

**Pretty, Witty and Femme:  
Negotiations of Gender and Sex in  
Femme Sartorial Representations on *Tumblr***

– and –

**Smoking Hot Dykes:  
Smoking Imagery and Lesbian Style on *Tumblr***

by

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## **Abstract. Pretty, Witty and Femme: Negotiations of Gender and Sex in Sartorial Representations on *Tumblr***

This paper addresses the primacy of visual representations of queer femme-ininity on the microblogging platform, *Tumblr*. Three femme styles are analyzed using a qualitative queer and feminist intersectional theoretical framework. The analysis revealed that sartorial expressions of femme-ininity on *Tumblr* reflect a postmodern approach to conscious gender presentation that re-defines. Sartorial negotiations of femme gender and sexual desire are complex and varied, and visibility as a sole sartorial strategy for subversion is restraining.

**Keywords:** femme; queer fashion; representation; Tumblr; visibility; gender; desire

## **Abstract. Smoking Hot Dykes: Smoking Imagery and Lesbian Style on *Tumblr***

This paper discusses the role of the cigarette as a component to a lesbian sartorial style on the website *Tumblr*, called pomo dyke style. The investigation examines how the cigarette fashions the pomo dyke in a qualitative analysis of images depicting this style. Findings revealed themes in imagery depicting the pomo dyke style, including melancholy, whiteness, thinness, and class rebellion. Fashionable deviance materializes on the queer who values wilfulness in self-presentation while disregarding factors influencing her privilege.

**Keywords:** smoking; representation; lesbian fashion; Tumblr; postmodern; queer

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# Table of Contents

Approval.....	ii
Partial Copyright Licence .....	iii
Abstract.	
Pretty, Witty and Femme: Negotiations of Gender and Sex in Sartorial Representations on <i>Tumblr</i> .....	iv
Abstract.	
Smoking Hot Dykes: Smoking Imagery and Lesbian Style on <i>Tumblr</i> .....	iv
Acknowledgements .....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
List of Figures.....	viii

<b>1. Pretty, Witty and Femme: Negotiations of Gender and Sex in Femme Sartorial Representations on <i>Tumblr</i> .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>2</b>
1.1. The Medium .....	4
1.2. Coming Out, Femme Authentication and <i>Tumblr</i> .....	7
<b>2. Methods.....</b>	<b>10</b>
2.1. Reflexivity.....	11
<b>3. Theoretical Framework .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>4. Historical Context.....</b>	<b>16</b>
4.1. Feminism, Femininity and Fashion .....	16
4.2. Glamour .....	17
4.3. Gender Roles and (Un)Fashionability .....	18
<b>5. Image Analysis .....</b>	<b>21</b>
5.1. Hard Femme .....	22
5.2. High Femme.....	26
5.3. Vintage Femme .....	30
5.4. Dressing for Desire: Sexual Silences on Tumblr.....	35
<b>6. Conclusions.....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>41</b>
Books.....	41
Chapters .....	42
Journal Articles.....	43
Websites .....	43

<b>2. Smoking Hot Dykes: Smoking Imagery and Lesbian Style on <i>Tumblr</i> .....</b>	<b>45</b>
1. Introduction .....	46
2. Medium: <i>Tumblr</i> .....	49
3. Theoretical Framework .....	51
4. Historical Context.....	55
4.1. Fashion and Respectability: Smoking and Class .....	56
4.2. Public Health Narratives .....	57
5. Methodology .....	58
6. Themes.....	59
6.1. Pathology, Melancholy and Queer Time.....	60
6.1.1. Queer Time.....	61
6.1.2. Pastness and Pathology .....	63
6.2. Size, Race, Class and Gender .....	64
6.2.1. Whiteness and Body Size .....	64
6.2.2. Class Rebellion .....	67
6.2.3. Androgyny, Misogyny and Gender Privilege.....	68
6.3. Neo-Liberalism and Fantasy.....	68
7. Conclusions.....	70
<b>References.....</b>	<b>72</b>
Books .....	72
Articles .....	73
Chapters .....	74
Newspaper Article .....	74
Online .....	75

## List of Figures

Figure 5.1. Hard Femme .....	23
Figure 5.2. High Femme .....	26
Figure 5.3. Vintage Femme .....	30
Figure 6.1. Cigarettes symbolize depression .....	60
Figure 6.2. Queer Time and the Lesbian Protagonist .....	62
Figure 6.3. Thinness, Whiteness and Apathy .....	66
Figure 6.4. Eroticism and Fantasy .....	69

**1.**

**Pretty, Witty and Femme:  
Negotiations of Gender and Sex in Femme  
Sartorial Representations on *Tumblr***

# 1. Introduction

Our terms are slippery and our designs complex.

(Rose and Camilleri, 14)

Lesbian representation has been produced within and without the LGBTTQQ2SIP and feminist movements, dating from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Contemporary representations of lesbians and queer women reflect this history in layered and complex ways. On the postmodern landscape, the Internet dominates as the primary global technology of image dissemination. Within the online universe, lesbians have carved out discussion forums and communities organized around expressions of identity, style and politics. Blogs (*Gawker*), social networking sites (*Facebook*) and microblogging platforms (*Twitter*) are among the online mediums hosting these critical conversations. The microblogging platform, *Tumblr* hosts high levels of queer and lesbian interaction through imagery, written expressions and video links. Queer femmes enjoy bountiful representation within this community. In choosing this medium to explore femme sartorial representations, I faced questions pertaining to the technology of the blog, and specifically, the microblog, which is a more recent interactive online platform. Microblogs descend from a tradition of textual blogging, which influences the analysis of format and structural design necessary to considerations of the context, content and form of *Tumblr*. *Tumblr*, in particular, is largely image-based, and facilitated my focus on sartorial imagery.

The study is an analysis of queer femme sartorial representations online. Initially, I wondered how queer cis femmes signaled desire for AFAB (assigned female at birth) masculine subjects, including those identifying as butch and trans among other queer masculine identities. Cis femme desires for butch women and trans guys are comparable in the scope of this project because I focus on sartorial expressions of femininity by cis femmes as a response to their position in a queer, heterogender dynamic of desire, wherein this gender difference is consciously engaged. How is cis femme gender and desire for queer masculinity negotiated in expressions of queer femme-ininity, and is there a way to recognize these sartorial negotiations of gender and desire? This line of inquiry emerged from the observation that the butch/femme system

of desire as a lesbian archetype has moved from prominence in lesbian visual representations and narratives in recent decades. I was therefore not surprised when my analysis revealed that the organization of *Tumblr* blogs relies on a general definition of femme organized around gender identity as distinct from specific sexual desires that includes trans femmes, femme bois and femmes desiring femme-ininities alongside cis femmes desiring queer masculinities. *Tumblr* as a research setting prevented certain conclusions about dress correlating with desire because it provided mostly visual content portraying independent subjects, and facilitated only brief discussions among users. This ultimately affected my conclusions, as representations of femme fashion on *Tumblr* were not articulated as responsive to desiring particular bodies or identities, but rather as expressive of gender identity distinct from specificities of queer desire. When I refer to sexual desire or sexuality as an intersection of identity in this paper I am not speaking generally about non-normative sexualities as compared with heterosexualities, but about how queer sexualities vary within queer communities and representations. With specific consideration for the position of the cis femme desiring queer masculinities, I will emphasize that the ways in which queer sexual desires vary ultimately affect social positions and serve to differentiate queer experiences and so also, sartorial expressions.

Femme representation on *Tumblr* accounts for sexual expression and identification within the organizing category of gender presentation/style. This appears to be the result of prioritizing visibility as an incentive for lesbian activism in recent decades. The white, university educated lesbian-feminists of the 1970s and the largely working class butch/femme and pro-sex lesbian opposition emerging in the 1980s had a significant impact on subsequent lesbian narratives and postmodern feminist and queer theory from the '90s to the present. Sartorial style has been central to debates about lesbian activism, but visibility as a sole sartorial strategy for subversion is restraining in contemporary discursive politics. This is due to the increasingly diverse and vast amount of fashionable styles, social and political sartorial references, queer representations and queer identity discourses available to the postmodern subject. The present moment in fashion and queer activism requires consideration for the conditions, experiences and motivations surrounding sartorial engagement.

My theoretical framework developed out of an inquiry about essentialist repertoires of authenticity inspired by a study conducted by Alison Eves (2004) about

butch and femme identifications. Eves' interviews with lesbians in the UK revealed that essentialist language was often used to validate butch and femme identities to refute outsider skepticism, for example, that one's sexuality was 'just a phase' (486). My analysis was framed around the concept of locating repertoires of authenticity mediated through the layered discursive frames of dress, image and blog. I will use Judith Butler's theory of performativity, Elizabeth Freeman's work on queer time, and Ulrika Dahl's work on femme fashion to analyze three types of femme I have identified as representative of sartorial femme-ininities on *Tumblr*: High Femme, Hard Femme and Vintage Femme. I will use recent femme writings from *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity* edited by Chloe Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri to reflect on changing directions for imagining femme-ininities and authenticities created at intersections of race, class, ability, size and age. The theoretical framework focuses on assessing how the concepts of femininity and authenticity are defined, expressed and queered in femme representations on *Tumblr*. It is my intention in this paper to raise questions to propel continuous inquiry, although my foremost inquiry concerns a typology of represented femme styles and how femme-ininities and authenticities are portrayed as related to sartorialism.

## 1.1. The Medium

*Tumblr* is a microblogging platform owned by Tumblr Inc. that hosts over 80 million blogs ([tumblr.com/about](http://tumblr.com/about) us). I chose to focus on blogs hosted by *Tumblr* because they are more likely to be image-based than blogs hosted by other companies. Although *Tumblr* does facilitate text-based interaction, images have more currency within this space. As I conducted my analysis, I became aware that *Tumblr* is particularly well known as an online queer and queer friendly community. For example, two posts using textual graphics read, "So, if you're on Tumblr, why are you straight?" ([randomactsoflesbian.tumblr.com](http://randomactsoflesbian.tumblr.com)) and "that awkward lesbian moment: when you go on Tumblr in public" ([nobodyknowsimalesbian.tumblr.com](http://nobodyknowsimalesbian.tumblr.com)).

Without conducting a comparative analysis of different blog hosts, I cannot suggest why *Tumblr* has more image-based content or why it attracts this community. It occurs to me that an image-based blog forum may appeal to LGBTTTQQ2SIP bloggers

for the potential visibility it affords. If *Tumblr* is more accommodating of image content than other blogging or microblogging platforms, this may attract queer bloggers (lesbian femmes in particular, but not exclusively) as a space wherein an author may control the gaze. Feminist interpretations of the gaze have historically understood looking relations between subject and object within a heterosexual framework. In mainstream film, for example, the typically male protagonist controls the female object of desire in his position as voyeur. The object of the gaze is thought to lose autonomy within these looking relations (Mulvey, 1975). A medium like *Tumblr*, offering significantly more autonomy over looking relations to a blogger than a film does to a film viewer, may be attractive to queer femmes who wish to subvert traditional femininity through control of the frames through which they are seen. Control is achieved by posting items on a blog whose theme is queer identity, style or politics to ensure a queer reading of the posted content. Framing one's self-presentation and feminine sartorial elements in queer discourses may be appealing to a cis-gendered femme whose queerness is seldom read correctly, and whose femininity may be mistaken for passivity beyond this queer space.

*Tumblr* is a corporation with marketing incentives. Blog authors using this corporate platform to voice political concerns and self-expressions run the risk of having their politics used for marketing initiatives. Creating an online queer subculture within a space like this is one example of how contemporary queer culture participates, consciously or otherwise, in global capitalism through social media. On the one hand, this medium serves to connect queer expressions and identities, but on the other hand, these interactions may ultimately be appropriated for use by incentives that are exploitative and serve to erase queer visibility. As one blogger commented in response to Forever 21's fashion campaign "FALL IS FEMME", "I blame Tumblr!" (fuckyeahfemmes.com). In this campaign, a queer gender identity and sartorial aesthetic is co-opted to accommodate straight female consumer identities. Accompanying comments by femme bloggers indicate some resistance to this corporate appropriation of femme, "was so weirded out when I saw this...", "That's some pretty weak femme tbh [to be honest]. Where's the switchblade and glitter eyebrows?" A couple of the comments dispute the implication that femme can be a seasonal sartorial expression, "'So is every other season, Forever 21," and "Every day is femme." However, one blogger does not express disagreement, "just bought about ten pairs of mint-colored

tights.” Within this space, there are varying levels of consumer participation and feminist and queer political messages. It is significant to note that this blog post did attract more comments, and certainly more passionate responses than the majority of the posted images I analyzed.

The implications of the corporate medium and the political messages it hosts are serious and troubling. Femme as a queer expression may be threatened while it is asserted within this space. Queer communities have never been so technologically accessible to the broader mainstream culture, and it is apparent that this accessibility may be the cause for the appropriation of ‘femme’ as a sartorial identity by Forever 21. The queer femme community on *Tumblr* is organized around gender identity, which is expressed in fashion and style imagery to the extent that femme gender becomes visually associated with sartorial expressions of non-normative femininities, rather than with sexual desires or identifications. It is therefore not surprising that someone unfamiliar with *Tumblr* might recognize ‘femme’ as referring to a particular sartorial style, rather than a queer identity. Femme blogs in 2012 offer new ways to imagine authenticity through a queer lens, but they are also implicated in broader systems invested in manipulating the meaning of representations to reflect particular truths that have no affiliation or respect for queer femme identity, style and culture. It seems that femme bloggers may have too much at stake in this online space affording them visibility and community to wilfully evacuate *Tumblr* in protest.

Blogs that host images of fashioned subjects are the third lens in a three part series. Each level of representation: dress, image and blog add implications of identification to the discursive equation. How is authenticity negotiated through various and layered representational frames? As each tier of representation redefines the terms through which to envision reality, the realm of fantasy takes over the landscape of meaning. Bloggers can utilize representational frames to present an aspired self to the online social stage. “Style will encode all the cultural messages of our communities, but it is as incapable as our autobiographies of revealing the ‘real’ self. Fashion cannot indicate a fixed identity; it is a constantly changing set of statements to be interpreted by the onlooker’s own transforming perceptions” (Blackman and Perry, 75). It is therefore pertinent to distinguish identity from representation when conducting an analysis of femme fashion imagery. Representation through this three-tiered medium can only

indicate desired self-image and must be read as an intentional construction. The representational conditions surrounding the concept of authenticity will determine its definition.

## **1.2. Coming Out, Femme Authentication and *Tumblr***

It has been suggested that the very invisibility of the femme is what comprises her subversive ability (Galewski 2005: 201, Butler 1990: 228, Martin 1996: 83). Femmes must perpetually 'come out' to be perceived as queer, due to the invisibility of their queerness (Levitt et al 2003, VanNewkirk 2006). Coming out is a discursive act that normalizes and authenticates heterosexuality as the default human sexuality. Coming out involves assuming one's natural identity from which they have been hiding and requires a dialogue that typically involves an explanation, a defense, potentially a debate and certainly a Q&A that often positions the straight enquirer in the role of identity police.

