

Exploring the Lived Experiences of Black and Latina Masculine Presenting Lesbians: A Qualitative Research Study

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Abstract:

Black and Latina masculine presenting lesbians are a community that is overseen in academia and misunderstood among society. Their multiple intersectional identities serve as a factor that contributes towards unique experiences. While there is literature that exists regarding the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, there is little known about the specific challenges faced by Black and Latina masculine presenting lesbians. To address the gap in literature, this study explored the lived experiences of Black and Latina ($n = 11$) self-identifying masculine presenting lesbians. The findings of this qualitative study suggest that the intersectional identities of Black and Latina self-identifying masculine presenting lesbians poses significant challenges and misunderstandings that they must navigate throughout society. In addition, environments of diversity and inclusivity were found to be important and valuable for Black and Latina self-identifying masculine presenting lesbians. Moreover, as a result of their lived experiences, Black and Latina self-identifying masculine presenting lesbians embody confidence and resilience, which allows them to thrive in society. These findings provide insight into how the marginalized identities of race and ethnicity, gender, gender expression, and sexual orientation intersect and affect the lived experiences of Black and Latina self-identifying masculine presenting lesbians.

Introduction:

A masculine presenting lesbian is a person who identifies as a woman is sexually attracted to other women and displays masculine traits through appearance and behaviors (ItGetsBetter.org, 2023). Their identity not only challenges the gender and social norms of society but also catalyzes experiencing unique forms of discrimination due to their sexual, gender, and racial identities. For centuries, Black and Latinx communities have faced various forms of oppression and discrimination due to the color of their skin (Everett et al., 2019; Parmenter et al., 2021). Among women in the lesbian community, there is a spectrum of masculine presenting lesbians. The label associated with a masculine presenting lesbian may differ based on their racial/ethnic background and community upbringing. Labels include “stud,” “stem,” “butch,” “dyke” and more (Green & Peterson, n.d.; Salt Lake Community College, n.d.). In a gender-binary society that places men and women in gender-based categories according to their roles, behaviors, and appearances, masculine presenting women are found to be non-conforming to social expectations (Gunn et al., 2021). Masculinity falls on a spectrum and the expectations vary among racial and ethnic cultures. Therefore, there is value in understanding how masculine presenting lesbians in different racial communities embody masculinity and how they perceive their experiences.

Methods:

- 11 participants that identify as Black or Latina, a woman, lesbian, masculine presenting lesbian, and speak and understand English were consented to the study.
- Upon approval from the California State University, Long Beach Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher gain permission from the Director of Inclusion and Belonging at CSULB to share the flyer throughout the department, posted the study's flyer on her personal social media outlets, and connected with networks to share the flyer.
- Interested participants were screened and those who met all criteria were later scheduled for a zoom interview that lasted a maximum of 45 minutes.
- Participants used a pseudonym during the interview. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were saved on a password protected device.
- The data gathered from the interviews was analyzed based on the grounded theory method, a qualitative research method whereby data is gathered through interviews or observations (Chun Tie et al., 2019).
- Once the interviews were conducted, each response was transcribed and coded into recurrent themes that emerged. The researcher contextualized emerging interpretations and perspectives until no more themes were identified. Quotations were used to exemplify the main themes. Based on the information gathered, a conclusion was drawn.

Results:

- Participants ranged from 27-39 years old. Four participants identified as Black (36.36%). Seven participants identified as Latina (63.63%). Six participants identified as a masc (54.54%). Two participants identified as a stud (18.18%). Two participants chose two identities, masc and stud (18.18%). One participant identified as stem (9.09%). Four participants reported being mothers (36.36%).

The Manifestation of Identity

- Comfort and confidence through attire*
 - Wearing clothing that make the participants feel comfortable was emphasized throughout the responses.
- Cutting hair as the rite of passage*
 - Many participants mentioned having short hair as part of their present presentation; however, for some, it seemed to be a gradual process that happened over time, eventually leading to feeling more comfortable and confident. The change in hairstyle was a notable moment for the participants.
- Embodiment of Masculinity*
 - Many participants called attention to their attire as a way that they embody masculinity. Their choice of clothing, their style and where they shop was an indicator of masculinity.
 - Some participants found it easier to explain how they embody masculinity by speaking about it in the context of gendered roles, although for some participants it was made clear that adopting stereotypical gendered roles is not intended.
- Embracing Femininity*
 - Several participants indicated a sense of pride regarding their femininity.

