An Exploration of Gender and Sexually Diverse Understandings and Experiences of Femininity

Sophie Capern[1] and Dr Linda Chiodo[2]

[1] *College of Health and Biomedicine, Victoria University, Australia*
[2] *Institute for Health and Sport, Victoria University, Australia*

Femininity is often reductively conceived of in feminist research as oppressive and synonymous with the experiences of cisgender heterosexual women, excluding the wealth of diverse LGBTQIA+ lived experiences of femininity. To exclude gender and sexually diverse voices in the context of a social issue they are central to, is in great misalignment with community psychology values. Thus, the current qualitative research explored gender and sexually diverse understandings and engagements with femininity. Fourteen gender and sexually diverse people shared their valuable insights and personal experiences via semi-structured interviews. Individually and collectively, the depth and complexity surrounding participant experiences was apparent, as was the clear value femininity held. Through a reflexive thematic analysis, several main and sub-themes were identified; a theme whereby normative and alternative conceptions of femininity were defined by participants, and where engagement with femininity was identified by participants as a journey including stages of separation, ordeal and meaningful return. The current paper interrogates a notable gap in critical feminist literature by centering LGBTQIA+ experiences of femininity, untethering femininity from gender and/or sexual orientation with the overall aim of fostering greater gender inclusivity and equity for feminine people in future research, intervention and practice.

Key words: LGBTQIA+, queer, femininity, femme, community psychology

Femininity is a complex construct, often reductively and exclusively perceived as tethered to and reserved for cisgender, heterosexual women (Giunta, 2018; Hoskin, 2017). While the devaluation of femininity has been of great interest across social, philosophical and psychological disciplines for decades (Hoskin, 2017, 2019), gender inequity remains an identified social issue of significant concern (Riemer et al., 2020). Examples of systematic devaluation of women are currently reflected in significant and continued gender-based violence (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018) and income discrepancies (Carrino et al., 2019). While conversations around reproductive rights (Judge et al., 2017; Sun, 2022) and women-specific beauty ideals (Mckay et al., 2018; McComb & Mills, 2022; Stuart & Donaghue, 2012) are indicative of how women's bodies are policed in our current sociopolitical climate. Feminist literature largely attributes the function of this subordination in the context of cisgender women as maintaining patriarchal (male-specific) systems of power and privilege (Hoskin, 2019).

Gender and sexually diverse people have been found to intentionally engage in femininity, many of whom find it affirming and meaningful (Hoskin & Hirschfeld, 2018; McCann, 2018). However, the devaluation and policing of feminine people is also evident, outside of the experiences of cisgender women and heteronormative spaces, with discrimination, violence, and mental health disparities disproportionately impacting feminine people due to the increased severity of gender-related policing (Grossman et al., 2006; Han,

2008; Hoskin, 2019, 2020). Hoskin (2019) defines and explores this systematic devaluation and regulation of femininity as *femmephobia*. Considering femininity as a significant intersectional force underlying gender inequity and LGBTIQA+ discrimination (Hoskin, 2020), provides fertile justification for centering gender and sexually diverse experiences of femininity. The current research aims to consider both the devaluation and value femininity holds for gender and sexually diverse people, by exploring their personal understandings and engagements. The overall aim being: identifying sites and contexts of devaluation, as well as opportunities for affirming and meaningful engagements.

Defining Femininity

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* the term *femininity (noun)* refers to "behaviour or qualities regarded as characteristic of a woman" (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Regardless of its placement within the most extensive and trusted dictionary for British and American English speakers, the current paper considers this widely accepted definition as normative, and incomplete. Femininity, and its associated "feminine behaviour" and/or "qualities" in Western normative contexts, is often associated specifically with cisgender women's relationship to (including catering to) the heterosexual male gaze (Deliovsky, 2008; Hoskin, 2019). In this context, normative femininity may also be referred to as *patriarchal femininity* due to associations with regulatory powers (including gender policing), which maintain compliance to patriarchal values and desires (Hoskin, 2017, 2019).

Stereotypical representations of normative femininity often include behavioural features often associated with lack of personal power and influence, and aesthetic features like "politically incorrect 'frilly pink party dresses'" (Holmes & Schnurr, 2006, p.32). The colour pink, as one example, has stereotypically been strongly associated with normative femininity, with its use historically holding meaningful gender-related associations and implications (Lazar, 2009). Other aesthetic representations of normative femininity have repeatedly been found to be associated with patriarchal ideals like whiteness, thinness, able-bodied features (Blair & Hoskin, 2015; Deliovsky, 2008; Hoskin, 2019), as well as adherence to strict sex, gender and sexuality norms including cisnormativity (those whose gender corresponds with their sex) and heteronormativity (those who are attracted to the opposite sex) (Hoskin, 2017). This conception of femininity leaves little room for intersectionality, for example it excludes people with a disability, larger-bodied people, people of colour, gender diverse people and those for which the male gaze is irrelevant to their sexual orientation.

LGBTQIA+ Experiences of Femininity

In response to the exclusionary nature of normative and patriarchal femininity, *femme* engagements emerged within the LGBTQIA+/queer community; femme considers femininity through more inclusive terms, validating the membership of those who diverge from normative ideals and acknowledging femme experiences as they exist across sexual and gender identities (Blair & Hoskin, 2015; Hoskin, 2017). Femme is often considered as a form of resistance in LGBTQIA+ spaces, with feminine engagements aiming to simultaneously deprioritise the dominance and subordination expected in stereotypical gender role dynamics (Hoskin, 2019; Schippers, 2007). For example, a person engaging in hyper or emphasised feminine expression with no intention of catering to heteronormative male desire (Hoskin, 2019; Hoskin & Hirschfeld, 2018).

Unfortunately, femininity is also unequally policed within the LGBTQIA+ community, contributing to greater experiences of discrimination, violence, and mental health disparities (Grossman et al., 2006; Han, 2008; Hoskin, 2017, 2019). For example, *Grindr* - a dating app for LGBTQIA+ men - has seen a trend in profiles specifying: *no fats, no fags, no femmes*

(Hoskin, 2019; Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016). Further, trans women and cisgender gay men alike have described experiencing transphobia and cisnormative discrimination within community for not conforming to masculine ideals (Parmenter et al., 2021). For many gender and sexually diverse people certain forms of feminine self-expression involve risk, as maintaining their own safety can often depend on maintaining others' comfort, rather than disrupting or resisting against the status quo (Vivienne, 2017). This means that for LGBTQIA+ people, their sense of personal safety often depends on *passing*. Passing has been proposed as a form of stigma management (Goffman, 1963), whereby those with an identity considered socially deviant attempt to avoid discrimination by presenting themselves as "normal"; where normality equals "acting straight" or "acting cisgender," gender and sexually diverse people are expected to perform gender and sexuality within heterosexist binary categories (Wilkinson, 2017). For example, to be recognised as women, trans women describe needing to conform to heteronormative gender rules (Yavorsky & Sayer, 2013); they also experience additional scrutiny whereby engaging with femininity can be personally affirming, but there is an increased risk of being policed for engaging in femininity at all, and/or simultaneously for not presenting femininely enough (Hoskin, 2019). As Wilkinson (2017) explains, for gender and sexually diverse people, the interrogating of their gender presentation can result in a slew of negative consequences, ranging from inconvenience to death.

Limitations of Previous Feminist Research

The vast majority of research of femininities continues to adhere to exclusionary conceptions of gender and sexuality; even research exploring femininity claiming to utilise a critical feminist lens largely neglects to include gender and sexually diverse experiences (Giunta, 2018; Hoskin, 2019), leaving a notable gap in the literature. For example, feminist researchers appear unclear if and how gender diverse people fit into both existing research and previous data, with some of the non-binary population being erased by being misconceived as women due to their perceived gender (and/or gender assigned at birth), and trans women being excluded despite them being women (Giunta, 2018; Kessler & McKenna, 1978). The reiteration of this category of "woman" in feminist research reproduces a binary view of gender which erases a large variety of gender expressions and lived experiences (Giunta, 2018).