In response to the heterosexist reception of queer sexual behaviours as temporary or 'just a phase,' queer identity has often been articulated through essentialist language (Eves, 2004). Coming out of heterosexuality and into a new sexual identity may involve utilizing essentialist discourses to assert authenticity within a culture that constructs human identities, gender roles and sexual impulses as innate and fixed. In "Homomascularity: Framing Keywords of Queer Popular Culture," Jack Fritscher writes, "“Coming out of the closet” is an act of immigration. First, the person coming out is forced to learn a new language of sex and identity. Second, coming out is fraught with all the framing/keying problems common to every other “immigrant versus host society” trying to establish a discourse... In a way, the acid-inflected morning after Stonewall was like the first dawn in Eden when Adam’s task was to name everything in sight” (3). My analysis will assess whether dressing like a femme commits a subject to essentialist discourses of assimilation or reconstructs the frames through which authenticity is defined.

The queer femme endures a particularly complex negotiation of self when it comes to communicating her queerness through fashion. In "Gee, I Didn't Get That Vibe From You" (2006) Robbin Vannewkirk problematizes gay-dar from a femme perspective:

... a gay vibe seems to have so much to do with those observable signifiers for the authentic lesbian. I often wonder if I could make myself appear more gay, as I seem to remain in a perpetual state of dislocation and in-between-ness. My transformation between worlds causes me to feel like I belong to a hyphenation of the sexual binary... I'm situated inside a gap between both compulsory straight normalcy and creative queerness. (74)

Vannewkirk cannot articulate her queerness within the sartorial codes for lesbian authenticity, and instead perpetually undergoes transformation between describable, inhabitable identities.

In "The Digital Queer: Weblogs and Internet Identity", Julie Rak connects scholarly discourses likening blogging to diary writing with the history of identity discourses confessing deviant sexuality in the history of modern psychology (Rak, 166). "Confession, Foucault says, is the way in which sexual deviance and then sexuality itself became the focus of the developing sciences of the body (58–59)" (Rak, 169). Like confession, Rak continues, "The performance of blogging is based on the assumption that experience congeals around a subject, and makes a subject who can be written and read, even when the discourse that seems to support this subject threatens to undermine it. This is also true of sexuality when it is talked about as identity" (Rak, 166). Confession works to authenticate identity through the description/representation of the fixed subject. Blog analysis requires critical thinking about neo-liberal discourses of queer and electronic identity that implicate individualist ideology. The perceived authenticity of a blog author's identity is important to establishing a readership, and a significant portion of the blog will involve a confession, explicit or implied, of authenticity or fixed subjectivity. On *Tumblr*, confession appears visually, or in a brief 'About Me' description. For example, content on *Tumblr* blogs is sometimes framed by an image representing the author followed by their name and a list of identifiers, like 'queer, female pronouns, academic, FATshionista, gender-bending, able-bodied femme'. In some cases, a confession is comprised only of posted content, so the reader is made to perceive a blogger based on her taste in images and sartorial aesthetics.

Identification is a critical aspect of participation in the blogosphere. Greg Myers writes in *Discourses of Blogs and Wikis*, "The reader of blogs is not just picking up bits and pieces of information; he or she is constantly testing out membership in a group,

perhaps a very small group, of people who know the kind of thing the blogger is writing about” (11). *Tumblr* as a discursive medium acts as a platform for online social interaction that prioritizes visual confessions of individuality and fosters sexual diversity. As such, this postmodern discursive space organizes femme sartorial politics in terms of gender identity rather than sexual desire, as gender is presumably visually discernible and sexuality is diverse. The result of this organization is that within an image-based forum facilitating various expressions of femme fashion and sexuality, femme desire for queer masculinities can only be analyzed through explicit reference to this desire, as an image of a butch/femme couple, for example.

The blog medium prioritizes identification with sartorial gender identity over identification with sexual identity, behaviour or desire. For example, “Fuck Yeah Dykes” is a blog that celebrates and sexualizes a masculine-of-centre young, urban lesbian aesthetic, and presumably attracts an audience with an attraction to queer masculinity. It is possible to identify bloggers who follow and comment on this blog via hyperlinks to their own blogs, but I have yet to come across a blog explicitly about femme desires for butches. Some femme gender identity blogs suggest this desire, but they prioritize visible (mostly sartorial) expressions of femme gender, and importantly, they organize around this gender expression. In other words, sexual expressions and desires are included within the primary organizing category of a queer gender identity. This begs critical inquiry about the reasons for this form of organization. I have a few thoughts about this. First, there is a thoroughly documented political and cultural lesbian history that explores theories promoting subversion through visibility, and this has gained visual representation political priority. I will explore the implications of this history in discussion of Freeman’s writing on the concept of pastness as queer affect. Second, a representational trend of diversifying femme experience through imagery and sartorial expression resists the dominance of butch/femme representation in lesbian history. Further, the contemporary ideological and discursive trend of technological interaction has increased the speed of social connectivity, thus valuing visual language (whose meaning is received instantaneously) over written communication. Insofar as gender is expressed more easily than sexual desire through visual and sartorial representation, it will be prioritized on a visual platform.

## 2. Methods

I chose eight blogs organized around themes of queer femme identity, style and/or politics and authored by a blogger who identified as femme. Specifically, I analyzed images of subjects and fashion elements, and the text (image descriptions or comments) accompanying images posted in the month of September 2012. The number of images posted by individual femme bloggers in September ranged from nine to over one hundred. I surveyed each individual's September collection for themes in image content including sartorial styles and specific garments, as well as in culture and politics. Based on the dominant themes identified, I chose five images from each blog to analyze in depth. I will share three detailed analyses in this paper, that best illustrate the dominant femme aesthetics I discovered.

Bloggers find images on online image banks, through submissions by blog followers, or from their personal collection. It is often unclear where a blogger found an image. As such, this analysis does not seek to understand or identify motivations for taking a photo, but rather for posting a photo as part of a collage of imagery and supplementary text that represents the blogger's definition and personal representation of femme style as an expression of queer identity.

I have analyzed image posts and accompanying text appearing in September 2012 on eight *Tumblr* blogs identified as femme authored. Initially, I considered approximately 20 blogs for analysis, eliminating more than half of the list based on three major criteria: lack of imagery/not hosted by *Tumblr*, lack of femme content/identification of author as femme, and lack of blog activity in September 2012. I requested and received permission from bloggers to reproduce their images.

My analysis was framed by the following questions:

- What is the image content?
- What does the content signify?
- What are the dominant fashion themes/ what are subjects wearing in the image?

I organized my analysis in two parts: content and significance. First I noted what I saw captured in images and any accompanying textual comments or descriptions. I was interested primarily in expressions of fashion items and styles, types of bodily representation and the settings within which subjects were photographed. When analyzing significance, I thought about the ways in which fashion, bodies, settings and textual content utilized repertoires of gender performativity, queerness and authenticity. Following the image analysis, I considered how sartorial politics in lesbian history from the 1940s to the 2000s have contributed to contemporary trends in lesbian representation on *Tumblr*. Using postmodern theory alongside literature about lesbian sartorial politics in the analysis allowed me to situate the image content and supporting text as part of an historical chronology of lesbian styles, and within contemporary queer and feminist repertoires.

## **2.1. Reflexivity**

As an observer of *Tumblr* activity, it is necessary to consider my status as an outsider to this community, as well as my position as a cis gendered, white, middle-class student. Although I feel that I have thoroughly explored how discursive interactivity occurs on *Tumblr*, I have not personally engaged in social interaction (sharing, liking, posting or commenting) in this space. That said I believe my outsider position provides a valuable perspective, as I may question or problematize aspects that may be more easily overlooked by a participant in the space. Due to my privileged social position and my postmodern feminist perspective, I welcome the development and critique of my study by researchers from social positions and theoretical perspectives that differ from my own.

This research topic involves consideration of history and politics in gender and sexuality, fashion and dress, photographic representation, and new media and social networking technology. Throughout the research process, I realized that the scope of this topic is broad, and the work I have done here can only represent the tip of the iceberg. I hope the work I have done thus far will contribute to further research on femme representation and sartorial expression.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

Fredric Jameson theorized two distinguishing features of postmodernism to be “its ‘schizophrenic’ fragmentation of time, and its ‘depthlessness’, the foregrounding of ‘spectacle’ over narrative” (Muggleton, 35). Any study of online interaction and community must consider the Internet as a postmodern development. A brief glance at a *Tumblr* blog reveals visual imagery as the main priority of this medium. On femme-themed *Tumblr* blogs, spectacle is aligned with adornment, and images must be visually captivating to be worthy of posting. A sartorial politics of visibility takes well to this medium, but the focus on visual presentation limits discussion about potential correlating gender expressions and sexual desires, among other cultural and political topics. Femme *Tumblrs* appear to be queer spaces that focus on political visibility, but which function within a discursive frame that may co-opt this visibility for corporate marketing initiatives. Further, despite political messages existing beneath and between images of loud, excessive and extreme subjects and costumes, the visual primacy of the medium serves to distract from the potential for more complex political and cultural discourses to exist in this space. Within a postmodern context and an image-based medium, visibility may be more closely aligned with narcissism than with subversion.

In her work on lesbian communities in the UK, Alison Eves identified essentialist repertoires of authenticity in discourses confessing lesbian identity. Phrases like, ‘I have always been this way’ or ‘I was naturally attracted to women’ are frequently used to validate a lesbian identity through adherence to heteronormative values and expectations, for example that sexual identity is static. I structured my inquiry around an investigation of sartorial repertoires of authenticity in femme representations on *Tumblr*, with specific regard for gender performance, queer experience and intersections of race, class and body size in articulations of femme style. Does femme fashion as represented on *Tumblr* reflect postmodern ideas about sex and gender as socially constructed or essentialist ideas about traditional femininity?

Judith Butler’s theory of performativity (1990) provides a framework through which to consider contemporary attitudes and activism that utilize a sartorial distinction between gender and sex. This theory has been used widely in gender and sexuality

studies to the point that it has had a significant effect on femme sartorial representation. This is evident on femme *Tumblrs* where dress has been used to illustrate gender as performative, and to re-define performance as authentic in a move away from essentialist gender expressions. Bobby Noble's work on fem(me) performance cultures in Toronto takes up issues of navigating and negotiating the gaze through femme camp. "The gaze is one of the primary producers of what is posited as the self-evident, but which remains, in practice at least, a conceptual overdetermination between what one thinks one is seeing and traces of essentialist and biologically determinist truth/knowledge regimes. In the case of fem(me)ininity, what one sees is not at all what one gets" (102). Noble discusses how irony through camp and masquerade is used in femme performance and performativity, and inspires my own questions about the politics of visibility, and how irony works to queer essentialism.

Judith Halberstam's theory of queer temporalities provides a theoretical context within which to imagine how femme style articulates queer time through an online queer community in a way that questions identity as an organizing factor of femme-ininity. I will use Halberstam as a starting point from which to think about femme sartorialism and representation in temporal frames. I will apply the concept of queer time to thinking about how femme time is negotiated sartorially and photographically. Halberstam distances queerness from sexual identity and situates it as a way of life that opposes "institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction... [and] develops according to other logics of location, movement, and identification" (2005, 1). Recent femme writings echo this move away from visibility toward temporality in pursuit of identification that does not require categorization (Rose and Camilleri, 2002; Coyote and Sharman, 2011; Dahl, 2010). Femme as a continual process of invention rather than a static identity is taken up as a form of resistance against persistent historical assumptions about race, class, gender, ability and age that have informed queer cultural definitions of femme-ininity. In the anthology *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity*, edited by Chloe Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha contributed "Gonna Get My Girl Body Back: This is a Work in Progress." The piece explores the author's pained and complex relationship with her body as a survivor of incest and abuse, and as a working-class femme of colour. She explores getting back in touch with her body through sex and femme-ininity, and writes, "Sometimes the selves I am shift

like digits over my skin... Is this real or illusion? What's real, when there is no before the abuse for me since it started so young? *You know that as a fem what you are is not fake but it is profoundly made up*" (40). This piece re-imagines the concept of authenticity as a creative process requiring a rewriting of the racism, classism, and sexism, among other abuses through which femme bodies are socially defined. Dress functions as a critical element facilitating personal, cultural, sexual and political development and expression that reflects temporalities specific to femme experience.

Discussion of femme identity as independent from butch identity increased in the '90s in collections of written accounts by femme writers (Harris & Crocker, 1997; Munt, 1998; Nestle, 1992; Newman, 1995). This postmodern inspiration to deconstruct identity categories continued in the 2000s. In *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity*, Rose and Camilleri set out to "liberate femme from its binary relation with butch... as a gender experience on its own terms, as an experience that expands, exceeds, and troubles the familiar framework or "norms" of lesbian (butch) femme" (13). This liberation involves a rejection of "singular interpretations of femme 'identity'," (Ibid, 13) a point that is echoed in the contributions to another recent anthology of lesbian narratives edited by Ivan Coyote and Zena Sharman, *Persistence: All Ways Butch and Femme*. These publications, among other representations in visual culture and literature of and/or by lesbians have contributed to the political and social climate of lesbian blogs on *Tumblr*. Postmodern feminist and queer messages were prominent on lesbian blogs within this online community.

In *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women and English Culture*, Jane Garrity and Laura Doan point out that 'lesbian' as an identity was introduced into the western cultural repertoire via the advent of sexology in modern science. As such, it is necessary to recognize the ways in which sartorial subversion through visibility is culturally and historically related to a modern politics of individualism. "Instead of charting lesbianism's 'visibility' or lamenting its invisibility, we might consider hermeneutic, epistemological, and functional questions about lesbianism's (mis)interpretability and cultural deployment" (6). It is now critical to consider how the terms defining and determining femme (in)visibility function on a postmodern social and cultural landscape.

Ulrika Dahl's work on contemporary sartorial negotiations of femme-ininity in "(Re)Figuring Femme Fashion" (2010) proposes the exploration of femme subjectivities move beyond issues of visibility as a factor affecting liberation. "Discussions about femme fashion need to be brought out of the reductive discussions about what constitutes emancipation and examine how consumption and adornment is integral to how femme subjectivity materializes" (Dahl, 48). The sartorial mandate of androgyny in lesbian-feminist political communities in the '70s serves to illustrate Dahl's thinking. Sartorial regulations emerged within a specifically white, middle-class, educated context, and as a response to a narrow and exclusive cultural history. Moving from discussions of what constitutes emancipation toward discussions about consumption and adornment may facilitate a more inclusive framework for inquiry about the sartorial materialization of diverse femme subjectivities. The discussion about emancipation from white, middle class femininity is prefaced on culturally exclusive terms, while the relationship of consumption and adornment to femme subjectivities provides opportunity to explore diverse cultural, sartorial histories and contemporary social systems and discursive platforms. I use Dahl's assertion to move beyond issues of emancipation to consider new directions in femme fashion and representation. Here I use the concept of subjectivities to consider variations in femme experience and to emphasize the contextual nature of factors affecting representation.

Elizabeth Freeman explains how queer timing serves to queer the ways in which cultural rhythms function invisibly to those in positions of privilege. "Manipulations of time convert historically specific regimes of asymmetrical power into seemingly ordinary bodily tempos and routines, which in turn organize the value and meaning of time" (Freeman, 34). Dahl's suggestion to move from issues of emancipation to processes of adornment and consumption when considering femme fashion would mark a political shift from visibility to temporality. Visibility has historically been associated with gay and lesbian liberation, but in a postmodern context, a shift to thinking about variations in queer experience is a more useful framework for activism, in particular for femme sartorialism. The motivations, inspirations, preparations and decisions involved in femme processes of adornment and consumption which may rely upon social positions and experiences are not factored into the broader cultural schedule. These processes contribute to how femme-ininity is performed and perceived. Focusing on various femme

temporalities may expose privileged cultural rhythms to begin to facilitate a sartorial reading of various femme-ininities and femme desires.

