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# LESBIAN AND BISEXUAL WOMEN'S BODY IMAGE

Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Body Image: Negotiating Intersections of Identity

By  
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors Requirements  
for the Department of Psychology

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## Author Note

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### Abstract

Research on women's body image has focused on the sexual objectification women experience in society and their interpersonal relationships, but the concept of body image has been studied almost exclusively among heterosexual women. The present study explored how lesbian and bisexual women experience their bodies and the psychosocial factors that contribute to their body image development. I interviewed eight lesbian and six bisexual women living in South Central Pennsylvania. I employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) for my analysis, which aims to explore individuals' experiences and examine how they make sense of their world. My analysis resulted in themes focusing on four main areas: how participants described their bodies in relation to their sexuality; the role that LGBT and feminist communities play in how they feel about their bodies; how they negotiate sexualization and homophobia; and how their romantic relationships with men and women affect their sense of body image and identity. I will conclude by discussing similarities and differences between bisexual and lesbian participants. This study adds to the literature on lesbian and bisexual women's body image as both an oppressed sexual minority and sexualized women, as well as how communities of women help them deal with these stressors and accept themselves and their bodies.

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### Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Body Image: Negotiating Intersections of Identity

Women in the United States face enormous pressure to conform to a culturally defined standard for thinness and attractiveness, in which women are often defined by their bodies and treated as sexual objects (Fredrickson, & Roberts, 1997; Haines et al., 2008). This socialization towards equating self-esteem with appearance is implicated in body dissatisfaction among women (Dworkin, 1989). Furthermore, body dissatisfaction is so common among women that it has been termed “normative discontent” (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1985).

Objectification theory (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997) holds that experiences of sexual objectification are robust risk factors for the development of body dissatisfaction and eating pathology. The core principle of objectification theory is that sexual objectification encourages women to self-objectify, internalizing sexualized images of women (Kozee & Tylka, 2006; McKinley & Hyde, 1996; Tylka & Hill, 2004). This objectification and subsequent body dissatisfaction are important to understand, as they put women at greater risk for developing eating disorders (Cattarin, Thompson, Thomas, & Williams, 2000; Cutler & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991).

Research supports objectification theory's proposed constructs and the idea that sociocultural depictions of women's bodies as objects are important social factors in the development of women's disordered eating (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998; Tiggeman & Slater, 2001). However, these studies have primarily focused on heterosexual women, so the role of sexual objectification and promulgation of the thin-ideal on queer<sup>1</sup> women's body image is not well-understood. The purpose of the present study was to explore how lesbian and bisexual women experience their bodies and how their experiences with objectification may affect their body image.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term queer throughout this paper as an umbrella term to refer to both lesbian and bisexual women.

### **Sociocultural Appearance Ideals and Body Dissatisfaction among Lesbians and Bisexuals**

Until recently, theorists largely assumed that sexual orientation served as a protective factor against body dissatisfaction, supposing that lesbian women were not as vulnerable to sexual objectification as were heterosexual women. Their theories posited that lesbian women would not internalize objectifying messages to the same extent as do heterosexual women because they could reject the heterosexual culture (Dworkin, 1989). Some researchers also suggest that the lesbian community challenges the heterosexual culture's objectification of women and stigmatization of fat women (Brown, 1987; Striegel-Moore, McAvay, & Rodin, 1986; Pitman, 1999). The values of challenging patriarchal structures and accepting women's bodies as beautiful regardless of society's unrealistic standards were thought to protect queer women from the body image issues that often precipitate disordered eating.

Some research provides partial support for these theories. Several studies have found more disordered eating among heterosexual women than lesbians (Kozee & Tylka, 2007; Schneider, O'Leary, & Jenkins, 1995; Siever, 1994; Strong, Williamson, Netemeyer, & Geer, 2000). In general, researchers have suggested that in comparison with straight women, lesbians do not suffer as much from body dissatisfaction (Heffernan, 1996; Lakkis, Ricciardelli, & Williams, 1999; Polimeni, Austin, & Kavanagh, 2009; Strong et al., 2000), have higher levels of body esteem and general body satisfaction (Herzog, Newman, Yeh, & Warshaw, 1992; Share & Mintz, 2002), and choose heavier ideal weights (Herzog et al., 1992).

On the other hand, Rothblum (1994) has theorized that as women, lesbians have been socialized to focus on improving their physical appearance. Similarly, Dworkin (1989) suggested that lesbians' socialization as women encourages them "to attempt to mold their bodies to fit man's image of woman" (p. 36), and that this gender socialization has a strong effect on body

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image. According to this theoretical perspective, lesbian women's beauty ideals are influenced by mainstream culture, and their lesbian identity does not protect them from body image concerns (Beren, Hayden, Wilfley, & Striegel-Moore, 1997; Rich, 1980).

In support of this theoretical perspective are studies showing that lesbians do experience significant levels of body dissatisfaction and eating disordered attitudes and behaviors. Most researchers have found that lesbians suffer from bulimic and restrictive behaviors at levels comparable to heterosexual women (Brand, Rothblum, & Solomon, 1992; Share & Mintz, 2002). Research on body image is mixed as to whether lesbians are plagued by these issues to the same extent as heterosexual women, but a growing body of literature shows that lesbians may not be as protected from body dissatisfaction as once thought. Many studies in fact report no significant differences between lesbian and heterosexual women in terms of feeling fat and body disparagement (Bergeron & Senn, 1998), and overall body dissatisfaction (Beren, Hayden, Wilfley, & Grilo, 1996; Cogan, 1999; Striegel-Moore, Tucker, Zsu, 1990). Furthermore, in interviews with lesbian women on body image, most participants have focused on weight and shape dissatisfaction and their insecurities over not conforming to the thin-ideal (Beren et al., 1997; Kelly, 2007; Pitman, 2000).

In further support of the second theoretical perspective, studies testing the objectification theory model on lesbians found that sexual objectification experiences, body surveillance, and body shame were all significantly related to disordered eating, as they are in heterosexual women (Haines, et al., 2008; Kozee & Tylka, 2006). Furthermore, internalization of the sociocultural thin-ideal has been shown to predict more weight and shape concerns among lesbians (Heffernan, 1999; Share & Mintz, 2002). However, Share and Mintz (2002) found that lesbians had lower thin-ideal internalization even though they evidenced equal rates of eating pathology.

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Research on lesbian women's body image is mixed, providing some support for both theoretical perspectives, suggesting that the role of societal messages promoting thinness seems to be complicated for lesbians and perhaps operates in different ways than for heterosexual women. The present study attempted to contribute to this mixed literature by exploring influences on body image qualitatively to allow for the uncovering of areas of influence that have not been previously explored.

Although studies have not specifically examined how bisexual women are affected by sexual objectification and sociocultural norms for women's appearance, their attraction to and desire to attract men and women puts them in a unique position for both conforming to and resisting the thin-ideal. Rothblum (1994) theorized that women in relationships with women can feel freer to accept their bodies than with men because the primary reason women worry about appearance ideals is to attract men. She suggested that this pressure to conform to dominant standards of attractiveness is not present with women. Supporting this notion is one of the few studies on bisexual women's body image (Taub, 1999), which found that bisexual women felt more appearance pressures when in relationships with men than with women. Hence, whereas lesbians have been theorized to be able to critique and escape the male gaze, bisexual women still need to appeal to it in order to find male partners.

The few studies that have explored these issues suggest that bisexual women may evidence more body image issues and eating disorder symptomatology than lesbians, and even more than heterosexual women. One study found that bisexual women were more than twice as likely to report having had an eating disorder than the lesbian women in their sample (Koh & Ross, 2006), and another found that bisexual women were dissatisfied with their body image and had a higher prevalence of unhealthy weight control practices than lesbians and heterosexual

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women (Polimeni et al., 2009). Unfortunately, the majority of studies that have included bisexual women in their sample have included them in the same group as lesbian women (Austin et al., 2004; Cogan, 1999), which does not do justice to these women's unique position in wanting to attract both men and women.

**Rebelling against the thin-ideal.** Interviews suggest that while many queer women feel pressured to live up to the heterosexual feminine ideal, for many, there also seems to be a drive to rebel against this ideal. Thinness does seem to be valued based on lesbian women who state that they strive for or are attracted to the same standards of thinness and femininity that they feel are oppressive (i.e. the "lipstick lesbian") (Pitman, 2000). However, others feel that they do not succumb to sociocultural pressures and they are not interested in conforming (Beren et al., 1997; Kelly, 2007; Pitman, 2000). Their idea of the lesbian community is that "there's more of a validation of women's strength... a sort of resistance to patriarchal definitions of what women should look like" (Beren et al., 1997, p. 436). Thus, fat stigma and the beauty mandates of the dominant culture do have a prominent place in lesbian women's stories of their body image struggles, with some women internalizing these standards and others openly rebelling against them with a decidedly non-feminine appearance.

**Conclusions regarding sexual orientation and body image.** Evidence points to the prevalence of body image issues in queer women, but the reasons for these problems need further exploration as research on the risk factors of eating disorder development in this population has thus far been lacking. The studies that have examined predictors of disordered eating have done so in the context of heterosexual cultural influences, whereas queer women's identities with conflicting roles in society may have a unique effect on their experiences with body image. The complex ways in which lesbians and bisexual women experience their bodies need to be further



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explored in order to understand their body dissatisfaction.

### **Sexual Prejudice**

Heterosexism and homophobia are daily realities for LGBT individuals, and this environment of discrimination can have a tremendous impact on their mental health. Internalizing homophobia is predictive of psychological distress (D'Augelli, Grossman, Hershberger, & O'Connell, 2001; Frost & Meyer, 2009; Igartua, Gill, & Montoro, 2003; Meyer & Dean, 1998), and may impact other facets of well-being, including body image.

Research findings indicate that one homophobic perception is that lesbianism is equated with unattractiveness. This affects lesbians' body image and appearance in different ways, as some internalize these attitudes, trying to conform to the heterosexual ideal to evade prejudice (Beren et al., 1997; Kelly, 2007; Rothblum, 1994). Some lesbians have discussed how homophobic attitudes impact their body image and create a desire to present a thin, feminine, (i.e. heterosexual) appearance, making themselves invisible as lesbians (Beren et al., 1997; Kelly, 2007; Pitman, 2000). Other lesbians rebel against this ideal, choosing instead a more masculine, or butch, gender presentation, which contains an explicit rejection of traditional beauty norms (Hammidi & Kaiser, 1999; Myers, Taub, Morris, & Rothblum, 1998).