Simone de Beauvoir (1989) encouraged feminist critiques of biological essentialism when she stated, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (p. 267), separating the previously synonymous "female" and femininity (as cited in Hoskin, 2017). Following this, Judith Butler (1990) conceived of sex and gender as social products determined via repeated acts; implying that when it comes to gender, bodies can be conceived of as sites with the potential for multiplicity. One could deduce that both de Beauvoir (1989) and Butler (1990) encouraged critical feminist researchers to conceive of gender beyond heterosexist binary categories, including cisnormativity. As Giunta (2018) aptly expressed, feminist research must both "include and exceed the category 'woman'" to accurately capture the multiplicity and nuance of feminine experiences (p. 1).

Empirical qualitative research exploring the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ peoples in the psychology field is limited, and research exploring femininity specifically as adopted by gender and sexually diverse people, even more so (Giunta, 2018; McCann, 2018). As Giunta (2018) identified, emerging research exploring queer femininities has been largely theoretical, with most empirical research exploring how different groups engage with femininity being studies of same sex attracted 'men' or 'women'. There are some notable exceptions, for example Giunta (2018), McCann (2018), McCann & Killen (2019), and Hoskin (2019, 2020), whose significant contributions have been drawn on and referred to throughout this study. Additionally, research exploring the potential value and opportunities for positive engagements

with femininity, beyond oppression and discrimination, has been identified as also lacking (McCann, 2018).

A Community Psychology Issue

Gender and LGBTQIA+ inequity have been identified as targets for meaningful change within and beyond the field of community psychology (Riemer et al., 2020). Gender and sexually diverse experiences have historically been pathologised and oppressed in the context of general psychological research and practice (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Australian Psychological Society, 2021; Drescher, 2015; Power et al., 2022). For example, Homosexuality was a disorder included in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM) until its removal from the second edition in 1973 (Drescher, 2015). Similarly, and more recently, Gender Identity Disorder, (now Gender Dysphoria) was removed from the DSM for its fifth edition release as it attributed gender diverse experiences to disorder and deviance (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Conversion practices aimed at changing and/or suppressing the sexuality or gender identity of LGBTQA+ people and is one treatment that has historically been recommended and utilised (Power et. al., 2022). Australian states and territories have only moved to ban conversion practices in recent years; in 2021 the Australian Psychological Society released a statement, acknowledging the lack of clinical evidence for the effectiveness of conversion practices, and the considerable clinical evidence for the negative impacts and harm associated with such practices (Australian Psychological Society, 2021; Power et al., 2022). The above historical context of which LGBTQIA+ people sit within the field of psychology is in clear violation of community psychology values. Community psychology aims to centralise values-based research and practice, including foundational values of health, respect for diversity, social justice, and accountability (Riemer et al., 2020). The diversity of lived experiences of this population has not been historically respected; the health and wellbeing of this population has historically been compromised; and, their marginalisation unjust. It is through centering these values that repair and accountability may be fostered.

According to the scientist-practitioner model under which registered psychologists practice, research is expected to heavily inform client access to affirmative, safe psychological care (Jones & Mehr, 2007). For example, some of the first sexually diverse-specific health and community services in Australia were launched in direct response to the first national survey of same-sex attracted young people in 1998 conducted through The La Trobe University Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS) (Hill et al., 2021). The same survey has been repeated, with its fourth iteration and national report published in 2020-2021; a recommendation of which was that future research adopt qualitative methods, as survey data is limited in capturing the nuance and "why's" of health, education, and social lived experience (Hill et al., 2021). Who is and is not counted in data profoundly impacts their privilege, including their access, visibility and power (Riemer et al., 2020; Ruberg & Ruelos, 2020) - constructs that community psychologists centralise in their work. For the disenfranchised and marginalised, the implications of being excluded from data extends far beyond academia (Ruberg & Ruelos, 2020); it has far-reaching and meaningful implications for health, education, policy and practice (Hill et al., 2021). By taking intentional steps to ensure research is inclusive, subsequent psychological education and practice can confidently stand on the shoulders of data that accurately represents the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ people, reducing the likelihood that historically harmful and oppressive ideologies are perpetrated. Community psychology aims to be values-driven in its enquiry and practice (Riemer et al., 2020). The current study is motivated by community psychology values in personal, relational,

and collective holistic wellbeing domains, including but not limited to health, respect for diversity, social justice and accountability (Riemer et al., 2020).

The current research aims to reflect community psychology values of accountability and justice by centralising respect for diversity in research, ideally contributing to the broader health and wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ people engaging in femininity. The paper aims to draw attention to this important gap in current critical research and practice, and to motivate and encourage community psychology readers to take meaningful action in the context of inclusive data collection, research and clinical practice by proposing narrative frameworks and features of a reconceptualised femininity that allows for affirming and meaningful engagement for gender and sexually diverse peoples; also, in identifying specific contexts of ongoing devaluation and discrimination as potential targets for future research and intervention.

Rationale and Aims

The ongoing devaluation of people engaging in femininity is well-documented, including disproportionate experiences of discrimination, violence, and mental health disparities (Grossman et al., 2006; Hoskin, 2019, 2020). Regardless, many gender and sexually diverse people continue to intentionally and meaningfully engage (Hoskin & Hirschfeld, 2018; McCann, 2018). Unfortunately, even critical research attempting to explore these disparities has largely neglected to consider the construct of femininity beyond an unchallenged enmeshment with cisgender, heterosexual "womanhood" (Giunta, 2018; Hoskin, 2019). Empirical qualitative research exploring the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ peoples in the overall field of psychology is limited, and research exploring femininity as specifically as adopted by gender and sexually diverse people, even more so (Giunta, 2018; McCann, 2018). This approach fails to consider the subject through an adequate intersectional and inclusive perspective, as is expected in best practice psychological research, and especially so within the field of community psychology (Ruberg & Ruelos, 2020). Community psychology values align closely with feminist theory and frameworks and aims to challenge the status quo (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010; Tebes, 2017). It is therefore vital that LGBTQIA+ voices and insights are centred in research exploring social issues that directly concern gender and/or sexual orientations (Ruberg & Ruelos, 2020).

Thus, the current paper aims to report on the specific findings speaking to gender and sexually diverse peoples' understandings and engagements with femininity in response to the noted empirical exclusion of LGBTQIA+ lived experience data in the study of critical femininities; this aim is in alignment with community psychology's current identified social targets of gender and LGBTQIA+ inequity (Riemer et al., 2020). In doing so, it is hoped these findings will aid in guiding future inclusive research and practice both within and beyond the field of community psychology.

Methodology

Research Design and Theoretical Orientations

The current study was informed by a social constructionist epistemological approach, as it assumes that an individual's meaning making takes place within historical, social, cultural, and political contexts (Crotty, 1998; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). In alignment, the overarching theoretical approach was critical theory, which aims to recognise existing structural power and privilege dynamics and prioritise marginalised voices (Fox et al., 2009). The current research explores the unique and intimate experiences of gender and sexually diverse young adults engaging in femininity, while taking into consideration the broader ecological contexts within which those individual experiences were formed. This aligns with

the social constructionist assumption that reality and truth is not objective or universal but rather constructed through personal perspectives formed by an individual's life experiences and engagement in social context (Willig, 2013). The research conducted was also considered through the theoretical lens of gender theory and queer theory.

Gender theory was used, as it assumes that normative/hegemonic gender is operating through a hierarchical relationship, whereby the social subordination of femininity upholds masculine dominance (Connell, 1987; Hoskin, 2019). Queer theory interrogates heteronormativity and cisnormativity (Giunta, 2018; Hoskin & Taylor, 2019), actively critiquing the problematic assumption that normative identities are essentialist (Butler, 2002; Jagose, 1996). Femme theory was also drawn on as a theoretical framework; it considers feminine intersections, as untethered from sex or gender, are related to social inequality and power distribution (Hoskin, 2017, 2019). The adoption of the above theoretical perspectives was necessary in order to explore femininity through an adequate intersectional lens, as is expected best practice within the community psychology (Ruberg & Ruelos, 2020).

In further support of the current research aims and theoretical orientations aforementioned, a qualitative research design was adopted as it facilitates complex data collection that can adequately honour lived experience/s, and allows for a deeper understanding of personal context (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). Further to this, semi-structured interviewing is described in community psychology literature as a powerful method for respecting diversity of experience, by encouraging and encapsulating nuance (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010; Sonn et al., 2013); this method also allows some flexibility, while also allowing the researcher to establish and maintain the direction of pre-determined questions and themes throughout (Willig, 2013). This data collection approach provided the opportunity for the first author to build rapport with participants, which was important for the current project, as the research aim was expected to elicit sensitive information related to participants' sexual orientation and/or gender exploration. The semi-structured interview schedule developed for this study included questions which explored participants' understandings of, and engagements with, femininity. Interviews were held online via Zoom, running anywhere between 60-90 minutes. The first author conducted the interviews and commenced each meeting by clearly acknowledging their own insider positionality, which is outlined in more detail below. Participants were offered a $25 voucher as an acknowledgement for their contributions.