I have framed this study as a discourse analysis using a qualitative postmodern feminist and queer intersectional approach. Although I consider scholarship on social media and blogging, photographic representation and particularly fashion and dress, my academic background is in postmodern feminist thought, and my theoretical framework will reflect that. Butler, Halberstam, Freeman, Noble and Dahl will comprise the main theoretical direction for my analysis, and additional instances of theory and narrative will be discussed where appropriate.

## **4. Historical Context**

Sartorial items and styles have specific cultural and political meanings that are produced, represented and re-appropriated through space and time. In laying out an historical context through which to trace the social and sartorial chronology of femme fashion, my foremost intention is to emphasize the ways in which sartorial meanings are contextual. It is critical to recognize that fashion trends and sartorial meanings change over time and through representational mediums. In this section, I review literature and detail a brief chronology to contextualize my analysis and discussion of contemporary femme fashion.

### **4.1. Feminism, Femininity and Fashion**

In *On Lipstick: Redressing Fashion and Feminism* Linda M. Scott argues that adornment and artifice are natural attributes of humanity, but have been misconstrued throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century feminist movements in the west to reflect values based in 19<sup>th</sup> century religious Puritanism. Scott points out that the first wave of feminism arose from the Puritan tradition in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with Elizabeth Cady Stanton leading initiatives against glamour (Scott, 15). The feminist mandate for modesty as a sartorial

act of defiance against the patriarchal oppression of women's bodies was rooted in Puritan ideals about bodies and sexuality. Efrat Tseelon points out in "From Fashion to Masquerade: Towards an Ungendered Paradigm",

Denial of fashion extends from the philosophical disdain for the body, for fashionable dress, and for the woman – through the account of the civilizing process (Elias 1978, 1982) which charts the production of the refined and contained body by suppressing the physical body – to religious denunciation of the pleasure of the flesh and adornment of the body. (Tseelon, 105)

Divine aspiration as well as fears of abjection led to containment of the female body, which was a definitive and glorified trait of femininity that continues to influence discussions about fashion, gender and politics.

## 4.2. Glamour

Carol Dyhouse details the changing implications of class and gender in glamorous attire through the 20<sup>th</sup> century in *Glamour: Women, History and Feminism*. In the 1950s, glamorous femininity became associated with the working class. Glamour was becoming more affordable and accessible, and "this fuelled fears about cheapness and vulgarity" among the middle and upper classes (Dyhouse, 89). The New Look by Christian Dior was popularized among these consumer classes, emphasizing traditional, class-based hierarchical associations and ladylike behaviour. The popularization of this style stigmatized more brazen sartorial femininities, increasingly associated with vulgarity and sexuality. "Just as the dichotomy between Madonna and whore had haunted the Victorians, the postwar years were haunted by the distinction between fine ladies, 'real princesses', and the less pure kinds of pin-up girl, roll-in-the-hay glamour models, and other forms of 'cheesecake'" (Dyhouse, 90). I am interested in the shifting meaning of glamour during this time because "cheesecake" is a popular historical and sartorial reference signaled in contemporary femme representations. The dichotomy of princess/tart that was the result of mid-century class and gender politics within white communities is still evident in contemporary femme fashion, although in different forms and with different meanings. Although sartorial aesthetics from the past are perpetually replicated, discourses about gender, sexuality, race and class influence contemporary

interpretations of sartorial meaning differently from those of the 1950s. This is a point I will illustrate further in a discussion of my findings.

In Britain and America in the '50s, the Cinderella story “exerted a potent appeal” (93). “Unlike glamour girls, who got up and went for what they wanted, fairy princesses stayed submissive in the face of adversity” (Dyhouse, 93). Dyhouse’s description of glamour girls is strikingly similar to the descriptions of working class femmes in narratives about lesbian communities from the '40s to the '60s. For example, Joan Nestle, editor and contributor to the anthology *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, wrote in an article called “The Femme Question” (1984),

I wasn't a piece of fluff and neither were the other femmes I knew. We knew what we wanted, and that was no mean feat for young women of the 1950s, a time when the need for conformity, marriage, and babies was being trumpeted at us by the government's policymakers. Oh, we had our styles – our outfits, our perfumes, our performances – and we could lose ourselves under the chins of our dancing partners, who held us close enough to make the world safe; but we walked the night streets to get to our bars...  
(Nestle, 1992: 139)

How is femme glamour articulated today, and which sartorial and social elements of this style have been lost in time? How do political histories and fashion trends determine how we read femme-inine fashion?

### **4.3. Gender Roles and (Un)Fashionability**

In “Butch-Femme Relationships and Sexual Courage in the 1950s” (1981), Nestle argued for the acknowledgment of butch and femme gender roles as instrumental in the subsequent women’s and gay and lesbian liberation movements for the visibility they afforded the lesbian community. In “The Femme Question” (1984) Nestle confronted the problem of femme invisibility and under-representation in lesbian scholarship. Nestle argued that the femme occupied an equally important role, because the illusive normativity of femininity worn by a woman desiring another woman implicitly questioned the heteronormative construct of gender as natural.

In "Forbidden Love" (1983), Elizabeth Wilson wrote about lesbian gender roles in England, noting that butch and femme roles were specific to working class communities in the '40s and '50s, while aristocratic women played to societal expectations of gender in feminine couplings. This trend has been documented in North America as well, notably in Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Kennedy's study of working class lesbian communities in Buffalo, New York from 1940-1960. Davis and Kennedy examined the ways in which butch and femme roles were both resistive and a means for survival during the hostile political moment before the gay and lesbian movement enabled political organization.

After the Stonewall uprising in 1969 in Greenwich Village, which erupted during a political climate of rebellion spurred by the previous uprisings of other oppressed groups, radical lesbian feminists began consciousness-raising on college campuses. The lesbian-feminist movement of the '70s is known for its militant policing of gender roles, and its largely white, middle-class and educated following (Faderman, 1991). Fashion was imperative to the lesbian-feminist mandate of androgyny, which effectively erased femininity and reformed masculinity. Androgynous style was the sartorial manifestation of the political belief that women were essentially genderless, and were imposed upon by patriarchal notions of femininity. Ironically, this style privileged masculine dress while ousting those who were not woman-identified. Lesbian-feminist fashion of this time could be likened in theory to Cady Stanton's call for modesty in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Scott, 15), in the sense that femininity came under attack for its alleged affiliation with patriarchal values. These strict sartorial regulations left a narrow window for acceptable self-expression. In *Sappho was a Right-On Woman* (1972), Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love likened gender roles to mental inebriation as a strategy of denial of one's sexuality. "Gay role-playing [like drinking] is another way out of confronting oneself... Whatever role is played, butch or femme, the Lesbian will eventually find it hard to be herself, to know who she is" (40). The essentialist argument that the "Lesbian" has a common essence that can resist the patriarchal powers of social construction influenced the androgynous '70s.

Due to the strength of the lesbian-feminist movement, few voices spoke in defense of butch and femme styles and identities in the '70s and '80s. Amber Hollibaugh and Cherrie Moraga transcribed their conversation about lesbian gender and sexual

roles and feminism in “What We’re Rollin’ Around in Bed With: Sexual Silences in Feminism” (1981). This pivotal text explored the ways in which sexual desire was ignored in academic feminist discourses, and how this silenced and misrepresented lesbian communities within which butch and femme roles served to signal even power distribution between partners, rather than replicating heterosexuality and power inequality, as was alleged by the lesbian-feminists.

Postmodern theory was utilized in discussion of lesbian gender roles in the late ‘80s and ‘90s, to emphasize the social construction of gender and the subversion of performing butch and femme roles. In 1988, Sue Ellen Case argued that butch and femme roles allow the conscious resistance of traditional gender, exposing it as socially constructed. “The artifice of butch-femme role playing is its insistence on roles as roles, as a masquerade which, in its excess of “genderedness,” unmask the performative nature of roles which have their origin in social constructions rather than nature” (Case, 301). Teresa de Lauretis and Gayle Rubin also asserted theories premised on the postmodern position that gender is socially constructed and subversively performative, emphasizing the lesbian’s agency in using gender codes and symbols to exploit the heterosexual binary (de Lauretis, 1988; Rubin, 1992).

Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity (1990) eases certain previous points of contention in lesbian and feminist debates about role-playing. She asserts that butch and femme gender roles are neither wholly derivative nor independent of heterosexuality. Butch and femme role-playing is not purely an act of lesbian agency, but neither is it unconscious or uncritical. Butler wrote specifically about femmes, “Lesbian femmes may recall the heterosexual scene, as it were, but also displace it at the same time. In both butch and femme identities the very notion of an original or natural identity is put into question; indeed, it is precisely that question as it is embodied in these identities that becomes one source of their erotic significance” (123). The governing mandate of postmodernism that asserted gender as a social construction was repeatedly taken up by subsequent theorists, and identity politics became concerned with breaking down categories to make room for new methods of organization and activism.

## 5. Image Analysis

The analysis of images revealed three dominant sartorial styles representing femme identities on *Tumblr*: Hard Femme, High Femme and Vintage Femme. These styles signify varying expressions serving to queer time and explore femme subjectivities. I will emphasize here that these styles are not necessarily isolated, and appear collaged in various representations, which allows for multiple readings of the meaning of each sartorial expression. For the purpose of illustrating the ways in which these sartorial themes typically present themselves on *Tumblr*, I have selected images that distinctly represent one style out of the three identified. The analysis revealed that when femme desire for queer masculinities was clearly communicated (which was rare), Vintage Femme was most often enacted through vintage feminine aesthetics pictured alongside queer or female masculinities. More often, femme was expressed as independent from butch.

It is necessary to confront the power of the body as sartorial and political. Old femmes, femmes of colour, femmes with disabilities, trans femmes, working class femmes (more difficult to identify visually) and fat femmes (to a lesser degree) were represented significantly less often than thin, white, able-bodied cis femmes on most of the blogs I analyzed. These odds certainly affect a sartorial reading of race, gender, size, ability and class within these contexts. Dress and body work together in representation, as clothing is presented and received differently on different bodies. For example, the sartorial presentation in an image of a femme of colour wearing a prosthetic limb may be read as carrying a politics of race and ability particularly when outnumbered by images of white, able-bodied femmes. This is not to say that within many of these blogs, especially the more political ones, this reading might not be welcome, but it will certainly serve to tokenize particular bodies.

The analysis takes a particular kind of semiotic approach that focuses on fashion and image, and considers sartorial symbolism. Of the three trends in femme fashion on *Tumblr*, Hard Femme is expressed as tough, non-normative or witchlike femininity. I identified Hard Femme style on subjects in strong, confrontational positions, wearing gender non-conforming elements mixed with traditional femininity (stilettos with metal

spikes). Witch costumes, dark ornate tattoos, dark make-up and patterns or graphics of skeletons, knives, blood and profanity were common 'hard' aesthetics. High Femme is expressed through volume and hyperbole. High Femme camp manifests as larger-than-life platform shoes, big hair, bright colours, food graphics (cupcakes, cherries, hamburgers) and otherwise symbols of excess or loud ornamentation. Vintage Femme is expressed through re-appropriating traditional feminine styles and garments, typically with a vintage reference. Vintage references were divided starkly between burlesque cheesecake (pin-up) fashion comprised of lingerie and thick make-up, and '50s middle-class feminine propriety signaled by lace, pastels and modest necklines. With each analysis, I will consider how discursive sartorial constructions of authenticity are informed by gender performativity, queer temporalities and femme-ininities created at intersections of race, class, and body size. All observations are made from my own perspective, and it must be considered that the ways in which images are perceived on *Tumblr* will depend on a variety of personal and contextual factors pertaining to each viewer's experience.

## **5.1. Hard Femme**

Hard Femmes appear to present a tough sartorial exterior as an indication of experiential knowledge and identity creation and awareness. There is also a sense of apathy evident in many images of Hard Femme dress, which is countered by the apparent effort taken to construct a hard style.

**Figure 5.1. Hard Femme**



*Andre J. Standard East*; image by Julia Chesky; used with permission.  
<http://blackberryvision.tumblr.com>

I will use the gender-neutral pronouns they and their to describe this subject, as their preferred pronoun was not indicated and cannot be assumed. The subject in this image has their back to the camera, glancing back only to flip their hair over their shoulder. Holding a cigarette daintily between thumb and forefinger, they exhale between puffs. They lean on a railing, looking out over a bright sky and city skyline, basking in sun and breeze. Their eyes, glancing back, sit just above the silhouette of a far-off building. Their position suggests they are effortlessly above the city, and on top of the world.

Contrast is used as an important representational element in a number of ways in this image. Contrasting the relaxed position, the subject is bound in leather strapping with silver buckles and tight black pants. They are relaxed in their sartorial confinement, enjoying the cigarette that appears as an extension of the leather straps attached to their forearm, traveling to their wrist and diverging in five directions to cover their fingers. The subject is fashioned and photographed androgynously. Their muscular arm obstructs their chest in a feminine pose, directing the viewer's gaze to their cigarette and leather

fingers. Their long, dark hair is a feminine contrast to a full-grown scruffy beard on their chin. Despite the quantity and unruliness of their hair, they appear clean cut.

The sartorial reference to leather culture emphasizes the gender ambiguity of the subject. In "Layers of Leather: The Identity Formation of Leathermen as a Process of Transforming Meanings of Masculinity," Mosher et al detail the results from a series of interviews with leathermen about their experiences in leather subcultures. In this article, participants describe leather as a masculine symbol and a sartorial strategy of resisting the heteronormative assumption that gay men are effeminate (Mosher et al, 114). The subject in the above image will not be bound by assumptions about gender norms, and appears to claim leather as part of a politics of gender ambiguity that refuses normativity. The subject's costume hinders stereotypes about race, masculinity and sexuality, and in this way, they refuse marginalization based on these social categories by sartorially asserting their queerness.

The subject is relaxed, but in motion on top of a city backdrop in the middle of the day. Stressful activity is presumed to be occurring in the city below, but the skyline is stagnant and distant, while the queer subject is in motion and stress-free in their peripheral position. The subject appears amused, rather than confrontational, somewhat disinterested in the viewer, and aware of their bondage but not restrained by it.

The Hard Femme style often signals persistence, confrontation and continual movement. Identity and body politics are typically reflected in this aesthetic. In "Gonna Get My Girl Body Back: This is a Work in Progress", Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's description of her relationship with dress shows how dress can be used to mask vulnerability among other traits traditionally associated with femininity. "I have silk and lace slippers, platform boots, charcoal silver and lavender glitter eyeshadow sticks... I have indigo vintage jeans, fake leopard print furry platform flip-flops, turquoise glitter nail polish, cocoa butter shining brown legs, a panther jacket and a fake sheepskin furry '70s winter coat... Who [this compilation of garments] turns out is not just the mother of destruction and change, but the mama of sexual power" (Rose and Camilleri, 41). Hard Femme confronts pain and injustice and presents a reimagining of self by donning armour for the fight against oppression. In this way, Hard Femme exposes the race, class and ability privilege requirements of traditional feminine costume. Hard

Femme illustrates a femme-ininity that is reflective of experiences. This style expresses these experiences while celebrating femininity. Rather than denying the feminine self, femininity is rewritten and new versions of authenticity are created.

In a piece by T.J. Bryan called "It Takes Ballz: Reflections of a Black Attitudinal Femme Vixen in tha Makin'," the Hard Femme theme of the unfinished business of becoming surfaces again. "In tha makin'" and "work in progress" indicate dissatisfaction with present social, cultural or political conditions and call for persistent activism. Bryan asserts, "We, Black femmes, can often be masculin(ized) - automatically viewed, treated and cruised as butches" (147). In this piece, Bryan is critical of the way in which black femmes have been affected by the dominant whiteness of the queer movement. She details her journey through black femme-ness, mentioning her androgynous phase in dress, followed by "fierce, wannabe, Continental African/Carribbean Queen wear" during a time when she was engaged with radical black separatist social circles, then,

into white, queer space... Not enticed into colored'n'colonized stupidity. Merely drawn closer by curiosity. And the reason? An explosion of queer thought that is redefining widely held notions of sexuality and questioning configurations of gender – male/female, Butch/Femme, Trans, and all the spaces beyond and/or in between. This promises to be a succulently transgressive body, mind, and soul experience that I refuse to pass up.

(Rose and Camilleri, 157)

This social transition required change but never stopped Bryan from being critical of the historical foundation of white supremacy the queer movement persists upon. As Jewelle Gomez writes in Sally Munt's anthology *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender*, "Femmes are white, blacks are butches. The explicit racism and sexism in this stereotype persists in every lesbian community. It is a defamatory extension of the sexual stereotyping of both African-Americans and of white women" (107). Hard Femme resists racism and sexism through dress by presenting femme-ininity as a transformation from traditional mainstream feminine expression to an expression more accurately reflective of femme experience.

Femme-ininity requires cultural engagement paired with a critical outlook, and constant self-reflexivity. This is identity territory that mandates comfort with ambiguity.

Race is implicated in femme gender in a way that forces the recognition that no queer social position reflects an isolated gender or sexuality. Femmes of colour have to fight for their femme-ininity in ways specific to race and in response to colonialism and whiteness. A femme sartorial framework facilitates resistive politics for taking back power, and controlling representation. For this reason, hard femme is an aesthetic that is thoroughly utilized by femmes whose queerness is implicated by race, among other intersections like class and ability. Hard Femme aesthetics require processes of consumption and adornment that differ significantly from those of Vintage Femme style, which appear to be taken up primarily by white, middle-class femmes. Dahl's suggestion to move from a sartorial politics of visibility to considerations of consumption and adornment resonates with my observations of Hard Femme style. This style is not only about presenting as visibly queer, it is most significantly about signaling resilience built from hardship, and determination to fight against oppressive social and political forces.

## 5.2. High Femme

**Figure 5.2.** *High Femme*



*Hayley's Dressing up Box*; used with permission.  
<http://misshayleybee.tumblr.com>

In this image, the subject presents her outfit, posing in a curtsy. Holding her dress out to show the pattern, she dares the viewer to take her in. Her body position in relation to the camera implies that she is staring into the lens, although her heart-shaped sunglasses obstruct our seeing where she is looking. Her facial expression asserts an indignant pout, which seems somewhat contradictory to her otherwise bright and cheerful outfit.

According to Ian Paterson, author of *Dictionary of Colour: A Lexicon of the Language of Colour*, red is “an indicator of danger and a symbol of courage as well as revenge... In English folklore red represents good luck, health and happiness although it is also associated with the devil and blood and as an evil omen.” These contradictory meanings associated with the colour red are reflected in the subject’s dress and position. Red is recurring in her hair, cardigan, sunglasses, lipstick, shoes and dress pattern. Her heart-shaped eyes and pouting lips suggest this colour signifies love, happiness or playfulness, but her position and facial expression suggests that red signifies boldness and courage. Her position signals a vengeful challenge to traditional femininity, while her body and dress suggest abundance and joy.

Her curve-enhancing frock patterned plentifully in desserts draws the focus as she assertively emphasizes the fullness of her skirt. This engagement with the dress suggests pride in excess and pleasure, and signifies her right to take up space. High femme is portrayed in this image through the sartorial themes of excess, volume and hyperbolic femininity. The heart-shaped glasses and red lips are symbols of traditional feminine seduction. Her gender performance is conscious in the way in which she presents her dress. Authenticity is called into question in the way the colour red is used to emphasize her hair as an accessory similar to shoes, sunglasses and make-up, as elements of feminine artifice that blur the lines between real and fake. The pattern of illustrated desserts on her dress carry a message about authenticity in the sense that the portrayal of a large quantity of indulgent food spread over a voluptuous body says, ‘you are what you eat,’ and also, ‘eat me.’ She adorns herself knowingly with elements for consumption, ironically presenting herself as a product to be consumed. The way she holds her skirt out beyond the frame of her body exclaims her sartorialism expresses more than her body, and there is no limit to her indulgence in and through femininity. The dessert-patterned frock also signals what Abi Slone calls “fat drag”: “That’s right, I

said fat drag. I like to dress in a way that plays with what a fat girl is and isn't supposed to wear. This includes dresses with huge horizontal stripes and tight, brightly-colored cardigans that strain to keep one button done up." (Rose and Camilleri, 107) Sartorial references to food and sweets are plentiful on femme *Tumblrs*, perhaps as "fat drag" in resistance to fatphobia in mainstream fashion and media. This image presents an assertion that the truth of the subject relies on her ability to create and control what the viewer sees.

It is critical to recognize the implications of class apparent in the High Femme style. Donning this style requires certain access to the excessive material elements comprising this parody of femininity. It is probable that subjects donning High Femme style have considerable class privilege, however, online representations often do not belong to the blogger who shares them. This is part of how *Tumblr* facilitates fantasy and self-presentation, while it cannot be said to have direct connections to the material social world.

Discourses expressing femme-ininity often utilize postmodern sartorial practices of camp, irony and masquerade as a way of parodying the concept of authenticity. In a sense, the conscious costume of camp can be considered a confession of queerness that does not adhere to societal mandates of authentic identity, but exposes the ideological construction of authenticity itself. Bobby Noble explores femme camp as a performance medium through which to negotiate the gaze. He writes that feminism and queer theory have neglected queer femininity, "the former dismissing her potential while the latter folds her signifiers into pure artifice." (102) Noble proposes that femmes may utilize masquerade as a method of negotiating the gaze toward resisting traditional femininity. He explains how femme gender parody utilizes the processes of camp through hyperbole to resignify traditional feminine accoutrements. "Irony has functioned in queer contexts as a form of camp, a critical reading and performance strategy.... camp describes a body of practices and strategies, including cross-dressing, drag, and ironic resignification, to resist biological and sexual essentialism about gender and sexuality as natural." (108)

High Femme utilizes the irony and hyperbole of camp and masquerade to play out various aspects of feminine experience while also problematizing essentialist gender identification and re-articulating performance as authentic. Tseelon writes,

Masquerade is simultaneously an analytic and a critical tool...As an analytic category, it is a 'technology of identity' that deals with literal and metaphorical covering for ends as varied as concealing, revealing, highlighting, protesting, protecting, creating a space from where one can play out desires, fears, conventions and social practices. As a critical subversive strategy it mocks and destabilizes habitual positions and assumptions, transgressing rules of hierarchy and order. (108)

High Femme works well in photographic representation on *Tumblr*, as the layering of representational mediums works to repeatedly reframe the 'truth' of the captured subject. That said, there is very little explicit discussion about the parody of femininity, which begs the question, how seriously is the work of gender parody treated in these spaces?

Camp as ironic performance is a useful sartorial strategy that is recurring as a femme fashion statement on *Tumblr*. In the last couple of decades, the concept of camp and gender performance has been reiterated and misrepresented in its popularity. Citing Judith Butler in "How Does She Look?" Rebecca Ann Rugg writes,

It all sounds like a bad reading of Judith Butler that has become so familiar that Butler herself had to go back and clarify what she meant about performativity, 'if I were to argue that genders are performative, that could mean that I thought that one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day and then restored the garment to its place at night. Such a willful and instrumental subject, one who decides on its gender, is clearly not its gender from the start and fails to realize that its existence is already decided by gender' (Butler, 1993). (Harris and Crocker, 187)

It is apparent that combining postmodern theory with life on the postmodern landscape can result in gender parodies that sever gender from sex and social construction from biology, forgetting the ways in which these concepts are connected and codependent in profound ways. Butler's theory of performativity (1990) asserts that irony may be willful and instrumental, but gender is not. Enacting camp in images posted on queer blogs rightfully mocks the social construction of gender as authentic, and is

perhaps even more effective than live camp, as the technology of the medium suggests a removal from traditional notions of truth. However, it is less clear how camp exposes the profound ways in which we assume gender to be innate as a result of being conditioned into a gendered semiotic system from birth. As Butler contends, the body does not pre-date culture, responding to cultural signification, rather it is part of the processes of inscription. Online representations of High Femme offer new authenticities, but they do not acknowledge the possibility of a definition of authenticity that is not intrinsic or willful, but rather embedded in personal experience, history and culture. Unlike the Hard Femme style, High Femme appears to cut ties with personal histories, while re-inventing the present.

### 5.3. Vintage Femme

*Figure 5.3. Vintage Femme*



Shameless Photography; image by Sophie Spinelle; used with permission.  
<http://www.shamelessphoto.com>

Here, I will refer to the masculine subject with gender neutral pronouns they and their, as they are not identified as butch or trans. This image pictures a butch or trans/femme couple dressed in vintage styles referencing the 1950s, posed in an

intimate embrace, staring into one another's eyes. The photograph is black and white, and the subjects are presented as a monogamous couple. The representational and sartorial styles suggest traditionalism. Specifically, the femme subject is wearing a dark, V-neck, short-sleeved dress, forming an hourglass figure with a light belt that accentuates the waist. She wears heavy make-up, a double string of pearls, a beaded bracelet and a large flower pinned in a short, feminine hairstyle.

Her stance is assertive, passionate and confident, with one hand on her partner's face, and the other supporting their back. Her position and attire suggest she occupies a femme role in this relationship that differs from a traditional femininity in her apparent control over herself and assertion of her desire for her partner that does not rely on their permission. Clarity and sureness is evoked in this image. The way in which this couple is gendered is emphasized through dress and bodily position in a way that acknowledges gender as a binary of roles through which to express sexuality and engage in a recognized dynamic of sexual desire.

The Vintage Femme costume appears strategic and elaborate, but still fashionable by today's standards. Both subjects are white, and their costumes reference middle-class aesthetics from the fifties. Is the move toward vintage in lesbian online communities politically problematic or subversive? Is it used to legitimize lesbian expression in normative terms or is it a reappropriation that transforms normative terms into queer terms? How does femme vintage operate as a discourse of authenticity, queer time and performance?

The archetype of the working-class, femme prostitute is commonly called upon in lesbian narrative history up to 2011 (Nestle, 1992; Davis and Kennedy, 1993; Rose and Camilleri, 2002; Coyote and Sharman, 2011), however sartorial references seen on femme blogs frequently glamorize mid-century lesbian styles in butch and femme gender parodies. I am interested in this taking up of vintage fashion for subversive purposes, but it is problematic that the sartorial reference to white, heterosexual, middle-class aesthetics is not evidenced to have existed in lesbian communities in the 1950s. The butch/femme vintage sartorialism portrayed on *Tumblr* appears to emerge as gender parody resulting from access to post-secondary education in postmodern feminist and queer theory. I am concerned that despite subversive intentions, the images are created

from social positions and spaces far removed from the original lives, identities and aesthetics experienced within working class butch/femme communities of the 1950s.

In *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities*, Freeman identifies turning back, or “pastness”, as a “hallmark of queer affect” (39).

This stubborn lingering of pastness (whether it appears as anachronistic style, as the reappearance of bygone events in the symptom, or as arrested development) is a hallmark of queer affect: a “revolution” in the old sense of the word, as a turning back. Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward*, for instance, astutely diagnoses the “backwards” emotions elaborated by artists for whom the birth of the modern homosexual identity-form was constraining rather than liberating: shame, passivity, melancholy, and recoil, to name but a few, were ways of refusing the progressive logic by which becoming ever more visible was correlated with achieving ever more freedom. (Freeman, 39)

If Vintage Femme is a way of turning back, it is necessary to consider implications of historical context. Visibility as a political strategy is rooted in modernism. In the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the “birth of the modern homosexual identity-form” was taken as a route to liberation for some. Visibility of this identity-form became important to queer activism, and persists as a political priority today. In a postmodern context, turning backwards may continue to function as a resistance to this kind of progress that is defined by mainstream societal values. In the case of fashion politics, visibility may be reworked through temporal frames so that it serves to stand for a queering of lifestyle rather than identity. Visibility remains an important political strategy, but must be used as a means toward negotiating expressions of queer experience.

I consider vintage lesbian fashion an expression of backwardness, although it is significant that mainstream fashion simultaneously celebrates vintage aesthetics, and this trend cannot be read as distinctly queer. This style appears to be uncritical of the moment it is referencing. While Hard Femme style signals forward movement, perseverance and change, Vintage Femme style is either nostalgic, or seeking to revise a dangerous and painful past in lesbian history through irony. This revisionist vintage may be politically useful, but as Noble points out, irony works well through camp or masquerade, and it is increasingly difficult to see butch/femme vintage as camp while vintage is fashionable in the mainstream. Further, it is significant that the representations

I analyzed carried distinct and exclusive race and class implications. Vintage Femme style typically cites middle-class, white, heterosexual femininity from the 1950s, forgetting particular narrative histories, for example of mid-century, working-class butch/femme bar cultures.

Vintage Femme style may be an expression of nostalgia for the 'golden era' of the 1950s, which is often considered a simpler time, free from the complexities of postmodern life. The clear gender roles apparent in the sartorial reference to white, middle-class and heterosexual styles in the '50s may provide solace for a femme who finds herself frustrated with the perpetual negotiations and conversations she faces about her sexuality. Una Troubridge said it best when she exclaimed to her partner Radclyffe Hall, the author of the famed lesbian novel, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), that she was glad to go public about her lesbianism upon the publication of the novel, because she was "sick to death of ambiguities." Joan Nestle has since cited Troubridge, "Troubridge's cry, 'I am sick of ambiguities' could become a femme's motto" (1992:144). Perhaps Vintage Femme style is a sartorial articulation of the desire to resolve the ambiguous discourses through which femmes navigate their lives, loves and selves on a daily basis.

Cheesecake fashion and photography can also be considered a prominent Vintage Femme style. As I introduced earlier, cheesecake pin-up aesthetics opposed white, middle-class propriety in the 1940s, and as such, align with narratives describing a femme sensibility to act and dress against societal mandates for femininity. Within a contemporary social context, and particularly on femme *Tumblr* blogs, pin-up fashion may serve to revise the historical heterosexual association of cheesecake toward queering femininity. However, at a time when pin-up fashions from the '40s are modest when compared with contemporary 'smut', this form of Vintage Femme style fits comfortably into the realm of traditional feminine propriety. Further, producing vintage pin-up photography is a serious and lucrative business due to the recent mainstream fashionability of this style, and acquiring this fashion, as well as the photographic frames through which to communicate a vintage reference is inaccessible to many femmes. In the case that these images are shared and posted to *Tumblr* for decoration and with no intention of assuming this style offline, the representation still celebrates a distinctly middle-class trend.

Dahl identifies the word 'authentic' to mean (in a sartorial context), "manufactured in the 1950s" (57). She considers how race and class are implicated within vintage sartorial aesthetics popular in queer sub-cultural style and contemporary mainstream fashion.

I have come to see that it is particularly, though not exclusively, in white-dominated cultural formations that this particular performative is invoked. Does this... reflect a yearning for pre-gay liberation times of that highly stylized butch-femme public culture (Kennedy & Davis 1993)? Is it campily citing and reworking a racist and heterosexist era and if so, is this because, as Reina Lewis (2006:2) put it, postmodernism has taught us that not only lipstick but all feminine technologies now operate through irony? (Dahl, 57)

The concept of authenticity carries connotations of race and class when aligned with the 1950s. Postmodern parody of '50s fashion may use irony as a sartorial strategy, but it is significant that white, educated lesbians predominantly assume this aesthetic and that middle-class heteronormative style is evoked. While reframing authenticity, this style also references its traditional definition.

Dahl discusses how authenticity has been thought to exist beneath feminine artifice and has assumed a visual association with masculinity and practicality since Joan Riviere's "Womanliness as Masquerade" (1929). To revise these sartorial and visual associations within which this definition of authenticity is embedded, I propose Dahl's desire to move beyond considerations of what constitutes emancipation (which commonly present subversion in terms of visibility) toward issues of consumption and adornment should involve thinking about femme dress and subjectivities through femme temporalities to consider the political, social and contextual negotiations involved in femme beauty routines. Using femme temporality to articulate how authenticity may be engaged with artifice, rather than opposed to it, complicates this binary (authentic/artificial) on which discourses of gender rely. Conversations about sartorial femme temporality necessarily incorporate visibility, but frame visibility in a way that acknowledges intersectional social positions, complex personal and cultural histories, and processes of becoming and presenting.

Halberstam (2005) explains queer temporality as reflecting lifestyles that shift and oppose heteronormative styles of living. This concept moves the focus around which to organize life and self away from a concept of identity that is fixed in temporal rhythms set by the broader culture. For cis-gendered femmes, visibility does not typically determine our queerness or set our queer schedule. Rather, our queer desires and experiences define us as sexually non-normative. It is this non-normative desire that queers the ways in which we move through the world, the interactions we experience and our processes of sartorial consumption and adornment. If subversion is considered in temporal terms, details of sexual desire can emerge with relevance to femme dress.

The gravitation to the gendered extreme of the Vintage Femme style exhibits a postmodern gender consciousness, as well as a signal of sexual desire for queer masculinities. By dressing in vintage femme, femmes indicate a consciousness and possibly ironic confrontation of gender as artifice, while also acknowledging this temporal sartorial moment as eroticized in its gender extremes, from a contemporary context wherein fashion involves increased gender diversity. Discussing the results of a survey conducted on gender identifications and experiences of lesbians in the United States, Levitt et al wrote, “gender expression was more important to butch and femme-identified women than androgynous or “other” women when forming romantic relationships” (2005, 101). I posit that vintage is pleasurable as a butch/femme sartorial expression of lesbian identity because it makes visible, and so also heightens the erotic exchange of difference between partners. In a recorded conversation between three femmes called “The Femme Tapes” (Nestle, 1992), Madeline Davis says, “There’s something kind of theatrical about being femme. It is not at all phony, but it seems like we learn to heighten our differences and create settings” (Nestle, 1992: 265). As Butler contends, “In both butch and femme identities the very notion of an original or natural identity is put into question; indeed, it is precisely that question as it is embodied in these identities that becomes one source of their erotic significance” (1990, 123).

#### **5.4. Dressing for Desire: Sexual Silences on Tumblr**

The inquiry that initially propelled my research asked how femmes dress for a butch gaze, historically and contemporarily. I have learned that queer *Tumblr* blogs are

organized around gender identity, regardless of specific sexual desires that may accompany or correlate to gender. It seems like spaces designated for queer identities among certain other oppressed identities are acceptable and welcomed (“fuck yeah brown butches”, “queer fat femme guide to the net”), but identities organized around sexual desire are not considered to comprise a collective experience. This indicates that it is generally assumed in these queer spaces that desiring queer masculinities from a femme gender should not be isolated from other manifestations of femme desires, including sartorial expressions. Based on my reading of the literature, I believe there should be discursive spaces to facilitate the organization of specific femme desires, including femmes desiring queer masculinities. This may not be a popular idea based on the evidence in blogs and recent queer literature that many femme individuals have diverse and fluid sexualities and may never define themselves by such a singular desire. I do not intend to propose that all femmes desiring queer masculinities desire the same masculinities or engage in the same sexual acts, lifestyles or practices. However, it is my belief and experience that femmes desiring queer masculinities are perpetually engaged in social negotiations (conversations, debates, confrontations) relating to their femininity and their desire for queer masculinities. My research on butch and femme historical narratives has also revealed that femmes desiring queer masculinities exist as sexual subjects within a very specific sexual dynamic that relies on the hyphen or slash in butch/femme. The results of the study by Levitt et al support my thinking, writing about femmes in butch/femme relationships,

This wish to be admired was not described by participants as connected to a lack of self-esteem, but, rather, as a desire to exchange sexual energy. It was through signaling a mutual recognition of gender difference that a sexual appreciation and tension was built... By offering themselves as objects for butch gaze alone, femme women took control of their status as such... It took a social foundation of equality and a shared valuing of the courage to relinquish the position of the viewer to elect to be the object of another’s gaze. (Levitt, et al. 112)

In “What We’re Rollin’ Around in Bed With: Sexual Silences in Feminism” Hollibaugh and Moraga write, “In terms of sexual issues, it seems feminism has fallen short of its original intent. The whole notion of “the personal is political” which surfaced in the early part of the movement... is suddenly and ironically dismissed when we begin to discuss sexuality... This most privatized aspect of ourselves, our sex lives, has dead-

ended into silence within the feminist movement” (Nestle, 1992: 242). Femme *Tumblr* blogs often cite feminist and queer political engagement or awareness to facilitate explicit sexual representation, but they cannot be said to facilitate discussions about sexual desire as an aspect of queerness that determines the ways in which one moves through the world as a social and political subject. The representations found on femme *Tumblr* blogs are presented as sartorial responses to various queer femme gender identities.

*Tumblr* reveals a trend to erase the co-dependence of butch and femme lesbian identities, which has resulted in prioritizing femme genders over femme desires. I do not disagree that femme identities are diverse and often independent of butch identities. However, I feel that this severance works through a neo-liberal framework valuing individualism to erase femme identifications that are formed around specific sexual desires, and to ignore the ways in which gender and sexuality interact.

## 6. Conclusions

*Tumblr* functions primarily through visual currency, and this bears influence on the messages conveyed in this online space. Images are posted by bloggers to express desires, gender identities, sartorial styles, beliefs, values and interests that describe them, or more specifically, who they wish to be. On blogs expressing femme identity and/or style, typically images are chosen for visual and political effect, prioritizing unique aesthetics, creative sartorial ideas and interesting versions of queer femininity. Despite the way in which images are shared and reblogged to connect the blogging community, individuality is highly valued in this space, in terms of bloggers differentiating themselves from each other, and photographed subjects and dress standing out from neighbouring images. Independence is valued implicitly in the structure and organization of the *Tumblr* blog form. Posted photographs typically feature single subjects, *Tumblr* accounts are typically run by lone individuals, and the blog typically serves as an online representative of oneself. The blog form supports the concept that experience solidifies around a

written subject. The microblog form suggests that this experience can be predominantly expressed in visual language.

Theories about queer temporality and gender performativity problematize the prioritization of visibility in contemporary queer activism. Lesbian and queer history has focused on sartorial expressions of gender to gain political solidarity and to signal subversion. These histories are important, but should be critically reflected upon, especially in consideration for how particular discourses perpetuate ideologies that may be increasingly problematic as time goes by. Visibility is important to LGBTTTQQ2SIP activism, but was likely more useful in decades past when scientific classification, for example, was utilized as a method for community building and political organizing. In a postmodern context, visibility through sartorialism is more difficult to come by than in the past. Sartorial styles referencing historical moments or political statements are consistently layered, co-opted and misconstrued. Contemporarily, visible sartorial aesthetics cannot solely represent a queer movement without considering temporalities and lifestyles that are queered in personal and contextual ways. *Tumblr* does not function to facilitate this reflection, because it prioritizes visibility and gender presentation in a way that disconnects queer representation and sartorialism from other critical factors defining queerness and impacting social lifestyle and politics.

Social constructivism continues to be celebrated through representations portraying gender parody. Unlike Eves' interview subjects, the representational expressions on *Tumblr* reveal that authenticity is refuted as essentialist in this space. Rather, an authentic expression of gender recognizes that gender is socially constructed. At times, the treatment of gender as willful costume erases the ways in which subjects are created through social interactions and experiences. This may facilitate self-invention to certain benefit, but may also prevent a willingness to acknowledge the ways in which everyone is necessarily implicated in social scripts that correlate biological sex to gender expression. Authenticity is re-invented to reclaim feminine artifice on these femme blogs, but *Tumblr* adversely frames authenticity as congealing around a fixed subject. As such, the meaning of authenticity is contested in this medium.

It is my belief that non-normative expressions of sexuality are the fundamental organizing factor of LGBTTTQQ2SIP politics, and that discussions about how desire organizes experience are critical for the growth of this movement. Insofar as sexuality is an intersection of identity alongside gender, race, class, ability and age, the ways in which sexual desire influences subject positions and experiences cannot be disregarded. I think that the Internet has the potential to facilitate interactions that serve to validate queer desires and connect these desires with sartorial statements. This connection between desire and sartorialism is important because explicitly associating sartorial expression to gender alone, as I have seen on *Tumblr*, serves to silence sexuality and streamline queer sexual experiences. The online medium, the photographic medium and the sartorial medium work together constructively, but when these representative frames organize queer discourse around gender expression, and treat sexual desire and gender as disconnected, like on *Tumblr*, experiences of desire will continue to be presented as secondary to experiences of gender.

When organizing queerness under a gender category and sartorial presentation, gender serves as the indicator of queerness, rather than sexual desire. If there were femme representations organized by this specific queer desire, we might begin to see how gender, sartorial presentation and sexuality correlate in particular ways on the femme. We may also begin to draw out commonalities in femme experience that would serve to facilitate conversations toward gaining broader understanding among femmes and the queer community in general with regard for sexuality, gender and sartorial expression. On *Tumblr*, it is difficult to analyze how femmes desiring queer masculinities, for example, might dress to reflect this desire, as this desire is not explicit or treated as significant to femme identification.

High Femme and Hard Femme styles function to express independent femme queerness through aggressive and ironic or exaggerated femininities, while Vintage Femme is more often used in representations of monogamous butch or trans/femme couples. When donned by a femme who desires butches or transguys, vintage fashion announces a particularly gendered sexual desire because it represents a return to stark gender divisions in fashion and life. This style serves to emphasize the masculinity of one's partner, which may regularly endure societal speculation. At the same time, Vintage Femme is an exclamation of one's own desire for queer masculinity and the

desire to be feminine through conscious, hyperbolic (in this case, vintage) femininity. Unlike Hard Femme and High Femme, Vintage Femme is typically represented as part of a binary gendered couple. Although hyperbolic, Vintage Femme style is also normatively fashionable in its use of vintage feminine aesthetics from the '50s, as this has been taken up recently as a mainstream fashion trend. Without her queer masculine counterpart, the Vintage Femme may be lost among fashionable straight women more easily than Hard or High Femmes. Based on my experience of being femme and observations of femme fashion on *Tumblr*, I recognize that emphasizing traditional femininity with Vintage Femme style when with a queer masculine partner and donning a style more in line with High or Hard Femme when alone is a femme sartorial strategy affording her visibility in certain contexts. *Tumblr* is useful for expressing these sartorial experiences in the form of visually representing the finished product, but it does not facilitate conversations (visual or textual) about temporal and contextual negotiations that comprise daily femme experiences.

As Frischer points out, language is established for communication across community borders (Fritscher, 2). It is imperative in creating language through which to articulate our identities, that we are aware of the sartorial references and discursive mediums through which we represent ourselves. The language through which I can describe my identity is insufficient when it requires a lengthy explanation of whom and what it is that I specifically desire because those desires are regularly rejected and ignored. The treatment of gender as independent from sex on *Tumblr* is in line with recent lesbian literature resisting a tradition of conveying femme as dependent on butch. I agree that this movement is necessary, but we should not forget the ways in which our genders impact our sexualities, and how our desires affect the rhythms of our lives. I am also inclined to believe my perpetual struggle to explain myself is the result of a widespread negligence within our communities and beyond to admit, let alone celebrate queer desires for non-normatively gendered subjects, and the historical negligence of feminine subjectivities in general. In "A Coincidence of Lipstick and Self-Revelation" Katherine Millersdaughter writes:

Those of us who call ourselves femme have varying needs for the languages of femininity, masculinity and lesbianism in the expressive production of our identities. I am always and consciously engrossed in a whittling away at the available languages of gender and sexuality, tracing

and re-tracing the unpredictable contours of the individual and collective  
femme. (Harris and Crocker, 121)

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**2.**

**Smoking Hot Dykes:**

**Smoking Imagery and Lesbian Style on *Tumblr***

# 1. Introduction

The cigarette is a social symbol and sartorial accessory that has assumed an archetypal status within western cultural narratives. For western women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the act of smoking is embedded in a political history that has influenced social meanings associated with sexuality, womanhood and normativity. The role of smoking in lesbian sartorial presentation and identification has relied upon the visual culture of fashion and advertising, as well as diagnostic narratives issued by public health authorities throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. These institutional voices have defined normativity, and in so doing, have worked to 'other' non-normative identities, but they have also played an important role in writing the queer body into social, cultural and political narratives. This paper will assess the relationship between smoking, lesbian style, and online representation to illustrate the role of the cigarette in negotiating fashionable queerness on *Tumblr*.

