Understanding body size and bisexuality via femme theory: An investigation of self- and meta-perceptions of gender expression

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ABSTRACT
Existing literature fails to address bisexual women’s experiences at the intersection of fem(me)ininity and fatness. Fat fem(me)inine bisexual women experience hyper-visibility in their fatness and hyper-invisibility in their fem(me)inine and queer identities; their concurrent violations of dominant norms of thinness, heterosexuality, monosexism, and expectations of queer women’s gender expression (as masculine) position them as uniquely and multiply marginalized. Literature on these women’s experiences of fat gendered embodiment is lacking but could inform understandings of mechanisms of multiple marginalization. In a sample of 188 bisexual women (61% White; \( M_{age} = 27 \)), we examined relationships between bisexual women’s self-perceived femininity/masculinity, reports of how others perceive their femininity/masculinity (i.e., meta-perceptions), and their body size. We hypothesized that bisexual women’s self-reported gender expression would not correlate with body size, but that meta-perceptions of bisexual women’s gender expression would. Specifically, we expected others to perceive fatter bisexual women as more masculine given the association of fatness with masculinity and butch lesbians. We found that both self-perceived and meta-perceptions of gender expression were generally unrelated to body size, whether measured via BMI or self-perception. However, moderation analyses revealed that when bisexual women were perceived as sexual minorities, increased BMI was related to decreased meta-perceptions of femininity. The present results suggest perceived sexual orientation may be an important factor in understanding how fatness, gender expression, and sexuality interact to produce the multiple marginalization faced by bisexual women. We discuss the need for closer examination of bisexual women’s experiences of oppression at the intersection of fatness and fem(me)ininity.

KEYWORDS
Femme theory; bisexuality; femininity; fat; perceived sexual orientation

Fat feminine\(^1\) queer women\(^2\) face multiple marginalization; condemnation via sizeism, heterosexism, and misogyny characterizes some women’s experiences of having unruly bodies (e.g., Taylor 2018). In particular, fat feminine queer women defy boundaries of normativity from expectations of women’s bodies
(i.e., thinness; Gailey 2014) and women’s sexuality (i.e., as androcentric; Matsick and Rubin 2018) to expectations of queer women’s gender expression (i.e., as masculine; Blair and Hoskin 2015). Dominant Western cultural discourses prize heterosexuality, thinness, and masculinity; queer cultures tend to similarly value thinness and masculinity (Taylor 2018). Though the devaluation of fat and femininity is pervasive in cisgender gay male culture, evidence suggests that fat and femininity are also devalued in queer women’s cultures (e.g., Blair and Hoskin 2015, 2016; Hoskin 2019, 2020; Luis 2012; Maor 2012; Mishali 2014; Stafford 2010; Taylor 2018, 2020). That queer women’s spaces – often hailed as havens shielding their constituents from harmful heteronormative beauty ideals (e.g., LeBesco 2004) – tend to replicate the dominant devaluation of femininity and fatness demonstrates the ubiquitous challenges faced by those at the intersection of femininity, fatness, and queerness (Blair and Hoskin 2015, 2016).

Through their branching from hegemonic expectations of thinness and heterosexuality, fat feminine queer women can be understood as femme: belonging to a “femininity that veers from any one of patriarchal ideals, whether it be normative Whiteness, cisnormativity, heteronormativity, able-bodiedness, the cult of thinness or sexual appetite” (Hoskin 2019, 687; Blair and Hoskin 2015; Hoskin 2017). The notion of femme draws its roots from historical understandings of feminine, cisgender lesbians, traditionally conceptualized as counterparts to masculine, “butch” lesbians (see Hoskin 2017). Femme lesbians defy patriarchal femininities through their refusal to cater their femininities to the heterosexual male gaze (Hoskin 2017). Little work has examined experiences of fem(me)inity among bisexual women. Much scholarship on fem(me)inity focuses specifically on lesbian women, groups lesbian and bisexual women, or self definess queer women (e.g., Taylor 2020); these approaches are advantageous from an inclusivity standpoint and resonate with femme theory’s valuation of subjectivities. However, additional value lies in disaggregating femme subjectivities by examining experiences of fem(me)inity at specific identity intersections. Herein, we focus on the intersection of fem(me)inity and bisexuality—in tandem with fatness—among women. We draw upon theoretical frameworks from critical femme, queer, and fat studies, as well as feminist and social psychological theorizing on stigma, to examine bisexual women’s experiences of fem(me)inity as it intersects with body size. We use queer literature as a starting point for theorizing bisexual identities given the lack of critical literature specific to bisexual identities in relation to body size and gender expression. Further, we employ femme and fat as starting places for critically theorizing the spectra of gender expression and body size, respectively. We do not focus exclusively on femme- and fat-identified bisexual women, rather, we center femme and fat in our theorizing of gender expression and body size to decenter dominant values of thinness and masculinity and prioritize marginalized positionalities.
**Femme theory’s contributions to diversifying queer experience**