It is important to note that the research presented here is drawn from a larger qualitative study exploring gender and sexually diverse peoples' understandings and experiences engaging in femininity, in both online and offline spaces (Capern, 2022). The original study used both qualitative semi-structured interviewing and photo elicitation methods (Bates et al., 2017). In line with the stipulated aims, the current paper reports on themes specifically related to gender and sexually diverse definitions of and experiences of femininity as yielded from that original research.

Participants

Participants were recruited via purposeful convenience sampling through the researcher's extended professional and social networks. This included the posting of an electronic flyer on a variety of social media outlets (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) on personal and professional accounts. A total of 14 participants were recruited, with the inclusion criteria requiring that participants were aged between 18-30 years, were gender and/or sexually diverse, and identified with or engaged with femininity in some capacity. Due to specific participant interest, it should be noted that one participant who was 33 years of age was included. The decision to recruit young adults was made as social media platforms are found to be overwhelmingly used by young people and play an important role in their socialisation

and self-expression (Döring et al., 2016); as one of the aims of the original research was to explore online contexts, this was an important consideration. Recruitment aimed to maximise the potential for an intersectionally diverse sample (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010; Sonn et al., 2013) and while all participants in the current study resided in Australia, they varied in other demographic details such as: gender, ethnic/racial identities, sexual orientation and occupation.

Of the 14 participants recruited, half were female, and the other half were gender diverse, using a diversity of labels that best suited their gender (e.g., "non-binary"/ "gender fluid"/ "gender questioning"). Nine out of the 14 participants' sexual orientation was "bisexual", with five of those participants also using another secondary term to adequately describe their sexual orientation ("pansexual" or "queer"). Two participants were "queer", whilst another was "pansexual". Of the remaining participants, one was a "lesbian", and another "90% straight". Most participants were born in Australia and described their ethnicity as white, while four participants were ethnically and/or culturally diverse. While it was not asked, several participants also disclosed they were neurodivergent and/or live with a disability. Participant identities have been protected by assigning pseudonyms.

During the recruitment phase, it was observed that participant interest was greater than expected. Two reasons were identified across participants; firstly, that fitting within a specific inclusion criterion such as this was rare and so it felt like an opportunity, and secondly, because they believed there were common misconceptions surrounding the topic and felt like their own personal experiences would provide valuable insights. These observations further validate the exclusionary nature of current data collection methods and highlight the importance of providing LGBTQIA+ peoples with opportunities to be counted.

Researcher Positioning and Reflexivity

According to the principles of qualitative research, potential personal bias is not an issue that requires solving to acquire objectivity, but instead a factor that should be realistically reflected on and acknowledged, to account for its potential influence (Willig, 2013). I (the first author) am a middle class, white, queer person who was born in Australia. I have benefited from many privileges throughout my life, including but not limited to access to the education pathway that enabled me to conduct this research. I have also experienced discrimination in relation to my sexual orientation, my weight, and my gender. My personal experiences related to power, privilege and oppression have informed my ongoing commitment to social justice and my professional interest in community and critical psychological research.

LGBTQIA+ people have a history of experiencing discrimination within the field of psychology and in associated psychological research (Ruberg & Ruelos, 2020). I believe my position as a community member with lived experience aided in fostering a trusted researcher-participant relationship with participants, whereby power and privilege differentials were at the very least, minimised. It also meant I carried a level of emotional investment that rendered attaining "objectivity" difficult. Hall (2017) describes how researchers often position themselves in an objective, "outside" position when it comes to their subject matter, even when their central theoretical perspective acknowledges this isn't possible to achieve. While conducting this research I felt anything but outside of it, however, I do not believe this to be a flaw; I believe this further enriched the research process and provided additional opportunities for deep and meaningful data collection. To ensure that the integrity and quality of the research was always prioritised, I took additional steps to engage in self-reflective practices and mentorship throughout.

Data Analysis

Data analysis of the semi-structured interview transcripts was completed using a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) approach (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Thematic analysis has received criticism for lacking in specificity, however, its flexibility is one of its great strengths as it enables rich explorations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). RTA was utilised as it allowed the potential for both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) theme development, while also allowing flexibility around the theories informing the research and significant subsequent interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Further, RTA considers themes as existing inseparably from the researcher who generates them (Braun & Clarke, 2020); in alignment, the current researcher considered themselves an instrument in the current study.

In a thematic analysis, validity relies on the assumption that themes are actively constructed by researchers in response to the data, as opposed to them emerging passively (Braun & Clarke, 2006). When utilising reflexive approaches to theme development, considerable analytic and interpretative work is required of the researcher, therefore, it is important to note, that the themes and codes identified during analysis in the current study were selected not only due to their frequency but also due to their significance (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Patterns were identified by the researcher as central organising concepts, as they appeared across the dataset as a whole, and in relation to the pre-determined theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2014). This was done so through systematic nested coding through NVivo and the additional use of multiple themes visual maps and tables (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, throughout each stage of the research process, supervision was sought, and ongoing in-depth discussions were had between co-authors, who systematically reviewed the output at each stage, as well as following the project in its entirety. As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2014), the current research prioritised deliberative, reflective, and thorough data collection and analysis methods.

Findings and Interpretation

The current research yielded several significant themes, which explored gender and sexually diverse participant's understandings of, and engagements with, femininity. Two main themes were identified, with several sub-themes within each. The first main theme "Defining Femininity(s)" held three sub-themes: "Normative Femininity", "Limitations of Labels", and "Queer (Re)Thinking". This theme explored participants' understandings of normative and personal conceptions of femininity. The second main theme, "Femininity as a Journey", also held two subthemes: "Conflicting Group Memberships" and "Returning to Femininity"; this theme explored participants' ongoing engagements in femininity, and the many influential factors involved, as well as the forms it took depending on context. These themes are reported in more detail below.

Defining Femininity(s)

While the dominant discourses surrounding femininity assume it is inherently attached to the experiences of cisgender, heterosexual women, participants in the current study provided an alternative perspective. Participants considered femininity as holding multiple conceptualisations. Most notably, almost all participants considered femininity as having a normative form, which departed to varying degrees from their personalised concept. Differential understandings of femininity appeared to be inspired by participants' exclusion from normative expectations, and their active critical reflections of their experiencing exclusion; for example, their acknowledgement of oppressive and restrictive expectations associated. While aspects of participants' understandings of femininity did vary, there were some clear underlying commonalities.

"…I think it is something that is very digestible…": Normative femininity

Participants described normative femininity in relation to both external (bodies and/or aesthetics) and relational factors (to masculinity and/or cisgender men). When asked how they define normative femininity, participants commonly spoke first and foremost of bodies and their adherence to specific aesthetic norms. This aligns with the definition of normative femininity as cited by McCann (2022) whereby dominant forms of femininity are thought to be regulated via expectations placed on the feminine body. The same short list of features were recounted by almost all interviewees - thinness, whiteness, youthfulness, and long hair:

> *The beauty standards of straight white girls, long flowing hair, makeup, all that kind of stuff. I suppose I start to think of quite physical things. (Alex)*
>
> *Like all the females must look very, very thin, very young and very white. (Danny)*
>
> *Um, a lot of what is represented is long hair, beautiful hair, makeup, thin, White....non-disabled, straight...These sorts of things come to mind. (Reese)*

The aesthetic features recounted by participants often included features they themselves did not hold, highlighting the exclusionary associations normative femininity held for them. For example, Alex has shorter hair but listed "long flowing hair" as a feature, Danny is Chinese and listed "very white" as a feature, and Reese who lives with a disability listed "non-disabled" as a feature. This observed and reported exclusion appeared to motivate participants in frequently applying a critical lens when it came to discussions of their engagements with normative femininity. Participants also referred to the systemic forces that contribute to dominant expectations associated with normative femininity. For example, Carter and Harper both acknowledged the role colonialism and patriarchy play:

> *A lot of it is tied to bodies, a lot of it is tied to a male gaze idea of beauty…Tied to outward appearance and outward expression. (Carter)*
>
> *In terms of like an aesthetic, I think it is something that is very digestible and very defined by white western European ideas…(Harper)*

Harper's perspective aligns with previous research detailing how normative femininity is far from race-neutral (Deliovsky, 2008). In a Eurocentric sociopolitical context, heteronormativity involves the "white patriarchal production, of a white feminine ideal" (p. 50), whereby normative/hegemonic femininity is comprised of the colonial conflation of white women's whiteness, and her femaleness (Collins, 2004; Deliovsky, 2008).

The same critical lens was observed when describing normative feminine expectations beyond bodies and aesthetic choices. Participants frequently described normative femininity by referring to its oppositional and subordinate relationship to masculinity. For example, Ari described normative femininity using terms like "gentle" and "soft" and masculinity as "strong" and "assertive". This was a noted commonality among most participants, in that they frequently described femininity as a word synonymous with soft, and masculinity described as a word synonymous with strong. For the participants, normative definitions of femininity aligned with hegemonic definitions, in that normative femininity appeared reliant on its relationship to masculinity to be defined (McCann, 2022; Schippers, 2007). Several participants also overtly described normative femininity in relation to subordination/domination power dynamics in traditional gender roles, whereby normative femininity is passive and lacks resistance to masculine domination:

> *I think the normative definition of, or characteristics or whatever of femininity would probably be something quite, um, like oppressive? Within the realms of, of like misogyny of going oh, femininity is pretty and soft and submissive and, an aesthetic based and, joyful and, like people pleasing… (Maxi)*

Something that is very passive and something that is very malleable, something that is...Very subservient…To me, it always feels like something that is very easy to break. Like something that has no force and no resistance. (Harper)

I think really malleable to the world around you and I think what people want in femininity is like...Not anything too set in its ways…Designed as an ideal concept to push people to push their own boundaries of how they feel comfortable. (Ziggy)

These participant descriptions of normative femininity align with Hoskin's (2017) patriarchal femininity, which refers to feminine ideals as they cross identity dimensions (e.g., sex, gender, race, ability), with the additional acknowledgment of the broader regulatory power and policing used to maintain those ideals. Participant descriptions also align with what McCann (2022) describes as *rigid femininity*, a "toxic" form of femininity associated with ideals and expectations which maintain binary gendered systems, reiterating patriarchal ideals.

These findings indicate that gender and sexually diverse people who engage in femininity hold advanced and diverse knowledge regarding individual norms associated with normative femininity, as well as the broader sociopolitical contexts and structures influencing those norms.

"You can't quite grasp it…": Limitations of labels.

Whilst participants were consistent in their definitions and understandings of normative femininity, it was evident that they found it difficult at times to as neatly define their own definition of femininity, as it applied to them. As Maxi aptly articulated, "I don't think that femininity can be as easily defined as for so many years we have been brought up to believe it can be".

When reflecting on their personal definitions of femininity, many participants attempted to convey the complexity of their femininity by utilising oxymoronic terms, as Alex explained: "it's the fierce and the vulnerable. It's, it's kind of this you know, paradoxical thing and I kind of love that". These specific descriptions align closely with Dahl's (2017) research and reflections on the seemingly paradoxical vulnerability and strength involved in embodied femme experiences. A number of other participants also described femininity as "soft" and some other seemingly opposing terms synonymous with strength/force:

Like there's something that's kind of- it's like, it's quite soft, but there's also something a bit tough about it. (Harper)

I can find harshness in my femininity as much as I find softness in my masculinity. (Maxi)

You can be soft and demure…And you can be loud and aggressive and still have a feminine energy. (Carter)

It's sort of two different sides of me and how my femininity can play out. You know, it can be sort of edgy and dark, and it can have a real lightness and, you know, maternal thing. (Alex)

These oxymoronic descriptions stood in stark contrast with participants' discussions surrounding normative femininity specifically, whereby femininity represented softness, and masculinity, in opposition, represented strength and force. For participants within the current study, their personal understandings and experiences of femininity did not dispose of normative feminine features, but instead also encompassed features typically reserved for masculinity, too.

Carter, who used the word "energy" when referring to femininity, exhibited another noted commonality among participant descriptions; femininity was frequently described as an energy that was not restricted or reserved to a person of a certain gender, sexual orientation, body or even specific aesthetic choice/s:

> *That's what kind of I love about it, and it doesn't just belong to people…I guess identify female or she/her, like everybody has femininity and feminine energy and aspects in them and the way that they either embrace or reject that plays out, and we can feel that, you know? (Alex)*
>
> *Like I don't know that I think anything is inherently feminine. There are things that feel feminine when I do them. So, putting on makeup, for example, that feels like an expression of my femininity. But I don't necessarily think that's all it is? I don't think necessarily that's the case when somebody else does it. (Jamie)*

These participant reflections align with femme scholar Dahl's (2017) conception of femme, which they describe as encompassing a multiplicity of *femmebodiments*, described as "infinite intra-categorical variations femininity" (p. 36), determined by individual subjective experiences (Hoskin & Taylor, 2019). These perspectives highlight the potential inherent limitations associated with attempting to neatly categorise subjective experiences across participants, and the importance of including the current sub theme.

While traditional research approaches often prioritise drawing distinctions between the "messy" intersections of identity (Puar, 2005), honouring diverse experiences may require alternative approaches, which allow additional room for both current complexity and potential future evolutions (McCann, 2018). The participants in the current research did not appear concerned or confronted by the intricacies of their personal understandings of femininity or femininity and/or femme-ness, but rather appeared quite comfortable sitting within the complexity of their experiences. As Ari expressed, "there's power in not being defined, because I guess, when you're not being defined or like boxed in, there's greater scope to exist…". To attempt to agree on a shared definition, in this case, may encourage a sense of restriction that many participants themselves worked hard to navigate their way out of.

"How do I want to represent myself today?": Queer (re)thinking.

While it was difficult to clearly define or contain their alternative personal definitions, the current study revealed that most participants associated normative iterations of femininity with exclusion and restriction, while their personal definitions with inclusivity and dimension, allowing room for their diverse experiences. For most participants, identifying as queer/LGBTQIA+ heavily influenced their ability to conceive of femininity beyond normative iterations and expectations. For example, for Alex, joining the LGBTQIA+ community made her feel like "you don't have to be one trope" and expanded her view of what femininity could look like:

> *You know, it really is far more colourful than I ever thought it was and I used to just kind of think it [femininity] was a bit more black and white and that I had to fit into that…In LGBTQ spaces there's a variety of expression and acceptance and variety of beauty…The difference is maybe sometimes it's not what would be considered the societal norm.*

The participants' engagement in femininity beyond normative conceptions aligns with the queer femme process of offering a "rethinking of the queer potential of feminine embodiment" (McCann, 2018, p. 279). For several participants, this looked like engaging in a practice of consistent self-reflection and intentional decision-making, allowing themselves permission to remain unfixed and (re)think their positioning. For Carter this involved frequently asking themselves, "how do I want to represent myself today?". Similarly, for Stevie, they describe engaging in a "constant conversation" with themselves:

> *I really don't feel like I have a lot of clarity…on like exactly where I sit, and it definitely shifts. Because I don't think I really have these fixed ideas of what femininity is or what*

my version of it is, it's just like a constant conversation and attempt to like engage with how I'm feeling that day.

For Stevie, who is non-binary, their femininity presents differently depending on how they are feeling – their comfortability and authentic engagement lies not in being a static and consistent version of themselves, but rather in their ability to move and shift according to their personal instincts. These findings appear to demonstrate what McCann (2018) described as the *femme assemblage,* whereby femme engagement and aesthetic choices are guided by affect, extending beyond the limits of politics of identity.

For many participants, their queer rethinking of femininity often involved an intentional element of play and/or subversion. Harper spoke directly to this phenomenon, mirroring the sentiments of Maltry and Tucker (2002), who describe queerness as often involving engaging in acts of subversion against the systems that have excluded them:

A big part of being queer I think- and one of the most radical aspects of being queer, is totally deviating and subverting those systems because ideally, feminist thought and feminist action is about undoing very limiting patriarchal systems; I think, by default, queer people are seeking to subvert that…(Harper)

In response to the restriction associated with normative femininity, Carter also likes to turn societal pressures "on their heads", as they explained, "…I love to play with femininity, I love to subvert people's expectations of what my femininity is or represents, especially my outward femininity". Several other participants also described their personal engagement with femininity using terms such as "drag", "camp" and "costume", which are often associated with subversion and performance:

It's almost a bit camp as well, it has like a kind of a bit of like a drag expression to it…And that's what I like as well, because I like being able to like subvert my appearance and like expectations around how feminine people are supposed to present themselves. (Harper)

I always feel like femininity is more like a character, in a way?...Even if that contradicts all the mainstream stereotypes people think that's how femininity supposed to be like, it's still fine. (Danny)

And I've realised that a lot of my femininity feels like, not doing drag in a bad way, right? But like doing drag with enthusiasm of somebody who loves doing drag. (Remi)

In the context of queer femininity, Brennan (2011) describes visibility as a strategy for rights, recognition, and legitimacy in identity, with approaches like exaggeration, parody and/or transgression cited as strategies that are used within community to challenge expectations and standards associated with feminine norms; Rugg (1997) refers to this strategy of adopting signifiers of non-conformity as *something wrong with this picture* (as cited in McCann, 2018). For many participants it appeared that their subversive and playful engagement allowed them to celebrate and engage in femininity, while simultaneously retaining visibility as a queer/LGBTQIA+ person who actively critiques normative expectations.

Femininity as a Journey

For gender and sexually diverse people, engaging in femininity can be a complex task, especially when their lived experiences are at odds with the societal assumptions and expectations associated with normative ideals. At the time of the interviews, all participants described engaging in femininity to some degree. Many explicitly addressed that this was not a static engagement and there had been times in which they had engaged less in femininity or attempted to avoid it completely. There was a noted pattern across participants' experiences whereby they described their relationship to femininity as a kind of "journey":

Yeah, I'd say like, it's been a bit of a journey. (Alex)
I had a really, I guess, fractured relationship with femininity when I was little. (Maxi)
Um, my relationship with femininity, I think has shifted a lot over the years…(Ziggy)

This ongoing journey of (dis)engagement appeared to hold a similar narrative structure across the participant group; firstly, an experience of separation experienced within a particular version of femininity (normative/patriarchal), then an ordeal or crisis resulting in the rejection of femininity, followed by a subsequent reengagement and returning to femininity utilising a more inclusive and affirming conceptualisation. This observed narrative structure follows what is commonly known in mythology as *The Hero's Journey*, a narrative arc popularised by Joseph Campbell (1949), which has since been adopted in popular culture. It describes a narrative defined by a common pattern of separation, ordeal or crisis, and a re-emergence or return often associated with mastery (Campbell, 1949; Falconer, 2021).

Falconer (2021) critiqued the hero's journey arc for its inapplicability to feminine experiences; specifically, how the hero is presented as a solitary figure, and how the protagonist's journey has a distinct start and end point. The current findings align with these critiques. The influential role of social group memberships and relationships are explored in more depth in the following sub theme, and there is a noted trend whereby participant understandings and engagements with femininity are described as ongoing. As Jagose (1996) describes, queerness is a site of 'permanent becoming'. The authors therefore conclude that this theme demonstrates the hero's journey may be a relevant narrative framework for considering gender and sexually diverse experiences of femininity, with some caveats; that the journey is interpersonal, and without a clear, definitive end point.

"…I just felt like I did not fit that definition at all": Conflicting group memberships.

For almost all participants, their sexual orientation and gender identity influenced their relationship to femininity and their ability to engage in it comfortably at times throughout their "journey". For example, many participants described feeling as if they had to decide to be feminine *or* LGBTQIA+/queer, due to feeling as if membership to one group, invalidated their identifying with the other. For some non-binary and genderfluid participants, their gender identity influenced their ability to comfortably engage in femininity due the essentialist assumptions associated; meaning, if they chose to be feminine, their gender identity risked being invalidated:

I hated [pink] when I was younger, because I didn't realise at the time but I was experiencing really bad dysphoria of being pigeonholed as having to be feminine. (Carter)
I guess having that sense of myself belonging to that category [woman], and then feeling this sense of discomfort around, like, what is it to be a woman?...But then still aligning myself strongly with um, with femininity and being a femme queer? So I guess it can be complicated in that sense, kind of untangling those connections. (Ari)

Other participants within the current study found their LGBTQIA+ group membership was questioned due to their femininity, both from members within the LGBTQIA+ community and outside of it. For Alex, she experienced confusion when she came out as bisexual; as someone who enjoyed and wanted to "hold on" to her femininity, she still questioned: "Am I as feminine as I thought? Because I feel this way sexually?". Alex also received invasive questions from fellow members of the LGBTQIA+ community, whereby her sexual orientation was questioned due to her feminine appearance:

> *But I've also had friends that are in the community that have questioned me…Not for some time but definitely, like, oh what do you mean you're bisexual? And then they do the whole well who have you been with? Who do you like? It can get really invasive…*

For Lane, similar feelings arose and were harmfully reinforced externally within her social circles, she explained: "When I used to date more women, people didn't really believe that I was....not straight? Because I was feminine". These experiences align with femme literature, which details how femmes/feminine people are often presumed heterosexual even in lesbian-feminist contexts due to their gendered presentation, whereas those who are perceived as more masculine/gender-crossing in presentation are more commonly assumed to be queer (Harris & Crocker, 1997; McCann & Killen, 2019). While said invisibility may reduce the likelihood of femmes experiencing discrimination in heteronormative spaces, in queer spaces this can result in a "deeper attack on their [femmes] self-worth" (Nestle, 1992, p. 15 as cited in McCann & Killen, 2019). Ari also described several instances where they had been judged and excluded from LGBTQIA+/queer spaces due to misconceptions surrounding their feminine presentation:

> *My femininity became a point of policing in queer spaces. Which I found really difficult because I actually like, I like my hair like this and I like having long hair. And it's something that...I feel really comfortable, you know, and strong about. But I also don't like that it kind of renders me invisible and I resent that, I resent that the way I present and my femininity makes me...Seen as less queer, or that my queerness or my...Right to be in certain spaces can be questioned because of how I present.*

Throughout their interview, Ari recalled multiple other instances whereby their femininity was devalued by members within the LGBTQIA+ community. Specifically, they recounted their photograph being taken at an event, and a fellow queer person commented on how 'straight' the photographer had made them look. Similarly, they recalled another instance where they were rejected from joining a queer-only online group because the moderators assumed they were heterosexual. Ari reported feeling authentic and powerful in their femme queer identity in both photographs prior to these occurrences, however, these experiences resulted in their withdrawal from community engagement and added complexity to their ongoing experiences as a femme queer person navigating LGBTQIA+ spaces and relationships.

Reese who is non-binary and works as a hairdresser described how they have "always felt a little on the outside of the community", especially when presenting as feminine and adhering to normative or traditional beauty standards; a frequent expectation and occurrence for them due to their line of work. Femme literature acknowledges how engagements with feminine aesthetics can complicate both one's relationship to queer identity politics, and the broader LGBTQIA+ community (McCann & Killen, 2019), which was the case for Reese and other participants interviewed here. Jamie, another participant, went so far as to drastically alter her appearance to signal her rejection of normative femininity in the hopes of solidifying her group membership as a queer person:

> *I went through periods when I was younger, where I rejected femininity, or what I thought of as femininity…I cut all my hair off and then I felt like, oh, well now like if I want to be seen as a queer woman, like I have to dress a certain way that isn't associated with femininity.*

This reflects Mishali's (2014) observation that queer paradigms can encourage and pressure women to reject femininity, in order to be included in community; unfortunately, this risks perpetuating restrictive and rigid structures, rather than effectively subverting them as intended. Ziggy similarly explained how as a self-identified femme person, they feel not only vulnerable to the gaze of non-queer people, but queer people too, and how they often sit in the discomfort of being visible, but not quite visibly queer enough:

> *I also feel like there's a sort of shift in the queer community-I just feel sometimes if I present as very femme, then I sort of feel vulnerable to both being viewed by people who aren't queer, but also…Looking less queer than I feel and am? So, I actually think that's been a part of it is just like, sort of dysphoria, I guess, is what I'm describing.*

Invisibility has been found to be a central theme in femme literature, specifically that there is a lack of acknowledgment that femininity is queer, even within LGTBQIA+ spaces (McCann & Killen, 2019). When discussing the pressures feminine people face in the LGBTQIA+ community, Remi explained how they believed similar pressures exist for femme/feminine people within the community as those outside of it: "I feel like...Everyone above a certain age in the queer community knows the phrase 'No fatties, No femmes'...So not okay to see". Seemingly, femme presenting community members risk either experiencing invalidation and invisibility, or achieve visibility and may subsequently experience femmephobia (Hoskin, 2019).