In an article called "How Does She Look?" (1997) Rebecca Ann Rugg introduces a particular lesbian sartorial identification she calls the pomo dyke (184). Rugg explains the pomo dyke as a contemporary lesbian who's sartorial presentation opposes contemporary expressions of femme-ininity and lesbian chic, and who typically self-identifies as a 'queer dyke'. The pomo dyke accessorizes in piercings and tattoos rather than lipstick and high heels. Rugg explains the pomo dyke as "often into leather, owns a motorcycle, usually dates other pomo dykes" (184). The "pomo crowd" doesn't limit themselves "by taking gender/identity seriously" (186). The treatment of gender and identity as fluid and wilful is implied in a popular sartorial style worn by lesbians online. I have extended Rugg's definition for my own research based on experiential observations of this lesbian subcultural aesthetic that denies any association with femininity but also celebrates the woman-identified lesbian, producing what appears to be a lesbian hipster. What I have witnessed online are representations of a popular lesbian sartorial aesthetic that wears androgyny in a way that conjures Rugg's pomo dyke. It cannot be said with certainty how represented subjects identify explicitly, and identity must be differentiated from identity expression. This is a study of the social and political implications of sartorial representations as expressions of identity appearing on lesbian *Tumblr* blogs, rather than of particular lesbian identities and social or political

identifications. Dictionary.com defines 'hipster' as a term originating in the 1950s or '60s, "a person... characterized by a particularly strong sense of alienation from most established social activities and relationships." In a contemporary urban western setting, the hipster materializes as a subject that refuses certain aspects of mainstream culture while functioning within a significant consumer subculture. The sartorial aesthetic of the lesbian hipster (pomo dyke) includes the cigarette and the act of smoking in significant ways. It appears that the pomo dyke sartorial expression utilizes the cigarette as part of an aesthetic refusal of traditional gender categorization. Is this refusal an act of sartorial politics or is it more closely aligned with mainstream fashionability?

In this paper, I will look specifically at lesbian blogs hosted by the microblogging platform, *Tumblr* that depict images of the smoking pomo dyke. What does the cigarette contribute to the sartorial presentation and identity expression of the pomo dyke on lesbian blogs? To answer this question, I researched the origins of a relationship between cigarettes, fashion and lesbian identity, studied recent postmodern feminist and queer theories, reviewed literature about smoking and modernity, and conducted a qualitative analysis of imagery posted to lesbian blogs of the cigarette as a fashion accessory and smoking as a fashionable behaviour. I collected images of smoking subjects posted on eight lesbian blogs hosted by the microblogging platform, *Tumblr* between July and October 2012. I chose eight blogs organized around themes of contemporary lesbian style and identity expression reflecting what I identified as a pomo dyke aesthetic. Specifically, I took a particular semiotic approach with a sartorial focus to analyze images of subjects, fashion elements and text (image descriptions or comments) accompanying the images. The quantity of images I analyzed on each blog varied from six to thirty-two. I surveyed the selection of smoking images from each blog for sartorial details, treatment of the relationship between cigarette and subject and contextual factors affecting image interpretation (surrounding images/posts, for example), as well as cultural and political references. I have identified recurring themes in the representations of smoking pomo dykes, which I will discuss within a postmodern queer and intersectional feminist theoretical framework. Throughout the paper, I will raise a number of questions relating to my thematic observations with the intent to generate thought. Some questions will not be satisfied, and may contribute to continued study on this topic.

This paper addresses the intersection between fashionability and normativity as it materializes in the form of the cigarette as an accessory to lesbian style. I use the term normativity to reference a standard of normalcy perpetuated by mainstream social ideologies. The concept of normativity presents a paradox in the sense that contemporary western ideologies idealize individualism, and simultaneously encourage adherence to a uniform group ideal. Fashionability functions in relation to normativity. The social and culture prioritization of individualism allows a sexually non-normative subject to achieve fashionability when she is different in a way that maintains adherence to a majority of criteria comprising a normative standard. Pop cultural and institutional messages idealize a cis-gender, white, middle-class, thin, young and able body in representations of both normativity and fashionability. The pomo dyke style may be gender non-conforming, but it also adheres to a sartorial standard governing fashionable individuality which accounts for race, class, ability, size and age. The investment of pathological and mainstream marketing discourses in dictating and policing normativity requires the persistent diagnostic othering of bodies that deviate from normative social standards. Insofar as deviance is a form of asserting individuality however, to be deviant in particular ways has become fashionable. Androgyny is taken up as a postmodern lesbian fashion trend that achieves fashionable deviance through gender privilege. For example, when considered from the mainstream, androgynous style is less queer than cross-dressing or donning the costume of a sex worker.

On *Tumblr*, young, urban lesbians post images of smoking subjects donning the pomo dyke style. Smoking is depicted as part of the sartorial aesthetic, appearing in posted images alongside accessories like ear lobe spacers and tattoos. Although these images may connote certain counter cultural politics, the pomo dyke style is represented within a discursive space and an online community that promotes and perpetuates narcissism and individualism, which serve to oppose feminist and queer political engagement. This style articulates an investment in normativity through fashion that is uncritical of the broader authoritative discursive frameworks diagnosing queer smokers and facilitating the online community itself. The pomo dyke's relationship to fashionability, normativity and queerness is embedded in combative and complex institutional and historical discourses.

## 2. Medium: *Tumblr*

*Tumblr* is a corporation with marketing incentives. Blog authors using this corporate platform to voice political concerns and self-expressions run the risk of having their politics turned to product for profit. Creating an online queer subculture within a space like this is one example of how contemporary queer culture develops within heteronormative frames. On the one hand, this medium serves to connect queer expressions and identities, but on the other hand, these interactions are made visible and accessible to any Internet user and may ultimately be appropriated for use by initiatives that are exploitative. In David Kline's anthology, *Blog! How the Newest Media Revolution is Changing Politics, Business and Culture*, Christian Sarkar, a web marketing and design consultant speaks passionately about the authenticity of the medium, "Blogs are the voices of people – real people talking to each other about things they care about deeply, passionately, and even heroically. They're authentic" (Kline, 181). However, *Tumblr* may not have the interests of queer communities at heart, and it may not be recognized in the broader world of social media as an online space facilitating queer life.

In "The Digital Queer: Weblogs and Internet Identity", Julie Rak connects scholarly discourses likening blogging to diary writing with the history of identity discourses confessing deviant sexuality in the history of modern psychology (Rak, 166). "Confession, Foucault says, is the way in which sexual deviance and then sexuality itself became the focus of the developing sciences of the body (58–59)" (Rak, 169). Like confession, Rak writes, "The performance of blogging is based on the assumption that experience congeals around a subject, and makes a subject who can be written and read, even when the discourse that seems to support this subject threatens to undermine it. This is also true of sexuality when it is talked about as identity" (Rak, 166). Blog analysis requires critical thinking about neo-liberal discourses of identity that implicate individualist ideology. The frequent representation of fashionable lesbian smokers on *Tumblr* can be read as a form of confession. The images I analyzed appeared to confess numerous personal attributes, such as depression, lesbianism and experience of social adversity. These visual confessions served to situate a photographed subject as a queer or counter cultural protagonist. I will explore how

*Tumblr* facilitates this kind of confession through identity expression in the section on Themes.

The representational frames of dress, image and blog each add interpretive implications to the discursive equation. The blog is the third tier of representation when it is host to images of fashioned subjects. How is self-image negotiated through various and layered representational frames? Identification is an important aspect of participation in the blogosphere. “The reader of blogs is not just picking up bits and pieces of information; he or she is constantly testing out membership in a group, perhaps a very small group, of people who know the kind of thing the blogger is writing about” (Myers, 11). *Tumblr*, as a microblogging platform, is hidden behind layers of representation facilitating online communication, enabling corporate incentives to be camouflaged beneath queer positive messages.

A *YouTube* video called “What you need to know about Tumblr” presents a blogger’s assessment of social etiquette on *Tumblr*, claiming that this microblogging platform attracts an LGBTQ following. “If you’re homophobic, you’re probably not going to last long on this website, seeing as most people on Tumblr are either lesbian, gay or they support homosexuality. Just saying.” Item number six reads, “People vent on Tumblr.” She tells her viewers that they will notice people complaining about their lives on *Tumblr*, adding, “I guarantee within a week or so, you’re going to be complaining about yours.” She continues, “Most people on Tumblr are, in some way, shape or form, hipsters.” She concludes by saying that *Tumblr* will become a priority in your daily schedule because “Tumblr is life.” Apparently, it is understood that *Tumblr* is prominent in the daily lives of its users and within this community exists an audience for the complaints of depressed lesbian hipsters. Further, as a site hosting predominantly visual representation, *Tumblr* provides an element of fantasy to its users. *Tumblr* serves as a stage upon which young queer people can act as a protagonist in a fantasy version of their lives. The images posted in this space are thus expressions of sentiments that are not facilitated in their daily lives, and possibly also indicative of who they wish to be. The image analysis assesses representation as an element of identification, as distinct from identity.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

My study of smoking as a critical aspect of contemporary lesbian style follows Judith Halberstam's (2005) theory of queer time, Elizabeth Freeman's (2010) discussion of queer time, Volker Woltersdorff's (2011) discussion of sexual subcultures under neo-liberalism and Penny Tinkler's (2006) history of smoking, modernity and womanhood. I also use David Muggleton's (2000) discussion about the continuities between aesthetic modernity and postmodernity regarding subcultural postmodern style with reference to Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson.

In *Smoke Signals: Women, Smoking and Visual Culture*, Tinkler asserts that smoking imagery has historically indicated sexual and gender deviance among other rebellions, and has thus gained particular identity associations within discourses framing modernity and womanhood. Tinkler presents smoking as meaningful to modern womanhood through its representation in visual culture. Visual culture as a modern phenomenon worked to form female subjectivities throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. "Women became adept at using the significations of smoking not only to articulate identities, but to read others and to shape the meaning of social interactions. Smoking... was experienced most notably by many as a comfort and/or as a stimulant, but these purposes were inseparable from the visual significance of smoking" (11).

In his study of postmodern subcultural style, Muggleton proposes a distinction between enlightenment modernity and aesthetic modernity, positing that the latter has certain continuities with postmodernity, in terms of disorder, social movement and individual expression (35). His use of Baudrillard explains the dominance of visual culture as a product of aesthetic modernity. "Baudrillard (1983b) theorizes how 'information networks' and media proliferation have brought about a transition from an 'industrial order' of mass production to a society premised on the reproduction of signs and images (ibid.: 100) ...Whereas images once reflected and represented reality... the image now serves to distract us from the fact that there is no reality to which it seems to refer." (34) In an age where representation is reality, it is the responsibility of the postmodern consumer to invent herself. Muggleton writes,

Fashion and style have become correspondingly more heterogeneous (Kratz and Reimer 1998)...With the advent of 'specialized consumption' and 'market segmentation', 'lifestyle enclaves' are said to be losing their correspondence to, and indeed superseding as a basis for social stratification, modernist grids of class, gender, age and ethnicity (Evans and Thornton 1989; Mort 1989; Crook et al. 1992; Nixon 1992). 'Modernist styles', once firmly structured along these traditional lines of demarcation, become 'postmodernist codes' (Jameson 1991) available for the pleasure of the (apparently ironic, reflexive and knowing) postmodern consumers, who wish to construct their own identities through the wearing of 'stylistic masks' (Jameson 1985: 114). (39)

The pomo dyke style utilizes ironic knowledge toward her presentation of gender fluidity and class rebellion, as a way to signal a superiority that is based in whiteness, class, age and sexuality. The representations of this style on *Tumblr* are formulaic in elements of dress and photographic composition, presenting a uniform that references a sartorial history of lesbian gender expressions. In "From Fashion to Masquerade: Towards an Ungendered Paradigm," Efrat Tseëlon writes,

Camouflage...is a strategy used by a marginal, despised, discredited group wishing to remain invisible and unlabelled, and avoid rocking the boat. Another strategy, used by middle and upper-class women in the first third of the century, is one of open and public lesbian presentations of their chosen selves. It used a kind of elegant austerity (plain silk shirts, tailored suits, cropped hair, elegant tie pin), and an ideal of boyish slenderness to create an ambiguous cultural style. The point of those performances is not to flaunt a crude masquerade of manhood, but to advocate an alternative aesthetic. This is an example of ... an oppressed group ... choosing their own criteria to turn their ascribed inferior identity to an achieved superior one. (Body Dressing, Tseelon 111)

Similar to interwar lesbian style, the pomo dyke style signals proud lesbian identification as it requires a uniform comprised of very particular pieces. This style communicates the material superiority of the pomo dyke, a position that may be less easily achieved if this style required more critical political engagement. Interestingly, the pomo dyke uniform also works as camouflage on the postmodern landscape as it is often indistinguishable from the fashion of straight hipsters. In this way, the pomo dyke style positions its wearer safely between normativity and queerness, in the realm of fashionable deviance and wilful gender ambiguity.

The ways in which cigarettes are visually manipulated into stylish mannerisms and repeatedly disseminated are crucial to their social reception as fashionable. The blog medium is a neo-liberal discursive platform in its facilitation of subjective identification and expression. The pomo dyke style indicates a postmodern approach to sartorial expression that is carried out in modern and neo-liberal discursive frames. I will explain how the queer deviance of smoking and sexuality paired with sartorial and corporeal alliances with normativity establish the image of fashionable deviance. Through this sartorial gender performance, social ideologies implicating race, class, ability, age and body size are conveyed. In representations of pomo dykes on *Tumblr*, individualism, neo-liberalism and postmodern identity are entrenched in the photographed performance of fashionability.

The concept of sexual identity and the subsequent classification of homosexuality as well as heterosexuality occurred in the early 1890s. Before modern sexology, sexual desire was not categorized as such. (Katz, 1995; 32) This modern tradition of classifying sexuality persists today. It is steeped in essentialism, which although problematic, also facilitated opportunities for social rebellion and political organization. Keeping this in mind, I agree with Judith Halberstam's assertion in *In a Queer Time and Place*, that queer time provides a way of thinking about queerness that is separate from queer identity and its discursive relations to individualism. Considerations of queer time problematize the very discursive foundation upon which queer identity materializes. Time reflects the ways in which a subject moves through the world while refuting a process of identity classification that is grounded in essentialist discourses.

Halberstam (2005) distances queerness from sexual identity and situates it as a way of life that opposes "institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction... [and] develops according to other logics of location, movement, and identification" (1). In *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Elizabeth Freeman discusses queer temporalities as distinct from normative cultural rhythms citing Bourdieu, "subjectivity emerges in part through mastering the cultural norms of withholding, delay, surprise, pause, and knowing when to stop— through mastery over certain forms of time. In temporal manipulations that go beyond pure repetition, his work suggests, institutionally and culturally enforced rhythms, or timings, shape flesh into legible, acceptable

embodiment” (Freeman, 35). I will consider the ways in which the cigarette symbolizes queer time, while it also contributes to a politics of morality implied in public health literature on smoking in queer populations. My intention is to apply the concept of queer time beyond its original use to consider the subcultural style of pomo dyke representations on *Tumblr*. The term subjectivity is used here by Bourdieu to refer to participation in dominant cultural rhythms. I do not intend to problematize the cultural importance of subjectivity, rather my aim is to question how this concept is ideologically defined to assess its usefulness in queer terms.

Fashion, photographic imagery and blogs serve as mediums through which queerness is at once claimed and denied. Neo-liberal individualism is notable in the photographic and blog mediums as used by *Tumblr* bloggers in the sense that posted images typically depict single subjects, presented as protagonists within a space facilitating individual expression of identity, interests and style. My reading of representations of pomo dyke style reveals this style as a political disavowal. Although this style claims a political stance on gender and sexuality, and perhaps also reflects a desire for lesbian collectivity, it blatantly disregards potential sites of oppression, indicating an investment in normativity via fashionability. In “Paradoxes of Precarious Sexualities,” Volker Woltersdorff writes, “In neo-liberalism traditional gender roles have begun to falter without disappearing altogether. This leads to the fact that crossing traditional gender attributions is not only self-chosen, but also socially encouraged, sometimes even imposed. The fantasy of the fluidity of gender and the categorical imperative postulated by certain queer theorists... have therefore been criticized due to their facile compatibility with neo-liberal maxims (e.g. Ludwig 2006)” (172). The pomo dyke uniform signals autonomy over gender expression through a specific configuration of sartorial elements like a short or asymmetrical haircut with part of the head shaved, spacers or body art and a cigarette. An interesting cultural moment has arrived wherein postmodernism, neo-liberal individualism, lesbian and feminist politics, and fashion discourses amalgamate to announce that it is cool to be uncool, there is a socially acceptable way to be queer and leftist and that this is predominantly concerned with how we present ourselves as visual images on a social stage.

This paper addresses three questions. One, when did smoking become part of the lesbian’s costume? Two, how does smoking as an element of pomo dyke style

signify fashionable deviance through social privilege (race, class, body size and gender), queer time and neo-liberal individualism? Finally, what is the role of the photographic and blog mediums in normalizing the fashionable lesbian subject and fashioning the smoking lesbian subject? More questions specifically pertaining to the analysis of blogs will be listed in the section on Methodology.

## 4. Historical Context

In *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture*, Laura Doan charts the convergence of the sartorial construction of the New Woman and the aesthetic emergence of the ‘mannish’ lesbian. Doan explains that the obscenity trial of Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) was the pinnacle moment of societal recognition of a relationship between masculine fashion and lesbian identity. Photographs of Radclyffe Hall framed to accentuate her masculine fashions as visual evidence to her sexuality were widely circulated.

Penny Tinkler notes that the smoking lesbian had a sexological connotation in the late nineteenth century: “Havelock Ellis had, in 1897, written that lesbians ‘frequently’ had ‘a pronounced taste for smoking cigarettes’ and ‘a decided taste and toleration for cigars’... The Sapphic associations of smoking had not, however, achieved mainstream recognition; the trial of *The Well* changed this” (Tinkler, 116). Hall’s novel has been critically influential in establishing a lesbian archetype in literature and visual culture. It has also been criticized extensively by radical feminists and feminist historians in part because Hall’s protagonist, Stephen Gordon comes to understand her queerness through sexological literature she finds in her father’s study, which is said to indicate Hall’s own identification with sexology’s definition of sexual inversion (Newton, 1984). Esther Newton emphasizes the historical context in which sexological discourses may have appeared liberating to the “mannish lesbian” compared with the asexual model of romantic friendship previously available (560). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, modernism provided new languages for identification that enabled the concept of masculinity on a

female form. At this time, many welcomed the authoritative diagnosis by sexologists of sexual inversion as an opportunity for liberation through the formation of an identity category. A masculine costume, including cigarette or cigar, became an indication of a lesbian identity following Hall's obscenity trial.

for some lesbians, pipe and cigar smoking, or a masculine style of cigarette smoking, could in combination with masculine clothes and a lack of other feminine signifiers, serve as a marker of lesbian sexuality...The sapphic possibilities of certain smoking practices would have been discerned by other lesbians, as well as by those who were aware of female homosexuality. Following media coverage of the trial of *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928, this signaling entered public consciousness and the realms of popular culture. (Garrity and Doan, 86)

#### **4.1. Fashion and Respectability: Smoking and Class**

In "Sapphic Smokers and English Modernities," Tinkler emphasizes the rarity of depictions of working-class women as smokers in the media during the post war period because of the "prewar association of smoking with prostitution" (Tinkler, in Doan and Garrity, 83). Marjorie Garber writes of the history of female smokers in visual culture, asserting that a visual sartorial language of class was part of the heterosexist erasure of the sartorial language of lesbian sexuality. "The high-style lesbian with the cigarette holder has become a quotation, or a citation, of an earlier time safely "glamorized" by nostalgia. Between the virile female who fiercely but tenderly stands by her man and the fashion model flaunting her cigar, the bifurcation of class (upper/lower) has subsumed and made invisible the question of sexual orientation and erotic style" (Garber, 157). The erasure of representations of working class women smokers and Sapphic smokers in the mainstream media throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century was facilitated by cigarette campaigns working to heterosexualize the act of smoking. The representational histories of fashion and smoking are steeped in classism and heterosexism, among other oppressive institutions. The cigarette as a symbol of acceptance into male society and a statement about gender and sexuality was particular to middle and upper class lesbians. Tinkler writes, "Smoking was an articulation of modernity for many lesbians, but this was not universal and working-class lesbians were almost completely excluded." (Tinkler, in Doan and Garrity, 76).

Tinkler writes that smoking was often associated through visual culture with unruly heterosexualities and lesbian sexualities through social concepts about class. The costume of the prostitute, for example, commonly included a cigarette. Working class women smokers were portrayed as prostitutes or “mannish lesbians” before cigarettes were marketed more widely as fashionable accessories to middle and upper class heterosexual lifestyles. “With the increased public awareness of lesbianism after 1927, the media could hint at Sapphic versions of the desirable woman smoker. Nevertheless, the mainstream image of the desirable woman smoker remained pointedly heterosexual. Defined by sexuality and social class, the line between respectable and unrespectable smoking was a fine one for women” (Tinkler, 117).

Lesbian discourses have been historically dependent on mainstream heterosexual discourses. With regard to smoking, the heterosexualization of smoking was central to various corporate advertisements of smoking as part of the aesthetic of modern womanhood (Tinkler, 114). The fashionability of sartorial masculinity among women in the 1920s, and the rampant corporate heterosexualization of smoking and womanhood following Hall’s trial are examples of the ways in which heterosexist cultural messages can bear influence on the development of lesbian aesthetics. In other words, heterosexuality and queerness are perpetually interacting in popular and historical discourse. My blog analysis revealed this in interesting ways pertaining to cigarette smoking in online representation, which I will detail shortly.

## **4.2. Public Health Narratives**

Recent studies in the field of public health seek to identify potential factors influencing smoking lifestyles. In “Disparities in Smoking Between the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Population and the General Population in California,” Elisabeth Gruskin et al identify class as a factor affecting smoking prevalence among women. “Women in our sample whose income was \$30 000 or less were significantly more likely to be smokers than were women in the general population at the same income level. Smoking rates among women in our sample, particularly WSW (women who sleep with women) continued to be higher than rates among women in the general population at higher

levels of income” (1499). Gruskin et al point to “high levels of societal discrimination and daily stress” to explain tobacco use in this LGBTQ population (1499).

Studies in Public Health about smoking in LGBTQ communities and alleged affecting factors will never begin to piece together a complex cultural history of oppression and representation implicating intersections of race, class, ability, age, gender and sexuality, and can only serve to marginalize queer populations. The sartorial history of women and smoking reveals a complex relationship between lesbian identity and the cigarette. The cigarette was an important accessory in the sartorial display of lesbian identity from the late 1920s. This history is more often forgotten than noted in public health literature speculating on the determining factors of smoking in LGBTQ communities.

Moreover, stress and social discrimination are typically cited as factors affecting high smoking rates in sexual minority populations. (Gruskin et al, 2001; Rosario et al, 2011; Willis and Shiffman, 1985; Wills and Filer, 1996) These studies serve to pathologize queer populations in the sense that stress and social discrimination are attributes of depression and anxiety, which are framed as mental illnesses provoking smoking as a coping mechanism (Rosario, et al). Although the language of sexual inversion is increasingly passé, public health authorities continue to use pathology as a way of generalizing queer experiences and marginalizing queer populations.

## **5. Methodology**

This paper analyzes image posts and accompanying text on eight western *Tumblr* blogs run by English-speaking, self-identified femmes ranging from approximately 18-22 years of age. Initially, I considered 15 blogs for analysis, eliminating blogs lacking imagery portraying pomo dyke style, and lacking blog activity from July to October 2012. Blogs hosting images of pomo dykes typically also hosted images of smoking subjects. This realization inspired the topic for analysis. The images I have reproduced in this paper are used with permission.

The analysis was framed by the following questions: First, what does the cigarette contribute to the pomodyke style on lesbian blogs? Second, what are the sartorial trends and symbolisms apparent in these images? Third, how is the fashion of smoking informed by surrounding blog posts/themes? Finally, how are the images of smoking subjects gendered, queered or normalized?

I organized my analysis in two parts: content and significance. First I wrote down what I saw captured in images and any accompanying textual comments or descriptions. I was interested primarily in expressions of fashion items and styles, types of bodily representation and surrounding political references. Second, I assessed how treatment of the cigarette or smoking action and facial expressions negotiated queer fashionability. To determine significance I noted the ways in which fashion, bodies and textual content indicated queering the concept of time, individualism and postmodern ideologies about gender.

## **6. Themes**

Here I discuss the thematic trends in lesbian representations that I identified in a semiotic sartorial image analysis using a postmodern queer and intersectional feminist approach. I use examples of images to illustrate how the cigarette functions through both mainstream and lesbian cultural narratives as a symbolic element of the pomo dyke style. This analysis supports my thesis connecting representations of fashionably deviant style to the online facilitation of neo-liberal individualist representation on *Tumblr*. I will emphasize here that what follows are observations from my viewing position, and this is not representative of the various interpretive possibilities of these spaces and representations.

## 6.1. Pathology, Melancholy and Queer Time

In *The Well of Loneliness*, Hall alludes to a sort of spiritual masochism in the identity of the main character, Stephen Gordon, “She would want to cry out in a kind of protest that was very near tears... But instead she would blink hard and shut her lips tightly, unhappy yet happy. It was a queer feeling; it was too big for Stephen, who was still rather little when it came to affairs of the spirit” (32). The “affairs of the spirit” Hall points to are implied as possessing a “queer” element. The association of masochism and lesbianism in *The Well of Loneliness* is particularly important to the sartorial act of smoking because the controversy that ignited in the wake of its publication spurred the subsequent social discourse claiming the fashions of the New Woman as an indication of lesbianism. No other lesbian text received comparable press at the time (Newton, 559). The controversy surrounding Hall’s novel is a notable site of the convergence of cigarette smoking, lesbian identity and masochism.

As Tinkler (2006) writes of cigarette ad campaigns in the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “The cigarette is described as a ‘companion’ that chases depression away, a concept that was to remain popular throughout the twentieth century” (29). Contemporarily, it appears that this narrative of the cigarette as a companion for depression persists, although it does not necessarily chase depression away. The following *Tumblr* image suggests the drowning of sorrows in smoke.

**Figure 6.1. Cigarettes symbolize depression**



Image by Mariana; used with permission.  
<http://f-r-e-e-v-o-d-k-a.tumblr.com>

In the above image, the way in which the cigarettes are labeled with tragic descriptions like “big false friend,” “self-harm,” and “unhappy endings” suggests an emotional connection with smoking that involves “chasing,” or burning the depression away, while also consuming it. In “Cigarette Imagery in Contemporary Recordings,” Lee Cooper writes that smoking in song lyrics reveals, “difficult problems facing an individual smoker appear to stem from social stigma, self-deception, and self-ridicule” (86). Described as a “coffin nail, the cigarette is an object of linguistic condemnation and ridicule” (88). Considering a queer narrative and representational history that points to masochism in lesbian expression, including the example of Radclyffe Hall’s protagonist in *The Well of Loneliness*, smoking in a social climate overrun with public health warnings about the dangers of tobacco carries a certain association of masochistic pleasure. On *Tumblr*, is masochism (signalled by the cigarette) treated as an effect of the symptom of homosexuality, as Hall presents it, or does the masochistic association of the cigarette serve to queer the cigarette as a lesbian fashion accessory? Cooper writes about K.D. Lang’s recent album, *Drag* (1997), which includes two songs about cigarettes and smoking. Lang includes these songs despite the recent decline in recordings discussing tobacco, which is likely influenced by contemporary attitudes about anti-smoking as a moral issue. Lang’s lyrics convey thoughtfulness, memories and romance rather than condemnation for smoking, revealing a pointedly queer and outdated approach to this topic. Lang’s treatment of smoking works to defy the heteronormative values surrounding the cigarette. In a Victoria newspaper, an article titled, “Smoking rate among gays called ‘scary,’” quotes gay media and marketing veteran Rod Rozen identifying one cause of smoking within LGBTQ communities “as a defiance of straight morality” (*Times Colonist*, Victoria, BC, 2005). The following is a discussion of the relationship between smoking symbolism and defying straight morality through queer time.

### **6.1.1. Queer Time**

Freeman cites Bourdieu’s take on the rhythms of cultural temporality, “withholding, delay, surprise, pause, and knowing when to stop” (35). Each rhythm resonates clearly with queerness and smoking. Both queers and smokers are encouraged by heteronormative discourses to quit their non-normative lifestyles, or isolate themselves from society. It follows that queers might seek companionship in the

cigarette as a symbol of their non-normative, condemned and potentially isolated lifestyles.

Navigating temporal rhythms of social normativity requires participation in culturally encoded scripts. Regardless of how queer time may be enacted through smoking, queerness reads from the same cultural scripts as heterosexuality, and a subversive subject must acknowledge her existence within this temporal language. The pomo dyke style offers alternative sartorial negotiations of temporalities, but remains unquestioningly invested in a fashionable postmodern performance of individuality and gender ambiguity, and blissfully unaware of how whiteness, class status and body type help to achieve fashionability. This is especially critical when considering the role of *Tumblr* as a representational medium for sartorial expression.

**Figure 6.2. *Queer Time and the Lesbian Protagonist***



Image by Taschka Turnquist; used with permission  
<http://www.taschkaturnquist.com>

The above image depicts a subject in two frames, exhaling and inhaling cigarette smoke. Isolation and melancholy are indicated by the subject's expression, her fixation on the act of smoking, and her black costume. Her clothes blend with the dark background, likening her to the night and distancing her from the daytime. The frame emphasizes her position as the lone subject in the image, deeply engaged in her own world and answering to no one.

A text graphic posted to a *Tumblr* blog called “The Lonely Spaceman” suggests a reframing of cultural logic that uses statistics to convince smokers to quit. The text reads, “100% of Non-Smokers Die.” This graphic is interesting for the way in which it combats social narratives about science and health to challenge an ideology that values longevity. The word “DIE” is emphasized in size, mocking the ways in which social narratives use fear to persuade people to conduct normative lifestyles. Posted among images of subjects donning a pomo dyke style, this graphic indicates that the cigarette plays a critical role in queering cultural ideologies as part of this style. The act of smoking, as a well-known cause of death, can be interpreted as an act of assuming control of one’s timeline. References to death in smoking imagery on lesbian *Tumblr* blogs suggest a queering of time, masochistic pleasure and an expression of depression.

### **6.1.2. *Pastness and Pathology***

Sigmund Freud psychologized sexual perversion as an inability to mature beyond early sexual practices. Freeman writes about a queer refusal of this Freudian psychology:

This stubborn lingering of pastness (whether it appears as anachronistic style, as the reappearance of bygone events in the symptom, or as arrested development) is a hallmark of queer affect: a “revolution” in the old sense of the word, as a turning back. Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward*, for instance, astutely diagnoses the “backwards” emotions elaborated by artists for whom the birth of the modern homosexual identity-form was constraining rather than liberating: shame, passivity, melancholy, and recoil, to name but a few, were ways of refusing the progressive logic by which becoming ever more visible was correlated with achieving ever more freedom. (Freeman, 39)

For Radclyffe Hall, the “birth of the modern homosexual identity-form was... liberating” (Ibid) rather than constraining. The relationship between pathology, queerness and visibility has endured throughout lesbian history, and the cigarette has played a significant role, first as a symbol of liberation for women in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The publicity following Hall’s obscenity trial connected sexual inversion, sartorial smoking and a politics of visibility with lesbian identity. A lesbian costume including the cigarette has maintained cultural recognition, as seen contemporarily in the popularity of

the pomo dyke style. Do representations of the depressed lesbian smoker on *Tumblr* signal defiance of heteronormativity or adhere to cultural notions treating smoking as a symptom of mental illness?