Drawing upon feminist intersectional theorizing (Combahee River Collective 1983; Crenshaw 1989), contemporary femme scholarship renegotiates the meaning of femme to encapsulate an expansive scope of “diversely positioned bodies” and “a range of experiences across various intersections of difference” (Hoskin 2017, 99). Historically, research has homogenized fem(me)inine experiences, and some feminist work has scapegoated femininity as a source of, or as synonymous with, patriarchal oppression (see Hoskin 2017; Serano 2007). Only recently have scholars turned to more critical examinations, diversifying understandings of femininity and the devaluation thereof (e.g., Hoskin 2021). By centralizing a plurality of fem(me)inine identifications and examining femininity as an axis of oppression, femme – as a critical analytic – has effectively highlighted a long-overlooked axis of domination (i.e., femininity). In doing so, femme has been used to theorize mechanisms of oppression, and hierarchies of power, within and beyond queer communities (Blair and Hoskin 2015; Hoskin 2017, 2019, 2020, 2021; Shelton 2018).

Theoretical and empirical examinations suggest that expectations for gender expression and the privileging of masculinity shape experiences within, and outside of, queer communities (Anderson 2020; Blair and Hoskin 2015, 2016; Hoskin 2020). A growing body of evidence points to the devaluation and regulation of femininity in queer women’s cultures (i.e., femmephobia; e.g., Blair and Hoskin 2015, 2016; Hoskin 2019, 2020; Mishali 2014; Stafford 2010; Taylor 2018). Importantly, these experiences of femmephobia in queer communities are deeply intersectional. For instance, feminist and critical scholars have written at lengths about how gender expression and bodily presentation are experienced differently by women of color (e.g., Macías 2009; Moore 2006; Wilson 2009); this is particularly true given women of color’s distance from mainstream feminism and its rejection of femininity (see Moore 2006). In the present work, we draw primarily from feminist theorizing rooted in White, North American queer communities given the positionality of the current sample. Additionally, though bisexual women tend to be excluded from queer communities (e.g., Balsam and Mohr 2007), we draw significantly upon queer theorizing given these women’s ongoing connections to and identification with queer existence.

The privileging of masculinity, and concordant devaluation of femininity, constitutes femmephobia as a mechanism of oppression (Hoskin 2020). Femmephobia contributes to feelings of inauthenticity and invisibility among fem(me)inine queer women. For instance, fem(me)inine queer women are often presumed heterosexual due to their gender expression that violates expectations of lesbian gender expression as masculine or “butch” (Anderson 2020; Blair and Hoskin 2015, 2016; see Hoskin 2020). Further, femme(me)inine queer women have typically not been understood in their
own terms or in their own right, only as counterparts of butch women (Blair and Hoskin 2015; Hemmings 1998). The association between invisibility – in queer and heterosexual contexts – and interpersonal consequences (e.g., discrimination, invalidation, assumed heterosexuality; Anderson 2020; Hoskin 2019, 2020) may be especially problematic for some subgroups of queer women. In particular, bisexual women – who already face invisibility within queer communities and who tend not to adopt masculine appearances (Rosario et al. 2009) – may be particularly susceptible to fem(me)inine invisibility (see Hemmings 1998).

**Dual invisibility of Bisexual femme**

Bisexual feminine women challenge “the architecture of patriarchal femininity” (Hoskin 2017, 99) by disrupting heteronormativity and monosexual norms and can therefore be understood through the lens of femme. Bisexual women defy heteronormativity and monosexual norms through their attraction to multiple genders; often perceived as instability or uncertainty, this multiple attraction underlies stereotypes of bisexuality as illegitimate (e.g., Brewster and Moradi 2010). Such stereotypes yield negative consequences (Friedman et al. 2014; Matsick and Rubin 2018) including worse physical, mental, and sexual health outcomes than heterosexual and lesbian women (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al. 2010; Kerr, Ding, and Thompson 2013). Further, many bisexual women lack buffers (e.g., social support) that protect against stressors (e.g., discrimination) as a result of the dual discrimination bisexual women encounter from both heterosexual and queer communities (Balsam and Mohr 2007).

Stereotypes of bisexual women, which persist in both heterosexual and queer cultures, situate them as performing bisexuality for male attention (Yost and Thomas 2012). This stereotype, however, applies unevenly along the axis of femininity, whereby fem(me)inine bisexual women face unique stigma of not being perceived as authentically queer (Hoskin 2019; Huxley, Clarke, and Halliwell 2014). As explicated by a bisexual woman interviewed by Hoskin (2019): “there’s this perception that bisexuality is an attention-getting thing for the benefit of men . . . I think femininity plays into it because the way that we present our gender almost determines whether we’re ‘actually queer’ or if we’re just hooking up with women to titillate men, so queer women who are more femme are seen to be the latter” (p.691). The notion of fem(me)inine bisexual women’s sexuality as a male-oriented performance is rejected by bisexual women’s sexual desire for other women; a desire often met with disgust and even violence when understood as legitimate (see Oswald and Matsick 2020). Fem(me)inine bisexual women thus reject “the masculine right of access to femininity” (Hoskin 2017, 100) through their radical desire and subsequent refusal of the male gaze (Mulvey 1989). These women are systematically and interpersonally punished for their failed femininity, through
sexualization, objectification, violence, and denial of legitimacy (Oswald and Matsick 2020). Masculine bisexual women, who escape the male gaze through differing (though adjacent) means, likely face differing forms of stigma (e.g., more explicit homophobia). We suggest that body size, in tandem with fem(me)ininity, has the potential to shape the experiences of bisexual women.

Hyper-(in)visibility: Fat bisexual fem(me)ininity
Research on bisexual women’s experiences of fatness is lacking. Historically, research on fatness has reflected an overarching cultural pattern of bisexual erasure. Where gender and body size are studied, queer and heterosexual women have been homogenized; when sexual orientation is examined in relation to fatness, the literature often contrasts sexual minority women’s experiences with those of heterosexual women, focusing specifically on lesbian women or grouping lesbian and bisexual women. However, bisexual women with a variety of body sizes and fem(me)inine identities – including fat and femme – exist, and have unique experiences given this constellation of identities. For instance, Hemmings (1998) postulates that devaluation of femmes in lesbian culture is linked to perceptions of femme as bisexual, which situate femmes as a threat to lesbians given their perceived likelihood of returning to heterosexual relations. Further, Hemmings theorizes that femme bisexual women’s identities are shaped through rejection of both heterosexual and lesbian femin(me)inities, suggesting that a bisexuality-specific lens is necessary to understand bisexual fem(me)inities. It is challenging to elucidate the specific negative consequences experienced by fat fem(me)inine bisexual women given the dearth of existing literature at this intersection, however, we draw upon literature examining the experiences of fat people and fat queer women – in addition to literature on bisexual prejudice generally – to theorize how body size, in tandem with fem(me)ininity, shapes bisexual women’s experiences.

Fatness, in contrast to bisexuality, is hyper-visible. Fatness is taken to articulate a multitude of characteristics, often invoking stereotypes of laziness and unattractiveness (Gailey 2014); whereas, bisexuality – perhaps due to its erasure – is difficult to visibly articulate. Appearance signifiers that explicitly denote bisexuality are lacking (Huxley, Clarke, and Halliwell 2014), which can render bisexuality further invisible: fem(me)inine bisexual women face assumptions of heterosexuality, whereas masculine bisexual women face assumptions of lesbianism (Hoskin 2019). Fat bisexual women – particularly when fem(me)inine – thus experience hyper-visibility in their fatness and hyper-invisibility in their sexualities.

Though fatness deviates from patriarchal feminine norms and gendered ideals (Taylor 2020), fatness does not negate identification as fem(me)inine. Some fat women resist oppression by (re)claiming fem(me)inities, and their fatness may even be central to their expressions of fem(me)ininity (Taylor
Indeed, through processes of fem(me)inine reclamation, fat women can embody chosen fem(me)inities. In this way, failure to uphold norms of patriarchal femininity represents the possibility of (re)creating one’s fem(me)inine identity (see Hoskin and Taylor 2019). Thus, despite cultural messaging aligning fatness with masculinity (Taylor 2020), bisexual women’s fatness may not impact the degree to which they perceive themselves as fem(me)inine, which we conceptualized herein as self-reported gender expression. However, fatness may impact how others perceive bisexual women’s fem(me)inine expression. Given fat women violate societal demands of thinness, and thus fail/refuse to approximate patriarchal feminine norms, fat women’s “failed femininities” (Hoskin 2017; Hoskin and Taylor 2019) are unlikely to be perceived by others as feminine. Failed femininities are subject to policing by others in the form of cultural shame and devaluation (Hoskin and Taylor 2019). In the eyes of perceivers, fatness may feminize and even masculinize bisexual women, particularly if their fatness leads others to read them as “butch” (see Arteaga 2013; McPhail and Bombak 2015). Literature suggests that fat women are perceived as unfeminine or even masculine, and such experiences complicate fat queer women’s experiences of fem(me)inity (Arteaga 2013; Taylor 2020). Further, person-perception research demonstrates a robust relationship between women’s masculinity and perceptions of lesbian identity (Dunkle and Francis 1990; Freeman et al. 2010; see also Rule 2017), further suggesting this link between fatness, perceived masculinity, and perceived sexual orientation. As perceived femininity specifically plays a role in femmephobia (i.e., individuals are targeted not for their own understandings of fem(me)inity but for “their perceived deviation from patriarchal femininity” (Hoskin 2017, 101)), it is necessary to examine factors that contribute to bisexual women’s perceived femininity.

The current study

We aim to understand bisexual women’s experiences of gender expression as it intersects with body size. We hypothesized that, given fat women can embody chosen fem(me)inities, women’s self-reported gender expression would not be related to body size, but meta-perceptions of bisexual women’s gender expression (i.e., women’s reports of how they believe others perceive their femininity/masculinity) would be associated with bisexual women’s body size. We expected fatter participants to report that others perceive them as less feminine/more masculine given the association of fatness with (butch) lesbianism (McPhail and Bombak 2015). To this end, we examined relationships between bisexual women’s self-identified body size, self-reported femininity, and self-reports of how others perceive their femininity. Additionally, we tested participants’ reports of perceived sexual orientation as a potential moderator of the relationship between body size and meta-perceptions of
femininity. Given the association of fatness with lesbianism specifically, we hypothesized that fatness may render women less feminine in the eyes of perceivers particularly when perceived as queer.

These data belong to a larger project examining bisexual women’s experiences of stigma, and we use only a subset of the larger dataset to address the present research question (see online supplemental material). We determined the variables of interest to this research question a priori, data from these variables are not published elsewhere, and we identify all analyses performed as confirmatory or exploratory. There are no other publications related to data from the larger project at the time of writing.

**Method**

**Participants**

We recruited bisexual cisgender women living in the United States for an online study via Prolific, a participant recruitment service ($9.00/hour for a 20-minute study). We collected data in September 2020. From our initial sample (N = 240), we removed six participants for reporting a gender identity other than woman, 25 for reporting a non-bisexual orientation, nine for responding inconsistently to two identical sexual orientation questions (at the beginning and end of the survey), nine for missing weight data, and three for obviously inaccurate height or weight data (e.g., a height of 2 inches). The final sample included 188 bisexual women. Table 1 presents demographic information.

**Design and procedure**

The study was advertised as examining “self-presentations and experiences with how you present yourself.” Participants reported basic demographics and responded to measures assessing gender identity and expression and beliefs about how others perceived their gender expression and sexual orientation. Participants responded to an open-ended question about their experiences in interpersonal interactions, and completed data quality checks (e.g., “did you respond seriously and honestly when providing answers to this survey?”). At the end of the study, participants provided additional demographic information, including height, weight, and perceived body size (from very underweight to very overweight).