"If I get rid of it, I feel like something is missing": Returning to femininity.

Regardless of the complex and at times negative experiences associated, the majority of participants expressed that completely rejecting femininity often came at some kind of personal cost; they described re-engaging it as it provided them "dimension" (Remi), "joy" (Stevie), and "power" (Maxi). For both Stevie and Lane, they had attempted to move away from femininity many times throughout their life for fear it was perpetrating or contributing to oppressive stereotypes, but they returned due to the joy their engagement in femininity provided them:

> *A few years ago, I tried to, like, not be so feminine? Because I didn't want to...Be feeding into that stereotype. But I guess recently I've realised that I just love pink? And I love doing my hair, I love doing my makeup, and that's just who I am. Like, I just love those sorts of things. (Lane)*
>
> *Why I keep going back to femininity, anytime I try and move away to like a different and be like- fuck this, I don't need all these shackles of oppression…But then I go straight back because it's fun, it's playful, the fashion, the aesthetics...I feel more joy in my life, acting this way…I feel like a more full version of myself when I lean into that. And if I get rid of it, I feel like something is missing. (Stevie)*

It appears that participants' theoretical critiques of normative femininity acted as a significant barrier to them engaging in femininity at times, even when that may have been their preference. These participant experiences, align with a phenomenon Serano (2007) labelled *scapegoating femininity,* whereby blame is attributed to femininity itself, as the source of its own systematic oppression and devaluation. It is important to note that when choosing to re-engage with femininity, participants did not fully reject all features associated with normative iterations; instead, they repurposed them under a more inclusive conceptualisation. These findings also align with McCann's (2018) femme research, which found that LGBTQIA+ participants' aesthetic choices, even those typically associated with normative femininity (e.g., long hair, makeup, dresses, and jewellery), operated as much "more than simple signifiers" (p. 287).

As participants in the current study have exhibited, one can also engage in normative features of femininity, even if they do not relate to or identify with the experiences of cisgender women specifically (Mishali, 2014). Carter and Remi who are both genderfluid, explained how femininity is valuable and adds dimension into their lives:

> *I think that's something people get wrong about the way my non-binary-ness is expressed - that I was raised a woman so if I'm trans, that must mean I reject femininity,*

and I don't. I think it's extremely valuable. I just reject being pigeonholed into it and I reject traditional ideas of what femininity is supposed to be. (Carter)

Like it's a part of my experience? It makes me a little more me...If I didn't have it, then it would be a little more bland and like, you know, that dimension is missing in a sort of way. (Remi)

After re-engaging with femininity, many participants felt protective, due to the efforts they had put into fostering a healthier relationship with femininity. As participant Maxi powerfully articulated:

My femininity means so so much to me because...I feel like it's- my, I've worked really hard to have the relationship that I have with my femininity and now it just feels like this kind of strong lovely pillar within me that...I don't know, I guess we'll continue to like add vines to and then it'll be this colosseum of gender by the end of my life (Laughs).

This sentiment is particularly meaningful, as it not only centers Maxi's passion for protecting her femininity, but it also describes femininity and her relationship to it as a continued evolution, a journey she does not expect will end throughout her lifetime. As Serano (2007) asserts, there must be something profound about femininity, for so many to actively gravitate towards it.

Discussion

Motivated by community psychology values, identified targets for social change, and a noted gap in the current critical psychology literature, the current study aimed to qualitatively explore the ways gender and sexually diverse people engage with and understand femininity. Participants held and discussed rich and complex engagements with, and understandings of, femininity - normative and otherwise. The participant descriptions of normative femininity aligned with the notion of patriarchal femininity, which encapsulates and extends on both normative and hegemonic theoretical concepts; meaning, a large portion of participants equally acknowledged the role of individual reproduction of norms (for example, aesthetics, bodies and demeanor) and systematic influences (for example, cultural and political climates) (Hoskin, 2019; Hoskin & Taylor, 2019). It appeared that for participants, navigating and negotiating femininity in its many forms is a considered process, motivating a depth of critical thought concerned with how femininity operates and is understood ecologically (personally, socially, politically and historically; Bronfenbrenner, 1977); for example, through participants' definitions and experiences of femininity personally, within community and group memberships, and in broader sociopolitical contexts.

In the current study, most participants separated themselves from the concept of normative femininity to varying degrees, and instead aligned themselves with alternative conceptualisations that allowed more room for their authentic engagement as gender and sexually diverse people. Participants described how their gender and/or sexual orientations influenced their ability to conceive of femininity beyond patriarchal conceptions and encouraged them to rethink and reimagine the "queer potentials" of femininity, and how they might fit (Bordo, 1997; McCann, 2018). The process of rethinking femininity looked different for each participant, but there were some noted commonalities: consistent self-reflection and intentional choice-making, as opposed to following rigid predetermined expectations and patriarchal ideals. While participants were clear and consistent in their definitions of normative femininity, it was evident that they found it difficult at times to neatly differentiate and define their own personal definition; this did not appear concerning for them. As it is a typical convention in research to draw seemingly straightforward distinctions, it may be logical to assume that in diverging from tradition - allowing the "messiness of identity" to exist without

categorical reduction or simplification (Puar, 2005, p. 128) - may add to the authenticity and inclusivity of their experiences.

The current findings indicate that for participants, their relationship to femininity was described as a kind of journey, and while there were consistent parallels in their narratives, participants' experiences diverged from the hero's journey in some respects. For example, there was no distinct start and end points, and their journeys were not solitary, but rather heavily influenced by impersonal and community relationships and group memberships (Falconer, 2021).

Throughout the current research, participants' awareness of the devaluation of femininity was clear, within the LGBTQIA+ community and outside of it. This pattern of feminine/femme lived experiences reaffirms that people engaging in femininity experience discrimination regardless of gender and/or sexual orientation, site or context. These findings also provide fertile ground to consider the value femininity must hold for participants, as they go to such efforts to rethink, reengage, return, and reaffirm their femininity, even in the face of discriminatory and oppressive forces.

Implications and Recommendations

These findings present several implications for future research and practice, within community psychology and beyond.

Participant interest during recruitment stages was much larger than expected. Participants shared thoughtful and personal motivations for participating, with two common reasons reported. Firstly, that it was unusual for a study to be advertised where participants felt they would comfortably sit within the inclusion criteria, with many describing this as rare. Secondly, because they believed there were common misconceptions surrounding the topic, and they felt like their own personal experiences would provide valuable insights. These findings highlight the profound importance that marginalised voices continue to be centered in research, as their insights are valuable, and there is motivation to explore and share those insights with those who are willing to listen.

The current research was, in some ways, inherently complex to navigate, as labelling and reducing the experiences of people who had fought to exist beyond them felt counterintuitive at times. Each participant had differing demographic descriptors; also, with such a wealth of specific and nuanced experiences explored, it took additional care and efforts in data analysis stages to adequately encapsulate the complexity of participant experience while also presenting and interpretating findings via clear and concise commonalities and theoretical frameworks. Drawing conclusions and categorising experience is the foundation of empirical enquiry, and so the irony is not lost. The current study further validates scholars' previous pleas (for example, Ruberg & Ruelos, 2020) that researchers take particular care to use data collection and analysis methods that allow room for nuance and dimension; for example, by collecting demographic data via open ended answers versus categorical data collection, and prioritising qualitative data methods. In psychological practice, this may include adapting categorical, static data collected during intake and assessments, for example, to better suit gender and sexually diverse people and their lived experiences.

The current research also highlighted that for participants, engaging in femininity often resulted in devaluation and discrimination within the LGBTQIA+ community itself, and that their gender and/or sexual orientation was interrogated by others (and subsequently, themselves) as a result. While research exploring discrimination against gender and sexually diverse people is often considered in hetero and cisnormative contexts (Parmenter et al., 2021), these findings are indicative of the importance of further exploring how discrimination is

perpetuated against femininity within community in more depth; also, how this may result in internalised manifestations of femmephobia. In psychological practice, these findings indicate the potential importance of identifying and working with internalised femmephobia and supporting clients in maintaining their psychological safety within community.

The aim of the current research was to explore experiences of discrimination, as well as opportunities for meaningful and affirming engagements with femininity. As aforementioned, participants found great value in their engagements with femininity, when their engagements were associated with choice and self-determination. The presented findings demonstrate the importance of self-reflective praxis in both research and practice, with the aim of identifying and reducing any unconscious bias when engaging in femininity studies. As McCann (2018) asserted, the end goal here is not positioning the "straightness" of normative femininity and the "queerness" of femme femininity as inherently oppositional. To consider any form of femininity as superior to any other, whether perceived as normative or resistant, would also likely further contribute to ongoing oversights of social inequities and may hinder opportunities for meaningful and engagements across femininities (Hoskin, 2017).

Limitations and Future Research

There were several limitations noted in the current study, which may lay fruitful foundations for future research.

Firstly, the intent was to explore diverse and intersectional experiences of gender and sexually diverse people's engagement with femininity, however, there were some limitations when it came to the homogeneity of the sample. While the entire sample were gender and/or sexually diverse, it would be important to include other members of the LGBTQIA+ community who engage in femininity whose gender and/or sexual orientation was not represented here to provide a true representation of diversity of experience – for example, there were no intersex and asexual participants who expressed interest in the current study.

Secondly, while the current research was considered through a social constructionist lens with the aim of contributing to the transformation of knowledge, it is recommended future research take on a more active co-production participatory action research approach, in order to better support emancipation and provide additional empirical support for actionable social/meso-level intervention/s (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). This recommendation is in alignment with the recommendations of Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System (State of Victoria, 2021) to prioritise lived experience co-design, with the aim of better supporting psychological wellbeing and outcomes.

Conclusion

The current research aimed to explore the gender and sexually diverse lived experiences of femininity. The enquiry was inspired by gender and LGBTQIA+ inequity being identified as significant social challenge the field of community psychology needs to address (Riemer et al., 2020). It was also inspired by the noted gap in critical femininities research whereby the lived experiences of gender and sexually diverse people who engage in femininity were underrepresented, as was research exploring opportunities for meaningful engagement beyond a focus on risk and discrimination.

What is clear above all else is that if gender and sexually diverse experiences are excluded, enquiries and explorations of femininity are incomplete. The current study aimed to honour gender and sexually diverse experiences and exhibit how they provide us invaluable

insights around sites and contexts of difficulty and restriction, as well as precious opportunities for meaningful and affirming engagements.

A multiplicity of feminine experiences was recounted here - one normative which, participants conceived of similarly, and another more personally significant and difficult to define. Throughout the present research a clear central learning was uncovered - that navigating femininity as a gender and/or sexually diverse person is often complex, regardless of context and company. For these participants, femininity was oxymoronic: a point of pain and restriction, but also play and expansion; sometimes visible, and other times not-so-much; sometimes a departure, at other times an arrival. Regardless, participants described intentionally carving out their own meaning in the very complexity normative ideology seeks to avoid, describing the significant value and dimension femininity often holds, even in the face of oppressive and discriminatory forces.

References

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Gender Dysphoria*. https://www.psychiatry.org/File%20Library/Psychiatrists/Practice/DSM/APA_DSM-5-Gender-Dysphoria.pdf

Australian Human Rights Commission. (2018). *Face the Facts: Gender equality* [Report]. https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018_Face_the_Facts_Gender_Equality.pdf

Australian Psychological Society. (2021). *Use of psychological practices that attempt to change or suppress a person's sexual orientation or gender: Position statement*. https://psychology.org.au/about-us/position-statements/psychological-practices-conversion-practices

Bates, E. A., McCann, J. J., Kaye, L. K., & Taylor, J. C. (2017). "Beyond words": A researcher's guide to using photo elicitation in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *14*(4), 459-481. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2017.1359352

Blair, K. L., & Hoskin, R. A. (2015). Experiences of femme identity: Coming out, invisibility and femmephobia. *Psychology & Sexuality, 6*(3), 229–244.

Bordo, S. (1997). The body and the reproduction of femininity. In K. Conboy, N. Medina & S. Stanbury (Eds.), *Writing on the body: Female embodiment and feminist theory* (pp. 90–110). Columbia University Press.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2014). What can "thematic analysis" offer health and wellbeing researchers?. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being*, *9*(1), 26152.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2020). Can I use TA? Should I use TA? Should I not use TA? Comparing reflexive thematic analysis and other pattern-based qualitative analytic approaches. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, *21*(1), 37-47. https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12360

Brennan, S. (2011). Fashion and sexual identity, or why recognition matters. In J. Kennett & J. Wolfendale (Eds.), *Fashion – philosophy for everyone: Thinking with style*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist, 32*(7), 513.

Campbell, J. (1949). *The hero with a thousand faces*. New World Library.

Capern, S. (2022). *An exploration of LGBTQIA+ people's understandings of femininity and their dis(engagement) in online spaces* [Masters Thesis, Victoria University].

Carrino, E. A., Bryen, C. P., Maheux, A. J., Stewart, J. L., Roberts, S. R., Widman, L., & Cassells, R., & Duncan, A. (2019). *Gender equity insights 2019: Breaking through the glass ceiling*. Gender equity series. https://bcec.edu.au/publications/gender-equity-insights-2019-breaking-through-the-glass ceiling/

Collins, P. H. (2004). *Black sexual politics: African-Americans, gender & the new racism.* Routledge.

Connell, R. W. (1987). *Gender and power: Society, the person and sexual politics*. Polity.

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Allen & Unwin.

Dahl, U. (2012). Turning like a femme: Figuring critical femininity studies. *NORA-Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, *20*(1), 57-64. https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2011.650708

Dahl, U. (2017). Femmebodiment: Notes on queer feminine shapes of vulnerability. *Feminist Theory*, *18*(1), 35–53. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700116683902

de Beauvoir, S. (1989). *The second sex* (H. M. Parshley, Trans.). Vintage Books/Random House.

Deliovsky, K. (2008). Normative white femininity: Race, gender and the politics of beauty. *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice*, *33*(1), 49-59.

Drescher, J. (2015). Out of DSM: Depathologizing homosexuality. *Behavioral Sciences, 5*(4), 565-575. https://atlantisjournal.ca/index.php/atlantis/article/view/429

Döring, N., Reif, A., & Poeschl, S. (2016). How gender-stereotypical are selfies? A content analysis and comparison with magazine adverts. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *55*, 955-962.

Falconer, E. J. (2021). *Recognizing the self through the other: The fallacy of the Heroine's journey.* [Master's Theis, Pacifica Graduate Institute]. https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/recognizing-self-through-other-fallacy-heroine-s/docview/2541321689/se-2

Giunta, K. (2018). *Including and exceeding 'women': Studying femininities in LGBTQIA+ Sydney*. Humanity. https://novaojs.newcastle.edu.au/hass/index.php/humanity/article/view/61

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Penguin Books.

Grossman, A. H., D'Augeli, A. R., Salter, N. P., & Hubbard, S. M. (2006). Comparing gender expression, gender nonconformity, and parents' responses to female-to-male and male-to-female transgender youth. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counselling*, *1*(1), 41–59. https://doi.org/10.1300/j462v01n01_04

Hall, D. E. (2017). *Queer theories*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Han, C. (2008). No fats, femmes, or Asians: The utility of critical race theory in examining the role of gay stock stories in the marginalization of gay Asian men. *Contemporary Justice Review*, *11*(1), 11-22.

Harris, L. & Crocker, E. (1997). An introduction to sustaining femme gender. In L. Harris & E. Crocker (Eds.), *Femme: Feminists, lesbians, and bad girls* (pp. 1-12). Routledge.

Hill, A.O., Lyons, A., Jones, J., McGowan, I., Carman, M., Parsons, M., Power, J., Bourne, A. (2021). *Writing themselves in 4: The health and wellbeing of LGBTQA+ young people in Australia* (Report No. 124). Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society. https://www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs/documents/arcshs-research-publications/Writing-Themselves-In-4-National-report.pdf

Holmes, J., & Schnurr, S. (2006). 'Doing femininity' at work: More than just relational practice 1. *Journal of sociolinguistics*, *10*(1), 31-51.
Hoskin, R. A. (2017). Femme theory: Refocusing the intersectional lens. *Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice*, *38*(1), 95-109. https://journals.msvu.ca/index.php/atlantis/article/download/4771/95-109%20PDF
Hoskin, R. A. (2019). Femmephobia: The role of anti-femininity and gender policing in LGBTQ+ people's experiences of discrimination. *Sex Roles*, *81*(11), 686-703. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-019-01021-3
Hoskin, R. A. (2020). "Femininity? It's the aesthetic of subordination": Examining femmephobia, the gender binary, and experiences of oppression among sexual and gender minorities. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *49*(7), 2319-2339.
Hoskin, R. A., & Hirschfeld, K. L. (2018). Beyond aesthetics: A femme manifesto. *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice, 39*(1), 85–87.
Hoskin, R. A., & Taylor, A. (2019). Femme resistance: The fem (me) inine art of failure. *Psychology & Sexuality*, *10*(4), 281-300. https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2019.1615538
Jagose, A. (1996). *Queer theory: An introduction*. NYU Press.
Jones, J. L., & Mehr, S. L. (2007). Foundations and assumptions of the scientist-practitioner model. *American Behavioral Scientist, 50*(6), 766–771. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764206296454
Judge, C. P., Wolgemuth, T. E., Hamm, M. E., & Borrero, S. (2017). "Without bodily autonomy we are not free": Exploring women's concerns about future access to contraception following the 2016 US presidential election. *Contraception, 96*(5), 370-377. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.contraception.2017.07.169
Kessler, S. J., & McKenna, W. (1978). *Gender: An ethnomethodological approach*. University of Chicago Press.
Lazar, M. M. (2009). Entitled to consume: Postfeminist femininity and a culture of post-critique. *Discourse & Communication*, *3*(4), 371-400.
Maltry, M., & Tucker, K. (2002). Female fem (me) inities: New articulations in queer gender identities and subversion. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, *6*(2), 89-102. https://doi.org/10.1300/J155v06n02_12
McCann, H. (2018). Beyond the visible: Rethinking femininity through the femme assemblage. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, *25*(3), 278-292. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506818767479
McCann, H. (2022). Is there anything "toxic" about femininity? The rigid femininities that keep us locked in. *Psychology & Sexuality*, *13*(1), 9-22. https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2020.1785534
McCann, H., & Killen, G. (2019). Femininity isn't femme: Appearance and the contradictory space of queer femme belonging. In A. Tsalapatanis, M. Bruce, D. Bissell, & H. Keane (Eds.), *Social Beings, Future Belongings* (pp. 135-147). Routledge.https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315200859-10/femininity-isn-femme-hannah-mccann-gemma-killen
McComb, S. E., & Mills, J. S. (2022). The effect of physical appearance perfectionism and social comparison to thin-, slim-thick-, and fit-ideal Instagram imagery on young women's body image. *Body Image, 40*, 165-175. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2021.12.003
Mckay, A., Moore, S., & Kubik, W. (2018). Western beauty pressures and their impact on young university women. *International Journal of Gender and Women's Studies, 6*(2), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.15640/ijgws.v6n2p1

Miller, B., & Behm-Morawitz, E. (2016). "Masculine guys only": The effects of femmephobic mobile dating application profiles on partner selection for men who have sex with men. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *62,* 176-185. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.03.088

Mishali, Y. (2014). Feminine trouble: The removal of femininity from feminist/lesbian/queer esthetics, imagery, and conceptualization. *Women's Studies International Forum*, *44,* 55-68. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2013.09.003

Nelson, G. B., & Prilleltensky, I. (2010). *Community psychology: In pursuit of liberation and well-being* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.

Nestle, J. (1992). Flamboyance and fortitude: An introduction. In J. Nestle, J. (Ed.), *The persistent desire: A femme-butch reader* (pp. 13-20). Alyson Publications.

Oxford University Press. (n.d.). Femininity, n., in *Oxford English Dictionary*. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3450802179

Parmenter, J. G., Galliher, R. V., & Maughan, A. D. (2021). LGBTQ+ emerging adults perceptions of discrimination and exclusion within the LGBTQ+ community. *Psychology & Sexuality*, *12*(4), 289-304. https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2020.1716056

Puar, J. (2005). Queer times, queer assemblages. *Social Text, 23*(3-4), 121-139.

Riemer, M., Reich, S. M., Evans, S. D., Nelson, G., & Prilleltensky, I. (2020). *Community psychology: In pursuit of liberation and well-being*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Ruberg, B., & Ruelos, S. (2020). Data for queer lives: How LGBTQ gender and sexuality identities challenge norms of demographics. *Big Data & Society*, *7*(1), 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951720933286

Rugg, R. A. (1997). How does she look? In L. Harris & E. Crocker (Eds.), *Femme: Feminists, lesbians, and bad girls* (pp. 175–189). Routledge.

Schippers, M. (2007). Recovering the feminine other: Masculinity, femininity, and gender hegemony. *Theory and Society*, *36*(1), 85–102. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-007-9022-4

Serano, J. (2007). *Whipping girl: A transsexual woman on sexism and the scapegoating of femininity.* Seal Press.

Sonn, C. C., Stevens, G., & Duncan, N. (2013). Decolonisation, critical methodologies and why stories matter. *Race, memory and the Apartheid archive* (pp. 295-314). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137263902_15

Stuart, A., & Donaghue, N. (2012). Choosing to conform: The discursive complexities of choice in relation to feminine beauty practices. *Feminism & Psychology, 22*(1), 98-121. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353511424362

Sun, N. (2022). Overturning Roe v Wade: Reproducing injustice. *BMJ*, *377*, 1588. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.o1588

State of Victoria (2021). *Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, Final Report, Summary and recommendations* (Parliament Paper No. 202). https://www.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-01/RCVMHS_FinalReport_ExecSummary_Accessible.pdf

Tebes, J. K. (2017). Foundations for a philosophy of science of community psychology: Perspectivism, pragmatism, feminism, and critical theory. In M. A. Bond, I. Serrano-García, C. B. Keys, & M. Shinn (Eds.), *APA handbook of community psychology: Methods for community research and action for diverse groups and issues* (pp. 21–40). American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/14954-002

Vivienne, S. (2017). "I will not hate myself because you cannot accept me": Problematizing empowerment and gender-diverse selfies. *Popular Communication*, *15*(2), 126-140. https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2016.1269906

Wilkinson, C. (2017). 'You're too much!': Experiencing the straightness of security. *Critical Studies on Security*, *5*(1), 113-116. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2017.1294832

Willig, C. (2013). *Introducing qualitative research in psychology: Adventures in theory and method* (3rd ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.

Yavorsky, J. E., & Sayer, L. (2013). "Doing fear": The influence of hetero-femininity on (trans) women's fears of victimization. *The Sociological Quarterly, 54*(4), 511-533. https://doi.org/10.1111/tsq.12038

Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge and pay my respects to the traditional custodians of the lands on which we undertook this research, the Wurundjeri,Woi Wurrung and Boon Wurrung peoples of the Kulin Nations. We would also like to extend our deepest thanks to the participants for taking part in our research; their engagement was generous, and we do not take the privilege of being privy to their valuable personal experiences or perspectives for granted.

Address for correspondence
Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Sophie Capern, College of Health and Biomedicine, Victoria University, Melbourne Victoria 8001, Australia. Email: Sophie.Capern1@vu.edu.au

Author biographies

Sophie Capern is a registered psychologist and sessional academic based in Melbourne, Australia. She has held various roles at Victoria University, including as a Research Assistant and Sessional Lecturer within the College of Health and Biomedicine. In her psychological practice, Sophie works with LGBTQIA+ clients in sexual health and intimacy clinical settings. Sophie is experienced in both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. Her Masters of Applied Psychology (Community Psychology) thesis, from which the current paper is drawn, was a qualitative study of LGBTQIA+ young adult negotiations of and relationships to femininity in both online and offline spaces.

Dr Linda Chiodo is a Lecturer in Psychology and a Research Fellow in the Institute for Health and Sport at Victoria University, Melbourne Australia. Her research centres on the psychosocial wellbeing of youth, women and marginalised groups, intersectional understandings of gender performativity, sexism and collective community wellbeing. Linda's research primarily involves qualitative research methods and extends to evaluations of community, local government and school based programs supporting complex families and diverse young people.