Smoking has historically as well as recently been associated with “shame, passivity, melancholy and recoil” (Ibid). However, the cigarette has made these “backwards” emotions visible and sartorial, especially within a space like *Tumblr* where imagery is the foremost method of communicating lesbian style. These emotions are also taken up by public health literature in a continued pathology of queer bodies, which further suggests that images of depressed, smoking dykes reiterate this pathological discourse.

## **6.2. Size, Race, Class and Gender**

### **6.2.1. *Whiteness and Body Size***

White masculinity is implicitly glorified on *Tumblr* blogs representing smoking pomo dykes. Smoking is visually associated with malnourished, listless and drained bodies. The racial implications of this malnourished ‘look’ are significant, as the rare representation of a lesbian of colour depicted a subject who appeared hard and strong, rather than malnourished and depressed. These rare representations of tough dykes of colour reflect the frequent assertion that in white lesbian representations, “Black wimmin... can often be masculin(ized)” (T.J. Bryant, in Rose and Camilleri, 147). These blogs are an extension of a visual autobiographical tradition in white lesbian history. The images predominantly portray white lesbians likely because the bloggers are white and minimally political, and have come to identify with a racially blind historical tradition of lesbian sartorial expression and representation.

My analysis of pomo dyke style revealed that femininity is rejected in representations of both body and dress, which points to misogyny in the pomo dyke version of androgyny. Dress was colourless and shapeless, presenting a version of androgyny with an emphasis on masculinity. Curvy and fat bodies were extremely rare on the *Tumblr* blogs I analyzed. This suggests that femininity is treated as a physical attribute, which is interesting considering Woltersdorff’s comment that the autonomy to

choose gender roles reflects neo-liberal individualism (172). According to the pomo dyke prerequisite of thinness, this version of androgyny is not so willfully chosen by curvy dykes, which serves to grant this gender autonomy exclusively to thin female bodies.

Slimness is a major aesthetic constant that has historical resonance with imagery of the fashionable smoker archetype. Smoking has historically been connected with weight loss and fashionable slimness in the capitalist tradition of chasing the ideal of modern femininity. Tinkler and Warsh (2008) illustrate how smoking and slimness were key elements of the modern look in the 1930s, as they satisfied the popular modern aesthetic of linearity. "Smoking was...aligned with streamline and appeared frequently as a weapon in the modern arsenal against fat..." (Tinkler and Warsh, 123). Muggleton also emphasizes the modern fixation of slimness and functionality in the invention of the "modernist body," the female form of the 1920s, free from the confinement of corsetry and the excess of feminine ornamentation (37). The modern equation of subjectivity to slimness is repeatedly reflected on *Tumblr* blogs featuring the pomo dyke style.

The vast majority of subjects photographed on the blogs I analyzed ranged from thin to emaciated. This body type aligned image content with the prevalent discursive themes of mortality, depression and masochism that emerged throughout my analysis.

**Figure 6.3. Thinness, Whiteness and Apathy**



Image by Jarrod Jones; used with permission.  
Posted on: <http://fuckyeahdykes.tumblr.com>

This black and white image presents a thin, white smoking subject in plain clothes. Points of interest are her tattoos, the glass that nearly falls out of the frame, and the cigarette she holds to her mouth between two fingers. Her disinterested gaze is averted from the viewer, following something beyond the frame. Her expression is disengaged and apathetic. The colour black is emphasized in the monochromatic finish of the image. The subject's pants, hair, eyes and shadows stand out against the lighter photographic elements. Black and neutral tones commonly occur in the sartorial elements of the pomo dyke style. In *Dictionary of Colour: A Lexicon of the Language of Colour*, Ian Paterson explains the origins and contemporary meanings of the colour black. In the west, black is predominantly associated with mourning, and so also with "having a deadly, nefarious or wicked purpose; illegal; evil; melancholy; pessimistic, gloomy or dismal" (44). Many of these concepts and emotions are evident in this image. Accentuating her status as a social outcast through gender non-conformity and cigarette smoking, the subject is aligned with social failure, and so also with mortality. However, as the single subject appearing in the image, she is also presented as an individual and protagonist.

### **6.2.2. Class Rebellion**

Apathy is a major criterion for achieving the pomo dyke style, and I have observed that this is connected with smoking and class rebellion. Tinkler introduces the concept of smoking by women as gender and class rebellion in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, “Whilst in 1900 a few older working-class women smoked clay pipes, this practice was restricted almost exclusively to lower-class men. Smoking a clay pipe was, therefore, a statement of gender and class rebellion for Gluck [a famous lesbian portrait artist in Britain in the 1920s and ‘30s]” (2006, 82). Smoking is framed within this online space as a signal of counter cultural heroism. Class rebellion may be interpreted as counter cultural through apathy for normative values. Contemporarily, smoking is an act of apathy because it is unlikely that one is not aware of the associated health risks. Apathetic attitudes toward race, class and gender work around the cigarette as a symbol of apathy which supports the overall sense of societal and political disregard conveyed online.

Samantha Ronson is a public figure with celebrity status as a lesbian DJ who is well known for her wealth and lesbian style. Her style has pomo dyke elements, including loose-fitting, worn, masculine pieces, short hair and cigarettes. Photographs of Ronson are typically captured by paparazzi, so it is not unusual to see images of her walking outside with a cigarette in her mouth. These images appear regularly in mainstream and lesbian media, including on *Tumblr* blogs. Her costume is comparable to that of a hipster or pomo dyke, and as a young lesbian public figure, it is probable that her style has influenced the style of other lesbians. Ronson makes class rebellion look good, as a humble dismissal of her known privilege enacted through the stylistic strategy of apathy. As Tinkler points out, gender and class rebellion have historically worked toward the same end in lesbian smoking practices (2006, 82). In the pomo dyke style, both femininity and middle-class propriety are refuted. This style questions class and gender, but it does not acknowledge the privilege of those who wear it. Class rebellion is problematic in the way that aesthetics deemed working class are appropriated by those with access to class privilege, which will serve to alter the aesthetic meaning of the style. Rugg writes, “Pomo dykiness is often synonymous with a downward mobility that looks like a politics of class but is in fact a politics of style which can dishonor the very working class whose fashions it appropriates” (1997, 185).

### **6.2.3. Androgyny, Misogyny and Gender Privilege**

Rugg explains the pomo dyke style in terms of gender appropriation, “fun with gender can come at the expense of those for whom gender is not fun but carries the weight of a constant threat of violence; not victims or sad cases, but fierce transgendered/transsexual folk who live on the boundaries of gender... for whom the stakes are infinitely high” (185). My analysis of pomo dyke style revealed that images of men and men’s fashion on male models are common, indicating a desire for a body or style that is unrepresented on female bodies. The large quantity of available images on *Tumblr* of masculine fashions on female bodies indicates that posting images of men in similar fashions serves to present a desired image of self as male. The result is a transgendered sartorial autobiography, but this is not supported by trans political messages in surrounding blog posts, or trans positivity in any other form.

Tinkler and Warsh point to a connection between independence and rejection of femininity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century female smoker, “Smokers also purportedly rejected demure and passive femininity... The woman smoker, without chaperone, was unafraid of drawing attention to herself” (2008, 131). In the images I analyzed, independence and narcissism are indicated by subjects posing alone, in their own world and deep in thought, reflecting neo-liberal individualism as a representational theme. Woltersdorff connects the postmodern approach to gender autonomy that is evident in the sartorial choices of pomo dykes, with neo-liberal individualism (172), while Rugg writes, “I commonly witness pomo dykes dissing transpeople’s fight to inhabit gender in a way that feels appropriate for them because this fight takes identity too seriously” (185). The neo-liberal assertion of autonomy and independence neglects to consider the social positions and experiences of those surrounding the subject.

### **6.3. Neo-Liberalism and Fantasy**

*Tumblr* is designed as a neo-liberal discursive framework. Each blog is intended to be a personal expression and description of an individual. Discussion is not facilitated well, especially in terms of posted imagery. Bloggers share images, and may also comment, but rarely does an interaction last longer than a two-comment exchange.

Images of lone pomo dykes smoking fare well in this space wherein content typically serves as a description and often a promotion of self. The repeated representation of images depicting the pomo dyke style in this way work to glorify the androgynous outcast.

Images of women, fashion and smoking from the past, such as in *Vogue* magazine (Tinkler and Warsh) or in cigarette advertisements have romanticized the relationship between women, smoking and fashionability. The romance and glamour initially used to encourage consumption and seduce women into the fashion of smoking is evident, although in new forms, in the images I have analyzed on lesbian blogs. The commonality of romance is what cements a formulaic aesthetic relationship between fashion and smoking in imagery of women across communicative mediums (magazines, advertisements, blogs) and temporal moments. The correlation between romance and smoking indicates escapism through fantasy, rather than political subversion.

The romanticization of depression and androgyny through the cigarette is related to eroticism. Images and accompanying text in comments and descriptions on *Tumblr* suggest the depressed smoking dyke is a subject for sexual consumption in this space. The image and accompanying user comments below indicate sexual attractions that align smoking among style elements with eroticism and fantasy.

**Figure 6.4. *Eroticism and Fantasy***



Image by Carter; used with permission.  
<http://kids-in-boots.Tumblr.com>

- “Mmmm~ I know it’s a horrible, destructive habit, but smoking is sexy as fuuuuccckkkkkk,”
- “OH MY GOD. get in my bed NOW.”

- why do i find girls who smoke cigarettes to be extremely sexy if i think cigarettes are gross lololol ...”
- “Smoking in pictures is so attractive but irl [in real life] uhhhhh no,”

The comments indicate an acknowledgement that the medium of photography lends to the eroticism of the smoking subject. This conscious engagement with fantasy points to the broader theme of using medium (fashion, image and blog) for presenting an imagined self for purposes of self-promotion throughout lesbian representational history. Tinkler presents smoking as a distinctly modern presentation of personal appearance, “Consistent with the modern emphasis on the importance of outward appearance as an expression of identity, many lesbians, and women more generally, consciously exploited the visibility of smoking to make complex statements about gender and sexuality... Joe Carstairs [a wealthy American heiress], for example, admitted that she smoked “merely for effect; she never inhaled” (Doan and Garrity, 78). It appears as though much of the pomo dyke style is merely for the effect of self-promotion and imagining a fashionable and sexually attractive lesbian identity within this space facilitating fantasy.

Liberation and erotic representation emerge as fantasy in this space that separates real from imagined self. Perhaps young lesbians use *Tumblr* as an escape from the discourses perpetuating “straight morality.” The cigarette, therefore, serves as a symbol of this neo-liberal fantasy, presented as a pomo dyke accessory “merely for effect” (Doan and Garrity, 78). Within this space where users “vent” and “complain about their lives” to a listening audience, the individualism evident in the representations of smoking lesbians reflect neo-liberalism in the sense that each blogger is the protagonist in her own representation. In this space she can feel heard, while in everyday life she may feel silenced by various social pressures relating to her sexual orientation.

## 7. Conclusions

“Style will encode all the cultural messages of our communities, but it is as incapable as our autobiographies of revealing the ‘real’ self. Fashion cannot indicate a

fixed identity; it is a constantly changing set of statements to be interpreted by the onlooker's own transforming perceptions" (Blackman and Perry, 75).

Being aware of spaces, discourses and motivations beyond our own is an important part of being a political subject in a postmodern context. My analysis of smoking subjects on lesbian blogs suggests that lesbians who wear a pomo dyke style may not engage in counter cultural politics to the extent that their sartorial refusal of gender category might imply on the surface. The implications of *Tumblr* as a corporate-owned medium facilitating neo-liberal fantasy are critical to consider. Layers of lesbian representation (dress, image and blog) necessarily comprise the context and meaning of the subjects presented. When a corporation governs an important part of one's daily schedule, it is imperative that engagement in this aspect of life is conscious and critical.

Throughout my analysis, I have indicated the ways in which representations of pomo dyke style on *Tumblr* convey a uniform sartorial aesthetic for young, white lesbians. This style combines whiteness, thinness, youth, class rebellion, depression, isolation, androgyny and eroticism in the specific sartorial compilation of torn, over-sized clothing in dark and neutral colours, minimal gender-neutral accessories like hemp bracelets, spacers and dog tags, asymmetrical short hairstyles and burning cigarettes. A mixture of expressions relating smoking to feelings of depression, isolation and contempt for society combined with pride and arrogance is evident in the images I analyzed. The allegations made by public health researchers that lesbians smoke due to factors including stress and societal adversity appear to find proof on *Tumblr*. Interestingly, the imagery of smoking lesbians and affiliated melancholy were predominantly apparent in images of pomo dykes and on *Tumblr* blogs representing the pomo dyke style. I observed that the fashion of the pomo dyke is typically donned within contexts surrounded by discourses favouring material social values over political activism or awareness. The only political sentiments I saw repeated on the pomo dyke *Tumblr* sites were related to gender rebellion or lesbian identity, which were achieved through pomo dyke style. The pictured subjects were predominantly white, thin, able-bodied and materialistic, implying a certain class status, although this apparent material access was often disavowed through sartorial references denying class privilege. Overall, the representations I analyzed revealed pride in a lesbian uniform that exhibits an adverse social position, as well as material superiority.

The discursive history of sexological and psychological research dating back to Krafft-Ebing, Ellis and Freud utilized positivist frames through which to pathologize queer bodies. Although historical sexological terminology is contemporarily considered passe, especially in feminist and queer activist communities, scientific methods for rationalizing human behaviour and identity continue to dictate social ideologies. Sexual desire, behaviour and orientation remain socially connected to the question of bodily health. Public health literature on the effects of smoking on LGBTTTQQ2SIP individuals and communities is an example of this. In place of the pathology of “inversion”, societal condemnation now puts queers at risk for mental illnesses like depression and anxiety. Further, the discourses of identifying through pathology that I have observed online indicate that many lesbians are expressing their sexual identity through the diagnostic act of smoking as a sign of depression. Not only is the equation of smoking, depression and lesbianism evident in this imagery, there is a decided ambivalence portrayed here for both the cigarette and the self. At once, these images are self-deprecating and boastful. Smoking is treated as both part of a culturally intelligible lesbian sartorial entitlement and an emotional expression. The pomo dyke appears to smoke as a way of signaling her feelings of depression, isolation and social adversity. The rich and complex discursive history of a relationship between lesbian identity and smoking continues on *Tumblr* to reflect narratives of individualism and pathology. Smoking is utilized as a fashion accessory that serves as a vehicle to fashionable deviance. There is no way of existing as a contemporary queer beyond a conversation with dominant social scripts, but the relationship between normativity, fashionability and queerness requires constant deconstruction. Sartorial agency will only be achieved when we are critical of the semiotic, political and social systems within which we get dressed.

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