The Power of Culture and Community

- The fight for visibility and respect*
 - Majority of the participants highlighted experiencing different forms of discrimination and misunderstandings both within family and in society.
 - All participants spoke about their experience in public restrooms. Given their masculine presentation as women, many of the reactions observed by the participants indicated a sense of rejection and otherness by others.
- Stepping into belonging and acceptance*
 - For many participants, spaces that acknowledged and validated their sexual identity seemed more important and valued.
 - All participants identified key several qualities that characterize the concept of chosen family and enhance their sense of belonging and acceptance.

Embracing Individuality and Resistance through Resilience

- Confidence and self-appreciation*
 - One of the most critical factors in how the participants overcome the obstacles they face and create space for themselves in society is resilience.
- A message for you*
 - Despite the challenges and negative experiences as a result of their race, gender expression and sexual orientation, the participants' responses reflect a sense of courage, pride, self-love, hope and longing for understanding and respect.

Acknowledgements:

Shout out to the participants in this study for sharing their stories and vulnerability for the purpose of shedding light on a community that deserves to be seen, heard, and valued.

Implications:

Implications for Social Work Practice Policy, Policy, and Advocacy

This study provides social workers with insight and knowledge of the factors that affect the lived experiences of Black and Latina self-identifying masculine lesbians. This is valuable because, by understanding the intersections of race and ethnicity, gender, gender expression, and sexual orientation, social workers are better equipped to create inclusive and supportive environments. This study promotes acknowledging and understanding diversity and inclusion, which are key principles in social work. The knowledge gained from this study provides social workers with appropriate interventions, resources, and psycho-education through micro, mezzo, and macro systems. The goal, ultimately, is advocacy for Black and Latina masculine presenting lesbians and other underserved and marginalized individuals.

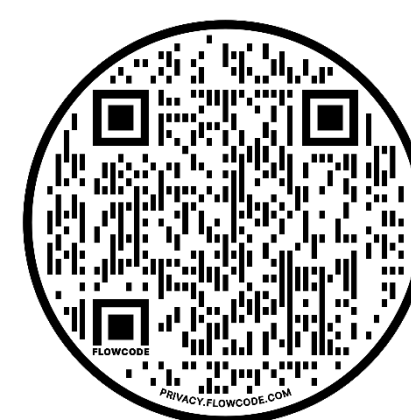
Implications for Future Research

This study is unique in that there is limited research that focuses on the lived experiences of Black and Latina masculine presenting lesbians. This study revealed the need for further and more specific research focused on racial and ethnic, sexual and gender-diverse individuals. Future research should continue this study and focus on a particular age group to shed light on the nuance associated with age, race, gender, and sexuality. This nuance refers to the unique experiences and challenges that individuals of different ages face due to their race, gender, and sexuality. For instance, older individuals may have different experiences of discrimination and acceptance compared to younger individuals. Future research should also include a broader range of racial and ethnic groups to shed light on the experiences of other marginalized groups. Moreover, future research should further explore the relationship masculine presenting lesbians have with femininity. Doing so will challenge stereotypes and provide a deeper understanding of an individual's relationship with their identity. Lastly, future research should utilize a mixed methods approach composed of qualitative and quantitative research to gather a more holistic and in depth understanding of the lived experiences of masculine presenting lesbians.

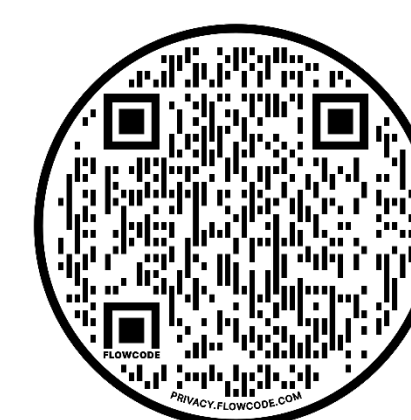
Conclusions:

Style and appearance are important factors to consider when taking into account the lesbian experience. This study revealed that culture, community, and media influence the participants' style and how they identify. Several participants highlighted their embodiment of masculinity as notable in their roles, actions and mannerisms. In addition, several participants indicated a sense of pride regarding their femininity. Furthermore, the participants in this study did not claim the term *butch*, which challenges the assumption that all masculine presenting lesbians identify as *butch*. The findings in this study also indicate that a preference for masculine attire and having short hair is closely associated with comfortability rather than wanting to mimic a particular gender, men. Moreover, Intersectionality plays a vital role in the experiences of the Black and Latina masculine presenting lesbians part of this study. Their lived experiences cannot be easily categorized by race, gender or sexuality but by the interconnectedness of all elements.

References:



Study's Flyer:



Handout:

