



5-2014

Exploring Biculturality and Beauty Standards through Breast Discourse and Breasted Experience of Sexual Minority Women

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Christine Laura Beck entitled "Exploring Biculturality and Beauty Standards through Breast Discourse and Breasted Experience of Sexual Minority Women." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Psychology.

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Exploring Biculturality and Beauty Standards through Breast Discourse and Breasted Experience
of Sexual Minority Women

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Christine Laura Beck
May 2014

Abstract

Body satisfaction and embodied experience are fundamental components of women's mental health. This is especially true for sexual minority women (SMW) who experience the complex demands of biculturality, as they must attend to the appearance ideals of both mainstream and SMW subculture. The current study aimed to investigate SMW's bicultural experiences of body satisfaction and beauty pressures through a focused exploration of SMW's breast discourse and breasted experience. Specifically, we hoped to discern more conclusive findings on whether the SMW subculture acts to protect SMW from the negative effects of mainstream, heteronormative beauty standards as proposed by previous research findings. We conducted a qualitative study of 11 SMW with questions focused on a variety of experiential areas including breast development, gender identity, romantic relationships, mainstream culture and media, and SMW subculture. Data analysis resulted in 13 primary themes and 26 subthemes. From the thematic aggregate, a preliminary theoretical model emerged detailing the relationships and interactions among various social and personal-based factors and influences. Results determined that breasts as a gender marker, gender identity, the breast/chest-gender identity relationship, and internalized sexism and beauty codes are the principal factors involved in SMW's bicultural breasted experience and beauty standard negotiation. These factors, emergent themes, and the preliminary theoretical model are discussed, along with clinical implications, study limitations, and future research directions.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Body satisfaction and embodied experience are fundamental components of women's mental health. This is especially true for sexual minority women (SMW) who experience the complex demands of biculturality, as they must attend to sexual orientation based minority stressors and the appearance ideals of both mainstream and SMW subculture (Beren, Hayden, Wilfley, & Striegel-Moore, 1997). These sometimes conflicting ideals can create heightened stress and unique internal conflicts for SMW (Beren, Hayden, Wilfley, & Grilo, 1996; Beren et al., 1997; Kelly, 2007; Myers, Taub, Morris, & Rothblum, 1999; Pitman, 2000). There have been numerous studies conducted to investigate body satisfaction and appearance norms exclusively in SMW culture (Beren et al., 1997; Kelly, 2007; Myers et al., 1999; Pitman, 2000; Striegel-Moore, Tucker & Hsu, 1990; Thompson, Brown, Cassidy, & Gentry, 1999), as well as comparison studies examining similarities and differences between heterosexual women and SMW (Beren et al., 1996; Bergerson & Senn, 1998; Brand, Rothblum, & Solomon, 1992; Gettelman & Thompson, 1993; Herzog, Newman, Yeh, & Warshaw, 1992; Ojerholm & Rothblum, 1999). Collectively, these study findings remain unclear and somewhat conflictive on how SMW develop body perception and experience their bodies and appearance as entities infused with political and sociocultural meanings (Millsted & Frith, 2003). The current study aims to further explore body satisfaction and beauty pressures experienced by SMW through the focused investigation of SMW's breast discourse and breasted experience in the hopes of clarifying previously established themes, as well as identifying nuanced aspects left uncovered by previous research.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Women's Body Satisfaction

Women's body satisfaction has been a focus of attention in an array of past psychological research given its large role in women's psychosocial health. Across spectrums of age, ethnic and racial identity, and sexual identity, women's body dissatisfaction is a source of distressing self-judgment, peer influence, and societal pressure (Beren et al., 1997). Women's body dissatisfaction is commonly catalyzed and maintained by sociocultural messages of beauty and attractiveness, which are disseminated and enacted through processes of socialization and internalization.

Socialization of beauty messages occurs within the wider process of gender socialization, which teaches women, from when they are young girls through adolescence and adulthood, how they should look, think, feel, and behave. From infancy onward, socialization agents such as parents, peers, teachers, and media reinforce certain qualities and behaviors girls and women are supposed to exemplify: delicate, gentle, sweet, cooperative, caretaking, emotional expression, and control of aggression. Girls learn that they are rewarded for their looks and physical attractiveness and that appearance is a fundamental and inextricable component of femininity (Kimmel, 2004). As Kimmel (2004, p. 131) describes, "girls are taught to capitalize on good looks, cuteness and coyness, and learn to look in mirrors and seek reflections of themselves from others." As these lessons and messages play out over time, many women become highly concerned with and critical of their breast size and weight. The definitions of femininity and beauty are so narrow and nearly unreachable that women become trapped within a mythical beauty goal (Kimmel, 2004).

As part of the gender socialization process, women receive beauty messages and definitions of femininity from society and then internalize them as a part of their personal belief system and material for self-judgment, and the internalization of sociocultural beauty norms is one of the strongest predictors of women's overall negative body attitudes (Bergerson & Senn, 1998). Women internalize societal body standards to such a deep degree that they come to believe the ideals originate from the self (McKinley & Hyde, 1996) and that attaining such unrealistic ideals is possible despite widespread education on the dangers of these venerated body states (Bergerson & Senn, 1998). This dynamic is just one of the many aspects of internalized sexism, in which women enact learned sexist judgments upon their own bodies and self-perceptions (Bearman, Korobov, & Thorne, 2009). Confounding this internalization is the idea that body ideals are not static entities (Fallon, 1990; Bergerson & Senn, 1998). Rather, they synchronize with the present trend of the fashion industry, indicating the perfect breast and hip size of the year (Mazur, 1986; Bergerson & Senn, 1998). This continuously changing beauty model requires women to maintain constant attention on appearance ideals and to re-internalize beauty expectations with every ebb and change, solidifying the demands of the self even deeper into the psyche. Sociocultural forces go even further by not only handing women the body ideal to which they should strive, but by also providing the literal means to achieve it (e.g., dieting, pills, exercise; Striegel-Moore, Silberstein, & Rodin, 1986; Bergerson & Senn, 1998).

Body Satisfaction in SMW Subculture

Past research on SMW body satisfaction and body image development remains mixed as to whether SMW experience equal or greater body satisfaction than their heterosexual counterparts, as well as what the contributing forces are that may account for found differences. Findings from several studies support the notion that SMW communities and relationships promote more

flexible and accepting appearance standards, as well as deemphasize the importance of physical appearance in attractiveness, which may protect SMW from the damaging beauty codes of mainstream culture (Beren et al., 1997; Brown, 1987; Brand, Rothblum, & Solomon, 1992; Cohen & Tannenbaum, 2001; Gettelman & Thompson, 1993; Herzog, Newman, Yeh, & Warshaw, 1992; Thompson, Brown, Cassidy, & Gentry, 1999). We refer to SMW subculture as opposed to the larger Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) subculture because the latter would include beauty messages SMW get from sexual minority men which may be quite different (e.g., more judgemental, narrow beauty mandates) from those received by other SMW. However, not all research on SMW body satisfaction supports the notion of a protective element within SMW identity and subculture (Beren, Hayden, Wilfley, & Grilo, 1996; Kelly, 2007; Myers, Taub, Morris, & Rothblum, 1999; Pitman, 2000), including those that affirm more flexible beauty norms within SMW subculture (Beren et al., 1997). Research on SMW body satisfaction and appearance norms has been conducted through comparison studies of SMW and heterosexual women and SMW-only studies, and regardless of the sample composition, findings show disagreement, irresolution, and complexity.

While beauty politics in the SMW subculture remain separate and distinctive from mainstream, heteronormative beauty ideologies, the SMW subculture is not devoid of appearance scripts. Research has shown that SMW subculture endorses beauty ideals that promote thinness and fitness (Beren et al., 1997), as well as more specific norms for members of certain subcultures within the SMW community (i.e., butch/femme lesbian identities, bondage-discipline, dominance-submission, and sadomasochism subcultures; Myers et al., 1999). At the same time, SMW express that their SMW communities are more accepting of diverse body shapes and sizes (Meyers et al., 1999), encourage acceptance of one's body (Beren et al., 1997),

prefer heavier body weights and experience more body satisfaction than heterosexual women (Cohen & Tannenbaum, 2001; Herzog et al., 1992), and understand that attractiveness is composed of much more than physical appearance (Thompson et al., 1999). In attempting to figure out how these somewhat contradictory appearance scripts interact, past research has uncovered a variety of findings and dynamics.

Upon coming out and entering into the SMW subculture, some SMW experience a sense of freedom from the constricting, heteronormative beauty standards of mainstream society (Myers et al., 1999). Supporting this notion, compared to heterosexual women, SMW report preferences for heavier body types and ideal weights (Brand et al., 1992; Cohen & Tannenbaum, 2001; Herzog et al., 1992), less internalized sociocultural norms (Bergerson & Senn, 1998), and greater body satisfaction and less concern for weight and appearance (Gettelman & Thompson, 1993; Herzog et al., 1992), all of which contribute to a buffering hypothesis of SMW subculture. Other SMW report a continued influence from mainstream appearance norms (Myers et al., 1999), as well as struggles of biculturality in having to deal with two simultaneous, and at times conflicting, beauty codes from mainstream and SMW cultures (Kelly, 2007). While some of these SMW found support for diverse body types in their SMW-feminist communities, they continued to struggle with body satisfaction on personal levels due to socialization within dominant, heteronormative society (Myers et al., 1999).

Taken together, previous research presents a muddled array of dynamics and constructs comprising SMW body politics and body satisfaction. SMW's experiences with beauty norms and body politics requires further research exploring such topics from new angles and methods in hopes of establishing more conclusive and comprehensive evidence for the sociocultural and political beauty forces at work in SMW's lives.

Feminism and Body Satisfaction

Feminist ideology, as a rejection of patriarchal structures and societal constructs, encourages women to evaluate beauty on a subjective level and refrain from using appearance as a measure of self-worth (Dionne, Davis, Fox, & Gurevich, 1995). Paralleling the supposition that SMW culture offers some protection from the oppressive influences of dominant body ideals, some researchers have proposed that feminist identity may also offer armor from such beauty mandates (Dionne et al., 1995; Rubin, Nemeroff, & Felipe Russo, 2004).

Women who endorse feminist beliefs related to physical attractiveness have been found to show greater levels of body satisfaction (Dionne et al., 1995). While feminist identity may function as an alternative method for understanding, reframing, and resisting cultural beauty messages, it may not necessarily govern appearance reactions to such norms. For example, in a qualitative study, Rubin et al. (2004) found that young, White heterosexual feminist women's reactions to aesthetic messages consisted of a continuous negotiation of emotions and practices surrounding their bodies rather than a passive acceptance or radical resistance to cultural beauty mandates. These women displayed a sense of internal conflict between their feminist beliefs—knowing the oppressive and objectifying nature of cultural beauty ideals and that good feminists are not concerned with the trivial matter of body image—and their negative feelings about their appearance and overall body dissatisfaction. Additionally, these women experienced a paradoxical relationship with these cultural beauty ideals because they also benefited from them, namely through the advantages that arise in relationships with powerful men that dominant aesthetic posture can yield.

Regardless of sexual orientation, it appears that feminist identity produces a personal struggle for women between an aspirational rejection of oppressive beauty norms and body dissatisfaction

and reactionary aesthetic rituals, all confounded by various social and political factors. Though the distinctive aspects of inner conflict differ between feminist and SMW identity, the core of the struggle shows similarity—a tug-of-war between resistance, complicity, involuntary body dissatisfaction, and a tradition of silence.

Breasted Experience

Breasts were chosen as the primary focus of this study for their role within female beauty ideals, and as such, a contributing factor to overall body satisfaction. Moreover, breasts act as an acute microcosm displaying the dynamics and impacts of the female aesthetic mandates imposed by dominant, heteronormative culture. Breasts, among all other body parts, have become the ultimate symbol of female sexuality, attractiveness, and womanhood. Infused with social, cultural, and political power, breasts are a definitive aspect of female identity and a metaphorical measure of a woman's femininity and personal worth (Millsted & Frith, 2003).

Beginning in the fourteenth century, the functionality of breasts as providers of nourishment for offspring became secondary to a primary role of breasts as providers of pleasure for men. Over the past six centuries thereafter, the erotic function of breasts has prevailed with the emergence of corsets and brassieres, the shifting of breast-feeding responsibilities to wet nurses, and surgical augmentation, all for the purpose of displaying and maintaining the ideal breast size, shape, and suspension as dictated by societal beauty ideals (Bonillas, 2009).

Perhaps more than any time before, breasts are the target of pervasive and deep-seated female objectification and sexualization. Media images in television, film, print, and video games depict breasts (usually large breasts) as equatable to women, forcing breasts into our minds as the fundamental and exclusive definition of womanhood; a woman is minimized to the existence and quality of her breasts. In this context, breasts become objects for others, typically

men, and their ownership is stripped from the very bodies they rest upon (Millsted & Frith, 2003). The impacts of these sociocultural forces, namely the commodification and scrutinization of women's breasts, greatly influence women's mental health.

Research suggests that around 70% of women are dissatisfied with their breasts due to either size or shape (Frederick, Peplau, & Lever, 2008), and that breast dissatisfaction may affect a woman's sense of attractiveness, comfort and satisfaction with her overall body, intimacy with her sexual partner(s) (Frederick et al., 2003), and her self-esteem (Koff & Benavage, 1998). Women with greater mismatch between ideal and perceived breast size have been shown to exhibit higher self-consciousness, social anxiety, and preoccupation with appearance (Koff & Benevage, 1998). Some women even pursue physical breast/body alterations through cosmetic breast augmentation surgery, and these choices have been found to correlate with body dissatisfaction (Didie & Sarwer, 2003), desires for more confidence, and wanting to feel more feminine, womanly, and attractive (Birtchnell, Whitefield, & Lacey, 1990). These findings support the premise that breast satisfaction is a significant contributing factor to overall body satisfaction, and breasted experience as a major component of overall body satisfaction definitively affects women's self-esteem, gender identity (GI), body image, embodied experience, and psychosocial well-being in complex and intricate ways (Didie & Sarwer, 2003; Frederick et al., 2008; Koff & Benavage, 1998; Millsted & Frith, 2003).

Current Study

In sum, past research findings suggest that to one degree or another mainstream beauty standards do affect SMW, despite the premise that SMW subculture fosters a more accepting and diverse body affirmation. However, no one has been able to tease apart the intricate and complex knot that metaphorically comprises this aspect of experience for SMW and their

subculture. To date, there has been no empirical research beginning with a more focused and acute indicator of body satisfaction (e.g., women's breasts) in order to assist in controlling for the vast array of confounding variables present within the body satisfaction construct. This study is an attempt at zeroing in on one particular manifestation of mainstream beauty standards and its relationship to mental health: a woman's attitudes of, discourse about, and experience with her breasts. This study seeks to acutely excavate the arena of SMW's breast discourses and breasted experience with the goal of locating heightened coherence and undiscovered aspects of sociocultural beauty mandates and SMW's mental health. More specifically, we hope to yield fresh insights about SMW biculturality and breasted experience, additional factors comprising body satisfaction for future research, and foundational pieces for building a more comprehensive, theoretical understanding of the impacts of United States (U.S.) culture's oppressive beauty ideologies on SMW.

In endeavoring to conduct a qualitative research study with the ingenuity to ascertain dynamics and motifs within SMW's breasted experience in clearer and more concrete ways, this study explored areas of SMW's breast discourse and breasted experience in new and precise domains. Questions focused on the following areas: 1) breast development experiences, 2) sexual minority identity and breasted experience, 3) breasts and GI, 4) dominant breast attitudes, 5) breast ideals in SMW subculture, 6) breast messages in media, 7) breast comparison, 8) clothing and breast garments, and 9) feminist identity and breasted experience.

Chapter III

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants included 11 SMW, ranging in age from 21-29 years old ($M = 25$ years).

Participants were primarily White and lower-middle to middle class. Additional demographic descriptors of the sample of SMW are provided in Appendix A.

Participants were recruited by sending an email of the research announcement to the contact person of LGBTQ campus and community organizations throughout the country. The contact person was asked to forward the research announcement to their constituents. The research announcement invited women between the ages of 18 and 30 years who experienced same-sex attraction and identified as a SMW (for at least two years) to participate in a research study focused on SMW's breast experience and appearance norms. Interested participants contacted the first author to set up a confidential, one-on-one interview. Participants received a \$40 Amazon.com gift certificate for their time and efforts.

Researcher Reflexivity Statement

The author is a White, lesbian/queer identified woman who became interested in the questions grounding this investigation after having experience in both heterosexual and same-sex relationships and communities, and experiencing a tangible difference in the body politics and attractiveness scripts between the two sociocultural environments. The second research team member, the first author's faculty advisor, is also a White lesbian and the third and fourth research team members are White, heterosexual women, all of whom possess research interests in SMW issues, minority stress, and gender and body politics.

Data Collection

The first author conducted all of the interviews. Two interviews were conducted in-person and 9 were conducted via telephone or through the Internet using Skype. Interviews began with a brief description of the topics to be discussed, obtainment of informed consent, and several general questions regarding basic demographic and background information (see Appendix A). Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format consisting of 16 open-ended questions (see Appendix D) followed by any applicable prompts or clarifying questions to further investigate participants' responses. These probing questions evolved through the progression of ongoing data analysis based on findings and newly detectable question weaknesses. Interview length was an average of 60 minutes excluding time spent on the previously mentioned steps. Upon completion of the 9th interview, data analysis demonstrated a clear point of saturation and 2 more interviews were subsequently conducted to be certain data saturation had been reached.

Data Analysis

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), iterative inductive analysis based on the phenomenological philosophy foundation of Husserl and Heidegger, was used as the primary method for data analysis (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). IPA is a method of qualitative research focused on the exploration of how individuals process and make sense of their experiences and realities. IPA investigation targets the details of a person's lived experiences in order to unveil the meaning and meaning-making mechanisms within personal experience (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Transcripts were prepared verbatim from digital audio recordings and converted to digital and hard textual copies by trained undergraduate students using Inqscribe software. A data analysis research team was assembled consisting of the first author, 1 additional counseling

psychology doctoral student, and 1 senior undergraduate working as a research assistant.

Transcripts were reviewed by each team member individually prior to group-based analysis. As part of the initial noting phase of analysis, team members listened to the audio recordings while following the typescript and documented themes, points of significance, and general notes (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Group-based analysis was conducted to further analyze the comments generated within the initial noting phase. The research group met weekly for 1 to 2 hours until all data analysis was complete. Annotations were assigned to the key elements of exploratory commenting: (a) descriptive commentary to describe content, (b) linguistic commentary to describe language and how content was presented and (c) conceptual commentary to describe interpretations of the content (Smith et al., 2009). Each significant comment was documented as a low-level code with additional notations indicating the participant, transcript line number(s) and element type (e.g., descriptive, linguistic, conceptual). Following the initial noting phase, analysis focused on identifying emergent mid-level codes through a second examination in which low-level codes were grouped together around common and significant experiences and conceptual motifs. These mid-level codes were used as subthemes from which to generate high-level themes through the investigation of connections across codes. Newly emerging connections and patterns were documented in an electronic spreadsheet throughout this theming phase in order to track connections and display relationships among experiences, events, and meaning-making processes. Once two tiers of themes were identified, primary and subthemes (see Appendix B), final analysis consisted of the interpretation phase of data assessment. This process of analysis was replicated for each interview and transcription. Simultaneously, once several transcripts moved through both individual and group analysis, emergent themes were explored across cases (Smith et al., 2009). The research group finalized analysis with the development of

a preliminary model of the interfacing of and relationships between primary themes, dynamics, and interpretations of the data. At the conclusion of data analysis, 14 themes were identified as significant in SMW's breasted discourse and their accounts of breasted experience, and aggregated into a preliminary conceptual model of thematic interaction (see Appendix C).

Data Auditing

Establishing and maintaining procedural checks to ensure the trustworthiness and accuracy of data is an integral component of sound qualitative data analysis (Morrow, 2005). Data auditing was conducted by the second research team member who was chosen because of her design and literature review assistance with the study while still remaining separate from the data analysis research team conducting the major portion of analysis. The second research team member did not have contact with the data until the advent of auditing responsibilities, which were conducted periodically throughout data analysis. Auditor responsibilities included basic review of the transcripts, thorough review of the content and progression of notation analysis, emergent themes, grouping of themes and theme connections across cases, and detailed review of interpretive findings and conceptual model design. The goal of the auditor role was to probe for inconsistencies, stretched findings, and data analyst biases in findings reports and to subsequently assist the research team in rectifying the analysis weaknesses appropriately.

Chapter IV

Results

The data analysis resulted in a preliminary conceptual model of emergent themes including relationships and interactions among them. The 13 major model themes are divided into two groups: those related to social influence and social experience and those related to personal factors and personal experience. The nine social-based themes include breast development experiences; breasts and coming out; breasts as a gender marker; breasts/chest and GI; heteronormative breast beauty scripts and preferences; breast attention; breast comparison; SMW subculture breast beauty scripts and preferences; and SMW subculture message of breast/body acceptance. The four personal-based themes include breast perception by self; dressing breasts/chest; breast functionality; and navigating and coping with breast beauty scripts. Subthemes emerged within most primary themes, capturing more subtle and particular experiential patterns. Major model themes, corresponding subthemes, and thematic relationships are discussed in detail below. Appendix B illustrates the emergent themes and subthemes, as well as the particular participants who reported each experience. Appendix C displays the conceptual model of emergent themes and thematic interactions.

Breast Development Experiences

All interviews began with a question about breast development in order to gather significant developmental experiences and build a context for other topic areas. Some women had positive to neutral development experiences, while others had more negative experiences. For most women, positivity or negativity of the experience related to types of attention received, availability of supportive guidance and advice, the rapidity and typicality of physical development, and feelings of self-consciousness and/or insecurity. Participants described

attention in the form of comments from peers, teasing from peers and siblings, and the onset of body consciousness by one's self and others related to breasts. Some participants had positive experiences through guidance from their mothers or other older women, while others struggled to find support for how to handle the physical and mental aspects of puberty, "...as they developed, like my mother wasn't very, she wasn't very supportive in helping me find stuff or talking to me about that kind of stuff...so trying to find bras and things like that was really hard" (Dean). Some participants recalled developing "normally" along with their peers and this experience generating positive to neutral feelings. Other participants remembered feeling different from their peers in terms of speed or typicality of development and this being a target of teasing. Differences in development, as well as initial body changes, often related to feelings of self-consciousness and insecurity, as described by Cara, "So I thought maybe something was wrong with me. I would say, like, I was a little insecure...because I wasn't growing." Taken together, these experiences can be understood as part of a heteronormative backdrop in which growing and having breasts and wearing bras are part of a typical female gender construct.

Present on both implicit and explicit levels, breast development during puberty acts as a "ticket" to womanhood, as Dean noted, "...everybody...mistakenly called me a boy...so I was like... 'God I hope I have like the biggest boobs because then people will know that I'm a girl' ..." Similarly, participants talked about breast existence and size being a necessary component of being a woman, "...they're not big enough, like I'm not a woman" (Chris) and "I think I was happy about for a little bit when I started growing because then I was like, 'Okay, I am normal, I am growing,' you know" (Cara). Participants' breast development experiences demonstrate the heteronormative culture and heterosexist socialization processes that all young

women grow up in and are influenced by, which are then grappled with in various capacities through the coming out process and entrance into an alternative culture, the SWM subculture.

Breasts and Coming Out

Participants talked about their coming out experiences in two particular ways which correspond to the two subthemes: being different and breasted experience as unaffected or unchanged.

Being different. Some participants discussed their coming out process as a time of recognizing differences in terms of emotions, attractions, and behavior compared to heterosexual peers. Anna recalled, "...that's when I started kind of realizing that something was different with me, because I'm like, 'Oh, I don't have the same interest that they [female peers] have,' and I noticed that I would be more fixated on my [female] friends..." and Cara noted, "...I wasn't the norm, you know, then I also came out when I was in high—I mean middle school, so I was already different." Aria and Jane talked about experiences in which they didn't necessarily understand they were SMW, but did know that they weren't interested in boys like most of their female peers were, as Aria explained, "I can't say I always knew I was a lesbian. That would be inaccurate. I didn't know what I wanted so much as I did know what I wasn't interested in. You weren't going to find me chasing a boy..." For these participants, recognition of being a SMW or being different from their female peers related to a conscious awareness of being part of a different cultural context, either immediately or eventually leading them to membership in the SMW subculture and another set of beauty norms.

Breasted experience as unaffected or unchanged. Four participants believed their breasted experiences, thoughts and feelings about their breasts, were unaffected or unchanged by their coming out process and identifying as a SMW. As Sean described, "I don't think that my

feelings necessarily changed about them. But it was just another, another level of physical intimacy when you can, you can share with a woman as opposed to man.” For Cara, coming out encompassed a recognition of alignment between what she wanted as a lesbian and her breast size, “The only thing that I would link towards my sexual orientation and my breasts was that stage where I was happy...I wanted to look as boyish as possible. So, my feelings were happiness that I didn’t have any breasts really.” Chris described how coming out and her breasted experience were rather unrelated, “In terms of like, I’m really feminine appearing, and so like that, you know, there’s that aspect of it. But there isn’t like, ‘I wish they didn’t look like this’ or ‘People don’t believe me’...I didn’t really link the two to be honest.” Coming out in the context of a women’s college shaped Jane’s experience, “I was surrounded by eight-hundred women, as far as I know all of whom had breasts and it wasn’t...that was just the norm for the environment.”

Breasts as a Gender Marker

Numerous participants described experiences of their breasts being used by others as a marker or cue for determining their gender and/or being used by themselves to indicate their gender. Casey and Dean described this dynamic well, “Gender is socially constructed. But sex is not. And so we, you know we, when you see breasts, that representation of sex, then the first thing you associate it with is your cultural markers of gender” (Casey) and “...my breasts are like basically the crossroad like defining, like that’s the line, like where are my boobs and then you can figure out if I’m going feminine or masculine” (Dean). Among participants’ experiences of breasts and gender definitions, two subthemes emerged: breasts equal woman/femininity and hidden/deemphasized breasts equal non-female.

Breasts equal woman/femininity. Participants talked about various ways in which breasts, when visible or purposefully displayed, equate to a person being a woman and possessing femininity. Sean's recognition of this connection began during puberty, "I thought that puberty was like the best thing ever, it was like, yeah, it means that I'm a woman now." In thinking about how significant breasts are as a gender marker, Jill described, "It's just the fact that it's like that is the biggest defining trait when you see somebody a lot of times. It'll be "Are they a man? Are they a woman? And one of the biggest cues is like breast size" and Casey expressed, "It's [breasts] a big part of the female identity. It is what establishes you at first glance, at instinctual levels as female." Similarly, Dean described, "Whenever I'm at a gay nightclub when I'm, and I'm being perceived as a gay boy by boys and then it [breasts] becomes a clear identity marker, like no you, wrong plumbing. And so it's kind of like the card you know...I'm flagging that I'm a female so."

Hidden/deemphasized breasts equal non-female. Some participants described instances in which there was little to no visibility of their breasts, and consequently, others would not identify them as women or female. Sometimes lack of breast visibility led to a male gender marking, "Maybe the lack of breasts, I get told that I look like a boy a lot because, you know, you can't really tell" (Cara). At other times, little to no breast visibility didn't result in an identification of male, but more so eliminated or prevented a perception of a woman or female person, "And it's that outward force that's identifying me in a way that I don't want to be identified and it has a lot to do with, a lot to do with the visibility of my chest. So if I bind, that happens less often" (Casey). In order for a participant to generate a gender perception other than woman or female, breasts must be hidden or deemphasized, as Casey described, "...they [breasts] become sort of an inconvenience because it's very difficult to be androgynous when you have breasts."

Breasts/chest and GI

Most salient among all the topics and emergent themes is the fact that and the way in which breasts interface with a SMW's GI, her intrapersonal sense of gender. While there was variation in the degree to which participants' breasts and/or chest play into their GIs, participants' experiences can be divided into three subthemes: breast and GI alignment, fluid GI and role of breasts, and breast and GI misalignment.

Breast and GI alignment. Several participants described experiences of congruence in which their physical breast makeup matches their GI and therefore results in an experience of alignment. Sean's breast-GI alignment seems to stem from her breasts, "...it has never crossed my mind to think of myself and my gender identity other than a woman. And I think that my, my body type has a lot to do with that. Because my breasts are large and I very much look like a woman. I think that makes a big difference." Cara described her breast-GI alignment,

I think I would be real uncomfortable if I continued dressing tomboysish, whatever, and I had big breasts. So, I guess it does have a lot to do with my gender presentation, you know, because of the fact that it doesn't make me, I guess look like a girl, per se?...I think they fit me, too. Cause a lot of, I know a lot of tomboys but just, it's whatever. They have to bind themselves, you know? And I'm just, I don't have to do that, you know?

Jane described her breast-GI alignment in terms of an absence of body dysphoria, "...I know a lot of people who identify as genderqueer do experience body dysphoria, that isn't something that I've experienced so I've never felt the need to change my body or change how my body presents to the world." Similarly, Dean believes her breasts are a primary component of her GI as a lesbian woman as opposed to transgender,

And I would never want to not have a vagina, I would never want to not have my breasts because I had to really kind of think about that and come to terms with it whenever I thought that I was trans and whenever I realized that I wasn't, then they [her breasts] had a whole deeper meaning for me. In terms of that womanhood, like this defines me as a woman versus trans...I'm like a solid dyke and how that goes into like the way I feel about my body is more of like my womanhood defines me and is one of the defining markers that separates me from

queer or separates me from trans and that is my breasts...Like how I see myself is that I'm always going to hold on to these puppies [her breasts] because they define me as a woman. And so it's like that is where my womanhood is, and that actually solidifies my sort of lesbian or my dyke identity.

Fluid GI and role of breasts. While almost all participants discussed breasts as playing a role in their GI, this dynamic was most apparent in the experiences of women with a more fluid GI. For these participants, GI and presentation varies from day-to-day and their breasts and/or chest act as a locus of definition and indication for determining and presenting their GIs. Jill described her fluid GI process,

...I live more comfortable about being a little more fluid with things...I kind of feel like I've been doing like a pendulum thing. Where it was like I used to do a lot of real tomboy stuff, and a little bit of dresses. And then it's more tomboy ended with a lot of dresses. And now I'm kind of like going back and forth on the day...I've had days where I'm like 'Okay, my boobs are good.' Other days I'm like 'Uh, not so much.' I kinda wanna minimize it. So, but it's more of a gen—more of gender identity...So a lot of it [gender presentation] has to do with my top...And as far as like actual chest presentation...I think of them as three phases. An underwire bra...I've got a couple of sports bras...And the binder.

Dean shared about how her fluidity is a daily process of recognizing how she is connecting with her breasts and then finding a gender presentation that fits,

...it's kind of a conflict [back and forth of what size breasts she wants] that has gone, that's gone on over time, and it tends to switch back and forth even now...normally I'll mix it up [feminine and masculine clothing]...I use them and I don't use them, but I like that about myself because I'm androgynous enough to like, if I wanted to they're big enough for me to put them out and they're prominent, but they're also small enough and there are ways that I can wear them and they're not there...So I have a struggle with that [breasts being crossroad of feminine or masculine presentation] because sometimes I'm just like, 'Man, I wish I could just not worry about it,' but it's a constant thing that's the line and so constantly trying to define where it is and where it isn't or ignoring it all together and saying 'Screw it. We're throwing on a sports bra, we're throwing on a pullover and calling it a day.'

For Casey, a small range of fluidity occurs in her GI between a neutral GI to a strongly male GI, with her outward chest presentation originating from her internal GI,

Ultimately the real deciding factor is how I'm feeling that day as far as gender identity. See that's gonna be underlying all of this. If I am having a severely like really male side of the scale kind of day, like I'm really not identifying with my chest at all and it's, it's very much

bothering me. It's, I'm very frustrated by it. It's, makes me feel uncomfortable, makes me feel out of place. It makes me feel incorrect in some way. I will use a tight bind with a compression vest [greatly restricted or deemphasized chest presentation].

Breast and GI misalignment. Some participants described experiencing ongoing or periodic breast and GI misalignment, a time when their internal sense of gender clashed with how they are able to present outwardly to others and/or how others perceive their gender. In these moments, breasts/chest symbolize a gender the participant does not identify with, and often results in feelings of annoyance, frustration, and discontent. Casey shared about her current GI and how her breasts/chests create incongruence between her physical body and GI, often leaving her feeling negatively about her chest,

I would be neutral male...They're still an inconvenience so that's, that's, it's not really a feeling but. And then also just sort of they symbolize a gender that I don't necessarily identify with...I mean and I sort of, you know, when I say distaste, like I had a distaste for them, what I mean is, you know, a strong dislike and you know, I definitely like, I disliked them to the point where I've considered top surgery...So I've definitely considered top surgery to help align my gender identity...I have a disconnect and a distaste and I don't care for them. I guess so. And I would say definitely frustration. I've definitely had frustrated moments where, you know, I don't like the way that they look or that I look, you know?...Then I would say I have moments where I'm specifically kind of pissed off at my chest.

Dean shared about times when she may find herself in certain attire that isn't feeling like the right match for how she is connecting with her breasts that day,

I mean if I have to wear something more feminine for whatever reason and I'm not feeling comfortable, then it shows...if like, there was a time that I left work and I was wearing something a little bit more feminine and when, like I wasn't feeling right, I just wanted to get comfortable, like I went home and put on a sports bra, I put on a man's shirt, or a more masculine shirt and then I instantly changed...

Jill described an experience of breast and GI incongruence when an instance of body dysphoria unexpectedly surfaced while she was at work,

...And I had one of the most intense moments of body dysphoria about, about my chest...It was just like, 'Oh my god, what's happening? I don't know how I'm feeling'...and then

during my break I was trying to get my makeup off my face...I ended up having my partner bring me [anti-anxiety medication] to work so I just kind of could shut it off.

Cara talked about how she would experience a breast-GI misalignment if she had larger breasts and maintained her masculine GI,

I would want one [breast reduction]. Cause I don't see myself just changing the way I dress or changing my gender presentation just because of my breasts, per se...I would bind them. I would try to, like, reduce them for real. Cause it wouldn't work out in my head. I wouldn't want that.

Similarly, Sarah talked about how her larger breast size would create a breast-GI misalignment if she should start to feel a more masculine GI,

...if I ever chose that I wanted to identify a different way, specifically if I wanted to identify as male or some form of transgender, I like, I would have to take so many more steps to get to even have someone else see me as that, it would be really interesting and it would be much harder for me to get to that position.

And in considering what she would do if she did have smaller breasts, "I think I would have, I would have tried expressing myself in a different gender."

Heteronormative Breast Beauty Scripts and Preferences

All participants had some experience with breast beauty messages in mainstream, heteronormative culture, and within these discussions three subthemes emerged: attractive breasts are large, perky, and unattainable; standards are generated and reinforced by media; and greater breast beauty pressure.

Attractive breasts are large, perky, and unattainable. Numerous participants talked about specific breast prescriptions that they have experienced and/or recognized in heteronormative, mainstream culture, namely that attractive breasts are breasts that are large, round, and perky. Participants also noted the specificity and unattainability of this breast standard. Participants expressed that, "in the mainstream there is much more specific, there's a much more specific image of what women and women's breasts should look like..." (Jane), "...attractive breasts

obviously in mainstream media are round, perky, roughly C-sized, maybe D” (Casey), “I guess in my head mainstream culture is more ‘the bigger the better’ ” (Cara), “I grew up thinking, you know, boobs should be, you know, extremely high and perky and there should always be that cleavage” (Amy), “...I will never be that, you know, perfect size full C” (Sarah), and “It’s like you have to be prepared and on-point and looking a certain way” (Jill). As Sarah’s discussion continued, she also noted the unattainability of the mainstream beauty standard,

When thinking about what we are told, what we grow up in and we’re told the perfect image is it’s long hair, it is big breasts, a big butt, and a waist that’s probably a size twenty-two. And I think for most, for almost all girls unfortunately, that’s the image they hold themselves to. That’s what I need to look like. And so I think it’s so unfortunate because that’s not what everyone is supposed to look like, that’s not even what 99% of people are supposed to look like.

Jane conveyed this unattainability of mainstream beauty scripts as well, “having them all [mainstream beauty prescriptions] in a single individual that theoretically should be the epitome of beauty, would be pretty much impossible.”

Standards are generated and reinforced by media. Several participants mentioned the way in which mainstream media produces these cultural breast beauty scripts and continues to reinforce and maintain them through time. In speaking about the media’s role, participants commented, “breasts in the media kind of play a large part whether people realize it or not” (Sean), “if there was anything that probably showed me that side of like what it is, like a woman physically, it’s probably more like media” (Anna), and “I think that the media really puts a lot of emphasis on that being the beauty standard” (Cara). Sarah and Chris discussed media’s role more indirectly as they expressed mainstream beauty norms displayed by women like Victoria Secret models and actresses on primetime television, as did Jane when she portrayed the way mainstream media teaches girls how they should look in doll form (i.e., Barbie).

Greater breast beauty pressure. A couple of participants described mainstream beauty standards as enacting noticeably more pressure and being more socially enforced than beauty scripts within the SMW subculture. In thinking about these differences, Anna stated, “I feel like there’s a big shift or big difference I notice there. I feel like mainstream or straight or, it seems like it [physical appearance] matters a lot more...feels like there’s a lot more of expectation in like the straight community. Definitely. I feel that.” Jane talked about how she feels mainstream culture does more policing of individuals’ adherence to attractiveness scripts, “I think that it’s much more specific and much more socially enforced, where there’s more...yeah, it’s more socially enforced, it’s more socially policed.” Cara and Sarah talked about this difference through the way they feel mainstream culture places greater focus on women’s breasts and presentation, “I don’t think breasts are one of the hot points in the lesbian community. I don’t think it’s one of those things where they really focus on that. Like the straight community does” (Cara) and “...I feel like women don’t focus on, I don’t know how to explain it, but I guess women don’t focus on breasts as much...girls don’t react to breasts the same way guys do...” (Sarah).

Breast Attention

All participants spoke to some extent about breast attention, including topics of how and from whom they receive attention, how attention compares in mainstream and SMW environments, and how they feel about and respond to breast attention. From these topics three subthemes emerged: forms of attention; mainstream culture vs. SMW subculture; and feelings about and responses to breast attention.

Forms of attention. Breast attention took on a variety of forms and ranged from positive to negative depending on who the attention was coming from, whether it was elicited or not, and how the attention made a participant feel. The two predominant forms of attention discussed by participants were compliments and objectification. Attention in the form of compliments was typically perceived as positive, was wanted or understood as acceptable and/or desirable attention, and resulted in mostly positive responses. Alternatively, objectification was usually understood as negative, often unsolicited and/or unwanted, and generated negative responses, with a few exceptions. Most generally, participants' received breast attention from both men and women, though instances of objectification almost invariably related to attention from men.

For Sean, compliments about her breasts are received as a positive affirmation of one of her best physical features, "And they're [breasts] one of, I think one of my best features. And others have said as much." For other participants, like Anna, breast compliments bring about mixed feelings,

I've had guys make comments about it [low-cut shirt] before. And you know, they'll say like, 'Oh, that's so hot,' or something. And I'll be like, 'Oh, well it's nice to hear,' but at the same time it kind of bothers me a little bit, because it's like, well, like, 'Why does that matter so much?' is my thought.

In some instances, feeling positive about breast attention and compliments stemmed from who it is that is giving the attention, as Jill described, "If I'm okay with a person, they're attracted to my chest, I've been you know, totally cool with it because it's, you know, clearly part of me. I enjoy the attention. You know, because it's like, 'You enjoy my body. That's cool,' " and for Jill these breast compliments are "just always a nice boost."

Alongside breast compliments, participants shared experiences of negative breast attention and instances of objectification. For several participants, breast objectification in some form is a regular occurrence, "Because I just feel like I'm always being objectified by men" (Chris), "No

matter what I was wearing and stuff like that...I have gotten catcalled and weird comments and shit” (Jill), “To some extent they’re [breasts] always an object” (Sean) and of a negative quality, “I think that the only negative thing associated with it [breasts] is the objectification you sometimes feel...” (Sean). Even when attempting to bring attention to other parts of her body and personal expression, a meaningful tattoo on her back, Aria experienced unwanted breast attention and objectification, “I’m showing my back because I have a wicked, you know, back tattoo that I’ve had for years...cause I think my back is sexy. And the first thing they say is ‘You don’t have a bra on.’ ” Sarah talked about the objectification she experiences, as well as its relationship to her larger breast size,

...they [her breasts] are seen as solely objects and you see, typically men, making crude comments and catcalling. I live in the city so we deal with catcalling a lot, and it’s always interesting to me because, well first of all I don’t stand for it, but I just, it’s more acceptable if you have larger breasts too. And for me that’s always interesting. They feel it’s more acceptable and they like to make comments.

Related to forms of attention, is how accentuating and exposing breasts garners and/or increases breast attention. Sean discussed this dynamic of breast attention, “Cause it’s something I don’t necessarily accentuate but sometimes do, and I have probably been hit on more when they are accentuated as when they’re not...if I do accentuate my breasts, I get a lot of compliments about it.” Dean is aware of this aspect when she purposefully deemphasized her breasts in order to prevent the attention that comes from accentuation, “If I want to get something done [speaking of a professional, business environment], I don’t wear my breasts out because I don’t want the distraction there.”

Mainstream culture vs. SMW subculture. Connected to discussions of breast objectification, numerous participants talked about breast attention differences they notice or experience between mainstream culture and the SMW subculture. The consensus across participants was

that mainstream culture imposes breast objectification more often, with more intensity, and with a stronger sexual component, while the SMW subculture understands breast exposure and attention from a perspective infused with more feminism and empowerment. In speaking about these differences, participants expressed, “I don’t find this [breast objectification] as much in the lesbian community...” (Sarah), “I think that in general lesbian culture they [breasts] are just, just something that’s there and in mainstream culture they’re something to be coddled more than something that’s useful” (Sean), and “I think it’s different. I think lesbians would prefer everybody to be running around with their shirts off...I think it would be more along the lines of feminism, you know. So. Yeah. I don’t think that they would look at that as sexual at all” (Cara). Aria talked about how she receives a different kind of attention in SMW spaces, “So it’s like an attention piece, it’s a different kind of attention, you know? You can feel the difference, you can tell the difference in how you’re approached...you’re more respected in the lesbian community, you know?” Chris experienced a difference in both objectification and how aware she is of her breast presentation in SMW versus mainstream environments,

I feel more objectification when I’m not in like specifically gay space. And by gay, either lesbians or gay or whatever it is...So I go out to, you know, to my, to like just a random club in [city]. I would feel like, you know, I’m more objectified...So I might, I mean, yes, there’s more of a consciousness of how I look and how my breasts look and all that stuff when I’m in, you know, mainstream life culture. But I don’t, like for me, I don’t experience like a bad feeling as much as like almost like a hyperawareness.

Feelings about and responses to breast attention. Participants described a range of reactions and responses to various breast attention. Some participants discussed a sense of discomfort with the way in which breasts, as the female symbol of gender and one that is sexualized, are on display and appropriated by others for various purposes (i.e., sexual objectification, gender typing, etc.). Jill expressed this sense of discomfort,

And just like this fixation on the...cause it's like with men, I mean there's the idea of like penis size, but that's something that's hidden. But with women, more or less, for a better word, it's on display. Like you can't, you can, you can alter it, do different things, but you're not gonna be like, you can't be like 'Oh, you can't see this' until I get to a point where I'm comfortable because it's very much judged on your sexual appeal.

Jane talked about this discomfort in terms of entitlement and how others don't have the right to know what her breasts look like just because they maintain a certain sense of display or visibility,

I would have to be careful who I like crossed my arms in front of and things like that cause it would just, press them together and have the cleavage up to here and no one needed to see that and it wasn't, I didn't want to show that to anybody because that's none of their business. Other people in public aren't entitled to the right to know what my body looks like.

Other participants talked about how they have become habituated to much of the breast attention they experience and this often results in no longer having strong reactions and/or just ignoring it. In speaking about the regular breast attention they receive, Aria commented, "All the time. But you just get use, it's, it is what it is" and Sean stated, "I've grown accustomed to it [breast objectification], so I usually just ignore that now."

While some participants experienced discomfort with breast attention and some have become accustomed and desensitized to it, other participants talked of empowerment and control within particular experiences of objectification. As Dean described,

And I think there was a sense of power, like okay, so from my stand point, whenever I was bartending and I was liberated from being in my bra, like I felt a sense of power, I felt a sense of control and I felt sexually objectified as well. But I was holding your gaze...it was really owning like a feminine portion of me that I hadn't owned in like, in any other time. So it was like this whole like, 'I'm woman, hear me roar' whenever they're out...And kind of welcoming that sexual objectification. Now if there's say a go-go dancer and she tells me that she's liberated, this is how she wants to dress, this is how she feels sexy. I think having somebody else feel sexy or helping somebody else feel sexy I can, I can jump on board and say that's my place, that is fine for me to do that...

Sarah talked about finding empowerment in being assertive and speaking up when she is objectified,

...how I typically react to catcalls is I turn around and I, I like to say, 'Would you say that to your mother? If you would say that to your mother go ahead and let me, let me hear it. But if you're not going to talk like that to your mother and you're not going to talk like that about your mother's breasts that way or your mother's ass that way, you shouldn't be talking about mine either because that's not okay with me.'

Breast Comparison

All participants were asked about their experiences related to breast comparison with others and each participant had something to share about whether and how they engage in breast comparison and/or what thoughts, feelings, and behaviors emerge as a result. Two subthemes materialized from these discussions: purposes of comparison and effects of comparison.

Purposes of comparison. On the whole, most participants stated that they do engage in breast comparison with other women, though a variety of reasons for and purposes of comparison were shared. Related to reasons for comparison, a couple of participants started by expressing that they feel breast comparison is a natural inclination of the human condition, a way to understand and define ourselves in relation to others, "I mean I think we do it [comparison] and I think it's perfectly human," (Dean) and "I think all the time [in talking about comparison]. I think we, it's an instinct because society teaches us that you want to judge yourself against someone else" (Sarah). Alongside the natural tendency to compare ourselves with others, participants talked about specific comparison purposes of observation and/or recognition of difference and evaluation and/or reference point.

Several participants described their breast comparison as an act of simply observing the physical features and presentation of another woman and/or a recognition of the differences between one's appearance and presentation and that of another woman. Sean talked about her comparisons as observation, "I think that I compare my breasts to others. But, it's always, it's never because I wish that I had a different type of breasts. It's always just strict, 'Oh, your

breasts are smaller; oh, they're much larger than mine.' ” Jane and Sarah both discussed how they often observe aspects of proportionality in their breast comparisons, “...it tends to be about proportion” (Jane) and “I always like to see if people are proportional...it's always interesting to see other women's body types and see if they are proportional and how do they go about dressing themselves so they feel comfortable” (Sarah). Comparisons for Jill tended to be observations that result in a recognition of difference between herself and another woman's presentation, accompanied by thoughts of how her body or breasts might look in similar attire. She described,

Seeing it in others is a big comparison that, it's like I'll see somebody's style like really feminine style and I'll like 'Man, I wonder, I don't know if I can pull that off' or something....not just focused on 'Maybe if I have bigger boobs,' or 'maybe if I just didn't have boobs.' But it's more of like if I had that option I could do something a little bit different or whatever...some days will be a comparison of how flat a chest can be. And then some days would just be breast shape and how it fills out clothing...

Jane also described this recognition of difference, “I certainly may notice other women's breasts...there's certainly some recognition of like, 'Oh, those are smaller than mine are' or 'Oh, those are larger than mine' or whatever...”

Other participants spoke of comparison as an act of evaluation of other women's breasts and/or an act of seeking a reference point from which to appraise and define their own breasts and/or presentation. Breast appraisal and how breasts are displayed plays into Aria being mindful of others breasts and using a wide array of women as referents,

I'm mindful of other women's breasts. I am mindful of how other women display their breasts...I do it [compare] all the time. Especially the women I'm involved with...friends I'm involved with, I compare my boobs to everybody. I compare my boobs to models and books. I compare my boobs to people in dresses. Like if I have on the same dress as somebody, the determining factor is usually how the breasts look in said attire.

Dean described her breast comparison as an action of finding and using other women as a reference point that also informs her self-concept and breast presentation,

While I was a drag king, you compare in the dressing room, like for sure. Like you're duct taping the shit out of your breasts and you're comparing like what they look like without the duct tape or without the binder...It's just, I think it's more of just like a reference...It's like 'Oh, okay, well mine are still looking good,' so it's like, 'okay, they look like theirs'...And it's funny because like I think that I still do it and I think maybe, I think as humans we do this anyway, we try to find a reference group and based on your reference group that you like then we try to mimic.

For Amy, breast comparison still involves an evaluation component, but its purpose also involves a way for her to identify women who model a sense of confidence she wants to emulate, as she expressed,

I think when I do comparisons it's more about how other people view them versus how I think they look. And I think that's more of a confidence thing, like the people who I would hope to emulate...It's never like, 'Oh, I wish I looked like her,' it's more like 'I wish I could have that whatever that she has'...When I make comparisons and I'm like, 'Well why can't I be more like her?' it's rarely ever because of what she looks like and it's more the confidence she carries and who she is, not how she looks but just the way she carries herself physically.

Effects of comparison. Several participants discussed what happens for them as a result of comparison, including a range of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Chris shared how comparisons sometimes bring about feelings of wanting to look different,

...So when I see people that look like that I'm like... 'That's what I wish I could look like.' I just feel like they could pull off clothes better. Like it'd just look better...Just sort of like, 'Oh, gosh, I wish I'd look like that'...I'd love to look like that, and then I mean, there's like a little bit, you know, like, 'I should lose weight, I should exercise more,' that kind of thing...

For Anna, breast comparison was sometimes followed by a feeling of self-consciousness, a dislike toward feeling that way, and then an attempt let go of her feelings, "I'm fine with a girl who is bigger than me. I've, I might feel a little self-conscious. Like, and I hate that I feel that way...I do think I compare, but then I just try to brush it off more so." Similarly, Aria talked about not dwelling on her feelings from comparisons, "It's a gleaming thought. It comes and goes. Like, I don't sit and dwell." Some participants were explicit about not experiencing any envy or judgment when comparing, "...but it's not in a 'Oh, I wish mine looked more like that'

or ‘Wow, I’m glad mine don’t look like that cause, uh’...those aren’t generally thoughts that tend to pass through my head” (Jane) and “...I certainly don’t remember being envious of anyone else...” (Casey).

SMW Subculture Breast Beauty Scripts and Preferences

Participants spoke at length about breast beauty scripts they both express and experience within the SMW subculture. Three subthemes developed from these discussions: attractive breasts are small, confident, and androgynous; specific breast scripts attach to lesbian subtypes; and replication of heteronormative standards.

Attractive breasts are small, confident, and androgynous. Corresponding to breast beauty standards within mainstream culture, SMW subculture also possesses a script denoting breast beauty qualities that predominate the subculture. Generated from participants’ experiences, attractive SMW breasts are those that are small, confident, and androgynous. Numerous participants described preferences for small or smaller breasts, “I don’t like big breasts...I think that would probably not be a determining factor, but it would be a turn-off” (Cara), “Women that I dated in the past tend to be like smaller, have smaller breasts, and be like really skinny, slender” (Chris), “...maybe a size B chest at most. I tend to like really small boobs, I don’t know why I, it’s just my preference” (Sarah), “I tend to prefer a partner’s breasts that are in proportion, whatever that may be to the person’s body, or on the smaller side” (Jane), and

...most of the girls that I’ve dated, they tend to not have like the biggest breasts in the world and...I kind of like them a little bit smaller...everybody [she’s dated] tends to have smaller breasts...big breasts are not, they’re just not attractive and most of my lesbian friends are not attracted. Like I mean nothing too big, I guess...if they’re too small that actually doesn’t bother me at all, I think its kind of attractive. (Dean)

Aside from breast size, a couple of participants also spoke about how confidence is involved in breast attractiveness, “...it really has nothing to do with the way they look or their breasts or

anything...I think just being confident in yourself is really what makes anything about you attractive..." (Amy), and Sean said,

I really do think that in some cases confidence had more to do with it than breast size specifically...I personally find that women who are more comfortable with their own body are much more attractive to me. So, it doesn't really matter what their body looks like as long as they're comfortable with it, they are attractive because they think they are attractive.

Several participants discussed androgyny, a state of presentation that includes both masculine and feminine characteristics, at times to a level of balance that neutralizes a gender label altogether, as highly attractive and often prized in the SMW subculture. Chris described androgyny as the body type she is most attracted to, "...I mean maybe it's like more andro...like kind of you can't tell if it's like a man or a woman sometimes. Like kind of like that. That probably would be like more of my ideal. And so in that andro-sense, but in the queer andro-sense..." and Dean expanded on this idea,

...I mean, if you can hit the middle it's actually a lot more sexually attractive. You'd be surprised, like if you can hit the middle, like the closer you are to that whole like straddling, the hotter you are...the middle androgynous lesbian who has like a little bit of makeup on, everybody is going to go towards her. And I don't know why. It's one of those things, it's just, like it's way more sexier, and I don't know if it's because we're all trying to get towards the middle...or maybe we like boys that look like girls or girls that look like boys...I think they're hotter if they can hit toward the middle rather than all masculine or all feminine.

Aria talked about how androgyny relates back to beauty messages and the belief that smaller breasts are more attractive in SMW subculture,

... in our subculture being androgynous is celebrated, so I guess smaller tits are better...I think small tits are in with lesbians because we like androgyny...even the most lipstick of lesbians appreciates androgyny to some degree...I think that, the smaller your breasts are, the more you can play into that androgyny...

Jill and Sarah also spoke to some of this idea, that smaller breasts create greater potential for the androgyny that is revered, "...there's a lot of androgynous that's like thinner. And like that's the thing. And I understand like there's literally, it's easier to do a lot of androgyny" (Jill) and "...I

think if I had smaller breasts and was able to find a way to pass more [as androgynous] that I would...I think if I had a smaller chest I definitely would be able to get away with more but because I don't, I didn't push that boundary as much as I would have liked to" (Sarah).

Specific breast scripts attach to lesbian subtypes. Most participants, either directly or indirectly, discussed the presence and effects of specific, and sometimes stringent, breast beauty scripts corresponding to various lesbian identities or subtypes. These discussions focused on the particular beauty expectations for the two predominant lesbian identities of femme lesbians and butch lesbians. Some participants acknowledged these lesbian subtypes/identities and script differences on a general level, "...with lesbians there's different, different are attracted to different types. Like some...some girls are androgynous. Some like to look girl—like more of what you might think they look straight...femme or more, look more like a male" (Anna) and "there was no specific archetype of what your tits wanted to be like or were supposed to look like unless you picked a niche...so then you're getting messages that are saying you have to look a specific way, but you really gotta get to a more nuanced level than the overall, than the overall [SMW] population" (Casey). Other participants' discussions included the specific breast beauty scripts that attach to the butch lesbian and femme lesbian identities; butch lesbians should have small and/or hidden breasts and femme lesbians should have larger, visible breasts,

I think it just depends on the subset of the lesbian you are talking about, for like, for the girlier lipstick lesbian people, I think that larger breasts may be more attractive. And for the complete other end of the spectrum, more butch lesbians, I don't know that size makes much of a difference. (Sean)

...it throws me off...if I saw a butch with large breasts...nothing's wrong with them per se, but just looks-wise, I'm just like, 'that's different' you know? Because I do equate breasts and all that with femininity. So you know, you have a stud or a butch whatever, has large breasts, it would just throw me off for a minute...With the girl who wants to dress femme and wants to, you know, be sexy and all that, I think there's a lot of emphasis on breasts in that case. (Cara)

...a lot of people who are looking for more of the dyke stereotype tend to want smaller breasts and that just is associated with it typically. A lot of people who tend to like feminine lesbians or lipstick lesbians look for larger breasts. For those who are looking for those specific types I do find that they have a breast choice that goes along with those stereotypes. (Sarah)

Like you know, a dominant [more butch identified lesbian] woman would wear a sports bra. That's her signature trademark thing. You're not going to see her reach in the back and clipping... You know, then we have the [more femme identified lesbian woman who wears] demi-cup bras... bras with padding and things like that. I don't think straight society notices doms where sports bras all the time... whereas lesbian women know that... I think lesbians, unbeknownst to them, have a protocol too... I think lesbians have their bra procedures too. (Aria)

Perhaps most nuanced within this dynamic is the breast script for femme lesbians in which there seems to be a fine line between being perceived and approached as a femme identified lesbian and being seen as a straight woman. Should you display too much femininity it is not uncommon to be flagged as straight and lose desired attention from other SMW. As Aria and Dean described, "And I think my boobs play into that whole 'you're too pretty to be gay.' I get that a lot" (Aria) and

...there is a friend of mine... who has larger breasts... she's very feminine, she's a lipstick lesbian and so she's like, 'God, why can't I meet anybody?!' and I'm like, 'Dude, you have boobs.' Like when you have boobs that you're proud of, I was like, 'You have to go talk to them because they're scared of them. They're scared of your breasts and they think that you're straight and you have to go talk to them'... whenever it comes to having them out and they're actually in a bra... that's seen as a very feminine thing and that, I mean you put slightly long hair and makeup with that then, bam, you're, yeah, you know what I mean... she wears stilettos out to the club, like they're going to see you as straight every single time. (Dean)

Replication of heteronormative standards. Closely related to the presence of specific and distinctive beauty standards for certain lesbian identities, is the way in which the corresponding gender presentations (i.e., more masculine for butch lesbians and more feminine for femme lesbians) replicate certain aspects of gender presentation, gender expectations, and gendered behaviors present in mainstream, heteronormative society. Casey explicitly talked about this

connection and replication, “The breasts scene is sort of, you know, if you’re butch you sort of minimize. If you’re femme you accentuate. So you know, and the ideal is almost like heteronormative standards, almost. Ya know? Of what that sort of idealized club look looks like, right.” Sean described it as a mirroring effect, “...more lipstick lesbian culture mirrors mainstream culture more...I think that lipstick lesbian culture mirrors mainstream heterosexual culture more than any other subset of lesbian culture” and Amy described observing stringent gender roles and man (butch)-woman (femme) lesbian pairing, “...if I go to a lesbian nightclub I am almost appalled at the strict gender roles, you know? Everything is so, there is definitely a masculine person and a feminine person, you know who does what in the relationship,” which she dislikes and experiences as limiting, “...and I hate that. I would love to meet a couple that is just that, a couple. Two people who are together and don’t know who does what or how it goes or whatever. That is very rare.”

SMW Subculture Message of Breast/body Acceptance

Alongside the particular and instructive SMW breast beauty scripts previously described, participants discussed a norm of breast and body acceptance widely present in and distinct to SMW subculture. Two subthemes emerged as mainstay components of this message: love and a place for “whatever you’ve got” and little to no emphasis on physical appearance.

Love and a place for “whatever you’ve got.” Numerous participants discussed how they experience SMW culture as a place in which there is a sense of unconditional love and support for “whatever you’ve got”—all breasts, bodies, identities, and presentations—and the SMW subculture provides a community and place for all of its members. As participants expressed, “...there will be partners for anybody, whatever your body type, breast size, gender presentation is” (Jill), “...people are encouraged to just let loose and be themselves” (Sean),

...most of the people that I associate with may have their personal preferences, but at the same time would probably be the first ones to say, bodies are bodies, they look however they look and that's fine. Or bodies look however they are supposed to and those bodies are beautiful regardless of what they look like. (Jane)

...the message I guess that I got, at least in the lesbian subculture were again that you could sort of be whoever you wanted to be right....the messages were good and positive and sort of be, there's a place for you no matter what you look like...it's sort of okay to look a lot of different ways...if you look like a model or you look like a diesel truck driver or anywhere in between, like if you're lesbian identified, for sure there's a place for you somewhere. (Casey)

I think that like generally the subculture, just by the very nature of it, is like very accepting in a lot of different ways. So I think you'll get like pockets of, you know, people only like this or they're only like this, but I think that like generally, the queer and gay community, it's almost like...there's a little niche area for everybody. (Chris)

Connected to and possibly underpinning this acceptance of all breasts and bodies is a more realistic expectation of breasts, bodies, and beauty ideals within SMW subculture. Casey and Dean spoke about this SMW cultural norm, "I think that if you're looking within the LGBT community it's [beauty expectations] a lot more realistic" (Casey) and

...I think we are a little bit more accepting, well I mean, yeah, I mean in general...I meant there's a realistic expectation that they're [breasts] not all going to be perfect and I think that is very accepting in this culture...there's a very like accepting, like realistic, like 'these are what boobs look like' so there's not this expectation that they look perfect. (Dean)

Little to no emphasis on physical appearance. In addition to the SMW subculture supporting and accepting all bodies and identities, the subculture also tends to place little to no emphasis or focus on physical features when considering a member's attractiveness. Several participants spoke about how little physical appearance factors in among other things (i.e., personality, confidence, etc.) when assessing attractiveness. Participants shared, "I think we're a much more open community and that we don't judge as much on looks...looks don't matter to me at all" (Sarah) and "It's just, I find more like just attracted to them as a person...like personality-wise, how they carry themselves. That's more of what I'm attracted to than what something actually physical on them looks like" (Anna).

Breast Perceptions by Self

Each participant talked about her own feelings and perceptions about her breasts/chest. Just as participants identify along spectrums of GI and presentation, participants expressed variegated breast perceptions. Numerous participants described a general feeling of positivity, likeness, and comfort with their breasts, "...it's all very positive...I like my breast size" (Sean), "I felt pretty good proportionally...I've been pretty happy with it [breast size] for the most part" (Jill), "With them not being as big, I really, I like that...honestly, I'm happy. With my size. Like, I wouldn't change it" (Cara), "I generally feel that mine are in proportion to my body" (Jane), "...I mean, mine are, my feelings are pretty positive" (Chris). For Amy and Sarah, positive breast feelings came from accepting and embracing their breasts and bodies as they were, "Now I just kinda like my boobs. I think I just came into my own and just realized, this is what I have" (Amy) and "...and so I realize that the only thing I could possibly do is embrace it [breasts and body] and love who I was and that's how I was made kind of thing...and I'm completely happy with who I am...my feeling is my breasts go with that" (Sarah). Anna described experiencing a sense of apathy, indifference, and neutrality towards her breasts, "Yeah. Neutral is a great way to put it as far as, it's just kind of, I'm apathetic about it. Like, it's like, 'okay, it's there,' but if it wasn't there, whoop-dee-do." Aria and Dean talked about having mixed or fluctuating feelings of like and dislike and frustration and appreciation for their breasts, "...when it hurts [back pain from large breast size], you know, and people laugh and joke 'Give me some, yada yada,' 'No really, like you can have it, I promise. Like you can have it,' and then, then it's I like it a bit, like I'm gonna miss them when they go [if she gets a reduction]" (Aria) and

...I think it depends on my comfortability issue...if I feel insecure then getting rid of them [decreasing breast visibility] actually makes it better. And then if I feel secure, then wearing feminine clothes or feminine bra or like to where they accentuate my breasts, I have to be in a very personally secure place. (Dean)

Casey shared how she tends to experience fairly stable and constant feelings of dislike and disconnection with her chest, “I don’t want to do a full transition, you know, because I don’t identify entirely as male. Top surgery I could go for, so I guess that would definitely show that you know that I have a disconnect and a distaste, and I don’t care for them.”

Alongside these general breast perceptions, several specific experience domains emerged as two subthemes: breasts and personal identity and breast esteem and confidence.

Breasts and personal identity. Numerous participants shared about the relationship they experience between their breasts and bodies and their senses of personal identity, their understandings of who they are as people. The two main motifs of this relationship were instances of breasts-personal identity connection and breasts-personal identity separation. Amy, Aria, and Sarah described feeling like their breasts are connected to their sense of self, though not to the extent that they are defined by their breasts, “...I appreciate that, now my breasts are there. I’m more comfortable with them and I even, I don’t know, I don’t think I see myself separately from them, you know?” (Amy), “It’s [breasts] just a part of me...I don’t think I’ve been concise about it as the part of my identity because its always there. It’s like, I don’t remember a time I didn’t have titties...” (Aria), and “I think they are part of who I am, but they are not who I am” (Sarah). Jane and Anna expressed that although they have not experienced any body dysmorphia, they feel that their breasts are separate from their personal identities, “When I think about my identity it tends to be more, it doesn’t tend to be about what my body looks like...my body doesn’t really play into it” (Jane) and “...I never ever felt like I’m not in the right body, or something like that. But as far as like, I just feel so separate from like, I mean, identity-wise, I feel separated from like what my physical parts” (Anna).

Breast esteem and confidence. Numerous participants shared sentiments of breast positivity, which we refer to as “breast esteem,” that yields greater body confidence, feelings of beauty and attractiveness, and overall self-confidence. Participants shared, “...being confident in yourself. So, I think that breasts play a part in that, for sure...I love them [breasts]. They’re great. They’re like one of my favorite things about myself...they’re I guess, one of my assets...they’re one of, I think, one of my best features” (Sean), “So, I think it’s [lack of breasts] like, like a—gives me a sense of confidence sometimes” (Cara), “I think my breasts specifically play a role in, in my sexual confidence” (Sarah), and

I mean, it was just like, ‘Here they are and I look good as a woman,’ you know?...Like, you know, it’s just this confidence piece of like, ‘Yes, I’ve got one of the best racks in Tallahassee.’ And so it was like this I recall proud sort of thing that I mean, attracted people, but at the same time it was just like, ‘Yeah, I rock.’ (Dean)

Dressing Breasts/chest

Nearly all participants talked about dressing their breasts and chests and what factors influence what they wear in terms of bras and other upper body garments. The underlying factors informing participants’ dress choices clustered into two areas that led to two subthemes: dressing breasts for comfort, utility, and/or confidence and dressing breasts to display GI.

Dressing breasts for comfort, utility, and/or confidence. Several participants described their bra purchase choices and daily bra selections as being related to a desire to feel comfortable, needing a certain bra for a certain function, and/or a way to feel confident about their body presentation. Participants described, “I used to wear sports bras and it, it’s just like, I didn’t care at all what it looked like. And so, it’s just like this is its function, this is functional...I’ve always been like, it’s got to be comfortable” (Anna), “I think most things in my life are utility-based instead of look-based, so...I definitely wear them [bras], because otherwise it’s definitely uncomfortable...I had to or else they get in the way quickly” (Sean), “I, I feel, you know how

they say dress for success. I feel like my boobs are one of the very first things you're going to notice about me, whether I want you to or not...being mindful of what looks good on me" (Aria), and "It actually, I mean, it's like a, it's like a test in the morning, like if I don't like what I'm wearing then how I am feeling confidently, like how I am feeling personally, and then it'll base on what side of the closet I'm going to" (Dean).

Dressing breasts to display GI. A few participants talked about how they use bras and chest garments to present their bodies in a way so that others will better recognize their GI. Jill, Cara, Casey, and Dean each spoke of this dynamic in dressing their breasts/chest, "...but there's like, I can go through and pick different things [breast/chest garments and clothes] depending on the day, that I'll pick different kind of gender, a large spectrum of gender expressions" (Jill), "I just wear a sports bra [more masculine bra choice]. That's the only thing" (Cara), "...I have a compression vest that I wear pretty much every day. I very rarely wear bras. I don't like them...and sometimes I'll actually bind with an ace bandage either above or below the compression vest, just a little bit extra [minimization/flatting]" (Casey), and "Yeah. And I mean, like I said that, that was kind of the medium, of like, okay, how far are the breasts out, in order to determine masculine or feminine" (Dean).

Breast Functionality

Many participants described experiences in which they understand and treat their breasts as assets that function as a means for certain ends, such as gaining attention from others, attracting potential partners, being treated in a certain way, and to attain things.

Sean, Cara, Jill, and Sarah spoke about how they use their breasts to attract potential partners, "Only when I was single and or looking for a partner, yes, I would accentuate them much more" (Sean), "I think the women who like tomboys, soft studs...I think they're more attracted to me

because of my lack of breasts” (Cara), “More men than women, but you know, it was still like that was a thing...that [using breasts] was a way to attract, attract people...like when I minimize or do things like that, it’s also a way to attract...” (Jill), and “...I feel like in a lot of social situations, it sounds awful, but I really rely on them to some extent. Its, it helps me to feel sexier, it helps me to feel more open, I just kind of always seem to rely on them” (Sarah).

Chris and Aria shared about how they have sometimes used their breasts to acquire certain things, “Like I’m aware that they [breasts] work for me, and so I kind of use that to my advantage when I can...Like maybe I wore something lower to get attention, get some free drinks. Yeah, whatever it might be” (Chris) and “I can honestly say I, I’ve gotten jobs probably because of my outward appearance...I’d gone places and gotten things fairly cheaper...if it’s the pretty girl and the pretty girl with boobs, you know? I can use an extra credit assignment” (Aria).

Lastly, Dean described some of the function and utility of her breasts,

If you know how to wear your breasts then you, you’re going to be able to plow through whatever you need to...it was almost that I wished that I could take them [breasts] off and then put them back on. And I think that I do that now, it’s like that utility aspect. It’s like, okay, well I gotta get this done today, so I’m like putting them on and putting them out. And then it’s like on other days, I’m like okay take them off and put them down. You know, and its like I really wish I could just take them on and off....But I wish they were kind of an accessory [researcher speaks]. Yeah, something like a necklace!...it depends on what I want to accomplish that night. So like I said, they’re very, they’re a utility to me, they’re an accessory to me....I’m telling ya! And it’s like, you know, this is how I navigate life. Based on the boobs...They’re a powerful force, you just have to use them right.

As evidenced by the use of her breasts for navigating gendered restrooms,

Yeah, it’s funny, whenever, like when I’m at a night club, even if it’s a straight nightclub, if I’m perceived as male enough, like I’ll go into the men’s restroom if there’s a line in the women’s...and what it is all about, it’s all about if they perceive my boobs or not. And so its like, you know, you hunch in a little bit and you kind of just walk and make sure that your shirt comes out...

...I try to go to the restroom in places and like, I was at the mall this weekend and I was like walking around and had on like a sweater...and as soon as I walked into the [women’s] restroom, it was like I was up and I had like breasts out because I was like, I don’t want to be

told to leave. And so it's [breasts] like the passing card, it's like my driver's license to the restroom, you know. And so, it's like when I need them, they're there.

Navigating and Coping with Breast Beauty Scripts

Within and among various breasted experience topics, participants described instances of and ways of navigating the breast beauty scripts of both mainstream and SMW subculture, as well as coping with social pressure, expectation, and consequences that regularly attach to such beauty scripts. Across the array of navigational and coping methods and experiences discussed, two predominant experiential areas developed as subthemes: confronting and challenging breast beauty norms and feminism.

Confronting and challenging breast beauty norms. Several participants talked about ways that they intentionally push back against and challenge the breast beauty norms of both mainstream culture and SMW subculture. Anna and Jane spoke about how they purposefully deprioritize and dismantle the importance placed on appearance in cultural messages of beauty and the role of beauty in identity,

...I still get a little like self-conscious and think 'Oh, well, you know, maybe I would, more people would be attracted to me if I tried appearance-wise harder.' But then I think, but that's when I get aggravated and think that I don't, 'but that's not me.' And I don't wanna just do that for that reason. So that's kind of what keeps me, I guess. Even though I, I am around that and I see people who put importance on it. I guess that ultimate, I just feel pretty grounded, I, that thought, where it's like 'Well, I'm not gonna, I'm not gonna shift over to this.' (Anna)

In general when I was an earlier teenager, I remember not being particularly happy with my body, not for any specific reason, but more because I understood socially that as a woman I was not suppose to like my body. I was suppose to find a whole laundry list of things that were wrong with it and just generally be unhappy and hate everything about it, whether I actually did or not. And as I moved into my later teenage years and my early adulthood, at some point, though I don't remember precisely when it was, at some point, I got to the point where I basically said, 'You know what? Screw it! I have a nice body. To hell with anyone who tells me otherwise. To hell with anyone who tries to make me feel like I should think otherwise.' So. (Jane)

Jane and Anna also talked about how they try to reinforce this act of subverting the importance of physical appearance by submersing themselves in communities that place little to no emphasis or value on physical beauty as a component of attractiveness, "...I would think, it's possible that because of, because of the environment that I was in [all women's college], I was able to and I would assume most of the other students that I went to school with were able to focus on other things besides that [appearance]" (Jane) and "I guess more of the people like I'm associated with that are lesbian or bisexual are a little bit more, I don't know if androgynous is the right word or if it's just a little bit more average. Like not trying so hard for one look, like the certain appearance" (Anna).

Jill described how she tries to disengage and ignore certain media forms when she recognizes and feels the toxic nature of their messages, "Like with mainstream media, like there's a lot of like...I'm just starting to learn how to like literally turn it off. I'm like, 'I'm not comfortable with this.'...I just try to ignore it most of the time because it's so toxic and difficult to get around."

Feminism. Feminist identity, feminist belief systems, and feminist communities have provided participants with a variety of ways to deal with and take a stand against the breast beauty scripts placed and used upon them. As an aggregate, participants believed in and promoted a form of feminism focused most on women's rights, choices, and empowerment, "Being a feminist just means supporting women's rights in every way, shape, and form" (Sean), "I tend to ascribe more to kind of a third-wave or postmodern sort of feminism where the emphasis is less on encouraging people to do things that are extrinsically considered feminist and more on promoting women's choices" (Jane), "...whenever I talk about my feminist ideals, like it's more of like, okay, women are free to do what they want with their bodies... and I try to be very conscious about [not] policing other women or even butch lesbians in how they should act"

(Dean), and "...I look at female empowerment as being the main contributor to whatever the feminist movement is going to be" (Aria).

Within this framework of what feminism is, participants spoke about how they specifically use it to gain the kind of support they want or need. Feminism was used to seek and maintain like-minded friends, "So I don't think I would necessary associate myself with people who don't think of themselves as feminists" (Sean); to have a community that supports one's identity, "that's [online feminist communities] been incredibly helpful and supportive in developing a feminist identity and just kind of a network. So it's been really good cause it's like having another supportive group...They've been very positive [about her gender fluidity]" (Jill); to undermine and challenge beauty norms, "Where transgressing the social norm of, by not feeling dissatisfied...I think that the fact that I don't hate my body or hate my breasts the way society tells me I probably should is itself a feminist act or a political act...part of my feminism" (Jane); to develop comfort with one's breasts/body, "I think that it [feminism] might have influenced sort of like, just more, being more comfortable with my body and more being a little less self-conscious" (Chris); to promote and maintain realistic beauty standards, "...so going in with that like how a female's breasts should look, like having an ideal of like what they should look like. Like that to me is like very anti-lesbian feminist. The more accepting you can be of like a natural anything, I think is more aligned with my lesbian feminist values" (Dean); to eradicate the sexual objectification of breasts/women's bodies, "...I think it terms of breasts in feminism, I think the main thing for me is that they aren't seen as objects" (Sarah); and to maintain a critical lens for examining the impacts of beauty standards and how they inform one's perceptions and actions, "...as I become more part of the community, I think that I've definitely had to take a look at my

own biases and my own baggage about identity and gender presentation... ‘Am I dressing or behaving this way because I feel like it is a societal expectation?’ ” (Amy).

Conceptual Model

As the themes and subthemes emerged, data analysis focused on the relationships of connection and influence among them. From this phase of analysis, a conceptual model emerged as a preliminary theoretical framework describing how the themes in the form of experiences and dynamics function and play out in the lives of SMW.

Model structure and design. The organization of the model includes a directional flow that moves from top to bottom. The top portion of the model showcases themes and dynamics that relate mostly to social contexts and mechanisms. The bottom portion displays themes that, although still related to social factors in certain ways, can be categorized as principally related to individual, intrapersonal features and mechanisms. Cultural contexts are represented in the form of gray-shaded spheres, with the SMW subcultural context (dark gray) embedded within the mainstream, heteronormative cultural context (light gray), displaying their real-world association. As depicted in the Relationship Key in the lower right-hand corner, the thematic relationships are depicted using solid and dashed arrows. The arrows in our model do not indicate the traditional causal relationships, but rather, show predominant dynamics of influence that show where an influence originates and where/what it tends to impact. Solid arrows represent fairly direct relationships and influences while dashed arrows represent more indirect or partial influences. Word descriptions are provided with most arrows and connector lines to provide specificity of the kind of relationship or influence one thematic area has with/on another.

Breast development experiences. Thematically, the model begins with breast development experiences because, while awareness of breasts and gendered experience occur for women from infancy on, women's personal breast experience usually begins during puberty. All participants, and young women throughout the U.S., go through breast development experiences and these experiences occur in the context of mainstream, heteronormative society. Commonly, as described by some participants, the experience of puberty includes the beginning of greater attention paid to physical appearance and a new awareness of how physical beauty factors into attractiveness as deemed by others and society. Heteronormative breast beauty standards dictate and inform the messages young women receive about their breasts during puberty and frequently catalyze and lay the foundation for an internalization of these beauty standards by young women. Breast development experiences are comprised of continued contact with the beauty standards already placed upon young women as young girls, and a further rectification of these beauty standards in the form of mainstream, heteronormative breast beauty scripts that are used by women (of all adolescent and adult ages) in defining their own beauty and the beauty of others, and are used upon them by others in assessing their appearance and attractiveness.

Breasts and coming out. A significant event in the life of a SMW is the realization, recognition, and understanding that she is not like her heterosexual peers, that she experiences attraction to members of her same gender, and desires to or has engaged in same-sex relationships. This event can be understood as part of a broader coming out process of claiming and sharing one's sexual minority identity with oneself and/or others of one's choosing. This coming out process of identifying as a SMW, be it internal to the self and/or external to others, is an event that generates an additional SMW subculture appearance script to be used by this woman and also used upon her by other SMW subculture members. This process happened in

different ways for participants, consciously for some and more unconsciously for others, but in all cases, the institution of the additional SMW beauty script remains the same. Ultimately, coming out as a SMW leads to an experience of biculturality in which she is at once submersed in two cultural contexts, mainstream, heteronormative culture and the SMW subculture.

Typically, the SMW subculture beauty scripts become the primary cultural reference and source of influence for attractiveness and breast/body presentation, though mainstream cultural messages and pressure remain present externally as the broader cultural context, as well as internally as a product of internalization. Throughout her life a SMW will be influenced by and will have to deal with the beauty standards present within both of these cultural spheres, and how she is perceived and treated by others and herself will depend on a variety of factors, many of which comprise the other components of the model.

Breasts as a gender marker. Indirectly related to breast development experiences and coming out and situated in both the heteronormative and SMW cultural contexts, though predominantly informed by heteronormative ideology, is the socially constructed way that breasts function as a gender marker. Breasts act as a physical symbol of gender; a person who has visible breasts is deemed to be a woman and feminine and a person who lacks breasts or visible breasts is regarded as a man and masculine. This breast-based gender marking dynamic occurs in two ways: breasts are presented in purposeful ways by SMW in order to establish and portray their gender, and SMW's breasts, or lack thereof, are used by others to distinguish and classify their gender. This gender-typing mechanism is a driving component of the preliminary theoretical model that fuels the breast/chest and GI relationship and also informs the highly influential beauty scripts present within both mainstream and SMW cultures. Additionally, the

breast-gender marking mechanism latently underpins much of the happenings within the areas of breast attention, dressing breasts/chest, and breast functionality.

Breasts/chest and GI. Powered by the socially constructed apparatus of breasts as a gender marker is the relationship and interaction of SMW's breasts/chest and GIs. SMW's breast/chest-GI relationships typically take three forms: alignment, fluidity, and/or misalignment. SMW who experience breast/chest and GI alignment typically have either sizeable to larger breasts that are regularly visible and are congruent with a woman/feminine GI or have smaller breasts that are able to be hidden or are less visible and are aligned with an androgynous or masculine GI. The relationship of breast/chest and GI can be one of fluidity in which a SMW's breast/chest presentation (i.e., breasts/chest displayed or hidden/deemphasized) changes from day-to-day and in doing so she attains breast/chest-GI alignment for the given day or time. Breast/chest and GI misalignment occurs for SMW who feel that their outer physical form is incongruent with their internal sense of gender, either they identify as more masculine and have sizeable breasts that are difficult to hide or deemphasize or they identify as more feminine and have small breasts that have little to no visibility in presentation.

The overarching idea is one of matching between breasts/body and one's internal sense of gender: "my breasts/chest fit me, and therefore I present them/it regularly in its natural form" (breast-GI alignment), "my breasts/chest in their/its natural form sometimes fit me, and therefore, I adjust my breast/body presentation to fit my internal sense of gender" (breast-GI fluidity), and "my breasts/chest in their natural form do not fit me, and therefore I substantially alter my breast/chest presentation to better fit my internal sense of gender" (breast-GI misalignment). While there are moments in which one's breast/chest presentation comes to affect and help define one's GI, the correlational dynamic usually occurs in the opposite direction

within the breast/chest-GI relationship. Typically, a SMW first possesses her GI and this internal sense of gender is what defines and shapes how she feels about and presents her breasts/chest. The components of this relationship, specifically her GI and how she presents her breasts/chest will help inform and determine how she uses and is affected by breast beauty scripts within heteronormative culture and especially those within the SMW subculture.

Heteronormative breast beauty scripts and preferences. Mainstream, heteronormative breast beauty scripts act as a bedrock for the definitions and formula of female attractiveness. These breast beauty scripts are founded on the mainstream gender binary in which there are two very specific, even antithetical, genders of man/masculine and woman/feminine. Prescriptions of what it means to be an attractive woman are centered on how well a woman fits into her gender role as a woman. These breast beauty scripts assert that beautiful and appealing women are those that showcase and display the epitome of femininity to the greatest of extents: women that possess and display large, round, and perky breasts, the opposite of what an attractive man's chest should look like. These mainstream breast beauty scripts contain such hyperbolized and distorted breast images that they also greatly stray from what real women's breasts actually look like (i.e., gravity and skin tissue structure often make having both large and perky breasts quite difficult), and therefore, highly unrealistic and unattainable. Additionally, these beauty and appearance standards, through wider societal connections between appearance and a person's value, often lead to women equating their value as people and women to their level of attractiveness and physical appeal. As these stringent beauty standards and designations of personal value converge, mainstream breast beauty scripts become strong forces used by and upon women to establish and define their attractiveness and personal value. As these breast beauty scripts embed

within social interactions, they come to encourage breast comparison, promote and justify certain breast attention, and in part, penetrate and duplicate within certain SMW breast beauty scripts.

SMW subculture breast beauty scripts and preferences. The SMW subculture possesses its own set of breast beauty standards and is comprised of two components: scripts for particular lesbian subtypes/identities and messages of breast/body acceptance. These two scripts operate simultaneously alongside one another among SMW and within SMW subculture. Most generally, SMW subculture contains a breast beauty script that asserts that all breasts, regardless of shape, size, match with GI, presentation, and the like are beautiful and how they should be, and that all SMW, regardless of their breast attractiveness, are valuable people and worthy of loving partners who will celebrate their bodies as they are. However, the SMW breast beauty script also contains a component with more specific and prescriptive norms for certain lesbian subtypes or identities (i.e., butch lesbians, femme lesbians, and androgynous lesbians).

Interestingly, this beauty script component seems to absorb and replicate the appearance norms of mainstream, heteronormative culture. As such, SMW breast beauty scripts for lesbian subtypes tend to promote the gender binary in which feminine presenting women are supposed to have larger, perky, and displayed breasts and masculine presenting women are supposed to have small and hidden or deemphasized breasts. Therefore, two dynamics operate at once within SMW breast beauty scripts, one of traditional, inflexible gender norms and corresponding appearance standards for specific lesbian identities and another of unconditional acceptance and thus, to some extent, a space of haven and even protection from rigid beauty standards and pressures. While our data does not provide a clear or assured conclusion on which SMW experience the more rigid and specific SMW breast beauty scripts, given the attachment of these scripts to specific lesbian identities and subtypes, it seems that GI, and those women who more

closely align with the heteronormative male-female gender binary, experience more breast beauty pressure and prescriptions than those that don't.

Breast attention. While breast attention occurs in both mainstream, heteronormative and SMW contexts, breast attention takes on particular forms in each cultural space. Breast attention in the form of compliments tend to stem from the prescriptions of beauty and attractiveness within heteronormative and SMW breast beauty scripts with the content of breast compliments corresponding to the beauty ideals specific to each environment. Breast attention in the form of objectification is powered chiefly by heteronormative breast beauty scripts, which promote, justify, normalize, and condone sexual objectification of women and especially women's breasts. As reported by participants, this form of attention was experienced almost invariably from men within heteronormative cultural environments. If/when objectification was experienced in a SMW environment, the objectification experience was one of consent in which the objectified woman wanted to be treated as such for the experience of freedom, empowerment, and celebration of her body begotten from the sexually objectifying attention by other SMW persons. Mainstream breast objectification is an act of consumption for the pleasure of the consumer while SMW breast objectification is an act of celebrating and affirming the body and beauty of the woman who is objectified, and this is a significant phenomenological difference. Most generally, breast attention in mainstream culture is characterized by breast/body consumption and in SMW subculture it is characterized by breast/body celebration and empowerment.

Breast comparison. Similar to the relationship between breast attention and cultural breast beauty scripts is that of breast comparison and these cultural beauty scripts. Though breast comparison occurs within both mainstream and SMW environments, breast comparison arises from the mainstream, heteronormative beauty messages that encourage women to compare their

breasts and bodies to that of the ideal woman and subsequently work to alter their breasts and bodies to attain the archetype of womanly beauty. While body comparison is a fairly natural act of self-understanding and finding a social referent for presentation and behavior, as conveyed by several participants, breast comparison takes on different forms and dynamics within mainstream culture compared to SMW subculture, and this difference seems to rest upon the differences in cultural beauty standards. On a general level, within mainstream culture breast comparison is often about a sizing up of other women, a judgment of how one compares to the ideals of female beauty alongside the other, and a conclusion about whether one can feel good about her body next to the other's or whether she needs to change her body in some way to achieve an appearance closer to the ideal female beauty. Breast and body comparison within the SMW subculture seems to consist of less judgment and more neutral observation and recognition of difference. Additionally, comparison in SMW contexts often results in a mindfulness and understanding of one's breasts and presentation rather than a feeling of needing to change and improve one's breasts/body and how they appear.

The bottom half of the model shifts to themes and processes that occur amidst the SMW and heteronormative cultural backdrops, but involve a strong personal factor that supersedes the social aspects. The social factors from the top half of the model feed into and inform women's personal experiences within breasted experience. Additionally, these personal experience-based themes connect back to the social-based themes in the way that remnants of the social forces and dynamics become internalized, especially in the form of internalized sexism and breast beauty standards, and come to influence and affect what occurs on the personal level of SMW's breasted experience.

Breast perceptions by self. Amid the mainstream and SMW cultural forces that convey messages about how one's breasts should look and be presented and produce breast/body judgments by others, SMW have their own feelings and perceptions of their breasts. SMW hold a variety of feelings and perceptions about breasts that can be understood as a continuum from positivity and satisfaction to negativity and dissatisfaction with one's breasts. As designated by the three dashed arrows pointing to self-based breast perceptions in the model, much of a SMW's self-based breast perceptions and feelings relate to the relationship between her breasts/chest and GI, breast attention, and breast comparison. For SMW, positive self-made breast perceptions seem to correlate with breast-GI alignment, breast attention that is complimentary, celebratory, and includes little to no objectification, and breast comparison that centers on observation and recognition of difference rather than judgment and feelings of needing to change one's breasts/body. Additionally, positive breast perceptions by oneself seem to connect to the SMW subculture message of breast/body acceptance and what could be a bidirectional relationship between acceptance of self and acceptance from others (i.e., if others accept my breasts then I can too, and if I accept my breasts then others will likely accept them as well). Self-made breast perceptions, once established and maintained, function to inform and determine, at least in part, dressing one's breasts/chest and breast functionality.

Dressing breasts/chest. SMW dress their breasts/chests in a variety of ways, from displayed and pronounced through bras and accentuating clothing to minimized and hidden through sports bras, chest binders, and deemphasizing clothing. How a SMW dresses her breasts/chest on a given day regularly hinges on her personal breast perceptions, and these perceptions are again influenced by her breast/chest-GI relationship. As such, the spectrum of breast/chest dress forms corresponds to the GI spectrum, which is further backdropped by the way breasts act as a gender

marker. Breast functionality/utility is another significant motif for how SMW dress their breasts/chest, and this functionality plays out in two ways. Firstly, breast garments and clothing are chosen for the functions of support, comfort, and what breast dress is suitable for a given context, activity, or presentation. Secondly, dressing one's breasts/chest partially relates to overall breast functionality in that SMW will often dress their breasts/chest in a way that aids in how they are using their breasts as a means to a certain end at a given time. In this way, how a SMW dresses her breasts is bidirectionally related to the functionality of her breasts.

Breast functionality. As with dressing one's breasts, breast functionality is informed by how a SMW feels about and perceives her breasts/chest. In this way, personal breast perceptions form the potential and parameters for how SMW may use their breasts for certain ends, such as to get attention, to attract a date or partner, or to receive certain kinds of treatment or respect. For example, if she has a personal breast perception of positivity in which she understands her breasts as attractive and an asset, then this creates the potential for using her breasts to attract a partner. Furthermore, how she uses her breasts has a relationship of mutual influence with how she dresses her breasts, and therefore, this woman would likely dress her breasts in a way that highlights her breasts as an asset of physical attractiveness and beauty. This breast functionality, along with many other model themes and dynamics, remains founded upon a SMW's breast-GI relationship.

Navigating and coping with breast beauty scripts. The ways in which SMW navigate and cope with breast beauty scripts partially connect to the various experiences involved in all the themes and dynamics of the conceptual model. However, how women deal with breast beauty scripts connects most closely to personal breast perceptions. As breast beauty perceptions are formed from the breast-GI relationship, breast attention, breast comparison, and cultural

messages, self-made breast perceptions arise that produce and define the ways in which a SMW will need to navigate and cope with breast beauty scripts in order to maintain a positive self-image, supportive relationships, and optimal psychological well-being. Additionally, as a SMW copes and navigates breast scripts and breasted experience in certain ways, the experiences she has often reciprocate influence and come to modify and shape her personal breast perceptions. As an example, a SMW may find an accepting niche of the SMW community in order to deal with more stringent breast beauty norms and in doing so the supportive message of her peers will come to increase her own sense of positivity and satisfaction with her breasts.

Model summary. As a concise summation, a SMW is at first planted within the heteronormative, mainstream cultural context. She grows up within this context, beginning to experience and possibly internalize societal messages and expectations about what it means to be a woman (especially regarding appearance and attractiveness). During puberty she develops breasts and begins her own breasted experience, which will continue, in some form, for the remainder of her life. At some point, she recognizes that she experiences same-sex attraction and comes to embody a sexual identity as a SMW (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or queer). This recognition, and the broader coming out process that subsequently occurs, embeds her within an additional SMW subcultural context. At this point, she primarily exists within the SMW subcultural context, but continues to interface with mainstream, heteronormative cultural mechanisms and ideology as her SMW subculture is situated in this wider mainstream cultural framework. Her breasts, depending on how she wears them, act as a socially-constructed marker for typing her as either a woman and female or non-woman and non-female. At the same time she possess a personal, internal experience of gender, her GI. How her breasts as a gender marker and her GI come to relate forms her breast/chest-GI relationship, leading to breast-GI

alignment, fluidity, or misalignment. She carries this breast-GI relationship within mainstream contexts and experiences that contain heteronormative breast beauty scripts, as well as within SMW contexts and experiences that contain specific breast beauty scripts for lesbian subtypes (informed in part by heteronormative breast prescriptions) and a message of breast/body acceptance. More indirectly influenced by her breast-GI relationship and SMW breast beauty scripts, and rather directly informed by heteronormative breast beauty scripts, she experiences an array of breast attention and breast comparison within both mainstream and SMW environments. All of these experiences, and their consequent emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions, amass as social breasted experiences that move to influence personal breasted experience, and included in this aggregate are also any remnants of internalized sexism and breast beauty scripts. At the same time, though couched in the mainstream and SMW contexts, SMW are engaged in personal breasted experience, which primarily includes self-made breast perceptions and feelings. Her personal breast perceptions inform and guide how she dresses her breasts and how she uses her breasts for various utility purposes, while dressing her breasts and breast functionality influence and reinforce each other. Her self-made breast perceptions construct and define the ways in which she may choose to or need to navigate and cope with various breasts beauty scripts. Lastly, these navigational and coping experiences complete the interaction model and feed back into and either solidify or modify her personal breast perceptions.

Chapter V

Discussion

A wide variety of salient themes and thematic interactions emerged from the data and collectively illustrate the most definitive and important aspects of SMW's breasted experience. When considering the variables and factors that relate to the research question of how SMW are affected by beauty standards within their bicultural experience, breasts as a gender marker, GI, the breast-GI relationship, lesbian subtype identity, and the covert presence of internalized sexism and dominant beauty codes are the most pivotal forces of impact and operation as SMW seek to utilize, negotiate, and contend with sociocultural beauty scripts and breast perceptions within interpersonal and intrapersonal experience.

While SMW often occupy SMW subcultural spaces, which to some degree oppose the dominant, heteronormative gender binary, these environments, and therefore SMW, are not untouched by the stringent, mainstream definitions of femininity and masculinity which include the narrow recipe for what it means to look like and act like a woman. Our findings show that this gender binary and its corresponding gender roles, framed in our study as breasts as a gender marker, are duplicated within the part of SMW subcultural breast beauty codes that attach to specific lesbian subtypes (i.e., femme, butch, and androgynous lesbians). In this way, regardless of how a SMW personally feels about the gender binary, she must still contend with its prescriptions in both mainstream and SMW environments, though most heavily in heteronormative contexts: how she wears and presents her breasts/chest determine how she is gender typed and what beauty mandates she will be pressured to comply with. SMW who do not follow the specific gendered appearance codes assigned to their breast/body type may experience a variety of distress related to body image, self-esteem, and psychosocial well-being.

Closely related to and built upon the construct of breasts as a gender marker are the concepts and experiences of GI and a SMW's relationship between her breasts/chest/body and her GI. Within the lives of our participants, GI and breast-GI relationship highly affect a SMW's experience with breast beauty scripts, and both of these variables flow into a broader sense of body satisfaction. Participants who possess a more feminine GI reported experiencing less social consequences and less breast/body negotiation and dissatisfaction compared to participants with more masculine GIs. Similarly, experiences of breast-GI misalignment often resulted in arduous, uncomfortable, and even painful efforts to modify one's body; instances of invalidation of one's GI by others; social policing of one's breasts/body; greater body dissatisfaction; and frequent breast/body-related negative emotionality, all of which correlate with overall mental health.

GI frequently relates to lesbian subtypes; more feminine GIs, more masculine GIs, and genderqueer or neutral GIs often correlate with femme lesbian identity, butch lesbian identity, and androgynous lesbian identity, respectively. Given our finding that SMW breast beauty codes are particular and specific for these lesbian identities and that this component of the SMW breast beauty codes imitates certain heteronormative appearance mandates, it follows that SMW with the most prototypical GIs and lesbian subtypes will experience the greatest pressure and distress when it comes to negotiating and contending with beauty norms. With increased complexity, although our findings posit an overarching subcultural climate of acceptance and celebration of all breasts/chests and body presentations, participants' experiences support the notion that some SMW are more touched or supported by this norm than others, namely those that also fall under the purview of the lesbian subtype-specific breast norms which are formulaic and narrow in scope, deeming only certain breasts/chests and bodies as attractive and worthy of positive attention.

As previously described, all SMW are socialized and experience breast development within the mainstream, heteronormative backdrop, and this societal context places great emphasis on appearance and beauty as fundamental and indispensable components of a woman's sense of self, attractiveness as a romantic partner, and value as a person. Through the process of socialization, a SMW may internalize the societal rules, expectations, and reinforcements related to beauty and appearance codes, which act to validate the social ideology of beauty and attractiveness through actions, feelings, and thoughts that conform to such messages, as well as reinforce such messages by enacting societal beauty prescriptions upon herself and others. Therefore, regardless of when a SMW recognizes her sexual identity and undergoes the coming out process, it is highly likely that she will have internalized, to some degree, some or all of the abovementioned beauty and attractiveness codes and ideologies, and these will stay with her even as she enters and occupies SMW subcultural spaces and interfaces with the SMW appearance norm of acceptance.

When considering the previously proposed ideas of the SMW subculture buffering or inoculating SMW from the stringent beauty pressures of mainstream society, our findings remain consistent with past research (Beren et al., 1997; Kelly, 2007; Meyers et al., 1999; Pitman, 2000); the SMW norm of acceptance does help to bolster body satisfaction in certain ways, but does not create full immunity from the pressure and negative impacts of the dictatorial and durable breast beauty mandates within mainstream culture and part of the SMW subculture. How protective the SMW breast/body acceptance norm may be for a given SMW depends on a variety of factors (i.e., belief systems of specific peer groups, feminist identity, purposeful challenging of beauty norms, etc.), but in general, SMW as a population continue to struggle with

internalized remnants of beauty essentialism and must contend with and negotiate breast/body beauty codes within their breasted experience.

Clinical Implications

The exploratory and preliminary theoretical findings of our study provide numerous clinical considerations. First, our findings suggest that there are several SMW subgroups that may be most vulnerable to the presence and impacts of body dissatisfaction and breast/body-related social consequences and microaggressions: SMW with masculine GI, SMW that present contrary to traditional breast and gender appearance scripts, SMW that have some level of breast-GI misalignment, and SMW with specific lesbian subtype identities. Practitioners working with SMW may consider pursuing formal and/or informal evaluation of these GIs, gender presentation, and sociocultural risk factors, as well as corresponding phenomenological information. Some example questions that target these areas might include: What is it like to be a masculine presenting SMW in a SMW setting? In a mainstream setting? What kinds of feedback do you get from others, SMW or heterosexual, about how you look and present yourself? What is it like for you to want to present your GI in a certain way, but your body as it is doesn't feel like it is a good match?

Initial interventions may be focused on exploring the affective and interpersonal components of these women's experiences. After assessing distress levels and determining treatment needs, coping-based interventions might focus on our findings related to how SMW navigate and cope with certain breasted experiences. These therapeutic focuses may include building a supportive peer network, including members of the SMW community who promote the beauty norm of acceptance; exploring and developing a feminist identity and community; distancing oneself from beauty-based attractiveness messages; assertiveness skills to express one's experience and

reactions to certain unwanted and/or uncomfortable breast attention; strategies for cognitively challenging beauty messages; affective and cognitive work to dismantle internalized sexism and beauty mandates; self-compassion work; self-esteem building, and internal sources of identity and validation, among other things. Given the fundamental, social facet of body dissatisfaction and its impacts on psychological well-being, psychological practitioners may look to feminist therapy and theory to help empower clients to advocate for themselves and challenge the sociopolitical constructs that build and maintain beauty ideologies and beauty essentialism. Furthermore, clinicians may consider social justice interventions that target system, organizational, and paradigmatic levels of beauty socialization and beauty essentialism.

Limitations and Future Research

Our study was both exploratory and investigational in the way that it sought to discover more conclusive information on whether SMW subculture protects SMW from stringent mainstream, heteronormative beauty standards, as well as surveying for additional variables and factors that play into SMW's experiences of beauty standards. A primary limitation of our study is our small-sized and homogenous sample who were predominately White, lesbian/gay, educated, and middle class. Given this limitation, our findings may be best used to ground future quantitative studies involving larger and more diverse samples in order to generalize findings to the wider SMW population. Social identities related to racial/ethnic identity and socioeconomic/class identity may be of particular importance given the nature of mainstream cultural beauty standards, which tend to prize Whiteness and upper-class identity.

While the study has concluded with a rich data archive and a robust preliminary theoretical model of themes and thematic interactions due to the wide scope of questions and content areas, much of what we are left with is more questions for further research study. We discovered that

GI and the breast/chest-GI relationship seem to have strong influences on how SMW experience beauty standards. What we were not able to do in the present study was examine exactly how these factors influence body satisfaction and overall mental health. Future research may use our findings to design scales to measure the breast/chest-GI relationship and then examine variable correlates and interaction effects among GI, breast/chest-GI relationship, lesbian subtype identities, internalized sexism, internalized beauty standards, body satisfaction, and overall mental health. These variables would help target the gap in our research where we did not ask about specific psychological impacts of beauty standards related to factors such as self-esteem, negative self-talk, and/or dating/relationship experience. Additionally, our data touches on a few coping factors for navigating and dealing with beauty code stressors, however, future research may bring in more direct inquiries and measures of participants' experiences with feminist identity, challenging and confronting norms, interfacing with the SMW norm of breast/body acceptance, and participating in communities that resist and oppose beauty essentialism and its corresponding norms. Lastly, we hope that future research endeavors may aim to provide further evidence for or against our emergent preliminary theoretical model by investigating variables more deeply and targeting specific thematic interactions through quantitative studies or other research methods.

In conclusion, SMW's experience with beauty standards is one of biculturality in which they experience messages and influences from mainstream, heteronormative culture and the SMW subculture. SMW acknowledge and experience the presence of a norm of breast/body acceptance within the SMW subculture, however, their experiences do not support the idea that this necessarily protects them from the impacts of stringent beauty mandates from mainstream culture or prescriptive appearance codes that are present within parts of the SMW subculture.

These women contend with beauty norms from both cultural contexts and must negotiate and cope with beauty scripts present on both sociocultural and personal, internalized levels. In doing so, a SMW must navigate experiences of GI, breast/body attention, breast/body comparison, self-made breast/body perceptions, dress and breast/body presentation, and breast/body functionality with the goal of developing and maintaining a sense of self and a community that supports her breasts/body with sentiments of positivity, validation, and empowerment.

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Appendices

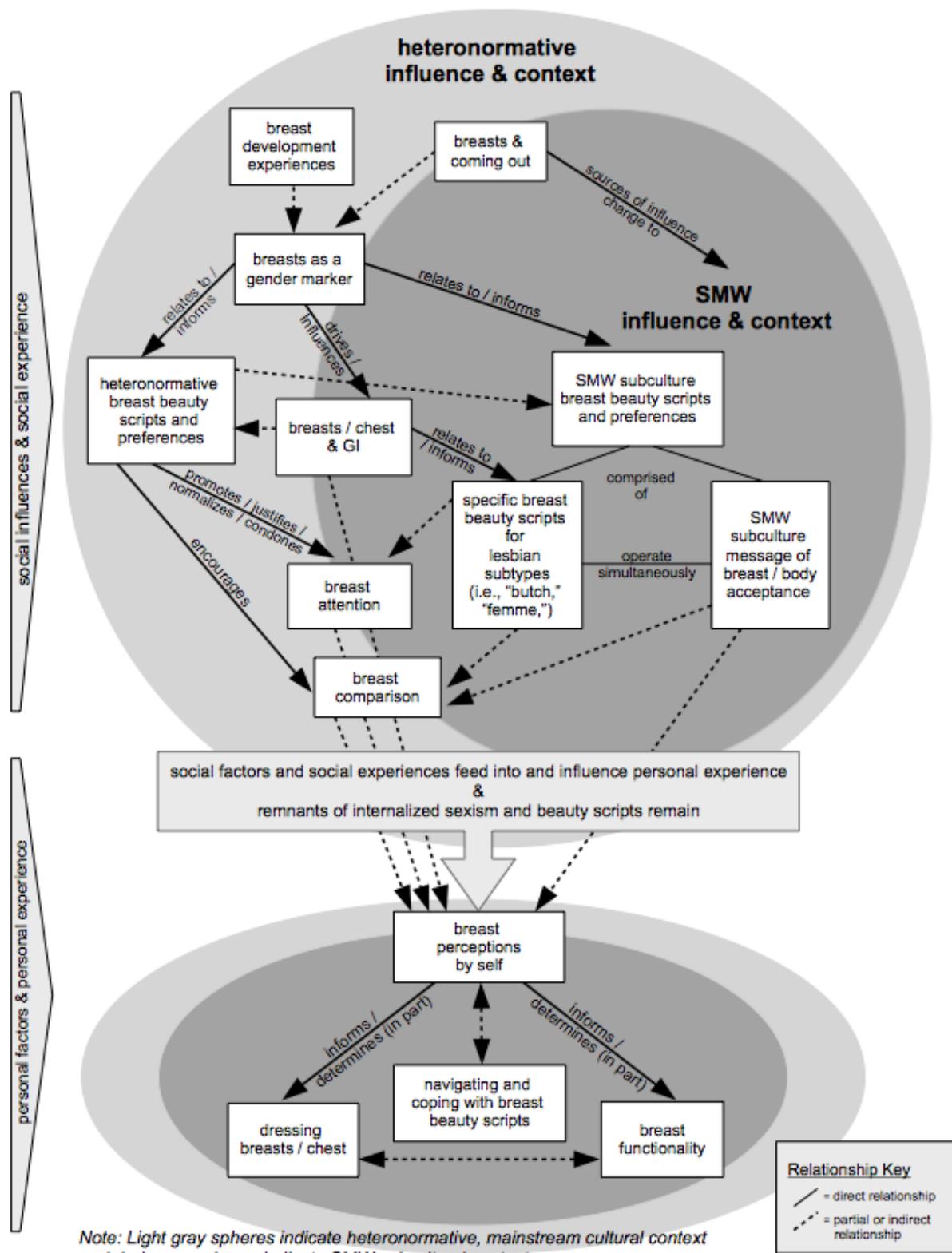
Appendix A *Participant Demographics*

| Demographic | Sean | Cara | Casey | Jane | Chris | Amy | Dean | Aria | Sarah | Anna | Jill |
|---|------|---------------------------|-----------------|------|----------|--------|------|------|-------|------|----------------------------|
| Age | 27 | 28 | 29 | 25 | 22 | 23 | 27 | 25 | 21 | 26 | 23 |
| Sexual Orientation <i>L = lesbian; G = gay; B = bisexual; Q = queer</i> | Q | L/G | Q | L/G | L/G | G | L/G | L/G | Q | B | Q |
| Gender Identity <i>W = woman; GQ = genderqueer</i> | W | W | GQ | W/GQ | W | W | W | W | W | W | GQ |
| Age of recognition of SMW identity | 18 | 13 | 14 or 15 | 15 | 19 | 14 | 14 | 12 | 12 | 11 | 18 |
| Age at start of same-sex relationships | 19 | 16 | 16 | 21 | 20 | 14 | 15 | 4 | 12 | 19 | 20 |
| Age of “coming out” | 18 | 13 | 16 | 18 | 20 | 14, 21 | 14 | 13 | 18 | 19 | 19 |
| Racial/ethnic identity <i>W = White; B = African American / Black; H = Hispanic; A = Asian AI = American Indian; C = Cherokee</i> | W | Multi-racial: A, W, H, AI | Bi-racial: W, C | W | W | W | W | B | W | W | W |
| Socioeconomic status <i>LMC = lower middle / working class MC = middle class UMC = upper middle class</i> | LMC | MC | LMC | LMC | UMC, LMC | MC | MC | LMC | MC | MC | LMC |
| Highest education <i>HS = High school / GED SC = some college C = 4-year college SG = some grad/ professional school G = grad/professional school</i> | G | HS | C | SG | SG | SG | SG | SC | SC | G | C |
| Religious affiliation <i>J = Jewish / Judaism; AG = agnostic AT = atheist; S = spiritual</i> | AG | S | AT, S | AT | J | J | AG | S | J | AG | Various magikal traditions |
| Memberships in LGBTQ organizations <i>Y = yes; N = no</i> | N | N | Y | N | N | N | Y | Y | Y | Y | N |

Appendix B *Themes and Participants' Reported Experiences*

| Theme or Subtheme | Participants |
|---|--|
| <i>Social influences and social experience</i> | |
| 1. Breast Development Experiences | Sean, Cara, Casey, Jane, Chris, Amy, Dean, Aria, Sarah, Anna, Jill |
| 2. Breasts and Coming Out | Sean, Cara, Jane, Chris, Amy, Aria, Anna |
| Being different | Cara, Jane, Aria, Anna |
| Breasted experience as unaffected or unchanged | Sean, Cara, Jane, Chris |
| 3. Breasts as a Gender Marker | Sean, Cara, Casey, Dean, Jill |
| Breasts equal woman/femininity | Sean, Cara, Casey, Dean, Jill |
| Hidden/deemphasized breasts equal non-female | Cara, Casey, Dean |
| 4. Breasts/chest and GI | Sean, Cara, Casey, Jane, Dean, Aria, Sarah, Anna, Jill |
| Breast and GI alignment | Sean, Cara, Jane, Dean |
| Fluid GI and role of breasts | Casey, Dean, Jill |
| Breast and GI misalignment | Cara, Casey, Dean, Sarah, Jill |
| 5. Heteronormative Breast Beauty Scripts and Preferences | Sean, Cara, Casey, Jane, Chris, Amy, Dean, Aria, Sarah, Anna, Jill |
| Attractive breasts are large, perky, and unattainable | Cara, Casey, Jane, Chris, Amy, Sarah |
| Scripts are generated and reinforced in media | Sean, Cara, Jane, Chris, Sarah, Anna |
| Greater breast beauty pressure | Cara, Jane, Sarah, Anna |
| 6. Breast Attention | Sean, Cara, Casey, Jane, Chris, Amy, Dean, Aria, Sarah, Anna, Jill |
| Forms of attention | Sean, Dean, Aria, Anna, Jill |
| Mainstream culture vs. SMW subculture | Sean, Cara, Dean, Sarah |
| Feelings about and responses to breast attention | Sean, Jane, Chris, Dean, Aria, Sarah, Jill |
| 7. Breast Comparison | Sean, Cara, Casey, Jane, Chris, Amy, Dean, Aria, Sarah, Anna, Jill |
| Purposes of comparison | Sean, Jane, Chris, Amy, Dean, Aria, Sarah, Jill |
| Effects of comparison | Casey, Jane, Chris, Aria, Anna |
| 8. SMW Subculture Breast Beauty Scripts and Preferences | Sean, Cara, Casey, Jane, Chris, Amy, Dean, Aria, Sarah, Anna, Jill |
| Attractive breasts are small, confident, and androgynous | Sean, Cara, Jane, Chris, Amy, Dean, Aria, Sarah |
| Specific breast scripts attach to lesbian subtypes | Sean, Cara, Casey, Dean, Aria, Sarah, Anna |
| Replication of heteronormative standards | Sean, Casey, Amy |
| 9. SMW Subculture Message of Breast/body Acceptance | Sean, Casey, Jane, Chris, Amy, Dean, Aria, Sarah, Anna, Jill |
| Love and a place for "whatever you've got" | Sean, Casey, Jane, Chris, Dean, Jill |
| Little to no emphasis on physical appearance | Sarah, Anna |
| <i>Personal factors and personal experience</i> | |
| 10. Breast Perceptions by Self | Sean, Cara, Casey, Jane, Chris, Amy, Dean, Aria, Sarah, Anna, Jill |
| Breasts and personal identity | Amy, Aria, Sarah |
| Breast esteem and confidence | Sean, Cara, Dean, Sarah |
| 11. Dressing Breasts/chest | Sean, Cara, Casey, Jane, Chris, Dean, Aria, Sarah, Anna, Jill |
| Dressing breasts for comfort, utility, and/or confidence | Sean, Jane, Chris, Dean, Aria, Sarah, Anna |
| Dressing breasts to display gender identity | Cara, Casey, Dean, Jill |
| 12. Breast Functionality | Sean, Cara, Jane, Chris, Dean, Aria, Sarah, Anna, Jill |
| 13. Navigating and Coping with Breast Beauty Scripts | Sean, Casey, Jane, Chris, Amy, Dean, Aria, Sarah, Anna, Jill |
| Confronting and challenging breast beauty norms | Jane, Anna, Jill |
| Feminism | Sean, Casey, Jane, Chris, Amy, Dean, Aria, Sarah, Jill |

Appendix C *Conceptual Model of Emergent Themes and Thematic Interactions*



Appendix D *Semi-structured Interview Protocol*

1. To begin, I'd like you to tell me about your breast development since puberty, in as much detail as you feel comfortable.
2. Tell me about how you feel about your breasts today.
3. How have your ideas of, feelings about, and experiences with your breasts changed over time?
4. How does your perception of your breasts relate to how you see or define yourself?
5. Did your attitudes about your breasts or your experience of your breasts change at various stages of your coming out process?
6. How does lesbian culture think about and value breasts in your experience?
7. How are the messages about ideal breasts different between mainstream culture and the lesbian subculture?
8. How do your breasts relate to your gender identity?
9. How do your breasts relate to your sexuality and sexual confidence?
10. Do you identify yourself as a feminist or hold feminist beliefs? If so, how does feminism relate to your experience with your breasts?
11. Do you compare your breasts to other women?
12. How do media messages relate to your attitudes about and experience with your breasts?
13. Do you think breast size relates to a woman's likelihood of finding a partner?
14. Do you wear bras? Why or why not?
15. How do your clothing choices relate to your breasts?
16. Is there anything else you'd like to share about the way you understand your breasts or your breasted experience?

Vita

Christine Laura Beck was born and raised in a small town in southeastern Wisconsin. As a child she exhibited an affinity for learning and strong sense of curiosity about the happenings of people and world around her. As a first-generation college student, she relied on her hunger to understand and passion for people to navigate through several majors and career directions within education, art, literature, and philosophy. She eventually stumbled upon sociology and fell in love with the inquisitive and critical nature of the social science. It was within sociology that she found ways to talk about the social issues and marginalized peoples she saw around her and discovered the areas of power and privilege; racial, gender, and socioeconomic oppression; and societal/system-based problems she wanted to help ameliorate through her future work.

After completing her undergraduate degree in sociology and philosophy from Marquette University, she spent time as an inner-city third-grade teacher, traveling abroad, and working a handful of other odd jobs trying to figure out exactly how she wanted to go about the social change she cared so much about. This exploration eventually led her to the University of Tennessee where she has been researching and teaching about gender and racial oppression, LGBTQ topics, masculinity, and power, privilege, and oppression more broadly. She is currently working toward her doctorate degree in Counseling Psychology, and following graduation, she hopes to work as a psychotherapist within the criminal justice system helping incarcerated individuals with processes of healing, understanding, and empowerment. Someday she hopes to promote a sociological psychotherapy that is especially attuned to address the system-based, social justice issues that so often manifest within individual's mental health struggles.