditional women's clothing or clothing with feminine elements). We then see that 10% are unsure how to tell if a man is gay, which is slightly fewer than the 17% who said they couldn’t pinpoint cis, het men; similarly, 8.8% said there’s no way to know if a guy is gay vs. 9.8% who said so of cis, het men. More fashion-related indicators come up (bolder fashion choices, clothing (not described)),
including tight clothing, which stands in contrast to the baggier clothes based more on comfort than style that respondents expected of cis, het men, and which some cis, het men testified to wearing (as compared in the previous chapter). Following, are body modifications (dyed hair → earrings → piercings more broadly), then makeup, rainbow imagery, and another body modification – hairstyle, then painted nails. We then see gay men defined by what they don’t wear: sporty clothes. Conversely, athletic clothing was the number one visual indicator for cis, het men. Here, we see the oppositional definition of gay vs. cis, het men again. Next is jewelry – which was not necessarily uncommon for cis, het men, then the traditionally feminine crop top, pride merch (things people wear to openly share their identity, such as when they go to Pride parades), cuffed pants (which we will see has heavy associations with bi people), traditionally feminine short shorts, pastel colors – as differentiated from more common, less conspicuous colors, rings (more jewelry), androgynous/fluid style, glasses, and then some indicators from individual respondents and specific blends of stylistic elements that respondents believe give them a full enough picture to suppose a man is gay.

All in all, we are seeing many of the indicators (colorful clothes, jewelry, piercings, dyed hair, feminine fashion elements, makeup) that were not used to describe cis, het men.

Here are takes from some of the interviewees:

- **Mark**: As mentioned in the previous chapter, Mark is inclined to assume a man is gay if he’s better-dressed than the average man of that age, with stylized hair and makeup (if he has that kind of money).

- **Ella**: She says that for male-presenting people, “it’s easier to throw a label on [his sexual orientation].” If a man has feminine jewelry or accessories, she is likely to question if he’s gay. If he wears makeup, she’s then likely to question his gender identity. Guys wearing nail polish doesn’t faze her anymore, “It’s just an expression thing. It doesn’t have to signal anything.” Overall, in reference to potential gay-signaling stylistic elements, she emphasizes that “It’s not like one is the other. It’s a correlation, not a causation.” In essence, wearing feminine jewelry is not synonymous with being a gay man, nor will being a gay man cause you to wear feminine jewelry.

- **Logan**: She has found there to be more pressure on guys to be masculine than girls to be feminine, which means that if her gay guy friend “dress[es] anywhere near being gay,” meaning breaking that masculine/gender-conforming mold, his slight visual differentiation will make him noticeable as gay. Accordingly, she believes that men who experiment with their looks are more likely to be gay, such as male art students. Overall, she claims that “Every art student I’ve met is somewhere on [the queer] spectrum,” but finds it harder to tell if female art students are queer as women can be adventurous stylistically with society’s approval.

- **Meg**: Again, as discussed in the in the previous chapter, Meg finds that “Men who are not straight typically dress better and look better” and that are more likely to choose feminine options and “take [them] further [perhaps in bolder ways] than straight men”; yet, she initially mistook some of her straight guy friends as gay – an assumption they get a lot. “People think they’re gay because they don’t look sloppy” regarding their clothing fit, hygiene, and the fact that they take care of themselves, she says.
• **Ryan:** He suspects that gay men may have hints of low-key femininity in their outfits, such as tighter shirts, but do not dress overtly feminine.

• **Skylar:** Our interview did not end up covering her perceptions of gay male style, but she did describe her best friend who’s a gay guy. She said that he wears “bedazzled everything of the loudest print,” see-through clothes with platform shoes, and will put glitter on his face. He likes to dress very loudly. “He loves eyes on him and attention.” He loves theme parties. One of his outfits might encompass yellow platform Doc Martens, a mesh shirt which is cropped, and loud pattern pants from the women’s section, “And he’ll rock it,” she says.

• **Caleb:** As mentioned earlier, he claims that form-fitting clothing – e.g. the combo of slim pants and a t-shirt – was a clear gay signal years ago, but that has morphed into the general style. He has found signaling romantic gender preference via clothes to be hindered as because straight guys are more well put-together.

The “tells” that these interviewees describe align well with the self-presentation that the rest of the respondents suspect to see in a gay man, including good fashion-sense and attention paid to appearance, feminine stylistic elements, self-fashioning that explores beyond the reaches of traditional masculinity, bright colors, and bold choices.

**Examples of Gay Presentation:**

We can see some parallels between respondent assumptions about gay male presentation, media representation, and some the reality of some gay men’s presentation. However, given my limited objectivity as a human being, it should also be considered that I may have subconsciously selected these examples given the stereotypes of gay men I have been exposed to.

The characters Eric and Anwar from the show *Sex Education* (2019 – present) abide these understandings of gay men. The Season 1 trailer (“Sex Education” 2019) gives a hearty preview of their styles.

Eric has penchant for bright, colorful clothes of varying textures and layering different loud patterns courageously.

Here is a sampling of his fashion from some of the brief scenes he appears in during the trailer:

1. Multicolored mosaic sneakers with a tribal-looking orange and yellow sock and a blue track sweater with large, colorful, pictures of food.
2. A black and monster-drink-green, synthetic vest over a synthetic, tropical yellowish-green track sweater with pineapples, leopard print, possibly roses, and other loud images on it. Both coats are busy patterns, but don’t clash in an unattractive way (as respondents said a cis, het man’s clothes might). They were put together with a good stylistic eye. That outfit is pictured

Netflix. *[Friends Otis (left) and Eric (right) from the show Sex Education]*. 2019. A screenshot from a YouTube clip with enhanced brightness. YouTube accessed April 15, 2021. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hd2kITR-WpI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hd2kITR-WpI)

These characters are a perfect juxtaposition of stereotypical straight style with gay style.
above.

3. Comes to prom in a traditional African (either Nigerian or Ghanaian, as he is descended from both) outfit – traditional textiles of bright orange, brick red, bright teal – with a metallic teal headwrap; light pink, glistening lip gloss; green glitter on his temples and around his eyes; a teal metallic eyeshadow; and large, dangly metal earrings.

4. In a fuchsia track sweater (pictured at right) with a large rectangle on each side of the zipper with an intricate swirly, paisley-like pattern over horizontal segments with purple, turquoise, and light brick red over a cheetah-print shirt.

Anwar also has good – and somewhat conspicuous – fashion sense. He mixes different patterns, sometimes uses bright, popping colors, though his outfits are usually not as loud as Eric’s style. He is seen in the Season 1 trailer in a pastel pink blazer over a grey button-down with striped grey-blue and black tight pants (pictured at left). At right, he mixes two patterns – both of which are colorful, though not richly vibrant.

These are not side characters in an otherwise straight series, but important players (at least Eric is) in an amazingly queer show that some call “a triumph for LGBT+ representation” (Phillipson 2019) with ample queer characters and plot lines. Furthermore, creator Laurie Nunn consulted gay actor Ncuti Gatwa, who plays Eric, “to discover the specificity that really makes Eric tick and fed that into the scripts” (ibid.). Her work with Gatwa and “a diverse writers room” helped Nunn, in her words, “shape Eric’s story into something as authentic as possible” (ibid.).

Thus, if the show’s creator put in an honest effort to shape these men into unique character and not common tropes, it is possible that she sought the actors’ opinions on their characters’ styles or she did not pick those styles to make them intentionally fit a gay mold. Whatever the case may be, these characters both noticeably fit the respondent indicators by having good style sense and wearing more uncommon and bolder patterns and colors.

Shaun Cole (2013: 136), a gay man himself, seems to lend validation to the idea that gay men dress well, claiming that they “introduce their integration into society [by] promoting aesthetic sense.” Hence, when a group is not respected in their culture, it seems reasonable to suggest that they may want to present themselves in a way that seems pleasing to the eye to gain societal favor.

Moving to discuss real gay men, in his TED Talk “Why am I so gay?” at Georgetown University, Thomas Lloyd (2014) prefaces his presentation by attempting to read the audience’s mind. He speculates that his audience must be thinking, “He doesn’t seem that gay to me. His
suit’s a little tight, but no gay person would use white text in a PowerPoint.” Hence, in this case, we are seeing both a reference to gay men wearing tight clothes and being attracted to colors, bright ones at that, as respondents predicted.

In his article “Queerly Visible: Gay Men, Dress, and Style 1960-2012,” Cole mentions a man by the name of TJ Wilson and explains how his self-fashioning changed after coming into his gay identity. After coming out, he sought out the gay scene and began modifying his body; he grew his hair out long and dyed it, shaved his eyebrows, and put on mascara (Cole 2013: 152). Wilson described how his clothes changed as well, he started “dressing like other gay people…my clothes became a lot tighter…I would make sure my jeans were very low and I would always show butt cleavage, just a little” (ibid.). Inspiring this change was “wanting all this male attention and that’s why I would show off my body” (ibid.). His use of makeup, hair dye, and adoption of tight clothing conform to respondent expectations, but the shaving of his eyebrows and wearing revealing clothing seems unique. His decision to have long hair does not directly line up with respondent expectations, though one respondent said gay men have “unusual” hair which, might mean gender-non-conforming. Some straight men described their long hair with these terms.

Cole also interviewed a gay man named Joe Harris, who changed his self-presentation when he began going to clubs his freshman year of college, starting to dress “just a little bit…sluttier” in “tank tops and ripped jeans” (ibid.). Like Wilson, Harris’s clubbing wardrobe seemed to be an attempt to create male-targeted sex appeal by exposing more of his body.

Eric Goodman and David McGovern, two other men Cole featured, found that their gay identification led them to ditch “a sloppy, comfortable style of sweatpants and tracksuits” (ibid.). For McGovern, this meant “something a little bit more formal…combat trousers [and] a long sleeved tee-shirt with a short sleeved tee-shirt over that” (ibid.). Goodman found himself “buying a lot more button downs, [and] vests [and] tees that fit properly,” which reflected “his newfound awareness of his body” (ibid.). Hence, these two men present themes already seen – the idea that men prioritize comfort over style, look sloppy (as put by Meg and how Skylar describes “frat bros”), and wear athletic clothing, and that gay men wear more “formal” and more fitted/tight clothing.

Looking at the cases of Wilson, Harris, and Goodman, we can now see possible motivations behind gay men wearing tighter clothing; a desire to attract male sexual attention. Perhaps before they knew they were gay, they were uninterested in showcasing their bodies as they didn’t want sexual attention from the people they were told they should want it from – women. However, it is worth asking if any gay men wear tight clothes before coming to term with their identity.

Comedic YouTuber, Benito Skinner (2019), created a video called “LIVE FOOTAGE OF ME IN THE CLOSET” in which reenacts the way he behaved and dressed in high school, all the while stating in a matter-of-fact tone, “I’m not gay.” The video is meant to provoke a laugh as he insinuates that anyone else encountering him at the time would have called him gay, but he constantly insisted that he wasn’t. In the video, he dons side-swiped bangs; a braided surfer necklace; a form-fitting, sky blue Abercrombie & Fitch t-shirt over a long-sleeve shirt; and two to three bracelets on both wrists (hairbands, fabric bracelets with big knots, woven bracelets). As earlier noted, McGovern too, has layered t-shirts over long-sleeve shirts before. I also saw this among gay guys in elementary and middle school, though many weren’t “out” at the time. It is questionable as to whether this is a gay style or a 90s style as it was more prevalent when I was in grade school and can be seen in old sitcoms like Friends. I have also seen some women wear this combo. Regarding Skinner’s bracelets, some cis, het men did claim to wear bracelets, but
one respondent noted that if a man wears too many accessories, he will come off as gay. It is unclear if the amount of bracelets Skinner is wearing per wrist reaches that threshold. His necklace might not trigger curiosity as some cis, het men also claimed to wear necklaces, and Skinner’s looks something a “surfer dude” would wear, versus a piece with a feminine touch. His bangs look Justin-Bieber-esque – a heartthrob for many girls – and his Abercrombie & Fitch shirt might have been an attempt to fit in; Skylar mentioned that that brand as well as Hollister were key to fitting in during middle school. His tight shirt also aligns with gay indicators, but it is curious what his motive might have been if he wasn’t aware that he was gay and, hence, trying to show off his body to other men. This might simply indicate more style-consciousness/not wanting to look “comfortable” and “sloppy.” His shirt’s color does pop slightly – it’s not dull or muted, but that’s the only colorful element of his outfit and it’s not vibrant. Hence, this may have been an attempt to not stick out from other guys – though a person doesn’t necessarily have to know he’s gay to not want to stick out.

Skinner finally came out at the age of 24 in 2016, and can now be seen in the intro to his YouTube videos dancing on a rooftop in red track pants with a sky blue, thin, flowy, button-down t-shirt peppered with motorcycles of a subtle red, blue, and green that’s open three buttons or so, revealing his chest (ibid.). We now see a transition to louder, more conspicuous clothes and a move to show off his body. Additionally, though he is technically wearing athletic clothing – the track pants, they are worn in a stylistic sense versus in a sports context, and are a magnificently bright red that would likely turn heads. Therefore, it is clear to see the transition that Skinner has made from mostly conforming to cis, het self-fashioning norms to embracing what many see as explicitly gay style.

Identity Becoming Fashion

The tie between gay male identity and self-presentation is not a new phenomenon. As Valerie Steele, American fashion historian, curator, and director of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, puts it, “as soon as a sense of gay identity began to emerge in public, it was expressed in fashion” (Steele 2013: 15). There were clear gay subcultures in the early 1700s in Europe, though they were of course not the first ones, with some Italian cities viewed as gay hot spots during the Renaissance and European courts having gay circles (ibid.: 12). The European gay subcultures of the 18th century arose in large cities such as London, Paris, and Amsterdam (ibid.) and three associated identities received attention from newspapers at the time (ibid.: 13). There was the “molly” who was effeminate,” came from “popular classes,” and would meet up with other mollies at inns or public houses dressed in “’gowns, petticoats, head-cloths, fine laced shoes…some had riding hoods; some were dressed like milkmaids, others like shepherdesses with green hats, waistcoats, and petticoats; and others had their faces patched and painted” (ibid.: 13-15). Another archetype was the “macaroni,” whose name came from pasta as a joking reference to the stereotype of sodomy in Italy (ibid.: 15). He was so concerned with his style that his “foppishness [male vanity] called into question contemporary ideas of masculinity” (ibid.). This type of man was not always gay, however (ibid.). The third well-known type of gay man at the time was the “man-milliner” who worked in fashion, creating, decorating, and/or selling various types of women’s clothing, such as dresses and hats (ibid.). These men were often called or implied to be “effeminate sodomites” and came to serve “a significant role in the emerging gay subculture” (ibid.). It may be these tradesmen who were the origins of the stereotype of the gay, male fashion designer (ibid.). Yet, designer Yves Saint Laurent may not
consider this a mere stereotype, asserting, “It’s hard to think of fashion that’s not made by gays or by women” (his emphasis) (ibid.: 44). It is worth considering whether fashion-related fields have provided gay men the “freedom” that’s “necessary to nourish creativity,” as put by Saint Laurent” (ibid.), by allowing them to be around and play with glamorous things that society says men can’t wear or use themselves. They could still dress sharply, but then indulge in feminine art to their heart’s content in their work. They may be more willing to put up with the stigma of being a male milliner than a cis, het man who also enjoys what’s considered the feminine fashion of the time, as their homosexual desires are breaking one norm, so it may be easier to break another (Kennedy 2009: 4-5).

As these “pretty gentlemen,” who adhered to the men’s style of the time, comprising colorful silk suits with flowers, lace trim, and accessorized with diamonds, became more visible in society – likely with help from the English press, they “de-legitimized what had previously been considered ideally ‘masculine’ and aristocratic styles”; such styles were increasingly deemed “effeminate” (Steele 2013: 16). By the mid-1700s, there was a major “paradigm shift in male fashion”; it became darker and plainer and “[c]olor, decoration, and other forms of ‘excess’ in menswear were viewed with increasing suspicion, especially when men of the popular classes imitated aristocratic beaux [perhaps referencing aristocratic eccentricity]” (ibid.). It is certainly worth asking if this “paradigm shift” is responsible for the current “plainer,” less conspicuous, cis, het men’s style that study participants have attested to and the bolder (“excessive”), more colorful self-fashioning associated with gay men (according to study participants and the case studies of gay men mentioned earlier).

Intentionally or not, the mollies, macarons, and male milliners all seemed to present effeminately. This tie of effeminacy to gay male identity reemerged in the late 19th century, and thus, has “centuries” of history (Cole 2013: 142). Brave” gay men intentionally utilized effeminacy to signal gay identity to each other, which included wearing women’s clothes and mirroring female behaviors and physical characteristics (ibid.). Gay men utilized this practice up until at least the first half of the 1900s (Breward 2013: 127).

This brand of effeminacy was known as “camp,” meaning, as designer Dame Zandra Rhodes puts it, “something that’s over the top in its concept, that wouldn’t go unnoticed and [that has] a sense of humor about it; but it’s not mainstream, and it’s joyous and out of the ordinary” (Bekhrad 2019). Fabio Cleto, professor of English Literature at the University of Bergamo in Italy, explains it as “a form both of performance and of perception celebrating theatricality and excess, improvising reality as a stage for outrageously ironic self-display and reinvention” (ibid.). It also includes “elements of visual décor,” as Christopher Reed, Professor of English and Visual Culture at Pennsylvania State University, puts it (Breward 2013: 127). The term likely derives from French Courts of the 17th century as “camp” may come from the French “se camper” – “to posture boldly” (Bekhrad 2019). The word came to the English language at the end of the 19th century and first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1909, which defined it as “ostentatious, exaggerated, affected, theatrical” as well explicitly connecting it to gay men, offering the additional definitions of “effeminate or homosexual; pertaining to, characteristic of, homosexuals…” (ibid.). Cleto adds that camp was largely tied to Oscar Wilde, a gay British playwright, novelist, and poet (ibid.). Wide’s trails for “gross indecency” for his affair with a British aristocrat in 1895 “typified the ‘homosexual,’” from which camp arose as “a twisted form of aestheticism that largely (if indirectly) meant sexual deviance” (ibid.).

This “conflation of effeminacy with homosexuality” from the late 1800s to mid-1900s not only helped gay men to signal to others, but allowed less feminine gay men to go unseen; their
dress became camouflage with cis, het men (Cole 2013: 142). Shaun Cole claims that gay communities often condemn “visible” gays (ibid.), perhaps because they set the tone for how society will perceive all gays. It is hard to not see an ounce of truth in that hypothesis, as many people today have come to closely associate gay with feminine style; again, that was the second-most popular indicator that respondents listed and many interviewees alluded to that quality as well.

Gender Ambiguity

Both as an unintended consequence of effeminate presentation or through purposeful, political decisions, gay men have occasionally transmitted an image of indeterminate gender. For instance, many of the feminine macaronis of the 18th century were caricaturized in way that “emphasized [their] sexual ambiguity,” such as this poem “Is it a man? ‘Tis hard to say - / A woman then? – A moment pray - / So doubtful is that thing, that no man / Can say if ‘tis a man or woman: / Unknown as yet by sex or feature, / IT moves – a mere amphibious creature” (Steele 2013: 15). Conversely, radical gay men of the Gay Liberation Front of the 1970s parodied stereotypical femininity and masculinity by “mix[ing] up the semiotic coding and readings of appearance” (Cole 2013: 144). To paint a picture, a man might have heavily-applied makeup and a sequin dress paired with workmen’s boots (ibid.; Cole 2008) but “kept [his] facial and body hair and revealed [his] genital bulge” (Cole 2013: 144). Opposed to drag, in which men try to hide their bodies and maleness, genderfuck was an act of playing with gendered signifiers to confuse the audience (ibid.). The act was both satirizing stereotypical masculinity as well as “a self-conscious embracing of those same stereotypes” (Cole 2008). Such a performance certainly leaves the question of one’s gender up in the air. I personally blend masculine and feminine elements in my style either because I think they look good together or, like these men, want to confuse people and make them critique societal gender norms. For example, I may wear a patterned, button-up t-shirt with a grey, lace cardigan over it and a backwards hat; clogs with an otherwise masculine outfit; or ostentatious, flashy jewelry with a traditionally masculine shirt. As a result, I have had people incorrectly assume or ask me if I am nonbinary whereas I firmly identify as a man.

Gay men continue to challenge societal gender standards today. One of Cole’s associates once saw a man in New York City with leggings, Doc Martens with socks, a tunic, blazer, and some makeup; another one saw guys in London in full-length skirts (Cole 2013: 150). At one of his jobs in a fashion company, Wilson worked alongside men who donned high platform boots and feminine clothing (ibid.). McGovern asserts that young men are “using their position of being gay to experiment…if they’re subverting one social norm and being gay they are possibly subverting another norm in dressing in another way.” (ibid.). This idea echoes what Kennedy (2009) has said as well as one respondent:

“M/m (male[-]loving males) are more likely to address their society-imposed male stereotypes [sic] when discovering their attraction to the same gender. Male-identifying individuals that appear to be comfortable with their masculinity, and are willing to present feminine in any capacity are more likely to be gay simply because they aren’t exhibiting toxic masculinity which is common in their straight male-[identifying] peers.”

Thus, it seems that gay men have pushed gendered boundaries – sometimes leading to gender ambiguity – either for intentionally performative reasons or as a result of them engaging
in genuine self-expression.

**Gay Muscle Man/Reclaiming Masculinity**

On the contrary, gay men have also made a concerted effort to reclaim masculinity. In the 1950s, gay iconography reflected the gay male community’s attempt to shift away from the “limp-wristed sexless ’sissy’ and the effeminate cross-dressed pseudo woman” stereotypes by embracing the “gay muscle man” (Cole 2008). This was evidenced by the popularity of physique photos taken by Bill Green and sold at Vince Man’s Shop in London as well as of muscle magazines (ibid.). These visuals offered a new basis upon which to redefine the gay male body (ibid.). The muscular body became the new stereotypical gay body, “a new form of excess” like makeup and which could cause a “ping” on a peer’s gaydar (Cole 2013: 154). Similarly, personal ads began requesting “straight-acting” men, such as with a t-shirt and jeans (ibid.: 151). Nevertheless, gay men tried to avoid completely recreating straight style, but to “reinterpret” it to be seen as “real gay men” (original emphasis) (Cole 2008). These men called themselves “clones,” and with their tight shirts and macho garb, essentially “satiriz[ed] straight style (Cole 2013: 144).

Tank tops were an effective way to show off one’s muscles and continue to be “a quintessential gay item of clothing” today (ibid.: 154). Bill Burr pointed this out when he hosted *Saturday Night Live* in 2020. He was performing his monologue, talking about how New York City was really crowded in June, saying he asked a friend why and they said, “It’s gay pride month!” (Burr 2020) He smacked his forehead, feeling dumb for his delayed realization, “Aa! Tank tops! Zero percent body fat! Two guys kissing! Rainbow flags! Aaa!” (ibid.). Hence, he not only connects tank tops to the queer community, but also mentions the stereotypical muscular gay body. My brother and I have also witnessed a plethora of colorful tank tops throughout Provincetown, Massachusetts – a gay nucleus of Massachusetts, and I witnessed such a tank top in an Indian movie from 2017 called *Loev*, where Alex, the ex-boyfriend of the main character, Sahil, is sporting a colorfully striped tank top early in the film when dropping Sahil at the airport to meet a love interest (Saria 2017). Thus, it is possible that this trend crosses international borders, or this may simply be a coincidence. Additionally, as a reminder, Harris said he started wearing tank tops in his attempt to dress “sluttier” for gong to clubs his first year of college (Cole 2013: 152). Harris doesn’t necessarily use the tank to show his muscles, but it does serve to show off his body.

Gay men (at least a portion of them) aren’t the only ones who wear tank tops with very specific intentions. In a funny instance of sharing my findings with my thesis advisor, Paul Deslandes, about the use of tank tops in his community, he then enlightened me as to the importance of tank tops in *my* community – of trans men, that is – as well as that of butch women, as an important marker of gender identity. I am unaware of the connection to butch women, but in reflection of my own connection to tank tops after getting top surgery (a double-mastectomy), I realized that wearing a tank top *did* mark some threshold being crossed. Wearing a tank top post-op as a trans man means no longer having to worry about bra straps slipping down your shoulders or slipping out from underneath the tank top strap or, worse, the side of a bra cup showing from the wide armhole of a tank. Even if you wear a chest binder, as many trans men do, the binder often has a t-shirt-like opening, reaching up, over your collar bones and extending to your bottom rib; this high neckline looks ridiculous with a tank top and the binder can be seen through the armhole. It’s a dead giveaway that you’re trans. Thus, I do concur with Paul. However, I should also mention that I am personally at the intersection of two identities,
both very eager to wear tank tops, as I want to “prove” my gender identity and because the queer sexuality part of me wants to enjoy the queer male membership of wearing a colorful tank top.

Hair

The gay male community has also taken different stances on body hair. In the 80s, in the middle of the AIDS crisis, gay men shaved their facial and other bodily hair, which “reassured” the viewer, the potential partner, of a man’s “purity, youth, and by extension, freedom from disease,” as put by author Allan Peterkin (Cole 2008). When paired with muscles and a tan, a body felt into the stereotype of “the smooth, healthy, gym-toned gay body” (ibid.). This was a time of “self-pampering narcissism,” encouraged by a developing male beauty industry (ibid.).

The community then shifted to a heavier presence of body hair in the form of the “Bear.” Designers (e.g. Gaultier, Dolce, Gabann – who are gay or are inspired by the culture) started using hairier models for fashion shows in 2006, hairier men appeared in Boyz magazine in January of 2008 in advertisements and editorial photos, and David Beckham lost his spot in the top five sexiest men in the gay magazine Attitude since he was “over-groomed” (ibid.). These hairier men are called “bears,” and “celebrate what they perceive as ‘real’ masculinity,” not a construct, meaning “hairiness, big bulky bodies, work-toned muscle (rather than gym-induced), and a belly (in direct response to washboard stomachs)” (ibid.). Essentially, they defended their appearance as what a man naturally comes to look like as his hairline recedes, he grows more body hair, and gets a chubbier stomach (ibid.).

This “bear” look, which originated from lumberjacks and rural workmen, has then been [re]adopted by straight men in a look that is now known as the “lumbersexual” (Teeman 2017). He has a thick beard, thick flannels, and “looks unkempt” (ibid.). His beard is an echo of the beards and mustaches that gay “clones” (men who took on straight style, with their own twist) and bears deemed sexy and used to “shortcut conversations about sexual likes and dislikes” (ibid.). As beards are now “ubiquitous,” they can confuse messages about sexual orientation (ibid.). They also illustrate that heterosexuality is “a performance” (ibid.), just as the styling practices of any other sexual orientation is. In essence, there is a constant borrowing of styles between the straight and queer communities, with each community tweaking the style they’ve appropriated before giving it back (Cole 2013: 137). As Cole puts it, “gay style is basically what becomes straight fashion six months later” (ibid.). Sometimes, of course, when it becomes straight style, cis, het men run the other way so as not to look gay, as happened in the early 2000s (ibid.: 150).

There are also various motivations regarding the hair on gay men’s heads. Some with internalized homophobia, who view gayness as gender inversion, may show concern about their hair “in terms of individual self-image and sexual attraction,” wondering if it’s “too long, too short, too fey, too butch?” (Cole 2008).

Hair can also signal conformity. If gay men want to blend in with cis, het men, they can cut and style their hair accordingly, or go in the opposite direction to look conspicuously gay (ibid.). When it was safest to conform, leading up to gay liberation in the 60s, gay men did so with their clothes and hair – keeping their hair “very ordinary short back and sides,” unless “one was in an artistic profession” that allowed slight deviance from this mold (ibid.). Long hair has been closely tied to effeminacy for centuries, one reason for such a connection drawing from its common occurrence on men who had colorful clothes and were interested in art in the late 19th century and especially from the Oscar Wilde trials in 1895; Wilde had nearly shoulder-length
hair at one point (ibid.). Gay men who wanted a “leisure-class image” then came to adopt this look (ibid.).

Up to the first half of the 20th century, some gay men styled their hair in feminine ways, such as by plucking their eyebrows, growing their hair long and styling it, and often dyeing it – this was usually in addition to applying rouged to their lips and powdering their faces (ibid.). Bleaching one’s hair also became associated with the gay community, the novel *Goldie* serving as an example (ibid.). The main character is a gay man named Paul Kameron who dyes his hair, but fears police will recognize him as “degenerate” due to his hair’s unnatural color (ibid.). Thus, he always wears a cap except when “to attract the attention of his prospect” (ibid.).

Similar ideas about gay male hair exist today. The connection of gay men to dyed hair seems to still be an association held by some today, as 7.3% of respondents said that dyed hair is an indicator that a man is gay and 3.9% said that a man’s hairstyle in general can be an indicator as well. Logan also mentioned the popular idea circulating that “When gays have mental breakdowns, they typically dye their hair.” She referenced a meme made when Pete Buttigieg dropped out of the presidential race; someone had photoshopped him with bleached-blond hair. As *Mel* magazine correspondent, Joseph Longo, explains, “When a gay man bleaches his hair, it’s a sign he’s going through a crisis…It’s a right of passage for queer people, specifically naive white gays like myself, to reach for the peroxide bottle when facing a minor inconvenience” (Longo 2020). Shaving one’s head and growing a beard is also associated with situations of panic for gay men. Buttigieg and his hair practices came to light again when he in fact did change his hairstyle. The headline of one of Josh Milton’s (2020) articles on the Pink News website reads “Pete Buttigieg Proves His Gay Credentials by Shaving His Head During Quarantine.” The article then cites a tweet from @savethebeesclub, reading “can someone please check up on pete buttigieg? he shaved his head and he’s growing a beard i hope he’s doin ok man” (ibid.). Thus, there are clearly still modern associations of hair practices to gay male identity.

Other theories of gay male dress include that different gay “scenes” shape a man’s dress when he discovers and accepts his identity (Cole 2013: 152) and Brian Findlay asserts that “gay men tend to make themselves into the type of man they’re most attracted to,” which Josh Cooper affirms in saying, “You go for the people you want to look like” (ibid.: 152-153).

Overall, scholar Jamie Gough sums up the varying patterns of gay men’s style as “a vacillation between striving towards or away from hyper-masculinity and overt femininity,” adding that “‘Gay masculinity is not in any simple way, ‘real’ masculinity any more than ‘camp’ is femininity” (ibid.: 135-136).

**Issues with Signaling Today**

Despite some modern discourse on gay male fashioning today – evidenced by online articles and respondents perceptions of gay men – some Gen Zers are having trouble with their gaydar. For instance, John, a 26-year-old listener of the podcast *Hidden Brain* who came to be featured in an episode, came out in college, ready to date, but struggled to figure out who was gay (Shankar 2020). One thing he checked was to see if “their hair [was] a certain way” (ibid.).
Unsuccessful in detecting others’ sexual orientation, he resorted to using Grindr which the narrator Shankar Vedantam stated, “removed all the guesswork” (ibid.).

There was less “guesswork” in the 80s when men wore handkerchiefs in their back pockets to symbolize preferences for certain sexual activities, which Daily Beast correspondent, Tim Teeman (2017) describes as “so efficient, and also much more fun and inventive than an app,” referring to dating and hookup apps like Grindr. He also said that the combo of t-shirts, light blue jeans, and a tight, black leather jackets or having square-cut hair and highlights were clear gay signifiers (ibid.). Further, Teeman (2017) states,

“Gay sexuality was once so proscribed that wearing ‘uniforms’ and decoding uniforms was necessary. Having a “gaydar” was once a necessity, rather than a joke. “Cruising” could be a delight, when—a few paces on in their respective directions—two men turned at the exact same moment to re-check each other out.”

Here, he seems to suggest that such meaning-laden styles are no longer needed or present and that gaydar has been laid to rest, even though its origins stretch back at least as far as Oscar Wilde’s time, when a green carnation in a man’s lapel signaled his gay identity (ibid.). In analyzing the results of what gay male respondents say they wear (below), we shall see if there is truth in what Teeman is saying. Though, respondents have tied past gay male signifiers to gay men today, such as good fashion, dyed hair, certain hairstyles, and feminine style, we have yet to see if modern gay men do in fact still style themselves in those ways.

The Survey Results

Unfortunately, very few gay men filled out this survey – only nine, so it will be difficult to generalize these findings more broadly. However, we may be able to see how scholarly sources, social media, and pop culture articles overlap with these individuals’ stylistic choices.

Additionally, there were no male-presenting nonbinary respondents who were assigned male at birth who identified exclusively as gay/being attracted to other male-identifying people. Hence, we do not have that group to compare the potential of sexual orientation to shape self-styling with that of gender identity.

**Everyday Clothes (Top Six Descriptors):**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Perceived Presentation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6, 67%</td>
<td>gender-conforming, outdoorsy, cotton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4, 44%</td>
<td>cuffed pants, common patterns, thrifted, flannel, t-shirts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3, 33%</td>
<td>dull/muted, modest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2, 22%</td>
<td>bright/vibrant/colorful, synthetic, earth tones, conspicuous, tight shirts, tight bottoms, preppy/nautical, tight sweatshirts, denim jackets, denim bottoms, short shorts, long-sleeve shirts, gender-non-conforming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1, 11%</td>
<td>loud patterns, plunging necklines, oversized shirts, oversized bottoms, turtlenecks, overalls, androgynous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
<td>“Goth baBEY”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clothing Effects:
• blend in with the LGBT+ community: 44%

Other motivations for wearing this style of everyday clothing (optional free response):
• comfort (2)
• convenience (1)
• not draw attention to self (1)
• to shape mood (1)
• to signal gay identity (1)

Novel responses (my emphasis):

“Even though I am gay, I have tended to feel more comfortable in "normal" male clothes.”

“I usually put my own comfort at highest priority when it comes to my clothes. I usually wear whatever styles are popular (no big name brands). Again, I usually try not to draw too much attention to myself.”

“I mean how else do I show people I'm gay other than being a very fem presenting Victorian goth.”

“I choose clothes that will express a feeling on a particular day. My default is utilitarian wear for work around the house, but I also enjoy dressing up for teaching or meetings. I see clothes as an expression that can change my mood, so choosing a certain outfit may alter how I enter the day.”

Overall, it appears that most gay men wear clothing that does not vary from the cis, het male norm; nothing in their wardrobe sticks out except for the “cuffed pants” indicator, which 1.5% of respondents predicted. It is only among the four- and fifth-most-selected descriptors that more gender-non-conforming and stereotypically gay descriptors appear, such as: tight, conspicuous, loud patterns, plunging necklines, and androgynous. “Short shorts” also stood out, as three respondents noted that as a gay indicator and this ties to the theme of some gay men trying to show off their bodies to gain male sexual attention, as we saw in earlier examples.

Correspondingly, we’re seeing that a minority of gay men feel their self-presentation makes them blend in with the queer community. Their motivations also seem mostly limited to their own personal concerns – about feeling comfortable in one’s clothes, dressing according to convenience, not standing out, feeling good from the outfit – rather than what message they are conveying to the observer. Only of the respondents who shared their motivations had others in mind; he wanted to project his gay identity. Half of the motivations, quoted above, suggest that the respondents abide cis, het dress codes, dressing “normal” and trying to not stand out from one’s peers.

This mismatch of the expectations and reality of gay dress could also be responsible for one respondent’s reported alienation from the community. He states,

“Unfortunately, the gay subculture includes several toxic ideas regarding how your body should look, how you should dress and act, etc. In some regards, I feel very out of place in the gay community due to these standards. I don’t dress how gay guys are ‘supposed’ to
“dress. I'm not necessarily interested in the same things.”

Though certain stylings associated with the gay male community may have once been helpful in finding partner, it may now be oppressing those who don’t conform. The respondent’s mention of “toxic ideas about how your body should look” may indicate that the stereotyped gay, slim, muscular body still has some currency today.

**Accessories (Top Five):**

Average number of each type per person.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accessory</th>
<th>Average per Person</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.67 finger rings, bracelets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.55 dress shoes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.44 messenger bag, baseball cap, beanie/knit hat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.33 name-brand shoes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.22 headbands</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The accessories the respondents selected, however, is a great departure from what cis, het men selected. Jewelry is the most used accessory, a stylistic element that 2.9% of respondents predicted gay men would have, which was the third-most selected accessory for cis, het men, not the first-most. Also, gay men wear rings, but cis, het men only have bracelets in common with gay men (though they also wear necklaces and earrings). Headbands and messenger bags also differentiate the two groups, though both had dress shoes as the second-most-selected pick and baseball caps as the third-most, sharing beanies/knit hats and name-brand sneakers in common, though at different frequencies (beanies were third for gay men and fourth for cis, het men and name-brand sneakers were first for cis, het men and four for gay men).

**Body Modifications:**

L = left, R = right, number = number of piercings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modification</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Undercut, L ear lobe 1, R ear lobe 1</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyed hair, 1-3 tattoos, uncommon haircut</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncommon haircut (optional free response):</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Currently shaved very short, dyed blue-black when my hair is naturally a light brown.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Uncommon haircut description (optional free response):**

- “Currently shaved very short, dyed blue-black when my hair is naturally a light brown.”

**Intentions of Body Modifications:**

- I feel that my body modifications do not cause me to stand out (4, 44%)
- Some of my body modifications cause me to stand out, which was not my intention (1, 11%)
- I got all of my body modifications to intentionally stand out from others (0, 0.0%)
I got at least some of my body modifications to intentionally stand out from others (0, 0.0%)

Motivations to get mods (optional free response):
- family pressure (1)
- to take ownership of body (1)
- to reclaim confidence (1)
- likes edgy look (1)

Novel responses (my emphasis):

“I only got an earring because of pressure from my family. I never opted to get any body modifications.”

“I haven't gotten any yet, but I plan for several piercings and tattoos once I have the money, and they're all just because I think they look badass.”

“I've never gotten a body modification or even died [sic] my hair. This decision doesn't stem from any moral opposition to these decisions. I think that it rather stems from a subconscious willingness to not stand out. Body modifications are, by definition, a deviation from the norm (the un-altered physical human body). Ever since my childhood I have done my best to avoid attention and try to blend in with the crowd. This behavior came as an adaptation to avoid being singled out or bullied (once I realized that my identity was different from most everyone else). I've definitely considered getting some kind of piercing or tattoo, as a way of reclaiming my confidence. However something has always held me back. I'm just not sure what it is.”

Hence, overall, we can see that body modifications are rather scant among gay men. Of those that respondents report getting, we see themes of hair modification, such as the undercut, which Caleb has jokingly deemed “the gay cut”; dyed hair, which many people today believe is a gay indicator; one person has tattoos; earrings show up; as well as foreskin restoration (a personal decision rather than a desire to signal something). It is interesting that the respondent who claimed to have an uncommon haircut mentioned that it is shaved short – in addition to being dyed blue-black – which seems to be a gender-conforming style. Perhaps he perceives it to be more militaristic than what the average man has. We see that earrings are also listed, and one respondent, whose parents were supportive when he came out but asked him to stay in the closet out of fear of being bullied, says that his parents made him get an earring. Hence, it is worth asking if they asked him to get an earring on his left lobe to signal that he’s straight. The person who has one piercing on their right lobe may have been purposefully signaling the opposite, their true identity.

In general, most of the gay men with body modifications claim that their modifications don’t cause them to stand out, and for the one respondent who feels that they do partially stand out, this effect was unintentional and only due to a few of their modifications. Motivations provided are varied, ranging from external pressure to the desire to develop a sense of agency in one’s presentation, as well as to dress in an aesthetic to make oneself feel good (to feel confident, or simply to enjoy the style).
Given what scholarly literature and popular media are saying about how gay men style themselves, there seems to be something of a gap between theory and reality, at least in this study, as very few gay men have body modifications; this demonstrates stylistic overlap with cis, het men. This then begs the question if society truly believes that dyed hair, piercings, and certain hair styles are displayed by all gay men, or if they simply believe that if a man does happen to have one of these, that he will be gay rather than straight. The same question could go for all the other indicators. I will personally say that most gay men I have met do not stand out from cis, het men; they don’t wear bright colors, don’t have piercings, nor dyed hair.

Nevertheless, most of those that they report body modifications hair-related, which has historically been a stylistic element of concern, regarding its length and color.

The last quote above, from someone who has not yet gotten body modifications, begs address. It reinforces the theme of Chapter 2 that authentic self-presentation is a privilege. This respondent clearly did not feel safe decorating himself how he pleased, afraid of standing out – as most respondents define gay men as contrasting with the cis, het norm. It is unclear why he has not gone on to pursue bodily modification now, but may be due to internalized homophobia that reminds him of the societal significance of these decorations. From the survey results, it seems that there is no inconspicuous way to get a body modification, unless it was perhaps underneath one’s clothes (e.g. tattoos, nipple piercings).

Is there any way that you try to visually present your sexual orientation?

Only a sample of novel quotes included for each category.

No (5, 55%):
- “I don't think I aim to visually present my orientation. Aside from dressing more ‘polished’ than some of my peers and coworkers, I don't view my visual presentation through clothing [as] overtly gay. I think my natural body language probably does more talking in this regard, which is likely interpreted as gay by those around me.”
- “Not really. I dress in pretty conventionally masculine styles.”

I effectively do (unintentionally) (1, 11%):
- “I have a very twink affect, honestly, in my voice and in my posture. That tends to be the giveaway. Other than that, it's pretty clear from my he/him pronouns contrasted with my feminine affect and style of goth let's be real.”

Yes (3, 33%):
- “Sometimes, I wear flamboyant clothing such as white jeans.”
- “I cuff my jeans lmao. I thought this would be a funny thing to include because for some reason it has become a stereotype that queer people cuff their jeans.”
- “i keep a pink triangle pin on my backpack so people will get the message but otherwise theres no real indicator in my opinion. Straight people, especially at UVM, but everywhere in the last 4 years have adapted many queer stylings as their own recently.”

It seems like most gay men do not hint at their sexuality through their self-fashioning, with two (both are not quoted) admitting that they wear clothes that break from the “conventionally masculine” [cis, het] norm. Another remarks how he does not intentionally
choose to transmit his gay identity, but this effect is a result of wearing goth clothing, suggesting that the mainstream – or at least other queer men – know of goth associations to queer identities (though, more typically, bisexual ones), though specifically bisexual ones, allowing for gender-bending nonetheless. Additionally, one man says that his “natural body language” likely communicates his sexual orientation.

A minority of gay men do intentionally signal their sexuality. One does it by wearing what he perceives to be feminine clothing. Another cuffs his jeans, which was not seen among straight men, only straight trans men – who have a queer gender identity, and is a predicted (as noted earlier) stylistic facet of queer people (at least among some respondents), as this respondent states; 12% of respondents say bi women do it, 8.8% say bi guys do it, 1.5% say it about gay guys, and 0.49% say it about nonbinary people. Lastly, one respondent differentiates himself with a pin with an undeniably tie to the queer community, but does not use any other measures. He seems to attribute the perceived conformity of his look to straight men appropriating gay style, as was mentioned earlier with gay “clones” reclaiming their masculinity by taking the lumberjack and working man’s style, which straight men have then taken back from the gays in creating the “lumbersexual.” Teeman (2017) concurs that this back-and-forth sharing has been cause for some confusion in reading others’ sexual orientation.

Is there any way that you try to visually present your gender identity?

Only a sample of novel quotes included for each category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No (5, 55%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I effectively do (unintentionally) (4, 44%):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Same as above. I identify as a man and see myself as fairly conventional.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “My style is pretty gender[-]conforming, I think most people can assume that I am a man based off of typical stereotypes.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Same as above, with the exception that I tend to wear more ‘male’ clothing. My wardrobe choice is certainly shaped by ideas of growing up male (cultivating male looks). While I am not wed to ideas of appearing male, I do love the styles and fashions of menswear. I think it is possible to move beyond the confines of male wear while also celebrating its expressive potential.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “My gender is twink, see above.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As evidenced above, no gay men intentionally signal their gender identity; recall that all respondents in this section are cisgender, which may make them feel doing so is unnecessary. They either feel that their style is conventionally masculine and achieves the desired effect or they show no interest in trying to look like an undeniably cisgender man; the latter is the case of the respondent who jokes that his “gender is twink.” To illustrate, though one of Urban Dictionary’s definitions for twink is “An attractive, boyish-looking, young gay man…[stereotypically] 18-22, slender with little or no body hair, often blonde” (DocLightning 2004); another is “A person who could be mistaken for man, or woman…Or a person with both female, and male genitalia” (P***D**k 2008). Thus, a “twink” may not appear to be clearly male.
Conclusion

Therefore, the majority of gay men conform to the traditionally masculine, cis, het styling of the day. A minority of gay men wear clothing styles that other respondents have deemed markers of gay identity, few have body modifications, most do not try to signal their sexual orientation through their style, and none put intentional effort forth to convey their gender identity. However, it is also possible that it is not the outfit that makes for the gay presentation itself, but the wearer. Lee Houk claims that a straight man may choose to wear a Marc Jacobs floral shirt, white jeans, and lime green SeaVees [shoes] and look straight, but if Houk were to wear that, “it’s definitely a gay look,” he says (Cole 2013: 160). Along those lines, at least a few respondents may not style themselves in a specific way to signal identity if they feel that their natural style or behavior already “outs” them. There are some respondents who conform to these stereotypes (e.g. dying their hair, wearing colorful and tight clothes), but not many. What is notable is the difference in gay men’s accessories when compared to that of cis, het men, with jewelry being most utilized, rings being unique to their demographic. Given this limited study – of nine individuals, it seems that few gay men don clear indicators of their sexual orientation. However, again, it is possible that when a man is displaying what respondents have deemed queer indicators, that there is a greater chance of him being gay. That theory has not yet been put to rest.
Chapter 5: Straight, Cisgender Women; Lesbians; & Femme Gynophilic Nonbinary People

To clarify, femme gynophilic nonbinary are people who are female-presenting (appear female) and who are attracted to women/other female presenting people. “Gynophilic” is used instead of homosexual, as saying these nonbinary people are “gay” would imply that they like their own gender. Yet, if a female-presenting person they are attracted to happens to be a woman, that implication would be incorrect, as they would be attracted to someone of a different gender. Again, a nonbinary person does not identify as male or female, and may feel they are a mix of genders, or feel no gender, though there are many other experiences of gender beyond these two.

I have opted to combine these identities into the space of a chapter as women have more freedom of expression and style exploration than cis, het men; there is not a hard line between straight and queer dress for women. Unlike cis, het men and gay men, they are not necessarily defined in opposition to each other, and women do not necessarily preoccupy themselves with “not appearing gay” as many cis, het men do. Additionally, having both identities in conversation is important to study women’s dress (and that of female-presenting people in general) under the frame of the male gaze: whether their desire to appeal to it, reject it, or ignore it influences their style.

I will be using “woman”/“women” as a shorthand for all female-presenting people for ease of use as well as “lesbian” when referring to data from both lesbians and femme gynophilic nonbinary people; two of three of the latter group use the label “lesbian,” while the other goes by “gay” or “queer.” Additionally, respondents have been asked what a lesbian looks like, so they believe the question to be about a woman, though in reality, it is about female-presenting people.

There were only three femme gynophilic nonbinary people, one of whom was assigned male at birth, so I opted to assess them alongside cis, female lesbians. However, at the end of the chapter, I review those three respondents as case studies to see if their self-styling stands out from that of lesbians.

I would have invoked data from straight, trans women for comparison to see if their gender queerness affects their presentation, but there are only five trans women in this study, all of whom are bi. As I did in my search for straight trans men, I opened an incognito tab so my personal search history wouldn’t influence the results and searched for “straight trans women” on YouTube. I looked through the first 50 videos and nearly all were asking different variations of the question, “Do straight men date trans women?” Once more, I would peruse social media to search for straight, trans women, but finding pictures that suggest a woman is dating a man do not rule out the possibility of her being bi. Thus, I went to YouTube in search of trans women who explicitly claim to be straight. A cursory Google search similarly did not yield any relevant results; they were mostly about trans health, understanding what it means to be trans, dating as a trans woman, the connection of trans people to queer sexualities, and more talk about the controversial issue of straight men dating trans women (many men are concerned doing so means that they’re gay). Unfortunately, I am not closely acquainted with any straight trans women and the ones I know who have not told me that they are interested in women are not close enough acquaintances for me to inquire about their sexual orientation.
The following is how survey respondents perceive people who identify as:

Cisgender, Heterosexual Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Perceived Presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>48, 23%</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29, 14%</td>
<td>No way to know,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Looks like the “Average” Woman/Absence of Queer Indicators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• No unique body modifications or modifications at all (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• No piercings (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• No unique hairstyle (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• No tattoos (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Few accessories (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Conventional accessories (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Less vibrant colors (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28, 14%</td>
<td>non-visual cues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24, 12%</td>
<td>feminine style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18, 8.8%</td>
<td>hairstyle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• long (8, 3.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• straightened hair (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• traditionally feminine (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <strong>specific case</strong>: fish-tail braid, has highlights and if she tends to curl or make it wavy, hair parted on the side, less likely to have unique hair, “done hair” (e.g. at the salon)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16, 7.8%</td>
<td>I assume all women are straight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11, 5.4%</td>
<td>Makeup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• a lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• on a regular basis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• natural makeup (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• sometimes foundation, definitely mascara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• less likely to have unique makeup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9, 4.4%</td>
<td>clothing (no description given)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8, 3.9%</td>
<td>Leggings, brand-name clothing, trendy, revealing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• crop tops (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• short dress or skirt (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6, 2.9%</td>
<td>tight/form-fitting clothes, simple style (no patterns, conventional patterns and colors, muted colors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5, 2.4%</td>
<td>skinny jeans, preppy, athletic clothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>nail practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• painted (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• long (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• fake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4, 2.0%</td>
<td>natural hair color,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
earrings

- two piercings (2)
- average/lobe piercings (2)
- conventional, simple earrings (1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Possible to tell (did not specify how)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>scarves, sweatshirt, blonde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>designer clothes, sneakers, white shoes, heels, boots, baggy top, purse, leopard print, furs, modest, less fashionable, nose stud, boutique, attention to fashion, light colors, pastels, less bright, androgynous, religious garments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Specific Cases**

- “Sorority aesthetic” (2): “Blonde, in line with mainstream fashion trends, air of performatism?”, “dressing like a sorority girl, two earrings, maybe a nose stud.”
- “On campus the heterosexual females seem to be the people most likely to look like their friends” (2)
- “vsco girl look, baggy t-shirt/tank top, skinny jeans, white shoes, straightened hair” (2)
- “The Pinterest fall aesthetic of booties and scarves.”
- “Small shirt big pants”
- “brandy Melville, hoodie and leggings combo”

*(#) = number of respondents who made this assertion.

Thus far, it seems like respondents feel slightly less confident in determining if a cis woman is straight versus a cis man; 23% feel unsure versus 17% for cis men and 14% say there is no way to know, versus 9.8%. This may suggest that there is slightly more overlap in style between cis, het and lesbian women than there is between cis, het men and gay men.

Nevertheless, we are seeing the similar framing of cis, het women as “average,” conforming to norms of traditional femininity, and at least partially defined by their lack of certain stylistic elements [perceived queer indicators]. Respondents paint a picture of conformity, using words and phrases like, “They dress like most people,” “generic,” “classic,” “mainstream,” “traditionally feminine and currently popular clothes,” “blends in with the crowd,” “normative,” “like the majority,” and “follows basic societal norms with clothing?” Interestingly, we are seeing “societal” used to specifically mean cisgender and heterosexual, demonstrating who is in charge and which aesthetic conventions predominate. We then hear those definitions by absence of stylistic elements, such as, “I usually assume straight until proven or hinted otherwise with men and women both,” “very in-line with what everyone else is wearing,” “[I guess that she’s cis and het] unless she has a masculine haircut and is dressed in traditionally male clothing,” “nothing in the way of body modifications beyond a couple average ear piercings, “naturally colored hair [vs. unnatural colors],” “Few accessories, and the accessories they do have are conventional (simple earrings, for example),” and “Less bright colors and piercings.” This perception aligns with what respondents predicted for men as well; 14% define cis, het women in this way while 16% believe that cis, het men look like the “average” guy with an absence of queer indicators.

Moving down the list of indicators, non-visual cues are next at 14% - though for cis, het men, this was 24%. Next is feminine style 12%, which is expected of cis, het women less than it is of gay men – 19% of respondents believe gay men incorporate feminine elements into their style. Correspondingly, a woman’s sexuality is also judged by her hairstyle, with “long” being
the most-used descriptor, followed by “straight” – suggesting effort made to straighten it (vs. it being naturally straight), and respondents then offered a variety of specific hair styles, including intentionally styling it (e.g. getting highlights, curling it, making it wavy, going to the salon).

These hair descriptors suggest notable effort on the part of the woman to craft her appearance that bears some resemblance to the self-pampering of gay men to appeal to other men in the 80s (Cole 2008), not exclude nail decoration/grooming (painted, long, or fake). It is possible that respondents expect to see this as this type of behavior may serve to appeal to the male gaze.

After that, we see makeup, which is emphasized as natural, not unique, and not used in large quantities. This is in contrast, as we will see, to what respondents believe is true of queer women.

Clothing comes up again, then revealing clothes with tight clothes showing up soon after. We also see more indicators of blending in (brand-names, trendy, simple style, natural hair, earrings (only two and on lobes, “conventional”)) and the suggestion that cis, het women wear athletic clothes, all of which parallel that of cis, het male style (recall that some men paint their nails).

Interestingly, we see what respondents deem the “sorority aesthetic” as an indicator that a woman is straight. This complements the “frat bro” look that some respondents attributed to cis, het men, though six people endorsed that aesthetic and only two people made this claim about women. It is possible that these very specific ideas of cis, het people derive from what people view as the quintessential straight American experience. The practices of frats and sororities parallel those of the American high school tradition of football players – athletes engaged in this lauded, “All-American” sport – who give their girlfriends their coats with their varsity letters; the cheerleader would be the sorority girl in this scenario. The football player and cheerleader couple are popular American archetypes hailed over the decades in the media. Correspondingly, a frat bro may let his girlfriend wear his jacket with his frat letters or give her a necklace with the letters, a gesture known as “lavaliering” (Rubin 2018). Additionally, frats and sororities may be seen as the touchstones of straight culture as they are sites of celebrated heterosexuality – frequent partying breeds hookups, sororities and frats get together for “Date Nights.” This seeming heterosexual playground may be more in the forefront of people’s minds as, in recent years, the culture of fraternity members competing for the most sexual conquests – which can turn ugly – has gathered more attention in the news. Many Americans were aware of the frat member Brock Turner raping a girl and receiving nominal punishment and a documentary about sexual assault on college campuses, which featured frats, called The Hunting Ground, came out in 2015. Sigma Alpha Epsilon was one of the frats mentioned, including its colloquially name “Sexual Assault Expected” (Nast 2019). Hence, these may be the reasons why some respondents have very specific images of cis, het men and women in their heads. This may also explain why those who said cis, het women are “blond” as the All-American, traditional, straight, and gender-conforming family has been historically portrayed as blond-haired and blue-eyed.

A few respondents also claim that cis, het women look like their friends. This could be indicative of the aforementioned idea of cis, het archetypes, so if a group of women are all cis and het, the assumption would be that they all mirror this image. This may also suggest that cis, het women are more likely to be friends with other cis, het women, if their style does vary from that of queer women.

Another suggested “look” that comes up is “the VSCO Girl.” The aesthetic comes up across the web – on online forums, YouTube videos, Urban Dictionary, Instagram, Tik Tok, and online articles. It can comprise an oversized T-shirt with Nike shorts or a tube top and jean shorts; Vans, Crocs or Birkenstock shoes; a Hydro Flask always on-hand (hjlt 2020); oversized T-shirts in general, clothing from the store Brandy Melville (which at least one respondent can
vouch for), Pura Vida bracelets (woven bracelets), Fjällräven Kånken backpacks; Puka shell necklaces. (Amazon Customer 2020); crocs, “millions of scrunchies,” metal straws on-hand (l.f.e 2019); friendship bracelets (on wrist or in-progress on the holding loop of a Hydro flask), faded t-shirts with beach, sun, or desert styles and retro sweatshirts – both faded (these reflect Brandy Melville influence); lip balm on-hand (“☆ how to be a VSCO GIRL ☆”); and clothes from Urban Outfitters (“Selfie Queen” 2019), creating an overall “beachy, California style, combined with a drop of 2000s or 90s nostalgia” (ibid.). The stereotype name derives from the app Visual Supply Company (VSCO) that was created in California in 2011, which gives users the ability to post filtered photos that look like they were taken by a film camera (ibid.), and these women get their name from their avid use of this app (l.f.e 2019). I would personally have to say that this style is almost ubiquitous among women across campus – or at least many of its elements. Much of UVMers’ style is thrifted and described as “crunchy” (according to Skylar, Ella, and Meg), incorporating many of these accessories and aligning well with the style of Brandy Melville, which has an overall old-school, vintage, thrift-store-find aesthetic. Notably, Burlington also has a Fjällräven Kånken and Urban Outfitters with many outdoorsy stores (e.g. Outdoor Gear Exchange, L.L. Bean, Ski Rack) that would provide Hydro flasks. Yet, importantly, I have seen it traverse boundaries of sexuality.

It seems like there is also an association of cis, het women with more feminine styles and patterns. Meg, for one, attests to this, and I have similarly witnessed a local stand-up comedian who identifies as bi claim that she steers clear of floral patterns to prevent people from mistaking her for straight. Weezer’s song “Pink Triangle” also makes this association, as Rivers Cuomo sings of mistakenly falling in love with a lesbian: “I start to look around for love/See a sweet in floral print/My mind begins the arrangements/But when I start to feel that pull/Turns out I just pulled myself/She would never go with me/Were I the last girl on earth” (my emphasis). Here, Cuomo seems to think he’s spotted a straight woman based on her dress, but it turns out that she wears “A pink triangle on her sleeve,” which is symbolic, not literal, as her lesbian identity was not directly reflected in her outfit. This suggests a difference in lesbian and cis, het female dress.

The following is how survey respondents perceive people who identify as:

**Lesbians**

We will presume that respondents would extend these assumptions to anyone who is feminine/female-presenting and attracted to other female-presenting people.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Perceived Presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>63, 31%</td>
<td>masculine style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55, 27%</td>
<td>Hairstyle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• short (40, 20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• undercut (10, 4.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• pixie cut (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• unconventional style (e.g. masculine) (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• shaved head (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• fade (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• long (for some lesbians) (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• close-cropped (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• shaved on sides (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crew cut</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dreadlocks</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tight bun on top of head</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mullet</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-visual cues, piercings</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flannel</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothing</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyed hair</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No way to know</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nose piercings</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Septum piercing</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nose rings</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earrings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun/funky/quirky earrings</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unusual/weird earrings</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extensive ear piercings</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dangly</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homemade</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big earrings</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less-fitted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type/use of makeup</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unnatural</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bold colors, loud</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doesn’t wear makeup</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorful eye makeup</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heavy makeup</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certain mascara style</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short nails</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible to tell</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewelry</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layered, metallic, statement jewelry, chain necklace, body modifications in general, Punk-Alternative Style (e.g. “heavy makeup, bright hair, dark, revealing clothing”)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Femme Style (for some lesbians):</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A more ‘masculine’ style is often strongly associated with some lesbians, though that is only part of the group and I don't know what if anything would distinguish femme lesbians for heterosexual women.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Short haircut/masculine clothing. I say this and know that there are also many femme lesbians that do not prefer to dress this way.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolder choices</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothing is “unusual” or “out there”), cuffing, Pride merchandise (e.g. pink triangle iconography, identity shirts and pins, displaying flag colors)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Button-down shirts</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thrifted, beanie, quirky style, athletic clothes, eyebrow slit, androgynous</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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3, 1.5%  | jeans, boots (e.g. combat boots, chunky books), darker colors, hyperfeminine, **cottage core look**
2, 0.98%  | socks type (e.g. “funky”), denim, leather, artsy style, certain accessories (unspecified), **body hair**, rainbow imagery, all-black outfits
1, 0.49%  | good fashion, bright colors, eyebrow piercing, sweatshirt, shorts, t-shirts, baseball cap, designer belts, hats, striped clothes, sandals, glasses (particular type, but not specified), high-waisted pants, Doc Martens, **revealing**, sneakers, vans, nails done a specific way (did not clarify), brand-name sneakers, denim jacket, no bra, pins on backpack, hippie, outdoorsy, indie pop aesthetic

**Specific Cases**
- “Flannel and short hair”
- “They don’t wear makeup and have short hair”
- “flannel over a sweatshirt”
- “Girls who put their hair up in a tight bun on the very top of their head and wear more masculine sports-wear type of clothing and chain necklaces”
- “I know some lesbians who do not accessorize and **dress in total straight male clothes. I know others who go overboard with outfits.**”
- “Queer womxn come in many different forms. We have our goths with dark and [eccentric] make-up, fashion, and body-modifications.”
- “If she is wearing lots of accessories, particularly unusual earrings.”
- “silhouettes (for example, big pants big shirt), big pants little shirt)…Thrifted clothing, particularly men's clothing.”

*('#) = number of respondents who made this assertion.

In comparison to cis, het women, respondents assert that lesbians are easier to diagnose; 23% of respondents are unsure what cis, het women look like, compared to 16% for lesbians, and 14% say there’s no way to know if a girl is cis and straight, but only 7.8% say that of lesbians. When contrasting these numbers with gay men, there is not a jarring difference: 10% of respondents are unsure if a man is gay (vs. 16% for lesbians) and 8.8% (vs. 7.8%) say there’s no way to know if he is. A few respondents explain why they find it easier to assess if someone is a lesbian.

“I know some lesbians who do not accessorize and **dress in total straight male clothes. I know others who go overboard with outfits.**” (my emphasis).

“Generally I feel as if lesbian women intentionally have some of the strongest stylistic hints about their sexuality.”

“Because the range of queer womxn is so large butch and femme being opposite ends, some people can be ‘clocked’ easier than others.”

Hence, here, we’re hearing that there are seemingly two poles of the spectrum of lesbian style – masculine vs. bold and colorful (“overboard”). This shows up in the kinds of makeup we see listed; either bold and eye-catching makeup or no makeup at all (1.5%). Thus, a woman could differentiate herself as a lesbian by styling herself in traditionally masculine ways (e.g. her clothes and hair) – engaging in “gender inversion” (as earlier mentioned) – or by simply decorating herself in prominent, “unusual,” and “bold” aesthetic elements. Accordingly, some
themes we see in perceived lesbian indicators are quirky, artsy, bold, funky, fun, weird, loud, colorful.

One such unconventional accessory that respondents associate with lesbians, perhaps as part of the archetype of the latter kind of lesbian mentioned above, is: earrings – fun/funky/quirky, unusual/weird earrings (e.g. “from non-traditional earring items”), dangly, big, or made by made the wearer. Logan explained that it is incredibly popular in the lesbian community to wear earrings that are “out there” – made from small objects that you would not normally see within an earring. She discovered this trend when she got on Tik Tok over the summer, which was when this trend started to gain momentum. For instance, she describes a girl she found on the app who made Monster High dolls into earrings.

There was also one post of a guy putting in a hook on earring and then hanging household objects off them in order to parody lesbians. Everyone she’s known to do Tarot cards has been gay; thus, she donned two large tarot card earrings during her interview. Ella can attest to this trend, saying that lesbians wear “whack earrings,” referencing friends who turn things into earrings. In general, she says a piercing can signal queerness on a woman depending on “what you wear in your piercing and location.”

I first noticed this phenomenon in 2018 as a sophomore in college when I saw a coworker of mine wearing plastic dinosaur figures – that a kid would play with – suspended by rubber bands, hanging from her earring hooks. I thought that was simply their stylistic choice, unaware that it was part of something larger. I learned more about the trend via my research into Tik Tok, but also came upon “lesbian earrings” offline as well. On January 16, 2021, I went to the thrift store Billie Jean in Burlington. In perusing the shop, a friend and I noticed the big, kitschy earrings – cardboard, sparkly purple feet with tufts of fur on the knuckles – which the worker told us were really popular. She then said they were like “lesbian earrings.” I told her when I first encountered the concept when I saw my coworker’s dinosaur earrings in 2018 and the worker said she had a similar pair. On March 6, 2021, I happened to meet the artist, Rebecca Wallace – owner of the company Kitschy Business – while visiting an antique store. She had an undercut with her hair pulled into a kind of large-scale braid/twist. I personally read her as very queer, which many respondents would, it seems, due to her undercut/unconventional hair style. I pondered whether she had intentionally created “lesbian earrings,” but, at the same time, recognized that she was in her 40s, and so I wasn’t convinced that her generation would be in-the-know about this earring.
trend. Curiosity got the best of me, so I contacted her via her business website to ask. She replied, saying the following:

“I have not heard about any earring trends among lesbians, but I am so glad they like our earrings! Those hairy feet can be a hard sell sometimes, though they’re one of my favorite designs :) We are a husband & wife design & production team, and we just make whatever we want to as far as the earrings go. I like big statement earrings of unusual objects, so we went in that direction.”

After this response, I made sure to clarify that I was not insinuating that she was a lesbian (though I had initially made that assumption), prompted by the mention of the “husband & wife design & production team” (oops!). Hence, it seems that “lesbian earrings” are a Gen-Z phenomenon, and perhaps undercuts as queer signals as well – though I do not know if Wallace is bisexual, so I cannot make any conclusions one way or the other on the hair.

Along these same lines, Ryan believes that he has noticed a connection between homemade earrings and queer identity. “It’s such an assumption,” he says, “I don’t know where I got it.” However, he then went on to say that a girl on Instagram talked about how seeing homemade earrings on a girl means she’s gay. Alex didn’t think that was true, but now it’s in his subconscious, “maybe it’s true.” Again, this is likely a Gen-Z sensation.

Nevertheless, it appears that respondents tend to notice the “butch” or masculine lesbians more so than the bold or femme ones – who they are not sure how to differentiate from cis, het women. This is indicative of a long history of lesbians being associated with masculine style and the concept of gender inversion.

Going back at least as far as Anne Lister (1791–1840), who came up in Chapter 2, her diaries reveal that her masculine appearance helped others identify her as a lesbian, gaining her access to women to sleep with (Doan 2006: 534).

We also see this correlation in the early 20th century. For instance, Ma Rainey, one of the originators of the blues, sang about women wearing traditionally masculine clothing in her 1928 song “Prove It On Me Blues,” in which she seemingly dares the listener to prove that she’s a lesbian.

“Went out last night with a crowd of my friends,/They must’ve been women, 'cause I don't like no men./It's true I wear a collar and a tie…Don't you say I do it, ain't nobody caught me/You sure got to prove it on me” (my emphasis) (Friederich 2017).

In 1930s through the 60s, especially in the lesbian community in Buffalo, New York, lesbian couples had taken to presenting themselves in a butch-fem paradigm; a “butch” was a more masculine/male-presenting woman and a “fem” was a more female-presenting woman. Butches “announced” their lesbian identity with their clothing, and this ability for lesbians to recognize each other was, as scholars Sherrie Inness and Michelle Lloyd put, “vital to creating a sense of belonging, not only for the butch, but also for all lesbians who see and recognize her” (Karaminas 2013: 196). This butch-fem presentation and its respective sexual roles paralleled heterosexuality, but differed in important ways, offering flexibility in gender roles, challenging patriarchy and heteronormativity, and promoting female sexual subjectivity.

Lesbian protest wasn’t only explicit and direct; they also engaged in a form of “prepolitical resistance” (Kennedy and Davis 2014: 6) in their adoption of a heterosexual-paralleling butch-fem dichotomy of presentation and sexual roles. This behavior liberated women from gender
roles and patriarchy while promoting lesbian visibility, and female sexual subjectivity. Butch-fem culture was about resistance, appearance, and eroticism (ibid.: xii).

Intentional or not, at the simplest level, butch-fem presentation signified societal resistance in that it challenged heteronormativity by making lesbian existence known. Butches “usurp[ed] male privilege in appearance and sexuality” and, with their fems, made lesbian couples more visible, demarcating for them a “part of public life” (ibid.: 5). They visually laid claim to space and defended it (ibid.: xii) in the hopes of attaining a better life for the gay and lesbian community (ibid.: 195). Clearly, this potentially effortless, preference-based mode of dress spoke volumes.

The structure of these couples shared commonalities with that of heterosexual relationships, but was not one and the same; it challenged gender roles. Like in heterosexual relationships, masculinity and femininity distinguished roles of aggressiveness and passivity in lesbian couples; as middle-class marriage manuals of the 30s and 40s encouraged men to sexually please their wives, a butch’s role was to please her fem (ibid.: 192). However, heterosexual masculine and feminine roles were somewhat reversed in lesbian couples; whereas advice columns and books of the time spoke of men needing to “tame” their sexuality to focus on women’s sexual enjoyment, a butch’s only priority was her feminine partner’s pleasure (ibid.: 193). Hence, instead of the butch, like a heterosexual man, being encouraged to make the effort to please her fem, as a male would normally fulfill the role of the “selfish” partner/the one being serviced, the butch is always the one doing the pleasing and the fem is the one being serviced (ibid.: 192). Lesbians bent the expectations of heterosexuality to create a model in which both feminine and masculine roles could achieve pleasure—the butch finding satisfaction by giving pleasure, the fem by receiving (ibid.: 203). Thus, though lesbians resembled the masculine and feminine components of a heterosexual couple, they were able to play with gender roles and flip heterosexual prescriptions on their head.

In that vein, lesbians in the Bondage, Discipline (or Domination), Sadism, and Masochism (BDSM) club scene in the 80s also dressed to distinguish the “aggressive” and “passive” roles, coined as “top” and “bottom” (Karaminas 2013: 197). This might be compared to the handkerchief signaling of men during that time.

Butch and fem intimacy also challenged patriarchy and promoted female sexual subjectivity. While heterosexual society celebrated and “glorified” male sexuality, women’s sexuality was repressed under patriarchy, informed only through men (Kennedy and Davis 2014: 194), and loaded with consequences, such as damage to one’s reputation, economic dependence, pregnancy, and disease (ibid.: 193). Though society became more open to sexual expression in the 1920s, women’s sexual desire remained limited to “the service of men, the family, and the state” (ibid.: 195). Conversely, in lesbian relationships, male-presenting members of these couples were on equal footing with their fem counterparts and the couple demonstrated evidence of a romantic relationship in which a woman is free from male control (ibid.: 6). Further, the butch’s “unique sexual desire” of focusing the sexual encounter on the fem’s elation came to “[open] the pathway for the exploration and enjoyment of the fem’s sexual potential” (ibid.: 193). Lesbians effectively asserted women’s sexual subjectivity—the ability to make sexual claims and attain them—and distanced sex from reproduction and marriage (ibid.: 195), the domain of men and societal institutions. In their pursuit of mutual satisfaction, butch and fem lesbians posed an affront to patriarchy and dared present the possibility of women enjoying and seeking sex.
Nevertheless, butches and fems did not always stand out, such as when they donned flannel. When attending honky-tonks in the West in flannel shirts, jeans, and without makeup, they blended right in (Karaminas 2013: 196). It appears that flannel still shares association with lesbians, as 9.8% of respondents mentioned it. One respondent demonstrates how lesbian’s use of flannel can obscure their identity in certain contexts, citing a joke her friend makes:

“one of my lesbian friends has a "quiz"-- are they lesbian or are they a Vermonter? because a lot of women around here could be lesbian. the clothing typically associated with lesbians (eg plaid flannel) is worn by everyone here. But certain very short haircuts would signal lesbian to me.”

Sometimes these two identities overlap for female-presenting people, as the AVEN user Karst (who is gender-neutral, aro, and ace) says that they explain their personal style to occasionally be “butch lesbian goat farmer from Vermont” (Upsidedownduck 2019).

Nowadays, though “butch” is still used in the lesbian community, Logan says that both it and “femme” are much less common (as she’s noticed on Tik Tok) and, instead, she claims that “top” and “bottom” have become “so big” recently. She believes “butch” and “femme” have fallen out of use as “we’re all lesbians…Whatever you want to be as a lesbian, just go for it,” perhaps meaning that looks are less the focus of identification and now the emphasis is on sexual role preference. This aligns with the theory that the butch-fem binary style markers disappeared in the 90s (Karaminas 2013: 211).

In the 90s, women came to engage in their own kind of “genderfuck” practices, as gay men did in the 70s. They engaged in a political act called “kinging,” dressing as drag kings, male impersonators, and drag butches (ibid.: 207). Drag kings performed masculinity; male impersonators gave a “plausible performance of maleness,” a 300-year-old practice; and drag butches – who were specifically lesbians – wore masculine outfits on a daily basis to critique gendered codes of dress (ibid.).

Canadian singer k.d. lang (who purposefully writes her name in lowercase) could potentially be seen as a drag butch, as in a 1993 photo shoot with Cindy Crawford, she wore a three-piece pinstriped suit, tie, and brogues, and could have been said to be “camping on her butchness” (ibid.: 202). However, she also engaged in male impersonation, bearing shaving cream on her face as Cindy Crawford sensually straddles her to shave it. She certainly had an audience, as Ariel Levy declares that “Never before had Americans seen female masculinity so overtly and unapologetically on display, and we couldn’t take our eyes off it” (ibid.: 204).

Drag kinging, in particular, was meant to “[expose] the artificiality of conventional gender roles” and/or present their own identity or “queerness,” if applicable (ibid.: 207). They would don suits, ties, grease their hair, add fake facial hair, use “crotch stuffers,” and engage in role-playing and “mimicry” (ibid.). Ultimately, their aim was to cut the umbilical cord of masculinity to men – to demonstrate that it was also up-for-grabs for women (ibid.). By and large, fashion scholar Vicki Karaminas explains kinging as “performance, excess, and politics. It is about traversing and breaking the gender system and its sexual codes, and about opening a space where masculinities and femininities are redefined producing new erotics, new genders, and new modes of power” (ibid.: 209).

Masculine Dress as an Indicator of Gender Roles

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Though the phenomenon of gender inversion was recognized in the late 1800s, masculine dress did not remain limited to queer women; it has been historically indicative of women’s place in society – either in demonstrating a switch up of gender roles, or in demanding one. At this time, the “New Women,” donned matching plain jackets and skirts, occasionally with a tie and unadorned hat – an overall tailored style that they would go on to wear into the 1930s, and aimed for their ensembles to convey the message that they did not dress to impress men, could think for themselves, and were professionals, ready to take on their new occupations (e.g. as social workers, writers, or teachers) (Oram 2021). They then went on to become suffragettes in the 1910s – though dressing in dramatically feminine clothing for demonstrations to further their political point (ibid.). Though a portion of these women wanted to signal same-sex attraction, that was not true of all (ibid.).

Similarly, female workers donned masculine clothing for their uniformed jobs during World War I. This era brought this style to thousands of American women, including clothes such as tunics with shiny buttons paired with skirts, though women engaging in manual labor or serving at the front lines were allowed to wear breeches or trousers with boots and overcoats (ibid.). These women “became familiar” and were lauded as modern women giving brave service, a positive sign of the future” (ibid.). Though once shocking, the "the khaki-clad feminine driver . . . was everywhere accepted as a natural and welcome sign of the times” (Doan 2006: 535; original emphasis). Overall, this masculine clothing was widely received as amusing and odd, including to interwar social commentators; the period between World War I and World War II was an innocent time of gender experimentation (Oram 2021). Conversely, performing femininity required more effort; it was “more than ever, a masquerade,” requiring visits to the salon, hairdresser, diets for slim figures, and more grooming (Wilson 2013: 175).

However, post-war-time women’s societal role was up in the air after this cultural shake-up (Oram 2021). Many people wanted to see women’s style, enjoyment in partaking in the workforce and the authority associated with their positions to return to the prewar “normal” (ibid.). Furthermore, after the trial of The Well of Loneliness, women in masculine dress were not looked upon as fondly and began to receive judgmental stares (ibid.).

Another instance in which masculine dress was mainstream for women was during the roaring 20s. Drawing from their new independence from joining the workforce during the interwar period and in-line with the push for women’s suffrage, flappers had bobs that were meant to signal “freedom from previous moral codes and gender expectations” and a challenge to the “androcentric state” (Johnson and Barber 2019: 111). Likewise, they often wore masculine clothes – that were “tubular” rather than form-fitting (Oram 2021) – to upper class parties, had an overall “boyish” look, and it was mainstream for them to wear dinner jackets (Wilson 2013: 175).

During this time, there was also a “severely masculinized style” that was popular among women (Oram 2021). Women wore their hair short, occasionally getting a “men’s” haircut called “the Eton crop,” and donned monocles with a tailored jacket (ibid.). Nevertheless, these women wore skirts since women were only permitted to wear pants for sports (e.g. riding, hiking, and sometimes tennis), greater flexibility not seen until after World War II (ibid.).

Similarly, in the early 1940s, black women, like black men, wore zoot suits – a man’s suit of the time with a long, loose jacket, padded shoulders, and high-waisted, tapering trousers (Johnson and Barber 2019: 117). This included black female gangs, such as the Slick Chicks and Black Widows – who wore black zoot suit jackets, short skirts, and fishnet stockings (ibid.).
Through their dress, they were “challenging conventional notions of feminine beauty and sexuality and rebelling against urban poverty and alienation” (ibid.).

The 60s also saw questioning of gender and sexuality norms among both men and women (as we saw earlier with hippie men in Chapter 3) (Oram 2021). The “second wave” of feminism that occurred at this time analyzed sex and gender as social constructs and denied their associations with specific roles, arguing that they “had become transient and interchangeable” (Karaminas 2013: 197).

Thus, masculine style has not always been the singular domain of lesbians, oftentimes employed by cis, het women to question gender roles. Magazines and newspapers even attributed gender role reversals from women gaining more job rights and rights in family law, the taboo topic of birth control arising, and women getting the vote “on the same terms as men” in 1928 to changes in women’s clothing (Oram 2021).

Even so, masculine style has also been used in this way by lesbians. In the 1980s, lesbians engaged in “power dressing,” adopting “masculine signifiers” such as shoulder pads and clothes with narrow waistlines to simulate the male physique (Karaminas 2013: 199). This androgynous style served as “political force” to make “office dress into a statement of equality and feminine control” (ibid.: 199-200). Overall, masculine style has not always been associated with and used as a signifier of sexual orientation.

The Male Gaze

In its thorough research of various media – including television, music videos, music lyrics, movies, magazines, sports media, video games, the Internet, and advertising – and review of ample studies, the American Psychological Association (APA) has found that sexualization of girls and women is nearly ubiquitous (Zurbriggen et al. 2007); the male gaze pervades all aspects of our heteronormative society. As a result, girls and women have come to objectify themselves. Various studies have demonstrated that women are more often sexualized than men, meaning donning revealing clothing and “with bodily postures or facial expressions that imply sexual readiness” (ibid.). They are also objectified, oftentimes serving solely as a decorative object or having their body parts portrayed without a full person. A study of advertisements conducted over 40 years in five magazines meant for either men, women, or a general adult audience found that of the 1.5% of ads that featured children, 85% sexualized girls over boys, and sexualizing ads are becoming more prevalent (ibid.).

This sexualization is not limited to adult women, as the aforementioned study suggests, but has also extended to girls. This sexualization can encompass infantilization of sexually-depicted adult women in ads or on TV (e.g. the Skechers “naughty and nice” ad that featured Christina Aguilera dressed as a schoolgirl in pigtails, with her shirt unbuttoned, licking a lollipop; a televised fashion show with adult models in lingerie depicted as young girls), toys marketed to girls (e.g. Bratz dolls wearing miniskirts, fishnet stockings, and feather boas), and kids clothing (e.g. thongs for 7– to 10-year-olds, some of which have slogans like “eye candy” or “wink wink) (ibid.).

This cultural deluge of sexual imagery can lead a woman or girl to objectify herself – to understand her body as existing for others’ enjoyment and to craft her appearance to fulfill that role (ibid.). In essence, women and girls “internalize an observer’s perspective on their physical selves and learn to treat themselves as objects to be looked at and evaluated for their appearance” (ibid.). Various studies have found that significantly more women self-objectify than men, and that this phenomenon is even occurring among adolescent and preadolescent girls (ibid.).
One reason that lesbian style may have come to indulge in masculine elements may be due to their disinterest in and rejection of the male gaze. American philosopher and gender theorist, Judith Butler, explains gender as something to be performed and that its “false stabilization,” or rather, societally constructed inflexibility, “ensures the interest of the heterosexual regulation of sexuality within the reproductive domain” (Pacho 2013: 16). Thus, she is essentially saying that women dressing in clearly feminine ways adheres to heterosexual gender roles, perhaps encouraging the male gaze and sexual and romantic propositioning. Further, the reliance of heterosexuality on sexual desire between a man and a woman necessitates distinction between the genders (ibid.: 17). Therefore, if a woman is uninterested in men, there is less incentive for her to differentiate her gender from maleness; she is not trying to assert herself as one half of a heterosexual equation. She is not looking for a man nor is she trying to appear feminine to attract a man. However, one deviation from this case would be the ways that butch and fem women recreated heterosexuality in the 30s through the 60s with couples composing both a masculine and feminine partner. In that case, perhaps one woman wanted to look masculine to assert herself as the “male” role in the heterosexual equation to attract the female, and the fem wanted to look feminine to take on the “female” role and attract the “male.” Nevertheless, their stylings are not for the male gaze.

A context in which interviewees have described this gap between cis, het and queer female dress is at parties. This context is rife with potential for sexual and romantic conquest – it usually happens at night, occurring in dim lighting; there may be alcohol to lower social inhibitions; there’s the possibility of intimate space for conversation among a busy, crowded room; and people from various friend groups can intermix. Thus, there may be impetus for making oneself look attractive to the gender of their desire. Jordan, Meg, and Skylar shared their experiences.

Meg said that when she would go to parties when she was younger, all the girls would be in dresses and “short things,” even in winter, while the guys would be wearing their everyday garb, “but maybe a little nicer.” At college parties, among these straight party guests, she felt her look did not fit in; she felt drawn towards the more formal look of a suit or a man’s dress shirt and pants with combat boots with feminine style from the neck up – such as accentuated curly hear, big earrings, a necklace, and makeup. Otherwise, when she dresses more casually, she feels as though she is emulating a frat boy – which isn’t what she wants. She believes that in this setting, her style stands out from the women in dresses.

Skylar also shared her observations of party guest attire when first starting college. While guys would come to parties “like they just rolled out of bed,” with stained sweatshirts and sweatpants, girls took two hours to get ready – curling their hair, putting on makeup, and changing their tops five times “for male attention.” Skylar didn’t personally care what guys at parties thought of her – she thought they were disgusting, which she believes, in hindsight, was an indication that guys were not her priority (recall that she’s bi). She finds that she does not generally fit in with cis, het women at parties, though she blends in with other queer women. She explains that her disinterest in “revealing, tight-fitting clothes,” heels, wedges, skirts, dangly earrings, and flashy necklaces differentiates her from her straight peers. Those elements are “Off the table”; she also states that she “Will not be wearing a push-up bra to attract guys.” Her preferred outfit would be loose, high-waisted pants, or maybe a tank top or cropped shirt, all in “simple, neutral colors,” without glitter, anything metallic or see-through, loud prints, or bright colors.

Jordan – who again, is genderqueer but female-presenting and bi/pan) – did not report on what cis, het women have worn at parties, but detailed how men treated her at parties based on
her appearance. She found that when she dressed more feminine at clubs and house parties in college, more guys would come up to her. Conversely, when she dressed more masculine, men seemed to assume that she was a lesbian or queer; fewer guys came up to her. Her friends tell her that, before meeting her, they had thought she was queer based on the way she dressed (and her use of rainbow imagery).

Thus, it seems that cis, het women may be intentionally trying to appeal to the male gaze – at least in party settings – while queer women and female-presenting people (including bi women) are less concerned or totally unconcerned with doing so. This difference in dress can directly affect the likelihood of a man approaching someone who is female-presenting, as we saw in the case of Jordan.

Some of the indicators respondents listed for cis het women versus lesbians align with these observations. Again, 12% said cis, het women have a feminine style (like the dresses the interviewees mentioned cis, het women wearing to parties). Similarly, 5.4% of respondents listed makeup as an indicator for cis, het women, some saying they wear it on a regular basis, go for a “natural” look, use mascara and maybe foundation, with one person saying they wear “a lot.” In contrast, five out of seven descriptors used for lesbians’ makeup (which 3.4% said was an indicator) differentiated it as unconventional (e.g. bold, colorful), with one person saying lesbians wear heavy makeup as well (like cis, het women), though as part of a punk/alternative aesthetic. An additional 1.5% of respondents said that lesbians don’t wear makeup at all. Respondents (2.4%) also said that cis het women engage in stylistic nail practices (e.g. growing them out, painting them, wearing fake nails) whereas lesbians are more likely to have short nails (4.4%) – though one person said lesbians may have their nails done a specific way (without clarification). Cis, het women were also more likely to be described as wearing revealing (3.9%) and tight (2.9%) clothing, whereas lesbians are said to wear less-fitted (e.g. oversized, baggy) clothing (4.9%) with no respondents saying they wear tight clothes and only one saying they wear revealing clothes. One respondent clearly asserts that cis, het women are often “drawing attention to specific aspects of their bodies that they appreciate or perceive that the group they hope to attract [men] will appreciate.” Another respondent echoes these findings, asserting that cis, het women are often “drawing attention to specific aspects of their bodies that they appreciate or perceive that the group they hope to attract [men] will appreciate.”

It seems that this association of cis, het women with tight clothes to draw male attention is similar to the motivations of gay men to wear tight clothing (like those who changed their style upon coming out, as we saw in the last chapter), which may be partially responsible for Mark’s wife telling him that he couldn’t wear his shirt after it shrunk in the dryer. Conversely, queer women and straight and bi men are appealing to the female gaze, which they perceive to be as less stringent and restrictive. This may be due to a patriarchal system prioritizing male satisfaction.

There can also be some intentional signaling in queer women’s clothing, as Mark has perceived. He said that female-presenting students who are “out” as gay tend to steer away from conventional feminine attributes in order to signal, “I’m not going to conform to feminine beauty ideals.” “It’s not masculine,” he says, “but in opposition to what would be overly feminine, but not a complete turn to masculine stylization.” This could be a protest of gender roles, rejection of female standards of presentation that are meant to attract men, or both. Meg has similarly claimed to have seen gay women “take presentation to the extreme of absent femininity.”

Regarding her own style, Meg has explicitly said that she’s trying to signal queer people from the neck down with masculine clothing (though she says it “doesn’t work,” due to her
feminine presentation from the neck up) while repelling straight men. Overall, she states, “If I were trying to get the attention of men, I would not dress the way that I do.” It’s a lot easier, she asserts, with the way she’s dressing to “ask straight [men] to ignore me.” In all, she would prefer to have queer people look, but more to have straight people to look away. “That’s the goal,” she articulates.

Respondents also describe the ability of lesbians’ aesthetics to steer away from men’s interests:

“[Lesbians have] Either a particularly masc presentation or heavy alt influence, or feminine styles in a non-traditional or ‘out of season’ way, bold makeup (note that men tend to not like visibly ‘unnatural’ makeup, so wearing bold colors can be off-putting to men but interesting to women) also they wear their nails in a way.”

Here we see that lesbians’ use of bold, colorful makeup can be seen as distasteful to men.

“Queer womxn come in many different forms. We have our goths with dark and [eccentric] make-up, fashion, and body-modifications that are attractive to fellow queers but likely off-putting to straight men. Similarly, androgynous womxn are off-putting to most men but are common wlw’s (womxn loving womxn).”

This respondent argues that, in addition to unusual makeup, dark and unconventional clothing, and body modifications can also be less attractive to male eyes.

A queer woman’s appearance may not specifically aim to “repel” the male gaze, but can also be formed by the release of expectations to look a certain way for men or to simply fit the required aesthetic as a cis, het woman. For instance, when Elliot [formerly Ellen] Page first came out saying he liked women [then identifying as female], he said he “used to feel this constant pressure to be more feminine,” that, as a woman, “You need to wear a dress or people will think you’re gay … Now I feel a sense of freedom in dressing” (Wilkinson 2015). Thus, he had initially felt that his clothes had to conform to the female norm that conveys interest in men.

Hence, it seems that queer women’s styling tactics may repel the male gaze be it intentionally or unintentionally and/or simply be the result of a relaxation of expectations regarding their dress, as they do not desire to appeal to men – which men may find attractive or not.

Hair & The Male Gaze

Just as was mentioned with gay men, how one cuts one’s hair is a sign of conformity or rebellion of sorts (Cole 2008). Thus, a woman cutting her hair short may be in protest of gender norms, female beauty standards, and/or the male gaze, as we saw with “New Women” of the 20th century.

Hair can also have sexual connotations. For instance, in Islam, a woman’s hair is a source of “temptation,” as well as pride, and symbolizes sexual maturity and marriage status (Johnson and Barber 2019: 112). To retain and signal feminine virtue and status as an upright, “moral” woman, they cover their hair (ibid.).

According to 8.8% of respondents, hairstyle is an indicator of cis, het women, some of the hairstyles mentioned requiring prepping, primping, fashioning, and/or going to the salon (straightened hair (3), fish-tail braid, highlights, making hair curly or wavy, “done hair”). Lesbians can also be identified by their hair styles, 27% of respondents claim, and in contrast to those of cis, het women, and 20% say that lesbian hairstyles are short (except for two
respondents), listing styles that do not require much maintenance or going to the salon (e.g. pixie cut, shaved head, close-cropped). Thus, there could very well be protest – perhaps sexual – in this hair-styling, as these perceived lesbian haircuts contrast the traditionally feminine long hair.

Historically, lesbians have played around with various hairstyles that cause them to stick out. In the 80s, new wave music inspired lesbians to cut their hair into mullets and “sho-lo’s” – the top of the head and sides are cropped or buzzed short with long hair in the back (Karaminas 2013: 198). Their hair’s “spikes and long tresses” differed from “feathered do’s” and “curling wands” of hair at the time (ibid.). One respondent is seemingly aware of this association, having mentioned a mullet as a lesbian signifier. Similarly, lesbians have adopted hip-hop-related hair styles, such as the “fade,” in which the sides are shaved or cut short with hair on top kept long, as well as the buzzcut – a style popular among black men (ibid.: 200). Notably, two respondents believe lesbians have “fades,” two mentioned a shaved head, and one said hair shaved on the sides.

These unusual styles are not always for naught, but can hold political sway. Riot Grrrls – members of a feminist punk movement that originated in Olympia, Washington and the broader Pacific Northwest in the 1990s – also styled their hair in conspicuous ways. Though they were not part of a specifically queer movement, they protested “male-dominated social spaces, heteronormativity, and the male gaze by playing with androgyny and ‘female masculinity’” through “colorful and spikey hair,” as well as by “parodying feminine artifice” by using outrageous makeup (Johnson and Barber 2019: 127). Likewise, three respondents specifically described lesbians’ hair as “unconventional,” while all the styles mentioned broke the long-hair, traditionally feminine norm. Furthermore, 8.3% of respondents associated dyed hair with lesbians. Mark also mentioned that he has noticed that female students in his class who are openly gay tend to have a mid-short haircut and dye their hair, more willing to play with color, like blue or purple. Skylar affirms that “short hair is stereotypically gay [queer] for girls” and that that “brightly-dyed hair can make a statement.” Again, if the associations are true, then lesbians [and queer women in general] may be attempting to convey a similar message.

Overall, Karaminas (2013: 199) concludes that hairstyles are integral to “lesbian subjectivity because they indicate sexual preference and gender identity,” with “short, cropped hair” serving as an identity signifier “regardless of cut and style.” Along these same lines, a peer of mine who identifies as a lesbian got an undercut which she and her dad clearly recognized as an indication of her queer identity, telling her that, based on the situation, she could “go incognito” regarding signaling her queerness based on how she parted or combed over her hair.

Yet, it is important to note that women do not always get to choose their hairstyles and, essentially, whether or not they will cater to the male gaze. Often, parents have a role in “facilitating” daughters’ styles to be sufficiently appealing to male preferences. As the APA explains, parents can be responsible for the “sexualization” of their daughters by emphasizing “maintaining an attractive physical appearance…[as] the most important goal” (Zurbriggen et al. 2007).

Some respondents report this to be the case. One says that her mom made assumptions about who she was dressing up for and encouraged her to maintain a traditionally feminine haircut. “[My mom is] Always vocalizing my future as being spent with a man, assuming when I wear make-up or dress-up it’s for a man, and telling me not to cut my hair short because it would ‘look gay’” (my emphasis). Here, we see clear pressure to be present oneself as interested in and attractive to men. Another respondent explains how concerned her mother was for her romantic future due to the lack of femininity in her presentation.
"My mother openly worried that I didn't "know how" to be a girl as I did not wear makeup...I was attracted to and dated boys so I guess that eventually reassured her that despite my iffy, to her, gender presentation I would be able to get married (to a man, the only possible route any of us imagined at that time!" (my emphasis).

The aforementioned respondent also said, “I think my mother wasn't necessarily happy with how I dressed in oversized thrift-shop clothes that 'hid' my figure.” Here we see the idea of women wearing revealing clothing for male attention again, as interviewees described from their observations of parties, and as “revealing” and “tight” were indicators that respondents listed for cis, het women.

An additional respondent described the aggressive, hands-on approach that her mother took to press her to conform to a narrow range of femininity.

“My mom very much encouraged a traditionally feminine physical appearance in me, because ‘you want boys to like you, don’t you?’ This included making me wear makeup when I didn’t want to, taking me to get my legs, underarms, and stomach waxed, obsessing over my hair and, up until I was fifteen, choosing my outfits for me.”

Though this may be one of the severest cases of forcible gender conformity reported by respondents, the question “Don’t you want boys to like you?” is not an uncommon question. Sophie Wilkinson, a correspondent for The Guardian explained her mom’s critique of her stylistic choices:

“Though I realised I was into girls at around four, it took until 14 to come out, and then 17 to tell my mum. I think she must have realised when I started cutting my hair (with a razor, in the shower) to make my hair like Shane’s from The L Word. ‘Don’t you want boys to like you?’ she asked. And now I wonder...how many women – straight or not – would benefit from never having to consider what a man – real or imagined – thought of their clothes” (Wilkinson 2015).

Here, not only is Wilkinson met with disappointment by her mom when she notices her in-progress haircut, but she comes to realize how much that question can hold back women who do like men and feel that they do have to use it as a rubric in deciding their self-presentation. Instead, she has “pride” in “setting [herself] apart...willfully doing something that will never ever be done for the pleasure of a bloke” (ibid.).

I, personally, have also faced that “question,” but it was a statement in my case. As I mentioned in the introductory chapter, I wasn’t allowed to get my hair cut to shoulder-length until freshman year of high school – and even then, my mom was hesitant to cut it, but felt more obligated since my motivation for cutting it (mostly) was to donate it. She would always tell me, “Boys like girls with long hair.” Nevertheless, she has let regulation of my hair go, and enthusiastically supports my new hairstyle picks, saying she could see how happy I was when I got my undercut in March of 2020. It is also relevant that, upon my coming out as a trans man, my mom was confused as to why I wanted to transition, saying, “But you like men.” She knew that I was bi at the time, but because I had any interest in men, it seemed like that trumped my attraction to women and, hence, I would only craft my appearance to appeal to men – by presenting as female. Of course, entrenched in this assumption is that I would try to appeal to men in the first place and that I would be trying to appeal to cis, het men, whereas, as a bi man, I
currently want to appeal to queer men. The other reaction she and my dad had was to ask if my trans identity had something to do with me being bisexual. It is possible that they associate bisexuality with gender queerness, but it is more likely that they believe that a person (especially someone assigned female at birth) who can be interested in women [no matter that they are interested in men and other genders as well] will naturally embody a more masculine identity and form of presentation – to fit the heterosexual framework. Thus, parental regulation of a woman’s looks – or rather, a female-presenting person’s looks – is not a fringe experience, and parents try fit their children into the gendered framework of the male gaze in our heteronormative society.

Perhaps most shockingly, sometimes other people’s parents feel justified in telling a woman how to present herself. For instance, when Meg went to a fancy formal dinner for a friend, her friend’s mom got mad at her for wearing a tailored suit, though she was wearing makeup. She scolded her for not wearing a dress, saying that “it wouldn’t kill [her]” to do it for a day and that she “didn’t even have to wear heels” the mom said.

Therefore, women’s parents, as well as other adults in their life, feel comfortable pushing them to ensure that their hairstyle (and clothes, as we’ve seen) conform to beauty standards that are acceptable under the male gaze.

The Disputed Terrain of Body Hair

The styling of the hair on one’s head may be loaded with meaning, but the implications of a woman’s body hair are similarly, if not more, controversial. Removal of body hair is required for a woman to fit within the realm of “acceptable femininity.” For a woman, shaving her body hair is an important practice in adherence to cultural notions of femininity in the West and beyond (Johnson and Barber 2019: 112). Approximately 99% of American women have shaved, waxed, or plucked their body hair, with 85% doing so regularly (ibid.), 91.5% of women shave their legs, 93% shave their arm pits, and 99% have removed body at least once in their life (Fahs 2011: 453). Additionally, over 80% of women in Italy, Turkey, Uganda, England, Australia, Egypt, Greece, and France remove their body hair, usually commencing at puberty, signaling a conclusion to the decades of female-body-shaving protests in Europe and the bohemian and countercultural hairiness seen in the 60s and 70s (ibid.). In essence, various cultures prize the hair on a woman’s but have “stigmatized” body and facial hair “as dirty or monstrous” (Johnson and Barber 2019: 112).

The norm of female body hair removal didn’t initiate until the 1930s. The prevalence of photography, the fashion advertisements of the time, and the developing association of beauty with status could have been responsible for the extensive adoption of this practice (Fahs 2011: 453).

Now, it is a seldom-questioned staple of “acceptable femininity” (ibid.: 454) with “the (heterosexual) dating market” and male gaze in mind (ibid.: 452). Just as women of color may straighten their hair to conform to Western beauty standards, women on the whole self-objectify, as earlier mentioned, to meet these heterosexual standards (ibid.). Society teaches women that this practice is crucial to “achieve femininity,” and feel attractive, clean, and confident (ibid.: 454). If they don’t shave, others may perceive them – as has been shown in studies – as “dirty,” “gross,” less sexually attractive, intelligent, sociable, happy, positive, friendly, moral, and relaxed, and more aggressive, unsociable, and dominant than women who remove their body hair (ibid.).
Holding women to these norms are various “sanctions” that operate as tools of “social control” (ibid.). Breanne Fahs, a professor at Arizona State University, gave female students in her women’s studies class extra credit if they grew out their body hair for 10 weeks and journaled about it; 34 students participated in the study. As a result, she discovered some of these mechanisms that limit women’s presentation. In addition to the aforementioned negative perceptions that women may face, she found that if a woman chooses not to shave her body hair, she will be chastised by her friends and family; her sexual orientation will come into question, which could put her in danger; if she is queer, she will feel “outed”; her partner may respond negatively; and perhaps most surprising of all, others may read her as a different gender – either a trans man or “something in between.”

Judith Butler was quoted earlier explaining how heterosexuality relies on sexual desire between a man and a woman, necessitating distinction between genders (Pacho 2013: 17). Further, as Chelsea Johnson and Kristen Barber put it, “Because gender is assumed to reflect biological sex, body and facial hair serve as ‘cultural genitalia’ to distinguish men from women” (Johnson and Barber 2019: 112). Hairiness is a “male” trait and hairlessness is a “feminine” trait, as men’s hair has historically signified power, with women as the foil with a lack of power, and hairlessness also signals “women’s tameness and less than fully adult status” (Fahs 2011: 454). These are the same connotations of body hair that make growing facial hair important for trans men to assert their masculinity. Accordingly, “trans identity, gender bending, and crossing lines of femininity” threaten the “networks of power that enforce both heterosexuality and femininity” (ibid.: 461). Thus, if a woman has body hair, her gender can come into question.

Fahs’ students reported their family, partners, and even coworkers commenting on their gender presentation when they chose not to shave, or the students expressed concern about what they would say. A student named Valerie, a lesbian, said that not shaving would “give people another reason to look at me weird,” and explained how her mom didn’t fully understand that being a lesbian didn’t mean she wanted to be a man, so growing out her body could lead her mom farther down that confused path (ibid.: 458). Several students did meet this fate. Cindy’s mom did express fear that she was becoming a man, saying that she had “man’s legs now” that were just like her brother’s (ibid.: 460). Mona’s mother shared the same anxiety. Mona’s baseline lack of conformity to traditional gender roles, bisexual identity, and relationship with a woman had already flagged her gender identity for her mom (ibid.: 458). Other students’ parents had asked if they were lesbians, but “since my mom cannot be worried about me being a lesbian, she just jumped to the next step,” Mona says, and asked her “if this assignment was really just an excuse because I wanted to get a sex change” (ibid.). Becoming trans was the “next step” beyond being a lesbian, “in the mother’s eyes” as “a more extreme version of being ‘merely’ queer” (ibid.: 459). Even Kelly’s coworkers felt comfortable addressing her body hair, and further, asking if her husband felt like “he was having sex with a ‘dude’” (ibid.: 461). This occurrence demonstrates how a woman’s hairlessness has come to be seen as a natural indicator of her gender identity and that the presence of body hair is fair game to be a topic of conversation. Furthermore, it is possible that perception of this form of bodily presentation in the 20th century (after World War II and the Well of Loneliness trial) would have merely been perceived as gender inversion rather than a sign of transitioning to another gender. As trans people have been gaining visibility over the years, perhaps more widespread knowledge of their existence has created another “possibility” in the older generations’ minds as to what their daughters’ divergence from heteronormative presentation could be.
If not viewed as a man, a woman with body hair may be viewed as an undefined gender. Kelly, too, had to tell her mother that she was “still a woman,” dismissing the notion of “a middle ground” [gender] (ibid.). Likewise, Caroline’s boyfriend said he would “tolerate” her body hair and did not find her less attractive, but believed that body hair “threatens [women’s] femininity,” and that he “wants to know that the person he is in a sexual relationship with is strictly “female” in appearance, and not “in between” (ibid.: 465). This perception of gender ambiguity seems to mirror that of the effeminate macaronis of the 18th century. It is also worth mentioning that this distaste for gender ambiguity could explain the lack of acceptance that nonbinary respondents have received from their parents. In any case, women with body hair are seen as either male or of an unclear gender.

Having body hair can also lead others to question a woman’s sexuality. Heterosexual rules “conflate feminine sexiness with body hairlessness” (Johnson and Barber 2019: 112), so when women do not conform to these heteronormative “scripts,” there is the potential to “reveal…the networks of power that maintain links between heterosexism and sexism” (Fahs 2011: 455). Hence, a woman growing out her body hair seems to suggest that she does not care to fit the heterosexual mold of sexy, which then causes others to question if she is heterosexual (ibid.: 452). Fahs’ students were met with these assumptions. One reflected on the past, remembering when she hadn’t started shaving like the other girls in her grade and was then called a “dyke” by “a group of the more popular girls” (ibid.: 459). Comparably, Cezanne was met with the question of if she had “turned lesbian,” which led her to understand “body hair as a social construction” (ibid.). Beth said that her brother asked her if “my women’s studies degree was corrupting me and turning me into a big lesbian” (ibid.: 460). According to such societal connotations regarding a woman’s body hair and her sexual orientation, the queer women in the study feared that growing out their body hair would “out” them in public, drawing negative attention, and potentially bodily harm (e.g. a hate crime), demonstrating how “pervasive and deeply entrenched in women’s lives” heterosexuality is due to our society’s “compulsory heterosexuality,” as Adrienne Rich puts it (ibid.).

When their identities weren’t being interrogated, students were still vulnerable to attempts on the part of their family to shame their appearance into conformity. Mona described breaking heteronormative beauty standards as resulting in being “labeled a freak or something only someone with a fetish would like” and being “stripped of sexuality”; her mother said that she was no longer pretty now that she had leg and armpit hair (ibid.: 462). Overall, she felt that her mom’s “horrible comments” over the 10 weeks were intended to make her feel “ashamed” of her social divergence (ibid.: 458). Family lash back was even more severe for women of color and lower socioeconomic status who didn’t shave (ibid.: 455).

Though implied in the aforementioned comments, family comments also explicitly contextualized women’s appearance as necessarily under the male gaze. Cherise’s grandmother “almost had a heart attack on top of her dinner plate” when Cherise notified her that she was growing out her body hair; “She told me I’d never find a husband if I carried myself like a tramp. She said it was bad and unladylike” (ibid.: 461). Further, Beth’s brother had no trouble asserting that “any woman with body hair certainly couldn’t get a man, so I’d have to start dating women if I wanted to ever have sex” (ibid.: 460). Beth’s brother’s comment crystallizes the male gaze, “getting a man,” as “the assigned goals of women’s bodily practices,” as opposed to presenting in ways that make them feel confident or comfortable (ibid.). In support of that point, some students let their partners have sway over their bodily presentation, demonstrating this male power over women’s bodies (ibid.: 465).
Throughout these examples, we see the theme of women being pressured to groom themselves to satisfy the male gaze and others interpreting a neglect to do so as signifying male or nonbinary gender identity or lesbian identity. In reality, it seems that there is at least some truth to the tie of body hair growth with sexuality, as evidenced by the self-presentation of butch lesbians (e.g. those from the period of the 30s through the 60s). As Inge Blackman and Kathryn Perry put it, “With flat shoes, baggy trousers, unshaven legs and faces bare of make-up, their style combines practicality with a strong statement about not dressing for men” (Karaminas 2013: 195). This quote, of course, also references a lack of makeup and baggier clothes, paralleling what some respondents associate with lesbians. Moreover, Fahs (2011: 453) states that feminists, lesbians, and older women in the US are less likely to shave. Thus, lesbian’s disregard of the male gaze may have some influence on their self-presentation.

Though only 0.98% of respondents listed body hair as a signifier of lesbian identity, examining why women choose to remove or retain their body hair presents a much larger framework that is useful in understanding any self-presentation-related practice of cis, het women or lesbians.

**Other Perceived Lesbian Signifiers**

Other signals of lesbian identity that respondents mentioned were tattoos (4.9%), piercings (12%), and body modifications in general (2.9%). Tattoos, for one, date back to 6000 BCE, and had a variety of uses, distinguishing a criminal, nobleman, religious pilgrim, astrologer, slave, or soldier (Huang 2016: 82). The practice then came to transmit identity and serve as a rite of passage in indigenous cultures in places outside the West, like Japan and Polynesia (ibid.). Tattoos then arrived in the professional market in the West in the mid-19th century, carrying a hefty price tag as they were done by hand (without the aid of machines), which was time-consuming; hence, only the upper class could afford them and brandished them to display their wealth (ibid.). When the electric tattoo needle was invented in 1891, it opened the bodily practice to the working class, causing the upper class to dissociate themselves from it and newly designate it as an indicator of poverty and deviance (ibid.). There was then a resurgence in their popularity in the 1960s and 1970s in what was called the “Tattoo Renaissance,” when the practice became a recognized art form with tattooists drawing from fine arts backgrounds designating themselves as “tattoo artists” (ibid.). Custom tattoos then became highly requested with even the middle- and upper-class partaking in this trend, eventually leading to society to understand tattoos as “an acceptable form of expression” (ibid.). Nevertheless, they did retain their “edge” in the workplace. During this time, tattoos came to be adopted by the counterculture, including queer members, as a sign of defiance of what was considered acceptable and “ideal” by the white, heterosexual, middle- and upper-class of the West (ibid.: 83). This visual protest was especially in contrast to the professional dress code, which the counterculture considered the “epitome” of the principles they were challenging (ibid.: 83).

In the 80s, lesbians utilized extensive tattooing, piercings, scarification, and branding for similar reasons – to defy mainstream culture, as well as to “[inscribe] the body as symbolic ownership” (Karaminas 2013: 210). The locations of tattoos and piercings varied based on a lesbian’s identity as butch or fem. Butches usually had large tattoos on their biceps or forearms to draw attention to their muscles and had the masculine piercings of a ring or bar on an eyebrow or in their bottom lip (ibid.). Fems, however, had tattoos, which were often mythological images,
on their “feminine features,” such as hips, ankles, or breasts, and likewise had piercings on the feminine features of their nipples, naval, or clitoral hood (ibid.: 211).

In the 21st century, Harris Interactive polls hint that show tattoo use by gender, sexual orientation, and race, as of 2012. One poll demonstrated that women (23%) were slightly more likely to have at least one tattoo than men (19%) and black (21%) and Hispanic (30%) respondents were more likely to have at least one than white respondents (20%) (Huang 2016: 83). Another poll showed that the amount of gay, lesbian, or bisexual respondents who had tattoos – 31% – was nearly twice the national average of 16% (ibid.: 83).

Therefore, tattoos have had a varied history, with notable patterns of service as a symbol of resistance, being passed down from “respectable society” – including both cis, het men and women, becoming a clear marker of sexual orientation, and now retaining a notable connection the queer community. Piercings have similarly appeared in the context of queer identity-signaling.

Respondents also attributed jewelry (e.g. layered, metallic, statement jewelry, chain necklace), Punk/Alternative Style (e.g. “heavy makeup, bright hair, dark, revealing clothing”), and boots to lesbians – 2.9% claiming this, and 1.5% attributed boots to them. These looks also have history in the lesbian community. The “leatherdyke,” an adoption of the gay “leatherman” – which was modeled after the style of masculine figures such as military and police officers and motorcycle gang members, has been around at least since the 80s and is typically the garb of a lesbian in the BDSM community (Karaminas 2013: 198). The look garnishes the gay men’s style with punk street fashion, such as military hats and caps, gloves (leather or rubber), stiletto heeled shoes, and black leather engineer or military combat boots popular among lesbian “tops” (ibid.). This, again, ties to the acceptability of queerness in the punk community.

It also worth mentioning that we are seeing cuffing again, which, by now, we know has some associations with the queer community and is performed by some gay men.

One curious indicator that three respondents brought up was what they called the “cottage core look.” This is a trend among queer women and femme nonbinary people that has spread across TikTok, Tumblr, and Pinterest (Linnell 2021). It comprises leaving one’s current life to “run off to upstate Vermont to pick apples, raise chickens, and live their best woman-loving-woman life” (ibid.). Ultimately, this whole trend traces back to a December 2019 TikTok video from the user SoraBlu, who raises chickens while living in a tent in the woods (ibid.). Yet again, social media has facilitated the development of a queer trend.

### Overlap in Cis, Het Female & Lesbian Style:

Despite all the historical fashionable factors at play, the male gaze, and more, distinguishing cis, het women from lesbians is not quite so clear-cut.

For instance, some respondents suggest that the bodily expectations of women in a heteronormative society (as mentioned in the section on body hair) can blur the lines of sexuality. One says, “Generally, I assume someone more classically feminine, or who specifically presents themselves in a revealing way, would be straight. I assume that they’re either following the general expectations, or specifically trying to attract male attention” (my emphasis). Hence, revealing clothing could indicate straight identity, they say, or simply be indicative of the tremendous pressure put on women regarding keeping up an appearance that is acceptable in our heteronormative society. Another respondent believes that cis, het women tend to wear “tight clothing” and “not a lot of patterns,” but acknowledges that “it is harder to tell
[who’s queer] with women than men because I think all women are pressured to think about their physical appearance a lot more so there is a lot more variety in the way they dress than in the way men dress.”

Similarly, the “fem” half of the butch-fem style division often fade into the background of the cis, het aesthetic. Logan reports fems on TikTok being upset that people are calling their style straight and Ella acknowledges that fem queer women struggle to be recognized. Nevertheless, Logan relies on the patterns and cuts of a feminine woman’s clothing to determine if she’s a lesbian.

The general style of UVM students also poses a problem with this differentiation, as it can share aesthetic elements with queer female style. Skylar explains that “Crunchy [style] and lesbianism kind of overlap.” She goes on to paint a picture of the various fashion style subcultures, any of which queer women could adopt, she insists. She says that the UVM stylistic categories are the following: “athletes” (sports jerseys, sweatpants, sneakers, always look like they’re headed to the gym), “skater guys” (long sleeves under t-shirt, longer hair, baggier pants, vans), the “crunchy” crowd (Carhartt, earth-tones, a beanie, flannel, corduroys), and “frat boys” (not necessarily preppy, but not in any of the other categories, a little “basic,” makes her think of button-up shirts, simple style, they don’t seem to be making a fashion statement, choose whichever t-shirt is clean). Skater guys and crunchy guys may think about what they’re wearing more, she asserts. Hence, Skylar says that queer women could be dressing in any of those categories, as a skater, crunchy person, or giving off a “very chill and masculine” vibe – “maybe what a frat guy would wear,” maintaining that there are variations of queer style. She doesn’t think queer women identify with just one style category and is sure that some straight girls fit into that. Overall, if she saw a bunch of crunchy people and skater girls hanging out, she’d think they were either gay or just UVM students. “I do believe at UVM, it is harder [to tell who’s queer]...because it is a more accepting place, and the fashion here does overlap with stereotypical, especially for females, gay fashion.” It’s more outdoorsy and gender neutral, she says. Conversely, if she was in the South and saw people dressed like UVM students “it would be more of like a signal that they weren’t straight. But here, it’s the norm of how people dress. It’s not a preppy school,” she explains.

Along these same lines, Ella believes that at UVM, there’s a large possibility that someone might be “queerish.” She lists one “teller” of queerness as “granola meets hiking.” She would likely agree with Wilkinson’s (2015) friend who “jokingly identifies not as gay or queer, but as ‘Carhartt.’” However, that seems to be in reference to the “crunchy” category that Skylar mentions, and the overall “outdoorsy” aesthetic of the student body. Thus, Skylar might argue that such a quality would not reveal anything about a woman’s sexual orientation.

One litmus test Skylar does offer to differentiate straight from queer women is to ask, “If you were to take an outfit and put it on a guy, how would that girl seem in it?” If Skylar swapped outfits with a guy, she could pull it off, people would say, ‘Yeah, that’s pretty much how Skylar dresses.’ “If you were to drop it on a straight girl who dresses pretty feminine all the time, it would just look like she’s in guys’ clothes, it wouldn’t look natural.” This relates back to Lee Houk’s idea that the wearer makes the outfit queer [or not].

Though she claims that either a straight or queer woman could dress like any of the aforementioned categories, she does believe that “skater fashion” on women “is a little gay.” It “doesn’t look super feminine” and a cis, het girl may not want to wear a beanie that could mess up her hair. This draws back to the need for a woman to monitor her appearance for the male
gaze. “Some of this stuff I think without realizing it,” she reflects, noting that if a girl walked by her with a beanie, “they might get a second glance.”

There is of course, also the possibility of cis, het women choosing not to abide by the style associated with their identity, as is the case with some respondents. One says, “I do not always feel like I identify with feminine or straight subcultures. I am not very interested in makeup or fashion, for example... Sometimes I find it difficult to make friends with other cis, straight women if they like shopping, taking care of their appearance, and dating.” Thus, this woman has placed less priority on overtly demonstrating her femininity and focusing on her appearance. Another says, “I don't try to present myself as straight – I try to dress/behave how I feel best fits my personality regardless of if that may come off as not straight. I don't believe gender roles should be followed and avidly try to stray from them.” Clearly, transmitting straight identity is not a priority for her; her fashion influences draw from elsewhere. This variation from stereotypical cis, het female style is not an unheard of transgression for women, as Logan can attest, as limited societal restraints on women’s dress has in fact made it easier for her, a lesbian, to dress how she wants. Hence, we cannot always rely on cis, het women to stick to their gendered fashion script.

Speaking to Logan’s sentiment that women have few stylistic restrictions, cis, het women have, in fact, been directly invited to try out lesbian style. This mainstream appropriation has, thus, contributed to the confused meaning of stylistic symbols. In the 90s, media representation and fashion ads created the idea of “lesbian chic,” from which the “lipstick lesbian” arose, which “straightened out’ lesbian sexuality in order to render it palatable to a straight audience” and to “invite straight women to tour lesbian terrains” (Karaminas 2013: 213-215). I have personally come upon evidence of this style myself. When I was identifying as female, one my favorite shirts was a baggier, yellow flannel shirt, encompassing two qualities (bagginess and flannel material) associated with lesbian dress. Its more masculine look was sanctioned for sale through the women’s section “thanks” to a sewn-in label stating that it was “Boyfriend Fit.” This essentially means that it was okay for the shirt to not conform to your body and to be of a lesbian-associated material as long as heterosexuality was physically sewn into the clothes. The shirt was okay for women to wear, because it embodied the “cute look” of a girl wearing her boyfriend’s clothes; to be clear, she has a boyfriend, not a girlfriend.

Straight appropriation of lesbian style continues onward, into the 21st century. Wilkinson rants about the adoption of “butch chic” into cis, het women’s wardrobes. She describes her personal interpretation of the term – what she would wear in college in the early 2000s – as “outfits a bloke could wear without being heckled” [as gay, she likely means], comprising

“printed shirts without frills and skirts without peplums [a decorative strip of fabric hanging from the waist of a shirt, dress, or jacket] or lace – or any of those things that look pretty, or pretty uncomfortable depending how you look at it. Functionality takes precedence, with elements taken from queer-friendly subcultures: punkishly torn vests, riot grrrl boots, hip-hop’s baggy T-shirts and grungey jumpers.”

She emphasizes the importance of this style – which reflects the earlier touched-on themes of bagginess and Riot Grrrl and punk influence, as well as overlap with notions of cis, het male comfort, convenience, and aesthetic (that which wouldn’t get a man heckled) – as serving as a “uniform” and “Freemason’s handshake”: a means to “tell the queer from the straight” (Wilkinson 2015). Now, Wilkinson (2015) says, there are gender-neutral clothing offerings at
JW Anderson, Selfridges, American Apparel, Uniqlo, Scandinavian shops like Cos, and in the Saint Laurent collection. In summary, “Some women are shirking the ‘boyfriend’ cut for actual men’s clothes,” she proclaims, “something we gay women have been doing for years,” which makes it “impossible to infer a sexual orientation from the way a woman dresses” (ibid.). One respondent has similarly seen straight overlap with this style, saying, “To some extent I would say [a lesbian would be] someone who presents as more masculine, but I think I've known too many straight, cisgender women who present in ways that would be considered masculine to really say.” Consequently, divisions of masculinity in dress are not necessarily signals of sexual orientation.

Meg can attest to the exact trend that Wilkinson mentioned. Wilkinson’s article was published in The Guardian in 2015, and Meg also mentions that year as when women’s fashion started to change. “There’s been such a big change,” she says, “it used to be much easier to identify other queers…There was kind of a clear line between…the way that gay girls dressed and the way that straight girls dressed, sometimes. Now…women are starting to wear baggier clothes and more androgynous clothes more often…the Doc Marten craze exploded a few years ago…the straightest girls are wearing what I used to wear five years ago” and which they made fun of her for. “It’s up for grabs by everyone,” she states of queer women’s style, “It’s much less obvious.” Note, Doc Martens have historical associations with lesbians, sometimes paired with “belted high-waisted stonewash jeans, white tees with rolled sleeves” for a streetstyle image (Karaminas 2013: 198). Further, looking down the road, she foresees that “In five years, the trend is going to change again.” Though she’s gay, she presents feminine from the neck up, and so if she wears thrifted clothing “like everyone else,” she asserts that she’s “not sending any signals.”

When she is looking for fellow queer women, she often must rely on what she deems, “the trifecta”: short hair, no makeup, and androgynous clothing. “Everything in between is a little harder now. If you hit that trifecta, “I can feel reasonably comfortable that…she is not straight…If you take one of those things away, it becomes a lot more muddied.” Overall, she finds that it is much easier to pinpoint a man’s sexuality than a woman’s since “women are allowed to wear pants and men aren’t allowed to wear dresses.” In essence, men have much tighter restrictions regarding traversing the border from masculine into feminine presentation; go too far, and a man will be seen as gay. Though Meg believes that straight women “may be apt to dress more feminine,” women, in general, seem to have somewhat free reign.

As lesbian style has been appropriated by straight people, such as Doc Martens (also a punk style element), short hair, and flannel shirts – in addition to the fashion elements of “butch chic” that Wilkinson mentioned, lesbians must rely on new identity signifiers (Farmilo 2020). As of 2020, this has been the eyebrow slit – reported by 2.0% of respondents and a style adopted by Logan. This trend has spread across social media, especially Tik Tok, where lesbians can easily find each other and build communities (ibid.). The mark is subtle and can be defended as “another internet trend,” if needed to protect one’s identity (ibid.). Perhaps ironically, in order to reinvent themselves after the mainstream appropriating their style, lesbians have appropriated the style of the hip-hop scene during the 80s and 90s, the eyebrow slit originating with Rapper Big Daddy Kane (ibid.). Back in the day, it was called a “cut” and can be used to make oneself appear tough and edgy (Picardi 2015). As one older user on Quora, John Altevers (2018), speculated in his answer to a question asking why people shave a section of their eyebrow, eyebrow slits can be a sign of “a tough ass dude or dudette who gets into street fights” as the cut is “usually the end result of a gash across said eyebrow that has healed; in other words, a scar!” Thus, eyebrow slits
may be a way of lesbians not only to signal each other, but to embody masculine toughness that tells onlooking men that they don’t need a manly protector. It may be a similar motivation that has queer women wearing necklace chains: bulky, thick, and without pendants, as Skylar has witnessed, which she claims men [of any sexual orientation] wear. Typically, a straight girl’s necklace would include a thinner chain with a pendant, she asserts. The chain necklace projects the image of being tough and “hard,” as discussed in the chapter on cis, het men. Hence, this accessory seems to serve a purpose similar to the eyebrow slit (or “cut”); it makes the wearer look tough and “outs” her as a lesbian.

**Style Testimony from Lesbian Interviewees**

Now we shall hear what our lesbian interviewees have to say about their style as a supplement to the comments we have seen from them throughout this chapter.

**Meg**

As mentioned earlier, Meg tends to dress more feminine above the neck – wearing makeup and necklaces and keeping her hair long – and more masculine below it, wearing clothing like a man’s dress and pants with combat boots. In describing her look, she explains, “I don’t feel…any particular draw to femininity…I don’t feel any need to accentuate a female body (her waist or cleavage) through my clothing” and that she feels “both masculine and feminine.” In summary, she supposes, “it’s more about what I’m comfortable wearing.” She can confidently say, however, that while wearing a dress, she feels like she’s “in drag.” Nevertheless, she feels drawn to makeup, wearing it when she’s with other people “to uphold what [she subconsciously believes] a woman’s face should look like.” She clarifies that if, for instance, she had to go out without her brows done, she wouldn’t feel like less of a woman, but would feel uncomfortable with the way that she’s perceived as a woman. Overall, she is not trying to signal a particular gender identity through her clothing and claims that if you put someone different in her body with her perspective, they may identify as nonbinary. She also acknowledges the popularity of thrifting at the moment, of which she is a part; that’s where she gets her men’s shirts.

She believes that her style, she says regretfully, makes her appear straight to others. Meg feels that her femininity “up top” alienates the queer community – she likens her stylistic choices to the way a lot of straight women at UVM dress. Though she admits that presenting as straight is safer and could make for an easier life, she says, “I wish I was a more obvious [queer] community member.” Her outfits currently aren’t signaling to the queer community, which makes it harder for her to make queer friends, find romantic partners, and be seen as a valid member of the queer community. She feels attached to the community, but unaccepted – other than her friends. If she goes to a gay-specific event, strangers will not read her as part of the community. “They feel like I don’t fit in with them.” Overall, she feels “Not queer enough for queer people, not straight enough for straight people.”

She wishes she felt comfortable not wearing makeup, having short hair, and not wearing necklaces. One of her friends dresses similarly, her hair is longer than Katherine’s, and she wears the same amount of makeup. Yet, people read her as queer since her ears are “completely studded up.” People likely interpret her to be bi, she posits, though she no longer identifies with that label, feeling more like a lesbian most of the time. Ultimately, she would like to blend in with people who are not women interested in men.
Additionally, her wardrobe consists of choices intended to not draw attention to her; loud compliments make her uncomfortable.

**Stylistic Change**

Prior to college, when in her hometown in the Mid-Atlantic region of the Northeast, Meg wore dresses, occasionally heels, had one hole in each ear, and no tattoos or nose ring yet. Part of her motivation for sporting feminine clothing was to blend in at a school where everyone already knew that she was gay.

Once she moved out of her parents’ house, she ditched dresses – she never liked them and only wore them because she felt she had to. She then got a pixie haircut which didn’t feel authentic, so she grew her hair out again. She then got second piercings in her ears and a nose ring her first semester of college and got a tattoo some years later – which had some nostalgic, childhood significance to her.

**Connections**

From Meg’s case, we can see the association again of femininity with cis, het female identity; she believes her femininity makes fellow queer people misread her – and, thus, treat her – as straight. This is similarly what AJ felt and what motivated her to avoid floral prints. She also seems to subconsciously believe that a woman should wear makeup, which signals possible absorption of societal messages about women’s “need” to dress to the male gaze. There is also mention of several ear piercings signaling queerness, but interestingly, her two ear piercings (presumably on the lobes) and nose piercing do not correctly get her identity across, though various correspondents associate piercings with lesbians and lesbians have historically used piercings to take ownership over their bodies. Their intentions were the same in getting tattoos, but it appears that Meg’s tattoo has similarly failed to convey her queerness – though it is unclear if it is visible or not. She also insists on the importance of being recognized as queer from her appearance as it can facilitate the acquisition of queer friends, romantic partners, and general membership into the queer community. Hence, much of what she has said aligns with the current themes that we have touched on, though we have yet to hear from other respondents or interviewees that their self-fashioning is directly suited to attract friends or romantic partners; secondary sources are the main evidence of these intentions.

**Logan**

One thing that Logan likes about the lesbian community is that members have the freedom to wear what they want: to be femme or more masculine or androgynous. When she started coming to terms with her sexuality and getting more involved in the queer community, she “hopped around,” trying different styles to see what she liked until she settled on androgyny; it made her feel more confident and beautiful. Thus, in general, she describes her style as a mix of androgynous and masculine elements. Yet, if she wants to feel more feminine, she can freely craft her outfit to do so. Additionally, all of her clothes are thrifted, so her style can vary. Sometimes she’ll find something colorful, or something neutral.

Effectively, Logan wants to explicitly project that she’s not straight – that she’s a lesbian, to straight and queer people alike. She doesn’t care who knows it and feels confident in herself.
She clarifies what her style communicates to queer girls in saying, “Hey, what’s up?” as she smiles suggestively, looking back over her shoulder. Her style must be achieving the desired effect, as she notes that her best friend who’s a gay guy will sometimes say to her, “You’re looking like a dyke today.”

To complement her look, she draws from a wealth of accessories, which either serve to communicate her lesbian identity or her Wiccan identity. To look like a lesbian, she’ll wear what she terms “headwear,” which looks like a bandana tied around her hair, but it’s a knitted headband, with a few little bangs pulled forward. She terms this both a “cottage wear” and 70s look. Further, she may wear a backwards baseball cap or brimmed hat like a fedora to look gay, though she also associates fedoras with “incels” (people who are involuntarily celibate). She then uses layered necklaces with chains, crystals, and big pendants; multiple rings (three to four per hand); and the occasional chunky bracelet to convey her Wiccan identity.

She then relies on others’ visual cues to pinpoint fellow queer people. Though she befriends people regardless of their sexual orientation, she says, “I typically prefer my friends to be gay.” Usually someone’s style will tip her off and she’ll want to get to know them better. This visual signaling also assists her in finding romantic partners; she typically goes for femme lesbians or “alt” (alternative/punk) lesbians who have longer hair, though she admits that there’s the possibility of an outlier. In seeking alt girls, she looks for more dramatic makeup, maybe interesting haircuts, and brightly colored hair. Overall, she claims in assessing who’s queer, “You just know.”

**Style Change**

Once she came out, Logan felt more confident about herself, and after observing how other queer people expressed their style and seeing their piercings, she thought, “I could probably pull that off.” She then thought, “Why not experiment? Why not have fun…experiment with your body and be confident in yourself?” Plus, hairstyle and piercings are not “set in stone,” she says.

Even so, she draws from a conservative area in the Midwest where being confident in your sexuality is “not the easiest thing.” She used to dress differently around her parents to hide her politics and sexuality. She would wear something different to her car where she would then change and then change again coming back home. She now feels more comfortable wearing what she wants, but still must refrain from donning anything that “screams gay” in public, such as a Bernie t-shirt in rainbow letters or a pair of earrings that adheres to the “lesbian earring” trend.

Nevertheless, she contrasts the plight of her experience to that of gay men in her hometown. She claims that it’s easier for her to dress however she wants, but harder for guys. Her guy friend can’t dress “anywhere near being gay” because it would be more noticeable since he’s a guy. She insists that there’s more pressure on guys to be masculine than girls to be feminine. So long as she avoids the Bernie shirt and earrings, at worst, she might be called a tomboy.

Conversely, at UVM, she says that people are more accepting, that it’s easier to be confident without “being hate-crime[d].” Thus, “Being proud of who I am and showing that off can vary based on where I am,” she expresses.

From middle school through the early part of her freshman year of high school, Logan had half of her head shaved. She had seen Rihanna with the same haircut and thought it was beautiful, so she wanted to emulate it. She was identifying as bisexual at the time, but didn’t
think she changed her look due to that identity; she simply wanted to stand out and be her own person. After she first got the haircut, she did think it made her look gay, and kind of liked that, so she kept shaving it.

Within the past year or so, she got a nose piercing because she thought it would look good on her, and now likes the ring better than her original stud; she believes it stands out more. Nose studs fall within the boundaries of convention – they’ve become more normalized, coming “after” ear piercings in their rank of normalcy. Anything beyond those piercings, she says, will make someone think, “Oh, well she’s interesting…she looks quirky.” That, Logan clarifies, is not what she’s going for – she doesn’t want to be described as quirky.

In general, she notes, if someone “looks different, there’s something else there. There’s something you don’t know.” An eyebrow piercing could have this effect, as well as eyebrow slits – she has one which people have also questioned her about. Septum piercing and nose piercings are also along this tract, indicating difference, but without specificity. “You may not be gay, but there may be something different about your gender identity,” she suggests.

**Future Plans**

Her hair was initially bleached, but now her brown roots are coming back. She is now planning on getting a 70s “shag” haircut – though she thought about a mullet – to change up her hair. She thinks the style will say she’s gay. “I can’t see a straight person getting a 70s haircut…I could never see them getting a hairstyle that’s so different from what the standard is used to. All of their haircuts seem to be the same thing. I couldn’t see them going into different realms, like a mullet, a 70s haircut, and trying those things out.”

She is also planning on getting tattoos, which won’t be visible while she’s at work. She is planning for at least three. One will draw from Greek mythology – which she loves – and will be visible for her to “show off.” Another will be smaller and less noticeable, relating to astrology, and, as she puts it, “a cute addition.” She has yet to plan the rest.

**Connections**

Logan brings up multiple points that are relevant to the discussion of this chapter and beyond. Firstly, she discusses how piercings indicate some difference in identity from the norm – though not specifically what. Many respondents must share her view as plenty have associated piercing with queer identity. Again, piercings were common among lesbians in the 80s. In this vein, she brings up nose piercings, which were mentioned in an earlier chapter; Ryan similarly found them to stick out and provoke some consideration, but was not convinced they were queer, while Skylar clearly designates them as a queer maker. In referring to hairstyle, though implying that she is speaking to style in general, Logan says that straight people don’t stray far from the norm. Regarding men, this seems to be true based on the chapter on cis, het men, and with women, this could be said to be accurate if appealing to the male gaze is taken into consideration. Otherwise, women have more freedom in their self-fashioning, as Logan affirms. She also offers support to the ideas that lesbian style can be masculine and/or androgynous, incorporate punk elements (e.g. some of the women who she’s interested in), and include tattoos that draw from mythology – as fems used to get. Interestingly, she also describes her motivation for shaving half her head in middle school as simply being a desire to differentiate herself and be her “own person,” but remarks that realizing it made her look gay made her happy, so she continued to style her hair that way. This suggests that person may simply style their hair in an
unconventional way to stand out, regardless of their identity, but that standing out is also synonomousized with queer identity, as Logan came to see her unusual hair as queer. Lastly, Logan presents an example of an interviewee explicitly demonstrating a desire to signal sexual orientation and actively seeking others to make friends and find romantic partners. Thus, there is evidence that the historical, intra-subcultural signaling behavior continues.

**Ella**

At the moment, Ella would describe her style in three words: “granola,” “hiker,” and “Vermont,” incorporating “mom jeans” (looser at the bottom, then cuffed); Blundstone boots; burnt orange colors (as of recently); baggy, navy blue, L. L. Bean windbreaker/raincoat; a lot of denim; and earth tones into her daily look. She remarks that she has seen ample other UVMers with the same windbreaker and that Blundstones are also huge on campus. Essentially, she is saying that she blends in, though that is not her intention; these are just the things she’s most comfortable in and what she likes. In general, she insists that “style is something that is very fluid” and can change based on her mood and the moment.

In her hometown in the Midwest, she might stick out against the background of a brand-name hype (e.g. Lulu Lemon) among people her age, but does not believe that people would “peg [her] style as queer.”

She is also rather conventional in her body modifications; she has simple ear piercings, has never dyed her hair “a crazy color,” though she dyed it purple once. Further, her hair was always long as a kid so her current shoulder-length style feels strange to her; she’s very attached to her hair. She also has some cartilage piercings which she got to “look more adult”; she doesn’t feel piercings have much attachment to being queer.

In looking for prospective dates, “how they dress definitely plays a factor,” she says. When she first started “exploring,” she was initially attracted to more masculine-presenting women. She also predicts that if they dress like her, “like they’re about to go hiking,” they may have similar interests as Ella enjoys being outside. Of course, she clarifies, the intention is never to date a person before meeting them; “Let’s see if they’re an okay person first.” She adds that she wouldn’t rule out feminine lesbians. She would theoretically approach some of the people with this style, but she’s too shy.

She then shares some indicators of female queerness of people she’d be interested in: shorter hair – the first thing she notices, “granola meets hiking,” sometimes hats (e.g. beanies, baseball hats), cuffed jeans, pocket chains on pants (whereas she says necklace chains are more alt style), backwards hats, and a rainbow bracelet. If someone has “some kind of rainbow on them somewhere,” she assumes that they’re queer. Yet, she admits that her parents wear rainbows, as do other allies, so to clarify, she insists that someone who’s intentionally wearing pride shirts is definitely queer – she hasn’t seen any straight, cis people wearing that.

Tattoos on women can also signal queerness depending on the design, such as if it has boobs, rainbows, or the Mars and Venus symbols – though she backpedals slightly, acknowledging that the Venus symbol typically represents feminism in general. Overall, she says most people don’t get tattoos – especially big, noticeable ones – unless they’re encoded with special meaning.

She also makes a point of mentioning that for male-presenting people, “it’s easier to throw a label on [their identity].” If they wear typically feminine jewelry or accessories, she’ll question if they’re gay, and if they use makeup, she’ll question both their sexual orientation and gender identity.
Style Change

Before coming out, she used to wear things based on comfort and convenience. For instance, she would frequently wear leggings because she would go ice skating after school. Now that she’s out and in college, she cares more about how she looks; she wants to “feel more ‘adult’ and put-together,” as she says that “Adults always seem like they have their stuff together.”

After coming out, she said, “I felt like I needed to look a certain way to be a valid queer person.” Thus, she explored different stereotypically lesbian styles, many of which were informed by Tik Tok and social media in general – drawing from people she found attractive. Accordingly, her first thought was to try the t-shirt over the sweatshirt look or patterned pants with Doc Martens. She tried those things, but then gave up; she doesn’t think her style changed that much. She also didn’t want to “waste a lot of money on clothes.”

Ultimately, she’s concluded that it’s all about what you feel comfortable wearing. She’s not comfortable dressing up more masculine than she does now, but the idea of wearing a suit or jumpsuit to a formal event like prom is something that she would “absolutely” try it. “There’s no need to put a label on your sense of style,” she decides. She may want to wear a dress one day then baseball shorts the next.

Connections

There are quite a few important things to note about what Ella said. For one, she mentions wanting to dress like people she found attractive on social media and is attracted to people who look like her, who appear “like they’re about to go hiking.” As mentioned in the chapter on gay men, Brian Findlay theorizes that in looking for romantic partners, “You go for the people you want to look like” (Cole 2013: 152-153). Hence, Ella fits the bill here. Additionally, we again hear that it’s easier to label men’s sexual orientation than women’s; a man with feminine stylistic elements sticks out while a woman like her can blend into the outdoorsy UVM aesthetic. This, once more, suggests that women have more freedom of expression, able to dress fairly androgynously and masculinely without having their sexual orientation questioned. Nevertheless, she does note short hair as a major signal of sexual orientation – it’s the first thing she notices on a woman, adding that her hair is shoulder-length herself. This could align with the idea that women normally adhere to traditional gender norms – e.g. of having long hair – to attract male attention. However, it is interesting that she says she feels “attached” to her hair, and worth questioning the sentiment behind that (conscious or subconscious), as it seems less due to societal pressure and more personal. She also acknowledges believing that she had to dress a certain way as a lesbian – an idea reinforced by social (e.g. Tik Tok). This illustrates the power social media can have in allowing subcultures to form a sense of identity, though that may come to feel forced on certain members. Ella’s experience trying to conform and not feeling herself may explain the experience of other respondents, as mentioned in Chapter 1, who do not relate with their subcultures. Yet, she does admit to thrifting, which is what Meg and Logan do as well, and which 2.0% of respondents associated with lesbians. Additionally, one respondent whose mother critiqued her presentation – which did not cater to the male gaze – said that “my mother wasn't necessarily happy with how I dressed in oversized thrift-shop clothes that ‘hid’ my figure.” The question then becomes, is thrifting necessarily a lesbian style, or do lesbians tend to thrift as they are unrestrained by the male gaze, allowing them to buy clothes that are baggier – less fitted to their precise size – and
there may be less stigma in buying male clothing at a thrift store, where the clothing may not be organized by gender? Ella’s discussion of her body modifications is also intriguing, as she admits to dying her hair once, but doesn’t explain why, and feels that purple was not a “crazy” color; not too nonnormative. Thus, it seems that she was not directly trying to signal queerness and that she is generally not attempting to stand out, as her hair has otherwise been left its natural color. She also explains her cartilage piercings and much of her style as contributing to the desired effect of looking like “put-together” like an adult, not associating piercings with queer identity, despite their history in the lesbian community and the queer-linkage perceived by some respondents. We must wonder, then, which adults she is looking to if piercings are defined by many respondents as going against the mainstream. Or, perhaps, she feels that the action of getting the piercings demonstrates a sense of autonomy that makes her feel mature, just like how I felt like I was finally ready to dye my hair for the first time at age 20. She similarly does not generally associate tattoos with queerness unless their subject is explicitly queer. Lastly, she describes how she finds “queer” women, but does not say specifically say “lesbian.” This may indicate an overlap in bi female and lesbian style, which we will explore more in the next chapter.

**The Survey Results**

**Everyday Clothes (Descriptors Selected by 50% or More of Respondents):**

In the cases of other identities, I have only shown the six most-selected descriptors; however, they normally go on to include those picked by less than half of respondents. Hence, if more than six descriptors are selected by at least half of the group, I will list them.

**Non-Queer Women**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Perceived Presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>83%</td>
<td>Cotton, dull/muted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79%</td>
<td>denim bottoms, T-shirts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75%</td>
<td>baggy sweatshirts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71%</td>
<td>common patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67%</td>
<td>outdoorsy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63%</td>
<td>tight bottoms, dresses, high-waisted pants, long-sleeve shirts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58%</td>
<td>modest, short shorts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54%</td>
<td>flannel, pastel, oversized shirts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50%</td>
<td>thrifted, denim jackets, skirts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here, we can see that a significant majority (75%) select baggy clothes, like oversized shirts, for instance, which is entering into the lesbian fashion territory that we have discussed. We also see that slightly over half (58%) wear modest clothes, while, conversely, the same amount wear short shorts, and a majority (63%) wear tight bottoms. Thus, it seems like more cis, het women wear baggy clothing than tighter, more revealing clothing, but there is still hearty representation of the latter styles. Similarly, over half (63%) wear dresses and half wear skirts. Thus, it seems that there is representation of both traditional feminine presentation regarding
attire type (e.g. dresses) and fit (tight) and non-traditional presentation (e.g. baggy). These women seem to not be dressing to the male gaze, for the most part, as their style is not overwhelmingly about highlighting certain parts of one’s body and a majority do not claim to wear revealing clothes to show skin.

Half also wear thrifted clothing, which Meg, Logan, and Ella all wear, but which Skylar, Ella, and Meg have also admitted is a widespread trend. Additionally, a majority (67%) wear outdoorsy clothing, which Skylar and Ella have also acknowledged as a wider UVM trend.

Further distorting their sexual identity signaling is their use of the well-established lesbian trend of wearing flannel (54%). Then again, this speaks to one respondent’s anecdote about their friend’s game of trying to determine who’s a lesbian and who’s simply a Vermonter, as “the clothing typically associated with lesbians (e.g. plaid flannel) is worn by everyone [in Vermont].”

It is undeniable that lesbians could have trouble discerning who’s straight and who’s queer if the lesbian style elements we discussed reveal reality, as half, if not most, cis, het women utilize many of them.

### Lesbians & Femme Nonbinary Gynephiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Perceived Presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>90%</td>
<td>T-shirts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80%</td>
<td>cotton, denim bottoms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75%</td>
<td>flannel, dull/muted, long-sleeve shirts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70%</td>
<td>baggy sweatshirts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60%</td>
<td>high-waisted pants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55%</td>
<td>common patterns, modest, thrifted, androgynous, cuffed pants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>“I’m kind of a formal clothing and menswear guy and I like blazers and stuff. I wear a lot of tweed. I like wearing ties too but am too insecure to most of the time although I have a large collection of them. I don’t feel as good if I’m not overdressed but I’m also insecure about standing out too much; button up shirts, sweaters (a lot of sweaters).”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus far, some of respondents’ predictions are coming true. Flannel is in fact a staple fashion element for lesbians – 75% to be exact, as many respondents and various other [including historical] sources have asserted. Baggy clothing (70%) is also utilized, which could be said to be worn due to freedom from the pressure of the male gaze; however, fewer lesbians wear baggy clothing than cis, het women. It is possible that this indicates that cis, het women are intentionally trying to hide their bodies; perhaps if the rest of their presentation signals that they’re straight, that could lead men to look at them, but they then don’t want to be sexualized, so they hide their curves. Lesbians may simply wear baggy clothing if they find it comfortable, and some may use it to avoid the male gaze, but they may feel that their other accessories send men the message that they’re gay or make them less attractive to men (as respondents suggested regarding some queer women’s bold makeup). The same may be said about the fact that 58% of cis, het women wear modest clothing, whereas slightly fewer (54%) lesbians wear such clothing.
“Cuffed pants” then shows up, which is not mentioned by cis, het women (nor was it predicted for them) but which was predicted for lesbians by a mere 2.4% of respondents, though a majority sport them (55%).

Over half (55%) also call their style androgynous, which ties back to the “power dressing” of lesbians in the 80s, how Wilkinson described “butch chic,” and one of the points in Meg’s queer female signaling “trifecta.”

A majority (55%) also buy thrifted clothing, which again, may be part of a larger trend, but it is notable that slightly more lesbians thrift than cis, het women (50%).

One respondent also speaks to the more masculine-leaning motif of lesbian style. Notably, she feels insecure about wearing ties – likely due to her phobia of standing out. This demonstrates female masculine dress as varying from the heterosexual norm (again, the male gaze).

Non-Queer Women

Clothing Effects:
- blend in with peer group/friends: 100%
- blend in with most people on campus: 92%

Other motivations for wearing this style of everyday clothing (optional free response):
- comfort (3)
- to look well put-together (3)
- to look stylish (1)
- to follow fashion trends (1)
- to look creative (1)
- likes aesthetic (1)
- to hide body parts one is insecure about (1)
- modesty (1)
- to accentuate body (1)
- to appear friendly and easy-going (1)
- to adapt to the weather (1)

We’re seeing the split again that we saw with cis, het men: comfort vs. looking well put-together. Following, we’re seeing some interest in style (look stylish, follow fashion trends, look creative) and enjoying the look of the clothes one puts on oneself. There are then two points about hiding one’s body and one about accentuating one’s body – showing a divide of modest vs. revealing, which has been debated through much of this chapter, with assertions made that cis, het women are more likely to wear revealing clothes to appeal to the male gaze. Though 63% of cis, het women claim to wear tight bottoms and 58% wear short shorts, we can now see that the exact intentions behind those outfits may not be directly to appeal to men. They could simply be what is popular at the moment or, perhaps, what is being designed by male fashion designers with male desire in mind.

Overall, the vast majority of cis, het women believe that their clothing causes them to blend in with their peers and the greater campus community.
Novel responses (my emphasis):

“I value comfort over anything else and do not mind if I wear looser clothing; I dislike form-fitting clothes. Modesty is very important to me! And i try to dress pretty trendless i.e. what I like vs what is in style.”

“I like to look well put together. I like business clothes, but it's not something a lot of people wear to school, so I wear a more youthful version. I wear a lot of dresses, skirts, and blazers.”

“I invest a lot in clothes and try to appear dressed for the occasion. The standard i use to judge what I should wear everyday is based on what i read or see about fashion trends and follow people i appreciate in various situations. I do not follow my colleagues ‘just to fit in.’”

The first respondent lends some insight as to the motivations of cis, het women who wear baggier clothing – we see comfort and modesty (perhaps not wanting to be sexualized) arise.

The next one demonstrates how a blazer, which could otherwise be seen as masculine, when situated in a certain context (business) and paired with feminine elements, loses that connotation. Further, the respondent interestingly sees dresses, skirts, and blazers as a “youthful” take on business style.

Whereas 3.9% of respondents expected cis, het women to be “trendy,” this woman seems to view following fashion trends as going against the grain and standing out from her colleagues.

Lesbians & Femme Nonbinary Gynephiles

Clothing Effects:
- blend in with the LGBT+ community: 80%

Other motivations for wearing this style of everyday clothing (optional free response):
- comfort (3)
- to feel confident (2)
- to appear confident (1)
- to feel important (1)
- to motivate self by dressing well (1)
- based on mood (1)
- to feel safe (1)
- to be authentic (1)
- to signal sexual orientation (1)
- to wear clothing that “breaks the ice” (1)
- to look whimsical (1)
- to appear stylish (1)
- to not look reserved (1)
- to seem cool (1)
- to seem relaxed (1)
- based on what’s clean (1)
- to adapt to the weather (1)
Comfort prevails again, and is as prevalent among lesbians as cis, het women. Similarly, convenience is also demonstrated through choosing to wear what’s clean and weather-appropriate. We also see looking and feeling confident to be the next most common motivations. There is then a trend of wanting to support oneself (to feel confident, important, and safe; to motivate self; to be authentic). On the other side of the coin, many respondents also have external motivations guiding their self-fashioning, many wanting to make a certain impression on other (to appear confident; signal sexual orientation; look whimsical, stylish, or unreserved; seem cool or relaxed; visually “break the ice”). We of course, also see one who explicitly says that she wants to transmit her sexual orientation.

In addition to overlapping with cis, het women on comfort, the lesbian who said she wanted to “feel safe” referenced wearing baggy clothing, so it is possible that she aligns with the cis, het woman who wants to hide her body and the one who wants to look modest; and one lesbian said she wanted to seem relaxed, like the cis, het woman who said she wanted to look friendly and easy-going. Notably, no lesbians reference wanting to show off their body, only one wants to look fashionable, and none say they want to look put-together, though two say that they want to feel confident. Though some cis, het women and lesbians may want to avoid being sexualized, overall, there is a notable absence of lesbians trying to draw attention to their bodies in comparison, again, which may be due to their inattention or defiance of the male gaze. Their lack of interest in looking stylish may also tie to the male gaze, as well as be in opposition to traditional gender roles as well. They may be engaging in gender inversion, in a sense, as they appear to be emulating the cis, het male look (mentioned in Chapter 3), which has often been characterized (in many of our sources and by respondents) as a disregard of fashion. The respondent who says she simply wears “what’s clean” reinforces this idea; this is precisely how Skylar characterized frat boys’ selection of their clothes.

In summary, most (80%) of lesbians feel they fit in with the queer community.

**Novel responses (my emphasis):**

“I like to be **comfortable**, but I feel confident in a lot of different fits of clothing (oversized, tight).”

“I like to **feel safe** (in larger clothes or baggy or soft ones) sometimes **dressing well makes me more motivated**.”

“I am most **comfortable** and feel most myself in **masculine** clothing.”

The first response indicates that this person’s confidence does not draw from attention (or lack thereof) that they receive from highlighting their body.

The second respondent was referenced in the earlier analysis.

The next one offers an instance of not outward intentions, but how the person wants to feel. It also suggests that outside forces and historical subcultural trends are not pushing this person towards dressing in a masculine manner.

**Accessories (Top Five):**

Average number of each type per person.
Non-Queer Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>earrings</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>finger rings</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bracelets</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hairbands/hair ties</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>necklaces</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lesbians & Femme Nonbinary Gynephiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>earrings</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>finger rings</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bracelets</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>necklace</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hairbands/hair ties</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly, these groups appear to use the exact same accessories, though within the latter group, members wear necklaces slightly more often and use hairbands and hair ties slightly less often. In general, however, fewer lesbians use accessories – especially bracelets and hair bands/hair ties. This may possibly be due to some members wanting to convey a more “butch” appearance by using fewer accessories. It is also worth asking whether the necklaces that some lesbians are wearing are chains.

Body Modifications (Top Six):

L = left, R = right, number = number of piercings

Non-Queer Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>L ear lobe 1</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R ear lobe 1</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R ear lobe 2+</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dyed hair, L ear lobe 2+</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L ear cartilage</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 tattoo only, 1-3 tattoos</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Uncommon haircut description (optional free response):

- Super short to my chin, most of my peers had very long hair past their shoulders.

Intentions of Body Modifications:

- I feel that my body modifications do not cause me to stand out (17, 71%)
- I got at least some of my body modifications to intentionally stand out from others (3, 13%)
- I got all of my body modifications to intentionally stand out from others (1, 4.0%)
• Some of my body modifications cause me to stand out, which was not my intention (1, 4.0%)

**Mods gotten in order to stand out (optional free response):**
- Dying [sic] my hair a lighter color than natural (from a box)
- Dying [sic] my hair different colors - pink, blue, purple, etc.
- Haircut
- Purple highlights in my hair

**Motivations to get mods (optional free response):**
- to appears artsy/creative (4)
- to express self (2)
- as rite of passage / convention (e.g. girls getting ear lobes pierced) (2)
- like tattoo art (1)
- to feel unique (1)
- to appear inattentive of societal judgment (1)
- to appear fashionable (1)
- to look professional (1)
- to symbolize something important (1), a tattoo

**Novel responses (my emphasis):**

“Dying [sic] my hair is more of a way to feel different from everyone else and to look how I want to look; to me that doesn’t necessarily mean I did it just to stand out from others but that is a small piece of it. I want to appear more free/creative and like people can’t judge me for wanting to look a certain way.”

“I got piercings because I thought they were cool and also because I think they do show that I’m artsy/creative. I got them all in college, so I also think it was a way to shed my high school identity and express myself.”

The “conventional” right and left ear lobe piercings are most prevalent, which was predicted by respondents. Two piercings on the right lobe are still rather common, showing up among a third of cis, het women. Two piercings on the left lobe are less common, however, as is dyed hair. Cartilage piercings and tattoos then become scanter. This seems to align with the prediction by 14% of respondents that cis, het women would not have any tattoos or any unique body modifications and only “conventional accessories,” and the notion held by 2.0% of respondents that cis, het women only have “two piercings” and/or “average”/lobe piercings. Similarly, 8.3% of respondents attributed dyed hair to lesbians, as did interviewees, which has historically been used by Riot Grrrls to protest the male gaze and heteronormativity.

The vast majority feel that their body modifications are conventional enough that they don’t draw attention to them, though a notable percentage (13%) wanted at least some in order to stand out, and only one intended for all of their modification to make them stand out.

What is compelling is that all body modifications that were intended to stand out were hair-related; three out of four dyed their hair and one cut her hair. These reinforce natural hair color
and hair length as the heteronormative standard, which is the same thing that could be said of the uncommon haircut description. The first quoted response seems to address just how transgressive hair-dying is.

Here, we can see that wanting to convey oneself as artsy or creative prevails (also related to liking tattoo art and perhaps wanting to look fashionable), with self-expression following (related to wanting to feel unique and appear as if you disregard societal prescriptions). Next-most common is the propensity to get one’s ear lobes pierced as a girl – either viewed as convention or “a rite of passage.” What’s then left is the intrinsic desire to have something symbolic (a tattoo) and the extrinsic desire to look professional.

The last quote illustrates how the high-school-to-college transition, a major life transition into independence and adulthood, can trigger stylistic change.

**Lesbians & Femme Nonbinary Gynephiles**

L = left, R = right, number = number of piercings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>55%</td>
<td>dyed hair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50%</td>
<td>L ear lobe 1, R ear lobe 1, L ear lobe 2+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45%</td>
<td>uncommon haircut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40%</td>
<td>R ear lobe 2+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30%</td>
<td>nose stud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25%</td>
<td>undercut, 1-3 tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>nipple piercings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Uncommon haircut description (optional free response):**

- Right now it's dyed blonde when my natural hair is darker. I used to shave half of my head.
- It’s a short, pretty normal 'masculine' haircut. I did it myself with clippers but its a little grown out now. I maintain it pretty short though, I don't think I look good with long hair and I’ve had short hair for about 4-5 years now.
- **Bob** with bangs and N undercut
- Asymmetrical **bob**.
- Currently it is long (below shoulder-length) with **one side shaved**.
- I haven't gotten it cut since COVID started and it was a long **pixie** back then so it's kind of a shoulder length straight cut.
- It was short and slightly longer on the **right side**, but since quarantine [sic] it has grown into more of an uneven **bob**.
- I'm a cisgender woman; I get barbershop-style short men's haircuts.

**Intentions of Body Modifications:**

- I feel that my body modifications do not cause me to stand out (11, 55%)
- I got at least some of my body modifications to intentionally stand out from others (5, 25%)
• Some of my body modifications cause me to stand out, which was not my intention (5, 25%)
• I got all of my body modifications to intentionally stand out from others (0, 0.0%)

**Mods gotten in order to stand out (optional free response):**
• My body modifications weren't only to stand out, however, I like standing out. My nose piercing [ring and stud] especially makes me stand out, but I like that.
• Undercut
• My side shave
• My [helix] cartilage piercings!
• eyebrow piercing and nipple piercings

**Motivations to get mods (optional free response):**
• to reveal sexual orientation (4)
• for self-confidence (3)
• to make self happy (3)
• to look artsy/creative (3)
• like aesthetic (3)
• to feel beautiful (2)
• did it with friends or family (1)
• as convention (e.g. girls getting ear lobes pierced) (1)
• to look edgy (1)
• to look cool (1)
• to symbolize important things (1), a tattoo
• to reclaim body (1)
• comfort (1)

**Novel responses (my emphasis):**

“*I would say I got my modifications for personal confidence and beauty. I feel like my piercing makes me look cute same with my dyed hair. I’m going to get a tattoo and that's just a personal choice, but if it makes me stand out I’m ok with that.*”

“When I was younger (19-21), I got my second earlobe piercings and a much more 'alternative' haircut so that I did not have to reveal my sexual orientation every time I met someone new -- it was assumed -- and that worked better for me at that time. *Now that I am more comfortable with myself and in a long-term relationship, I cut my hair in a way that makes me feel good rather than how it makes me appear/in relation to others.*”

“I don't know if this answers the question directly, but one reason I chose a side shave is so that I can make my identity visible to the level I choose (i.e. wear my hair one way in one context or differently in another situation so I can always hide my shave if I don't feel comfortable showing it). I guess I also like the aesthetic of the side shave and I think it makes me look a bit tough/edgy and also artsy - it makes people *not* immediately assume that I'm a normal straight girl.”
"I liked them - some of them increase my 'gay aesthetic.'"

"I certainly only got my eyebrow piercing because I wanted to be perceived as more gay by other gay people."

Noticeably, the body modification that many cis, het women got to be transgressive is the number one most common body modification among lesbians: dyed hair, which 8.3% of respondents deemed a lesbian indicator. Next are the conventional left and right single piercings on each lobe; they seem to have this in common with cis, het women as it is such a common practice among young girls. However, just as popular among lesbians is two piercings on the left lobe, which is less conventional. Uncommon haircuts are next and hair, as we have seen, is a very sensitive medium, rife with gendered and sexual meaning depending on its styling and cut. Two piercings in the right lobe are then next. Next is a nose stud, expected by 5.9% of respondents (though they said nose piercings broadly). We then see hair modification again in the form of an undercut – which Caleb had called a “gay cut.” This pattern of body modifications is similar to gay men; though few gay men had body modifications, hair modifications were most often hair-related. Importantly, 27% of respondents said that lesbians are recognizable by their hairstyle – the second-most common indicator offered after “masculine style,” with 4.9% of respondents expecting to see an undercut. Finally, a quarter of lesbians have between one to three tattoos, a practice of lesbians in the 80s to reclaim their bodies, which 4.9% of respondents predicted.

Of the “uncommon” hairstyles, one has been dyed, though not an unusual color (just blonde), while the rest – seven respondents – claim that their hair is unusual since it is short. Gender nonconformity – as well as artistic looks in general (e.g. asymmetry) – seem to be a theme here.

Over half of lesbians did not get their body modifications to stand out while an equal amount got some to intentionally stand out or standing out was an unintended consequence of their bodily modification. None got all of their modifications to stand out.

It seems that lesbians modified their hair (2/5) and got piercings (3/5) to stand out, the exact style elements that many respondents have said are queer markers throughout this chapter and the previous one.

The most common motivation for getting one’s body modifications seems to be signaling one’s lesbian identity. Looking at the quoted responses, respondents seem to be split 50/50 on wanting their modifications to either signal that they’re queer to everyone or to fellow queer women in order to find a partner. Following, the next two most common reasons were intrinsically-driven, wanting to feel better about oneself and to make oneself happy. Equally common is simply appreciating an aesthetic and wanting to adopt it for one’s body. Relatedly, two respondents wanted to feel beautiful. Other trends include doing something with friends or family (including as a convention), to look edgy/cool, and then single respondents sought modifications to symbolize important things to them, to reclaim their body (just as lesbians of the 80s did), and for comfort (which might relate to cutting one’s hair so it’s not in one’s face?).

Again, in comparison, few gay men had body modifications, and of those who did, signaling their gay identity was not a priority (none gave that reason), though one did mention wanting to reclaim his body and another wanting to build his confidence. It seems like these more personally meaningful motivations of building oneself up and contenting oneself – versus getting
a piercing merely for aesthetic reasons – seems more prevalent among queer respondents than non-queer ones (cis, het men included). It is possible that body modifications serve as a sort of solace, self-reassurance, and self-care for queer people who have potentially struggled with figuring out their identity and then dealt with possibly negative societal effects as a result. Conversely, non-queer people may modify themselves simply for the fun of it, or for other significant reasons that do not fall along these themes. The hypothesis of a non-queer man, mentioned in Chapter 3, may be somewhat insightful in this respect. He posited that body modifications show “insecurities in the person. They are not happy with themselves and need to 'change' their appearance in some way.” Rather than “needing” to change, it’s possible that he is on the right track that body modifications could reflect internal insecurities in queer people about their identities.

One respondent’s comment about being relieved to style her hair in a way that makes her comfortable rather than to signal her queerness to find a partner brings to mind Ella’s journey of self-discovery, heavily influenced by TikTok norms of lesbian dress. Hence, here we see the theme of perceived pressure to fit in with one’s subculture, if not to be a part of the community, then to signal romantic interest in others in the community.

The tendency of some respondents to want to look beautiful – based on their own standards – could also indicate an asserted redefinition of beauty by doing what oneself thinks is beautiful, regardless of what the societal standard is for women. If a woman doesn’t want to appeal to the male gaze (e.g. by wearing tight and revealing clothing and makeup), she may do something to her appearance to please herself rather than to please a man.

Explicitly Transmitting Sexual Orientation & Gender:

Is there any way that you try to visually present your sexual orientation?

Only a sample of novel quotes included for each category.

Non-Queer Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No (21, 88%):</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• “No, I don't really think much about how I present my sexuality. I think it's generally presumed I'm straight.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• “I think my sense of style is actually very much in the classic ‘bisexual’ range despite me being straight. I just like the clothes though.”</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I effectively do (unintentionally) (2, 8.3%):</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• “Not really. If I'm at a social gathering I dress more feminine, otherwise I don't make an effort to make a point that I'm a straight woman.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Not intentionally. I might try to appear attractive but I don't think about it in terms of my own sexual orientation.”</td>
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<tr>
<th>Yes (1, 4.2%):</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• “I am a straight woman, so I like to play up my femininity in a way men will find attractive, plus I love makeup and hair so it's fun for me to play with that when creating my image.”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Clearly, the vast majority of cis, het women do not intentionally try to signal their sexual orientation, though a small percentage indicate that their personal style likely transmits their identity unintentionally.

Noticeably, one respondent recognizes that her style may cross into the boundaries of the “bisexual” domain, which could confuse signals. It is interesting that she is aware of this, prompting the question of if other people have questioned her sexuality or if she simply knows other people who identify this way and, thus, dress this way.

Regarding the respondents who unintentionally signal their identity, one affirms the idea that cis, het women seem to dress in traditionally feminine clothes for social gatherings, again, possibly to attract male attention. The second respondent then explicitly mentions the desire to look attractive, furthering this point.

The woman who intentionally tries to transmit her sexual orientation also claims to do so for men, inferring that they will find femininity attractive (perhaps because of Butler’s idea that heterosexuality relies on visual distinction between men and women). Nevertheless, she admits that she has fun “creating [her] image.”

### Lesbians & Femme Nonbinary Gynephiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No (3, 15%)</th>
<th>I effectively do (unintentionally) (2, 10%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• “I'm asexual, so I don't try to find partners.”</td>
<td>• “the way I dress normally and having short hair and stuff already kinda do it for me.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• “I think I dress in a way that other gay people might be able to tell I am. I have part of my hair dyed and I do tend to dress on the androgynous side. I used to care more about people being able to tell I was gay when I first came out, but now I don't care so much.”</td>
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<tr>
<th>Yes (15, 75%)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Trends of signals mentioned:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Flannel (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Rainbow imagery (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Pride items (4) (flag ring, lesbian &amp; polyamory flag bracelets, polyamory flag necklace, rainbow pin on backpack)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Short hair (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cuffed pants (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “I enjoy wearing flannel bc I know it fulfills the ‘gay woman’ stereotype.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Wear lots of pastels and femme clothing (especially pink). Tend to keep my nails pretty long. Wear lesbian and polyam[ory] bracelets, double Venus earrings and polyam[ory] necklace.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Cuffed pants, my energy”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “yes I present as gay by dressing androgynously”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Sometimes I wear a small rainbow stud earring, Tegan and Sara merch, leather boots with cuffed jeans, etc. But it's pretty subtle. I just don't really feel that my sexuality is a large part of my identity.”</td>
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</table>
Lesbian’s styling motivations seem to be the exact opposite of those of cis, het women. A significant majority are actively trying to transmit their queer identity. Many use flannel, demonstrating that this is not simply a look chosen due to comfort, but historical signaling trends have carried through into today. Rainbow imagery is also second most common, tied with Pride items that unambiguously state respondents’ identities to those who know the meaning of the colors. Surprisingly, only two respondents mentioned cutting their hair short as a signal, implying that most of those who do cut their short do so out of personal comfort and preference rather than to communicate identity to others. That rings familiar, drawing back to what one respondent said about feeling more comfortable in masculine clothes and Meg saying that wearing a dress made her feel like she was “in drag.” Though 55% of lesbians cuff their pants, only two mention doing so to explicitly signal identity. Additionally, one lesbian mentions wearing Tegan and Sara merchandise, which could be a clear queer signal, as the band consists of lesbian twin sisters who are known queer icons, as well as leather boots, which have also been a historical lesbian staple.

We then see masculine/gender-non-conforming stylistic elements in the next respondent, as well as mention of a hippie/70s look, which bears similarity to what Logan said. Perhaps hippies’ rejection of convention, and especially of gender roles for men, is what has made some lesbians gravitate towards styles of that era. Intriguingly, one lesbian dons many lesbian indicators—flannel, short hair, and a nontraditional piercing, but, nonetheless, is still perceived as straight. This follows along Findlay’s idea that the wearer makes the look queer; conceivably, if the wearer has many other feminine features, she is unable to make the look appear queer. Intriguingly, the next respondent says that her side shave “takes the pressure off” her to be fashionable every day, having said that the look helped people not perceive her as queer, which seems to insinuate that lesbian style is fashionable. We have not heard this claim so far, it could also be that she is defining “fashionable” in terms of lesbian fashion—having an outfit that is “on point” for lesbians. Still, this definition is unclear. The next person who says that she wants to dress like she enjoys being outside aligns with what Ella said, but then again, this could very well be Ella’s response as all interviewees also took the survey. The last respondent quoted has short nails, as 4.4% of respondents predicted for lesbians, as well as uncommon hair in the way of dreadlocks (“locs,” as they refer to it), baggy pants, as well as men’s clothing with the
occasional crop top – a feminine item. Thus, she is fashioning herself in many different ways that transmit a lesbian identity.

Of the few who don’t actively try to present their identities, two find that their personal style already implies their identity – one mentioning androgyny as a characteristic of her style (known to have lesbian associations), with one hinting that she used to make more of a concerted effort to look queer, but now does not care as much. This is another strand in the theme of respondents and interviewees trying to fit subcultural definitions of appearance and feeling fatigued, constrained, and ultimately giving up on fitting the mold. Some lesbians may use rainbows and Pride items to mark themselves as lesbians so that they can otherwise dress how they want. For instance, the second respondent quoted who chooses to signal her identity dresses in a very feminine manner which may cause her to blend in with cis, het women, but she dons various Pride items (lesbian and polyamory bracelets, double Venus earrings (like a pair of women together), and polyamory necklace). Another lesbian who purposefully signals her identity claims to have once worn baggy clothes and button up shirts to look gay, but has similarly stopped adhering to a lesbian fashion script and wears traditionally feminine clothes as well. Thus, it seems that depending on the day, she may look queer or not, but if she mixes the elements, she will probably still look queer as androgyny has been mentioned several times as a lesbian look.

One of the respondents who doesn’t signal her identity explains that, as an ace person, she isn’t seeking partners, insinuating that such signaling has romantic intentions, rather than to build community. Yet, Meg wishes she did signal queerness so she could build community and Logan also mentions relying on others’ queer signals to choose who she wants to approach and befriend. Hence, it seems that those who signal their sexual orientation or choose not to have different understandings of the purpose of doing so.

It can also not go without saying that significantly more lesbians (75%) intentionally attempt to transmit their sexual orientation than gay men (33%). This may be because women have more freedom of expression in their clothing that can mean overlapping in cis, het and queer style, requiring a concerted effort to stand out. In contrast, men seem to have a much more binary system in which gay and cis, het men are defined in contrast to each other, where merely one stylistic element that varies from the traditionally masculine norm can call a man’s sexual orientation into question.

Is there any way that you try to visually present your gender identity?

Only a sample of novel quotes included for each category.

**Non-Queer Women**

**No (12, 50%)**

**I effectively do (unintentionally) (7, 29%):**
- “Not really, just dress like how ‘girls usually dress’ skirts sometimes in summer, makeup some days, etc.”
- “I have medium-length hair, which I guess helps to show that I am a female. I occasionally wear dresses and skirts, although not often. Sometimes I also wear things with a floral pattern, which I think is typically seen as feminine.”
Overall, most cis, het women do not intentionally try to convey their gender through their style, fewer unintentionally signal their gender, and fewer yet intentionally try to transmit it. Many of those who unintentionally signal that they are women mention dressing in traditionally feminine ways. One associates floral patterns with femininity and partially attributes this to the transmission of her gender to others, confirming AJ and Weezer’s assessment of floral patterns as feminine (though they also clearly tied it to straight sexuality). Two respondents acknowledge the length of their hair as gendering them – one says she has medium-length hair and the other says that she’s never cut hers “super-short.” This ties back to the cis, het men who described their longer hair as uncommon, implying that it is naturally a characteristic of women, not men. There are then two cis, het women who say that they either like to show off their body or wear things that flatter it, suggesting attentiveness to the male gaze. One comment that cannot go without address is the belief of one woman that a nonbinary person with her curves would have trouble communicating their identity to the onlooker. This is very likely true, and why there is a market for chest binders for both trans men and nonbinary people, though not all nonbinary people who were assigned female at birth necessarily wear one.

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All of the women who purposefully dress a certain way to indicate that they are women, except one, mention dressing “feminine,” which 12% of respondents expected of them and two mention having long hair – considered a cis, het female indicator by 3.9% of respondents. Though one respondent admits to wearing masculine clothes, she clarifies that she wears them in a way that shows off her feminine frame. Thus, it is not only the type of clothing worn that matters, but how it is worn. This may be one of the underlying mechanisms of how groups of different sexual orientations have coopted others’ styles – to wear the same elements, but in a slightly different way (e.g. gay male “clones” wearing tight shirts).

Yes (5, 10%):

- “when I wear more masculine clothing, I try to do so in a feminine silhouette”
- “Through my fashion. I tend to dress up.”
- “Wearing more typically feminine clothing like dresses, maintaining long hair.”
- “I dress in a feminine way.”
- “I have long hair, I wear typically feminine clothing.”

• “I wear a lot of dresses and skirts and wear makeup, which was traditionally been seen as ‘feminine’”
• “I guess I dress in a stereotypically feminine way because I think it flatters my body”
• “I have a curvy figure so I think my gender identity is pretty obvious....this sort of implies that someone with my body type couldn't be nonbinary. I suppose they could, but I think it would be hard to combat the evidence of people's eyes. I've never chosen super-short hair. I think my hair is one of my better features and it conforms with my gender identity.”
• “As a girl, sometimes I like to show off my body and things like that.”
• “I don't really think much about how I present my gender, but I do conform to standard female/cis stereotypes and identify with that anyway, so it's also not something I really have to think about.”

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- “Wearing more typically feminine clothing like dresses, maintaining long hair.”
- “I dress in a feminine way.”
- “I have long hair, I wear typically feminine clothing.”
### Lesbians & Femme Nonbinary Gynephiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No (8, 40%):</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• “I identify as a cis female, and I don't think too much about this when I get dressed. I think I dress pretty much like other girls at UVM.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• “Not really, I don't have a strong connection to my gender identity so I just wear whatever I have as long as it's comfortable.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• “No, I like being an unknown.”</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “No; I accept that my preferred appearance confuses people about my gender identity (cis woman, somewhat masculine appearance).”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “No. I would cause I’m tired of people assuming I’m not female but I don’t want to change how I present because I like it.”</td>
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</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>I effectively do (unintentionally) (4, 20%):</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• “No, I am cis and luckily don't get misgendered.”</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “I don't have to put much effort into this... that's the privilege of being cisgender! Sometimes I do dress up more girly, but most of the time I know my body presents as female and I don't worry about it at all.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “I personally don't care about my gender. I identify as female but I don't actively try and look female. I think most of the time I present as female, but it's not purposeful.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• “I'm somewhere between a girly-girl and a tom-boy I guess. I generally don't dress with the intention of conveying a specific gender, I just look like a woman naturally I guess.”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes (8, 40%):</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• “We all are the sum of our gender presentations, so I try to visually present my gender identity by presenting as my gender identity.”</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “I keep my hair long and my clothes fit me in a feminine way even if they are androgynous.”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• “I stick to wearing more feminine clothing.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• “I generally wear clothes that accentuate a more feminine body shape in some way, I have longer hair and more typically feminine features.”</td>
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</table>

In analyzing lesbians’ broadcast of their gender identity, there is an equal number on both sides of the spectrum – those who don’t try to transmit it and those who do, with half that amount who unintentionally do.

Of the women who don’t try to look female, one says that she believes her style simply makes her fit in with other UVM women – which may require fewer explicitly feminine elements, according to Meg, Ella, and Skylar. Three seem to simply be unconcerned with how people perceive them – opposed to not “trying” to convey their gender with people correctly assuming it nevertheless; one doesn’t feel strongly connected to her gender identity, another likes looking ambiguous, and one has come to accept that her masculine presentation confuses people. This seems to relate to the phenomenon of gender inversion in that only lesbians struggle with being correctly gendered. Yet, some are unphased by others’ confusion, which may have been the sentiment of butch lesbians in the butch-fem dichotomy of the 30s through the 60s, as the “butch” served as the “male” role in their spin on a heterosexual relationship. Conversely, one is disappointed when people misgender her, but prefers to dress how she pleases, showing the
struggle mentioned many times before of the tension between wanting to be recognized as part of one’s subculture (in this case, of women) but also wanting to present as one’s authentic self.

One woman who believes that she naturally appears female regardless of her intentions attributes others’ ability to accurately gender her to her body. She says that she sometimes dresses up “girly,” but that [ultimately,] her “body presents as female,” just like what the cis, het respondent from earlier said about the effect of her curves. Another lesbian doesn’t care about gender (like those mentioned in the previous paragraph), but looks female. Furthermore, one woman describes her style as intermediate – between masculine (“tomboy”) and feminine (“girly girl”) ends of the spectrum, but that she must happen to look more female than male, likely insinuating that she is treated as such. She supplements the evidence of the presence of androgyny in the lesbian community.

The responses of those who intentionally signal their gender identity spans a broad range. One respondent states that the way she dresses is indicative of her gender identity – her gender is the sum of her various fashion choices over time. This challenges the definition of women as a complement to men (as they must be differentiated in a heterosexual system), allowing for a broader concept of what it means to be a woman. In addition, two respondents mention having long hair and two explicitly dress in feminine way while one states that she has more feminine features and takes care in accentuating her feminine body.

**Conclusion**

From this chapter, we have become aware of the following themes: Lesbians try to signal their sexual orientation more than gay men, which may be due to greater overlap in style across women’s sexual orientations – whereas gay men and cis, het men are defined in opposition to each other. Next, cis, het women may be more likely to accentuate their bodies through tight and revealing clothing to demonstrate their gender identity and to appeal to the male gaze, falling in line with the necessity of men and women to be differentiated from each other in a heteronormative society. Conversely, lesbians either embrace a greater range of expression due to their lack of need to cater their style to the male gaze or they actively self-style to repel male attention. Yet, these behaviors are mere themes, not rules, with some cis, het women opting to wear baggy, masculine clothes and some lesbians wearing tight and more feminine clothes and with some lesbians and cis, het women wearing a combination of those elements. Also, some lesbians seem unconcerned with being misgendered or projecting an ambiguous gender identity to the onlooker, which may relate to the idea of gender inversion, serving as a demonstration of the possible correlation between sexual orientation and nonnormative gender expression. Similarly, this may have been the perspective of butch women of the 30s – 60s who took on the “male” role in a lesbian interpretation of heterosexuality. We also see plenty of historical lesbian indicators carrying their significance through today, including flannel, short hair, uncommon hairstyles (e.g. half-shaved), dyed hair, piercings, and tattoos. Moreover, many people feel a tension between wanting to project a certain identity/be associated with a certain subculture (based on gender identity or sexual orientation) and wanting to dress authentically. Many eventually give up on adhering to their subculture’s rules of style, with some using rainbow imagery and Pride items (e.g. backpack pins, identity flag bracelets) to get the message across without having to abandon their preferred self-fashioning. Lastly, it is important to note that respondents and interviewees claim to be aware of certain indicators of “queer” women, but don’t say that they can spot “lesbians” precisely. This is a crucial theme to note going into the
next chapter where we will learn more about bi women, as this phenomenon implies that there is considerable overlap in the styles of lesbians and bi women.

A Closer Look: Femme Nonbinary Gynephile Case Studies

Case 1

Assigned Female at Birth
Labels: Lesbian, Queer

Clothing Descriptors:
➢ Underlined descriptors = different from lesbians
➢ Bold descriptors = more notable indicators shared with lesbians

Cotton, dull/muted, conspicuous, common patterns, loud patterns, modest, thrifted, oversized shirt, oversized bottoms, outdoorsy, crop tops, turtlenecks, denim bottoms, high-waisted pants, t-shirts, long-sleeves, overalls, androgynous, cuffed pants

Clothing Effects: I feel like I do not blend in with the LGBT+ community

Clothing Intentions: “I want people to perceive me as ‘cool’ or ‘chill’ based on the outfits I put together.”

Accessories: 2 earrings, 1 necklace, 1 hair band, 1 beanie/knit hat, dress shoes

Accessory Effects: I feel like I blend in with the LGBT+ community

Body Modifications: L & R lobes 2+ (mix of upper and standard lobe piercings), nose stud, nose ring, eyebrow piercing, nipple piercings

Modifications to stand out: eyebrow piercing and nipple piercings

Other Motivations: “I certainly only got my eyebrow piercing because I wanted to be perceived as more gay by other gay people.”

Body Modification Effects: I got at least some of my body modifications to intentionally stand out from others

Is there any way that you try to visually present your sexual orientation?

“I used to try and ‘dress gay’ by wearing baggy jeans and button up shirts but within the past year I have been wearing both those kinds of clothes but also traditionally feminine clothes like skirts and heels.”

Is there any way that you try to visually present your gender identity?

“I think depending on the day I have my hair tied up or leave it down according to how I feel about my gender on a given day.”
This person seems to not particularly stick out from other lesbians except for their use of loud patterns, crop tops, and their desire to look conspicuous. However, that could also simply place them in the category of the bold lesbians (e.g. those who wear loud eye makeup) versus that of the butch, more masculine ones. It should also be noted that they described their look as androgynous, congruent with their third gender/intermediate gender identity. They also cuff their pants, which is seen across various groups in the queer community. Their accessories are not much different from those of lesbians other than that they also wear beanie and dress shoes (not listed as a top accessory for lesbians).

Interestingly, they do not believe that their clothes cause them to blend in with the queer community, though their style is much like that of lesbians.

Their body modifications, however, could very well cause them to stand out. They have some rarer piercings that fewer than half of lesbians have, such as two or more piercings on their right ear lobe (40% for lesbians) and a nose stud (30%), as well as nipple piercings (they are the one respondent who has them listed in the lesbian/femme nonbinary gynephiles section), and a nose ring and eyebrow piercing, both of which are similarly not seen among lesbians. The fact that they have two nose piercings in itself is highly uncommon. They acknowledge that their eyebrow piercing, especially, was “to be perceived as more gay by other gay people.” This is a more traditionally masculine piercing that some butch lesbians of the 30s-60s would get, so it could very possibly achieve the desired effect. Yet, their nipple piercings are more what fem lesbians would get – perhaps a further expression of their androgyny. They claim that they used to try to wear baggy jeans and button-up shirts to “dress gay” – as they are someone who was assigned female at birth, these items may help transmit that identity, but then they naturally started moving towards traditionally feminine clothing and accessories. They, like many others, seem to have grown tired of trying to fit themself in a mold to communicate their attraction to women/female-presenting people.

They also feel as though their gender fluctuates, which they reflect in their style by putting their hair up or down. Of course, this response begs the question of why putting it up or down signals differential gender expression. Perhaps putting it up makes it look shorter or like a “man bun” (though “man buns” were adopted from women). One respondent predicted that lesbians would have tight buns on top of their heads, and if the idea of gender inversion correlating with sexual orientation is right, that might suggest that such a look is somewhat masculine. Or maybe putting one’s hair up is like “hiding” how long it is, and long hair is attributed to women in order to differentiate men from women in a heteronormative society (as Butler has said), so that then means that the look is masculine. Keeping their hair down would then be the “natural state” of a woman/female-presenting person which appeals to men. This respondent’s varying gender expression confirms Butler’s point that gender is a performance, “produced through…practice” (Pacho 2013: 16-17).

**Case 2**

Assigned Male at Birth
**Labels:** Lesbian, Queer

**Clothing Descriptors:**
Underlined descriptors = different from lesbians
Bold descriptors = more notable indicators shared with lesbians

Gender-non-conforming (likely referring to gender assigned at birth), cuffed pants, androgynous, long-sleeve shirts, t-shirts, dresses, skirts, rompers, short shorts, denim bottoms, baggy sweatshirt, tight bottoms, oversized shirts, dull/muted, flannel

Clothing Effects: I feel like I blend in with the LGBT+ community
Clothing Intentions: I would like everyone to know that I am a lesbian

Accessories:
1 necklace, 3 bracelets, 2 hair bands, 1 name-brand shoes

Accessory Effects: I feel like I blend in with the LGBT+ community

Body Modifications: Dyed hair, 1-3 tattoos

Body Modification Effects: Some of my body modifications cause me to stand out, which was not my intention

Other Motivations (my emphasis):

“I personally get and will continue to get tattoos because they make the skin they cover feel like mine. I didn’t choose to be born into this body but the skin that I cover in beautiful art absolutely feels like mine and I look forward to being able to cover my body in art that I choose.”

Is there any way that you try to visually present your sexual orientation?

“Yes, I cut bangs and wear cute glasses w visible tattoos and [trans pride merch] so that people who know know. I don’t want to live back in the closet and fortunately, I am able to live in places where I usually feel comfortable presenting queer.”

Is there any way that you try to visually present your gender identity?

“I do [use trans pride merch].”

This next respondent has clothing vastly different from lesbians. In fact, the only clothing descriptors they have in common with lesbians are: long-sleeve shirts, t-shirts, denim bottoms, dull/muted, androgynous, baggy sweatshirt, and flannel.

They lean more feminine (e.g. dresses, skirts, rompers) and are more likely to wear tight, shorter clothes (tight bottoms, short shorts). They claim to want to blend into the queer community and would like for everyone to know that they’re a lesbian, so the more feminine attire may help them appear more female-presenting – as they were assigned male at birth – to achieve that effect, even though lesbians who were assigned female at birth tend to stray away from traditionally feminine clothing. This person may also possibly identify as a fem lesbian, and
the case could simply be that not that many lesbians at UVM identify as fems, or that they express it through their makeup and accessories rather than clothing. It should also be noted that they prefer to signal lesbianism to all observers, not just to queer women. This could, of course, function to repel the male gaze, or be to celebrate having their identity out of the closet and out in the open, as they state, “I don’t want to live back in the closet.” Their use of flannel may also serve to unite with lesbian identity and their use of androgynous clothing – in addition to feminine clothing – may serve to signal their gender identity.

Regarding their use of accessories, they have slightly more bracelets and hairbands than the average for lesbians and also wear name-brand shoes, which was not listed for that group. They then blend in with 55% of lesbians who have dyed hair, but are unique in that they have 1-3 tattoos (only seen in 25% of lesbians). They then cite two important reasons for their tattoos, including taking ownership of their body when it may otherwise feel foreign to them – since it misaligns with their gender identity – and entwined with that reason, enjoying looking at art on their body. Hence, both of these motivations seem geared towards themself as a means of self-care and to be unrelated to the impression they may make on others. They further specify that they would prefer for these body modifications to not draw attention to them. Yet, they claim to rely on their visible tattoos to signal their lesbian identity, in addition to having bangs and “cute glasses.” Interestingly, neither bangs nor a certain style of glasses came up as lesbian indicators. They then acknowledge using trans pride merch to signal their trans identity, though do not mention trying to signal a nonbinary identity.

**Case 3**

**Assigned Female at Birth**

**Labels:** Gay, Queer

**Clothing Descriptors:**

- Underlined descriptors = different from lesbians
- Bold descriptors = more notable indicators shared with lesbians

Lacey, metallic, reflective, fur (fake or real), cotton, synthetic, rhinestones, dull/muted, pastel, conspicuous, loud patterns, modest, plunging necklines, spaghetti straps, **thrifted**, oversized shirts, oversized bottoms, tight shirt, see-through, crop tops, **baggy sweatshirt**, sweatpants, denim bottoms, high-waisted pants, short shorts, skirts, dresses, t-shirts, long-sleeves, **overalls**, gender-conforming, gender-non-conforming

**Clothing Effects:** I feel like I do not blend in with the LGBT+ community

**Clothing Intentions:** “Based on what’s clean and how I’m feeling in my body that day. And the weather!”

**Accessories:** 2 necklaces, 1 finger ring, 1 hair band

**Accessory Effects:** I feel like I blend in with the LGBT+ community

**Body Modifications:** Dyed hair, undercut, nose stud, nose ring, septum ring, 1-3 tattoos
**Body Modification Effects:** I feel that my body modifications do not cause me to stand out

**Other Motivations:**

“Thought they were pretty. I have two nostril piercings.”

Is there any way that you try to visually present your sexual orientation?

“Short nails, always a loose pant, men’s clothes, crop top sometimes, braids and locs.”

Is there any way that you try to visually present your gender identity?

“Men’s clothes, women’s clothes.”

This individual is absolutely unique in comparison to lesbians. They not only wear more feminine clothing (pastel colors, loud patterns, spaghetti straps, skirts, dresses, crop tops), but tighter (tight shirts) and more revealing clothing (short shorts, crop tops, plunging necklines). It also cannot go unaddressed how loud, bold, and funky many of their descriptors are (lacey, metallic, reflective, fur (fake or real), synthetic, rhinestones, pastel, conspicuous, loud patterns); many seem to be descriptors of party or Pride parade wear, but these are all “everyday” clothing descriptors. They additionally claim to dress androgynously, likely affected by their use of both gender-conforming (traditionally feminine) and gender-non-conforming (perhaps the baggy sweatshirt, oversized bottoms, sweatpants, oversized shirts) clothing, which they state is to signal their gender identity. Due to their uniquely bold fashion choices, they seem to feel like they do not fit in with the queer community, which aligns with the findings of this investigation.

In addition to the weather and what clothes are clean, they then state that their motivations for their clothing style is dictated by how they’re “feeling in [their] body,” which might mean what their gender expression for the day feels like – deciding whether they will wear masculine, feminine, or androgynous clothes or mix masculine and feminine elements. Or, it could similarly indicate whether they plan to hide or expose their feminine curves, which could make them look more feminine or androgynous.

Their accessories do not stray much from lesbians, but their piercings certainly differentiate them. Though they have dyed hair, like 55% of lesbians, they also have less common body modifications from the group, such as an undercut (25%), nose stud (30%), and 1-3 tattoos (25%), with two piercings not found in the group at all: a nose [nostril] ring and septum ring. Again, several nose piercings – three in this case and two in the case of the last respondent – is extremely rare. Yet, this person believes that their body modifications do not cause them to stand out. Ultimately, they got these piercings because they enjoyed the aesthetic.

Fascinatingly, none of their body modifications are meant to signal queerness; they solely rely on short nails, masculine and baggy clothing, crop tops, braided hair, and dreadlocks. The short nails are likely referenced to contrast the traditionally feminine long [and perhaps painted] nails and the baggy clothing signals some gender inversion (regarding the gender they were assigned at birth), though also likely contributes to an androgynous look. However, the last three elements offered have not been widely proposed as lesbian indicators, though one person (perhaps this respondent) said dreadlocks were a signal of lesbian identity and 1.5% of respondents associate unconventional hairstyles with lesbians, which could encompass the
dreadlocks, though not necessarily the braids. Nevertheless, it depends what kind of braids they are – e.g. two large braids vs. cornrows – and the ethnicity of the person wearing them, as cornrows on a white, female-presenting person is uncommon, while the same can’t be said about larger braids.

**Conclusion**

In summary, all three respondents describe having an androgynous style, which can be achieved through alternating masculine and feminine stylistic elements – such as clothing or hairstyle, a look two rely on to signal their nonbinary identity, while one signals being trans over nonbinary specifically (using a trans bracelet). One varies from lesbians in wearing more feminine clothing than is common for that group, but this might be to offset their male presentation from being assigned male at birth, which might ultimately lead to an androgynous presentation. One person also has both masculine and feminine piercings, which could also yield an androgynous effect. Additionally, two specifically mention dressing a certain way to signal their sexual orientation, two rely on certain hairstyles for that purpose, and one uses a piercing for that purpose. Notably, one describes getting tattoos as an expression of self-care while two view their body modifications as aesthetically pleasing. Overall, body modifications, especially piercings, cause femme nonbinary gynephiles to stand out, whether intended or not.
Chapter 6: Bi Men, Women, & Nonbinary People

In the survey, I asked respondents what stylistic elements they would expect to see in bi men and women. I did not ask about their perceived indicators of bi nonbinary people as that entails a broad range of presentation. Instead, I believe that anchoring the question to men and women will simply gauge what respondents expect to see in people who are male- and female-presenting, which could also account for nonbinary people. Even if a person can be said to look androgynous – as opposed to clearly male or female, they appear as such due to their self-fashioning. Thus, respondents could then say that bi men (male-presenting people) or bi women (female-presenting people) or both have an androgynous style.

Correspondingly, I will be using the terms “men” and “women” to encompass the categories of male- and female-presenting people for ease of use.

These identities are combined into one chapter to allow for the observation of bisexual expression across genders. Bi men will also be compared to gay and cis, het men and bi women to lesbian and cis, het women. Bi nonbinary people will then be contrasted with bi men and women to see how their queer gender identity influences their self-presentation.

The following is how survey respondents perceive people who identify as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Perceived Presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>57, 28%</strong></td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I haven't met that many bi or pan men.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Unsure bisexuality is so nuanced that it's harder to determine if someone is bi just from their presentation.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>40, 20%</strong></td>
<td>No way to know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>24, 12%</strong></td>
<td>Non-visual cues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>18, 8.8%</strong></td>
<td>Cuffing jeans (one says, “cuffing everything”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>17, 8.3%</strong></td>
<td>Feminine Style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>15, 7.3%</strong></td>
<td>Piercings (e.g. facial piercing, lip piercing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>12, 5.9%</strong></td>
<td>Good Style (well-dressed, attention to detail, “fancy” clothing, thought put into outfit, interested in fashion, has clearly defined style)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>11, 5.4%</strong></td>
<td>Dyed hair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>10, 4.9%</strong></td>
<td>Earrings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>fun/funky earrings (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>one piercing in left ear) (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>earrings on both ears (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ear gauges (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7, 3.4%</strong></td>
<td>Hard to discern bi vs. gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6, 2.9%</strong></td>
<td>Bolder fashion choices (e.g. loud, unique, unconventional materials like silk or linen, glitter; crop tops; unusual or brighter prints), clothing (no description given)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hairstyle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>long hair (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>adventurous haircut (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>Descriptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unusual hair</td>
<td>(long, ponytail, man bun, undercut, dyed or bleached) (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5, 2.4%</strong></td>
<td><strong>Tattoos (e.g. minimalistic, unusual), painted nails, possible to tell (did not specify how)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nose piercing</td>
<td><strong>nose ring (3)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4, 2.0%</strong></td>
<td><strong>flannel, makeup, jewelry (e.g. “a lot” (2))</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>glasses</td>
<td><strong>round (2)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative/Punk Style</td>
<td><strong>bi colors, pride merchandise (e.g. clothing or pin stating identity), not sporty (e.g. not wearing basketball shorts (2)), tight/more fitted, septum piercing, bright colors, middle ground between straight and gay</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3, 1.5%</strong></td>
<td><strong>Androgynous, patterns (e.g. unusual or brighter patterns, printed shirts), rings, rainbow imagery, beanie</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2, 0.98%</strong></td>
<td><strong>eyebrow slit, street fashion, short shorts, traditional, 80s style, converse, sneakers, socks (unspecified), Doc Martens, crop tops, artsy, more accessories</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Cases</td>
<td><strong>“Again, there is truly no way to know unless you ask that person. But if they had one ear piercing or if they wore a lot of jewelry and painted their nails I might assume that they are bi or pansexual.”</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>“They have an earring in their left ear, they cuff their pants twice at the leg and they look like they walked out of the 80’s.”</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>“There is no way for me to actually know but sometimes colored hair, cuffed pants, androgynous features, and funky earrings may give off that vibe.”</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>“Colorful hair and a septum piercing. If the hair is otherwise colorful, the man is probably some brand of queer. The fact that one identifying as a man is comfortable enough with their masculinity to spend more than two minutes at a time and a haircut once a month thinking about how to take care of their hair signals to me that they are queer and gaining comfort in their identity.”</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(#) = number of respondents who made this assertion.

Perhaps setting the tone for this group is the fact that, so far, respondents are the least unsure about what their style is. Bi men are much less likely to be pinpointed than gay men, as 28% of respondents are unsure what they look like and 20% say there is no way to know if a guy is bi; these numbers for gay men are 10% and 8.8%, respectively. Bi women parallel bi men in
their difficulty to discern, as 29% of respondents are unsure what a bi woman looks like and 16% say there’s no way to know if a woman is bi, compared to 16% and 7.8% for lesbians, respectively.

On that note, some respondents rely on pride merchandise as identity signals for bis - 1.5% for men and 2.9% for women; the amount who predicted this for bi women is a somewhat greater percentage of respondents than for lesbians (2.4%), and fewer respondents expected bi men to have them than gay men (2.0%). It seems like relying on pride merchandise as identity signifiers increases with an identity’s obscurity, for the most part. Again, lesbians are more masculine than cis, het women, but still not as clearly distinguished from them as gay men are from cis, het men, due to women’s greater range of stylistic expression; and then, bi women are less well known than lesbians. Yet, it is unclear why fewer people would expect bi men to have pride merchandise than gay men, as gay men are most visible due to the clear queer-non-queer binary of male style and fewer respondents are aware of what bi men look like. Additionally, ace and aro people do not align with this trend, as only 2.0% of respondents rely on aces and aros to have pride merchandise. Yet, this could be because respondents don’t expect people to signaling their identity if they don’t intend to do so to find a partner.

Several respondents (at least 3.4%) explicitly attribute their uncertainty about bi male presentation to their inability to differentiate bi men from gay men. Here are what three respondents said:

“I think it’s more like I could tell if they were into other male-identified people at all. I don't think I would be able to tell if they were into more than one gender.”

“My answer [for gay men] still applies I think. (There's no way for me to know, but often the straight men I know wear very generic clothing, and some of the non-straight male-identifying people I know tend to dress better - better fitting clothing for their body types, more fun/bolder clothing choices, etc.).”

“I think I would presume they were queer if they dressed feminine or alternatively, there is nothing that would make me presume they are specifically bi/pan.”

Hence, we are hearing speculations about bi men sharing stylistic elements with gay men, be it “better fitting” clothes, bolder choices, or feminine style. They seem to describe a queer-non-queer binary of male style, just as we saw how gay male style, in particular, was defined in opposition to cis, het male style in earlier chapters. In fact, many respondents reused their descriptions of gay male style in describing bi male presentation. Meg similarly adds that a male-presenting person who looks nonbinary and has an androgynous style with more feminine markers (e.g. nail polish, earring, dresses, skirts, heels, feminine shirts) “is more likely to be gay than bi.” Yet, she says that “What a bi man wears does not look that different from what a gay man is wearing, which is what a straight man is wearing, but more open to the color spectrum, or better fit, or a little bit nicer clothing.”

One respondent mused about possible reasons behind this perceived queer-non-queer style divide.

“[A bi man could have] Colorful hair and a septum piercing. If the hair is otherwise colorful, the man is probably some brand of queer. The fact that one identifying as a man
is comfortable enough with their masculinity to spend more than two minutes at a time and a haircut once a month thinking about how to take care of their hair signals to me that they are queer and gaining comfort in their identity.” (my emphasis).

By saying that queer men are more likely to have brightly-colored or nicely-styled hair (and a septum piercing, it seems) because they are “comfortable enough with their masculinity” suggests that they don’t mind having their manliness questioned. This comment echoes that of three other respondents – one of whom was quoted in the chapter on gay men – and two of whom tied feminine presentation to queer men, one specifically mentioning feminine “clothing/colors/patterns and jewelry.” Thus, this idea supposes that queer men are already defying heteronormativity, so maybe social back lash for gender-deviancy is expected and tolerated (along the lines of what Kennedy (2009) said); this would align with the attitude of many lesbians who didn’t care about being misgendered. Also, the theory of gender inversion would naturally expect such gender nonconformity of queer men. Again, 4.9% of respondents believe that cis, het men don’t care much (or at all) about their appearance, 3.9% believe they have less fashion sense, and 3.4% describe their clothes as plain and say their hair is short/well-kept/traditionally masculine. Furthermore, if there are truly non-visual cues that “out” queer men have as respondents say they do – 12% for bi men and 37% for gay men – there may be less incentive to adhere to the traditionally masculine mold if it will not save oneself from questioning of their sexual orientation (and/or gender).

Interestingly, one respondent suggests that there isn’t a middle-ground in style that could distinguish a man as bi. They claim:

“There is no way for me to know [what a bi man looks like]. Like maybe cuffing everything, but they could just be a cishet hipster. I think this is a contributor to Bi-erasure, like if someone were to dress more queer-ly then the presumption might be that they are homosexual and not bi/pan or they could dress more straight and they could be presumed straight. there isn’t REALLY a middle ground, or if there is its [sic] something like the ‘bi women are straight and just trying to seem more interesting’ or ‘bi men are just closeted gay guys’ stereotype.”

They seem to be addressing the dualistic paradigm of queer-non-queer; if a man has a nonnormative piercing, haircut, or article of clothing, he’s automatically questioned as queer. Yet, they assert that it’s not simply a straight-queer divide, but that it’s a straight-gay differentiation; there’s no bi “middle ground.” They are also not wrong in claiming that hipsters can blend sexuality lines. A style that arose in the 90s in “neo-bohemian neighborhoods, near to the explosion of new wealth in city financial centers” such as the Lower East Side and Williamsburg in NY, Joe Harris proclaimed that “straight Hipster guys look very gay and the gay Hipsters look very straight,” comprising “skinny jeans and gingham and plaid, skull hats and lots of chains and lots of bracelets” (Cole 2013: 156). Nick Fyhrie similarly said that “Hipster culture has blurred [gay and straight] (ibid.). Some attribute the hazy sexuality signaling to the new sense of masculinity – one that rejects middle-class “masculine convention” – that demonstrates a man can care about his looks and trends (Johnson and Barber 2019: 120-121). The Hipster look can include “ambiguously gendered styles such as the ‘man bun,’” which can be found among high-status, straight celebrity men (ibid.: 121). Therefore, even if a man’s gender presentation is “ambiguous” – a historical trait of the bi community, as we shall see – and/or his jeans are cuffed, he could have his perceived queerness quickly dismissed as a straight Hipster aesthetic,
or as a gay man. The existence of Hipsters seems to negate the possibility that that gender play could transmit bi-ness.

Conversely, some respondents do see bi men as straddling gay and cis, het male self-fashioning, walking a unique middle ground:

“Bi men to me often seem like artsy straight guys.”

“More in the middle. Not so leaning to the ‘gay’ vibes.”

“I feel like a bi man is more ambiguous than being gay - like you can tell they're not straight but also aren't totally gay.”

The first respondent seems to have some visual in mind when thinking of bi guys, whereas the other two seem to have a nebulous, less-defined idea that seems to be more of looking for someone who doesn’t look definitively straight nor gay.

At the very top of the list of indicators sits “cuffing jeans,” predicted a bi male signifier by 8.8% of respondents. Notably, bi men are such an unknown for most respondents that there is not one indicator for which there is a broad consensus; a small minority of respondents can get behind jean cuffing as a signal. If this style is truly practiced by bi men, it begs the question, What do bi men do during the summer: shorts season? Likely, they rely on other signifiers, or shirt sleeve rolling (or “rolling everything,” as one respondent suggested). If using other signifiers, it is then important that they – or the combination of them – be just as obvious and robust in their identity transmission. Yet, considering that cuffing is only a bi signifier to some respondents and that other indicators are even less popularly supported, it seems unlikely that a bi man would be recognized without cuffed jeans (or even with them, since so few respondents associate this with bi men). Furthermore, cuffing is also predicted for bi women (12%), lesbians (2.4%), and gay men (1.5%).

Jake Pitre (2018), a bi man and correspondent for the website Xtra, explains how he came across the bi cuffing trend in June of 2017 when he saw a [now-deleted] tweet by @remvslupin that read: “cuffing your jeans and tucking in baggy shirts is bisexual culture.” This, he claims, was the first time he saw a bi-culture-related tweet (ibid.). Within a year, he asserts that the concept had become a meme, all of a sudden “ubiquitous” as it ripped through Twitter (ibid.). Though anyone can choose to cuff, he emphasizes that bi cuffing is explicitly for identity signaling, demonstrating “very conscious” self-presentation (ibid.). Such ideas about bi culture are continuing to be spread across social media, such as under the Tumblr “Bi Culture Is” that users can submit examples to; these of course, are not explicitly fashion-related, but can be about interests and perceived behavior similarities (e.g. “almost outing yourself with a pun,” “your eyes hurting from getting so little sleep”) (ibid.). Pitre explains that not conforming to these trends makes him feel “left out” and like he’s “not doing bisexuality right” (original emphasis).
(ibid.). Thus, it appears that this is a social-media-borne trend, just like lesbian’s eyebrow slits, for instance. I can attest to the great prevalence of cuffed pants across campus – more pants are cuffed than not, and most rolled twice or more to be more obvious. Given that no cis, het respondents reported cuffing their pants and that 44% of gay men reported cuffing their pants, it may very well be that queer men are making a concerted effort to display their identities. Recall from Chapter 4 that one gay man explicitly mentioned cuffing his pants to signal his sexual orientation saying, “I thought this would be a funny thing to include because for some reason it has become a stereotype that queer people cuff their jeans.” I can also assure that this trend is primarily for “very conscious” self-presentation, as Pitre puts it, because on a stroll across campus on March 29, when the temperature was in the high 30s and the wind was whipping, I saw ample men with their pants cuffed, revealing pretty much the whole top of their sock (about 4-5" above sneaker). Furthermore, Twitter User @sianvconway tweeted in January of 2019, “pray for all bisexuals’ exposed ankles in this bitterly cold time” (Ghouls 2019). The only thing that makes me question if it has a use is when I see skateboarder with cuffed pants, as I presume that it could serve to prevent them from tripping while skateboarding. Yet, the rolls are often much higher than would be needed not to trip (e.g. up, above ankle-length socks). Therefore, there may be some truth to what some respondents – and what Pitre has heard – about cuffing being tied to bi men.

As cis, het men were not predicted to have the style indicators below (according the queer-non-queer style duality), I primarily compare bi and gay men.

It seems that there are a few stylistic elements that that respondents are slightly more likely to attribute to gay men than bi men. Like gay men (2.9%), bi men are also considered by a few respondents – though slightly fewer than gay men – to not look “sporty” (1.5%), whereas 18% of respondents characterized cis, het men as wearing athletic clothing. Bi men (2.0%) are also expected to wear makeup, though slightly less often than gay men (5.9%). Respondents also said that bi men wear earrings – 4.9% vs. 6.8% for gay men – with one respondent (vs. two for gay men) saying a bi man would have both lobes pierced, one (vs. two) saying he’d have a single piercing and on the left ear (though they likely meant the right ear to signal queerness), and three (vs. six) specifying the precise type of earrings/piercings he’d have, either fun/funky (2) or ear gauges – which signal a more alternative style. Additionally, dyed hair is expected for slightly more gay men (7.3%) than bi men (5.4%). Respondents also said that bi men wear earrings – 4.9% vs. 6.8% for gay men – with one respondent (vs. two for gay men) saying a bi man would have both lobes pierced, one (vs. two) saying he’d have a single piercing and on the left ear (though they likely meant the right ear to signal queerness), and three (vs. six) specifying the precise type of earrings/piercings he’d have, either fun/funky (2) or ear gauges – which signal a more alternative style. Additionally, dyed hair is expected for slightly more gay men (7.3%) than bi men (5.4%). Gay men are also more often predicted to wear crop tops (2.4%) and short shorts (1.5%) than bi men (0.49% for both articles of clothing). They are similarly presumed to have hair that noticeably distinguishes them (3.9%) than bi men (2.9%). Both groups have their hair described as “unusual” (1) and “adventurous” (1), but only gay men’s hair is thought to be well-maintained (2) and only bi men’s hair is thought to be long (3). Gay men are also more often thought to have painted nails – 3.4% vs. 2.4% for bi men – and have jewelry (of some kind, e.g. “a lot” or “feminine”) attributed to them (2.9%) vs. bi men (2.0%).

Conversely, there are also a few fashion items that are attributed to bi men more often by a slim margin. Nose rings are more predicted for bi men (1.5% vs. 0.98% for gay men), with one respondent also noting a bi man could have a nose stud. Piercings overall are expected for bi men by 7.3% of respondents, versus 6.8% for gay men. Additionally, while gay men were not predicted to have tattoos, 2.4% predicted them for bi men.

A few indicators are more noticeably different for bi vs. gay men. Far more gay men were expected to have good style – 19% vs. 5.9% for bi men – and to have feminine style – 19% vs. 8.3% for bi men. There was also a notable difference in associations of gay men to bolder
fashion choices – 10% vs. 2.9% for bi men – and to tight clothes – 9.3% vs. 1.5% for bi men. Therefore, it seems like bi men are less likely to be expected to dress as conspicuously as gay men are thought to.

The following is how survey respondents perceive people who identify as:

**Bi Women**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Perceived Presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>59, 29%</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33, 16%</td>
<td>No way to know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32, 16%</td>
<td><strong>Hairstyle</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>short (12, 5.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mid-length (8, 3.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>shoulder-length (5, 2.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>undercut (5, 2.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the “bisexual haircut” (chin length (1), long bob (1), or shoulder-length (1)) (4, 2.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>bob (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>long (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>specific styles: long bob haircut (2), tight bun on top of head, “shaved sides of the head or a shaved whole head or mullets,” bangs, “unusual”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29, 14%</td>
<td><strong>Overlap with others</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lesbians (25, 12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>cis, het women (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>bi men (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24, 12%</td>
<td><strong>Cuffing (“the bisexual roll”)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>cuffed jeans/pants (22, 11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>cuffed t-shirt sleeves (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23, 11%</td>
<td>Piercings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16, 7.8%</td>
<td>Dyed hair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15, 7.3%</td>
<td><strong>Nose piercings</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>septum piercing (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>nose ring (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13, 6.3%</td>
<td>Masculine clothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12, 5.9%</td>
<td>Non-visual cues, possible (does not specify how)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10, 4.9%</td>
<td>Flannel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9, 4.4%</td>
<td><strong>Earrings</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dangly (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fun earrings (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>big earrings (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>unusual earrings (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>funky earrings (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Makeup</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>bold makeup (e.g. colorful, dramatic, eccentric) – 6, 2.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As mentioned earlier, respondents struggle to identify bi women. This group seems to be much less visible than lesbians, since while 29% of respondents are unsure what a bi woman looks like and 16% say there’s no way to know if a woman is bi, these numbers are 16% and 7.8% for lesbians, respectively. As you may remember from the previous chapters, many interviewees and respondents spoke to what “queer women” may choose to wear, with very few

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>8, 3.9%</th>
<th>Less fitted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• no makeup (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• either doesn’t wear makeup or had bold makeup (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>7, 3.4%</th>
<th>Clothes (no description given)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6, 2.9%</td>
<td>Pride merchandise (e.g. bi colors; rainbow; clothes (2), pins [maybe on backpack] (2), and stickers that state identity), artsy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5, 2.4%</td>
<td>Tattoos (e.g. minimalist, small, unusual), thrifty or vintage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4, 2.0%</td>
<td>Nails (e.g. short (2), chipped nail polish), Punk/Alternative style, Bolder choices (e.g. unusual patterns)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3, 1.5%</td>
<td>Accessories (e.g. “lots of accessories”), body modifications (in general), androgynous, eyebrow slit, jewelry (e.g. metallic), femme, beanies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2, 0.98%</td>
<td>Blend of styles (e.g. some days more feminine, others more alt), good style, Athletic clothing, Vans, Doc Martens, bright colors/colorful (e.g. unusual and bold colors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1, 0.49%</td>
<td>more fitted, “soft” aesthetic, bi color, overalls, socks (unspecified), glasses (but only if accompanied by at least 1-2 other indicators), shirt tucked in front, hoodie, boots, crop top, jeans, button-up patterned shirts, converse, traditional, hippie, revealing, chains, dark colors, leather, heels, cottage core, quirky, crunchy/outdoorsy, eyebrow piercing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Specific Cases

- “I also assume women are bisexual because I actually don't know that many women who aren’t. I don't know many lesbians or many straight women so my default is some are bi.”
- “The stereotypical "bisexual" look with shoulder length hair, a nose piercing, vintage or thrifty and oversized skirts and pants with sandals, etc. Although it honestly depends. I can usually guess from their personality, even if their style is completely different.”
- “clothing style. accessories and body modifications including gauged ears, unusual tattoos, jewelry. FLANNEL SHIRTS. UNDERCUTS…don't ask me why this is for bi people only. it's true tho”
- “Cuffed jeans and a jacket over a hoodie.”
- “dresses in combination of ways that are conventional and unconventional.”
- “Cuffed jeans, nose piercing, small tattoos, shoulder length hair, converse or vans, button up shirts (specifically patterned ones), mom jeans, chipped nail polish.”
- “Big pants big shirt” (3)
- “big pants little shirt”/“baggy pants and a tight crop top”

*(#) = number of respondents who made this assertion.
saying what lesbians specifically wear. This further insinuates that there is not a clear break between lesbian and bi female style.

Along those lines, 14% of respondents believe that bi female style overlaps with other groups, such as lesbians (12%), cis, het women (2.0%), and bi men (0.98%).

Some respondents claim that there is no way for them to know if a woman is bi or a lesbian.

“I don't think I would know if they were bi or gay. Like there are things that would make me think they are not straight, but I don't think I could specify more than that.”

“If they dressed like how I described lesbians I would assume they were attracted to women but I would not know they were bi/pan.”

“there is no way for me to know a difference between a someone who is gay/bi/asexual but I think I would say LGBT+ women are more comfortable wearing masculine-presenting clothing/colors/patterns or more bold/noticeable makeup and clothing/pattern combinations.”

One similarly says that bi and lesbian women have the same type of hair, clothing and body modifications. Additionally, we’re seeing masculine style and bold makeup and clothing come up again (as they have for lesbians, though we did not explore the bold clothing indicator, which was predicted by 2.4% of respondents for lesbians), though also include ace women this time. These perspectives parallel those for men – some respondents see a queer-non-queer binary without a style middle ground.

However, some respondents can slightly differentiate bi women from lesbians (my emphasis):

“nothing distinct from lesbian except possibly being more femme? maybe longer hair.”

“Same as lesbian, but less masc. More likely to wear heels or have long hair, embroidered flannels, might wear makeup.

“Pretty much any of the same things as I said for lesbians. Overall, I think if a girl were to dress that way and be more masculine I might assume she’s gay rather than bi/pan but overall I can’t really distinguish between the groups.”

“[Same as lesbians], add in cuffed jeans.”

“Same thing as lesbians but emphasis on the dyed hair, the "bisexual bob" haircut, and also pins are there a lot of the time I think.”

Hence, some themes we’re seeing here are that bi women are thought to have a less masculine style than lesbians and to otherwise be visually distinct by the presence of cuffed jeans, dyed hair, the “bisexual bob,” and pins (likely meaning identity buttons, those for social causes, and/or to display personality/interests). Many respondents share this mindset, as only 6.3% predicted that bi women would have masculine style, while that number for lesbians was 31%. Along those same lines, less-fitted/baggy clothing, which 3.4% of associated with cis, het
men, was said by 3.9\% to be found among bi women and by 4.9\% to be a quality of lesbian dress. It is notable that the groups that do not cater to the male gaze are all said by at least a few respondents to wear less-fitted/baggy clothes, but not those that do cater to it – gay men and cis, het women. As this quality is associated with cis, het men, based on respondent descriptions of bi women and lesbians as having masculine style, but bi men less so, this stylistic property falls in line with that framework. Tattoos may possibly be compared in this same paradigm as they, on a man, can convey a sense of masculinity, dominance, and aggressiveness, according to 2017 Polish study (Mehta 2016). Thus, if a lesbian is seen as more masculine, she may be thought to have more tattoos than a bi woman. Nonetheless, respondents did not say that cis, het men had tattoos, and even one explicitly said that they don’t. Overall, respondents seemed to lump tattoos in with “LGBT indicators.” Therefore, it is unclear why precisely lesbians would be thought to more likely have tattoos than bi women, unless respondents judge the number and kinds of queer indicators a person has as illustrative of their level of queerness. In this vein, people may see bi women as less queer since they like women [and possibly nonbinary people], but still like men as well.

Other indicators that suggest bi women are somewhat masculine – or that they at least lack traditional femininity in comparison to cis, het women – is that none are thought to wear tight or revealing clothing. Only one respondent offers “more fitted” as an indicator, which does not translate to body conforming, and one other says “revealing,” which contrasts cis women’s expected indicators - revealing (3.9\%) and tight (2.9\%). Furthermore, cis, het women are said by 12\% of respondents to have feminine style, when that term does not come up for bi women (nor lesbians), and to flaunt their nails in various ways, either by growing them long (3), painting them (3), or buying fake (1) nails. By contrast, of the 2.0\% of respondents who mention bi women’s nails, two say that they keep them short and another says that they often have chipped nail polish (versus well-taken-care of nails to flaunt). Therefore, several factors mentioned by respondents point to bi women being perceived as more masculine than cis, het women.

Though overlap in style between communities can make one community less visible – as is the case of bi men and Hipsters, in describing how to identify lesbians by their dress, one respondent seems to have a particularly clear aesthetic in mind for bi women.

“I...feel like there’s a lot of lesbians who have a more stereotypical ‘bisexual’ look with shoulder length hair, a nose piercing, vintage or thrifted shirts and pants with sandals, etc.”

Hence, it is curious how this style has been able to remain distinctly labeled “bisexual” if other groups wear it.

A portion of respondents also describe blurred lines between cis, het female and bi female fashion.

“at UVM i feel like a lot of girls dress the same way/in a way that could be interpreted as bi/gay but its [sic] really just crunchy UVM gals.”

“idk. there’s definitely a ‘bi aesthetic’ but a lot of straight and lesbian girls also meet it.”

“Usually other bi girls look like artsy straight girls.”

The first comment aligns with what Meg, Skylar, and Ella have said about UVM style
and how it crosses boundaries of sexual orientation. Also, again, through my own observation, I have noticed that “VSCO girl” style is nearly unanimous among women across campus. The fact that bi women (2.4%) and lesbians (2.0%) are also predicted to wear thrifted or vintage clothing, while some of the brands predicted for cis, het women – like Brandy Melville – offer an old-school, vintage, thrift-store-find aesthetic, can certainly spell confusion for distinguishing sexual orientation. Because women can “get away with wearing masculine things and men can’t with feminine things,” Meg says that “bi women don’t stick out.” Along those lines, she says that many bi women look straight, and if they look queer, they usually just end up being gay, not bi. Overall, she concludes that “Bi women are the hardest group to pin down in terms of appearance.”

The second quote seems to tie to what one of the cis, het women said in the earlier chapter about her natural style being “very much in the classic ‘bisexual’ range” because she simply likes the clothes as well as the sentiment of other respondents who struggle to differentiate lesbians from bi women. Nevertheless, it does, just as the earlier respondent’s comment about lesbians donning the “bisexual look” did, notably present a certain mold for bisexual fashion – which presumably more bi women wear than anyone else, but which other identities embrace as well.

A few respondents spell out this distinct “bi aesthetic” for women.

“The stereotypical ‘bisexual’ look with shoulder length hair, a nose piercing, vintage or thrifted shirts and pants with sandals, etc.”

“Cuffed jeans and a jacket over a hoodie.”

“If she is wearing lots of accessories, particularly unusual earrings. Unusual colors/patterns, unusual or gender nonconforming clothing or silhouettes (for example, big pants big shirt, big pants little shirt). No make up, or creative, colorful, or dramatic makeup. Thrifted clothing, particularly men’s clothing. Unusual haircuts or colors. Cuffed pants.”

“Big pants with little shirt (i.e. baggy pants and a tight crop top), cuffed pants, nose piercing, ‘bisexual bob’ aka chin length hair.”

“If she cuffs her jeans, wears crop tops with flowy pants, has a nose ring, has a bob haircut, has pride pins or stickers, has fun and colorful makeup. No makeup.”

Here, we see cuffing, noted in all the above examples except for the first one. There is also note of specifically layering a coat over a hoodie and three mention the pairing of a tighter, smaller shirt with big or “flowy” pants. Four mention specific haircuts, with three mentioning a bob. The third comment seems to predict many of the same elements for bi women as for lesbians, including “unusual haircuts or colors,” “unusual earrings,” the dichotomy of either no makeup or “dramatic” makeup as well as thrifted clothing – both of which another respondent mentions, and masculine clothing. Nose piercings also seem to be a staple in the look, mentioned three times. Hence, a mold is clearly forming from these descriptions.

Curiously, despite others having a preconceived notion of a “bisexual look,” one bi respondent seems unaware of this. She states,
"I feel like even though I identify pretty openly as bisexual, it's not something that people pick up on. I've been misperceived as being a lesbian in the past and used to identify as straight, but I feel like it's hard to 'present' as bisexual."

Therefore, the main questions seem to be: How many people know about the supposed "bisexual look"? And how many bisexuals know about this aesthetic? These answers are key to understanding the extent – or lack – of bisexual identity signaling.

The last respondent’s take seems to add a style element onto cis, het style, rather than adding one on to lesbian style, as others did. It is curious why they would consider bi girls artsy, and if this perception is true, why they would be artsy. Perhaps being creative entails experimenting with one’s look, such as trying out different hair colors, hairstyles, and decorating oneself with various piercings, whereas cis, het women may be less inclined to do this either due to lack of interest or to maintain appeal to the male gaze, which may view such experimentation as queer – as many respondents have considered such decorations.

Ultimately, the top-ranking identifier for bi women is hairstyle (16%), with short hair most expected (5.9%) followed by “mid-length” (3.9%) then “shoulder-length” (2.4%) hair. The undercut style also comes up among 2.4% of respondents and 2.0% say that there is a uniquely “bisexual haircut.” In contrast, for lesbians, hair was considered an indicator by 27% of respondents, with short hair being predicted by 20% of respondents and undercuts by 4.9%. Though short hair is expected among both lesbians and bi women, for lesbians, “short” is defined as cut closer to the head, e.g. close-cropped, a pixie cut, shaved head, whereas for bi women, the broad word “short” is used by many respondents as well as mention of bobs (3), which can range from just above the shoulders to the jaw line, with only two other respondents mentioning close-cropped hair like a shaved head. In comparison, women are judged to be cis, het by their hair by 8.8% of the respondents with 3.9% of respondents believing them to have long hair and an additional 1.5% asserting that it is at least long enough to be straightened.

This proposed intermediate hair length for bi women – opposed to long hair associated with cis, het women and close-cropped hair associated with lesbians – seems to tie where a woman falls on the spectrum of sexuality falls to the spatial medium of her hair. As lesbian style and cis, het style can be at least partially understood in terms of their attention – or lack thereof – paid to the male gaze, it only seems natural that bi women could be understood in this paradigm. Hence, because their pool of potential partners is not limited to men, they may have more stylistic freedom and not feel pressed into presenting as feminine as cis, het women to attract men. Additionally, dressing in a more masculine manner than cis, het women may help visually signify that they are not a complete complement to men – as the institution of heterosexuality requires gendered differentiation, subsequently meaning that share similarities with men: they like women/female-presenting people too.

Cuffing seems to be the next indicator, which 12% of respondents offered, in comparison to 8.8% for bi men. Again, this was also expected by 2.4% of respondents for lesbians. Following that, 11% expected bi women to have piercings vs. 12% for lesbians with 7.3% of respondents expecting bi women and 5.9% expecting lesbians to have nose piercings - either in their septum or a nose (nostril) ring. Notably, nose studs were not predicted for either bi nor lesbian women and the one respondent who mentioned them said that cis, het women would have them. This echoes what Logan said about nose studs being more normalized; they may not be connected to a specific identity, so respondents didn’t think to mention them, despite 30% of lesbian respondents having nose studs. However, nose rings and septum piercings are not
mentioned for cis, het women. Here, we can see the slight nuances in self-presentation – the mere location and type of a piercing on the nose – and how they can communicate sexual orientation. Additionally, 7.8% of respondents expect bi women to have dyed hair, versus 8.3% for lesbians. What’s more, the dichotomy of no-makeup vs. bold-makeup lesbians (perhaps within the butch vs. fem framework) seems to also be predicted for bi women. For lesbians, 4.9% of respondents said that the type of a woman’s makeup or lack thereof was an identity indicator, listing the corresponding descriptors along the lines of unnatural/loud/bold colors (4), colorful eye makeup (1), and heavy eye makeup (1). The percentage of respondents getting behind makeup as an indicator for bi women was similar, 4.4%, using descriptors of bold/dramatic/colorful/eccentric (2.9%) and for both bi women and lesbians, 1.5% expected them to not wear makeup, and 0.98% expected bi women to either wear bold makeup or none at all. Thus, there could be a debate among whether bi women (and lesbians) wear makeup or not, but it also seems that at least a few respondents see two subsets of queer women – those who don’t wear makeup and those who go “all out.”

Bi women are also thought to have stylistic elements that are more directly tied to lesbians. For instance, the loud, fun, unusual earrings that people on Tik Tok, interviewees, and the employee at Billie Jean Vintage have captioned “lesbian earrings” also seem to be expected of bi women. Just as 5.9% of respondents list earrings as an indicator for lesbians, describing them as fun/funky/quirky (5), unusual/weird (3), dangly (1), and homemade (1), 4.4% percent use a woman’s earrings to assess if she’s bi, claiming that they will be dangly (2), fun (2), big (2), unusual (2), and funky (1). Likewise, eyebrow slits, which have gained popularity in lesbian communities on TikTok and were a predicted facet of lesbians’ appearance by 2.0% of respondents have also been a projected indicator of bi women by 1.5% of respondents. An eyebrow slit is meant to signal attraction to other women, and not necessarily to repel men, so it is not inconceivable that bi women would have this body modification. However, it might be said that its “masculine” connotations of toughness, as a natural slit is usually a scar from a fight, could intimidate a man [with fragile masculinity], maybe more so than more masculine clothing, less-fitted clothing, or short to mid-length hair (versus long hair). Flannel, which has both historical and current ties to lesbians, as we saw in Chapter 5, is also predicted for bi women (4.9%), though less so than for lesbians (9.8%). Nevertheless, it also anticipated in bi men by 2.0% of respondents, but not in gay men and only by 0.98% for cis, het men.

In attempting to understand respondent predictions, it is possible that they [consciously or subconsciously] believe that both bi men and women are less likely to wear tight clothes than gay men and cis, since they are not fully committed to attracting the male gaze; they also desire to attract female and/or nonbinary attention. Additionally, bi men may be less likely to wear feminine clothing than gay men and bi women more likely to wear masculine clothing than cis, het women (for whom masculine clothing was not mentioned) for nearly this same reason; bi women don’t want to fully cater to the male gaze while bi men may not want to alienate the female gaze. If a man dresses in feminine and conspicuous ways, he may cause onlooking women to judge him to be gay (as we have seen in our queer-non-queer duality of fashion), and, thus, lose potential romantic partners. Yet, bi women are also judged by some respondents to have a less masculine style than lesbians, potentially signaling their desire to not alienate the male gaze by appearing lesbian (though that judgment could be hard to make anyways, due to the extent of overlap in style across female sexualities).

Moreover, respondents may believe that bi people feel less inclined to visually distinguish themselves from a society that they predict does not fully reject bi people – as their
heterosexual relationships would be socially accepted. In the same way that one of the straight, trans men wanted to accessorize slightly to differentiate himself and his experience from cis, het men, respondents may infer that such differentiation is less needed in the case of bi people.

Additionally, some respondents believe that there is a spectrum of gender deviance ranging from heterosexual to same-gender attraction and that identities in the middle have corresponding levels of gender inversion. Both bi men and women are coded as intermediates – between homosexuals and cis, het people; respondents believe bi people have some of the things homosexuals are thought to have, but there’s less consensus on the presence of each of these stylistic elements. Overall, bi women are less expected to have masculine stylistic elements and bi men fewer feminine and conspicuous ones than homosexuals of their own gender, while thought to have more of these elements that their cis, het correspondents.

Two respondents also believe that bi male and female style overlap.

“Similar to my answer for male-identifying individuals, a blend of styles or more a willingness to incorporate [sic] non-traditional aspects of appearance.”

“I think my response to the question about male-identifying bi clothes applies here too.”

The first commenter does not seem to be alone in their assessment, as in an Instagram post from @inclusivitea_ (2019) can attest. The post is a screenshot of a conversation, likely from a forum, and reads as such:

Podencos: Lingerie under oversized hoodies.

Elphabaforgallifrey: This is 2 aesthetics made into one so it’s obviously bisexual culture

It is unclear where this eclectic bi aesthetic comes from, but clearly this respondent is not a unique case in making this stylistic connection to bi people.

The next comment seems to suggest that bi men and women have androgynous style in saying that they have the same style. This echoes of a time when I saw a stand-up comedy set a year or two back in which a comedian said that we the audience could probably tell that she was bisexual because she dresses pretty androgynously – she was wearing a t-shirt tucked into faded jeans at the time. Yet, only 1.5% of respondents describe bi female style and 0.98% describe bi male style as androgynous. However, arguably, the above respondent has not erred in their judgment, as bisexuality has historical connections to androgyny.

Additionally, conceiving bisexuality as an intermediate between heterosexual and homosexual identity may inform this expectation for androgyny. If cis, het women are seen as embodying feminine style and are more likely to accentuate their bodies through tight and revealing clothing to demonstrate their gender identity; lesbians are expected to have a more masculine style and a notable amount have masculine haircuts and admit to being misgendered; cis, het men are defined as embodying masculine style, which seems to be the case shown in the results; and gay men are thought to wear more feminine clothing – though not the reality among most, there have been historical themes of effeminacy; then it seems natural that people who fall in the middle of the heterosexual → homosexual spectrum would dress androgynously. A few respondents seem to be aware of this connection or theorize that this connection exists, but not many: 1.5% say bi women are androgynous, 0.98% saying the same of bi men, and 3.9%
attribute mid-length hair to women – an intermediate between lesbians’ masculine haircuts and cis, het women’s traditionally long hair – and 1.5% believe bi men have long hair – which was not predicted for gay men, and suggests a more fluid gender identity.

Correspondingly, 2.0% of respondents assert a direct connection of bisexuality – for both men and women – to punk/alternative style, which is known to be androgynous. Some specific comments include the following:

“More confidence in alternative fashion and accessories than a straight man.”

“Bi dudes tend to be more punk than flamboyant [in comparison to gay men].”

“maybe a slightly more relaxed or alternative style.”

Here, we are also seeing themes of bi men exhibiting intermediate gender expression between straight and gay men.

My own style, expressed first as a bi woman and now as a bi man, also seems to demonstrate the androgyny associated with bisexuality, as my look hasn’t changed dramatically since I began to transition, but I have more or less adhered to what respondents expect of me as a bi person, first fulfilling that of a bi woman, and now as a bi man. Intriguingly, looking back on my self-presentation when I thought I was a bi, cis woman (e.g. 2018 – when I came out and finally understood what it meant to identify as bi), my style aligned closely with the way respondents perceive bi women. Yet, I was unaware of any of these stylings as trendy indicators floating around social media. I had the “bisexual bob” that varied between chin-length and shoulder-length, I wore (and continue to wear) second-hand/thrifted clothes – many were somewhat baggy on me at the time (e.g. sweaters whose sleeves I had to roll, faded “mom jeans”), and many of which were traditionally men’s clothing (hand-me-downs from my cousins’ husband). I also didn’t wear makeup. Honestly, and I told Meg this during our interview, I fit her “trifecta” of short hair, no makeup, and androgynous clothing at the time. Yet, none of this was to intentionally signal others; it was simply due to wanting short hair since I was 10 or so; finally being more comfortable wearing “men’s” clothing as I got to college (which I’d looked at with interest from a young age); and having men’s clothes given to my family by my cousin – a safe place to pick through them (though I did fear critique), rather than having to brave social scrutiny in the men’s section of a department store. I also had only worn makeup in middle school – perhaps to fit in. I briefly tried lip gloss and had worn lipstick for Halloween, but I found having that stuff in my mouth repulsive. I regularly donned mascara, but that was it. Nothing else appealed to me; I didn’t like the feel of makeup on my face, how long it took to get ready, how it could get smudged, cleaning it off, and didn’t want to look like “a girly girl” nor like I was wearing it to attract romantic [male] attention. In that vein, when I had makeup put on me for fun at a party during the summer of 2019, a few months into questioning my gender identity, the makeup made me completely dysphoric – I didn’t want people to see me as a pretty lady. However, I can now comfortably wear eyeliner or pink eyeshadow, which I’ve seen countless punk rock and emo musicians – not to mention my idols (e.g. Gerard Way) – wear, as I am now being more recognized as a man and will be perceived as emo/punk as I so desire. Thus, I fit the bi male alternative look in that respect, and my hair is still about chin-length, though I might let it grow to my shoulders, which satisfies another bi male association. Additionally, I now predominantly wear clothing marketed to men, but all of which could be worn by women. Much of it is also more feminine than what a cis, het man, or as respondents put it, “the average man,”
would wear, which mirrors alternative men’s use of feminine signifiers. In summary, it is fascinating how androgyny can be a part of a bi person’s self-presentation regardless of their gender and their intentions to look androgynous or not (that was not my conscious intention).

Bisexuality’s History of Androgyny

Bisexuality has ties to androgynous style at least as far back as the late 19th century. From that period into the early 1900s, Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich, both bisexual women, wore masculine clothes both on-and offscreen (Cole 2010).

Another such form of presentation was the “boyish” look (Wilson 2013: 175) of the flappers’ masculine clothes – that were “tubular” rather than form-fitting, hiding feminine curves (Oram 2021), and were paired with short hairstyles and often dinner jackets (Wilson 2013: 175). This widely controversial lack of visible breasts and hips, ditching of corsets, and cropped hair “seemed to blur traditional boundaries between men and women” (Steele 2013: 28). The style was called the “garconne” look, deriving from Victor Margueritte’s “notorious” novel La Garconne (1922), which featured a promiscuous female protagonist who slept with various people, one of whom was a woman (ibid.: 27).

A few decades later, a fascinating example of bisexuality and androgyny arose in the form of American burlesque dancer, Zorita, born Kathryn Boyd (“Zorita” 2021). She was bisexual and enjoyed fame for her act from the 1940s and through the 50s (ibid.). Though she was known for her dance with her two pet boa constrictors, she had another popular act that one could say epitomized androgyny. It was her “Half and Half” act in which she would dress up as both bride and groom and the groom would slowly strip the bride (ibid.).

Elvis, who was popular in the mid-50s until his death in the late 70s, was also androgynous and a bisexual man. It was this androgyny that led me to type into Google “Elvis bisexual” to investigate and academics like Professor Albert Goldman and Marjorie Garber similarly “[analyzed] Elvis’s androgynous sexual mystique and feminine qualities,” which led them to pose the question, as worded by article author, “Was The King a bit of a queen?” (RBUCH1 2014). What ultimately convinced me, before Google turned back any answers, was his outfit in the music video for “Jailhouse Rock.” He dons tight, black jeans with a tight striped shirt and black denim jacket over it, paired with black leather shoes and nicely styled longish hair on top, all of which ring familiar to me, following along the lines of the punk and emo bands I’ve grown up with: all of which featured bisexual front men.

Bisexuality and androgyny are also heavily embedded in various alternative music scenes, just as we saw that queers have been at the core of punk, emo, and the world of “glitter or glam” rock. Though
both homosexuality and bisexuality were welcome in the “glitter and glam world.” the scene’s biggest names, like David Bowie, were bisexual and it was closely associated with blurring gendered lines in one’s presentation and sexual experimentation (Cole 2000). David Bowie was extremely influential. He “encouraged experimentation with dress and to some extent sexual identity,” which had girls and boys alike exploring new forms of gender presentation, such as adolescent boys “filching their mommie’s [sic] mascara” (ibid.). Hence, “Bisexuality became a fashionable pose, along with the idea of androgyny in fashion” (Cole 2000). The New York Dolls were also playing with gender presentation, exhibiting “outrageous androgyny,” dressing in a form of drag that they described as ‘Puerto Rican sluts’, and promoting ‘polymorphous pansexuality’” (ibid.).

The American side of punk, too, was led by groups, such as Wayne County and the Electric Chairs (who were ‘taking sexuality to the extreme’), who were often “ambivalent about their sexual preferences” and “dressed in ‘genderfuck’-style drag” (ibid.). The “gay [queer] punk look” perpetuated themes in glam rock, such as “the insistence on bisexuality,” and “over-the-top clothes and make-up” (ibid.). Many of the young gay men at the time saw a key facet of punk as “wearing make-up and having ‘big hair’” (ibid.). Other style specifics included a “very narrow-legged black jeans, skin-tight, pointed, like, suede or leather winkle-picking boots and then a [brightly-colored] mohair jumper on the top, with hair that was…very long but all standing up and out at right angles; loads of black make-up round your eyes kind of look, and a deathly white face” (ibid.). Punk stood in opposition to the “Clone” way of dressing and disco and rock music, “creating an arena that welcomed sexual ambiguity” (ibid.). Yet, as punk rock grew in popularity, punks had to decide whether to go to straight punk clubs where they would face discrimination against their sexual orientation or commercial gay clubs that had been known to have “physically thrown [punks] out of gay clubs for not conforming to the approved gay images” (ibid.). Thus, “gay” [queer] punks clearly adopted more feminine elements (e.g. tight clothes, makeup, colorful clothes (the mohair jumper), long hair), achieving an androgynous look, and preached bisexuality (ibid.). They even experienced the double-stigma from gay clubs and punk clubs that bi people face today with queer and heteronormative societies, as we will discuss later. Such double rejection may explain why bi men felt comfortable in alternative communities, opposed to adopting straight or gay male fashion.

By 1977, punk was thoroughly mainstream—everyone was dressing like them beyond queer people and art students – and it had a new “thuggish” attitude, so queers moved on to New Wave or Gothic Punk” (Steele 2013: 49). This group has a markedly androgynous style, comprising accessorizing with makeup and jewelry, long hair, and traditionally feminine clothing (e.g. tight fishnet tops, skirts), seen among men and women the same (Brill 2008a). Fetish gear, such as PVC and rubber clothes, has made a recent appearance on the scene as well” (ibid.), paralleling the use by punks.

The Goth community often describes itself as “a haven of free-floating bisexual desire, as something like a ‘genderless’ space where partners are chosen for their looks and character regardless of gender” with bisexuality celebrated for its “radical potential to break down traditional gender categories” (ibid.). Members often reference the group’s androgynous style “to illustrate and partly to explain the widespread adoption of bisexual identities and practices in Goth” (ibid.). For instance, androgyny can be said to blur gender, diminishing differences between the appearances of men and women to an extent unseen in broader society (ibid.). As Butler has explained that heterosexuality relies on distinction between genders, such “‘boundaries of sexuality’ set by the heterosexual matrix that normally structures our culture
more permeable” in Goth culture, with less emphasis on binary gender (ibid.). Thus, Goths assert that a person’s character is of higher priority than their gender in partner selection; people “‘look at each other as people before they look at each other as a bloke or a girl’” (ibid.).

This androgyny is not only a preferred style of self-presentation, but can also make a political statement, allowing members to transgress gender roles. For instance, men and women alike can address the male gaze in gender-non-conforming ways. Firstly, it must be understood that the male gaze is objectifying and “not necessarily male,” but “to activate it is to adopt a male position” (Brill 2008b). The classic framework of understanding of the male gaze encompasses a masculine, active “onlooker” and a feminine, passive, viewed subject (ibid.). Accordingly, Goth women subvert the societal insinuation that women are passive by styling themselves to “‘flirt with masculine curiosity but refuse to submit to the masterful gaze,” turning “being looked at into an aggressive act’” (ibid.). This is achieved through adopting a hyperfeminine style, which, though it comprises a “highly sexualized” presentation that somewhat adheres to male prescriptions of female appearance and appeals to Goth men, “transgresses common norms of female propriety by signifying femininity in excess of conventional codes (Brill 2008c). Many of these women, resultingy, feel empowered, free, and a sense of protection (ibid.). This is not unlike how respondents describe some queer women’s bold makeup as repelling men – who prefer natural makeup – and it also mirrors the excessive use of makeup by punk women.

One subset of goth women is the Vampire Fan, who enjoys books and movies about vampires as well as vampiric clothing (Brill 2008b). She dresses in a hyperfeminine manner as well, but mainly dons black “sinister dress,” creating a “more androgynous, less rigidly gendered way of being,” challenging conventional “pink” and “frilly” femininity (ibid.). She relies on the color black’s symbolic meaning form Romantic literature to cause her to stand out as different, unapproachable, and strong; as Anne Hollander explains, it represents, “delicious forbidden practice and belief – the courting of death, not the mourning of it” and “fear of the blind darkness of night and the eternal darkness of death” (Williamson 2011). Vampire Fans then “emphasize the sinister drama of black” by donning old-fashioned clothing, such as silks and velvets, potentially paired with dyed black hair, yellow contact lenses, and dental caps fashioned as vampire fangs to “shock” (ibid.). Overall, not only do they define their own sense of femininity, but they signal their status as cultural outsiders (ibid.). Additionally, “identification with the figure of the vampire, with its ambiguous, non-genital sexuality, leads the women to question the boundaries of gender and heterosexuality” (Brill 2008b). Correspondingly, Milly Williamson (2011) argues that a “vampire’s mouth…poses the vampire as a multi-gendered being by displacing sexuality onto this ungendered space,” implying that biting someone’s neck is an act of sexuality. This seems a fair assessment as the neck can be a very intimate space, kissed or bitten (in the way of hickeys) by someone’s partner. Then, because vampires’ victims are not limited by gender, it would naturally follow that vampires are bisexual. There have also been ample associations of androgyny, bisexuality, and vampires throughout media, such as the androgynous vampires of Anne Rice’s Vampire Chronicles; Alex Strangelove’s connection of bisexuality to vampires; Gerard Way (who faces credible rumors of being bisexual) and his band, My Chemical Romance, have written around 10 songs about vampires and he has dressed up as one before; Pete Wentz, who is bi, has dressed up as a vampire for a Fallout Boy music video
before; Kristen Stewart, who is bi, chose to be in Twilight; Brendon Urie, who identifies as pan, has dressed up as a vampire before; and David Bowie, who was bi, was in the 1983 movie The Hunger, which features a bisexual vampire. Subsequently, this relation to vampires allows women to “[produce] subversive identities beyond the constructs of gender” and heterosexuality (ibid.).

Goth men also breach gendered barriers and, further, it could be said that their look is more transgressive than what a woman would be able to achieve, given norms of gender presentation. Due to the “Great Masculine Renunciation,” men have faced cultural boundaries that steer them away from “all paraphernalia evocative of femininity,” whereas female fashion “has always borrowed features of traditionally male dress” (Brill 2008b). Additionally, though there is subversive power in Goth women’s wardrobes, women who engage in “excessive adornment” as a subcultural signifier are “dressing up,” as is culturally expected of women, whereas male adoption of female stylistic elements is a significant cultural taboo (ibid.). Effectively, male androgyny challenges conventional masculinity through using female elements of appearance that situate women as “objects of the male gaze” in order to effect “a recasting of male appearance as playful erotic spectacle” (ibid.). This effect could either be intended, perhaps as a direct way to attract male partners, or simply constitute a “general relaxing of gender norms and barriers” (ibid.).

Though Goth culture is interwoven with sexual experimentation and gender exploration, it is not a space open to the broader queer community. In general, it is bisexuality that can be said to be “a central social value” of Goth culture, “a dominant norm rather than a marginal position,” which can even earn members (predominant women) status; “open displays of homoeroticism” are normalized at times “venerated” (Brill 2008a). Accordingly, though Goths can intermingle with other queer people – they are often found in the same spaces as gays or transvestites in smaller cities where their subcultures are limited – and relate to them based on the abuse they receive for their alternative, flamboyant self-fashioning, Gothic culture is a predominantly bisexual space (ibid.). In fact, they often discuss sexuality in a binary framework of “bisexuality” versus “monosexuality” – encompassing homosexuality and heterosexuality, defining bisexuality as the “the only legitimate form of ‘true love’” and “‘unconventional’, liberated and transgressive” sexual orientation, while considering monosexualities as “‘relatively depraved’” (ibid.). Hence, if a person is seen adopting goth dress, it is a fair bet that they identify as bi.

Therefore, overall, androgyny has deep ties to bisexuality, to say the least.

The Hidden Identity

Though Americans, speaking broadly in reference to the survey data, don’t know much about bisexuality nor what it can look like, some of our biggest, most influential, cultural icons have been bi. James Dean and Marlon Brando have been synonymous with rugged individualism and masculinity in

![Percentage of the Queer Community That’s Bi](image)

*Bisexual People and the LGB Community* (Los Angeles: GLAAD, 2016), 9, fig. 1 & 2.

The composition of the queer community by sexual orientation (asexuality is notably left out).
American culture; Brando has been in various Westerns (e.g. *One-Eyed Jacks*), adventure stories (e.g. *Mutiny on the Bounty*), and the spectacularly popular and violent *The Stepfather* while Dean was in the western *Giant* and widely popular for his movie *Rebel Without a Cause*. Little do most people know, these two pictures of masculinity had a romantic relationship, as is revealed in the 2016 book *James Dean: Tomorrow Never Comes* (“James Dean” 2016). Similarly, Elvis, a straight sex-symbol, was known among select people to engage in “same-sex dalliances” (RBUCH1 2014). Additionally, grunge rock god, Kurt Cobain, admitted to being bisexual as well (“Kurt” 2019). Eleanor Roosevelt, Billie Holiday – acclaimed jazz and swing singer, Bessie Smith – the “Empress of Blues,” and Malcolm X are also on the list of perhaps less well-known bi people (Sargeant 2017), with Tupac’s sexuality having come into question as of May of 2019 in light of a photo of him and a man both shirtless in bed that gained public attention (Baker 2019). Additionally, though they were not American, people often mistakenly claim that Freddie Mercury of Queen and Oscar Wilde were gay, when they were actually both bisexual (Sargeant 2017).

Other famous people who identify as bi – and whose sexuality may be more publicly known – are Frida Kahlo, Janelle Monae, Amy Winehouse, Brendon Urie, Billie Joe Armstrong, David Bowie, Richard Pryor, Kehlani, Frank Ocean, Lilly Singh, Tyler the Creator, Kristen Stewart, and Angelina Jolie.

**Why Don’t People Know What Bi People Look Like?**

What makes the nominal recognition of this group especially shocking is that it, in fact, dominates the queer community. Bi people compose 52% of the queer community – 33% women and 19% are men (In Focus 2016). Yet, according to GLAAD and the Harris Poll’s Accelerating Acceptance report, a mere 29% of Americans know someone who is bisexual; nonetheless, this number increases to 47 percent among Millennials (Townsend and Deerwater 2021: 32). The number is likely higher for Gen Z, as more Gen Zers are queer overall. A 2018 Ipsos Mori poll found that only 66% of people between 16 and 22 identified as heterosexual and 15.9% of Gen Z respondents to a 2020 Gallup poll between 18 and 23 identify as queer (Lang 2021). Hence, the burning question is: Why is this group so unknown?

There are a few reasons why bi people may be a less recognizable demographic: bi erasure in the media, bi people being less likely to come out, and they may obscure their identity by using broader designations such as “gay,” “queer,” or “fluid,” or by purposefully not labeling themselves at all.

**Bi Erasure**

Bi erasure, as the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) defines it, is

“A pervasive problem in which the existence or legitimacy of bisexuality (either in regard to an individual or as an identity) is questioned or denied outright. For example, if two women are married and one is bisexual, others may insist she can’t really be bisexual or that her orientation doesn’t matter/has changed now that she is partnered” (In Focus 2016: 4).

From their 2020-21 review of media representation of various groups (e.g. bisexual, transgender, black, Latinx), GLAAD found 28% of the regular and recurring queer characters on scripted broadcast, cable, and streaming programming are bisexual+ (they use this term to denote
anyone who identifies as bi, pansexual, fluid, or queer); 66% are women, 33% are men (15% of whom are trans), and 1.0% (one person) is non-binary (Townsend and Deerwater 2021: 32). Further, 84% are season regular characters (ibid.).

Yet, GLAAD finds that bi people are still “underrepresented and often poorly represented in both entertainment and news media,” which can influence societal [mis]understandings of bi people (ibid.). Many “harmful tropes” are continually reused and found today, such as bi characters’ romantic partners dismissing their identities, a theme especially prevalent for male characters within the past few years (ibid.: 33). Another example and a “long-running problem” includes more unambiguous bi erasure, in which bi characters’ stories are “never explicitly labelled or discussed as bisexual,” depriving the characters of the ability to “own their own story or use a specific word for themselves” (ibid.).

Due to a lack of bi representation in the media, I personally didn’t know that bisexuality existed until I was maybe 9 or 10 when I saw a 48 Hours episode in which a man killed his girlfriend with help from his boyfriend. I didn’t understand what I had just seen, so I asked my dad about it, and that’s when I learned what bisexuality was. And what a way that was to find out! Other media had mentioned “bisexual tendencies,” like women “experimenting” in college, so I never got the sense that it was an identity. I thought I was just straight (identifying as female at the time) and happened to think that women were attractive too. I didn’t know I was necessarily different and didn’t fully come to understand my identity until I was 20 when I randomly stumbled upon a bisexual website (when reading articles about Freddie Mercury) that thoroughly explained the identity and the harmful stereotypes related to it. It’s hard to understand yourself if you don’t have a frame of reference for your feelings.

Worse yet, perhaps the first ever direct address of bisexual identity that I witnessed on-screen was in the Netflix movie Alex Strangelove (2018). The poster shows a young man with a woman on his left and a man to his right, both of whom gaze at him. Surrounding his head is a question mark in the shape of a heart. This suggests love interests that are both male and female and, hence, a bisexual plotline. Yet, this would go on to be the poorest representation and astoundingly inaccurate address of bisexuality that I have seen to date. The scene in question involves Alex, the main character, confiding in his friend Dell about his identity, and goes as follows:

Alex tells Dell that he thinks he’s bisexual.

Dell: “Say what?”

Alex: “I’m bisexual. I think I’m bisexual.”

Dell: “No, you’re not.”

Alex: “What?”

Dell: “You’re panicking dude…” [referring to how Alex has been pressured by his girlfriend to book a hotel room for them to sleep together for the first time]

Alex: “No, I’m just taking advantage of all the options available.”

Dell: “Do you listen to Panic! At The Disco while jerking off to pictures of vampires?”

Alex: “What? No.”

Dell: “Then you’re not bisexual.” [he says with a smile]
Dell: “Look, it’s a confusing time, man. Everywhere you look, someone is omnisexual [another word for bisexual], polyamorous, or genderqueer, or transitioning into god-knows-what. And before you know it, you turn into Sydney.” [the camera pans over to a group of goths and/or punks]

“Hey Sydney? Are you into vaginas or dicks?”

Sydney [assigned male at birth]: “I’m attracted to the person.”

Dell: [turns to Alex] “Whatever the fuck that means.”

Alex: “Sorry, Sydney. I’m sorry.”

[Sydney flips them off]

Dell: “Isn’t anyone just plain straight anymore?”

Dell: [gives his “diagnosis” to Alex] “You have a ‘man crush’ on a guy, and that guy just happens to be gay.”

Alex: “Yeah, you could be right.”

Though Alex apologizes to Sydney for Dell’s behavior, none of Dell’s misperceptions are challenged, creating a horribly inaccurate representation of bisexuality. However, the scene is accurate in that it mentions Panic! At The Disco – a pop rock band with a bi singer – and vampires, which have been tied to bisexuality (Johnson 2018).

Hesitance in Coming Out

Misguided notions, such as those represented in media, can disseminate through society and consequently inhibit bi people from coming out (Townsend and Deerwater 2021: 32).

Some common stereotypes include that bi people are promiscuous, confused about their sexual orientation, and that bisexuality doesn’t exist – that it’s “simply a ‘pit stop’ on the way to being gay or a lesbian (Schetzer 2020). Lesbians think bi women are “sexual ‘tourists’ who will abandon them for men,” bi men constantly have to insist that they’re not just gay, and straight men sexualize bi women – presuming that they are all down for a ménage a trois (ibid.). As LATimes writer Emily Alpert puts it, “Both are stereotyped as oversexed swingers who cannot be trusted” (ibid.).

The false perception of promiscuity and overall biphobia was particularly prevalent in the 80s during the HIV/AIDS epidemic; people asserted that bi people were promiscuous and frequently moved between male and female partners (ibid.). Of course, these beliefs grew out of the deep-seated fear and misunderstandings of the time (ibid.). There is still some currency to the
A lack of acceptance of bi people among the queer community is also common. It can, for instance, draw from the idea that bi people can “blend into” heteronormative society if they please (Schetzer 2020). This denies any denied feelings they may have as well as the distress from suppressing one’s identity. Or worse, many people believe that a bi person in a heterosexual relationship is simply no longer bi (Pitre 2018). Meg experienced such exclusion by queer friends of a boyfriend she once had – who knew she was identified as bi (at that time, though she now identifies as a lesbian) and felt that she was “Not queer enough for queer people” and “not straight enough for straight people,” though she still feels that way due to her half-masculine, half-feminine dress. Bi people can even pick on their own, as Pitre (2018) felt that he was “not doing bisexuality right,” such as for not cuffing his jeans or by being in a heterosexual relationship.

Because of these harmful misperceptions, bi people often feel rejected by both the queer community and heteronormative society (Schetzer 2020). Respondent complaints in Chapter 1 reinforce this concern as well as Xtra writer Jake Pitre (2018).

Bi people may also be confused about diagnosing their feelings as bisexuality since society tells them that the sexual orientation entails liking all genders the same amount and that bisexuality only entails attraction to binary genders (ibid.). Therefore, for those who do come to understand themselves a bi, anticipating a negative response and being faced with stereotypes, especially from the queer community, only 28% of bi people are out to “the most important people in their life,” compared to 77% of gay men and 71% of lesbians (Townsend and Deerwater 2021: 32).

Hence, if bi people are less likely to come out, naturally, people will know fewer bi people – if any – than other members of the queer community, and will not develop a sense of the group’s self-presentation. Accordingly, one respondent did say they hadn’t met that many bi men. Similarly, the fact that various celebrity men hailed for their masculinity, as mentioned earlier, did not publicly identify as bi can confine ideas of specifically male queerness to tropes of effeminacy.

**Not Using the Label “Bi”**

Bi people are also rendered invisible to the public when they opt out of using labels like “bi” or “pan(sexual/romantic).”

This tendency has been seen among ample celebrities. For instance, Kehlani has expressed attraction to men and women in her songs, but claims she’s “queer, not bi, not straight”; Tyler, the Creator and Frank Ocean have done the same in their songs, but will not publicly define their sexuality; Barbie Ferreira goes by “queer”; Lucas Hedges describes himself as "not totally straight, but also not gay and not necessarily bisexual” (Renfro and Ahlgrim 2020); and Harry Styles, as mentioned in Chapter 1, has said that his sexuality is not “something I’ve ever felt like I have to explain about myself” (De 2019).
As mentioned in Chapter 1, this lack of precise labeling may be due to mismatches of people’s romantic identities with their sexual identities, making people hesitant to define themselves. The comfort and ease of using broad labels like “gay” and “queer” seems to be captured in the inset meme, also demonstrating how this phenomenon is present within bi subcultures on social media. Similarly, 28% of bi respondents go by “queer,” 12% go by “gay,” and 3.0% go by “fluid.” Less use of the word “gay” may be to avoid bi erasure, especially in the case of men, who are told that they are just gay and confused.

Skylar offers an in-depth understanding of this label-related thought process. Though both her sexuality and romantic identity are congruent (she’s biromantic and bisexual), she prefers not to go by “bi” and only occasionally uses “gay,” feeling that “queer” is most authentic to her identity. She first came out as “bi,” an identity that took her a long time to understand since she thought being bi was so abnormal that she couldn’t possibly hold that identity. Per the tropes we’ve just discussed, she thought that she was lying to herself about liking more than one gender, that a person can only like one. She then came to feel uncomfortable with calling herself bi due to all the stereotypes, including that bi women are just experimenting and doing it for [male] attention and the perception that she’s “one foot in one foot out” of both the straight and queer communities; she wants to be more associated with the queer community. Ultimately, she ends up saying “bi” for social convenience or “shorthand,” since saying “queer” usually requires her to explain her identity to straight people; they want to know if it’s about sexuality or gender, she says, or are confused, because they thought it was a slur. She acknowledges that queer is “a little more murky” regarding meaning – it has a general meaning of “I’m not straight, I’m not cis.” Nevertheless, though she is cis, she says that it feels most authentic to her. She will also occasionally use “gay” to casually describe herself – thought that is not how she would come out, knowing that some people use it the same way as “queer.” She says it’s “not wrong” since she is attracted to other women, but it doesn’t quite fit her, as with the “bi” label. She is okay using “gay” around people who know her identity.

Therefore, if no one around you is identifying as bi, only the broad terms of “gay,” “queer,” or “fluid,” or choosing to not label their sexuality at all, you will not know what bi people look like and be able to recognize possibly trends in their self-fashioning. Moreover, the fact that the cultural icons mentioned earlier (e.g. James Dean, Elvis) were only known to be bi by a select group of people (though, of course, they come from a less accepting era) reinforces the idea that such masculinity is solely associated with cis, het men.

Conversely, one respondent claims that they know what bi women look like precisely because bi women are erased by society.

“All the same stuff from my last answer [about what lesbians look like], but to a more extreme and noticeable extent. I feel since bi/pan women often feel that they are invisible in society, they are more likely to color their hair or pierce their faces to a more extreme extent than their lesbian queer peers, who are acknowledged to exist by a larger sect of society” (my emphasis).
However, it does not seem like many respondents share this theory, as fewer respondents believe that bi women have piercings (11%) and dyed hair (7.8%) than the number who predict those for lesbians – 12% and 8.3%, respectively. Nevertheless, bi women are expected to have more nose rings and septum piercings (7.3%) than lesbians (5.9%), which could be considered a less normative piercing (vs. an ear lobe piercing or nose stud).

Style Testimony from Bi Interviewees

Now we shall hear what our bi interviewees have to say about their style as a supplement to the comments we have seen from them throughout this chapter.

Caleb

Though mostly sexually attracted to masculine-presenting people (but also biromantic), Caleb goes by “queer” instead of “gay” since many of the people he likes are also nonbinary or gender-non-conforming, whereas “gay” has traditionally meant attraction to cis men. Additionally, he identifies more with the nonbinary culture/label vs. the “gay” community (of male-presenting people loving other male-presenting people) since “it's less restrictive and allows for a wider range of expression” and “coming out as nonbinary in many ‘gay’ spaces has felt alienating,” as they mostly comprise cis men, “a decent portion of which don't respect gender-non-conformity.” Furthermore, he’s never felt the “need or desire to conform to that community” as he says, “I’ve always been fairly comfortable in marching to the beat of my own drum.”

General Style

Caleb describes his style as being about function (e.g. temperature), but he “has fun” with it. For instance, the fall is his favorite season, as it presents the ability to layer. He wants to utilize clothes’ purpose, but have freedom and flexibility, and experiment with things. He likes color, so he might don nail polish, which he describes as an “easy way to express that.” He also “refuses” to wear normal socks – “they have to be fun” and owns ample colorful, patterned shirts, as well as some solid-color ones. A lot of wardrobe is thin and form-fitting and streamlined (simplified), though he does have some baggier items.

His clothing is more androgynous/gender-neutral; for instance, on a given day, he might wear jeans and a jacket. His daily outfits also cycle between masculine- or feminine-presentation, which he intends. On his more masculine days, he’s lazy and doesn’t shave; overall, his outfits vary somewhat, but the degree of variation is not great. At home, he has more of a relaxed outfit (e.g. sweatpants and a sweater), but on campus, he is unlikely to wear sweatpants and might wear a sweater.

His general goal, as mentioned in earlier chapters, is to eliminate gender as a factor in interactions. Gender doesn’t influence what you can and can’t do in different settings, he explains; if there’s no sexual tension, it doesn’t add anything to a conversation. He doesn’t feel the need to specify a gender with his clothing.

He usually avoids styling himself in ways that would cause him to stick out as he doesn’t want to be the center of attention. If he does desire to draw attention under certain circumstances, he will put more thought behind what he’s wearing and try to look “put-together,” opposed to
wearing “crazy” and/or conspicuous clothing. Yet, when he goes home for breaks, he feels that his appearance doesn’t allow him to fit in as much as when he did in high school.

**Style Change**

When Caleb came out as gay to his friends in his senior year of high school – a year before he told his parents – his style changed. He was more comfortable with himself and, hence, more easily able to express himself. His first step was to wear more slim clothing – opposed to cargo shorts, which he had initially feared would make people think he was gay; originally, he would try his best to blend in. Since he had just come out and it was his last year of high school, he “didn’t care anymore,” so he thought he might as well be his “authentic self.” He got an “undercut,” which he jokingly calls “the gay cut,” before it was “in vogue,” he claims. Crew cuts and long hair parted to the side were the norm in his high school. He had his hair cut shorter on the back and sides with the longest part on top.

His style further changed from high school to college as he moved to a setting with more freedom that would allow him time to “experiment”: a “new chapter” to “reinvent” himself now that he felt more comfortable expressing himself. He started by trying out nail polish. Simply attending college in Burlington also indirectly altered his style, such as by adding flannel to his wardrobe.

Moreover, when he came out as nonbinary to his friends (he has yet to come out to his parents as he believes doing so won’t affect anything), he started wearing makeup to bars when going out with them. Some of them already used makeup, so they then offered that to him, figuring he would be interested. He then started wearing more form-fitting, thin clothing. He claims that he “has been that twink in a bar” that someone has mistaken for a lesbian, which happened once when he was wearing a “minimalist look” of jeans, a turtleneck, beanie, and eyeshadow.

**Identifying Others**

Caleb also mentions fashion’s role in romantic signaling. He tends to wear more form-fitting, patterned, and “stereotypically queer” clothing so other queer people might “clue in.” He hates approaching others, as mentioned in an earlier chapter, particularly out of the fear that he’ll mistakenly make an advance on a straight man and face backlash. He would normally presume that someone in form-fitting clothes, such as slim pants and a t-shirt, would be queer, but, as referenced earlier, he says that straight guys nowadays are more “well put-together” and tight clothes are just a general style. Thus, he hopes that his fashion will make other queer people more comfortable approaching him. For instance, he wears more high-waisted pants to make his “butt look better.”

A lot of his friends are queer, which is mostly personality-based, though outfits can play a role. Nevertheless, he claims that he doesn’t actively seek them out.

**Future Style**

He now muses about dying his hair, but not a bright color (he doesn’t want to bleach it) – perhaps a deeper purple or maroon.

**Connections**
Caleb describes cis, gay men as not respecting gender non-conformity, a phenomenon that might puzzle respondents, as the most-supported indicator of gay male identity [tied with good style] was feminine style. Yet, based on the actual results of what gay respondents wear, they tend to conform to the traditionally masculine, cis, het norm, so it perhaps should not be so surprising that they may respond negatively to difference. Again, Shaun Cole claims that gay communities often condemn “visible” gays (Cole 2013: 142), which in this case, would be gender-non-conforming ones and/or nonbinary male-presenting people.

He also seems to fit the androgynous/gender-neutral aesthetic associated with the bi community, though that seems less related to his biromantic attraction, which he does not go on to mention in our interview beyond offering his romantic and sexual orientations. Thus, it seems like his androgyny is more due to his gender identity.

Additionally, it fascinating that he describes his more stylistically “masculine” days as being when he’s “lazy” and doesn’t shave. This contributes to the perception that the “natural” state of men (cis, het men being the default in a heteronormative society) is to not care about their appearance and to prioritize comfort over fashion and that it is only queer men who breach this norm. The reality of cis, het male dress is conflicted, according to the results. He also discusses having a “relaxed” look when at home in comparison to when he’s on campus, which parallels Mark’s styling practices. Both seem to prioritize comfort when not in the public eye. Notably, he explains that if he desires to stand out, he simply tries to look “put-together,” which respondents would expect of a queer man and not a cis, het man, though, once more, the reality of the situation is mixed. Yet, the mere fact that Caleb attests to standing out when he looks this way provides some evidence to the cis, het male comfort-over-fashion expectation.

Moreover, he mentions entering college as being a chance to experiment and reinvent himself, leading him to try out nail polish. It is worth asking if this is the same mindset of cis, het men who paint their nails, as Ella, Meg, and I have noticed, predominantly among “skater bros,” though also among at least one UVM sports team (as mentioned by one cis, het respondent). Ella says that guys wearing nail polish doesn’t faze her anymore, “It’s just an expression thing. It doesn’t have to signal anything.”

Therefore, Caleb does not seem to fit into any of the bi tropes other than androgyny, which seems to be the result of a natural “internal feeling,” rather than an affinity for the goth, punk, or emo communities. In fact, his biromantic identity does not come up.

**Avery**

Avery takes issue with labels for gender and sexual orientation. They feel that they’re “too specific to feel comfortable using” or “so general they mean nothing” and are, “therefore, not useful.” Thus, they only use them “in passing” to give people a basic understanding of their identity, but will elaborate on their inaccuracy for more in-depth conversations. For Avery, though identifying as both bi/pansexual and bi/panromantic, they state that “pansexual” seems “too broad.” Thus, they just say that they don’t care about gender or sex, only developing interest in someone if they’re a good person.

Regarding their own personal style, Avery wears more androgynous clothing to signal that they’re nonbinary, as well as breast forms. They also often wear dress shoes, mainly inspired by their home environment – much of their family is of European descent, as well as bracelets to signal a more artistic style or particular interests (e.g. by wearing jewelry from a particular culture).
In general, their goal is to present themselves as “not normal” to everyone, not specifically to other queer people. They want to both stick out and blend in with everyone – to stick out just enough to showcase their strong sense of individuality, but to “get lost in the crowd,” which can be safer (as they’ve learned from living in a big city).

In diagnosing other queer identities, Avery believes that pegging nonbinary people is easier. If they see someone dressing very androgynously or who has elements of style that are both explicitly masculine and explicitly feminine, they’ll assume that they’re nonbinary. People who are not nonbinary generally won’t have both explicitly masculine and explicitly feminine elements. However, there’s no “knee-jerk reaction” for Avery in pinning down a person’s sexual orientation. They could only make an assessment if someone has their hair dyed the color of their identity flag or some other specific and explicit identity-signaling.

**Future Style**

Avery is hoping to change up their aesthetic—which they don’t particularly like, but is not yet sure what direction to go in. Since starting college not too long ago, they have not altered their style.

They are, however, planning various body modifications. For one, they are planning to dye their hair blue again, as they did a few summers ago. They thought it looked cool and want to repeat it. They would also like to pierce both ears and maybe get a nose stud or septum piercing.

Avery doesn’t associate piercings and hairstyle with certain signaling, but knows people will make assumptions. Knows the body modifications they’re planning to get will make them look not straight and not cis. Not their intention, is “just how society is currently.” Their only motivation for their upcoming body modifications is that they think they’ll look cool.

A lot of people in their life approached them to be friends and realized that they’re “real weird.” Thus, with dyed hair and piercings, “It will be useful to say without words that I’m not a normal person…not your run-of-the-mill average person,” they state. Overall, they won’t be signaling anything specific, but simply indicating difference in general.

**Connections**

Avery claims that someone dressed androgynously or mixing masculine and feminine elements are likely nonbinary. Yet, this idea opposes the androgyny of goth, punk, and emo communities. Though all embrace androgyny and goths aim for a community that is “genderless,” that transcends gender, and in which it is not a factor in attraction, members still identify as male and female. Curiously, in this same vein, Logan interprets punk/alt-community-specific androgyny as signaling nonbinary identity, with lesbian and gay people as secondary associations. Though the scholarly sources say those subcultural members’ identities were binary, that is not to say that more people in these communities are not identifying as nonbinary since the sources on those communities were written. As Mark, mentioned, the prevalence of nonbinary identities has been noticeably growing in recent years, whereas he was unaware of any 10 years ago. For instance, Gerard Way, singer of the emo band My Chemical Romance, describes his feelings about his gender in terms that others have interpreted to be indicative of a nonbinary identity, but which he has not diagnosed with those exact words (Kim 2020). Thus, he may be nonbinary, but unaware of that label and/or what it entails.

Additionally, it seems like Avery has correctly assessed that their piercings will make them stand out as “not normal,” since piercing both ears for someone who was assigned male at birth
goes against the somewhat well-known single left lobe piercing for cis, het men, and the nose piercing was not predicted for cis, het men – only for bi male-presenting people (2.4%) and homosexual male-presenting people (1.5%), as well as lesbians (5.9%) and bi women (7.3%); 30% of lesbians had nose piercings and no gay men had them. They are similarly insightful that their body modifications will make them look “not straight and not cis,” hinting that they will be signaling difference in the broad sense that the label “queer” does. Thus, these stylistic elements will communicate queerness, but not what, precisely (e.g. queer sexual orientation, gender identity, or both).

**Jordan**

I have referred to Jordan previously using “she/her” pronouns, but as she uses “they/them” as well, I will now use those pronouns here. Though they feel like a label doesn’t fully capture their identity, they will offer one if asked to in order to refrain from “going through the labor” of explaining their identity. They often dress “very street,” as they are a hip-hop dancer. Over-sized shirts, hats, baggy jeans or sweatpants, and a plaid shirt around the waist are found in their wardrobe, for instance. This is similar to their look while an undergraduate student, in which they would wear jeans, graphic tees and oversized shirts when coming from hip-hop practice. They were comfortable, which is mainly what they look for in clothes. Ultimately, their style ends up looking more masculine, though that is not their intention. Their general style can fluctuate between masculine and feminine, depending on who they’re around.

They claim that, in general, “I definitely want to stick out.” They see plenty of Asian women on Instagram who they deem “IG baddies” or “E-Girls” (“hip young” women defined by their “mediated” online presence and attractive appearance, usually with hints of skate culture, hip-hop, anime, cosplay, BDSM, and goth style (Jennings 2019)) who strike dramatic poses, such as pulling their hair back with one hand while looking over their shoulder. Nevertheless, this is not to say that they are thinking about the message their style is sending. They have been told by friends that their masculine clothing and rainbow accessories make them look queer. Regarding jewelry, they don three ear piercings in order to show off more earrings and, hence, more of their identity. They prefer jewelry that’s unique, tied to a specific interest, and conveys that they like to be “flashy”; thus, they, for instance, have solidarity fist earrings; cutesy food earrings, like gummy bears and desserts; music notes; hoops; Legos; and used to have a lot of skull jewelry (e.g. skull cuff earrings) – “emo and goth stuff.” They also wear rainbow bracelets.

**Style Change**

Jordan no longer identifies with what they would consider their more feminine high school outfits that comprised flowers, hearts, dressiness, and Hollister and Abercrombie & Fitch brands. Once they got to college, they didn’t wear crop tops and shorts “as women are expected to” and has since donated much of their high-school-era clothes. It was also during their undergraduate studies that they came out as pansexual. They had questioned their feelings since middle school, but didn’t find a label until after visiting queer identity centers. Coming to terms with this identity then initiated a new style, expression, and
dating. They went on to shave half of their head. They also added silver streaks, then blond streaks, to their hair. They don’t keep up this style as much anymore – it depends on time and money, but love this feature. The hair was inspired by queer celebrities they looked up to and was motivated by the desire to break their usual look of long, black hair to look “different” from other Asian women and simply in general, as well as “edgy.” Though much of these stylistic endeavors occurred after coming out, their friends said that they suspected they were queer based on the way they dressed. As their style transitioned into more stereotypically queer clothing, moving from a more feminine style their first two years of college to masculine, her friends looked on amusingly, “Oh, you’re getting more comfortable with yourself!” they would say. Now, they follow a bunch of queer meme pages that “reclaim those jokes and stereotypes,” that may something along the lines of “I’m definitely gay because I have my head shaved and wear flannel.” They would say that they look more stereotypically queer rather than specifically pansexual, an image aided by their abundance of items that incorporate rainbows (e.g. a pair of glasses).

Over the past few years, they have come to acquire three tattoos, all of which are publicly visible, though some are smaller, and have personal significance, rather than to transmit a message to the onlooker. They got one in particular to remind themselves that “there’s still life to live.”

These new piercings were inspired by conversations with others in queer identity spaces about their tattoos and piercings, which gave them the confidence to move forward. They were ready to do more things for themselves and their body.

Furthermore, they need validation from others to reassure them that the stylistic elements were worth the investment and a good choice. When they get such feedback, it’s affirming and, they say, “It makes me more confident that I can express myself”.

They then started exploring their gender identity as of last year, and now call themselves “genderqueer” – though they are considering identifying as nonbinary or transgender. Start of this questioning has been prompted by their involvement in activist groups, one of which commonly lauds pictures of “militant women” with guns or defiantly holding knives up to soldiers. Jordan feels “militant,” but not like a woman; they don’t identify with the feminized/sexualized parts of women in the media. Similarly, they feel a “weird sense of discomfort and irritability” when people assume that they use she/her pronouns. They don’t know if they’ll come to only use they/them pronouns.

**Identifying Others**

They do not date people based on their appearance, nor dating apps, and attest that they are so wrapped up in thinking out their own impression on other people that they are not as fixated on what other people are wearing. They just find people in different contexts of their life who they date. They also tend to make several queer friends from often intentionally being in queer spaces.

**Connections:**

The fact that Jordan’s style leans more masculine aligns with respondent perceptions of queer women/female-presenting people and their androgynous fashion mirrors that of what lesbians (55%) report. Additionally, their androgyny – referring to the alternation of masculine and feminine styles day-to-day – presents an example of androgyny being associated with bisexuals, though the typical example is of masculine and feminine signifiers combined in one
look. They also conform to bi style communities in referencing their original ownership of “emo and goth stuff,” with goth culture being especially relevant, as they are currently questioning their gender identity, and wondering if it is a nonbinary one – fitting the “genderless” ideal of goth culture. Though their friends have stated that their presentation makes them look queer, that is not a signal they have intentionally been trying to send. They seem to have simply grown more comfortable in expressing themself, as their friends have noted, which was the same case for Caleb after he’d originally come out as gay and started college.

Jordan’s decision to get one tattoo to remind themself that “there’s still life to live” and to do something for themself and their body—suggesting self-care and taking ownership of their body/skin – is a theme among queer people, though expressed in different, perhaps less conscious, ways. For one, Em Huang (2016: 86), a graduate student from UVM who Jordan in fact knows, who is trans (assigned female at birth), goes by “queer” (a commonly chosen label for bi people), of Chinese-Vietnamese descent, and uses they/them pronouns, has one tattoo dedicated to the night they attempted suicide after facing severe intolerance from their parents for their queer sexuality over several years. They decided to get the tattoo since they say “I will always carry that experience with me. It was invaluable to my coming out process, and the pain allowed me to remember the fears and struggles that were obstacles to my self-acceptance then, and that I sometimes find myself fighting against even now” (ibid.: 87). The broader significance behind Huang’s tattoos is to connect their body to their experiences, perhaps as a way of taking ownership of their body. They state that their tattoos

“incorporate images and words into a design that honors the impact that past events have had on my life. The actual process of getting the tattoo involves pain, which creates a time for me to form a deeper connection between my physical, mental, and emotional states and fully engage with the significance of the modification of my body. Finally, the healing process, which lasts several weeks, allows me to observe the way my body accepts the ink and integrates it into my skin. My tattoos are reminders of the important events and journeys in my life, the connections between my personal processes of navigating trauma and coming to terms with my identities. Each of them has played an important role in my learning and the way that I understand myself... My tattoos are the narrators of my story, and the lines and colors are the illustrators of my experiences”
(ibid.: 85; my emphasis).

Therefore, Huang’s use of tattooing is symbolic, adding “narration” of their life story to their body to seemingly claim their skin as their own. One example of a tattoo includes song lyrics that tie to their experience discovering their sexuality and another references the day they told their parents their queer identity (ibid.: 85-87). Not only does the process of getting the tattoos help them to reflect on and appreciate their experiences, but the constant visual markers of those incidents “helps [them] to heal” on days they “struggle most to love [their] queer and trans identities,” for instance, by reminding them of the event that began their coming out process and “shaped [their] passions” (ibid.: 88). Ryan similarly plans to get a tattoo that represents friends and family, who have supported him in his transition and with mental health issues in high school. He also acknowledges that tattoos can be useful in helping a person “go through a grieving process,” which it seems they did for Huang – facilitating his recovery from low times and traumatic events.
Lesbian tattooing (as well as piercing, scarification, and branding) practices of the 80s, reflecting on earlier chapters, also served to take ownership of one’s body.

I have also – as mentioned in the intro chapter – engaged in skin-marking practices for similar reasons, though the marks were temporary and the motivations were subliminal. During the spring of 2019, one of the periods of my life in which I’ve been suicidal, I drew on myself frequently. My motivation was not intentional and conscious, but I believe I might have done this because it distracted me from bad thoughts; I drew things I thought were pretty (like stars and sparkles)—I was appreciating beauty in life. By making something pretty on my skin, it put me in the moment – as the tattooing process seemingly did for Huang – and was like showing appreciation for my skin and body.

I also put temporary tattoos over my wrists during a time of peak suicidality in spring of 2020 when I was suffering from a debilitating amount of gender-transition-related stress: I intentionally put something artistic and pretty on my skin to dissuade me from defacing it through self-harm. This is the same motivation for Ryan pursuing tattoos: “to prevent myself from doing bad things to my body.” That way, he won’t want to ruin the body art with long-lasting scars. Jordan’s intentions for one of their tattoos seem less concerned with wanting to block destruction of body art through self-harm, but more to serve as a visual reminder with a positive message rather than a last-resort defense against bodily harm when the negative intention has already arisen.

Therefore, tattooing can serve as an act of self-care for queer people – to take ownership of their bodies, encourage themselves with affirming messages, bring them into the moment, and to serve as a last resort in fending off self-harm. As having a queer identity can have detrimental effects on a person’s mental health due to societal and familial reactions, tattoos can be impactful, and sometimes a form of saving grace.

Bi people may be more likely than their queer peers to need measures like this to assist their mental health as the “double stigma” they face – from both the cis, het and queer communities – can create” extremely poor [physical and mental] health outcomes” (Schetzer 2020). For instance, a Kent State University study published in 2015 showed that bi people are more likely to have poor health than straight people and bi women more often have increased suicidal ideation and self-harm than their straight or lesbian peers (ibid.). Bi people are also more likely to have anxiety and mood disorders; for instance, a US study found 60% of bi women to have a lifelong history of mood disorder vs. 45% of lesbians and 30% of cis, het women (ibid.).

The fact that Jordan, Ryan, Em Huang, and I are all trans/gender-non-conforming in some way could also account for this use of “tattooing.” Our demographic is significantly prone to suicidal tendencies due to many factors, such as experiencing family rejection, discrimination, stigma, and lack of access to gender-affirming care (Herman, Brown, and Haas 2019). The largescale US Transgender Survey of 2015 discovered that, of their transgender adult respondents, 81.7 reported suicidal ideation at least once in their life, 48.3 percent had done so within the past year, 40.4 percent had attempted suicide at some point in their lifetimes, and 7.3 percent had attempted in the past year (ibid.).

Jordan’s comments also address the male gaze. They state that they didn’t wear crop tops and shorts “as women are expected to,” making known the social norms and pressures on women in a heteronormative society to show skin (and wear revealing clothing) to appeal to the male gaze. On this same note, they say that they don’t identify with the feminized/sexualized parts of women in the media. Hence, it seems that they do not want to be in the passive viewed position; they perhaps, instead, want to be the viewer, which would correlate with their masculine
presentation, though the possibility of them holding a nonbinary identity could complicate their “natural”/desired place in this viewed/viewer binary.

**Skylar**

As mentioned earlier, though both her sexuality and romantic identity are congruent (she’s biromantic and bisexual), Skylar prefers not to go by “bi” and only occasionally uses “gay,” feeling that “queer” is most authentic to her identity.

In general, she says, “I would rather pass as a lesbian than a straight girl.” She says her clothes are “for me,” rather than what others might choose for her, and that her default style veers away from presenting her in a “straight way.”

Yet, when in the presence of other queer people, she admits that she puts more effort into her appearance. “It’s a space where more people are going to be looking at what I’m wearing.” If she’s hanging out with her straight friends, they know that she’s not going to dress like straight girls nor guys. “I’m in my own category,” she says; hence, they can only contrast her appearance with straight people. Conversely, when she’s hanging out with queer friends, she fits in more, and is being compared to her peers.

She would say that she’s not necessarily trying to visually signal her sexual orientation, but may have picked up some styling habits that “are stereotypically gayer [queerer],” like the popular practice of cuffing one’s pants or shirt sleeves, and wearing Vans shoes, beanies, and things with rainbows. Some of these things, like beanies, she never would have worn in the past. She says that her self-styling along queer norms is “all kind of fun…someone might spot me…and they’ll know…If I saw someone dressing the way I dress, I would assume that they’re not straight.”

Her wardrobe also consists of baggy button-ups, boxers, and baseball caps, which she also considers to be queer for women. When she and her roommate dressed up as frat bros her roommate said, “Skylar, you have the perfect clothes for that!” Conversely, Skylar said that her roommate, who is a cis, het woman, has clothes perfect for if they “were going as princesses.”

Her formal wear also varies from the typical cis, het woman, as she is more inclined to wear a formal dress suit. Similarly, for a family holiday, she might wear dress pants or overalls. Thus, if she sees another girl wearing pants to a formal event instead of a dress, reading her as queer “might be a fair assumption,” she claims.

When Skylar gets dressed in the morning, she’ll look at herself and think, “I’m dressed a little bit gay, and I’m into it.” She ponders if a straight person look at themselves in the mirror and think, “Do I look a little bit gay”? Are they aware of the stereotypical ways gays dress and modify bodies? she questions. If they get a nose ring, will they wonder if people will think they’re gay, or are they oblivious? Regardless of this question, she emphasizes that straight people going to party might worry if they look good, but don’t worry “Am I presenting my sexual orientation based on what I’m wearing?” Conversely, the queer community “is more conscious of the statement they’re making with their clothing,” she proclaims.

Since she’s out, she doesn’t mind standing out in what she believes is typically queer, female style in environments in which she might be the only queer person. Yet, such places, like her workplace, are already accepting. Though she’s okay standing out as queer, Skylar otherwise does not like attention.

**Style Change**
In middle school, Skylar tried to blend in as much as possible – she and other girls dressed the same. “No one strayed off the Abercrombie and Hollister uniform we were wearing.” This style and conformity “feel gross” to her now.

After learning that bisexuality was real – she had thought there was a “0.001% chance” that she could be bi—and coming to understand herself, she came out to close friends, one of whom was also bi and another who was gay. This was during her junior year of high school. By her senior year, she was out to more people in the community and went to a Pride parade that year.

Her junior year, Skylar started thrifting, which she thought that was super cool, as well as comfortable. She stopped trying to wear feminine stuff since she didn’t like it most of the time, such as the skirts and dresses that everyone else was wearing to formal events. She started wearing a jumpsuit (pants attached to a top without any sort of skirt or dress) instead of a short dress in order to be comfortable rather than wear a shorter dress and “be miserable for the night because other girls in my grade are wearing shorter dresses.” She also varied from the crowd in electing to not wear heels due to the discomfort and added height.

At prom, her school didn’t specify what to wear, but girls came in dresses and guys came wearing suits as “the norm.” When she went her senior year, even the more masculine friends in her group wore dresses. Skylar doesn’t feel wildly uncomfortable in dress, so she didn’t feel strongly enough about not wearing one that she wanted to differ. “It was a special enough occasion,” she says, so if she’s going to wear something “girly” like a dress, this would be the occasion. “Why not? I’ll go for it.” For that event, “it was almost fun to be part of a tradition,” though she’s normally down to break gender norms.

In high school she didn’t want to fully cross “the line” into something being “a very gay outfit”; she wanted to “tease” her identity. For instance, she asserts that baseball tees – which have a three-quarter length sleeve – “are very gay…It’s kind of a fact,” so she’d wear one to school but try to make the rest of her outfit not gay. She would not “out herself” by wearing rainbows, but if asked if she was straight, she would say, “nah.” Now, as earlier mentioned, she aims to “get as many of those [queer] elements in my outfit as possible,” not excluding rainbow bands or socks. Though she cared about her self-presentation in high school, she believes concerns with her appearance are now sexuality-signaling-based. Her ultimate concern: “Will they know based on my outfit that I’m into women or not?”

When she was coming out her junior and senior years, she started to express her own style and dress less feminine. The first two years of high school, she was afraid to wear sweatpants or hoodies to school, concerned that she would get weird looks or glares for “not trying enough.” To be clear, at this point, she was not out to herself yet, so being outing was not a concern; it was more trying to “avoid an extra glance of ‘why is she wearing that?’” By her senior year, it was no longer her concern. She was more comfortable dressing how she wanted to. “High school is miserable,” she says, “You sit in a desk for eight hours. Don’t wear skinny jeans and a top you have to adjust.”

She also gained more queer female friends her senior year, so instead of fearing “sticking out like a sore thumb” among the other women at social gatherings on the weekends, she had a group of friends like her, so “That pressure went away.” This must have boosted her confidence, as she now claims that in hangouts with straight friends, she’s more likely to dress like the guys. Conversely, as a freshman in high school, she hadn’t wanted to be the only girl wearing a hoodie while her friends were wearing “Skimpy tank tops and leggings” at gatherings with straight guys.

**Future Style**
Skylar has some ideas of some body modifications she’d like to make. For instance, she might dye her hair blonde. She has also been brainstorming tattoo designs that she might want; she likes them on other people, so would like them on herself. She would want some to have a deeper meaning, but also appreciates ones for artistic value. She is contemplating getting one to match her long-time best friend. Additionally, she may get more ear piercings. She has two lobe piercings on each ear with a cartilage helix (ring) on one ear; the second holes were inspired by what other girls had in high school and she got the cartilage piercing as a fun, spontaneous thing to do with friends.” She might also get a nostril piercing and switch between a ring or stud, but knows her dad doesn’t like them, nor tattoos. A nose ring, which she claims is “gayer [queerer] than a stud, could be an “added element to [her] body” that signals she’s gay.

Identifying Others

She references TikTok as a source of tips on “how to spot a gay [queer] female.” For instance, there are “transition” videos that will start with the caption “How people expect me to dress” with a girl wearing a dress, heels, makeup, and jewelry. Then, she’ll make a transition on screen, with a new caption reading “How I actually dress.” She then appears with a button-up shirt, ripped black jeans, and hair in a top knot (a knotted bun on top of her head), posed with the hashtag “#lesbian.” Another TikTok trend involves two girls complimenting each other’s styles, then asking, “Are you gay?” As Skylar explains, “By complimenting that style, you’re saying that you’re also attracted to women.” On a related note, if Skylar sees a woman dressed like her, she will likely “make an assumption about them.”

Listing some queer signals in particular for women, she mentions bulky/thick chains without pendants (though found on guys of any sexual orientation), short hair, as well as masculine clothing – “Not saying gay women dress like frat boys, but more masculine in general,” she clarifies. She emphasizes the importance of the presence of a collection of stylistic elements in signaling identity, like a beanie, hoodie, high top Vans/Converse sneakers, pride socks, and baggy pants (vs. skinny jeans).

“I don’t have superpowers,” she insists,” it’s common that people in the gay community see what people are wearing and make assumptions, and then may ask about the assumptions.” Occasionally, she does ask to clarify those assumptions. She tends not to approach people, but she has asked people their sexual orientation when looking for a friendship. On the other hand, she may get to know someone, become friends with them, and learn their orientation with time, and if they are compatible, it may “turn into something.” Nevertheless, she has used dating apps which offer certainty that the people you are perusing are attracted to your gender. “I know that the options in front of me are valid options,” she elaborates. She tends to be drawn towards female-identifying people with a more masculine style, or style more similar to hers; male-identifying people who have a skater-like/crunchy rather than preppy or formal style; or anyone who puts effort into what they’re wearing and dresses up when appropriate.

Connections

Throughout much of Skylar’s testimony, we see ties back to the theme of the male gaze and the social pressure of gender roles that make women feel that they must cater to it. For one, she mentions how she used to “be miserable for the night” when social norms got the best of her, causing her to wear short dresses like other girls in high school. Short dresses, of course, reveal more skin, appealing to the male gaze. She also explains feeling socially pressured into avoiding sweatpants and hoodies in high school, fearing others would judge her and even glare at her for
“not trying enough.” This anxiety clearly demonstrates the notion that a woman should be visually appealing for others and base for bodily choices on the observer, not on her own experience, which supports the earlier mentioned findings of the American Psychological Association of increasing numbers of women who self-objectify. Instead of comfortable clothes, we can infer that Skylar was saying that she felt pressured to wear “skinny jeans and a top you have to adjust,” likely meaning that it was revealing and needed to be adjusted for her own sense of modesty and comfort. Similarly, though her school did not specify a dress code for prom, as her story demonstrates, none was needed; societal norms dictated that men should come in suits and women in dresses. Again, society requires that genders appear complementary, as heterosexuality requires their differentiation; the male gaze follows figures who are distinctly female. Events like prom are one of the key celebrations of heterosexuality in American society, just as frats and sororities are, as explained earlier. Though Skylar is normally one to break gender norms, she didn’t feel strongly enough about avoiding a dress to visually differ and she even – willfully – acquiesced with this norm in the name of “tradition.” It is curious what exactly compelled her to stay within social boundaries for this event as traditions can be changed. Perhaps her aversion to standing out got the best of her and she tried to retroactively justify it?

By her senior year, after coming out, she felt more comfortable dressing how she pleased, which aligns with the way that Caleb and Jordan felt after opening up about their sexual orientations. It seems that once a person comes to accept an identity that is stigmatized by society, it makes it much easier for them to move forward in expressing their authentic selves.

Skylar’s discussion of queer style in women also connect to many relevant themes. Regarding spotting a queer woman, Skylar emphasizes the importance of a collection of stylistic elements, which mirrors Meg’s “trifecta” of queer women’s style elements. She, too, like Meg and Logan, doesn’t necessarily limit search for these elements to romantic partners, but looks for them when seeking friends. Nevertheless, she does mention being attracted to female-identifying people with a style similar to hers, as is the case with Ella, which supports Shaun Cole’s earlier mentioned notion that queer people tend to dress themselves like the people they find attractive. This theme can also somewhat extend to the assertion of TikTok users that two women complimenting each other’s styles means that they’re asking each other if they’re gay, and therefore, showing romantic interest. They have comparable styles and develop romantic interest from the other’s self-fashioning.

It is also interesting that she describes feeling more self-conscious in queer spaces as she is not one-of-a-kind/“in [her] own category.” This perhaps signifies that she feels regarded as such an oddity in straight spaces that no one is assessing whether her clothes are stylish or not – they are only confounded, and maybe disgusted, at how she is varying from the socially prescribed fashioning of women. This, again, ties back to the notion of gender differentiation in heteronormative society and the male gaze.

Correspondingly, it is worth mentioning that she has brought up some queer signals that we have seen mentioned before (if only by a few respondents), such as cuffed pants, beanies, and rainbow imagery.

She additionally describes the differences she perceives between cis, het female style and queer female style, saying how her cis, het roommate’s wardrobe is “princess,” whereas her own clothes were described as similar to that of frat boys, and she deems baseball tees “a very gay outfit.” Thus, and she makes this distinction explicit, there is a clear masculine influence on
queer female style, which also seems to be present in the baseball tee; it is associated with sports and 18% of respondents expect cis, het men to wear athletic/sports-related clothes. Thus, it could be deemed masculine.

The particular style elements that she uses are also of interest, such as her Vans shoes and beanie. Vans (as well as Converse) shoes are staples in emo style—which has queer membership—and Ella would personally characterize beanies as bisexual if worn on a woman, particularly a skater.

Lastly, in her questioning of whether straight people question if they are properly presenting their sexual orientation, of course, as we have seen, the answer is “no” for the majority: 96% for women and 91% for men.

**Ryan**

Ryan identifies as “pan,” but usually just says he’s “queer,” “part of the LGBT community,” or “gay,” clarifying, “I don’t get into the specifics unless I feel comfortable enough to tell them...if I’m friends with them, it will come up.” He might also mention that he’s trans, but it depends on the situation; for instance, he might share that identity in a Gender, Sexuality, & Women’s Studies or Sociology class in class introductions or if it’s a topic. Usually his pronouns “tip people off” as to his transgender identity when he has long hair, more feminine clothing, and nail polish.

He came out as trans his senior year of high school and much of his family has been supportive even if they don’t understand it. However, he has yet to come out as pan to his mom—sexuality isn’t something they talk about, though he came out to his friends his sophomore year in high school.

He currently feels that his style is becoming more authentic for him, but also believes that he will always struggle with his self-fashioning. He currently can’t bind his chest due to rib inflammation, nor wear a sports bra. Hence, he is forced into wearing baggier clothes, layering, and he is restricted from wearing tank tops. If he gets top surgery (a double-mastectomy), he’ll be happier with his body. Principally, he states, “I dress more to accommodate things I don’t like about myself, so I feel like I have to wear baggier clothes to not show that I have a chest and have fat around my stomach…I feel like I can’t buy men’s jeans – they fit my hips, but then they’re really long…women’s jeans fit better, but...have all these different styles (e.g. bootcut, skinny).” Thus, “Getting to an authentic self is going to take time and self-love,” he notes.

Ryan is incredibly conflicted about how he wants to present his gender identity and be perceived. Part of him wants to blend in with the “generic male who you wouldn’t look twice at,” but he’s conflicted. He doesn’t want to conform to “hegemonic masculinity,” but instead wants his own form that’s “healthy” – not sexist or racist. Therefore, he’s trying to figure out how to balance the two desires. Ultimately, he states that his main concern is, “I want to be able to pass and not be questioned if I’m truly a dude.” Yet, he doesn’t know if “passing” will make him happy, as he has never enjoyed “blending in.” “I don’t want to draw attention to be myself, but I also don’t want to be just another person in a crowd,” he delineates. He is aware of a non-standard masculinity, stating that a trans person may be more fluid, perhaps wear a skirt, but “rock masculinity.” Yet, though he enjoys wearing earrings, he feels the need to wear plain ones versus the more feminine dangly and flashy ones; he doesn’t want to signal queerness or femininity to strangers. “I feel like I’m performing for an invisible audience…to look masculine…to fit in that box,” he declares.
He also has various ideas of how he wants to convey his sexual orientation. He would like his self-fashioning to signal queer people that “I too am queer, but how do I do that without falling into stereotypes?” Furthermore, he finds going off clothing to read someone’s identity is hard because “clothing can have such nuances.” He additionally wants straight people to see him as queer so they don’t “talk to me because they think I’m straight and that they can just shit on gay people,” though he acknowledges that that might never happen. Moreover, he considers that he may want to come off as straight, because it could get a girl’s attention, but he’s technically not straight and doesn’t have a penis, so he doesn’t know if she would be okay with that. Therefore, there are many questions on his mind.

Since before coming out as trans, he has been drawn to masculine and androgynous style and people, wanting the snake bite lip piercings he often saw on such people (though he no longer desires that look). Thus, he wants to embrace an androgynous look, as well as emulate gay people he knows of, but wonders if those stylistic elements will come off as queer and androgynous when he wears them, “Or would it just come across as funky because it’s on my body?” Nevertheless, he feels that he is already emulating trans and gay icons to an extent subconsciously.

**Style Change**

Since coming out as trans, his style definitely underwent a transformation, he reveals. He started wearing more masculine clothes, dons fewer graphic tees and form-fitting clothes, now wearing converse shoes, black boots, and Doc Martens, all brands he sees as masculine and androgynous. He has also strayed away from the brighter clothing of high school to grey tones and muted, darker colors, with the occasional bright shirt, as well as pants in blues and blacks, though he is venturing into patterns to “jazz it up a little.

Additionally, upon coming out, he got a shorter, more masculine haircut. He’s currently looking for a new one, and states, that the “search [for an appealing masculine haircut] will always continue on as I change as a person.”

**Future Style**

Seeing people (including other trans people) with different cool earrings has inspired him to go on the hunt for some, including the feminine, dangly ones he loves, despite being afraid to wear them. Though he’s concerned out passerby’s perception of his queerness, he also appreciates that it could be a small detail that could signal another queer person. He feels this way especially about homemade jewelry – as well as accessories. “It’s such an assumption,” he admits, but saw a girl on Instagram say that seeing homemade earrings on a girl means she’s gay. Ryan didn’t think it was true, but now it’s in his subconscious, so “maybe it’s true,” he ponders. He has also noticed other queer people make handmade earrings since – or they “look that way.”

As mentioned previously, he says he is also seeking tattoos “to prevent myself from doing bad things to my body,” which was a greater problem in high school, but is still of concern sometimes nowadays. He believes that not wanting to ruin the body art with scars will prevent those tendencies. He has considered getting something related to Greek Mythology, a personal interest of his, but one of his friends said that he should do something that ties to where he’s from. Ultimately, his planned tattoos all hold significance for him, most related to friends and family, including his mom, though they’ve had their rough patches with his transition and beyond. He wants a tattoo that represents his friends and family, who have supported him in his transition and with mental health issues in high school. His mom is not against his tattoo plans,
but not for them; she simply requests that they be hidden for work, though he argues that tattoos
are becoming less taboo. They’re cool and a good way of expressing oneself, he claims, and can
also “help [a person] go through a grieving process.”

Identifying Others

Someone’s self-fashioning may affect who Ryan talks to and how he labels their
sexuality. For instance, certain brands, like Nike and Adidas, may signal that a guy is straight.
Additionally, a hairstyle that contrasts with the gendered presentation of a person’s clothing can
signal queerness; he is fairly confident that women adopting more masculine and androgynous
stylistic elements may signal a queer identity. However, men are a different story. He recognizes
that there are more guys who have longer hair and are comfortable with it who are straight and is
also unaware of many gay men with feminine haircuts. He believes that gay men embrace
femininity in a different way that’s not through their hairstyle and be through “hints of low-key
femininity in their outfits,” such as a tighter shirt. For women, embracing masculinity can be
revealed through their haircut but is more often in their clothing, while for guys, their hair is a
quick visual indicator for “connecting with masculinity.”

Regarding finding bi/pan people in particular, she states that he would only be able to
identify them if they had a bi/pan flag on their backpack.

Finally, in seeking romantic partners, sexuality signaling in clothes may play a role in
who he approaches, but he is more drawn to faces.

Connections

One thing that can be said from the outset is that Ryan is absolutely correct in his notion
of how clothing can have nuanced meaning. As we have seen, even the vibrancy and pattern of a
person’s clothes can indicate whether they are cis, het or queer.

Knowing these nuances, Ryan is clearly struggling to figure out how to navigate identity-
signaling through his self-presentation. What does he want to signal and to whom? What identity
precisely is he going for? Thus, he is a great example of the sometimes thoughtful and
intentional motivations behind a person’s appearance – the mindset that this study is trying to tap
into.

It is clear that his current stylistic attempts to appear more masculine are following along
the boundaries of cis, het male style in his move to muted colors, projecting the potentially
straight image that he is indecisive about pursuing.

Conversely, the blues and blacks that he has been adopting are more indicative of an
alternative, androgynous style, with the patterns he plans to add potentially causing him to stand
out as queer (which he claims he would like). He makes great mention of androgyny, which, of
course, is a staple in alternative communities (e.g. emo, punk, goth) and even admits to having
wanted snake bite piercings – an undeniably emo style. Thus, he is somewhat adhering to the
communities that have historically been welcoming of bi/pan people.

He describes women’s adoption of more masculine and androgynous stylistic elements as
signaling a queer identity, and in that sense, is of the same mindset of many respondents.
However, again, the data have shown that there is tremendous overlap in non-queer and queer
female style. He is correct, however, in stating that there are guys who have longer hair who are
straight, which aligns with the survey findings – albeit a small sample of cis, het men who had
long hair. Ryan also follows the trend of respondents who say that gay men express femininity in
their outfits; yet, they did not end up varying notably from their cis, het peers in the survey.
He also mentions some specific accessories he’s begun using, such as converse – which have been mentioned by Skylar as stereotypically queer – and Doc Martens. It is interesting that he describes Doc Martens as “masculine,” as they have come up in the edges throughout this investigation among interviewees and respondents as a marker of queerness.

Furthermore, he remarks that he had thought of getting a tattoo related to Greek mythology, which is what Logan has been planning as well, and which is the same type of tattoo that fems – of the butch-fem dichotomy of the 30s-60s – used to get.

It is also interesting that he connects specifically homemade earrings to the queer community. Perhaps the way that a person can tell if the earrings are “homemade” if they can’t be found in stores, conceivably because they use unconventional materials, which would then go along with the idea that lesbians and bi women wear unusual earrings. However, this seems distinct from what he means by him wearing dangly earrings being queer, as that would simply be a feminine item on a man, which would signal queerness.

Possibly most notably, Ryan says that he could only spot a bi/pan person if they had a bi/pan pride flag on them. That contributes to the notion that bi people are not easily identifiable.

Label Use Overall

As we have seen all of the interviewees, be it trans, genderqueer, nonbinary, or cis, do not embrace labels for their sexual orientation or, rather, choose more vague ones. This finding aligns with the tendency of many celebrities (as explained earlier), and may partially affirm the idea that lack of labeling is accountable for why many respondents are unsure of what bi people look like.

What Bis Online and in Popular Media Are Wearing

Now that we have heard from respondents regarding their perceptions of bi people and received testimony from five bi people themselves about their own styles, experiences, and how they read others’ sexualities from their self-presentation, we shall examine how bi people beyond UVM – online – are styling themselves.
In a previously mentioned YouTube video (in the section on straight, trans men), male-presenting trans people all sit together on a bed to share their experiences (Jay 2017). One, named Hunter, is a bi trans man and has [what seems to be naturally] black, close-cropped hair that’s shorter on the back and sides, and looks like a traditionally masculine haircut. He dons a California-themed shirt on. Overall, he does not stick out as bi.

A more in-depth glimpse of a bi male-presenting person online can be found in YouTuber Abigail Thorn’s video titled “Queer✨| Philosophy Tube.” Firstly, Abigail used to identify as a man, as she did at the time of my writing of this section, which is how she presents in this video. Though she now identifies as female, it is possible that the presentation of a bi man in this video could still be said to be authentic and accurate, as she seemed to believe that she was a man at the time she filmed. Similarly, I would argue that my presentation as a bi woman before realizing I was a man could also be said to accurately reflect the stylistic choices of that identity. In said video, she comes out as bi, changes outfits and accessories over the course of the video, offering a generous sense of her wardrobe, and further, actually presents outfits with nuanced differences and explains which signal a straight identity versus a bi one.

In the video, perhaps in coming to terms with her queer sexual identity, Thorn describes how she was only able to find representation for bi white American women, perhaps in search of other bi male icons to serve as role models of a sort. Statistically, this is unsurprising, as there are more bi women than men: bi women compose 33% of the queer community, whereas bi men compose 19%. This is exactly what I found in viewing the TikTok compilation video that you will see later: there were significantly fewer bi male users included.

Thorn then goes on to claim that she developed her style and mannerisms in a straight environment, so she’s “straight-passing,” but also explained that “When I finally admitted to myself that I was capable of being attracted to men, I felt a sudden, inexplicable need to change the way I dress.” It is worth noting that he describes this “need” as “inexplicable,” not driven by a conscious desire to appeal to men or to signal difference from the cis, het norm. The outfits she showcases below may entail the precise ways in which her style shifted.
Here, the only difference between the first look and the next is silver vs. black shoes, two rings, and a more relaxed look – her hair is tossed instead of being tightly slicked back, her tie is looser, and her collar is not buttoned at the very top. The rings may be a cue in that she has several instead of just one, as 2.0% of respondents predicted that bi men would have “a lot” of jewelry. Similarly, the signature look of David Rose, a bi character on Schitt’s Creek (2015-2020) is four rings on her left hand. Additionally, a peer of mine told me that upon her brother coming out as bi, he started wearing rings. This could simply be an indication of comfort with one’s masculinity, which some respondents attribute to queer men, and/or could derive from queer men breaking one norm by having a queer sexuality and subsequently being less hesitant to break a gendered norm. The silver shoes also seem nonnormative, which in itself, could suggest that a man is not cis and het. Perhaps they could be seen as fitting the “glitter of glam rock” or the “over-the-top clothes and make-up” of the gay punk look (Cole 2000). Letting her hair flow out in a relaxed manner also makes it seem longer – not close-cropped, which could be more of a nod towards androgyny – nearly a synonym with bisexuality. The more relaxed look may also offer more of a Rockstar aesthetic, projecting the image of not caring so much about conventions of dress and the shirt-and-tie uniform of corporate America.
These next two looks vary only in the color of her shirt, her type of boots, and her hair. Again, her hair is more relaxed/tousled, giving an androgynous punk/Rockstar vibe. The bright pink of her shirt aligns precisely with what respondents have said about cis, het men sticking to more dull/muted colors, clothing that doesn’t stand out, with queer men being more comfortable with wearing such clothes. The leather jacket suggests affiliation with alternative culture communities (e.g. emo, punk, goth), but those have clear ties to queer sexualities, not specifically bi identities. However, internet subcultures have come to associate bi people with leather jackets, as is evidenced by a Brooklyn-99-themed meme shown later. Also, cowboy boots seem a mismatch for this outfit, which could potentially be a signal of bisexuality according to the screenshotted forum conversation near the top of the chapter and some respondents who associate blending different styles together with bisexuality.

These two ensembles are especially similar with the only differentiating factor being the cowboy boots and tousled hair (though she is wearing rings, but doesn’t mention them). The boots, again, do not bode well with the outfit, evidencing why Thorn calls it a disaster, and fulfilling the stereotype of bi people mixing styles. She wears flannel in both, which was predicted by 2.0% of respondents as a signifier for bi men and not predicted for cis, het men at all, yet 64% of cis, het men wear it. Clearly, she demonstrates that a straight man can wear it too, but it may have more of a bisexual meaning if she layered it over the cardigan or a hoodie, rather, again, as shown in a meme that will follow. It is worth noting that, though she says the flannel was “stolen from [her] ex,” that does not offer any indication of his ex’s gender, based on the findings from this research.

Lastly, Thorn walks on camera in black Calvin Klein boxers with a pink elastic top, which she proclaims are “definitely bisexual.” The pink likely signals queer, but because the boxers are not entirely pink and colorful, they are more of a middle ground or mix of traditionally cis, het and gay style, they become bisexual.

Throughout the various scenes of the video, she goes on to wear a black formal vest over a black leather (or pleather) shirt with a silvery white tie; makeup at some parts (full face, not just eyeliner); up to three rings on one hand – one of which happens to be a snake wrapped around her finger; a silver wrap bracelet; silver leather shoes (like she mentions from one of the
ensembles); and at one point, a shirt that’s a pink and black checkerboard pattern made of sequins under a purple blazer. Her overall heavy use of accessories goes on to effect a bi aesthetic, the leather signals the “alt” communities once again – with the silver tie and shoes, flamboyant sequin shirt, and full-face makeup hinting at the historically bisexual glam rock. She also mentions wanting to have played Dracula in a play – a vampire, which many people perceive as androgynous and bisexual, as earlier noted. Hence, she does well in sticking to bi modes of dress in what is essentially his coming out video.

After her fashion show, she clarifies, “The fact that some of these looks seem bisexual to me is ‘cause they’re part of fashion games that I’ve seen other people play. There’s nothing about these looks that’s transcendentally bisexual.” Though of course, they do transcend several decades of subcultures and fashion, as we can assure.

**Memes**

In this first meme, referenced above, we see a few different possibly styles for bis. They signal bisexuality on their own, as well as when they can all come together.

Another meme connects bisexuality with leather jackets. A handshake is shown with the word “bisexuals” superimposed over one arm, “motorcycle gangs” superimposed over the second, and the palms together are labeled “leather jackets” (@i_want_to_bi_inside 2019). Leather jackets have been worn in punk circles, which are associated with queerness, not specifically bisexuals, as well as among the gay leathermen and leatherdykes. Hence, it is unclear why this would be a specifically bisexual look, though I, too, personally judge it as such. Note also that all three of these items are androgynous – commonly worn by any gender, neither definitively masculine nor feminine.

Additionally, a meme by @sixofcrows on Instagram (@sixofcrows 2017) proclaims that “cuffing ur jeans and tucking in baggy shirts is bisexual culture,” not unlike what Pitre came across on Twitter, but with the added element of tucking in one’s shirt. Pitre (2018) clarifies that this tuck is only in the front and was coined “the French tuck” by *Queer Eye’s* Tan France (perhaps earning its name from the creator’s last name).

Likewise, an Instagram photo is captioned “the Bisexual girl” at the top and depicts black combat boots; a skateboard; an oversized denim jacket; baggy, high-waisted jeans, high-waisted jeans with a white crop top; and a sticker with the bi flag and the word “Pride” above it (@bisexualityyyx 2019). The skateboard connects with what Skylar and Ella have said about skater girls being queer (though not specifically bisexual), the combat boots draws from the [queer] punk subculture, the oversized style element reflects the prediction of 3.9% of respondents that bi women wear less-fitted/baggy clothing, and the two respondents also
mentioned the notion of bi women wearing baggy pants with a smaller top – one of whom explicitly said a “crop top.”

**TikTok Clips**

I then watched a TikTok compilation video on YouTube (Zaki 2020) that solely featured videos related to bisexuality.

**Female-Presenting TikTok User**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TikTok User</th>
<th>Presentation/Notable Video Elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>@kaithebug</td>
<td>says they want to propose to girls with <em>septum</em> piercings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@aidan.frannie</td>
<td>beanie; faded, <em>oversized</em> t-shirt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@itslilyrose</td>
<td>beanie, striped <em>polo shirt</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@itsbonic</td>
<td><em>thick, winged eyeliner, t-shirt over sweatshirt, nose ring</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@aria_hroma</td>
<td>[Long bob with bangs]. Her hair is <em>shoulder-length</em> and she has burgundy <em>dye</em> up until an inch below her ear lobes, then her hair is a natural dirty blond; [Cuffed jeans and <em>converse</em>], [rolled up sleeves], <em>pink eyeshadow</em> and <em>black eyeliner on top lid</em>, has <em>baggy top tucked into tight high-waisted pants</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@grrraysea</td>
<td>Punk woman: three <em>eyebrow slits</em>, half of hair (up to part) is <em>black</em>, half is blond, <em>septum</em> barbell piercing (says “you know how” girls who get a piercing on the right are straight and on the left are gay (though it’s the reverses), then shows her nose piercing that goes between both nostrils – a <em>bracelet-like line of jewels that crosses over top of their nose</em>), <em>chipped nail polish</em> on long nails, <em>thick eyeliner that’s winged on top lid, heavy mascara</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@porttgass</td>
<td><em>oversized t-shirt tucked in front</em> of tight <em>high-waisted</em> pants, long <em>chain necklace</em> that goes to their pants waist, <em>chocker</em> (thick chain with big loop at center), <em>ombre of salmon and fuchsia</em> up to bleach blonde hair, <em>chipped black nail polish</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@dandylionelf</td>
<td><em>round, wire glasses; septum</em> barbell piercing; <em>thick, winged eyeliner</em> on upper lid; short/close-cropped/undercut with red dye, big knit sweater*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@anna_e_dunn</td>
<td><em>black, round glasses</em> with a <em>bob, fitted</em> floral print shirt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@mikajayc</td>
<td><em>thick eyeliner</em> on top lid with <em>heavy mascara, chain necklace, oversized</em> sweater <em>tucked</em> into <em>high-waisted</em> tight pants, <em>wallet chain</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@lyrik_sadira</td>
<td>fitted white <em>t-shirt tucked in front of sweatpants</em>, long, painted nails</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@gnomegnoise</td>
<td>plaid, <em>fitted shirt, with grey scarf and grey beanie</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@nicoleismegasad</td>
<td><em>Emo woman: lip ring; aqua hair dye; line tattooed across bridge of nose; thick, winged eyeliner</em> on top lid with mascara on outer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From these users, we can see themes of septum piercings, cuffing, bobs/shoulder-length hair, bangs, dyed hair, high-waisted pants with a shirt tucked solely in the front, thick [sometimes winged] eyeliner, split-dyed hair (one half to the side part dyed a different color), heavy makeup (especially eye makeup/eye shadow), ear gauges, chain necklaces, some baggy clothes, and black lines across two women’s noses (one goth and one emo). Many of these stylistic elements are familiar thus far. Septum piercings were predicted by 2.4% of respondents, cuffing has come up numerous times, 3.9% of respondents expect bi women to have mid-length hair with 1.5% expecting a bob, 7.8% associated bi women with dyed hair and 2.9% with loud makeup. Of course, the loud makeup and dyed hair could be related to alternative culture, such as the goth or punk women who wear excessive makeup to “parody feminine artifice” in order to challenge conventional femininity (Johnson and Barber 2019: 123). This framework may help explain the bold eye makeup and dark lipstick, for instance, while the thick eyeliner may simply be a staple in one type of emo aesthetic among both men and women (if the woman looks more emo than goth or punk). The piercings – including ear gauges – may also be a punk-related stylistic flare. We again see the shirt tucked in the front of high-waisted pants, as mentioned in the memes above. Baggy clothes also show up again, as 3.9% of respondents predicted. Additionally, the video from @jennifrmthblock confirms one assertion of the “Bisexual girl” meme by tying a denim jacket to bi women, as well as the Brooklyn 99 meme by showing a jacket over flannel. Furthermore, we unsurprisingly see various goths, as well as women with chain necklaces, which Skylar has heartily deemed queer. Chain necklaces have also been associated with lesbians, but these are less of a bare, hanging, bulky chain, and usually more of a choker with a big loop as a centerpiece. Chokers are also more associated with the sadomasochist scene, which was historically appropriated by the punk community. We also hear about the
whole right vs. left, gay vs. straight piercing phenomenon again from @grrraysea (though she says the reverse), in showing that she didn’t pierce one nostril, but has a piece of jewelry connecting to piercings on both. This also relates back to Logan’s parents asking her if her nose piercing had the 80s left/right signaling power – on nostrils vs. ear lobes. Additionally, @itsbonic is seen wearing a t-shirt over a sweatshirt, a look that Ella found on TikTok and mentioned trying when experimenting with lesbian looks. Hence, it seems to not be a look limited to lesbians. Lastly, there is curiously one goth woman and one emo woman with black lines on their noses, which could either be eyeliner (as some pictures on Google appear to be) or tattoos. I have found that this is not directly associated with bisexuality. One Reddit forum speculates that it relates to the Wiccan community (u/geumgeumgeum 2020), though some Wiccan Reddit users are unfamiliar with it and instead propose that it might be an appropriation of a Native American practice (u/DankBakerA 2020), which may have some truth to it as some websites celebrate indigenous nose tattoos (“42 Amazing” 2021).

**Male-Presenting TikTok Users**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TikTok User</th>
<th>Presentation/Notable Video Elements [text] = captions in video</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>@cxlum19</td>
<td>short black <strong>running shorts</strong>, tall, <strong>white socks</strong> (Champion brand?), grey workout shirt (Nike)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@cuantosmylesaway</td>
<td><strong>oversized</strong> hoodless sweatshirt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@steve’taff’evans</td>
<td><strong>male-presenting person in late 30s/early 40s</strong>: 3”-long beard/goatee, trucker hat, <strong>fitted</strong> black t-shirt, <strong>tattoo sleeves</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@giacdecastro</td>
<td><strong>overalls, styled hair</strong> with blond <strong>highlights</strong> (he has brown hair) over a <strong>well-fitted</strong> (but not tight) orange t-shirt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@jordz_19</td>
<td>text [Lived as a 100% straight kid for 18 years and a few months] over picture of him posed in a somewhat oversized sports jersey, black skinny jeans, and sneakers, crew-cut-like hair. Walks into frame in front of picture: <strong>now has undercut/side-swept hair, chain necklace</strong> with big loop in the middle, <strong>fitted black t-shirt with black denim</strong> coat over it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@theofficialwitb</td>
<td><strong>chain</strong> with lock pendant, <strong>black</strong> t-shirt, <strong>denim</strong> jacket</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@koelndel</td>
<td><strong>oversized grey PUMA t-shirt</strong> over faded <strong>baggy jeans, short hair</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@luca_scog</td>
<td>black <strong>baseball cap</strong>, black <strong>PUMA sweatshirt</strong>, <strong>short/close-cropped hair</strong>, with <strong>white t-shirt</strong> underneath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@colensotom</td>
<td><strong>undercut, black ring</strong> on right middle finger, beige fitted, synthetic hoodless <strong>sweatshirt</strong>, with <strong>white collar popping through</strong>, short chain <strong>necklace</strong> with small circular** pendant** (about 1” below sweater collar)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Ultimately, none of these men stick out from cis, het men, except for possibly @jordz_19 and @giacdecastro. Both have styled hair and well-fitted shirts (though that of @jordz_19 is tight), which are not expected of cis, het men. Additionally, @giacdecastro is wearing overalls,
which Skylar deems queer, and the combination of side-swept hair with the black associated with punk nihilism (Cole 2000) in both his shirt and coat signal punk, which signals queer, while his necklace signals goth (bi) – since necklaces are a common element among both goth men and women (Brill 2008b). Similarly, perhaps the fact that the coat is denim leans toward bi, based on what we now know. @theofficialwitb has the same outfit as @jordz_19, but because he doesn’t have styled hair and his clothes aren’t tight or well-fitted, he is less likely to stand out as signaling a queer identity. The only element that might garner attention is necklace, which is not the traditionally masculine chain, but a chunky one with a lock – pointing to a goth style. Otherwise, six of the nine TikTok users blend completely in with the cis, het norm, nearly seven since @theofficialwitb’s necklace is not that eye-catching.

The Media

Lastly, some current examples of bi people on TV can be found on the show Sex Education (2019 – present) and Atypical (2017 – present).

Adam and Ola are shown below and both identify as bi. Adam is nearly always seen in some kind of coat over a hoodie, and sometimes with a denim jacket composing one of the layers – a current bi theme that we are seeing. He also is always wearing a necklace with a pendant, varying from the traditionally masculine standard of a bare chain. In general, he looks much like the bi characters in the illustration that accompanies Pitre’s article at the top of the chapter. As for Ola, she has an androgynous style, the traditionally masculine high top fade hairstyle, owns a rainbow shirt, rainbow patch on her denim jacket, and wore a suit to prom with a bow tie. Hence, she represents the androgynous trait of bisexuality, though her fade hairstyle and more masculine clothes could also be associated with lesbianism.

Casey and Izzie are two more bi characters – who are in a relationship – on the show Atypical. Casey has been seen wearing coats over hoodies, denim jackets, and even once layered a brown blazer over a t-shirt. She also wears nondescript tank tops to run and other shirts that could easily be worn by men. Overall, her style could be said to be androgynous, and she has “the bisexual bob.” Therefore, she fits the bi mold that we have seen thus far. Izzie has long hair and is more likely to wear form-fitting, lower cut outfits and usually has on earrings of some sort, usually big hoops, and a necklace. However, she does have some androgynous clothing, like neutral sweatshirts, the occasional beanie, and some oversized sweatshirts as well, though they are usually cropped and, thus, more feminine. She does not meet the bi modes of presentation we are aware of so far, but perhaps because she has the occasional oversized outfit, and a few respondents expect bi women to have less-fitted clothing, that
occasional outfit would signal bisexuality when a cis, het woman might not be expected to even own one such outfit.

Therefore, it seems that there is some congruence of media with the reality of bisexual dress, according to TikTok users and memes from Instagram.

The Survey Results

**Everyday Clothes (Top Six Descriptors):**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Perceived Presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>94%</td>
<td>t-shirts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75%</td>
<td>dull/muted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69%</td>
<td>denim bottoms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63%</td>
<td>cotton, earth tones, gender-conforming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50%</td>
<td>flannel, modest, oversized shirts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Religious head covering</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In looking at bi men’s chosen clothing, nothing especially sticks out from gay or cis, het men. Notably, only the top 44% of gay men were compared with bi men as only descriptors selected by 50% or more of bi men were analyzed; the top six most popular descriptors for gay men went past the half-way point since it was a small group. Nevertheless, “outdoorsy” did not show up for bi men, whereas it did for 67% of gay men. Cuffing was also more popular among gay men, reported by 44% versus a mere 25% for bi men. The prevalence of flannel across men of different sexualities – bis (50%), gays (44%), cis, het (64%) – also defeats the idea that flannel is uniquely bi, though UVM’s crunchy culture and Vermont’s heavy use of flannel could be confounding factors. There was also no mention of androgyny and whereas 44% of gay men thrift, thrifting did not show up within the top six indicators, though it could possibly be associated with emo culture (or simply UVM culture).

**Clothing Effects:**

- blend in - LGBT+ community (if I am a member of it): 44%

**Other motivations for wearing this style of everyday clothing (optional free response):**

- disinterested in clothes (3)
- cost (2)
- practicality (1)
- comfort (1)
- dislike buying clothes (1)
- have given up on desired aesthetic (1)
- for religious reasons (1)
• to make oneself happy (1)
• to be stylish (1)
• to look queer (1)

Motivations for bi men’s self-fashioning aligns with what people expect of cis, het men and which is true for a portion of them (though not an overwhelming majority). Several respondents mention disinterest in clothes, so closely associated with cis, het men that a trans man tried to intentionally style himself that way to look straighter. One person even mentions having given up on their desired aesthetic, though that is slightly different, as it signals desperation that comes from initially caring about one’s self-presentation. Other motivations relate to convenience (cost, practicality, and comfort) – a main reason for cis, het and gay men alike, one is for religious reasons, and the last three show some interest in self-fashioning (to make oneself happy, be stylish, look queer), with only one intentionally dressing this way to look queer. With few trying to look queer, it seems like the preferred style of most does not visually land them in the queer community.

Novel quotes (my emphasis):

“I wear mostly generic clothes but sometimes will wear bright colors because it makes me happy. Pastel shorts are something I wear sometimes because it's a more socially acceptable way to be a little more colorful as a man.”

“I don't put much thought into the clothing that I wear on a daily basis. It is something that I want to change moving forward, but I'm not there yet.”

“They are a good balance of comfort and style in my mind”

“I don't like buying new clothes. My winter wardrobe is a lot of pjs and sweatpants with a sweatshirt.”

“I like to look obviously ‘queer’ with crop tops and high-waisted pants, but usually keep the color scheme limited to black or earth tones. Most of my clothes are thrifted and then personally altered to fit my taste. I look like almost any other grungy gay hipster from the pacific northwest.”

“I appear academic. I have given up on dressing in a way that pleases me because I am trans and my body can't carry the things I want to wear in a way that aligns with my ideal of male beauty.”

The first comment acknowledges the restraints on male expression and how wearing colorful clothes can cause a man to stick out in a negative, socially unacceptable way. Likely, the respondent means that he would seem gay if he dressed as brightly as he wanted to, but as he is bi, it is unclear why he would be upset with projecting that image. Perhaps he foresees mistreatment and questioning of his masculinity, and/or does not want to alienate women as romantic partners by causing them to perceive him as gay.
The next three respondents demonstrate the idea of men not caring about fashion, though it is interesting that the first one wants to be more fashion savvy. The first one and third one are complete contrasts, and ring familiar, replicating the cases of a cis, het man who wanted to look more put-together to differentiate himself from those he sees in dining halls always in sweatpants.

The next comment then comes from the respondent who explicitly wants to look queer. He mentions wearing crop tops, which shows skin, is more feminine, and which 2.4% of respondents expect to see in gay men (though none wear them). High-waisted pants, on the other hand, are also commonly seen among women, and seldom men – in my experience. They could potentially be used by this respondent to make his butt look good, as was Caleb’s motivation. He seems to acknowledge bright colors as being more feminine and queerer like the earlier commenter, as he lists these two items and then says, “but [I] usually keep the color scheme limited to black or earth tones” (my emphasis). He also admits to thrifting and seems to dress like hipsters, the precise people one respondent credits with bi-erasure, due to the ambiguity they create in presenting a person’s sexual orientation.

The last commenter seems crestfallen and apparently enjoys fashion, but has become exhausted by the struggle to effectively conform to the gender identity that they are transitioning into. Hence, this person’s styling issues have more to do with their gender identity than sexual orientation, it seems.

**Bi Women**

Here, I have included more than the top six clothing descriptors in order to capture what the majority of bi women selected.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Perceived Presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>83%</td>
<td>t-shirts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79%</td>
<td>denim bottoms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76%</td>
<td>high-waisted pants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74%</td>
<td>dull/muted, thrifted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73%</td>
<td>cotton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71%</td>
<td>long-sleeve shirts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68%</td>
<td>baggy sweatshirts, earth tones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62%</td>
<td>flannel, oversized shirts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60%</td>
<td>cuffed pants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59%</td>
<td>crop tops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56%</td>
<td>tight bottoms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55%</td>
<td>gender-conforming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54%</td>
<td>common patterns, outdoorsy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53%</td>
<td>oversized bottoms, tight shirts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (4)</td>
<td>• Shawls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “thrifted leather jacket, Ugg boots or Adidas sneakers, some fun patterned socks, Birkenstocks, mask always matches with my outfit”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Sustainably-made</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In comparison to lesbians (55%), bi women are slightly more likely to cuff their pants (60%), nevertheless further validating cuffing as a queer practice (also practiced by 44% of gay men). They also thrift more than lesbians, 74% doing so versus 55% for lesbians, which a few respondents described as part of the “bisexual look.” Nonetheless, 50% of cis, het women thrift as well. One might argue that this ties to emo practices, but emo groups are broadly queer and thrifting is also a widespread UVM trend. Intriguingly, they are also more likely to wear less-fitted/baggy clothing than lesbians; though only 68% wear baggy sweatshirts while this number is 70% for lesbians, they also wear oversized bottoms (53%) and oversized shirts (62%). However, 56% are also likely to wear tight bottoms, 53% a tight shirt, and 59% a crop top, whereas the “tight” descriptor and crop tops did not come up among lesbian respondents. These articles of clothing may fulfill the notion that a bi woman wears a baggy shirt tucked into tight, high-waisted pants – which 76% wear – or pairs a tight shirt – like a crop top – with baggy or flowy pants. It should also be noted that lesbians and cis, het women wear high-waisted pants as well, though fewer – 60% and 63%, respectively. Though bi women are more likely to wear baggy clothing, the fact that they may pair it with tight and revealing articles of clothing suggests an attempt to appeal to the male gaze, but with less concerted effort than cis, het women, who are more likely to wear tight clothing (tight bottoms (63%)) and traditionally feminine outfits (dresses (63%), skirts (50%), and pastel colors (54%) vs. dull/muted colors for bi women (74%)). Yet, intriguingly, crop tops and tight shirts do not show up for cis, het women, and 54% of them are also likely to wear oversized shirts and 75% wear baggy sweatshirts. This could suggest not always appealing to the male gaze, having outfits that achieve different effects. Additionally, cis, het women also identify their style as “outdoorsy” (67%), though slightly more often than bi women (54%), affirming Skylar and Ella’s beliefs that UVM is simply crunchy/granola across sexualities. Notably, lesbians do not classify their style this way. The much-discussed flannel also comes up again, with bi women’s use of it being intermediate between lesbians and cis, het women, as 62% of bi women wear it versus 75% of lesbians and 62% of cis, het women. It seems to be more of a historical staple for lesbians and a more recent internet trend for bi women, which could explain its decreased use among the latter population. Bi women also may not want to accidentally signal that they’re lesbians, so they may be less likely to wear it, if not in the “ultimate bi” layered context from the previous meme. They also have other means to signal their identity, such as via the “bisexual bob,” “French tuck,” and tight-pants-baggy-shirt or tight-shirt-baggy-pants combos. The clothing elements that weren’t reported must also be acknowledged, as hoodies/sweatshirts did not show up other than baggy sweatshirts, denim jackets did not come up – though 50% of cis, het women report wearing them, and there was only one mention of a leather jacket. Perhaps most importantly, androgyny did not come up at all, whereas 55% of lesbians reported it as a descriptor of their style.

**Clothing Effects:**
- **blend in - LGBT+ community (if I am a member of it):** 67%

**Other motivations for wearing this style of everyday clothing (optional free response):**

*Note: bi women are the largest group in this study and were also possibly the most generous in offering the motivations for their choice of clothing, so more data is available in this respect in comparison to other groups.*
In looking at bi women’s motivation for their mode of dress, a few themes emerge. For one, comfort is the top motivator, mirroring trends for lesbians and cis, het women. Correspondingly, convenience is the most-cited theme (for comfort (16) and warmth (2), to wear till worn out (1), for practical use (1), to hide body parts one is insecure about (1)). Next is the desire to make a good impression overall (to look professional (6), put-together (3), humble/non-pretentious (1), approachable (2), clean (2), stylish (1), serious (1), modest (2), good (2)). Queer influence also emerges, with some respondents reportedly varying the gender of their clothing based on their mood (3) and trying to look butch (2) or queer (3). The alternating gender of some respondents’ outfits suggests an androgynous style from viewing their overall wardrobe, though they may not necessarily wear gender-neutral clothes or mix masculine and feminine elements. The following theme comprises attracting others (look queer (2), butch (2), attractive (1), accentuate certain body parts (1)), tied with the motivation to look unique and express oneself (to appear artsy (1), quirky (1), interesting (1), express self (2), outdoorsy (1)). The last theme involves styling done for oneself (to feel confident (3), to feel good (1), based on mood (1)). Therefore, it seems that after convenience, bi women prioritize others’ perceptions in their self-styling, opposed to their own personal interests. This mirrors cis, het women’s practices, which are catered to the observer other than the few who claim to care about comfort, whereas lesbians use fashion more for themselves than others, with convenience also having great bearing on their looks.

Regardless of the intentions for their style a majority (67%) of bi women believe that their aesthetic fits in with the queer community.

**Novel quotes (my emphasis):**

- comfort (16)
  - comfort over style (2)
- to look professional (6)
- to feel confident (3)
- to appear put together (3)
- gender of clothing changes based on mood (3)
- to appear clean (2)
- to look approachable (2)
- to make a good impression (2)
- to look good (2)
- to look queer (2)
- to look butch (2)
- for warmth (2)
- to look modest (2)
- to express self (2)
- to feel good (1)
- to appear artsy (1)

- to have fun (with mixing and matching clothes) (1)
- to look quirky (1)
- to look interesting (1)
- to look stylish (1)
- to look cool (1)
- to look tough (1)
- for practical use (1)
- to appear outdoorsy (1)
- to appear humble/non-pretentious (1)
- cost (1)
- to wear clothes until worn out (1)
- to dress in cultural clothes (1)
- to look serious (1)
- to look attractive (1)
- based on mood (1)
- to hide body parts one is insecure about (1)
- to accentuate certain body parts (1)
“I just wear the things I have in my closet. I prefer comfort over fashion, but I feel like I dress like any other person in Burlington. I don’t make statements or splashes with my clothing.”

“I have different styles, it really changes for what I am feeling that day. Some days I look more feminine in dresses and other days I look more masculine in dad jeans and an oversized shirt.”

“I feel like I try to dress ‘queer’ sometimes (baggy jeans and button down shirts, etc), and other times I dress more basically (leggings/baggy T shirt/jeans).”

“I feel that I wake up each day and have different desires for how I want to be perceived / what I’ll feel most comfortable wearing. I very much believe that gender expression/presentation is a fluid thing that can change drastically day to day.”

“My style cycles between very feminine dresses and very grunge, punk styles with plaid skirts, fishnets, black converse/doc martens, etc. This is just because it’s my personal style, and I feel unlike myself in anything else.”

“I want people to think I’m attractive, but I also want to feel confident in what I’m wearing. I want to feel good about my outfit if other people will see me. I also like to wear fun earrings, because they add some jazz!”

“One choice I wanted to add to the above list was ‘Leather’. I ride a motorcycle and so during summer months, my outfit will accommodate that. Even come winter time, I’ll still frequently wear my riding boots and leather jackets. I like the look of leather in addition to its protective value on the road. It helps me to feel more tough and butchy, as well.”

“I mostly dress for comfort but I also try to not ‘look straight’. This is obviously stereotyping a lot but by this I mean that I would ideally be recognized as a Queer woman by the way I dress. I do not dress very femininely and like to wear a lot of men’s clothing.”

“I wear a lot of black, grey, dark red, and dark green. This is mostly because I am a pretty friendly person, but I like to be able to look serious and to be able to move/fight if need be.”

“I really do not like to appear classically feminine in most scenarios, or I do, I would rather look like a young lady rather than a teenage girl. I prefer to be modest and not showy, because frankly I’d rather not be stared at like an object. I’d rather make an impression with how I act, rather than drawing attention to my body.”

The first comment reminds us of the ubiquity of a certain style across Burlington, as well as the UVM campus, which has been credited with the lack of distinction in female dress across sexualities.

The next three quotes exhibit gender presentation changing by the day with two people intentionally changing their presentation based on how they want to be perceived by others (though comfort can also be a factor), though internal fluctuating feelings of gender can also guide two of them. Notably, one wants to signal queerness based on the day, contrasting that look with a “basic” look, which may be in reference to what the “typical” [cis, het] woman
wears; it should be noted that such an outfit can include both tight (leggings) and baggy clothing (a baggy t-shirt), as can a bi woman’s outfit.

Following, one woman claims to dress in a “very feminine” manner, which might cause her to look like a fem lesbian or cis, het woman. She also describes explicitly punk styles, which are, of course, queer-associated. Yet, she does not mention wanting to explicitly look queer; these choices are just expressions of her “personal style.”

Subsequently, we see both external and internal motivations for one’s stylings, as well as use of “fun earrings,” which were expected for bi women by 4.4% of respondents, also seen as a lesbian signifier by 5.9%.

After that, a respondent describes the power of her leather jacket to make her feel more masculine (“butchy”), which rings of the punk community as well as “leatherdykes” [lesbians] of the 80s who coopted gay men’s letherman look, which was modeled after the style of masculine figures such as military and police officers and motorcycle gang members (Karaminas 2013: 198). This desired masculinity might serve as a signal to other queer women and/or a partial rejection of the male gaze – situating her as a masculine person to look at a woman, not as someone to be looked at. The subsequent woman then aims to look masculine to explicitly signal queerness.

Similarly, the following respondent associates a more masculine look – created by dull/muted colors and earth tones – with looking “serious” and being “able to move/fight if need be.” The use of black also bears resemblance to the practices of goth Vampire Fans, who use it to create an alternative femininity.

Lastly, we see direct defiance of the male gaze by a woman expressing her desire to look modest.

**Bi Nonbinary People**

In exploring the styling of this next group, it is worth noting that 9/14 (64%) were assigned female at birth, which is important in understanding which gender roles they were socialized in. Thus, this portion of the group may be more comfortable wearing traditionally feminine things, whereas the five assigned male at birth in the group may have been shamed for showing displays of femininity and could still face dire social consequences (potentially endangering their bodily safety) for breaking gender norms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Perceived Presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td>androgynous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93%</td>
<td>thrifty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>86%</td>
<td>t-shirts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79%</td>
<td>long-sleeve shirts, dull/muted, <strong>baggy sweatshirts</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71%</td>
<td>cotton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64%</td>
<td><strong>oversized shirts, tight bottoms</strong>, earth tones, denim bottoms, <strong>high-waisted pants, gender-non-conforming, cuffed pants</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57%</td>
<td>Flannel, common patterns, <strong>modest, crop tops</strong>, sweatpants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50%</td>
<td>turtlenecks, <strong>overalls</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Firstly, it must be addressed that all of the nonbinary respondents claim to have androgynous style. This could potentially be due to the way they define their gender identity – as
neither male nor female, or a mixture of both (though the spectrum of nonbinary identity spans far and wide). However, this descriptor is not universally chosen by nonbinary people in the study. Though all ace and aro respondents, as we shall see in the next chapter, describe themselves as such, only two out of the three femme gynephile nonbinary people identify with this term. Intriguingly, despite the unanimous identification of androgynous for bi nonbinary people, only 64% report being gender-non-conforming, likely in reference to the gender they were assigned at birth. This might either be because they are, overall, more female- or male-presenting than genderless, but that their style comprises elements that are commonly worn by both men and women. Additionally, 64% were also assigned female at birth and women, as discussed, have a wider range of stylistic freedom than men being able to wear more androgynous or masculine elements than men can of feminine items. Continuing on down the list, bi nonbinary people seem to thrift more than any other group. This might be a way for them to buy clothing intended for genders different than the one they present as (e.g. female-presenting, despite their identity) without having to cross into different gendered sections of department stores, facing judgmental looks from onlookers. Conversely, many thrift stores mix clothing together, regardless of the genders they were “made for.” Baggy sweatshirts are the next most common item, used by 79%, which could offer gender ambiguity for female-presenting people who want to hide their chest to prevent people from assuming that they’re women. This could be the same motivation for the 64% who wear oversized shirts and the 57% who claim to dress modestly. Conversely, male-presenting people may not want people to assume that they don’t have breasts. Following, we see more tight and revealing clothing like tight bottoms (64%) and crop tops (57%) which wouldn’t make female-presenting nonbinary people stand out, but the crop tops would give male-presenting nonbinary people a more gender-bending appearance and the tight pants may make them appear gay (based on the perceptions of 9.3% of respondents). Cuffing then rears its head again, practiced by 64%, as compared to 60% of bi women and no bi men. Flannel then appears to be worn by over half (57%), versus 62% of bi women and 50% of bi men. Overalls also seem to be a stylistic element, which again, Skylar calls queer.

**Clothing Effects:**
- blend in - LGBT+ community (if I am a member of it): 71%

**Other motivations for wearing this style of everyday clothing (optional free response):**
- comfort over fashion (2)
- to **minimize** dysphoria (2)
- to show personality (2)
- to signal queerness (to attract romantic attention) (1)

Bi nonbinary people seem to also prioritize comfort in their style, which can extend to the mental – vs. physical – comfort of reducing gender dysphoria, a sense of discomfort and distress resulting from a disconnect between a person’s body and their gender (e.g. having breasts but feeling like a more masculine nonbinary person). This motivation gives backing to the notion that baggy clothing might be used to obscure one’s chest. Further, one person notes wanting to signal queerness to attract a romantic partner.

**Novel responses (my emphasis):**
“I like to express my aesthetic visually. (moody, artsy, creative, dark, mysterious, etc.)”

“Comfy, spooky.”

“Some of my clothes are also cultural and therefore stand out with brighter colours and patterns.”

The first two comments seem to want to project a gothic image of being “dark, mysterious,” or “spooky,” as well as transmit their personalities in general, and the last comment seems to show how meanings associated with colors and their vibrancy can vary cross-culturally. This person’s home country (or that of their parents) may not have a cultural connection between bright colors and femininity and, thus, the sexual orientation those color – or their absence – might suggest.

Accessories (Top Five):

Average number of each type per person.

**Bi Men**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Average per Person</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>finger rings</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bracelets</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>earrings</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>baseball caps, beanie/knit hats, name-brand sneakers</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hair bands</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Thorn predicted, and aligning with David Rose’s aesthetic and the story of my peer’s bi brother adopting them upon coming out, rings are seen among bi men (0.75), and slightly more often than in the gay male community (0.67); again, they are not seen among cis, het men. Bracelet also seems more common (0.69) for bi men than among gay men (0.67) and cis, het men (0.32); as well as earrings (0.56) vs. 0.23 for cis, het men and four cases of single-lobe piercings among gay men (two for the right ear lobe pierced once and two for the left ear lobe pierced once) – averaging to 0.44 for the group; and this is the same case for beanies – with bi men averaging 0.44 vs. 0.27 for cis, het men and none for gay men. Ella claims that beanies signal bisexuality for girls – especially skater girls, but only 0.98% of respondents associate them with bi men. Bi men then sit between cis, het men and gay men in their use of name-brand sneakers at 0.44, versus 0.55 for cis, het men and 0.33 for gay men. Sneakers may create more of an athletic aesthetic, which then slightly aligns with the fact that fewer respondents predicted that bi men wouldn’t look “sporty”/be seen in athletic clothes (1.5%) than gay men (2.9%). Finally, baseball caps – which can project the macho, gangster vibes of a rapper, much like a chain – are surprisingly more plentiful among bi and gay men than straight men: 0.44 for bi and gay men and 0.32 for cis, het men. The possible reasoning for this [personally] unexpected finding could be that a backwards hat could offer a queer man a sense of masculinity if he feels that his presentation (e.g. mannerisms, clothing) are otherwise feminine, and he wants to reclaim some masculinity. Ben Kawaller (2017), writer for the queer publication Advocate, explains his masculinizing experience in starting to wear a backwards hat.
“Well, I did it: I’m masc now. For years I languished, a decidedly cheaper cut of meat, reeking of homosexuality, powerless to satisfy anyone in the market for a real man. Then I became masc, and the men who once ignored me now treat me like a queen.” The look conveyed the message, “I’m a guy and I like guy things, like the people who play on the sports team on my head.”...when you look at me, you see a man. It’s a fantastic illusion.”

Therefore, queer men may be trying to achieve that look. I personally wear a backwards hat, as previously mentioned, ironically, because I think it’s funny to make claims about masculinity while wearing super sparkly jewelry and colorful outfits. It is also possible that other queer men have motivations similar to mine. Finally, we see that bi men use hairbands, unlike any other men, which might be to hold back the longer hair that they are expected to have. This could potentially mean that some don man buns, a style also closely associated with the Hipster community, which, again, one respondent believes erases bisexuality due to its cis, het male membership.

**Bi Women**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accessory</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>earrings</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>finger rings</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hair bands</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>necklaces</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bracelets</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clearly, bi women (3.5) wear remarkably more earrings than cis, het (2.5) and lesbian women (2.1). One respondent’s hypothesis that bi women may try to accommodate for their identity’s invisibility by making their appearance more conspicuous, e.g. through getting more piercings, may be relevant here. Conversely, bi women (1.8) are on par with cis, het women (1.7) for finger rings, with slightly more than lesbians (1.2), maybe signifying lesbians have somewhat fewer traditionally feminine accessories; though bi men may wear rings, it is likely precisely because rings are considered feminine that a man looks bi when wearing them. Bi women (0.94), cis, het women (0.92), and lesbians (0.85) seem to then be nearly on the same page with necklaces, while bi women (0.78) have slightly fewer bracelets than lesbians (0.90) and cis, het women (0.78). Additionally, bi women (1.0) and cis, het women (0.96) have more hairbands than lesbians (0.55), perhaps signifying that they are more likely to have hair long enough to need a hairband, whereas 45% of lesbians report having an “uncommon haircut,” all of which are bob-length (2) or shorter.

**Bi Nonbinary People**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accessory</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>finger rings</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bracelets</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>earrings</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beanie/knit hat, name-brand sneakers, baseball caps</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>necklaces</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This group has an intermediate number of rings (0.86) between bi men (0.75) and women (1.8), and wear more bracelets (0.79) than both groups – though only slightly more than women (0.78) – with bi men having 0.69. They also have an intermediate amount of earrings (0.64), though far closer to the number worn by men (0.56) than women (3.5). Similarly, they wear baseball caps, beanies/knit hats, and name-brand sneakers (0.50) like bi men (0.44), but unlike bi women. They notably wear fewer necklaces (0.43) than bi women (0.94), and bi men wear none. Lastly, they do not use hairbands like some bi men and women. Hence, their accessory use seems to more closely parallel that of bi men than women, which may be due to the fact that many were assigned female at birth, and exhibiting a gender other than female may entail having fewer typically female accessories.

**Body Modifications (Top Six):**

L = left, R = right, number = number of piercings

**Bi Men**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>44%</th>
<th>R ear lobe 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31%</td>
<td>Dyed hair, L ear lobe 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19%</td>
<td>1-3 tattoos, uncommon haircut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13%</td>
<td>R ear cartilage, 1 tattoo only, undercut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>R ear lobe 2+ (0.06), L ear cartilage (0.06), nose ring (0.06), septum ring (0.06), septum curved barbel (0.06), L ear gauge (0.06), R ear gauge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other</strong> (1)</td>
<td>Subdermal implant (functional, doesn't visually stand out).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Uncommon hairstyles (optional free response):**

- Only down to my shoulders now, but I am growing it out. Parted on the side, not the middle. Not dyed.
- My current hair is naturally curly and reaches my jaw with an undercut up to the base of my skull
- Long hair

Notably, bi men have far more body modifications than gay men and, by default, more than cis, het men; gay men only have seven types of modifications and the most people with a given modification was 22% vs. 44% in this case. The most popular body modification among bi men that is embraced by 44% is a single piercing on the right ear lobe, the queer signal (again, “left is right and right is wrong”); comparatively, only 22% of gay men have that given piercing. This may be due to bi men wanting to explicitly express their queerness to those in the know, whereas 44% of gay men report communicating their sexual orientation in other ways or feel that their natural presentation conveys that message and an additional one stating that his “natural body language” is what gives him away. Next, 31% of bi men have a single piercing in their left ear lobe, with only 22% of gay men having this piercing, and all the cis, het men who have an ear piercing (14%) have this piercing, which is the left-ear straight signal. In a similar pattern, bi men are more likely to have dyed hair (31%) and tattoos (1-3 tattoos: 19%) than gay men (11% for dyed hair and 1-3 tattoos) who are more likely to have them than cis, het men (9% for dyed hair and 5% for 1-3 tattoos and 3+ tattoos). The explanation behind this might be that bi men,
too, like bi women (as is hypothesized), may feel the need to make themselves more visible since their identity is invisible in society. Likewise, if they blend in regarding their mannerisms and much of their style preference – like the male-presenting TikTok users who could arguably not be differentiated from straight men – they may need something more unusual to stand out, like dyed hair, tattoos, or piercings. Again, intentions versus the actual effect their appearance has may be different, as 7.3% of respondents judge gay men to have dyed hair vs. 5.4% for bi men and 6.8% expect gay men to have piercings, compared to 7.3% for bi men. Some bi men then report having long hair – a total of 19% report having an “uncommon haircut” in general, compared to 11% of gay men, none of whom have long hair. This demonstrates a more androgynous look for bi men regarding their hair than gay men, perhaps tying bi men to goth or punk culture, as well as providing the opportunity for a man Hipster-esque man bun. Conversely, gay men are more likely to have undercuts (22%) than bi (13%) and cis, het men (9%).

A small number of bi men also seem to have a smattering of more unusual piercings, unseen in gay and cis, het men (except for the nose ring in cis, het men): 6.0% have 2+ piercings on their right lobe, a left ear cartilage piercing, nose ring (vs. 5.0% for cis, het men), septum ring, septum curved barbel, L ear gauge, and R ear gauge. This collection of nonnormative piercings suggests a punk vibe.

**Intentions of Body Modifications:**

- I feel that my body modifications do not cause me to stand out (6, 38%)
- Some of my body modifications cause me to stand out, which was not my intention (3, 19%)
- I got all of my body modifications to intentionally stand out from others (1, 6.0%)
- I got at least some of my body modifications to intentionally stand out from others (1, 6.0%)

**Mods to stand out (optional free response):**

- Dyed hair
- Nose ring
- in high school I always had dyed hair to stand out in my conservative Christian private school
- The earring. I wanted that connection to the 90s trend of MLM piercing the right ear only.

**Motivations to get mods (optional free response):**

- to feel good (2)
- thinks they look cool (2)
- to be rebellious (1)
- likes aesthetic (1)
- to have fun (1)
- to look good (1)
- have symbolic meaning (1)

Overall, the vast majority – 57% – of bi men’s body modifications were not meant to stand out, with only two respondents wanting at least some of their modifications to cause them to
stand out. Those that were intended to be conspicuous include piercings and dyed hair. Importantly, one man specifically states that his ear piercing was supposed to signal queer male identity – to channel the men-loving-men culture, as was hypothesized for the bi men who got right-ear piercings.

Overwhelmingly, the men’s motivations for getting their piercings were for themselves (to feel good (2), the modifications look cool (2), they like the aesthetic (1), to have fun (1), to be rebellious (1)), with only one person wanting to “look good,” and one person wanting their modification to have symbolic meaning, which could potentially be said to be self-serving motivation. A potential explanation for this phenomenon is that men are the group in power under patriarchy and, thus, are not raised – as women are – to craft their appearance for others’ (men’s) enjoyment. Though some gay men cited in scholarly literature in this investigation reported wearing tighter, more revealing clothing to attract male attention, the majority of gay male respondents reported no such behavior, which appears to be the same case here. Though nearly half of bi men may want to show that they’re queer, that’s different from wanting to look attractive. Reflecting back on goth and punk culture, though long hair and other feminine stylistic elements may have been transgressive in that they painted men as in the passive, “female position,” that was merely a cultural statement, and not necessarily the intent of such styling. Thus, this is one place where queer men and cis, het and bi women differ.

Novel responses (my emphasis):

“I really do not like body modifications. I guess I am a bit of a traditionalist on this specific issue. Like I feel like I’m being rebellious if I paint a couple of nails (I don’t paint both hands though because I like to see at least some of my real fingernails).”

“I just like them! Getting piercings makes me feel good. Honestly not sure why I got my tattoos, I think they look nice/cool but there’s no expectation about how others would react to them.”

“Body modifications are simply something I do for myself and to have fun.”

The first quote is from a respondent who did not pursue body modifications, but shows how the respondent acknowledges fingernail-painting as nonnormative for men, and aligns with the prediction by 2.4% of respondents that bi men would have painted fingernails. However, cis, het men have also been known to paint their nails (e.g. skater boys), as we have already seen. The next two comments reinforce the notion that bi men get body modifications for themselves, one explicitly stating that he does not have others in mind whatsoever when he pursues such bodily adornment.

Bi Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>53%</td>
<td>L ear lobe 2+, R ear lobe 2+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36%</td>
<td>Dyed hair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32%</td>
<td>R ear cartilage, L ear lobe 1, R ear lobe 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31%</td>
<td>L ear cartilage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24%</td>
<td>Uncommon haircut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23%</td>
<td>1 tattoo only</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Other (6)

- nose bridge piercing
- slit my eyebrow
- pierced one nostril twice (hoop-stud combo)
- I've had branding and major scarification
- nipple piercings (2)

**Uncommon hairstyles (optional free response):**

Summarized respondent answers are given as many details provided could have been identifying and there were 17 responses. The below descriptors include respondents’ reported historical haircuts as well as current ones.

- short (9)
  - buzzed (2)
- bangs (7)
- Mid-length (5):
  - mid-chest length (1)
  - collarbone-length (1)
  - shoulder-length (3)
- undercut (5)
- dyed hair (4)
- split-dyed (half of head to the part is dyed a different color) (4)
- bob (4)
  - below earlobes (1)
  - chin-length (1)
  - jaw-length (1)
- bleached (3), e.g. frosted tips
- mohawk (2)
- highlights (1)
- shag haircut (1)
- layers (1)
- gelled (1)
- long (1)

**Some examples of uncommon hair (my emphasis):**

- My hair is **shoulder length** and I have **bangs**-not sure if that counts as uncommon, but does fit stereotypes about people with my identity
- my haircut is **short**, like a **long-ish boy's cut** but occasionally an **undercut**.
- My hair has been **bleached/dyed pink, purple, red, and/or blue** at various points in my 20s and 30s, and I had a **mohawk** for several years. Right now it is a **traditional long length** and **half dyed** [an unnatural color].
- I haven't had a haircut in a while because pandemic, but usually, when I do get my hair cut I like to keep it in a short bob near my chin with... **highlights**...then I'll dye the highlight [an unnatural color]...(a signal to the world that I am specifically a bisexual woman). Currently, because I haven't had a haircut or highlights since January, my brown hair **reaches down to my collar bone**.
- I have a **short bob shag haircut** (what Logan wants) with **short bangs** and lots of **layers**. I haven't really seen anyone else with this haircut so I would consider it uncommon.
- Currently I have **shoulder-length** curly hair, but I **used to have short hair in a stereotypically male style**. There were a couple of years where I had an **asymmetrical undercut situation** where the longest part was **dyed pink, blue, gray, purple, red**, etc.
- I have a light brown **bob** with **bangs**.
• I buzzed my hair super duper short, with it being like an inch long at the longest and shaved down to the skin in the back.
• Maybe semi-uncommon? I have bangs straight across which I flat iron (rest of it is curly), and then I used to get my hair cut to be as short as maybe my jawline (have been growing it out since quarantine though)
• My hair is actually the longest it's ever been rn and most "cishet" style I've ever had; It's the first time in over a decade that there's no color in my hair, so it's just my natural color and about [mid-chest] length.
• In middle school I cut it really short in front and shaved the back.

It appears that bi women are slightly more likely to have two piercings or more per ear lobe (53% for both left and right) than lesbians (left: 50%, right: 40%); only 36% have the conventional single lobe piercings on each ear for women, compared to 55% for lesbians. Some bi women also have unusual piercings: two have nipple piercings vs. one lesbian, one has a nose bridge piercing, one pierced their nostril twice, and one branded herself and engaged in scarification of her body. Thus far, based on piercings alone (as well as scarification and branding), it seems possible that one respondent’s hypothesis about bi women wanting to stick out more than lesbians because their identity is invisible/erased in society may have some merit.

Nevertheless, bi women are much less likely (24%) to have an uncommon haircut than lesbians (45%); from the hairstyles reported, it is clear that “uncommon” means hair that is shorter than the traditionally feminine long hair. In looking at the specific uncommon haircuts for the two groups, 5.1% of bi women have bobs vs. 15% for lesbians – whereas 1.5% of respondents predicted that bi women would have bobs and none predicted them for lesbians. However, bi women reported mid-length and shoulder-length hair whereas lesbians did not, which aligns with respondent predictions. Both bi women and lesbians reported “short” hair in the broad sense of the word, which was predicted for both, but more so for lesbians (20% vs. 5.9% for bi women). Further, 6.4% of bi women have undercuts while this number is 25% for lesbians, in accordance with the greater prediction of them for lesbians (4.9%) than bi women (2.4%). Additionally, 10% of lesbians report having their head shaved/buzzed, while this is 2.6% for bi women. Moreover, 36% of bi women have dyed hair, in comparison to 55% of lesbians. Overall, it seems that bi women are more likely to have normative/traditionally feminine hair than lesbians, but they stand out from both lesbians and cis, het women (none of whom have uncommon hair, except for one, who’s is chin length) by having mid-length and shoulder-length hair – as respondents expected of them (3.9% and 2.4%, respectively), as well as bangs, split-dyed hair, and a few have mohawks – a punk look. One woman seems to believe that her mid-length hair is fulfilling a stereotype, as does a woman with a bob with bright highlights. Though bobs are also seen among lesbians, since they were only predicted for bi women, the second woman may be fulfilling a stereotype, albeit one that is not entirely accurate.

In addition, lesbians are more likely to have tattoos than bi women, 23% of whom have one, while 25% of lesbians have 1-3 tattoos. Yet, one bi woman reports having an eyebrow slit, which 1.5% of respondents expected, but no lesbians have one, though 2.0% of respondents predicted they would. Though only one bi woman has an eyebrow slit, this is somewhat interesting, as the trend was said to have developed among lesbian groups on Tik Tok (as mentioned in Chapter 5).
Therefore, if anything differentiates bi women, it’s mid- or shoulder-length hair, two or more ear lobe piercings, potentially unusual piercings (e.g. nipple piercings, nose bridge piercing), bangs, split-dyed hair, and possibly mohawks.

**Intentions of Body Modifications:**

- I feel that my body modifications do not cause me to stand out (46, 59%)
- Some of my body modifications cause me to stand out, which was not my intention (21, 27%)
- I got at least some of my body modifications to intentionally stand out from others (16, 21%)
- I got all of my body modifications to intentionally stand out from others (0, 0.0%)

**Mods to stand out:**

- I got two nose piercings (both rings) in one nostril in an attempt to not have to tell people I'm queer as much. It honestly works pretty well.
- **Dyed hair**
- When I dyed my hair blue in high school I did it to stand out and look different.
- My septum ring was the first, a gift to myself for coming out. I consider my cartilage piercings [daith & helix] as another way to stand out and be a little different. My tattoos I get for a lot of reasons, standing out is one of them but not as important as other reasons.
- **Dying my hair** cool colors and getting a nose piercing. However, I'm from NYC so these things don't make me stand out so much.
- **Septum** [curved barbell]
- ** Dyed hair**
- I think my arm tattoo
- arm and hand tattoo
- I guess my tattoos maybe. I have some pretty unique tattoos that a lot of people don't usually have and i like that.
- **My tattoo** and my cartilage piercing [helix]
- When I pierced my cartilage [forward helix] (6 years ago), I actually don't know that I intended to stand out much - If I had truly wanted to, I would've gotten a tattoo or done my nose, I think. I think I thought it might make me look a little less nice, and a bit more badass, and I was looking to feel more badass/strong/independent/tough at the time, so it seemed like a start (if people might perceive me that way, maybe I'd be able to begin to embody that goal).
- I got my piercings and hair color changes to intentionally stand out. My hair style has always just been about what I want for my own look, not to stand out.
- A few of my ear piercings and dying my hair pink.

Going against the hypothesis of bi women wanting to stand out to compensate for their invisible identities, it appears that an overwhelming majority did not intend for their body...
modifications to cause them to stand out, with only 21% wanting some to be conspicuous and none intending for all modifications to be conspicuous.

Looking at the specific modifications that some bi did get in order to stand out, it appears that these women believe that their piercings – predominantly septum and cartilage piercings, dyed hair, and tattoos are nonnormative enough that they will cause them to stand out. According to the preceding discussion of both lesbian and bi female body modifications, it seems that they are correct in their assessment of the effect of septum and cartilage piercings – neither of which were reported by lesbians (though 2.0% of respondents expected septum piercings for lesbians). Dyed hair and tattoos, conversely, were more common among lesbians. Yet, so far, there are enough uncommon body modifications – mid- or shoulder-length hair, two or more ear lobe piercings, cartilage piercings, bangs, split-dyed hair, possibly mohawks, and other potentially unusual piercings (e.g. nipple piercings, nose bridge piercing) – that could allow for a “bisexual aesthetic,” especially in conjunction with some of the possible clothes styles we saw earlier (high-waisted pants with baggy shirt tucked in or flowy pants with a crop top). Notice, too, that one woman specifically got two nose piercings to signal queerness, and another specifically got a septum piercing for herself in what seems to have been an act of self-care, like the motivations of tattooing for Jordan, Ryan, Huang, and myself; it is unclear if the fact that septum piercings bear some connection to bisexual women was a factor in her choice of that particular piercing.

Additionally, on another note, one comments that her dyed hair and nose piercing don’t stand out in New York City, which seems to tie back to the eccentricity of the aristocracy or, rather, the more generally well-off populace, like the brightly-colored, alien-like people of the Capitol in The Hunger Games.

Motivations to get mods:
- like the aesthetic (14)
- to look creative (9)
- for symbolic meaning (7)
- to look cool (6)
- to express self (6)
- to boost self-confidence (4)
- to cope emotionally (4)
- to take ownership of body (4)
- to become a work of art (3)
- they look cool (3)
- to remember someone deceased (2)
- for fun (2)
- to express political affiliation (2)
- to look unique (2)
- to match family’s modification (1)
- to look punk/grunge/goth (1)
- for self (vague) (1)
- to feel good (1)
- spiritual practice (1)
- to achieve certain impression (1)
- for cultural reasons (1), South Asia
- to look free-spirited (1)
- to look fun (1)
- to look queer (1)
- to increase a sense of intimacy in viewing of body (1)

In contrast to the motivations for choosing their clothing, it appears that bi women predominantly get their piercings for themselves (like the aesthetic (14), for symbolic meaning (7), to express self (6), to boost self-confidence (4), to cope emotionally (4), to take ownership of body (3), to increase a sense of intimacy in viewing of body (1), to become a work of art (3), to remember someone deceased (2), for fun (2), for self (vague) (1), to feel good (1), spiritual practice (1), to match family’s modification (1)). Among these reasons, we can see one theme that has pervaded this chapter for people assigned female at birth: using body modifications for
self-care, listed here for feeling good, to boost one’s confidence, and to help in emotional coping, with the similar idea of taking ownership of one’s body – including by increasing a sense of intimacy in its viewing, which we will discuss below in analyzing respondent comments.

There is also an artistic sense that respondents desire to achieve through their modifications, as many want to look creative (9), express themselves (6), and some want to become a work of art (3) – just as Oscar Wilde preached and along the lines of Karlo Steel’s idea that queer people find a place of “refuge” in beauty (Steele 2013: 70).

The rest of the reasons are viewer- or more societal-based (to look creative (9), to look cool (6), they look cool (3), to express political affiliation (2), to look tough (2), to look unique (2), to look punk/grunge/goth (1), to achieve certain impression (1), to look free-spirited (1), to look fun (1), for cultural reasons (1)) and are much less numerous than intrinsic motivations.

Other notable purposes include the desire to look queer or punk/grunge/goth – both desired by one respondent each. From what we know, the two are essentially synonymous, as the alternative communities are highly queer, but at the same time, a person can like the aesthetic without necessarily wanting to present that way to signal queerness. There is also the curious tie of body modifications to political affiliation. This may be because piercings are considered a queer identifier and, according to a Gallup Poll, Democrats are more likely to be queer than Republicans: 8.8% vs. 1.7% (Lang 2021). This may possibly be the case as a queer person may desire to be in the “progressive” party that is open to new family structures, types of relationships, and modes gender presentation, versus the “conservative” party that aims to conserve traditional values and gender roles. Nevertheless, that is not to say queer people aren’t Republicans; perhaps a wealthy queer person may prize tax cuts over social, queer-related issues.

**Novel responses (my emphasis):**

“I honestly just like the way they look, and my style has always leaned on the side of punk/grunge/goth. It’s just honest self expression. I actually hate receiving attention or stares/looks.”

“I had my body modifications because it is a way for me to express myself. I do not have them to make me stand out but rather because they are part of who I am and how I see myself.”

“Lots of my tattoos have meanings, at least 3 tattoos and both nose piercings that I have, as well as my current hair color, were spontaneous emotional coping mechanisms.”

“On another note, I pierced my cartilage after my mom passed away, and I think at the time I was really just looking for something to do to remember that time, and more truthfully, a physical ache to very temporarily relieve the emotional heartache.”

“Mental health reasons, whether it is to raise self-esteem, or to bring me back into my body.”

“Wanting to embrace parts of my body I was self-conscious about before.”

“I got my second piercings in my earlobes when I was twelve years old because I thought it would look really cool and I wanted to feel like I had control over my own body and how I expressed myself. It was a similar experience when I got an undercut, buzzed off nearly all my
hair, pierced my nose, and dyed all of my hair bright pink; it was mostly about wanting the freedom to explore different looks and not feeling tied in to looking a certain way.”

“I got nipple piercings for myself because no one could see/know about them unless *I* wanted them to. The second piercings are more for a more cohesive look when I style both holes in each ear.”

“I get my tattoos now to express aspects of my personality, interests, or past. Some of my tattoos have also been as celebrating major events in my life. My largest tattoo is both a deliberate attempt to be edgy or cool in addition to portraying a darker aspect of my personality. I put a lot of thought into my tattoos now, which I haven’t always done, so each new tattoo has multiple layers of meaning for me to help tell my life story.”

“I got my septum piercing so the conservative people where I work would stop assuming that I agree with their terrible opinions. However, I just got the other ones because I liked the way they looked.”

“You can be societally ‘normal’ looking and be gay/bi/etc.”

“I got most of my tattoos as body adornments and representations of who I am and the values I hold as well as using my body as a canvas.”

“I started seeing a lot of cute girls with blunt bobs so I hopped on that trend!”

“The only actual modifications I got, my ear piercings, I got when I was pretty young. It was the sort of feminine thing a little girl does to try to look pretty. I definitely use them to express myself now, but in a very simple and mostly expected way.”

“I have almost a half sleeve, likely to seem a little more tough & less feminine.”

Fascinatingly, this first person not only wants to achieve a certain aesthetic for her own liking, but actively dislikes attention from styling herself this way. This runs counter to the original purpose of the styles of those groups, as they wanted to look visually distinct, as evidenced by the people who wore McLaren and Westwood’s explicitly pornographic clothing, in what was called “confrontation dressing” to make “the rupture between ‘natural’ and constructed context” – societal conventions – “clearly visible” (Hebdige 2005: 127).

The next respondent says something interesting that we have not yet heard – that her body modifications are a significant part of her identity. This doesn’t seem due to the piercings making her look queer and queerness is at the heart of her identity; something about the piercings in themselves are vital to her sense of self. I have only heard such an idea once before, when one of my peers my sophomore year said that after getting her nose piercing, it made her “look the way [she feels] inside.” Perhaps the piercings are meant to convey a sense of quirkiness or creativity or are a general marker of uniqueness that my peer and this respondent feel is vital to convey.

Following, one bi woman describes body modifications as a form of self-care and demonstrates that piercings and hair-dyeing can fulfill this purpose, not only tattoos, as we have
seen. After her, one respondent clarifies how exactly body modifications can be soothing, describing the physical pain as an outlet for emotional pain. This reflects Huang’s use of tattoos, as they view the process of getting a tattoo as creating physical pain that ties together their physical, mental, and emotional states. The tie between those states is echoed by the next person, and leans more in the direction of taking back ownership of one’s body, as lesbians in the 80s, Jordan, Huang, and I have done with body modifications. The next person then shows how taking ownership of one’s body doesn’t have to refer to the body broadly, but can focus in on particular areas of shame. The succeeding comment makes a more direct implication about how society has made them feel limited in their range of expression, tying them to “looking a certain way,” which may mean a traditionally feminine way. The following quote falls along the theme of taking ownership of one’s body, but has a less straight-forward meaning. It is possible that the subject’s motive may be to reaffirm control over which elements of them the viewer gets to see, as well as to add to the sense of intimacy of allowing someone to see their chest by additionally offering access to very personal piercings that the subject only lets certain people see. Significantly, we do not see this body modification for self-care or to take ownership of one’s body among bi men.

The following person’s use of tattoos then almost perfectly mirrors Huang’s main use of their tattoos – to mark important life events, particularly ones regarding their queer journey for Huang.

The subsequent comment demonstrates the desire to signal political affiliation and the possible motivation for doing so – to discourage certain conversations at work.

I have also included a comment from a respondent who is body-modifications-averse, which seems to support Shaun Cole’s idea that queer people (gay men in his specific case) hate the “visible gays.” Conceivably, this person also does not want to be considered so societally odd in holding their particular identity, and thinks that getting body modifications further “others” bi women/people.

Next, a subject nearly takes words right out of Oscar Wilde’s mouth in declaring their interest in making themself a piece of art with their “body adornments.”

Shaun Cole’s idea that queer people dress like the people they’re attracted to is affirmed in the subsequent quote – as the woman describes “cute girls” as influencing her style.

The last two comments address the male gaze – though indirectly. The first illustrates how the convention of girls getting their ears pierced is in order “to try to look pretty,” whereas the respondent is now getting modifications for her own personal desire to express herself. The second one similarly has made bodily changes that also do not serve the male gaze, but instead make her “more tough & less feminine.” Again, “tough” signifies masculinity, which implies being the active observers versus the passively viewed woman.

### Bi Nonbinary People

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>57%</td>
<td>Dyed hair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Undercut, uncommon haircut, L ear lobe 2+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43%</td>
<td>R ear lobe 2+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36%</td>
<td>L ear cartilage, nose ring, 3+ tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29%</td>
<td>R ear cartilage, septum ring, R ear lobe 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21%</td>
<td>L ear lobe 1, septum curved barbel, 1-3 tattoos</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Other Nipple piercings (2)
(1)

**Uncommon hairstyles (optional response):**
Possibly identifying descriptions have been removed.
- My haircut was **very short**, ear length(?) I suppose, and **more masc**. My hair has since grown out however
- Today my hair is an [unnaturally colored] curly hair **bowl cut** of sorts. Tomorrow it might be something different.
- **Shaved head**, [dyed unnatural color] with **face** on it
- left side **shaved** with blunt long **bob dyed** neon [color]
- **long** and curly
- I currently have my hair **buzzed** to about half an inch.
- Asymmetrical **short on the sides** long bangs and long back area.

Dyed hair comes out on top as a body modification for bi nonbinary people, which Logan would not find surprising, as she associates dyed hair with gender-non-conformity; 57% report dying their hair, as compared to 36% for bi women and 31% for bi men. Next, we see 50% have uncommon haircuts, as compared to 19% of bi men and 24% of bi women. Half have undercuts as well, versus 13% of bi men. This should perhaps not be surprising. If hairstyle is so culturally gendered – long hair is feminine and short hair is masculine – and a person wants to signify that they do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth or, rather, a mix of genders, breaking gendered hair norms would be a good start. From the descriptions of hairstyles below, and given that most of these respondents were assigned female at birth, it seems that they did just that. The one person who mentions having long hair was, accordingly, assigned male at birth. Notably, more people (50%) have their left ear lobe pierced twice than their right one (43%); however, that is not to say that they are errantly signaling a straight identity, as more have a single lobe piercing on their right ear lobe (29%) than their left ear lobe (21%). They also have more unusual piercings than bi women – ones that differentiate bi women from lesbians: they have more cartilage piercings, for instance – 36% have left ear cartilage piercings vs. 31% for bi women (though bi women (32%) have more right ear cartilage piercings than bi nonbinary people (29%)); 36% have nose rings, 29% septum rings, and 21% have septum piercings with curved barbells with none included in the top six most popular body modifications for bi women, though 3 septum rings, 1 nose ring, and 1 “nose piercing” are mentioned in the “mods to stand out” section (recall that Skylar and Logan qualify nose rings as queer); and 14% have nipple piercings vs. 1.2% of bi women. Bi men have fewer body modifications than both bi women and nonbinary people overall. Additionally, bi nonbinary people are more likely to have tattoos than bi men and women, 36% have 3+ tattoos and 21% have 1-3 tattoos, whereas 23% of bi women have one tattoo, 19% of bi men have 1-3 tattoos, and 13% of them have one tattoo.

**Intentions of Body Modifications:**
- I got at least some of my body modifications to intentionally stand out from others (5, 36%)
- I feel that my body modifications do not cause me to stand out (5, 36%)
- Some of my body modifications cause me to stand out, which was not my intention (2, 14%)
• I got all of my body modifications to intentionally stand out from others (1, 7.0%)

**Mods to stand out (optional free response):**

- **Dyed** my hair blue
- **Dyed** hair, **tattoos**
- the **piercings**, maybe all of it
- **Septum/nose piercings** [nose ring, septum ring & curved barbel]
- my **septum** piercing [ring]
- My **haircut** as well as my **nose piercing**. [I currently have my hair buzzed to about half an inch.]

Most respondents admit that at least some of their body modifications were to stand apart from others, which might be in terms of differentiating their gendered appearance from others assigned their gender at birth, or to simply desire to look nonnormative in general. However, the same number of respondents also feel that they do not stand out due to their body modifications. Fewer admit to some of their body modifications causing them to stand out, be it unintentionally, and only one aimed for all of their modifications to cause them to stand out.

Dyed hair and piercings seem to prevail in modifications sought in order to stand out, with one mention of haircuts and tattoos as well. Dyed hair and nose piercings will certainly cause them to stand out among bi men and women, but female-presenting bi nonbinary people have a greater chance of blending in with lesbians, 55% of whom dye their hair.

**Motivations to get mods (optional free response):**

- like the aesthetic (5)
- to feel good about oneself & body (1)
- to have a sense of autonomy (1)
- to mark memories (1)
- to decrease dysphoria (1)
- for creative expression (1)
- for identity exploration (1)
- enjoy getting pierced and tattooed (1)
- for sex appeal (1)

Remarkably only one person got their body modifications to have a desired effect on the observer: to increase sex appeal; the rest were about the respondents satisfying themselves. For instance, several motivations involve taking ownership of one's body (to feel good about oneself & body (1), to have a sense of autonomy (1), to decrease dysphoria (1)), which may feel necessary when someone has been raised and/or forced into dressing and styling themself a certain way to conform to norms for a gender they don’t identify with. Two other reasons involve more artistic sentiment (they like the aesthetic (5) and for creative expression (1)). Other purposes include to mark memories (1) – like Huang’s intent, for identity exploration (1) – much like the cis, het man who got a nose piercing, and because they enjoy getting pierced and tattooed (1).

**Novel responses (my emphasis):**

“I have never done anything to my body to intentionally do anything other than feel good about myself and my body. I will say however that certain hairstyles specifically have helped or hurt my ability to visibly fit into the queer community. For example, when my hair is long and natural (blond, very curly) I present in a way that makes people assume I am a straight cis woman (which I am not). When I have a buzzcut on the other hand people often ask me what my pronouns are and assume my queerness. Honestly, I personally have never cut my hair to be accepted as a more accurate version of myself, but it does feel incredibly refreshing not to have to so constantly correct people, explain myself, or be misidentified so I can 100% see why someone would modify their body in order to get that social validation.”

“I just like how they look. It's more for me than others.”

“My body modifications are about me and how I like them not about anybody else. I don’t consciously think about what aesthetic I want to have, I just like getting pierced and tattooed.”

“modifications give a sense of autonomy.”

“I've got short hair because long hair makes me dysphoric.”

“Wanting to have them for my own personal aesthetic. I think for tattoos I wanted them for myself as memories. Most piercings I wanted for myself but I did get some as well for sexual appeal.”

From the top, we see someone mentioning how body modifications are only sought with their own best interests in mind, and more remarkably, a direct explanation for how gendered hair is. We have seen short hair described as masculine and cause people to question if a woman with such hair is queer (usually assumed to be lesbian), but are now seeing that there is a certain length at which gender – not simply sexual orientation – can come into question. This appears to be when someone who’s female-presenting gets a buzzcut. Some lesbians did mentioning getting misgendered, but, accordingly, there were also some who mentioned having their head shaved.

The next two respondents reinforce the notion of modifications being for themselves, with the second adding that they simply enjoy the tattooing and piercing process. This could be either due to the dopamine hit from the pain of the procedures; the fact that each trip for piercings and tattoos can be an exciting, novel outing; and/or that each attaining each piercing and tattoo is affirming and exerting agency and control over one’s body. The last point seems to be the motivation for the subsequent respondent.

The penultimate comment does seem to paint haircuts as fixing hair-gender incongruency, as was the hypothesis for the high rates of “uncommon” haircuts among this group. Further, we may presume that this respondent was assigned female at birth.

The last respondent seems to be the one who wanted their body modifications for sex appeal, though that was clearly one reason among many. Hence, no one in this group got body modifications solely for the observer.

Explicitly Transmitting Sexual Orientation & Gender:
Is there any way that you try to visually present your sexual orientation?

Only a sample of novel quotes included for each category.

**No (10, 63%):**
- “As I said before, I don't really think of my sexual orientation as a big part of who I am, so I don't typically try to present as bi or pan.”

**I effectively do (unintentionally) (1, 6.3%):**
- “I'm bisexual and I think I just dress in a more femme than average for straight guys...I give off a vibe (I've found and been told) so I think I don't really need to do that.”

**Yes (5, 31%):**
- “Yes - cuffed jeans, baggy clothing.”
- “If I want people to know I'm sexually attracted to cis men I wear earrings and if I want people to know I'm romantically and sexually attracted to cis women, I dress more earthy.”
- “Yes. Usually, a visual expression of gender identity that is not your own can visually present your sexual orientation (for men, painting nails, wearing clothes made for women, and for women, shorter hair, wearing clothes made for men). One could also adopt sexual orientation flags/imagery into their wardrobe.”
- “I like crop tops that show off masculine body hair, a single right earring, longer hair and a mustache/scruffy facial hair.”
- “I use jewelry to that end. I wear high heels in LGBT social spaces and at parties. I wear tight clothing. I try to wear clothes that I would find attractive on a man.”

A majority of bi men – 69% – do not actively try to transmit their sexual orientation, compared with 66% of gay men. One notes that his natural presentation already signals his identity as he is more feminine-presenting, which respondents have deemed a main indicator for gay men (19% vs. 8.3% for bi men). Of bi men, only 6.3% of respondents (this one man) feel this way, compared to 11% of gay men. Conversely, another man feels that his sexual orientation is not an important part of his identity. This seems to echo the bi woman who claims that bi people can look “normal” – that they don’t need body modifications.

Of those who intentionally signal their sexual orientation, cuffing comes up in the first comment, as well as baggy clothing. As baggy clothing is what cis, het men are thought to wear, it is possible that the respondent is blending elements that each attract different populations: cuffing could signal attraction to men while baggy clothing could present an otherwise straight-seeming appearance. Another man seems to vary his presentation based on the day – rather than mixing styles – in order to attract men (using earrings, a feminine elements) vs. women (using the muted/earth tones – vs. bright colors – expected of cis, het men). The next man explicitly addresses gender inversion and, accordingly, believes that men could signal queerness by engaging in the traditionally feminine practice of nail-painting. However, this practice was only expected for bi men by 2.4% of respondents, one cis, het man said he and his sports team paint their nails as a bonding activity, and Ella, Meg, and I have seen [people we presume are] cis, het men try it out. Thus, it does not seem that painted nails would be the most effective way to signal
a man’s queerness. A useful signal, as always, is the single earring on the right lobe, which is worn by the next quoted man. He also does something quite fascinating: he uses a feminine article of clothing – a crop top – to show off his masculine body, flashing back to the men from scholarly sources earlier in the paper who started showing more skin upon coming to terms with their queerness. This could also be likened to the muscly gay men who wear tank tops to show off their muscles. Perhaps in specifying bi identity over gay identity, he has a mark of androgyny (a staple of goth and punk culture): long hair. His mention of “a mustache/scruffy facial hair” may hint at a lumbersexual aesthetic, which is not uniquely bi, but rather a gay male look. The last respondent seems to be adopting feminine elements – including tight clothes, as has been expected, though not widely seen of gay men in this study – to signal his identity, and he affirms Shaun Cole’s notion that queer men dress like the men they find attractive.

Is there any way that you try to visually present your gender identity?

Only a sample of novel quotes included for each category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No (6, 38%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I effectively do (unintentionally) (4, 25%):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Generally speaking I wear traditionally male clothes.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Short hair. Facial hair. Pants as opposed to skirts and dresses (but like that is just what I grew up with and am comfortable with).”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Society says men typically dress in a certain way and for the most part I follow those societal rules.”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes (6, 38%):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Yes, just with traditionally masculine clothes.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I present as a man by wearing men's clothing and having a short haircut and facial hair.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Yes, by adhering to traditional gender norms/interests.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I just try to present like a guy would, I have strayed away from feminine clothing for the time being. I also have cut my hair way shorter than normal and it signals to a lot of people that I am male presenting. I buy some clothes from the men's section as well as used male specific body products since the scents are more masculine.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I like showing off my surgical scars when partying/at the beach.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I dress in a masculine way, and try to take inspiration from vintage (1950s) men’s clothing—tucking in my shirts, button-ups, etc. I do not wear big patterns; usually fine ones and maybe florals.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A majority of bi men also do not try to signal their gender identity. Of those who unintentionally do, we see mentions of traditionally masculine clothes, short hair – consistently gendered as masculine by respondents, and facial hair. Recall that facial hair is a means to “accomplish masculinity” and, thus, trans men who don’t have it lack “access to the patriarchal dividends available to other men” (Johnson and Barber 2019: 112). For those who actively signal their gender identity, we see traditionally masculine clothes, short hair, facial hair, adhering to male gender roles overall (likely encompassing dress, body modifications and accessories (or lack thereof)), and steering away from “feminine clothing” and “big patterns.”
Importantly, 50% of those who actively attempt to present their gender identity are trans men. One does not address how he normally dresses, but does hint how important showcasing his male physique is in claiming his gender identity. However, he could also be trying to assert that he’s specifically a trans man, in which case, the surgical scars would achieve that effect. One, like one of the straight trans men in the study, explains how he is temporarily avoiding feminine clothing and describes his hair as being “shorter than normal,” indicating that he usually prefers it longer, but is cutting it to this length for now as a gender indicator. The fact that he is describing his current presentation as short-term suggests that he is relying on his self-fashioning to signal his gender identity for the time being, but that once he sees more changes from testosterone, and develops a more masculine presentation, he will be able to return to his preferred style and maintain recognition as a man. The last trans man – who wears 1950s-like clothing – does not say what he prefers to wear, but seemingly affirms big patterns as feminine, as he makes a point of saying that he elects not to wear them. Though louder, more uncommon patterns could signal queerness in a man due to their supposed ties to femininity (as shown throughout this study), though this man is bi, it seems that he does not want to wear anything that could potentially confuse his gender identity. Hence, largely accounting the effort bi men put into signaling their gender identity is that 31% of them are trans men. Additionally, 6.3% of bi men use pride merchandise to signal their identity, which may be useful if they want to differentiate their more feminine style (if applicable) from that presumed of gay men.

**Bi Women**

Is there any way that you try to visually present your sexual orientation?

Only a sample of novel quotes included for each category.

Overall, the majority – 54% – of bi women do not actively fashion themselves so as to signal their sexual orientation. Only 46% do this, in comparison to 38% of bi men, and this number is remarkably low compared to lesbians, 75% of whom try to present their sexual orientation. This drastically lower participation rate in sexuality-inspired dress, in comparison to lesbians, may be due to bi women’s reduced reliance on signaling interest to women. If they are interested in both men and women it might be nice or preferred for women to know that you’re bi, but you also won’t be missing out on romantic opportunities completely if you pass as straight. For those who don’t try to signal their identity, one mentions how her sexuality is not usually relevant – similar to how Caleb believes that gender is rarely relevant to interactions, which motivates him to dress androgynously – but that, when it is, she might use certain colors (likely dull/muted vs. the “feminine” bright colors) or style to communicate her sexuality. Another describes how her style switched from dressing to not look like a queer woman – specifically a lesbian – to more authentically expressing herself, upon becoming more comfortable with her sexuality. As she describes her style, its androgynous quality, arising from the mixture of masculine and feminine features, seems to result in a look that could be perceived as signaling bi identity, versus more masculine dress, which respondents widely perceive as a signifier of lesbianism. Interestingly, she may be presenting as bi without trying. The next two women lament not appearing queerer. One is not willing to put in the effort, echoing the theme of the tension that arises from wanting to present like one’s subculture, but denying one’s authentic style in doing so, which has often resulted in the person getting fatigued from the effort and defaulting to their own style again. Another respondent comments on how passing as straight
– suggesting that she has a traditionally feminine presentation – creates a disconnect between her sexuality and presentation that others can find odd. This implies societal surprise when gender inversion is not at platy – as so many people (including respondents) expect. After that, one woman emphasizes sexual orientation as a personal facet, not insisting that it should solely be communicated amongst queer people, but that does not need to be shared with anyone. This is not a view that we have encountered thus far among any other respondents or literature. Next, one woman reignites the issue of deciphering queer women from Vermonters.

For those who unintentionally signal their identities, one seems to naturally cuff her pants (maybe for convenience or she likes the look) and attributes her “down-to-earth artistic style” to signaling her identity. Her style may communicate bisexuality as one respondent described bi women as “artsy straight women” and the “down-to-earth” aspect might indicate the crunchy/granola/hiker style that Ella attributes to queer women as well as dull/muted colors – which are less feminine than bright colors, giving her a slightly more masculine/androgynous edge. The other one mentions her septum piercing, which very well could be an element that distinguishes bi women, as we have discussed, but interestingly has no concept of “the bisexual look” beyond that.

I have personally witnessed this unintentional, but accurate, identity signaling. One of my peers thinks that she might be bi (though her attraction to her gender and other genders is not 50/50) and happened to buy some “loud” makeup in unnatural colors with glitter and gloss at one point. I told her of its associations with queer women, that some respondents say such makeup repels men, and she recalled reading an article that said that men prefer some makeup on women, but an overall natural look. She pondered if she was unconsciously fulfilling her bi destiny. Yet, interestingly, she said that when she goes home (which is still within the Northeast), her flannel and baggy pants are read as lesbian, and she wonders if she wants people to perceive her that way. Should she wear more feminine clothing? She wonders. At UVM, it’s a normal outfit for women, but at home, it’s perceived differently. She’s not even sure if it’s her own preferred style or if she just wears it to fit in. Therefore, a woman might demonstrate a bi – or rather, queer – Identity unintentionally, perhaps before she even diagnoses herself with a queer sexuality, but may nonetheless be aware of how her style’s meaning changes depending on the context.

No (38, 49%):

- “No, I wear what I like and don't think about if it is a means of expressing my sexuality."
- “Not really. My sexual orientation isn't terribly relevant in most settings. Speed dating or link events, sure. Then I try to signal with color or style.”
- “I used to be more concerned with the way I dressed in regards to how it portrayed my sexual orientation because I identified as straight but was constantly being misperceived as lesbian because I wore ‘men's’ oversized shirts and no jewelry. After I came out as bi, I got more comfortable with the way I dressed because I didn't have so much fear surrounding how I looked because I was more comfortable in my own identity. That helped me find my own style, which is a mixture of conventional feminine (earrings, necklaces, bracelets, bright colors) and more androgynous (men's style shirts, pants instead of skirts, men's sport coats, etc.).”
- “Not really, sometimes I wish I dressed more gay but I don't care enough.”
- “No and I'm still struggling with that.”
- “I really don't. Being bi is a weird middle ground, ‘cause I can 'pass’ as straight but suddenly if I was with another girl it's weird that I seem so 'normal.'"
• “I don't think I ever try to present my sexual orientation because it's not something that I want to share. I find it **personal** and whoever I'm attracted to is kept to me.”
• “In high school used to think if I wore **flannel** people would catch on but it was **Vermont** so didn't really work. I don't consciously try to visually present in a way that implies my sexuality.”

**I effectively do (unintentionally) (4, 5.1%):**

- “I don't really force my style to match my sexuality necessarily but do always **cuff** my pants and have more of a **down-to-earth artistic style.**”
- “I have a **septum** piercing but that is literally it. I have been told that I do present as bisexual, but I am not sure what it is. It is probably based more on my demeanor.”

**Yes (36, 46%):**

- “wear things that are associated with that subculture. ex. girl in red merch for lesbians/bi.”
- “Gotta **Cuff** those jeans!”
- “I try to with my clothes but I feel that I am not always successful.”
- “Yes! I wear **fun earrings**, I **cuff** my jeans, wear **oversized** layered clothes, **earth tones**, **vans**, **lots of jewelry**, and overall **androgynous clothing.**”
- “In the clothes that I choose to wear (loose, lots of pockets, **button up shirts**), the **tattoos** I have to signal my lack of normalcy, and the **double nose piercing** that no one can currently see due to mask wearing which has REALLY been difficult when trying to signal to the public that I like people with vaginas. The double nose piercing has always been a sort of code for me when talking to people of the same gender and wondering if we're just having a friendly convo or if its flirty. I guess this contradicts my previous response that "there's no way for me to know" if a womxn is straight or not. If they had a double nose piercing, I wouldn't automatically presume they were queer but I would not presume they were straight.”
- “I am not sure - I just dress how I want to dress. When I am not in a relationship I do **dress for the audience I am hoping to impress** though, which can include lower cut shirts, more skin revealed etc.”
- “Hair style. I **dye my hair** often and at times I do a certain color to make people be able to question what my sexuality is.”
- “I **cuff** my jeans, wear patterned **button up shirts**, sometimes wear **funky earrings** and a **lot of eyeliner**, I've **dyed my hair** a much darker color, generally just tried to look more unique.”
- “I wear a lot of **button-downs**, have multiple **piercings**, and have started dressing **less stereotypically feminine.**”
- “I follow certain signals of fashion found in queer spaces like **funky patterns**, wearing **clothes of the opposite gender**, **shirts tucked into high waisted pants**, **short** hair, etc.”
- “I **dyed** my hair, got my **nose stud**, had an **eyebrow slit**, have a bi pride flag, and a rainbow hat. I **suppressed my identity** for so long that sometimes i may try to express myself in different ways than I normally choose to do so.”
- “tendency towards pink/blue/purple hair and clothing.” [*the bi flag colors]*
- “My hair has **pink highlights** because that's a generally accepted signal of bisexual women (Stephanie Beatriz does it all the time and so do all my bi friends), I also frequently dress in a butch or masculine fashion in an attempt to express that I like girls.”
“I usually make sure my outfits don't "look to straight" before going out. Usually, I try and add **some I don't care vibes** to my outfits.”

“I don't really think about it too much but I do wear some "stereotypical bisexual" things like patterned button-downs, high-waisted pants, cuffed pants, and have a septum piercing.”

“Yes. I try to present as a Queer female. I dress more masculinely and dress in stereotypically ‘lesbian’ ways.”

“Big earrings (**wlw cue**) because I'm femme presenting, people assume I'm attracted to me.”

“Sometimes **leaning away from masculine clothing** combinations, adding a feminine touch to more ambiguous outfits.”

“If I dress aggressively it does that, so either very masc or very **alternative**. I often dress like a **dominatrix** or in all pink.”

Fascinatingly, the first comment off the bat demonstrates that the use of songs and musicians to signal sexuality on social media has moved that signaling back into the fashion-sphere where it has traditionally occurred, as these merchandise from these artists is used to achieve the same effect. However, this particular use of Girl in Red seems to only signal a general queerness, not specifically bisexuality. Another respondent describes trying to convey her sexuality to no avail. This likely suggests that she is not getting female attention, rather than alienating male attention by looking like a lesbian, as being approached by women would be novel and new, whereas the absence of male attention would likely not be immediately missed in exploring an identity that is defined as queer due to the female-loving aspect of it. This lack of successful signaling may be due to the large expanse that women’s fashion can cover, regardless of their sexual orientation. Further, UVM’s crunchy/granola look can muddy the distinctions across sexualities. A subsequent woman mentions wearing ear tones, which is precisely what one bi man said he wears to demonstrate attraction to women. These colors may then signal a more masculine stance, the active **observer** vs. viewed. Notably, one person describes her double-piercing on her nose not as a direct signal or bisexuality or even queerness, but simply as a marker that might give a person pause and not automatically presume that she’s straight. This is the first case we’ve seen of a respondent being satisfied with signaling an ambiguous sexual orientation, though we have seen such a sentiment among lesbians who have been fine projecting an undefined gender. Next, like one of the bi men, a woman claims, “[I] dress for the audience I am hoping to impress…which can include lower cut shirts, more skin revealed etc.” She may be implying that she shows more skin when trying to attract one group over the other, which would likely be men, as women are often encouraged to wear tight and revealing clothing under the male gaze. One respondent goes on to explain how she styles her hair like a bi character from Brooklyn 99, demonstrating how the media is playing a role in formation of perceptions about the presentation of people of different sexual orientations. In fact, this same character is the one who showed up in the leather jacket in the earlier meme, showing that she is becoming a bi icon online as well, idolized beyond this one UVMer. We then see some discussion of masculine dress. One woman describes adding “I don’t care vibes” to her outfit, which is a widespread perception of cis, het male fashion, which could then deem a disregard for fashion as masculine, which, when employed by a woman, could signal queerness. Next, a woman wears masculine clothes to look like a lesbian, which explains overlap in the groups’ stylings and, hence, why
respondents have a hard time differentiating them. Conversely, one woman tries to lean away from masculine outfits, while adding feminine elements to ambiguous (likely androgynous) ones, which suggests that she is trying to convey some queerness through demonstration of some masculinity, but that she doesn’t want to accidentally signal lesbianism. Lastly, one woman says that she sometimes looks extremely alternative or masculine, the alternative outfit being that of a dominatrix, which connects directly to punks’ use of kink in their outfits. Dressing all in pink sounds more like a fem lesbian practice; though hyperfeminization is common among goth women, it is usually done in a way that differs from traditional femininity, e.g. by embracing Victorian clothing and using black in contrast to pink. Hence, it seems like the former outfit would signal the general queerness of punks, whereas the latter would more likely demonstrate lesbianism. Though femininity normally signals cis, het female identity, wearing all pink sounds bold and unusual, which some respondents report as being off-putting to men, so this outfit may signal lesbianism over a straight identity.

**Themes in intentional signifiers and assessment of efficacy:**

**Piercings (11)**

If unusual (e.g. nose bridge), cartilage piercings, or 2+ lobe piercings, these could work, as discussed earlier. Piercings are also associated with punks, which signals general queerness.

**Cuffed jeans (10)**

In comparison to lesbians (55%), bi women are slightly more likely to cuff their pants (60%). As this is not a great difference between the two groups, cuffing would likely just signal interest in women in general.

**Masculine style (9)**

This was more commonly predicted for lesbians, so having an overall masculine presentation would likely project a lesbian identity. However, if other feminine elements were included, that might turn the tides. Meg, who’s a lesbian, says that even though her clothes are traditionally masculine, since she has long hair and wears makeup and jewelry, she is mistaken for straight. Hence, if Meg’s half-masculine/half-feminine look was also paired with some bi piercings, a bi woman could likely signal her identity. It is likely that many women mention masculine style as it can help a woman assume the active role of the *observer* vs. the passive female role of the *viewed*, demonstrating an interest in women.

**Dyed hair (7)**

Though we have seen that a notable number of respondents and TikTok users who are bi women dye their hair conspicuous colors – sometimes dyeing one half of their head a different color than the other half (split-dyeing) – and use piercings to signal their sexual orientation, this message does not always get across to the observer. For instance, Skylar believes that piercings just send a message that a person is “out of the norm” and not trying to fit in. Though one such reason could be due to their sexuality, she acknowledges, she claims that this styling could also be indicative of art students or people with alternative style – like punks, as we have learned. They could simply be “self-assured and confident” in who they are, unafraid to stray from societal norms, she states. She likewise sees brightly-dyed hair and abnormal haircuts as a statement, but associates them with gender-non-conformity/nonbinary people. If you’re in a
place where you can appear androgynous, she speculates, you may feel like you’re in your own
category, and you can express yourself the way you want to; you’re not held down by specific
gendered expectations. Brightly dyed hair and a “whacky haircut” is saying “Fuck the gender
binary. I don’t identify as male, and I don’t identify as female, I’m not going to stick to your
boxes…It’s about breaking norms.” Logan similarly associates dyed hair with gender-non-
conformity, though also sees connections to gay people. Conversely, Ryan defiantly states that
dyed hair is “definitely not a gay thing.” Though it can be associated with queer people, it is
becoming mainstream. You can see it on cis, het people he states, and he also had dyed hair
before he was aware of any of his queer identities. Additionally, more lesbians have dyed hair
than bi women, blurring the identity distinctions further. Hence, dyed hair does not seem an
effective way to signal one’s bisexuality.

**Button-up shirts (5)**

> **patterned button-ups (2)**

As button-up shirts are traditionally masculine that could signal female queerness. If the
shirt is patterned, especially an unusual or bright pattern, it will be considered slightly feminine,
creating a somewhat androgynous look, which is typical of alternative communities, like punks,
which have queer foundations. This mix of masculine and feminine may communicate bi
identity, but this is unclear.

**Tattoos (4)**

These are more common among lesbians and bi nonbinary people and, thus, would not be
effective.

**Androgynous (4)**

Not highly predicted for bi women (nor lesbians), but is an element of the punk
community, which is queer. However, if a woman has masculine elements of her outfit or cycles
between feminine and masculine outfits based on the day, she will likely be assessed as queer in
some way.

**Fun earrings (4)**

Associated with both lesbians and bi women.

**Eyebrow slit (3)**

Has roots in the lesbian TikTok community, but could generally signify women-loving-
women culture.

**Bi colors/flag (3)**

Success.

**Flannel (3)**

Worn by the majority of bi (62%), cis, het (62%), and lesbian women, but most by
lesbians (75%). Similarly only 4.9% of respondents expected to see bi women wear flannel,
whereas 9.8% expected it of lesbians. If a bi woman wears flannel with a denim jacket, hoodie,
or both, she may signal bisexuality to those in the know, but many respondents are unaware of this social media trend.

**Oversized clothes (3)**

**High-waisted pants (3)**

> with shirt tucked into them (the “French tuck”) (1)

Based on TikTok associations and a few respondent predictions, this may work, but only for those in the know.

**Rainbow imagery (2)**

General queerness.

**A lot of eyeliner (2)**

Mirrors punk and goth female style in parodying conventional femininity. If a woman wears Victorian-like goth clothes and/or generally projects a dark, hyperfeminine aesthetic, she will signal bisexuality over the general queerness signaled by a punk image.

**Short hair (2)**

If it is mid- or shoulder-length, then this should work.

**Undercut (2)**

More common among lesbians.

**Short nails (2)**

Not predicted for bi women; may signal lesbianism.

Overall, many of these stylistic elements can signal queerness broadly, but don’t home in on bisexuality. Hence, many would have to be combined in such a way as to project that image. Also, regardless of what the reality is of what bi people wear, if broader society is not aware of these tropes, they will not be able to identify bisexual women. Yet, it also does not necessarily seem like that many bi women are aware of the stereotypical style, some admitting that they don’t, and as they make up 38% of all respondents, we would have expected to see more of a consensus on the presentation of bi women in the results than we did. Instead, the overarching message was that most people do not know what bi women look like (except for some bi, cis, het, and lesbian women, quoted in this chapter).

Is there any way that you try to visually present your gender identity?

Only a sample of novel quotes included for each category.

Most bi women – 73% – do not try to present their gender identity. Two don’t feel the need to present exclusively in a feminine manner. Another feels that she in fact projects the image of a different gender (maybe male or nonbinary) and doesn’t seem to mind – as was true
of some lesbians. One then laments not being able to signal their gender naturally nor by crafting their appearance in a certain way. This might mean that her hair is very short (maybe a buzzcut), which, regardless of her clothing, may signal nonbinary identity; that she wears androgynous clothing or mixes masculine and feminine elements in outfits that could also signal nonbinary identity; or perhaps wears only masculine clothes with moderately short hair and even accessories (e.g. jewelry) won’t differentiate her appearance. She has followed the trend of people trying to present themselves a certain way to achieve recognition of an identity, but who then give up. However, this case seems less like a desire to return to one’s authentic style, and more like quitting such intentional self-styling because nothing is working for her. This seems to be a unique response thus far.

For those who unintentionally signal their gender identity, a natural draw to feminine style predominates – though one suspects she wears feminine clothing due to social conditioning, with one stating that her features are naturally feminine, so she will always signal femininity regardless of her self-styling. Such a case could be difficult for someone assigned female at birth who identifies as nonbinary. Another notes how she simply doesn’t hide her feminine curves – another barrier those who desire a nonbinary presentation. The next one makes the point that the difference in male vs. female wedding rings can indicate gender identity – which poses the question of what married nonbinary people do (perhaps wear the type of ring for the gender that they were not assigned at birth?). She also associates sentimental accessories – a necklace with her kids’ initials – with feminine identity. The last woman in this category doesn’t seem to rule out the fact that she could present as feminine, but describes dressing in an androgynous way.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No (40, 51%):</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I don’t feel much attachment to my gender.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“No, I wear both masc and femme clothes and I never really think about it.”</td>
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<td>“No, and I think at times I almost do the opposite and present a different gender identity.”</td>
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<td>“I have given up on trying to present for others to understand me, because they never will [understand me] by my presentation.”</td>
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<tr>
<th>I effectively do (unintentionally) (18, 23%):</th>
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<tr>
<td>“What I put on every day: eye brow pencil, fashionable clothes, jewelry.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I definitely wear some things that are stereotypically feminine - earrings, necklaces, tops bought in the women's section of stores - but I think I tend to choose these things more because I like how they look than whether they reinforce my gender identity. I do buy clothes that are labelled as men's if they fit me and I like how they look.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Not ‘try’ to, but I do tend to dress more feminine, in unintentional accordance with the way that my gender identity would (stereo)typically present.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I dress in a very feminine way, but my natural features are very feminine so I have no trouble being seen as female no matter how I dress. I've always had hair at least at my shoulders or longer.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“As someone who's cisgender, I think my gender identity is made pretty obvious by expected feminine choices such as longer hair, as well as not purposefully concealing any secondary sex characteristics”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Not ‘trying’ but wedding rings, necklace with kids' initials all suggest cishet ID.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>I wear dresses a lot (I think it's because I like them and they are comfortable but it may also be a remnant of being required to dress like a girl).</td>
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</table>
“I think that it just happens to be that I dress somewhere in between femme and masc so it really depends on how I'm feeling but I think that's the perfect balance of being genderqueer for me.”

Yes (20, 26%):

- Long hair (5)
- “I wear feminine clothes that compliment my body type.”
- “I wear things like dresses and clothes that show off parts of my body that I'm happy about, but I really enjoy wearing a blazer and leather jackets. I think it is stupid limiting clothing based on your gender. People should wear whatever they like.”
- “I try to present myself as fluidly as I feel. I identify as a womxn but that identity is a spectrum for me, some days I almost fall off it on one side, some days on the other side. However feme or masc I'm feeling I try to dress accordingly and put on whatever matches how I feel.”
- “I tend to wear makeup and feminine clothing to present my gender identity.”
- “Shirts that show that I have boobs, form-fitting pants, long hair.”
- “Early on in my transition I tried hard to present female in every way I could to avoid any possible misgendering. I assumed people wouldn't see me as female unless there were a lot of cues to guide them in. Now I rely on the assumption that people will view me as female due to subtle aspects like my piercings, hairstyle, lack of facial hair, breast development through hormones, etc. I try to still steer towards more feminine clothing but I don't go overboard in that regard.”
- “Yes, I try to express my gender identity in many ways. I have long hair and I shave my face very often, which would give me a more feminine look by most people's standards. I don't want to be looked at and regarded as simply a man because it makes me uncomfortable so I prefer to look androgynous.”
- “I wear things that are classified as women's clothing and sometimes show off the feminine parts of my body.”
- “It really depends on how I'm feeling that day. On days I feel more feminine, I'll wear more traditionally feminine clothing, tighter clothing (mostly tighter, lower cut tops), wear my hair down [vs. in bun], wear more makeup, etc. On days wear I feel less feminine/want to dress more androgynous, I'll wear more oversized clothing, men's clothing, big pants and big shirts, etc.”
- “Fem clothing and makeup, being armed at all times for protection.”

While 26% of bi women intentionally signal their gender identity versus 40% of lesbians. This may indicate that lesbians’ greater likelihood of having shorter, more masculine haircuts may require them to somewhat lessen their overall degree of male presentation – some of those who don’t try to signal a gender identity are misgendered or met with confusion. Several bi women list long hair as a gender indicator, aligning with the trends we have seen throughout this paper. Many also use traditionally feminine style elements, like clothing and makeup for that effect. Five describe wearing clothes to show off or compliment their bodies, such as their curves, be it via form-fitting or revealing clothing. Interestingly, this may help communicate that they are women, but could also signal that they are catering to the male gaze, which is only one of the genders of their intended audience. One woman speaks to presenting as
female, but how that entails a broad spectrum for her. The fact that she feels that her style can ebb and flow between masculine and feminine and that she can still present as a woman further attests to the idea of women having more freedom in their realm of expression than men.

Another woman, who is trans—a demographic that composes 3.8% of bi women—describes using piercings, alongside hairstyle, feminine clothing, reduction of facial hair, and breast development to signal her gender identity. These elements all seem to be straight-forward, especially those that have been themes throughout the paper, but the use of piercings seems more curious. It is possible that she is trying to do what fem lesbians of the 30s–60s did, by getting piercings on more “feminine features,” such as their nipples, naval, or clitoral hood (Karaminas 2013: 211). Yet, such piercings would naturally be hidden, unless she chose to wear a crop top and had a naval piercing or wore a tight shirt without a bra that would signal nipple piercings. A trans woman quoted after her also shaves her face, and seems to embrace an androgynous look—maybe because it is more possible at this time, given where she is in her transition. The second-to-last respondent notes how her feminine days can include tight and revealing clothes and how her more androgynous days include oversized clothing—which may hint at what nonbinary people assigned female at birth can do to communicate their gender identity: to obscure female signifiers. She also believes having hair in a bun is more masculine than feminine, which may mean that either the illusion of it being shorter is masculine, or that she associates it with the growing popularity of man buns. Lastly, it is worth recognizing that one woman believes that an accessory to “arm” herself, perhaps mace or a knife, is part of her gender expression, suggesting the extent and potential danger of the male gaze.

**Bi Nonbinary People**

*Is there any way that you try to visually present your sexual orientation?*

Only a sample of novel quotes included for each category.

<table>
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<th>No (7, 50%):</th>
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<tr>
<td>• “Not really anymore.”</td>
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<td>• “I used to try to ‘look bi’ but now that I’m transitioning no.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Not really. I have pansexual flag fingerless gloves that I wear when I'm feeling confident in myself, but other than that, no.</td>
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<tr>
<th>I effectively do (unintentionally) (1, 9.3%):</th>
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<tr>
<td>• “Not on purpose but I fall into a lot of stereotypes of bisexuals especially with my hairstyle.”</td>
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<th>Yes (6, 43%):</th>
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<td>• Pride merch (3)</td>
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<td>• “I have a lot of pins on the bag that I carry around everyday, including pins that are LGBT friendly, and I try to dress somewhat distinct I guess.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• “I try to present as a queer person, outwardly loud in clothing and hair style.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• “I dress without thinking of the male gaze. I cuff my jeans and use layering frequently.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• “Wearing more form-fitting clothes, wearing more unconventional prints, or just prints in general other than plaid.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• “Converse, geeky clothes, anime stuff, androgynous.”</td>
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</table>
Markedly, more bi nonbinary people try to signal their sexual orientation than bi men, but fewer than bi women. This could be indicative of the fact that an overall more masculine aesthetic of someone who’s female-presenting might lead others to assume that they’re a lesbian versus a bi woman, and more feminine presentation of someone who’s male presenting might lead others to assume that they’re a gay man. Hence, it seems from the outset that navigating expression of a third gender while simultaneously desiring to signal bisexuality could be difficult. A nonbinary person’s genderqueerness could be seen as gender inversion, signifying interest [solely] in the gender that was assigned to that person at birth, making it difficult to signal a broader interest in all genders. Accordingly, 21% report use pride merch to signal their sexuality, as compared to 6.3% of bi men, and 3.8% of bi women (though 2.3% of bi women also use rainbow imagery).

For those who don’t intentionally signal their sexuality, the first person quoted may have experienced such a strain in signaling their sexuality since they claim that they no longer try. Or, perhaps, they defaulted back to their authentic style, rather than trying to conform to the bi subculture. The next one hints at possibly medically transitioning (which could potentially mean getting a double-mastectomy or starting testosterone for someone assigned female at birth or getting breast implants or estrogen for someone assigned male at birth), which they state has led them to stop trying to look bi. It is unclear why they are no longer actively trying to signal bisexuality as they transition, but it’s possible that they find that as their appearance grows more androgynous, it may hint at bisexuality (e.g. as is the case with goth men), or they find that accurately presenting their gender identity is taking precedence over sexual orientation-signaling. Another respondent claims that bisexual signaling is not a part of their everyday style, but that pansexual-flag-themed gloves appear in their outfit when they’re confident in their identity. The one person who unintentionally signals bisexuality seems aware of stereotypes, claiming they fall into one, likely meaning that they present in the same way as people who were assigned the same gender at birth as them.

Three of those who do try to present their sexual orientation use pride merchandise; one of them insists wanting to look “distinct” as well, which is echoed by the person quoted after them. As these two were assigned female at birth, it is likely that they are aiming for the loud and bold aesthetic expected of some bi and lesbian women – the alternative to the butch, dull/muted look. However, this would then signal queerness in general, and not directly bisexuality. The subsequent respondent directly addresses the male gaze, saying that they purposefully do not dress for it and additionally cuff their jeans as a signal to women. It is curious, then, as to whether they have enough stylistic – perhaps feminine – elements to prevent men from assuming that they’re a lesbian. Yet, they could also simply mean that they don’t wear tight and revealing clothing. Following, a respondent assigned male at birth wears form-fitting clothes and unconventional prints, as respondents expected of gay men (10% for bolder/unique fashion choices and 9.3% for tight clothes), though not so much for bi men (2.9% and 1.5%, respectively), but which some bi men also admit to wearing to signal their sexuality. Hence, this person may come off as gay rather than bi. Converse and androgyny then show up, both popular in emo culture (though androgyny popular in punk and goth culture as well), with Skylar having called high top Vans/Converse sneakers queer markers for women (and this respondent was assigned female at birth), though not specifically bi ones.
Is there any way that you try to visually present your gender identity?

Only a sample of novel quotes included for each category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No (2, 14%):</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Not generally as much as I used to. I feel like I was a lot more femme</td>
<td>past but now am generally more masculine.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenting in the past but now am generally more masculine.”</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes (12, 86%):</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I wear a pronoun button.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I don't wear makeup and dress somewhat conservatively.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I am more feminine, but there are days that I do try to dress more</td>
<td>androgynously.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Appearing as queer as possible, mixing gendered clothes with masculine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>features and like a skirt for example.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Usually don't wear extremely feminine or extremely masculine clothing.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I wear breast forms.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I dress pretty androgynously. I wear my hair in feminine styles like pig</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tails or buns and I sometimes wear makeup. I take hormones to alter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>my physical body.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Yes. I have very bad body dysphoria, so I wear breast forms and shave</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>my arms and legs, as these are things I perceive as more feminine.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“yes, gender non-conformity and androgyny.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Buzzed hair, nose piercing. Dressing androgynously and intentionally</td>
<td>outside of typical gender norms.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>going outside of typical gender norms.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overwhelmingly, bi nonbinary people try to present their gender identity, except for 14%. This is much greater than for bi women – 43% of whom actively signal their gender identity – and bi men, 38% of whom do so. This finding is unsurprising, based on the fact that this gender identity is not well-understood; recall that Mark’s expression of his confusion and that 29% of nonbinary people (overall – not just those who are bi) report that their parents accept their identity, but don’t understand it; 18% say their parents refuse to accept or acknowledge it; and 5.9% state that they have been kicked out of their house/disowned. Therefore, nonbinary people may feel pressure to “keep up appearances” in the literal sense, or else face doubts regarding their identity’s validity. If the definition is being between male and female (or genderless), they may aim to dress androgynous, as 67% of those who try to signal their gender identity do.

People with breast forms (2) or going through hormone replacement therapy may face less criticism and doubt regarding the existence of their nonbinary identity as their body becomes more of a gender differentiating factor than their clothes, though there is always the possibility of people asking if they are transitioning to eventually become male or female (the “opposite sex”).

One person may not want to feel pressured to look a certain way to communicate their gender identity, so they merely don a pronoun button. Similarly, the one person who does not try to signal their gender identity seems content to dress in whatever gendered clothing suits them at the time, without a particular draw towards androgyny.
Conclusion

Many respondents struggle to differentiate bi people from homosexual people (and even sometimes cis, het women). For women, this could be due to the overall UVM crunchy/granola culture, which can obscure boundaries of sexuality among women. Additionally, women generally have a greater range of expression in fashion than men, able to wear more masculine clothing, while a man’s exploration of feminine style can place him on the queer side of the strict queer-non-queer male clothing binary. Thus, cis, het men are less likely to style themselves in ways that could be perceived as feminine (e.g. tight clothes, bright colors, uncommon/loud patterns). This queer-non-queer divide, of course, can make it hard to differentiate bi men from gay men. However, bi men are more likely to have body modifications of any kind (e.g. dyed hair, uncommon hair, tattoos, ear lobe and cartilage piercings, nose piercings) than gay men, though most prominently, the men-loving-men symbol of a single lobe piercing on the right ear. Long hair could also differentiate them. Body modifications are similarly what differentiate bi women, specifically split-dyed hair, mid- or shoulder-length hair, bangs unusual piercings (e.g. nipple piercings, nose bridge piercing), cartilage piercings, two or more ear lobe piercings, and possibly mohawks, though online subcultures insist and the data show that high-waisted pants with a baggy shirt tucked in the front or flowy pants with a tube top may also differentiate them. Some bi women are not aware of the stereotypical presentation associated with their identity, though some cis, het and lesbian women are, and some respondents claim to know of women who are not bi who don “the bisexual look.” Notably, in describing how to find a bi woman, respondents list similar indicators for lesbians and interviewees state merely how to find “queer” women, not specifying “bi.” Additionally, bi women are more likely than any group so far to get their body modifications for their mental health – to emotionally cope – and to take ownership of their body, including a handful of people assigned female at birth who identify as genderqueer, nonbinary, or as trans men. This may be due to poor mental health among bi people due to societal stigma and disbelief in their identity. Conversely, bi women mostly gear their clothing towards the viewer. Comparatively, bi men and gay men only get their body modifications for themselves, likely due to not being raised to cater to the male gaze. Their clothes, at least among a few, however, may serve to attract male eyes (e.g. by being tight or more feminine).

On that note, bi women may feel less pulled to satisfy the male gaze – as some explicitly mention, which could be why they are less likely to wear feminine clothing than cis, het women. However, the fact that they are still attracted to men may account for them presenting slightly less masculine than lesbians. Similarly, much fewer bi women actively signal their sexual orientation than lesbians, which may be due to their lack of dependence on one gender for romantic involvement.

Likewise, slightly fewer bi men try to present their sexual orientation than gay men. If they do, some use a variety of symbols, some blend signals that appeal to each gender, and some change the way they present based on the day depending on who they want to appeal to. Few try to signal gender identity other than trans men, who try to avoid femininity – regardless of what feels authentic to them, like straight, trans men.

One theme between both bi men and bi women is that their hair differentiates them from other identities; bi women have hair that symbolically stands a middle ground between a masculine, more-often-lesbian cut and a long more-often-straight cut, just like their sexuality, whereas bi men often have long hair, unlike both gay and cis, het men, projecting an
androgynous look that could make them the passive subject of the male gaze rather than the observer, as punk and goth men – both queer – have done stylistically.

Regarding bi nonbinary people, they get all of their body modifications for themselves; only one wanted to effect sex appeal, but this was in conjunction with reasons that served themself. Ultimately, dyed hair and piercings can cause them to stand out among bi men and women, but female-presenting bi nonbinary people have a greater chance of blending in with lesbians, 55% of whom dye their hair. In selecting their clothing, it is predominantly for comfort, such as to lower gender dysphoria/improving comfort with one’s body. They also generally try to make their hair vary from the gender identity they were assigned at birth. Finally, they may feel pressured to constantly demonstrate a “genderless” identity in order to validate their identity, as it is not well understood at this time, meaning that most who try to signal their gender dress androgynously.
Chapter 7: Ace & Aro Women and Nonbinary People

This last chapter analyzes self-fashioning of the asexual (ace) and aromantic (aro) community. As there were no ace or aro men, this chapter will focus on women and nonbinary people. Nevertheless, respondent perceptions of ace and aro men have been included. Given what we know about identity-signaling for other sexual and romantic orientations, we can now see how all that compares to groups who identify as experiencing an absence of sexual and/or romantic attraction, and also investigate why and/or how these people will signal their identity, and to whom.

The following is how survey respondents perceive people who identify as asexual (ace) and/or aromantic (aro).

Ace & Aro Men:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Perceived Presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>95, 46%</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69, 34%</td>
<td>No way to know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13, 6.3%</td>
<td>Non-visual cues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4, 2.0%</td>
<td>Pride merchandise (identity pins, shirts that explicitly state identity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3, 1.5%</td>
<td>Ace colors, rings (sample of responses; include both signals)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Black ring on the left middle or ring finger. Ace of spades iconography in black and purple [colors of ace flag].”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I don't think there's really an a-spec [ace and aro spectrum] style besides the pins or color schemes of the flags. Obviously the symbols too but thats again more of a pin thing.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“If he's wearing a black ring/other pride merch.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“If someone is wearing multiple rings, especially a black ring, I would think they're asexual.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2, 0.98%</td>
<td>Bland colors, Modest/not sexy, Possible to tell (unclear how), Nerdy, No sporty clothing, Ace iconography (e.g. “Ace of spades...in black and purple”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1, 0.49%</td>
<td>Less attention given to outfit, “cuter” clothing [than straight men, the “average man”?], skinny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Case</td>
<td>“Seeing someone dressed in a plain white T-shirt, tucked into basketball/gym shorts with long white socks and sneakers who just wears that through the day would make me question it. Aside from that specific case, unsure.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ace & Aro Women:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Perceived Presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>105, 51%</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64, 31%</td>
<td>No way to know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11, 5.4%</td>
<td>Non-visual cues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3, 1.5%</td>
<td>Androgynous, Possible to tell (Unclear How), Ace colors/flag,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rings (sample of responses):</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Black ring on the left middle or ring finger. Ace of spades iconography in black and purple”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “If someone is wearing multiple rings, especially a black ring, I would think they're asexual.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Pride merch/black ring”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2, 0.98%</strong> Pride merchandise (explicitly stating identity on shirt, pin, accessory), Modest, Ace iconography (e.g. “Ace of spades...in black and purple”)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1, 0.49%</strong> Skinny, No makeup, geeky, not trendy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, it appears that the overwhelming majority of respondents do not know what an ace or aro person looks like, with most saying they are “unsure” what signals to look for or that there is “no way to know”; non-visual cues seem to follow directly behind these two options. For men, the next best “tell” is pride merch, which undeniably indicates someone’s queer identity. Some themes in specific indicators we see for both genders include modest clothing; use of ace colors, flags, and iconography (e.g. ace of spades); wearing multiple rings and/or black rings (and possibly on the left middle or ring finger) – which were the most-found accessory among bi men; looking nerdy/geeky; less fashionable (not trendy, less effort into outfits, specific case listed for men, bland colors). For women, it is notable that we see some divergence from gendered presentation in the “tells” of “No makeup” and “Androgynous.”

One respondent remarked societal perceptions of men as inhibiting their ability to pinpoint ace and aro people.

> “Men are so often coded as innately sexual beings that very little would cause me to think someone was ace.”

Another who said they were unsure of ace style implied that ace people are seldom discussed or represented.

> “Really I think the presentation of asexuality feels a lot less stereotyped than anything else.”

Again, respondents were similarly unable to distinguish bi people. For instance, Ella remarked that bi, aro, and ace identities are the ones she’s the least familiar.

**Motivation for Signaling Identity**

In speculating about and examining the presentation of ace and aro communities, a question that may arise is why members of these identities would want to signal each other if they would not be doing so to find possible sexual and/or romantic partners (though it is not irrational to think that one ace person may want to find another to have a sexless relationship, or two aro people to merely have a casual, sexual relationship).

Asexuality is essentially invisible to society; it is defined by a lack of practice, in contrast to homosexuality, which is clearly visible through the presence of certain behavior (e.g. a man kissing his husband) (Pacho 2013: 29). Homosexuals must fight for acceptance while asexual
people do not face a similar necessity (ibid.: 30). Ace and aro people also complicate our understandings of other sexualities where they may intersect, as someone who is asexual and homoromantic questions the societal assumption of homosexual relationships (ibid.: 17) – and particularly gay males – as sexually active; one respondents’ comment contributes to this view, as he said he “struggled to feel like a part of the gay male community,” one of his distinctions being that he doesn’t “hook up.” This invisibility, perceived lack of need to fight for one’s sexual and romantic rights, and disruption of understandings of queer identities that intersect with asexuality and aromanticism may be why ace and aro people are left out of the queer community.

Yet, ace and aro people may argue that their identities do not entail a life without struggle, as if they choose to come out, they, too, will be marked as abnormal (ibid.: 30). While homosexuals may be deemed “shameful,” ace and aro people may be considered “incomplete or underdeveloped” (ibid.: 29). Nevertheless, ace and aro people may come out to clarify their identity to society to diminish stigma (ibid.).

Identifying as ace and aro can also help individuals find community, which can be useful in several respects. For one, it can foster self-acceptance and self-confidence (ibid.: 30). One great place to find community is the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), the world’s largest online asexual community which has access to resources on asexuality as well. AVEN users have expressed relief in connecting with others who share their identity, one stating, “when I discovered asexuality, I didn’t feel abnormal anymore” (ibid.). Another remarked that “it’s easier to accept [your identity] when you know there are other people who are asexual” (ibid.). This community can also serve as reprieve from sex-obsessed society. AVEN users have expressed discomfort and marginalization when constantly faced with sexual content (ibid.: 26). One bemoaned newspaper outlets that have “shelves stacked with magazines filled with articles on how to improve your sex life/have more orgasms/tur your partner on etc. There are similar things on TV and in books” (ibid.). Another blatantly stated, “I cant [sic] find a place for myself or see a place for myself in this OVERLY SEXUAL society. It’s so disconcerting” (ibid.). Thus, some ace and aro people may also come out to take a political stance as their identification directly challenges dominant societal values (ibid.: 19). Ace and aro people may also prioritize coming out in order to simply support the validity of their identity, as became true of homosexuality when sexologists invented a scientific name for it (ibid.: 18).

Of course, at the crux of developing a community is the reliance on there being enough people with shared experience and some opposition to societal norms (ibid.: 19). Outside of AVEN, this can be difficult for ace and aro people, as approximately only 1.0% of people are asexual (Sunar 2017). In the absence of broad statistics regarding the demographics of those who identify as ace or aro, a casual AVEN poll suggests that 65% of asexuals are cisgender women, 31% are cisgender men, and 4% identify as either intersex or transgender (Sunar 2017). Further, AVEN members claim women are more active participants in discussions on the forum, potentially indicating that asexuality more often impacts women’s lives (ibid.).

Self-Styling:

Not only does AVEN offer useful demographic information about the ace and aro community, but it is also the perfect source of insight into ace and aro self-styling. One thread in particular shines a great light on ace and aros’ associations of different methods of self-presentation with their identities and their own questions about such practices in their community as well.
The thread below, aptly titled, “Does asexuality have a fashion style?” by user Upsidedownduck (2019), is one such exemplary thread. All comments are from November 5, 2019 and are in consecutive order from the author of the thread to the last one I’ve included (of the two pages of comments), though “[…]” indicates skips over some users’ comments for relevance and brevity’s sake. I have underlines are my own to emphasize themes and ideas of note.

**Upsidedownduck (female, ace lesbian):** I recently have discovered that I am asexual, and I am wondering if asexuality has a fashion style? It sounds kind of dumb, but I want to dress like an ace person? I’ve seen that other sexualities, especially bisexuality, have a certain style associated with them. Is there an asexual style?

[…]

**argar (male):** The way I dress, I kind of doubt it.

**SithLord (female):** Wait, bisexuality has a style? I know the gay stereotypes with women wearing plaid shirts and men wearing tight clothes, but other sexualities have a style? I thought it was just a subculture thing.

I wouldn’t consider ourselves a big enough community to have such a style. Other than small things here or there like ace rings and most people not dressing to attract others, I don’t see something about it. (Not dressing to attract others does not mean not dressing well, because a lot of us dress nicely because we want to).

So unless you’re talking about rocking that purple and black, or ace rings, I don’t think we have a fashion.

**Captain Jay (male):** I’d imagine that you would be much more likely to see aces (or gay people, or the like) intentionally wearing "stereotypical" outfits at events such as pride parades, not so much just walking down the street. I generally dress plainly, for my part.

I suppose you could consider things like black rings or ace flag buttons. I haven’t seen many of those, though.

**RoseGoestoYale (she/they, demisexual):** I don’t think there really is one. Really, there isn’t a set fashion for any sexual orientation, and fashion changes so quickly any. I think most people just wear what they want.

**Antrhacite_Impreza (male):** Fairly sure the only time orientations have a "style" is at pride parades; the rest of the time everyone is just... themselves?

**layabout (male, ace & aro):** Do other sexualities have styles? I mean I’ve seen pictures of people wearing clothes in the flag color scheme and there’s the ring of course.

**Sally (female, ace):** No. Asexual people are all different...
Moon Spirit (she/they): The way asexuals dress varies as much as how any other orientation dresses. Not all sexual people like to wear sexy clothes, and not all asexual people don't like to wear sexy clothes.

crazy ace (gender not given): I was once told that my sense of style was so horrible that the person addressing me knew “that I couldn't be gay.” (Even though I am) so there’s that. 😅 Not sure that’s because of my asexuality though.

ColeHW34 (nonbinary, ace & aro): Nope. I just wear whatever I want, but it’s mainly bland so I won’t draw attention to myself. Besides the less people, the better it is for me.

gisiebob (male, demisexual): [in response to] pls don't accessorize sexuality.

[...]

Firefly8 (female, aro & ace): No, I don't think sexualities can be stereotyped like that. I’ve seen aces dress such that would make the most sexy of sexuals blush. I've also seen the most high libido sexuals dress such that would make my grandmother proud.

KrysComrade (male): Lol there’s just things associated with sexualities that make people proud to be part of it. It’s not bad to have styles associated with them. Bisexuality is cuffed jeans and flannels. Asexuality would probably just be black rings. It’s cool for orientations to have their own culture. So far I haven't seen anything I really like with gay dude culture other than drag, ugly [flamingo] shirts, and hookups.

Star Lion (male, aro & ace): Like @SithGirl said, the community isn’t really big enough or known enough to attach a stereotypical fashion style. However, I wouldn’t doubt if asexuals are more likely to wear clothes that cover themselves more and reflect sexual attention

[...]

Bloc (nonbinary femme, pan gray ace): For me it can range from jeans with an oversize sweater to fishnets and a short dress depending on mood and occasion. But mostly it is jeans and a tightly fitted t-shirt or sweater depending on the temperature.

In this discourse, we can see back-and-forth regarding if the ace and aro communities – or any sexualities, in general – are associated with any style elements, and if so, if those are worn on an everyday basis or limited to Pride-like events. Users also debate whether aces and aros wear “sexy,” revealing clothing or not. We also see the ace flag colors, black rings, pride merchandise (e.g. identity buttons), and exclusion from the queer community mentioned again (brought up in Chapter 1). The question also arises if the community is biggest enough to have an established stereotype.
Even if there is not an ace- and aro-specific dress code of sorts, some posts on Twitter under the hashtag “#ThisisWhatAsexualLooksLike” reveal stylings that align with what survey users and popular media have described as the “queer aesthetic.” The user known as “nike” or @_fabulousty shows off her dramatic makeup – eyeshadow made by mixing the colors from the ace flag, a massive eyeliner wing, and dark plum lipstick – as well as an ear cartilage ring, a zebra-striped shirt, and a short haircut (nike 2020). Her heavy makeup is clearly a punk aesthetic – signaling queerness of some kind, which could either be in reference to her ace identity, or perhaps a homoromantic or biromantic identity. Elisa Hansen, a self-identified bi ace, similarly sports ostentatious makeup – thick eyeliner with silver eyeshadow, red lipstick, noticeable blush, and a Victorian-like outfit. She is exhibiting a clear Vampire Fan (author of a vampire novel herself), goth aesthetic – likely signaling her bi identity over her ace identity (Hansen 2020). The user known as Meg or @Bisexual_Meg likewise fits the bill for the queer aesthetic, as they are female-presenting with a shaved head (likely what communicates their nonbinary identity), arm tattoos, multiple rings (mentioned as an ace signifier), “lesbian earrings” (sparkly Windex bottles in one picture), at least three cartilage piercings (likely bi markers), a labret lip ring (centered on their bottom lip), a medusa piercing (above the center of their top lip), and a septum ring (all of which could be either bi or nonbinary identity markers) (Meg 2020); they seem to have a punk-inspired aesthetic. Also noteworthy is their address of bi and ace exclusion from the queer community, “The biases and stigma I have faced as someone who is bi and ace are eerily similar, even though one of my identities is labelled as gluttonous and promiscuous, whilst the other is sex-repulsed, frigid” (Meg 2020). The user Cal or @Sunshine_Calvs, who is aro, ace, and a trans man, dons black and green hair – the aromantic colors, a barbell piercing in the middle of his lip, symmetrical ball stud piercings on either side of it below the lip, a barbell septum piercing, and black nail polish (Cal 2020). His nail polish doesn’t necessarily signal queerness since some cis, het men have been known to paint their nails, but his hair and piercings align with the punk community, expressing a vague queerness. However, if the viewer knows the colors of the aro flag, his identity would then be clear. Some, like Skylar and Though the hair color is directly tied to his aro identity, it is unclear which identity his piercings may


be tied to, or if they reflect queerness in general, or other motivations. The user TallSquall #DemandBetterNews, who similarly showed up under the earlier noted hashtag, is shown in his profile picture with a bright purple beard and a shirt with different queer pride flag colors on it. As bright colors are considered feminine and any stylistic element that differs from the traditionally masculine cis, het male norm signals queerness, it is likely that he would be read as queer, and more likely gay than bi, as people have a harder time identifying bi men than gay men, and are less likely to predict that bi men will have feminine stylistic elements. Hence, it seems that he is signaling a romantic identity over an ace one, though his romantic identity is not made known on Twitter. User Danielle Gilgamesh von Riegan also bears the queer identifiers of a nose ring, ball stud under her bottom lip, and goth black outfit with a rivetted leather top, floppy hat, fishnet sleeves and train, and black leather combat boots (von Riegan 2020); her unusual piercings and goth aesthetic may signal bisexuality over an ace identity, which is in fact her romantic identity.

Neesa Sunar, a writer for the website Ravishly, has given her own cursory look over AVEN and has made some conclusions about ace clothing choices, with a focus on women. She has found that asexuality has bearing on how or whether women present their femininity (Sunar 2017). Some move away from abiding to practices of traditional femininity since it typically “serves to attract a partner sexually”; thus, some women avoid makeup or “skimpy” clothing (ibid.). One user, going by SpeakoftheDevil, even remarked that she wasn’t only trying not to attract men, but felt guilty if she did. “I think my mind has gotten the idea of expressing femininity [as] linked to expressing an interest in sex/men. I feel like I’m leading people on, however indirectly” (ibid.). Some have even been encouraged to “show more skin” to demonstrate their womanhood, directly clarifying the notion that a woman’s dress is a statement of sexuality that is for “someone else’s viewing pleasure” (ibid.). User Zoe W. reacted to this societal notion in saying, “To hell with that!” (ibid.).

Recall that women dressing in clearly feminine ways adheres to heterosexual gender roles, potentially encouraging the male gaze and sexual and romantic propositioning, and that the reliance of heterosexuality on sexual desire between a man and a woman necessitates distinction between the genders (Pacho 2013: 17). Therefore, since the inter-gender dynamic is different for someone who is ace and/or aro, there may be more possibility for such a person regarding gender presentation in general; this “lack of erotic bonds” may free aro and ace women’s self-expression, like one archetypal woman, the “virgin goddess’…who does not engage in sexual relationships and stays independent from men’s judgments”
In other words, as Sunar (2017) puts it, “Since sexual attention is unwanted, the need to appear attractive is not pressing.” Appearance becomes more a matter of pragmatism, with less need for “beautification rituals” that are “time-consuming” (ibid.). One user, QuirkyGeek, explains her dress in the following way:

“I usually grow out my hair, and then cut it short and donate my hair. I wear a watch often. I think I dress rather androgynously personally, though it depends on the day. I wear colorful closed-toed sandals usually, but I also have formal shoes [that are] not especially feminine.”

The user Cimmerian describes her desire to look “nice,” but which does not overcome her disregard for “frivolous or uncomfortable” things, such as getting her nails done and wearing heels beyond a few hours (ibid.). Some ace people, beyond trans and agender (genderless, gender neutral, nonbinary) people, also dislike the feminine features of their body, and thus wear loose clothing, chest binders (to flatten one’s chest), and don an androgynous style in general, as is the case with the user Nowhere Girl (ibid.). Conversely, some are comfortable showing their curves, speaking true of user swirl_of_blue who might wear a gown that shows cleavage to a formal event, stating, “If it looks good, I don’t care if it’s sexy or not.”

In summary, Sunar (2017) has found that ace women do not feel one way or another in “flaunting femininity.”

Yasmin Benoit (2019), an alternative model and asexuality activist from Berkshire, England, has taken it upon herself to use her spotlight to raise awareness for asexuality and be a face of representation, speaking in documentaries, universities, and pride events, and first created the earlier-mentioned hashtag #ThisisWhatAsexualLooksLike (Benoit 2019). She too, addresses preconceptions about asexual people, saying that as ace and aro people “barely get any representation, you’d think we wouldn’t have stereotypes, but we do” (ibid.). Benoit alludes to comments that she doesn’t “look” asexual, likely in reference to her sometimes heavily-revealing photoshoots, as in the photo where she sports a skimpy tank top with ample cleavage, and in another, where she wears a narrow tube top with low-rising, tight, short latex shorts with pointed projections on top of her thighs, clipping onto latex tubes coming up her leg to the top of her knee (ibid.). She states that the presumed “‘asexual look’ is not a good one,” and that the idea goes that

“if you're not trying to sexually attract someone, you should try to blend into the background and dress in a way that doesn't attract attention. Who've you got to impress? We shouldn't feel the desire to dress up — to wear flattering clothes and highlight our best features — because we're not trying to entice anyone. This assumes that people dress to please others and not themselves.”

Benoit is not alone in her opinion, as she cites three other alternative/punk models: Mara (@psychara on Instagram), Brianna, Anouk, all of whom remark that they enjoy dressing up “sexy” at least occasionally (ibid.). She also mentions Nes (Neseres on Tumblr), a 47-year-old agender person (assigned male at birth) from Germany, who presents another perspective. They believe that clothes are genderless and find showing off their body to make them feel human (ibid.). They describe their
style as “a little advocacy for a merely aesthetic (i.e., not sexualized) perception of legwear and body-conscious fashion in general” – apparently an avid leggings wearer from the pictures Benoit (2019) includes in her article.

The alternative models offered various motivations for their style, some saying when they started presenting themselves as such. Mara claimed that she was dressing alternatively ten years before she came out as ace (since age 11) (ibid.). Brianna said that her style mixes 90s goth fashion and makeup with indie elements, and that “Fashion became the outlet I needed to express and explore my creativity” (ibid.). Anouk, on the other hand, simply wears what she thinks is pretty, defined as cute and dark (ibid.). However, why these aces were drawn to alternative fashion in particular is unclear. The question arises if they found acceptance in the punk and goth communities, which are highly queer. One survey respondent demonstrates the benefit of an alternate idea of “queer style”:

“I feel like I do identify with the Ace subculture, but not as much the Queer subculture. I think this is because I have an inner dialogue telling me that the clothes I wear, and the way my hair is makes me seem like I am a straight woman to everyone around me. I don’t feel like I look ‘queer enough’ to be comfortable in that community.”

Hence, alt stylings – like punk and goth – could offer these women an alternative queer femininity that allows them to be feminine in a way that won’t be immediately recognized as heterosexual. Then again, it is possible that these styles represent the women’s romantic identities (punk: bi or lesbian; goth: bi), as was the case with some of the earlier mentioned Twitter users. Nonetheless, it is notable that these ace/aroid identities have felt comfortable with this aesthetic.

The Survey Results

As acknowledged throughout the previous chapters, a limited number of respondents identified as ace and/or aro; five were nonbinary and 13 were women. Unfortunately, we do not have any data from aro or ace men to provide a more complete picture of the community.

It is important to note that though three nonbinary respondents and two women identified as both ace and aro, the rest of the respondents share other identities, e.g. someone may be biromantic and asexual, which may influence their self-styling. Thus, if the ace and aro community does not feel that they have a unified code of style, members may dress more to express their other identities.

Everyday Clothes (Top Six Descriptors):

Ace & Aro Women:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>92%</td>
<td>t-shirts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85%</td>
<td>cotton, denim bottoms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77%</td>
<td>long-sleeve shirts, common patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69%</td>
<td>modest, flannel, dull/muted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62%</td>
<td>earth tones, outdoorsy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54%</td>
<td>baggy sweatshirts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ace & Aro Nonbinary People:

All respondents from this category were assigned female at birth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td>denim bottoms, t-shirts, long-sleeve shirts, androgynous, thrifted, modest, flannel, dull/muted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80%</td>
<td>oversized shirts, turtlenecks, baggy sweatshirts, gender-non-conforming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60%</td>
<td>oversized bottoms, tight shirts, earth tones, crop tops, cotton, dresses, denim jacket, high-waisted pants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40%</td>
<td>spaghetti straps, tight bottoms, outdoorsy, sweatpants, short shorts, skirts, overalls, cuffed pants, gender-conforming, flowy, synthetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>bright/vibrant/colorful, fur (fake or real), pastel, conspicuous, common patterns, loud patterns, plunging necklines</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other (1)
Corsets

*There was no descriptor that fewer than 20% of these respondents selected.

Here we see “modest” as the fourth-most common type of clothing women chose, with the rest of the descriptors painting a generic picture – types and colors of clothing that would not stand out (opposed to bright colors and patterns). Overall, one might call this style androgynous – not unique to women or men.

Notably, all nonbinary people want to look modest and gravitate towards androgynous clothing, with 80% specifying their preference for gender-non-conforming and baggier, more conservative clothing (e.g. turtlenecks). Sixty percent echo this desire for over-sized clothing, but this is also where we start to see tight and more revealing (e.g. crop tops) as well as gender-conforming clothing come in (dresses). The fourth-most chosen descriptors include tighter, more revealing (e.g. spaghetti straps, tight bottoms, short shorts), as well as gender-conforming clothes (skirts, and the explicit descriptor “gender-conforming”). This tier also seems to entail more conspicuous clothing that breaks from the norm (e.g. flowy, synthetic [materials]). The conspicuous trend continues with the fifth most-chosen descriptors (e.g. pastel, loud patterns, bright/vibrant/colorful) and also includes the revealing descriptor of “plunging necklines.” One descriptor that someone wrote in, “corsets,” may be a potential hint to gothic (a.k.a. bi) fashion, which is often includes Victorian clothing, especially for female-presenting people. Additionally, 40% of ace and aro nonbinary people cuff their pants, a widespread practice in the queer community.

It looks like both groups have made the assessment that these styles help them to blend into the queer community. Perhaps the nonbinary aces and aros feel this way as they tend to select androgynous and gender-non-conforming clothes, while ace and aro women select more modest and less overtly-feminine (colorful, flowery, bright) clothing, approaching styles of lesbians, and bi women.

Ace & Aro Women

Clothing Effects:
• percent who say their clothing makes them blend in with the queer community: 62%

Motivations for wearing this style of everyday clothing (optional free response):
• for comfort (3)
• to appear academic/professional (2)
• to blend in (2)
• to cover one’s body/not be revealing (2)
• to express self/to feel authentic (1)
• to reflect mood (1)
• to look/feel confident (1)

Novel Responses (my emphasis):
“…feel most myself in masculine clothing”

“Comfort is my number one requirement for clothing; also, I don’t want to be too revealing so I wear pretty conservative clothes.”

“I prefer to be modest and not showy, because frankly I’d rather not be stared at like an object. I’d rather make an impression with how I act, rather than drawing attention to my body.”

Ace & Aro Nonbinary

Clothing Effects:
• percent who say their clothing makes them blend in with the queer community: 80%

Motivations for wearing this style of everyday clothing (optional free response):
• “I like to try and look gothic and a bit intimidating. If I’m tired and don’t want to put a lot of effort in, jeans, T-shirt, and flannel. If I’m really not doing good, sweatpants and a sweater.”

According to the results, style does not seem to be on the forefront of ace and aro women’s minds. The theme seems to be trying to blend in with one’s professional and/or scholarly environment or in general, and again, we see more data related to the controversial topic of whether or not aces and aros choose to hide their bodies given that they’re not seeking partners; two respondents try to conceal their bodies, one emphasizing that this is directly regarding her relationship to others – not about her own style preferences or what makes her feel good. Thus, Yasmin Benoit and the other ace models she cites may assert that ace and aro women can dress in revealing, sexy clothing, but whether or not women want to is another issue, given that they may want to avoid – and possibly repel – the male gaze.

Only one nonbinary ace and/or aro person listed one of the motivations for their everyday clothing, so we unfortunately do not gain much insight into this group’s styling intentions. Yet, we do see gothic style coming up again, which could be another nod to alternative cultures’ openness to queer people and inherently queer basis.
Lastly, a majority of both groups – the same amount each group had regarding their body modifications – claim that their clothes make them look queer, though this is more so the case with nonbinary aces and aros.

**Everyday Accessories (Top Five):**

Average number of each type per person.

**Ace & Aro Women:**

1. earrings (1.92)
2. finger rings (1.00)
3. necklaces (0.85)
4. dress shoes (0.54)
5. hair bands (0.38)

**Ace & Aro Nonbinary:**

1. earrings (4.2)
2. finger rings (3.00)
3. bracelets (1.80)
4. necklaces (1.00)
5. dress shoes (0.80)

The accessories for women do not seem to differentiate these groups visually, though it may be of note that nonbinary aces and aros assigned female at birth may have a penchant for earrings, averaging more than two piercings per person, and rings – with three per person. They also seem to enjoy bracelets, necklaces, and dress shoes (somewhat) more than their female peers.

**Body Modifications (Top Six):**

L = left, R = right, number = number of piercings

**Ace & Aro Women:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>62%</td>
<td>L ear lobe 1, R ear lobe 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46%</td>
<td>dyed hair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31%</td>
<td>Uncommon haircut, L ear lobe 2+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23%</td>
<td>R ear lobe 2+, R ear cartilage, 1 tattoo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15%</td>
<td>1-3 tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>Undercut, L ear cartilage, nose ring, septum ring, lip 2+ rings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Ace & Aro Nonbinary:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>80%</td>
<td>Dyed hair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60%</td>
<td>Undercut, uncommon haircut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40%</td>
<td>L ear lobe 2+, R ear lobe 2+, L ear cartilage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Here, we see that the most common bod mods for women are the more conventional, single lobe piercings, but soon followed by dyed hair, then uncommon haircuts and multiple lobe piercings. The bod mods become less conventional from there, perhaps least conventional are those picked by 8.0% of this group, particularly the nose, septum, and lip rings.

Nonbinary aces’ and aros’ preferences seem to begin unconventional from the outset, growing more so moving down the tiers. Notably the only conventional body modifications mentioned are the single lobe piercings and only 20% of this group chose this option.

Ace & Aro Women:

**Uncommon haircuts:**
- pixie cut with bangs
- was pixie cut, now shoulder-length, straight cut
- pixie cut with bangs
- barbershop-style short men's haircut
- Chest-length - longest it’s ever been, “most ‘cishet’ [cisgender, heterosexual] style” they’ve ever had, first time in over a decade without hair dye

**Bod mod intentions:**
1. I feel that my body modifications do not cause me to stand out (8, 62%)
2. Some of my body modifications cause me to stand out, which was not my intention (2, 15%)
3. I got all of my body modifications to intentionally stand out from others (1, 8.0%)
4. I got at least some of my body modifications to intentionally stand out from others (0, 0.0%)

**Bod mods to stand out:**
- industrial piercing, cartilage piercing, nose ring (1 person)

**Other motivations to get mods (optional free response):**
- to look cool (4)
- as convention (certain age little girls get ears pierced) (2)
- symbolize important things (1, tattoos)
- to look artsy (1)
- to look attractive (1)
- most comfortable this way (1)
- to express self [broadly] (1)
- to look tough (1)

Ace & Aro Nonbinary:

**Uncommon haircuts:**
- regularly shaves head
• hair is curly and currently a pink bowl cut. “Tomorrow it might be something different.”
• hair buzzed to about half an inch

**Bod mod intentions:**
1. Some of my body modifications cause me to stand out, which was not my intention (3, 60%)
2. I got all of my body modifications to intentionally stand out from others (1, 20%)
3. I got at least some of my body modifications to intentionally stand out from others (1, 20%)
4. I feel that my body modifications do not cause me to stand out (0, 0.0%)

**Bod mods to stand out:**
• Haircut – “I regularly shave my head”
• “My haircut [I currently have my hair buzzed to about half an inch] as well as my nose piercing [septum – curved barbel].”

**Other motivations to get mods (optional free response):**
• for own enjoyment (3)
• for convenience (1)
• to feel good about self (1)
• to present queerness/nonbinary identity (1)
• as creative expression (1)
• as identity exploration (1)

It seems that both women and nonbinary aros and aces define “uncommon” haircuts as gender-non-conforming, as four of five of the haircuts women mentioned were short and all three of the nonbinary hair cuts were short. However, one of the hairstyles also included pink hair dye, and we know that nonbinary aros and aces dye their hair more often than female aros and aces. Also, one might say that the nonbinary haircuts were more noticeably gender-non-conforming or conspicuous, as one respondent claimed they shaved their head and another said they buzzed it down to a half an inch. These hairstyles on people assigned female at birth will surely stand out more than a simply shorter or more masculine haircut. Tying back to the Twitter users, this seems to be the haircut of the user Meg.

There is some notable variability between the two groups when we look at intentions regarding visibility of bod mods, as most women felt theirs don’t cause them to stand out, some said they stand out but don’t want to, and a mere 8.0% said all of their bod mods were to stand out. Conversely, the nonbinary group all declared that their bod mods cause them to stand out, and most say that this is unintentional, while the second most-chosen answers (which are tied at 20%) say they were – either all or some of the bod mods.

Regarding specific reasons they got their bod mods, the seven female respondents who offered their motivations most claimed they got them to look cool or to follow the convention of young girls getting their ear lobes pierced, and nonbinary aces and aros most often said it was for their own enjoyment – with no mention of conventions. These top-picked reasons resonate with the themes for each group, as two of the last three reasons for women involve altering their appearance to make a certain impression on others (to look attractive or tough) while two of the
last three reasons for nonbinary aces and aros was for personal, internal reasons (to feel good about oneself or to explore one’s identity). However, one might argue that as wanting to present queerness/a nonbinary identity could also be interpreted as for oneself. Though it could serve to make an impression on others (e.g. to communicate or dispel cisgender, heterosexual norms) or to embrace one’s stigmatized identity as a form of self-care. There is some overlap between the groups. Both mention wanting to look artsy or express themselves in some way or that convenience or comfort was a deciding factor.

One nonbinary person who identifies as both bi and on the ace/aro spectrum, offered a more detailed explanation of the effects of their body modifications, regardless of their intentions:

“I have never done anything to my body to intentionally do anything other than feel good about myself and my body. I will say however that certain hairstyles specifically have helped or hurt my ability to visibly fit into the queer community. For example, when my hair is long and natural (blond, very curly) I present in a way that makes people assume I am a straight cis woman (which I am not). When I have a buzzcut on the other hand people often ask me what my pronouns are and assume my queerness. Honestly, I personally have never cut my hair to be accepted as a more accurate version of myself, but it does feel incredibly refreshing not to have to so constantly correct people, explain myself, or be misidentified so I can 100% see why someone would modify their body in order to get that social validation.”

Thus, from this testimony, we, just like the respondent, can gain insight into queer people’s possible motivations for self-styling, especially hairstyling. This, in fact, may be why some ace and aro women and nonbinary people have short/gender-non-conforming haircuts: to signal queerness. Shaving their hair nearly or all the way off may be the step beyond “queer” needed to signify a difference in gender identity for nonbinary aces and aros.

It seems possible that hair color may also challenge gender norms, as, curiously, one respondent said the following: “I really like green and plants so I dyed my hair green. I did get a lot of comments about ‘going butch’ from people though.” The respondent did not mark that they had an “uncommon” haircut, undercut, or anything of the sort, leaving us to presume that dying their hair provoked this comment.

Lastly, a majority of both groups claim that their clothes make them look queer, though this is more so the case with nonbinary aces and aros.

Explicitly Transmitting Sexual Orientation & Gender:

Ace & Aro Women

Is there any way that you try to visually present your sexual orientation?

Only a sample of novel quotes included for each category.

No (6, 46%):
- “I'm asexual, so I don't try to find partners.”
- “While I definitely try to avoid sexualizing myself, I wouldn't really call that a presentation of my orientation. I feel pretty much invisible.”
I effectively do (unintentionally) (4, 31%):

- “If I dress aggressively it does that, so either very masc or very alternative. I often dress like a dominatrix or in all pink.”
- “not intentionally. the haircut i have, piercings and the way I dress have led my lgbtq friends to suggest I 'look like a lesbian.'”
- “I never feel comfortable revealing a ton of skin out of fear of being sexualized by others when I prefer not to be seen that way if I don't feel that way abt other people.”

Yes (3, 23%):

- “I enjoy wearing flannel bc I know it fulfills the ‘gay woman’ stereotype.”
- “Gotta Cuff those jeans!” // Either a general statement about queer people or referencing bis.
- “When I want to attract men (opposite gender), I wear gender-typical styles.”

Ace & Aro Nonbinary:

No (2, 40%):

- “I'm aromantic and asexual so my orientation is No. this makes it difficult to present I wear a[n] aro flag bracelet sometimes, otherwise I just don't dress to attract anyone.”

Yes (3, 60%):

- “I dress without thinking of the male gaze. I cuff my jeans and use layering frequently.”
- “I have a lot of pins that have the ace flag on them.”
- “I have pins and stuff with the aro and ace flags, but besides that I don't really take my orientation into account in terms of presentation.”

It seems that both groups have some members who fall into the stereotypes that aces like Yasmin Benoit are trying to challenge – of ace and aro style being defined as dressing not to attract others, to not sexualize oneself.

Some women mention wanting to look “gay” (it is unclear if they are using this to mean “queer” broadly, which would include ace and aros, or if they mean lesbian) and others to wanting to attract men (this person is likely heteroromantic and ace).

The nonbinary aces and aros seem to suggest that they don’t know how to signal their identities other than with the more obvious methods of identity-proclaiming pins and flag iconography. The person mentioning jean cuffing is also biromantic and so may be signaling romantic attraction over asexuality.

Overall, most ace and aro women tend to not want to signal their sexual orientation, while others do signal it, a nearly equal amount doing so intentionally as those who do it unintentionally. Nonbinary aces and aros seem neck-in-neck regarding whether they want to signal their sexual orientation or not.

Is there any way that you try to visually present your gender identity?
Only a sample of novel quotes included for each category.

**Ace & Aro Women:**

**No (6, 46%):**
- “No; I accept that my preferred appearance confuses people about my gender identity (cis woman, somewhat masculine appearance).”
- “I wear things like dresses and clothes that show off parts of my body that I’m happy about, but I really enjoy wearing a blazer and leather jackets. I think it is stupid limiting clothing based on your gender. People should where whatever they like.”

**I effectively do (unintentionally) (4, 31%):**
- “I'm cis, so i guess i just dress in gender conforming ways.”
- “As someone who's cisgender, I think my gender identity is made pretty obvious by expected feminine choices such as longer hair, as well as not purposefully concealing any secondary sex characteristics.”

**Yes (3, 23%):**
- “I like to switch up my appearance a lot, sometimes I feel masculine, sometimes I feel feminine.”

**Ace & Aro Nonbinary:**

**No (1, 20%)**

**Yes (4, 80%):**
- “I like dressing feminine, but in a queer way, like performing femininity on my own terms. I'm not a girl, but I can make you do a double take. The haircut is a crucial part of this. Having buzzed hair and wearing very femme clothes is very queer.”
- “I dress androgynously, t-shirts flannels and leather jackets. I try to hide the shape of my body, trying for clothes that give me a more boxy figure.”
- “I have a few pronoun pins and some nonbinary flag pins as well.”
- “Buzzed hair, nose piercing. Dressing androgynously and intentionally going outside of typical gender norms.”

Cisgender aces and aros seem to acknowledge that they don’t have to make an informed attempt to signal their identity to have it correctly assumed. We also see one engaging in the discourse about ace and aro self-sexualization (she said she accentuates parts of her body). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the opposite is true of nonbinary aces and aros. They make a concerted effort to broadcast their gender identity. Looking at both gender identities under the umbrella of this one sexual/romantic orientation category is useful in helping to distinguish what motivations are sexually-/romantically-based and which are gender-based.
Revisiting Chapter 2, some of their motivation to define their identities visually may be due to others’ lack of understanding of their identity, as is the case for 29% of nonbinary respondents (not just ace and aro ones) regarding their parents.

Mark, who, again, is in his 50s, is a good example of this current societal confusion. He claims that he is constantly mixing up pronouns – seeing four or five “nonnormative” ones (likely meaning not conforming with someone’s gender presentation or being “they/them” pronouns) for each class of 20-30 students, a number that has increased over the years. Whereas a normal classroom would offer little chance for introductions and pronoun-sharing, using Microsoft Teams during the pandemic allows a time and place for people to introduce themselves in the chat where they can share their pronouns. Otherwise, the attendance sheet does not bear students’ pronouns, and Mark would be utterly aware of queer gender identities.

He remarks that nonbinary people have thrown him something of a curveball. “I have to be more aware that the signals and cues that used to signal a certain gender mean less, because now we’re using a non-gender-specific pronoun, ‘they.’” Ten years ago, he had never encountered they/them pronouns and counted on “nonnormative” pronouns being the opposite of someone’s “physical gender,” likely facilitating his understanding by situating it within the binary. However, of the nonbinary presence, he says “I feel it this year.” Now, he says, “there’s the more ambiguous they…there’s more ‘they’s’ [nonbinary people]. People are embracing a ‘they’ pronoun…I’m curious to figure out, what does that mean?” He also expresses dislike of nonbinary pronouns, likely of the same mindset of nonbinary respondents’ parents who don’t understand and/or fully support their identity. “‘They’ is so dissonant to me. Why is it…plural?”

Some of his daughter’s high school friends were switching to “they” in middle school. Those friends were also bisexual, causing he and his wife to conflate use of they/them pronouns with being “gay.” Now, he seems to be perceiving a trend, noting that it tends to be more female-gendered students who are using they/them pronouns. He claims that they want to indicate some disidentification with their gender.

Therefore, nonbinary identities seem fairly “new” and misunderstood, at least to older generations, which may explain nonbinary aces and aros’ firm attempts to challenge cisgender assumptions others may make when laying eyes upon them. Visible presentation may legitimate and solidify their identities and, by taking up visual space, negotiate a place in a cis-assuming, heteronormative society.

**Conclusion**

Principally, the majority of people do not know what ace and aro people look like; even many AVEN members concur, most seeming to believe that there is not an ace/aro style. The most popular and promising indicators (that were not simply “bland,” “nerdy,” etc.) were explicit identifiers of ace and aro colors/pride flags (suggested by 1.5% of respondents for ace and aro men and women) and ace of spades imagery (0.98% for men and women) as well as rings (1.5% for men and women). Some of these indicators were mentioned on AVEN as well, one Twitter user had an ace of spades painted on her check and eyeshadow in the ace colors, and another Twitter user dyed his hair the aro colors. However, it seems that many ace people may be choosing to signal their romantic identity rather than their sexuality. Many ace women dress in goth and punk aesthetics, and all of those who have disclosed their romantic identities online identify as bi (there’s also the earlier mentioned Twitter user who dyed his hair the aro colors vs. the ace ones). Thus, ace people may choose to fashion themselves in a way to attract romantic...
partners. Nevertheless, some people could simply be dressing in such ways because it’s comfortable to them. For instance, the goth and punk communities offer women an alternative kind of femininity, which can offer an escape from other norms for queer female dress. Again, one respondent remarked that she seemed too feminine to be queer, whereas goths style themselves in hyperfeminine ways and punk women similarly wear heavy makeup, both of which challenge conventional femininity. Furthermore, both of these communities signal queerness, though goths specifically signal bisexuality. Additionally, ace and aro people could also don the specifically ace signifiers to find community to feel less abnormal.

Looking at ace and aro women specifically, they tend to dress androgynously (maybe in a gothic or punk manner?) and most are modest. Most wear earrings, with rings being the next most popular (as predicted). Nearly half have dyed hair and they have far more body modifications than cis, het women, with a minority of the modifications being for themselves.

Nonbinary aces and aros, on the other hand, are also androgynous, oversized clothes are slightly more prevalent than tight/revealing ones, but both kinds are worn by over half of the group. The majority stick to dull/muted colors and earth tones. All dress modestly, and they have significantly more earrings than ace and aro women as well as more rings. Further all of their body modifications were for themselves. It seems that this stylistic difference may be more motivated to assert gender queerness than a queer sexual or romantic orientation. For instance, ace and aro women predominantly don't signal their gender, while nonbinary people overwhelmingly do.

Overall, most ace and aro women tend to not want to signal their sexual orientation. Of those who do signal it, a nearly equal amount do so intentionally as do it unintentionally. Nonbinary aces and aros seem neck-in-neck regarding whether they want to signal their sexual orientation or not, while some female-presenting ones want to romantically attract people, e.g. men.

Finally, there seems to be a debate among the ace/aro community as to whether female-presenting aces and aros wear tight and revealing clothing or modest clothing. Though Benoit is trying to redefine ace style as more sexualized – perhaps to offset some of the respondent ideas that aces look “nerdy,” there are also plenty of aces who prefer not to wear clothing that could be seen as catering to the male gaze, and who feel freedom from that gaze to express themselves in ways that are not traditionally feminine.
Conclusion

Within this investigation, it is clear to see that all of these chapters are in conversation with each other; you can’t easily disentangle them. These identities do not each exist in a vacuum and many are defined in contrast to each other, though some overlap. Of course, this overlap can come from queer men being lumped together, defined as “other” in comparison to the cis, het male norm, whereas women of any sexual orientation are likely to overlap at least somewhat stylistically due to women’s wider range of expression; they don’t have to fear looking masculine in the same way that men have to fear looking feminine due to cultural taboos.

Theories of gender inversion also seem to hold up somewhat, though gay men are not all wildly flamboyant, nor do all lesbians get misgendered or diagnosed with an ambiguous gender by onlookers. Nevertheless, a male-presenting person who has some feminine elements in his style may get another glance; the same goes for a female-presenting person with masculine elements in her outfit – though solely once said elements pass a threshold, as it takes more masculine items to make a woman’s sexual orientation suspect than feminine items for men. Hair, as we’ve seen, seems to be at the crux of this gender inversion, with widespread associations of shorter, masculine hair as indicating either a cis, het male identity or a queer (more likely lesbian than bi) female identity. However, long hair signifies bi male identity – not gay male identity, and bi female hair is symbolically a length between that which is perceived of cis, het women (long) and lesbian women (short), just as her sexual orientation is. In general, respondents across all demographics define their haircut as “uncommon” if it breaches traditional gender norms (e.g. long hair for male-identified people, short hair for female-identified people). Additionally, some examples throughout this investigation have demonstrated that a shaved head on someone who is female-identifying can surpass the projection of a lesbian identity – a queer sexual orientation – into raising questions about gender identity, potentially leading the onlooker to assess that person’s gender as nonbinary. Overall, the data seem to show these patterns of hair length and their societal associations:

**Men/male-presenting people:**

| Straight | → | Bisexual |

**Women/female-presenting people:**

| Nonbinary | → | Lesbian | → | Bisexual | → | Straight |

**Buzzcut**

| Short | → | Long |

These widespread perceptions represent how “The institutional structures of gender and ideology…are ‘are ‘made flesh’ in the hair as people conform to, or deviate from, the norms, and even deviate from deviant norms’” (Johnson and Barber 2019: 114). Thus, though the associations of haircut lengths to sexuality or gender identity are not always true, hair is such a gendered medium that it could be hard to break these culturally-constructed molds.

Of course, who a person wants to appeal to can alter their presentation, as the male gaze has morphed women’s self-styling. Throughout their lives, starting from a young age, women are told how – and potentially forced – to appeal to a man, such as by wearing tight, revealing clothes, having long hair and makeup, and shaving their body hair. These messages can lead to
self-objectification and are often parentally and socially reinforced, with penalties awaiting if they are broken. Disregarding them may call a woman’s sexual orientation and even gender identity into question (e.g. if she doesn’t shave her body hair). Thus, women who are uninterested in men or not solely dependent on men to find love have more leeway in their range of self-expression through their style, unless they are consciously trying not to “out” themselves. As Kennedy (2009: 4-5) has pointed out, one instigator of gender-non-conforming behavior may be the breaking of one social norm – having a queer sexuality, which greases the wheels for breaking another – defying gender norms.

One group that, by definition, disregards gender norms, is that of nonbinary individuals. Recall that this investigation looked at femme nonbinary gynephiles, bi nonbinary people, and ace and aro nonbinary people. They all describe their style as androgynous, either by using that word specifically or communicating that sense in describing their self-presentation (e.g. by alternating or blending masculine and feminine stylistic elements). This seems voluntary for the most part, there is the possibility that at least some of them or at least some of the time, they may feel pressured to demonstrate a “genderless” identity in order to validate their identity, as it is not well understood at this time; most who try to signal their gender identity claim to dress androgynously. Overall, in comparison to other genders, they are more likely to try to signal their gender identity over their sexual orientation; to have significantly more and often unusual piercings; and to attain all of their body modifications for themselves, opposed to make an impression on the viewer – which can include for self-care reasons.

This investigation has also taught us that the way sexual orientations’ styles are characterized can vary based on the source consulted, be it UVM, TikTok, or the history books. UVM’s crunchy/granola/outdoorsy/thrifted vibe has blurred boundaries between sexual orientations, leaving most women on campus looking like “VSCO girls.” Additionally, though remarkable numbers of respondents and interviewees made some mention of TikTok, and the app has most definitely impacted how at least some members of certain populations style themselves across the West (and potentially beyond) – arguably more so than Instagram, Twitter, and other social media, not all respondents seem aware of those self-fashioning trends, even those outlined for their own identities. It is then perhaps unsurprising that these trends are not universally known, as the communities who know about them tend to be composed of people who share the identities in question and are following other people with those identities, leading to a stylistic echo chamber. Again, even some people with those identities will be left out of the loop if they are not in these online spaces. Furthermore, historical sources are useful up to a point, but especially as subcultures find each other online in the digital age, pop culture articles, online forums, and other “quick clicks” can sometimes prove more useful, as whizzing around the internet is often needed to decode many modern self-fashioning trends. However, we have seen the ability of old signaling techniques to carry through to today, such as the men-loving-men signal of a single earring on the right ear lobe, the use of tank tops among gay men, and lesbian’s awareness of their identity’s historical association with flannel – despite the fact that they are not the only group who dons it, since the study took part in the outdoorsy culture of Vermont.

On that note, the phenomenon of overlap in the self-presentation of varying identities must be revisited, as it a main theme running through this investigation. UVM’s general fashion trends create overlap between identities; Vermont’s wide use of flannel hinders lesbians’ ability to signal their identity; Hipster style blurs the lines between queer and straight style; bearded, gay, “Clones” are now indistinguishable from the straight “lumbersexuals” who coopted their look, which originally came from straight lumberjacks and working men; lesbians (or possibly queer
women in general) adopted rappers’ marks of toughness – their eyebrow “cuts” – to distinguish themselves from the other people who have coopted their signifiers (e.g. flannel, Doc Martens); and both punk and goth men can look androgynous, though the former can be broadly queer and the second is bisexual. Of course, these are just some examples among innumerable other such cases. These cases demonstrate how certain stylistic elements do not hold inherent meanings; they can be coopted from one group by another or become used in two different contexts simultaneously. They then acquire new meaning based on their new context, such as the gender, sexual orientation, or race of the person who dons them and what other stylistic elements they use to build their self-presentation. Seldom will a given stylistic element retain the same meaning and group association indefinitely. Further, even elements that are incredibly similar or are worn in nearly the same spot (e.g. a nose stud vs. a septum piercing) can communicate different identities (lesbian vs. bi identity, in this case).

Understanding a stylistic element’s given group associations becomes more difficult when those who use it opt to not label their identities. As we have seen, all of the queer interviewees – be them trans, nonbinary, or cis, except for one, do not embrace labels for their sexual orientation or, rather, choose vaguer ones. A notable portion of respondents and celebrities feel the same way. This lack of knowledge of others’ definitive identities may partially explain the resounding uncertainty of respondents in describing the self-presentation of various identities, predominantly the bi community. This reluctance to label oneself, potentially motivated by a mismatch between one’s sexual and romantic preferences, could be largely responsible for bi erasure, in addition to poor representation and underrepresentation in the media.

When respondents do attempt to guess how other groups present, though their perceptions of these other identities may be highly inaccurate or lackluster – barely offering a model to go off – they are significant in themselves. They indicate how effectively certain groups are communicating their identities – or imply that they are not signaling to the general onlooker – and more importantly, these societal perceptions can influence how groups style themselves! For instance, if people think that queer men utilize feminine stylistic elements in their clothing, then cis, het men who feel insecure in their masculinity and fear having their sexual orientation questioned will stick to a traditionally masculine mode of dress. It doesn’t matter that very few gay men actually dress in bright, flamboyant ways; it matters that people think that’s how they dress.

When a person catches wind of their identity group’s stylistic practices, they may try to present themselves in the same way to signal that identity – be it to others within their group to make friends or find romantic partners – or to the general public. However, again and again throughout this investigation, people experience a tension of wanting to authentically express themselves and wanting to adopt a new style with social meaning. In the end, as seen, they all give in to their personal style. Many, of course, naturally present themselves in ways that subscribe to their community’s fashion guidelines, and hence, do not face an internal struggle.

In this same vein, coming to accept one’s socially stigmatized identity can make it much easier for a person to move forward in expressing their authentic self, as has been demonstrated by various interviewees.

It can also not go without saying how self-fashioning can be political. Given the context, a person may be unsafe – physically or mentally – in a given space if they present themself in a way that breaks gender norms, not only because they are transgressing gendered boundaries, but because most people are aware of gender inversion and will presume that they have a queer sexuality as well. Alok Menon, for instance, has seen their fair share of hate in response to their
presentation, possibly responsible for their chronic pain. The wealthy seem immune from these social consequences – the power deriving from their riches might protect them, or bodyguards bought with said money, and/or they may be free of family restraint if they are financially independent. Gay Liberation activists have exposed and challenged these gendered politics in their “genderfuck” performances and glitter rock, punk, and goth men have defied social norms in their androgynous presentation by adopting feminine elements that situate them in the passive, female, position as a viewed object of desire, as opposed to the active, male observer position. We have also learned of the role that families can have in instilling and reinforcing these norms, revealing their political nature by the mere fact that they must be imposed, as many respondents would say of gender and sexuality in general.

Of course, these charged ideas of proper gender presentation are not the same cross-culturally, as we have seen, as bright colors are not necessarily feminine in one respondent’s culture, nose piercings are a historically significant practice for South Asian women, and masculinity in East Asia can allow for much more integration of feminine elements and male vanity without men having their sexual orientations questioned.

Therefore, understanding how people fashion themselves and why is no easy matter, and though the observer may correctly guess at least one of a person’s identities, there is much more – in the way of motivations – that they can’t see.

If there is anything I would like you to leave with, it is this:

Vampires are bisexual.

And this image, to accurately summarize this investigation.

Acknowledgements

I would like to first thank Paul Deslandes, who advised this investigation. He kept me on track with deadlines, provided useful readings when I was just starting off, and helped me narrow my scope (which, after reading this, a person might find incomprehensible). He was patient with me as I continually handed him lengthy chapters – and most importantly, this massive thesis upon completion – and was a crucial element in ensuring that I completed this thesis before graduation. Furthermore, when I was seeking reimbursement for expenses from creating flyers to advertise the survey and purchasing Amazon gift cards for a lottery to attract survey respondents, Paul encouraged me to apply for an APLE Award from the College of Arts and Sciences, which I was lucky to be granted. My mom, Katie O’Brien-Barritt, has additionally been unmistakably vital to this project, as she volunteered (without coercion) to be my research assistant. She combed through innumerable spreadsheet pages of survey data across nine demographics, counting responses for various questions (e.g. how many ace & aro women selected each clothing descriptor); logged her findings on paper and electronically; and accomplished all this using a finicky program on the family laptop that crashed every 20 minutes. Her mental strength is admirable. I guarantee that I would not have been able to analyze that much data myself amidst completing all my other coursework and, thus, would absolutely not have been able to cover as much ground (e.g. stylistic elements, demographics) in this thesis. I must also thank the two other members of my thesis committee, my Committee Chair, Emily Manetta, and Faculty Mentor, Mary Burke, for accepting the invitation to join my committee, unknowingly agreeing to read this massive document. It should also be noted that both, as well as Paul and various other kind faculty members, assisted me in distributing the survey to their classes and beyond. Emily was similarly instrumental in my acquisition of funding, as an APLE Award provides half of the amount sought, relying on the student’s home department for the rest, which Emily provided through the Anthropology Department. Thus, I am also grateful to the College of Arts and Sciences for their support. Likewise, Mary responded generously when peppered with questions throughout both the thesis prep and writing stages, drawing on her experience to clarify the IRB process and addressing my concerns about data analysis. My friend Shania Benjamin was another great help in distributing flyers for me across campus. My friends, overall, were not only kind in listening to me talk about my thesis for the past year and a half, but were engaged and interested, and some opted to take the survey as well. My family too, must be recognized for listening to me go on about this; my mom and dad were especially patient when asked to watch the long, rusty, first-run of my presentation of this investigation for the Student Research Conference. Similarly, it cannot go without saying how grateful I am to all of my survey respondents and interviewees for their time, thoughtfulness, hard work, and for making data collection and analysis far more enjoyable than I ever thought it could be by providing responses – written in the survey or spoken in interviews – that constantly had me in stitches. I had an incredible amount of fun during the interviews – I believe the longest one lasted three full hours (with no breaks) – and though I was constantly delighted by what I read from the survey data, I was also saddened, knowing that I will never find out who those charming respondents were. Therefore, this whole thesis could not have come together without ample helping hands, for which I am truly thankful.
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