One aspect of bisexual identity that is different from that of lesbians in terms of stigmatization is that bisexuals are often discriminated against not only by heterosexuals, but also by lesbians and gay men (Mulick & Wright, 2002; Rust, 1995). The LGBT community supports discriminatory ideas that bisexuals are simply confused about their "true" sexual identity, that they are too afraid to come out, and that they are promiscuous and cannot be monogamous because they are attracted to both sexes (Eliason, 1997; Rust, 1995). This stigmatization may be an important factor in bisexual women's sense of body image as well as their mental health.

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The present study aims to explore the ways in which bisexual women negotiate their identities and body image in this context as well as how lesbians' body image is impacted by and relates to the stigmatization in a heterosexist society.

### **Support from the LGBT Community**

LGBT and lesbian communities have long been referenced as protective factors against body dissatisfaction among lesbian women since these communities were presumed to stand strong against patriarchal oppression (Brown, 1987). However, research as to the effects of the community on body satisfaction has produced mixed findings (Beren et al., 1996; Feldman & Meyer, 2007; Ludwig & Brownell, 1999; Heffernan, 1999). Although Heffernan (1996) found that community involvement was associated with less weight concern, other researchers have not found any significant relationships between LGBT community and body image.

Interviews have provided further insight as to how lesbian women feel about the lesbian community. One study suggested that the lesbian community is much more accepting of women's bodies of all shapes and was considered a safe space away from heterosexual beauty ideals (Myers et al., 1998). However, there were lesbian women in the study who talked about continuing to feel appearance pressure from the dominant culture. Rothblum (1994), notes that although the 1980's and 1990's marked a growing diversity in the lesbian community, varying standards for appearance within communities (i.e. pressure to be butch, femme, or rejecting both), have played an important role in lesbian women's body image and presentation. Thus, the relationship between body image and the lesbian community seems to be complex and important in understanding women's body satisfaction.

There is very little research on the role of a bisexual or LGBT community on bisexual women's identity, and there is no research on its connection to body image. Researchers on

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bisexual identity have cited the importance of finding social support and acceptance from other LGBT people but bisexual women in particular often find it difficult to receive this support and acceptance from lesbian women (Israel & Mohr, 2004; Rust, 1995). There is a distrust of bisexual women because they are considered to still live under the confines of male patriarchy and unable to commit to the goals of lesbian feminism. McLean (2008) found that many bisexuals are ambivalent about the LGBT community: some felt they did receive limited support but others felt they could only participate by blending in as lesbian.

The present study aims to uncover how both lesbian's and bisexuals' involvement and feelings of support from other lesbians and bisexuals impact their body image.

### **Feminist Ideology**

Another factor that may play a role in queer women's experiences of body image is feminist ideology, which is often associated with the LGBT community. Among lesbians and bisexuals, who are often concerned with women's social justice issues (Cogan, 1999; Taub, 1999), feminism may have an important role in their attitudes towards their bodies and the dominant cultural thin-ideal. Researchers and theorists have suggested that feminism is more common among lesbians (Ojerholm & Rothblum, 1999), and that lesbian communities are feminist in nature, fighting against oppressive standards of attractiveness in the dominant culture (Pitman, 2000). Indeed, many women throughout the 1970's and 1980's in particular, came to a lesbian or bisexual identity because of their involvement with feminism, highlighting the overlap among feminism and sexual orientation for many sexual minority women.

Theorists discuss the critique of sexual objectification of women's bodies and the thin-ideal as an important feminist cause, suggesting that feminists are better able to resist internalizing dominant appearance standards (see Rothblum, 1994, for a review). However,

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quantitative research on the protective role of feminism against internalizing appearance pressures is mixed. Although some studies have found that feminist identification serves as a buffer against negative body image for both lesbian and heterosexual women (Bergeron & Senn, 1998; Cogan, 1999; Murnen & Smolak, 2009), other researchers have reported that feminist ideology is not related to more positive body image (Dionne, Davis, Fox, & Gurevich, 1995; Kelson, Kearney-Cooke, & Lansky, 1990; Mintz & Betz, 1986).

Qualitative research highlights the tension lesbian women feel about not living up to the standards of feminism when they do experience body dissatisfaction. Interviews with lesbian women convey the importance of a feminist identity for many lesbian women. However, lesbians may experience conflicted feelings when they do have negative body feelings. For instance, some feel guilty for not living up to the feminist ideals of rejecting the thinness culture (Beren et al., 1997; Pitman, 2000), suggesting that their feminist identities do not protect them from body dissatisfaction and in fact may exacerbate distress. The present research seeks to expand upon this understanding of body dissatisfaction as a failure to be a good feminist by understanding how both lesbian and bisexual women feel their feminist identity has an impact on their sense of body image.

### **The Present Study**

The present study aims to gain a better understanding of lesbian and bisexual women's experiences of body image and the psychosocial factors that contribute to their body image concerns. I hoped to uncover the ways that lesbian and bisexual women negotiate the dominant heterosexual culture that promotes objectification of women and discrimination towards LGBT people. I sought to answer three research questions: 1) How do lesbian and bisexual women describe their bodies and body image? 2) What are their experiences finding lesbian and feminist

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communities and how do these communities play a role in their sense of selves and body image?

3) How do their experiences with sexualization and homophobia play a role in their body image?

Qualitative methods, wherein participants were free to discuss the issues most important to their conceptions of identity and their bodies, were chosen to allow for a full exploration of these questions.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

Qualitative analysis calls for relatively small sample sizes in order to devote enough time on analyses to do each individual case justice. The goal in sampling is to achieve redundancy or saturation, meaning that additional participants would not yield new information (Sandelowski, 1995). Researchers suggest that a sample between 6 and 12 participants should achieve redundancy (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Participants in this study were lesbian ( $n = 8$ ) and bisexual ( $n = 6$ ) women in South Central Pennsylvania who were 22 years or older and identified as lesbian or bisexual for at least two years. Ages ranged from 28 to 51 years old for the lesbian sample and 22 to 33 for the bisexual sample (see Tables 1 and 2). All participants were Caucasian, except one lesbian participant who was African American.

#### **Procedure**

Advertisements were placed in the e-newsletters of two community-based organizations serving the LGBT population in the area as well as on the faculty and staff listserv at a small liberal arts college. Volunteers contacted me via email, and after answering a few demographic questions to screen eligibility, interviews were scheduled.

Interviews were conducted in a private room in the Psychology department on campus or

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at the local LGBT center. All sessions (which lasted approximately 90 minutes) were audio taped and then transcribed into Microsoft Word prior to analysis. Participants were read an informed consent script, were provided their compensation (\$15), and their willingness to participate was recorded. After the interview was completed, they were thanked and debriefed.

### **Materials**

The interview protocol included questions grouped into four main topics: (1) body image issues, self-presentation (to “look like” a lesbian), and sexualization by others; (2) engagement with an LGBT community; (3) romantic relationship history; and, (4) feminist identification and beliefs. Warm-up questions asked participants to describe their family of origin and their coming-out process (see Appendix A for complete interview schedule, although because of the semi-structured nature, some interviews included additional prompts to follow-up on an earlier response, and some interviews deviated from the listed order to follow the participants' lead).

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Overview of the Method of Analysis**

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), developed by British psychologist, Jonathon Smith, was chosen because, as a psychologically-oriented method, it is ideally suited for exploring my research questions. IPA aims to explore, in detail, individuals' experiences and examine how they make sense of their world. This method for psychological analysis allows participants' experiences to be expressed according to the personal perspectives of the individuals (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). It emphasizes an active role for the researcher in a double hermeneutic, or two-stage research process, in which the participant makes sense of his or her experience and the researcher interprets the participants' meanings (Smith & Eatough, 2007). Although commonalities among participants are used to create a cohesive story, each

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individual's story is examined and valued as a whole. This focus on participants' interpretations, identity, and sense of self allowed me to examine how lesbians and bisexual women make sense of their body image, sexual identities, communities, and relationships.

The first stage of the analytic process using IPA involves reading and re-reading the first case to identify themes, which are then clustered together into superordinate themes after finding connections among them. Each theme must be represented by the data in the transcript. Once the first list of themes is created using Participant #1, IPA proceeds with reading the second interview, starting with the master themes from the first interview to look for further evidence in the second interview, as well as looking for new themes. This analytic method is an iterative process; after creating a list of themes from the second interview, the researcher goes back to the first interview to see if any new themes from the second were represented. This process continued with each consecutive interview, which results in each interview being read at least three times. The goal is to have a clustered set of themes that represent all of the data which will then be translated into a narrative account (Smith et al., 2009). This analytic method recognizes the value of participants' responses even if only one participant said a given theme. Unlike other qualitative methods such as grounded theory, this method does not attempt to only find themes that are represented by all participants (Lyons & Coyle, 2007).

IPA calls for homogenous sampling based on a specific criterion, which in the present study, was sexual orientation (Smith et al., 2009). Hence, I analyzed lesbian and bisexual women as two separate samples in an effort to fully examine their experiences on their own terms. I present an integrated results and discussion for each sample, in which the themes are explained, representative quotes are provided along with my interpretative analysis, and these results and interpretations are linked to prior research and theory. I conclude with a general discussion in

which I discuss the similarities and differences between the lesbian and bisexual women as well as what the findings mean for future research.

### **Evaluating qualitative research according to its goals**

The overall goal of qualitative research in psychology is to provide “rich descriptions and possible explanations of people’s meaning-making” to understand how they make sense of the world and experience particular phenomena (Coyle, 2007, p. 11), rather than to determine prevalence or generalizability. The quality of qualitative research should be judged in terms of how well the study meets this goal of meaning-making and deep understanding.

Whereas traditional quantitative research is concerned with reliability and validity in evaluating a study’s results, these concepts are not as applicable in qualitative research. Small, purposive samples and subjective experiences cannot generalize to the broader population in the same sense as quantitative research methods with large random samples. Instead, researchers have proposed altering quantitative criteria to better suit the goals of qualitative research; these modifications are described below and were utilized in the present study.

Rather than testing for reliability and validity, qualitative research can be evaluated by its credibility and confirmability (Byrne, 2001). Credibility is the extent to which the results of analysis do justice to participants’ descriptions. I attempted to accomplish this in four ways. First, I thoroughly read and reread all transcripts, attending to each individual’s ideas about her own experience. Second, I developed “in-vivo” themes, in which themes are named based on participants’ own words. Third, all transcripts were read by my faculty advisor to verify my analysis. Fourth, I engaged participants in confirming the findings to make sure that they were satisfied with my interpretations. This latter strategy was accomplished by sending all participants a copy of my final paper and asking for their feedback (Johnson, 1997).



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Confirmability is the extent to which the researcher is present and trustworthy and the results can be confirmed by others. In order to accomplish this criterion, I left an “audit trail” including transcripts and a research journal detailing my methods, along with my assumptions, feelings, and interpretations throughout the research process. This process of reflexivity allows a “critical awareness of the role of the researcher and their cognitive processes” (Payne, 2007, p.85). With this detailing of the research process and my own thoughts, the rigor, trustworthiness of the analysis and interpretations, and implications of my results for future research is apparent.

### **Lesbian Sample**

In analyzing the eight interviews with lesbian women, three superordinate themes emerged which encompassed how they felt about their bodies in relation to their experiences with finding communities of women and the broader heterosexual culture (see Table 3).

**Theme 1 Ambivalence about Body.** This first theme draws on all 8 interviews and reflects the women's sense of their bodies and weight. Weight played a large role in most women's body image but a notable finding was some women's understanding of their bodies in terms of physical, active characteristics rather than appearance. These two ways in which participants experienced their bodies sheds light on the tension between their position both within the dominant heterosexual culture and outside of it as a devalued minority.

*1.1 Good with body, but it can always be better.* 7 of the women expressed overall satisfaction with their bodies although they still acknowledged feeling uncomfortable with weight. Michelle responded that “overall I'm at peace with my body” and “I feel good about my body. I like that I feel strong and I feel in my skin.” Although they did not feel that they really struggled with body image issues, the issues that did come up were in terms of weight in much the same way as has been found with heterosexual women (Beren et al., 1996; Kelly, 2007;

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Moore & Keel, 2003). This adds to previous findings that lesbians are socialized in the same way as heterosexual women in our culture and thus experience similar pressure to value thinness. Interestingly, two participants desired surgery even though they felt fine with their bodies in general: "I'm relatively happy with my body. I'd say that if I had the money, I would get plastic surgery... maybe a little nip and tuck. I'm not too stressed about the body" (Laura). However, there was an awareness of how detrimental this value is and a desire to get away from it even as they found it hard not to measure body satisfaction in terms of weight. Pamela explained her struggle:

I hope I'm not trying to fit this always "skinnier is better" thing but I do want to look...I think about like 'be more fit, look more fit' and so I'd like to think that that's not...that probably is internalizing the whole thinness culture in some way but I try not to feel overly fucked up about it.

Participants overall felt good about their bodies even as they talked about pressures to be thin. This adds to previous literature on lesbians' rebellion against cultural standards of thinness for women (Beren et al., 1997), as well as suggestions that with increased age and time since coming out, lesbians become more comfortable with their body image (Pitman, 1999). Participants had internalized the thin-ideal in some ways as they discussed a desire to lose weight, but were also able to think critically about cultural standards. This allowed them to define their bodies in a more positive way even as they recognized that they did not fit the body ideal for women.

One exception to the above was Leanne, who had an extremely negative body image and reported never having felt good about her body. She seemed to be more openly affected by media images of women than the other participants ("I do picture that, you know, the perfect body that we see pretty much portrayed in most places. That is what I feel I'm supposed to look

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like”), and experienced her body image strictly in terms of appearance and weight: “Since I can remember being old enough to think about it I always thought I was too tall or too fat....I’m constantly one of those trying to diet, trying to... you know, look better.” Based on previous literature suggesting that lesbian women are not protected from the sociocultural thin-ideal and do experience similar levels of body dissatisfaction to heterosexual women (Bergeron & Senn, 1998), this finding was not unexpected and shows how lesbian women can be affected by the dominant cultural values for women’s appearance.

Although it is not clear what made Leanne’s experience so different from the other participants, she did not feel feminism impacted the way she thought about the thin-ideal for women as the others did, she endorsed a more feminine appearance than all the participants (with the exception of Laura), and she seemed to have more limited involvement with an LGBT community (she primarily spoke of having friends rather than a cohesive community). She discussed a lack of lesbian space, but did not feel that this limited involvement played a role in her body image. Her valuing of traditional notions of feminine appearance as portrayed by the media seemed to be an important factor in her negative body image compared to the other participants who endorsed more androgynous presentation styles (Ludwig & Brownell, 1999). Her experience also suggests the importance of LGBT communities in lesbians’ self-concept and how they feel about their bodies (Dworkin, 1989; McCarthy, 2000), despite her own lack of acknowledgement about the utility of these communities.

***1.2 Ambivalence about being a larger woman.*** 2 participants (who were actually in a relationship together) were large women who were ashamed about their weight and sad that they could not be accepted in society either by lesbians or straight people: “It would be odd to think that there would be anywhere that Frances and I would fit in and people would not be

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horrified at our weight” (Carla). The lack of acceptance of fatness from society certainly seemed to play into their own body shame, as Carla acknowledged it as “the thing I hate most about myself” and both women emphasized an extreme desire to lose weight. As Frances said, “I wish that I could find a way of eating and exercising that the weight would come off naturally and I wouldn’t be so...focused on it, that I could focus on my life, not my weight.” Their accounts are similar to previous qualitative studies in which lesbians have expressed fat stigma and a desire for thinness (Kelly, 2007; Pitman, 2000).

At the same time however, they were not completely negative and even expressed pride and love for their bodies. Frances sometimes felt positively about her body, adding that “it’s strange, sometimes I feel proud to be a large woman and take up the space I do and to have that kind of power that comes with being a large woman and having a large voice and speaking up.” This pride in “taking up space” is a feminist ideal (Smolak & Munsterteiger, 2002). Although they looked at their weight as negative and unsightly according to the traditional ideal for women’s bodies, they also were able to appreciate their bodies as a way to claim a powerful space for themselves as nonconforming women.

This body image empowerment seemed related to their acceptance and ownership of their sexuality. They both discussed destructive and objectifying relationships with men in the past (Frances referred to feeling like she was “a piece of meat”) and it seemed that their acceptance of their sexual orientation freed them to truly accept their bodies. Carla succinctly said,

I did not really start to really like my body until I accepted my sexuality. My body...felt like something that was more holding me back and it wasn’t until I really started to embrace my sexuality that I really started to appreciate my body.

Accepting their lesbian identity allowed them to create space for a more positive and

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holistic sense of their bodies in which they could feel confident in themselves as both lesbians and larger women. This finding is in line with research linking lesbian identity with a rejection of fat stigma. There seemed to be a tension between the women's shame based on how they were viewed by society versus their understanding of themselves as empowered lesbians rejecting oppressive femininity ideals (Brown, 1987; Pitman, 1999). Through their physical presence they would not be limited to the passivity of traditional femininity and this allowed them to accept themselves as large women.

*1.3 Appreciating what the body can do rather than its appearance.* This theme represents 4 women's emphasis on health and how their body feels rather than how it looks. When asked about her body image, Carla felt her body was "such a wonderful, such an amazing thing, that it can go through so much and it has gone through so much. I've had...a very extraordinary life and my body still goes so I feel very positive about that." Although she felt badly about her weight, this was in terms of not treating herself better and a need to be healthier rather than just be thinner. She talked about what her body could *do* and how healthy she was, which seemed to be the most important aspect of how she valued her body. Similarly, Michelle also described her body in terms of how it served as an expression of her personality:

I feel strong and competent which is part of my body identification... I feel good about my body. I like that I feel strong and I feel in my skin. I don't feel reserved to project what I'm feeling inside... I feel like I'm an outer projection of what's inside so I like that.

Previous research has focused on lesbians' value of fitness over simply thinness (Beren et al., 1997) and the rejection of the thin-ideal, but this conceptualization of body image as a feeling instead of in terms of appearance has not been explored. These participants' focus on what their

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bodies could do and how they felt seemed to result in a much more holistic and positive sense of body image than has traditionally been found among women (Brand et al., 1992). Instead they discussed their bodies in a gender non-conforming way. Like men, they talked about the physical capabilities of the body and had much less body shame and surveillance than is associated with many heterosexual women (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Theorists have suggested that lesbians are less likely to internalize the thin-ideal and engage in self-objectification (Brown, 1987) and one study on objectification theory linking sexual objectification to self-objectification (which is subsequently linked to body dissatisfaction and eating pathology), suggested that lesbian identity may protect against self-objectification or body surveillance (Noffsinger-Frazier, 2004). The present findings of low levels of body surveillance correspond to this research and suggests that there are ways in which lesbians are able to think about their bodies in a more “masculine” way. They define themselves apart from cultural standards to create a positive body identification, valuing strength and action rather than the passivity of thinness. This is a finding that warrants future exploration among lesbian women, as it has not been fully examined (i.e. how this positivity develops, how they maintain this sense of themselves in the face of objectification) in previous literature.

**Theme 2 Finding Body Acceptance in Limited Lesbian Spaces.** The second superordinate theme represents all 8 participants' experiences connecting with LGBT communities. Lesbian connections played a crucial role in helping participants feel good about themselves and their bodies but there was a lack of lesbian space here in Central PA. This made it difficult for many to find a place within the small communities that did exist. Although community played such an important role in participants' self-concept and body image, the lack of resources and the homophobic area prevented a strong community of women from taking root.

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**2.1 *Feeling attractive and valued within lesbian communities.*** 6 women felt that their connections to a lesbian or LGBT community as they were coming out had been influential in their understanding of their bodies as beautiful. Finding other lesbians to connect with had an immense effect on participants' ability to develop their own sense of identity as lesbian women and their feelings about their bodies. Participants talked about the positive impact of lesbian communities during their coming out process as they struggled to feel comfortable with themselves as part of a stigmatized minority. Karen, who spent many years denying her sexual orientation and feeling much shame about it, said that finding a lesbian community "was vibrant, engaging, it was exciting" and that "getting involved with other people who were like me and who were unlike me but accepted me meant that I was...hey, I'm cool, I'm sexy, this is me. I'm good." There was an emphasis on valuing "the woman" inside rather than appearance within lesbian communities. This corresponds to Myers and colleagues' (1998) study suggesting that finding lesbian communities had a positive impact on how lesbians viewed their bodies by allowing them to reject the thin-ideal. Most participants in the present study did feel that they were not as confined to the thin-ideal and appearance concerns as heterosexual women. Kathryn verbalized the impact that her connection to queer communities had:

Thank god for the gays and the queers... gosh, if that [the heterosexual culture's body ideal for women] was my point of reference for body image, I think life would be a whole other can of worms....I do feel very comfortable in the community and I feel like in the community it's very accepting of very different body images that aren't portrayed by the media or the heterosexual world.

These accounts support theories that lesbian communities do create a safe haven from the objectification of the heterosexual world (Brown, 1987). Finding lesbian communities are central

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to feeling comfortable with one's identity and body image as a lesbian. The participants' continued need for lesbian connections also seemed to be important for positive body image even after having established their identities as lesbian women (Krakauer & Rose, 2002). Establishing a strong community base when coming out as lesbian and maintaining connections as they continued with their adult lives allowed participants to feel comfortable in their own skin away from the influence of sociocultural ideals for women.

**2.2 Black and Beautiful: The Black Community and Body Image.** Laura was the only African American participant and her racial identity had a strong influence on her body image. She had a positive sense of her body and did not worry about conforming to the thin-ideal. This resistance was driven in part by her Black community of origin. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) has discussed African American communities as spaces where larger physiques are appreciated and Black women can accept their bodies and critique normative ideology for women. In fact, Laura discussed the lack of pressure to be thin as a Black woman:

I don't think it's as strong in the Black community... We like our women curvier, healthier, with some meat on their bones. So I don't think there's as much pressure to be thin in our community as there is in the European community.

As a result, being thin was not something Laura worried about and she was happy about her body. Her connection to this community and lack of identification with the dominant ideal of thin, White women also allowed her to find a positive identification with her body. She spoke of being a teenager and not being able to identify with women in magazines because they looked nothing like the women she grew up with:

Looking at...*Seventeen*, we used to just laugh at all the White women, like 'Look how skinny they are!' It just didn't, we couldn't make a connection with those



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women because they looked nothing like anybody we interacted with.

Rather than look to these images of women as something to aspire to, Laura was able to laugh at the impossibility of attaining this appearance because the community she grew up in had such a positive view of women's bodies. Previous research has supported the idea that African American women experience less pressure to be thin and are less self-critical about weight (Greenberg & LaPorte, 1996; Lovejoy, 2001). This is most likely in part due to the greater acceptance of body sizes within their communities. As a result, Laura felt ties to both lesbian and Black communities, two communities which valued women's bodies regardless of shape and size, allowing her freedom to love her own body.

**2.3 *Where is the lesbian voice? The silence of Central PA.*** All participants were concerned with the lack of space for queer people, and lesbians in particular. They knew lesbians who did not feel comfortable being out in this area due to homophobia, and were frustrated with this and their subsequent need to find communities in larger urban areas. Laura had not found a community in the area and compared it with her experience in Philadelphia: "It's a little too narrow for me. I'm used to a larger urban area with lots of resources. Central Pennsylvania just doesn't have that. I have met many folks who identify as LGBT. I would say 90% of them are closeted so for someone who is not, it's a challenge." Participants found it difficult to maintain connections with a community and some said that they would be moving to a new area so that they could be in a vibrant and engaging lesbian space. Given past research suggesting that LGBT communities are important for lesbian women to feel comfortable expressing themselves without "hiding" as heterosexual (McCarthy, 2000; Myers et al., 1998), it is not surprising that many women felt uncomfortable and desired to live elsewhere.

Rural lesbians have limited access to communities, and the connections that they are able

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to make are essential but they may still be too limiting (McCarthy, 2000). Michelle was able to commute to a larger city occasionally, but still found it frustrating to live her daily life in a space where other women could not be open about their sexuality. On the other hand, there did seem to be space for lesbian mothers like Leanne and Karen in the area, but this small community of lesbian mothers did not really promote community among single lesbians or those without children. Michelle discussed: "I don't know if in the Harrisburg area I really get together just with a group of lesbians by virtue of being lesbian" which made her feel alone as a single lesbian mother trying to date. This finding sheds light on the work that needs to be done in Central Pennsylvania to carve a safe space for women to be out and form communities, particularly since they described the connections they did have as being so positive and important to them.

**2.3 *Fat<sup>2</sup> lesbians: You're always pushed into another subgroup.*** All the lesbians found that there was not much space for lesbian women, and Frances and Carla felt even more unable to find lesbian communities because of stigma related to their weight. They did not feel that lesbians were welcoming of diverse bodies as other participants had noted and Carla described the struggle to find acceptance with lesbian women: "I didn't feel like I was part of that group, I felt like a part of another subgroup. Here I was not only a lesbian that pushed me out of the mainstream and into this pocket of people and now out of this pocket of people I was still strange and odd." Frances added that the lesbian community is not accepting of fat women and is just as fat phobic as the heterosexual community. This finding sheds light on differences between women's experiences as lesbian women and finding community based on their bodies. Although normal weight to overweight women felt accepted and did not see prejudice taking place, those who were much heavier, felt excluded and were unable to make the connections that had been so

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<sup>2</sup> I recognize that this term is often considered pejorative. However, my usage is in line with emerging scholarship in "fat studies" that reclaim the word fat as descriptive and dissociated from stigma (Rothblum & Solovay, 2009).

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beneficial to others. However, Leanne also felt that lesbians had the same standards for appearance as heterosexual women and that “there is no unwritten rule that lesbians shouldn't care about body image,” even though she did not fit this category of being a large lesbian. This certainly does not correspond with Pamela's belief that many lesbians have taken up the cause of fighting fat stigmatization, which Brown (1987) theorized. Rather, it corresponds to findings that many lesbian women consider lesbian subcultures to have their own standards for attractiveness which often include valuing thinness and denigrating fat women (Beren et al., 1997; Pitman, 2000). Although lesbians have been found to be more accepting of women's bodies, many do not completely reject the dominant culture's values and in this area of limited lesbian space Carla and Frances were unable to find a fully accepting community of women.

Interestingly, Carla and Frances did speak about going to meetings for a national organization for large lesbians but found they could not actually relate to it because the group was so anti-health. Frances verbalized, “It's one thing to be a large woman but it's another thing to not care about your health, to not care at all about what you eat or what you do or whether you exercise or go to the doctor,” and Carla added that it seemed “like propaganda almost to convince themselves that being fat was okay.” In order to find women who accepted them for their size, Carla and Frances needed to let go of a desire to lose weight and be healthy; because they did not agree with this perspective, they were left with no community to turn to. Important to note is that most of the other participants had prior experience with extensive communities of lesbians in more urban areas or college settings whereas Carla and Frances did not. Perhaps in more active LGBT and lesbian communities where there are more resources and people feel comfortable being out, larger women can find a space to feel accepted.

**Theme 3 Dealing with Femininity and Objectification.** The third theme incorporates

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all the participants when they were younger, as they struggled to transition into their lesbian identities in the face of stereotypes and the dominant cultural ideas about femininity. They also talked about how their identity and relationships with women were affirming and positive changes from the way they felt about their bodies with men.

**3.1 Connecting masculinity to lesbianism.** 7 participants (only excluding Laura, who was very feminine and described herself as being considered a “lipstick lesbian” in the community) linked femininity with heterosexuality in many ways and had to deal with this connection as they came to terms with their sexuality to create a sense of lesbian identity and comfortable gender presentation. When asked how images of women in the dominant culture affected her, Pamela discussed how they all depict femininity in relation to heterosexuality:

Almost all images of, I think about femininity, are very heterosexual. I mean it's a particular idea about gender where femininity is like the opposite of masculinity, it compliments masculinity...it's really hard to think about images that you get of what femininity is that are not directly connected to or framed, or contextualized within a heterosexual framework.

Hammidi and Kaiser (1999) discuss beauty as a system which places femininity and beauty within the realm of heterosexuality in which lesbians are relegated to being outside this system. This connection leaves little room for lesbians to experience themselves as feminine outside of the context of heterosexuality.

Sexual identity was very connected to gender and affected the way women thought about their bodies, particularly as they transitioned into their sense of self and sexuality as lesbian. Karen had felt badly about being mistaken for a man before she had accepted her sexuality because she connected homosexuality with masculinity and was so ashamed of the sexual

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feelings she was having: "It [being mistaken for a man] was always a hot button issue because I was hiding being gay of course and I couldn't accept it." She even tried dressing in more feminine clothes and reading women's magazines to be more feminine and become heterosexual until she finally was able to accept her sexual orientation and feel comfortable with who she was and with her gender presentation. Her experiences correspond to the idea that lesbian women are stereotyped as unattractive and masculine, lying outside of the feminine, heterosexual system (Dew, 1985; Hammidi & Kaiser, 1999). Other participants who did not link masculinity to homosexuality so directly still described their coming out stages in life as dressing in a more butch, masculine style to signal and confirm their sexual identity. Frances verbalized that she used to dress butch when she came out: "I was trying to fit into a lesbian, what I thought was fitting into a lesbian community... I felt like I had to fit a stereotype."

Interestingly, none of the participants currently identified as butch. All expressed a comfortable combination of masculine and feminine qualities, perhaps due to their older age and greater length of time in LGBT communities where they had become confident in their sexual identities (Krakauer & Rose, 2002). As out adult lesbians, they were more able to resist thinking of themselves as needing to conform to what mainstream society considered desirable while still embracing the aspects of femininity they found positive (similar themes have been found by Ludwig & Brownell, 1999). Women who endorsed an androgynous appearance rejected dominant ideals of femininity and found a comfortable way of expressing themselves without completely relying on masculine or feminine qualities. In the beginning, claiming a lesbian identity through the body was very important, and was connected to masculinity because of the dominant culture's association between femininity and heterosexuality. Only once they were comfortable with themselves as lesbians were these women able to become more comfortable

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claiming space for feminine and masculine attributes outside of a heterosexual context.

**3.2 Avoiding media and finding positive feminist women.** All participants expressed negative feelings about women's portrayal in the media and dominant conceptualizations about women's appearance. Leanne described her negative feelings about her body and the role of the media: "I don't know if it compounds it or just kind of reinforces that I already don't like my body." Frances added that looking at magazines and images of women just reinforced for her, "you're large, you're not the norm, you're not what pretty is, you're not what acceptable is. This is how you should be." This finding is not surprising given the body of existing research linking media representations of women to body objectification and subsequently dissatisfaction and negative eating attitudes among heterosexual women (Haines et al., 2008).

4 participants said that they purposely avoided media outlets and sought out positive feminist messages. Carla did not have a television and resisted exposure to the sociocultural ideal on a daily basis: "when you see billboards or magazine ads, it's almost like you're not, since you haven't been bombarded with it, you have your sense about you again and you can see how horrible it is for people to be treating women like they are." Michelle also felt this way about dominant conceptions of femininity: "I don't have a television at home. And I go out of my way to make sure that my son in particular, is exposed to really positive female role models." She not only shielded herself and children from exposure to media images of women, she used a feminist critique ("We talk a lot about the meaning behind the image"), and filled her life with positive feminist connections as a way to not care about oppressive ideals. Participants (with the exception of Leanne) who did not mention avoiding dominant media outlets did talk about how feminist critiques and feminist connections with other women allowed them to feel positively about their bodies and resist comparing themselves to idealized bodies. Kathryn's feminist ties

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and involvement were how she learned to love and accept her body in the face of the thin-ideal and she said that “those are the elements that I draw upon on a day to day basis when body image becomes an issue.” These women who were able to avoid notions of what women should look like and how they should behave according to the media and heterosexual culture in general, were able to form a more positive sense of themselves as women and their body image. This provides an example to expand upon existing research on the role of feminism on women's body image (i.e. mixed findings from Cogan, 1999 and Dionne, Davis, Fox, Gurevich, 1995), in that those who actively critique the thin-ideal and have positive connections with other feminist women may experience more satisfaction than those who do not.

**3.3 To men I was just a piece of meat: Finding one's worth with women.** All of the participants felt that their romantic relationships with women had been positive for their sense of body image. 6 participants had been in romantic relationships with men as well as women. They did not feel as comfortable with their bodies when they were with men, whereas their relationships with women served to validate them and give them confidence that they were beautiful. Frances said her experiences with men “were always very negative...They weren't physically enjoyable, they weren't emotionally enjoyable...My body was just a piece of meat for them to use however they wanted to use it and it was degrading and terrifying.” Other participants simply felt that they could not be themselves in relationships with men and felt a lot more self-conscious about their bodies. Laura said “I was very aware of whatever look they wanted me to have.... My identity was wrapped up into their happiness.” These relationships with men were often sexually objectifying and the participants internalized these experiences objectified themselves (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996). Kathryn stated: “body image was probably more self-conscious than I have been with women.” This

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supports the idea that lesbian women are not immune to sexually objectifying experiences and within the heterosexual context they are much more vulnerable to internalizing these ideals because of male defined standards of attractiveness (Brown, 1987; Rothblum, 1994).

Relationships with women on the other hand, were very positive for all participants' body image and some participants considered their experiences with female partners to be an important factor in finally helping them accept their bodies. Carla said that with her female partner, "I feel beautiful. I feel loved, I feel whole. I don't hate my body, I don't hate my scars, I don't hate the wrinkles or the flab... any of it because I feel so loved and I feel sexy and I feel beautiful and I love it." Participants felt more comfortable to be themselves and love their bodies with their past and/or present sexual relationships with women, which provided a freedom from the "prescriptions of patriarchal society" (Dworkin, 1989, p. 28). They did not feel objectified and knew their partner would love them regardless of their weight and appearance: "She's never been the type of person that would care one way or the other if I weighed 500 pounds or 100 pounds and I would feel the same for her" (Leanne). This finding reinforces the idea that within sexual relationships with women, lesbians experience less sexual objectification because they do not have to conform to a male-defined standard of attractiveness (Rothblum, 1994). Sexual and romantic relationships with women were fulfilling and provided asylum from uncomfortable and often oppressive, relationships with men and dominant messages of what women should be.

### **Bisexual Sample**

In analyzing the six interviews with bisexual women, four superordinate themes emerged which incorporated how they felt about their bodies, their experiences with lesbian and feminist communities, and their romantic relationships with men and women (see Table 4). Results and discussion are presented together as with the lesbian sample.



**Theme 1 Body Image: The Tension between Judging and Experiencing Body.**

Participants experienced their bodies both in terms of how they looked and how they felt. There was a tension between a focus on weight and shape but at the same time, half of the participants could also appreciate the strength and feel of their body in a more holistic way. Although an objectified sense of the body was prevalent in their discussions, most recognized that this was an oppressive way of thinking and tried not to let it impact their lives.

*1.1 Objectifying the body and weight concerns.* This theme describes how 5 of the participants described their bodies in an objectifying way that focused on their weight and appearance, suggesting that their body image concerns are similar to those of heterosexual women (Moore & Keel, 2003; Polimeni et al., 2009). This focus had a major impact on how some of the participants lived their daily lives. Angela admitted to dwelling on her body's appearance and trying to fit a strict standard of thinness:

I feel like I'm constantly trying to beat it into submission or mold it shape, shape it... I think about it a lot. I obsess and worry about food and exercise. A lot.

Certainly my concerns about my belly chub affect how I eat every day and affect my fitness and if I don't work out I have a lot of feelings of... I obsess about it quite frankly.

Not all the participants found their weight concerns to have such importance in their daily lives, but they did objectify themselves and had internalized sociocultural standards for women's bodies ("I feel like I would be so much happier if I weighed 10 pounds less" (Samantha)) (Bergeron & Senn, 1998; Dworkin, 1989).

This corresponds to previous literature suggesting that bisexual women cannot escape dominant ideas about women's bodies and may be even more affected than lesbian women due

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to their conflicted position in the lesbian subculture and the heterosexual culture (Rust, 1995; Taub, 1999). Supporting this idea is Molly's response to what she felt was positive about her body:

I love my boobs. That's like the best thing I have. It gets you what you want at the bar, you know... it gets you noticed but at the same time I don't like them because they are big and they hurt sometimes. But that's like my pride right there.

As objects of desire to men (she referenced them only in a heterosexual context), her breasts were what she loved most about her body even though they served as a physical inconvenience to her. This highlights the role that men's objectifying view of women plays in the way that women then think about their bodies (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997). Overall, the participants suggested that bisexual women are not immune to body dissatisfaction. They express the same concerns as heterosexual women, desiring thinness and attractiveness as conceptualized by the broader culture which objectifies women.

**1.2 Trying to appreciate the body.** There was also a recognition that this objectified way of thinking was detrimental and 5 participants focused on health and how their body felt even as they worried about appearance. Only one participant (Jane) did not view her body in an objectified way at all: "I feel super positively about my body... I've been able to push aside the idea that I need to critically examine myself in the mirror... I don't have a lot of shameful associations with my body as a sexual or physically presented thing." She experienced her body in a very physical and spiritual way whereas the other participants experienced a tension between how they thought about the health versus appearance of their bodies: "there's this tension between how do I judge my body as opposed to how do I experience my body, how do I feel in my body rather than how I think about it" (Kelly). They were aware that the health of their body

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was the most important thing and overall prized strength (“I’m proud of what it’s capable of...I really like my strength” (Angela)), and how they felt in their bodies but it was difficult to completely abstain from valuing appearance.

This overall desire to focus on experiencing the body as opposed to judging it suggests that as queer (and feminist) women, these participants seemed to think a lot about the ways women are traditionally expected to look and critiqued these ideas while recognizing (and being frustrated by) their own participation. The findings highlight bisexual women’s focus on appreciating their bodies and not objectifying them, as has been found in research on lesbian women (Beren et al., 1997). This suggests that their position as somewhat outside the dominant heterosexual culture allows them to critique notions of how women’s bodies should be and focus on feeling healthier themselves (Brown, 1987). However, their socialization within a heterosexual culture objectifying women played a stronger role for these bisexual women (Dworkin, 1989).

**Theme 2 The Struggles of Being a Bisexual Woman.** This theme encompasses the struggles that participants faced as both outsiders to and participants in heterosexuality. They seemed to fit into a space in between feminine and masculine, heterosexual and lesbian, and struggled to find a place where they could be free to express themselves outside of these boundaries. Complicating this issue were their feelings that they were misunderstood and not accepted by lesbian women or heterosexual men.

**2.1 Existing in a boundary between real womanhood and lesbians.** Three participants struggled with dominant conceptions of gender and sexuality as women who were attracted to both men and women. Masculinity was associated with homosexuality and these participants expressed discomfort with their masculine qualities. They felt that these gendered qualities as

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well as their sexuality placed them further outside of the dominant culture and “real womanhood.” There was a fear of appearing too masculine (i.e. lesbian) and a desire to present feminine qualities, but the heterosexual system (viewing femininity and masculinity as mutually exclusive) made a comfortable and open expression of gender difficult for them. As queer women, they struggled to find a place within the dominant gender and sexual orientation dichotomies, as has been discussed by Hammidi & Kaiser (1999). Mary voiced this struggle:

Because I feel like I don't fit sort of the media images or these ideals about what a woman is supposed to look like, that I'm perceived as less sexual or perceived as not.... Yeah, that I'm sort of, not just am I outside of the ideal of look but the ideal sexuality, so I'm outside of femininity a bit. I just sort of exist in this sort of boundary in between real womanhood and lesbians or something.

She did not completely fit the ideal for femininity in women in terms of sexual orientation, but she also did not completely fit into a lesbian identity, which was conceptualized as the opposite of femininity. As bisexuals, women were somewhere between “real womanhood and lesbians” and this position was considered oppressive rather than a way to transcend the dominant binary. This corresponds to previous literature discussing bisexual women's adherence to traditional gender scripts in sexual relationships (Pennington, 2009). Angela also discussed a need to conform to a heterosexual standard of femininity and not express masculine characteristics. As a teenager, her mother had assumed she was a lesbian because she dressed like a tomboy and this experience continued to cause anxiety about presenting herself as feminine and hence, heterosexual: “I always try to look feminine. Always, I never leave the house without make-up. I think I have some concern that I am an inherently masculine-looking person so I get anxious... ‘what will they think if I'm not wearing make-up?’” This corresponds to findings that bisexual

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women conform to heteronormative scripts in relationships with men rather than deviating from traditional gender norms (Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994), but further suggests that bisexual women deal with these struggles in their daily lives regardless of their relationships.

The connection between their gender presentation and sexuality was something these participants thought about a lot, and they struggled with their position outside of both heterosexuality and homosexuality. Kelly explained feeling “fundamentally different” from other people and feeling insecure about her gender presentation:

At the same time that I have a very feminine figure in some ways...there's something about me and my energy or something that I observe and that other people have reflected back to me is very butch and that is usually reflected back to me as a criticism...it's something I worry about.

Although they are outside of heterosexuality, bisexual women still may have desires to attract men as well as women, causing insecurity about correct gender performance, as has been theorized (Rothblum, 1994). Kelly and Mary in particular, found it important to be acknowledged and cared for by men (“I want to find men who... really care about me and see me. That's something I desire very strongly” (Kelly)), and Angela was currently in a relationship with a man. This desire to appeal to heterosexual men as a cause of these insecurities makes sense in light of research suggesting that bisexual women think about their bodies and gender differently depending on the gender of their partner (Taub, 1999), as well as research on lesbian women's struggles with gender, primarily as they first begin to develop their sexual identities (Krakauer & Rose, 2002). Unlike previous literature however, these bisexual women struggled with gender presentation even outside of relationships with men, suggesting that contrary to past findings, these bisexual women are still confined by dominant gender binaries in same-sex

relationships.

**2.2 Lesbian suspicion and male eroticization of bisexual women.** All 6 participants felt sexualized by men as a “hot bisexual babe” (Jane), and/or simultaneously judged by lesbian women. This complicated their relationships and their comfort with their bodies with men, as well as their ability to connect and form relationships with women. Samantha stated, “I feel like the two groups of people that I would be involved in a relationship with both have these preconceptions around bisexuality that influences our relationships but are about different issues.” These participants’ negotiations of preconceived notions of bisexuality thus negatively impacted their relationships with both heterosexual men and lesbian women.

*Eroticization of bisexuality by men.* All participants had either experienced men sexualizing them or knew of the phenomenon, which seemed to contribute to their self-objectification. Although Kelly found this to be positive and a way for her to feel attractive to heterosexual men as a queer woman, she, along with the other participants acknowledged that it was demeaning in a way:

I’ve found that I could be queer and still be attractive to men to very affirming of myself in a way that I really craved. I’m not proud, like from a feminist point of view that bothers me, I judge that reaction but... I like that I can turn men on by finding women attractive.

As a bisexual woman desiring heterosexual male attention, Kelly did enjoy being able to attract men, but she and the other participants also found it frustrating and an obstacle to building relationships with men. Limited previous research has suggested that bisexuals are stereotyped as promiscuous and sexually adventurous (Spalding & Peplau, 1997), and participants had to deal with this assumption that male partners made. Angela said that when she told men she was

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bisexual, “the reaction has been ‘Oh, so you’re into threesomes’... and ‘Oh that’s hot, that’s sexy.’” She added that this common reaction, “it does make me feel like that partner does not see my previous relationships as legitimate or like a real emotional component.” Her experiences with men making these assumptions about her bisexuality made her feel like she could not communicate certain things about herself and other participants also perceived these stereotypes as detrimental to relationships with men. With the objectified ways that heterosexual women view themselves due to their experiences with objectification by men and exposure to sexualized images of women (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997), bisexual women face an added layer of objectification which not only complicates their romantic relationships, but contributes to their body image issues as they internalize the sexual objectification of male partners (see theme 4 for full discussion of male sexual objectification).

*Lesbians’ mistrust of bisexual women.* Relationships with lesbians on the other hand, were complicated by lesbian stereotypes of bisexual women as unable to commit to a lesbian identity and prevented participants from gaining full access to the positive effects of lesbian communities on body image. Jane felt that lesbian women were not completely accepting of bisexual women and did not trust them to keep up the cause of legitimating lesbian relationships:

There’s definitely some tension between me and lesbian women who feel that you’re not a real lesbian unless you only date women and you’ll eventually run back to the boys. There’s already enough trouble with the general public giving lesbian relationships proper respect and in some ways being bisexual deligitimizes that. That if men are still included in the equation, there’s still that association that those have a better structural value.

This inhibited bisexual women from forming connections not only with potential female

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partners, but from feeling fully supported by lesbian friends within LGBT communities, as has been found previously (McLean, 2008). They were not granted to the same access to lesbian communities, and hence many were not surrounded by the body-positive messages and rejection of thinness culture that lesbian participants had been. The frustration of not feeling entitled to a bisexual identity and being mistrusted and judged by lesbians perhaps contributed to their greater body surveillance than the lesbian sample.

Although bisexual women can choose partners outside of this gay-straight dichotomy (i.e. bisexual women and men), these participants overwhelmingly discussed issues specific to relationships with lesbian women and heterosexual men as important struggles with their identity. They were caught between being objectified by men who viewed bisexuality as a turn-on and judgmental lesbians, as Rust (1995) has discussed, which may have prevented them from completely embracing lesbian community ideals of challenging traditional heterosexual conceptions of women's bodies.

**Theme 3 Finding Body Affirmation from the LGBT Community and Feminism.** All participants reported positive experiences with LGBT communities and feminist ideals in terms of their body image. However, they did not feel completely free from normative ideology and were still affected by the thin-ideal. Their position outside of the heterosexual-homosexual binary contributed to their conflicting feelings about their bodies even as they participated in LGBT communities and feminist critiques.

**3.1 Feeling safe and accepted (for the most part) in LGBT communities.** Although some participants often did not feel their identities were validated by lesbian women, all participants found LGBT connections essential to feel safe and comfortable. Kelly said

It is incredibly rare for me to find an environment in which I feel safe being truly



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authentic in my sexuality. I need to locate them [queer people] wherever I go because if I don't have that I feel harassed in a sense of never being able to truly be myself.

Although she was frustrated by lesbian suspicion of her sexual identity, she did feel in community with queer people and needed that sense of connection to feel safe. McLean (2008) suggested that bisexual women do find support from LGBT communities although they are not as accepted as lesbians and gay men. Angela said that the community helped her feel better about herself as a queer woman and her experience allowed her to express herself more freely without worrying about presenting a feminine gender presentation:

It made me a lot more confident. It made me feel good to have people that I could be open with... I just didn't feel the need to pretend to be someone that at the time I was clearly not. I didn't feel the same amount of pressure to dress in a girly way... I was a little closer to natural.

Whereas without these connections, she was obsessed with maintaining a heteronormative and feminine appearance appealing to men, with the LGBT community she was a part of, she felt more confident and free. No longer a part of any community because of her move to Central PA, she again felt the need to hide her sexuality and worried about her body. These findings support the idea that bisexual women do desire a sense of community with queer people and that these communities can help women achieve a more positive sense of their bodies, as previous literature has suggested (McLean, 2008; Rust, 1995). Given the insecurity lesbian women caused some participants, further acceptance of bisexuality and the idea of female sexuality as fluid could allow these communities to be even more positive for bisexual women and allow them to embrace their bodies more fully.

*3.2 Feminism can provide body affirmation but it goes head-to-head with normative ideology.* Although all participants felt that feminist connections and critiques had a positive impact on the way they thought about their bodies, there was also a tension between these feminist ideals and broader sociocultural ideals about women's bodies. Mary's feminist ideas helped her feel more comfortable with her body but she was currently disconnected from feminist women and as a result, she struggled more with body image than she had in the past:

I think cultural messages about bodies and what a woman should look like are very strong and I think if you don't have a community or you don't have a lot of constant reinforcement about just being okay to not look like these idealized images, it's pretty hard.

The relationship between feminism and body image was complicated by types of feminist connections and their duration, as it was difficult for some participants to continue to critique the thin-ideal and not feel the need to conform to it unless they had constant reinforcement from feminist connections. Research has been mixed as to the effects of feminist ideals on body satisfaction, with some finding that there is no relationship (Dionne et al., 1995), and others suggesting that feminism protects against body dissatisfaction among both heterosexual and queer women (Murnen & Smolak, 2009). Feminism was found to be a positive influence for these participants in recognizing the objectified ways women were portrayed in society. However, without maintaining connections with other feminist women and ideas, participants were left to dissect dominant ideas of women on their own and these messages of the thin-ideal were very "seductive," according to Angela.

The participants knew that they should not care about thinness and attractiveness as defined by society, but feminist critiques were not enough to free them from internalizing these

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standards and in some cases just made participants feel guilty. Samantha explained,

It's raised consciousness for me to see that system as oppressive instead of buying into it blindly so it just also makes me feel guilty. Instead of having these skinny ideals to live up to, I have skinny ideals to live up to but then I also have this ideal that no, you shouldn't care about your body. You should recognize what it can do for you, not just what it should look like.

Participants felt torn between the idea that they should accept their bodies no matter what and rebel against strict and oppressive heterosexual standards of appearance. They may have still felt the need to conform to these standards in some ways because of their more complicated relationship to heterosexuality. This corresponds to previous research suggesting that lesbian women feel pressure to live up to the ideals of feminism and feel like "bad feminists" if they still value thinness (Beren et al., 1997; Pitman, 2000). Although all participants felt the overall effects of feminist ideals had been positive for them, they still felt pressures to conform to heterosexual standards. Even lesbian women are suggested to not be completely free from idealizing thinness just because they have a feminist critique, and bisexual women still may have to play into the male gaze if they want to be attractive to male partners, as previous literature has discussed (Dworkin, 1989; Rothblum, 1994). This may complicate their relationship to feminism further, preventing them from fully embracing their bodies without placing importance on appearance according to the dominant societal standards.

### **Theme 4 Body Image and Romantic Relationships with Men and Women.**

Participants' romantic relationships with men and women affected how they viewed their bodies. Similarly to lesbian participants, bisexual participants described their experiences with men as often objectifying whereas those with women were characterized by greater emotional bonds and

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an appreciation for the body. However, some participants clarified that feminist men were not objectifying and that relationships with these men could be just as positive and healthy as those with women.

**4.1 Men's objectification and women's appreciation of bodies.** Although some participants had had positive sexual experiences with men, 4 felt more comfortable with their bodies with women (only Samantha did not feel this way and Mary had never had a male partner), and all participants except Mary felt that relationships with women had been affirming for their bodies. Male partners seemed to be more objectifying than women, making participants more aware and self-conscious of their appearance. Angela said about her past relationships with men and women,

On days when I feel like I've had a really good run and I've been working out enough for the last however many days and I've been really careful about what I've eaten then I feel I can really fully enjoy the sexual experience with a man. I don't think that I feel as much ambition with women about needing to feel slim before I feel like I could relax.

Most participants seemed to expect that their male partners cared more about their bodies and how they looked, and this had a negative impact on how they felt about their own bodies. Angela could not fully enjoy sexual experiences with men unless she felt she was closer to conforming to the thin-ideal for women. Objectification Theory states that women's experiences feeling objectified and pressure to conform to sociocultural standards lead them to internalize these standards, causing body image insecurities (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997; Tiggeman & Slater, 2001), and this was evidenced in these bisexual participants' narratives:

Some of my relationships with men early on were really destructive to my body

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image. I felt very objectified by the way that they paid attention to my body and touched my body... I objectified myself and started looking at myself in that piece-meal way (Jane).

These participants felt more insecure with men and found that their relationships with women helped them feel more comfortable and appreciated in their bodies: "Female partners respect and sort of appreciate your body as a whole thing and not for its parts...it's been a tremendously affirming thing to be able to get away from that sort of piece meal objectification" (Jane). They did not feel as constrained to oppressive ideals for women's bodies and could have more open and comfortable relationships: "I think one of the strongest things about my relationships with women is that for so much of my life women are really where I have found myself able to be open to love in truly freeing ways, not bound by the same kinds of restrictions" (Kelly). Their accounts are similar to Taub's finding (1999), that bisexual women think about and perform gender differently with men and women, and many worry about appearance and conforming to an ideal of femininity more with men. Rothblum (1994) theorized that women's reason for attaining dominant ideals for thinness and attractiveness is to attract men, thereby freeing women from feeling this appearance pressure in lesbian relationships. In fact, most participants seemed to find women "more sensitive and caring" (Molly), and did not feel that they had to focus on their bodies as much, allowing them to have more freeing and loving relationships.

**4.2 Body surveillance in relationships with women.** Important to note are Samantha and Mary who had felt self-conscious at times with their female partners. Samantha actually engaged in less body surveillance with her past male partner than her current female partner. She explained that she never felt the need to compare her body with her male partner because they were so different, but her female partner's much less voluptuous body caused her more

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insecurity about the size of her own body. Samantha's partner had a more slender and boyish figure and Samantha's feelings of being larger and curvier comparatively caused her to feel insecure at the beginning of their relationship as she compared the size and shape of their bodies: "Something about the assumed similarities between myself and a female partner made me look at myself in a different way... because of the type of women that I'm interested in that, you know, their bodies are never like mine." Samantha's partner, although a woman, had a more masculine gender, which is most often associated with heterosexual men.

The difference in feminine or masculine gender presentation may play a more important role in Samantha's gender performance and associations with her body than the physical sex of a partner. Pennington (2009) discussed bisexual women's varying gender performance depending on the gender/sex of the partner and Taub (1999) also found that a limited number of women in her study were encouraged to have a more feminine gender presentation with butch lesbian partners. This suggests that dominant scripts for gender performance, modeled after a male-female power differential, may still play out in same-sex relationships. The association of masculinity to men and a greater focus on body appearance (and objectification for many participants), seemed to be a major factor in the body surveillance Samantha engaged in with her female partner, and this is a finding that warrants further exploration.

Mary also discussed feeling insecure about her body with her female partner, although this was precipitated by her partner's body-consciousness. This made her feel like her partner probably thought she was too heavy as she compared her body to her partner's: "I've become more self-conscious around her... I just think her difficulty with her body has really impacted how I look at myself." Watching her partner be so uncomfortable was difficult for Mary and was detrimental to how she thought about herself. Research has not focused on the negative ways that

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women with body image issues may influence their female partners, but these participants suggest that some women may not be able to escape heterosexual expectations for thinness even with other women. Some interviews have discussed how lesbians may still feel pressure to conform to the ideals of femininity they found oppressive because that was the standard of attractiveness (Kelly, 2007; Pitman, 2000). This finding sheds light on the fact even within positive relationships with women, bisexual women still may think about the dominant ideals and judge their bodies accordingly and this can have negative effects for both partners.

**4.3 Seeking feminist men: They're out there.** 3 participants believed that the sex of the partner was not as important as long as a man was a feminist. Samantha did not feel that her past male partner was objectifying and felt completely comfortable with her body with him, describing him as "sensitive and caring" and their relationship as a strong emotional one. Kelly and Jane felt that past relationships with men had been destructive for their body image, so they desired feminist relationships with men where they could be comfortable and love their bodies in a holistic way as they did with women. Jane explained that after having received a lot of objectifying feedback from men and feeling like they only thought of her in terms of her body,

I started seeking out queer relationships regardless of gender...those men I have not gotten that feedback from so it's really more of a feminist, a difference in feminism or in queer relation to one another. It's a difference in relating in a holistic way and getting away from that patriarchal way.

She had successful, healthy relationships with these "queer" men, (who she considered queer due to their feminist and non-patriarchal attitudes), because she did not think such men were inherently more objectifying than women. Kelly craved these kinds of relationships with men: "I crave feminist relationships with men... that's harder to find with men, but also to me, more

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appealing because it represents a real, like achievement.” She discussed feeling like it would be difficult to find a feminist man who could love her freely in a healthy and positive way, but finding him would be a true achievement and was something she really desired. These sentiments echo the participants’ general understanding of greater patriarchal restrictions within their romantic relationships with men but that it was possible to break down these barriers. Although, Taub’s study (1999) did suggest that some bisexual women felt comfortable with men and women and gender did not make a difference for their body image, previous research has not explored this idea of relationships with feminist men and how these can also be free of patriarchal ideals associated with male-female relationships. For these participants, feminist ideals and queer sensibilities (a holistic appreciation of the body and respect for women) were the most important characteristics in feeling comfortable with the body rather than gender.

### **General Discussion**

The present study expands upon limited research on how lesbian and bisexual women experience their bodies and sheds light on some of the social factors that contribute to their sense of body image in a unique way from what has been traditionally studied in heterosexual women. In this general discussion, I will highlight the important new findings uncovered in this study for lesbian and bisexual women separately, and then discuss some areas of similarities and differences between these two samples. I will conclude by reflecting on the role that my own social identities played in the research process, and will consider the transferability of these findings to other people and locations.

### **Lesbian Women**

The present study sheds light on how lesbian women feel about and *in* their bodies and the ways in which they judge their body image. To date, research on lesbian women’s body



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satisfaction has not examined this idea of thinking about how the body feels rather than its appearance. Although participants did often judge their body satisfaction in terms of weight, some emphasized valuing strength and what their bodies could do, which is an important distinction from previous literature that has been primarily focused on weight, (Bergeron et al., 1998). They also did not feel pressured to fit any standards of appearance, contrary to what qualitative studies have discussed, perhaps due to their age and length of time as an “out” lesbian. The present findings point to the possibility for lesbian women to escape the objectified ways women are socialized to think about their bodies. Future qualitative research should further explore whether this understanding of body image is related to women's lesbian identity or comfort with their sexuality, perhaps through comparisons with heterosexual women.

The present study also is new in its examination of the experiences of larger lesbians. The findings add to literature suggesting that there are lesbian women who feel that the lesbian subculture does hold strict appearance and weight standards (Pitman, 2000); however, in the previous literature, the voices of larger lesbians *themselves* have not been heard. The present study points to an issue for lesbian women who are not only devalued in society as larger women and lesbians, but within lesbian spaces as well, rendering them unable to find a place where they can feel truly accepted and attractive. In general, building community with other lesbian women had a very positive influence on body image, adding to literature suggesting that finding lesbian and LGBT communities serves as a buffer against body dissatisfaction (Heffernan, 1996). However, the need for greater resources in which inclusive communities can be created in this area (as well as other more rural areas) is important to address for lesbian women whose need for connections are not being met. Research should continue to explore the experiences of larger lesbians and how they find community for themselves or deal with the lack of support from other

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lesbians.

Lastly, the present study is an important addition to the literature on lesbians' body image in its focus on their sexual relationships with men as well as women. Although previous studies have suggested that lesbians' relationships with women can contribute to their body satisfaction (Beren et al., 1997), none have discussed lesbians' sexual experiences with men and how they might affect the way they felt about their bodies. The present study suggests that sexual experiences with men can be detrimental to body image and contribute to self-objectification among women who currently identify as lesbian. Although this could also be a result of engaging in sexual relationships inconsistent with one's sexual identity, most participants specifically felt that men had objectified their bodies in a detrimental way that they did not find with women. There is a need to discuss the power dynamics of traditional heterosexual relationships and how they affect women in order to educate and break down the oppressive structures contributing to their objectification within these relationships. Future research should explore the effects of sexual experiences with men among both heterosexual and queer women to gain a better understanding of this phenomenon.

### **Bisexual Women**

The present study is, to my knowledge, the first study to fully analyze bisexual women's body image, although a very limited few have examined bisexual women's feelings of appearance pressures and gender presentations in relationships with men and women (Pennington, 2000; Taub, 1999). As such, this study was able to address to a gap in the literature in its discussion of how bisexual women feel about their bodies and the tension some experience as feminist women who want to escape the objectified way women view their bodies, but are still unable to completely rid themselves of these internalized ideals. This tension between feminist

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ideals and normative ideals about women's bodies warrants further exploration as to what types of feminist connections can be protective and how bisexual women can use these feminist strategies in a positive and long-term way even as they desire to attract men.

Another interesting concept first discussed in the present study is bisexual women's experiences with feminist men. Consistent with Objectification Theory, most bisexual participants in the present study did find sexual relationships with men oppressive and objectifying even though they were attracted to men. However, some emphasized the need to find feminist men who were not considered objectifying and helped them feel positively about their bodies much in the same way their relationships with women did. The sex of the partner was not as important as the partner's feminist ideals. This is an interesting idea that warrants further exploration in both bisexual and heterosexual women and points to a potential need for education among young men and women about how to have more feminist, healthy ways of thinking about women's bodies within romantic relationships with men. Furthermore, the finding that some women may be negatively affected by a female partner's body image issues points to an important potential factor in lesbian and bisexual women's body dissatisfaction, which should be examined in future research.

Finally, the present study adds to previous literature discussing the struggle bisexual women face with not feeling accepted by lesbian communities and simultaneously feeling sexualized by heterosexual men, and connects these stigmatizing experiences to bisexual women's body image development. Their experiences of objectification by men and inability to receive full, positive support from lesbians most likely contributed to their seemingly greater self-objectification as compared with lesbian women. This finding sheds light on how bisexual women's struggle between two opposing cultures plays an important role in their body image.

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Their experiences point to the need for greater LGBT resources and education on the fluidity of sexuality (Diamond, 2008) to increase acceptance of bisexuality, which not only affects their sense of comfort with their identity, but also their bodies.

### **Comparisons and Contrasts**

There were a number of ways in which lesbian and bisexual participants' experiences with body image as feminist, queer women were very similar. All women expressed ambivalence about their bodies, lacking a completely positive sense of their bodies and being affected by broader sociocultural standards for appearance. This highlights the overwhelming effects the dominant culture has, and suggests gender socialization is a strong and important factor in body image even for queer and feminist women.

Contributing to this negative body image was participants' struggle with dominant gender and sexuality binaries where, as queer women, they felt they were pushed outside of traditional femininity. This finding among several participants points to the need to feel comfortable with one's sexuality in order to feel truly positive about one's body as well as the need to claim one's sexuality through the body and gender presentation. As femininity is always both paired with heterosexuality and seen as opposite to masculinity in our culture, these queer women found it difficult to claim a comfortable space for them to express themselves in a heterosexist and sexist society (Hammidi & Kaiser, 1999). This should inform future discussions of gender and sexuality binaries and how they devalue femininity.

Furthermore, both groups of women discussed feeling objectified in many sexual experiences with men, whereas they found sexual relationships with women to be more emotionally fulfilling and positive for their body image. This similarity highlights the role that sexual relationships have on how women view their bodies and the need to understand how the

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oppression participants often felt in relationships with men can be challenged.

The positive social factors associated with body image were also similar between bisexual and lesbian women, as they discussed feeling more positive about their bodies within LGBT communities. Similarly, feminist ideology allowed them to critique the thin-ideal and think about their bodies on their own terms, although this relationship seemed a bit more complicated for some bisexual participants. These findings highlight the need to increase feminist and LGBTQ education and resources so that all women can have these support systems in the face of homophobia and male objectification.

There were also some important differences between the two samples. Bisexual women's relationships to LGBT communities and feminist ideals and connections were more complicated than lesbians'. Their greater struggle with self-objectification was perhaps in part due to their lack of complete acceptance from lesbian women and their desire to remain attractive to men, which was difficult to think about outside of conforming to the thin-ideal. It was hard for many participants to completely reject the dominant standards of appearance they felt were necessary to find relationships with men, particularly when they also could not necessarily receive the support they needed from the LGBT community. Given the links among self-objectification, body dissatisfaction and eating disorders, future research should explore these factors in bisexual women, as the present study suggests that they may struggle with body image more than lesbian women.

One important note to make in interpreting bisexual women's greater body dissatisfaction than lesbians' is the age difference between the samples. The lesbian women were older on average than the bisexual women ( $M = 41.5$  and  $28.3$ , respectively), and previous research has suggested that older women may struggle less with body image issues than younger women

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because they are less likely to compare themselves to the thin-ideal (Kozar & Damhorst, 2009).

The bisexual participants were younger overall, which could have contributed to their greater self-objectification. Future research with a younger lesbian sample and older bisexual sample could address this issue.

### **Reflexive Analysis, Limitations, and Transferability**

There are limitations to note in the present study. The aim of the IPA method is to give voice to participants in understanding both how they make sense of their experiences and how the researcher interprets these experiences. As a female undergraduate researcher interviewing adult lesbian and bisexual women, I was very aware of how my presence could impact the research process. I was conscious that my age, body type, and feminine gender presentation could potentially inhibit participants from feeling comfortable disclosing personal information about themselves and their lives. Knowing how uncomfortable discussions of sexuality and body image could be for women whose voices are generally not heard on these topics, I did my best to show how seriously I took my research project and how much I appreciated their time and willingness to share their stories with me. Nearly all participants said that they appreciated being able to think about and discuss these issues. However, it is impossible to assure that participants always feel comfortable and are honest, and I did sense discomfort in a couple of interviewees based on their body language, which suggested that there were times that they both seemed reluctant to fully engage in the conversation. I tried to not push participants into topics they were uncomfortable with, and to be empathic while remaining a neutral listener, but I acknowledge that this discomfort may have limited the responses I received.

Furthermore, my background as a psychology student interested in feminism and sexuality, and my interview questions regarding these topics, may have set a certain tone for the

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participants. I was particularly aware of this in discussions of feminism and sexualization, as many participants referenced a common understanding (which they presumed I shared) of the necessity of feminism and the prevalence of men's objectification. I was always conscious of trying not to lead participants with my questions, but it is possible that in signing up for a study on lesbian and bisexual women, these participants did have more positive feelings about their identities, along with a greater feminist consciousness than the average lesbian or bisexual woman. Thus, other queer women's experiences might be much different.

Finally, the choice to use IPA guided me in the selection of relatively homogenous samples, and so I was not able to explore issues of diversity around race, SES, geographic location, or other meaningful social identities. Participants were all highly educated and likely had much more intellectualized ideas about body image and societal oppression than less educated queer women may have. Less educated participants may have made fewer explicit feminist connections between their experiences with sexist and homophobic treatment and their body image. However, the goal of IPA analysis (and qualitative research in general), is not to generalize to a broad range of people and places (which would be impossible given the small sample size), but to fully explore the experiences of a group of people who fit a certain criteria (Byrnes, 2001). Future research should utilize more diverse samples to address the influence of these demographic and social differences among queer women on their body image. However, despite these limitations, the study accomplishes the goals of qualitative work by painting a complex picture of the experiences of lesbian and bisexual women in a semi-rural area around body image.

### **Conclusion**

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The prevalence of body image issues among heterosexual women has been well-documented, and the importance of understanding these issues so as to allow women to have a healthier sense of their bodies and prevent mental health issues and eating disorders has been well-established in the literature (Cattarin et al., 2000; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The present study adds to this body of literature by identifying body image concerns of queer women and some of their unique experiences as stigmatized and sexualized women that contribute to their sense of their bodies. Findings can direct future research by highlighting the need to understand these women's conceptions of body image within the context of their position as marginalized women in society, and how this can lead to a better understanding of queer women's body dissatisfaction and eating pathology.



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Appendix A

Interview Schedule

## LESBIAN AND BISEXUAL WOMEN'S BODY IMAGE

1. In order for me to get to know a little bit about you, how would you describe the values/expectations of the people around you growing up regarding sexuality and relationships?

2. Do their views impact the way you feel about your sexuality?

3. What is your sexual orientation?

4. Can you tell me about how you realized you identified as lesbian/bisexual?

-How many years have you identified as lesbian/bisexual?

5. Have you come out to family/friends/coworkers...?

6. Can you describe what it was like to come out?

7. Have you ever felt harassed or stigmatized due to your sexual orientation?

8. How did it make you feel?

9. Did it have any impact on the way you present yourself in public?

10. Have you ever felt sexualized due to your sexual orientation? As a lesbian/bisexual, have you been treated as a sexual object by men or women? For instance, that your sexual interactions with women were for the enjoyment of a man?

11. How do you feel your sexual orientation influences the way you dress or present yourself?

12. Do you make an effort to look a certain way, to fit standards for lesbian/bisexual or heterosexual appearance?

13. Do masculine stereotypes of lesbian women and their bodies affect the way you feel about your body or try to present yourself?

14. Do you feel part of an LGBT community?

15. Can you please describe your involvement in an LGBT community in the past or present?

16. How do you feel the community has affected how you feel about yourself as a lesbian/bisexual woman?

## LESBIAN AND BISEXUAL WOMEN'S BODY IMAGE

17. Can you describe how your participation in an LGBT or lesbian/bisexual community has benefited you if at all? Do you receive the support you desire?
18. If bisexual: As a bisexual woman, do you feel that you are accepted by lesbian women?
19. Do you consider yourself a feminist?
20. What does being a feminist mean to you?
21. Why are/aren't you a feminist?
22. Does your feminist identity play a role in how you feel about your body?
23. I'd like to talk now a bit more specifically about your sense of body image. Can you please describe how you feel overall about your body?
24. What about your body do you feel positive about? (why?)
25. Are there any aspects of your body that you are uncomfortable with? (why?)
26. Have you observed any relationship between your sexual orientation and your feelings about your body?  
[If yes] can you tell me more about that relationship?
27. Do you feel that issues of body image are discussed in the lesbian/bisexual community?
28. Who are you able to talk to about body image concerns?
29. Do you feel that your body satisfaction is influenced by the lesbian/bisexual community?
30. Do you feel that your body satisfaction is influenced by heterosexual standards of beauty that you receive from family/friends, the mainstream culture and media images of women etc.
31. How do these images of women make you feel about yourself?
32. In thinking about your sexuality, how do you feel about being the "object" of male attention?
33. How do you feel about being the "object" of female attention?

Relationships:

## LESBIAN AND BISEXUAL WOMEN'S BODY IMAGE

34. What gender have most of your sexual partners been?

35. What gender have most of your partners in committed romantic relationships been?

36. In thinking about your most recent sexual and romantic relationship with a woman, how does/did this relationship impact how you feel about yourself as a lesbian/bisexual woman? Did it change how you felt about your sexual orientation identity?

37. Thinking about your sexual relationship with this partner, how did it affect the way you viewed and felt about your body?

38. Does your comfort or discomfort with your body's appearance affect your enjoyment of sexual encounters in any way? Do body insecurities ever prevent you from engaging in sexual behavior you desire or from enjoying a sexual encounter fully?

-If ever had a male partner:

39. How does/did this relationship impact how you feel about yourself as a lesbian/bisexual woman? Did it change how you felt about your sexual orientation identity?

40. Thinking about your sexual relationship with this partner, how did it affect the way you viewed and felt about your body?

41. Does your comfort or discomfort with your body's appearance affect your enjoyment of sexual encounters in any way? Do body insecurities ever prevent you from engaging in sexual behavior you desire or from enjoying a sexual encounter fully?

If had both:

42. How do you feel your romantic and sexual relationships with men have differed from your relationships with women? How have your sexual encounters differed in terms of how you feel about your body?

Everyone:

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43. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience as a lesbian/bisexual

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Education level</i>	<i>Relationship Status</i>
Carla	51	White	Bachelors	Long-term relationship with Frances

woman  
that you  
feel is  
important?  
44. Can

you please tell me your age?

45. What is your ethnic identity?

46. Can you please tell me your profession?

47. What is your highest level of education?

48. Do you have any other questions?

Table 1

*Lesbian Sample Descriptive Information*

## LESBIAN AND BISEXUAL WOMEN'S BODY IMAGE

Frances	42	White	Obtaining Bachelors	Long-term relationship with Carla
Laura	45	African American	Ph.D.	Long-term relationship
Leanne	44	White	Bachelors	Long-term relationship with Karen
Karen	46	White	Masters	Long-term relationship with Leanne
Kathryn	28	White	Masters	Long-term relationship
Pamela	34	White	Ph.D.	Long-term relationship
Michelle	42	White	Bachelors	Dating

*Note:* All names are pseudonyms.

Table 2

*Bisexual Sample Descriptive Information*

LESBIAN AND BISEXUAL WOMEN'S BODY IMAGE

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Education level</i>	<i>Relationship Status</i>
Mary	33	White	Masters	Long-term relationship with a woman
Angela	25	White	Masters	Dating a man
Jane	22	White	Bachelors	Dating women and men
Samantha	33	White	PhD	Long-term relationship with a woman
Kelly	32	White	PhD	Single
Molly	25	White	Bachelors	Single

*Note:* All names are pseudonyms.