Though BMI is a problematic measure of fatness (e.g., given racist roots and history of medicalized harm; Cooper 2010; Rothblum and Solovay 2009; Strings 2019), we use it as measure of fatness with the intention of informing how others might perceive the individual’s fatness (compared to how the individual experiences their own fatness or body size). We recognize the link
between the term “overweight” and framing of larger bodies as inferior or deviant and thus acknowledge the limitation of using this terminology in feminist, critical work (Rothblum and Solovay 2009). We chose this language given that our data were drawn from a larger project which did not center on fat identities, and we were not sure that the entirety of our sample would be familiar with the use of fat terminology. That participants in the present work could opt to self-identify as overweight, rather than being assigned this label by another party, avoids some issues of stigmatization associated with this language by privileging subjective self-definitions.

**Measures**

**Self-perceived femininity**
Participants completed Lehavot, King, and Simoni’s (2011) Gender Expression Measure (GEM), a 15-item measure of gender expression developed for sexual minority women. Participants responded to items from 1 (strongly disagree)
to 6 (strongly agree). Example items included “I often wear skirts and dresses” and “I relate to straight men as ‘one of the guys.’” We reverse coded five items and averaged items. Lower scores indicated higher self-perceived femininity ($\alpha = .63$).\textsuperscript{8}

**Meta-perceptions of femininity**
Participants completed Green, Rimes, and Rahman’s (2018), 15-item Beliefs About Others’ Perceptions–Gender Typicality measure about how other people perceive participants’ gender typicality. Participants’ responses ranged from 1 (very masculine) to 5 (very feminine). Example items included “People perceive my appearance to be . . .” and “People perceive my ambitions to be . . .” We averaged items to create an overall score. Higher scores indicated greater meta-perceptions of femininity ($\alpha = .81$).

**Meta-perceptions of sexual orientation**
One item assessed how others generally perceived participants’ sexual orientation: “Generally, others perceive me to be . . .” Response options were heterosexual, bisexual, or lesbian.

**Body size**
BMI, calculated from height and weight, ranged from 16.46 to 58.28 ($M = 27.24$, $SD = 8.45$), corresponding to an average categorization of “overweight” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2020). Most participants reported perceiving themselves as “overweight” (mode = 4, $M = 3.69$, $SD = 0.89$) on a scale from 1 (very underweight) to 5 (very overweight). Table 1 includes more information on body size.

**Results**

**Confirmatory analyses**
We hypothesized that body size would not predict self-perceived femininity, but would predict meta-perceptions of femininity (i.e., larger bodies would be perceived by others as less feminine). We predicted self-perceived femininity from self-perceived body size and BMI using simple linear regression. Neither self-perceived body size [$B = -0.037$, $t(186) = -0.713$, $CI_{95} [-0.138, 0.065]$, $p = .477$] nor BMI [$B = 0.002$, $t(186) = 0.390$, $CI_{95} [-0.009, -0.013]$, $p = .679$] predicted self-perceived femininity. We predicted meta-perceptions of femininity from self-perceived body size and BMI using simple linear regression. Contrary to our hypothesis, neither self-perceived body size [$B = -0.035$, $t(186) = -0.983$, $CI_{95} [-0.105, 0.035]$, $p = .327$] nor BMI [$B = -0.005$, $t(186) = -1.401, CI_{95} [-0.013, 0.002]$, $p = .163$] predicted meta-perceptions of femininity. Table 2 displays correlations.
Exploratory analyses

We explored whether fatness renders women less feminine in the eyes of perceivers particularly when perceived to be queer. We examined meta-perceptions of sexual orientation as a potential moderator of the relationship between body size and meta-perceptions of femininity (Hayes 2017; Model 1). We recoded meta-perceptions of sexual orientation into a dichotomous variable (0 = heterosexual, 1 = queer) given failure to meet assumptions (i.e., only eight participants indicated being perceived as lesbian). The relationship was not significant for the model with self-perceived body size, \((b = -0.12, t = -1.64, p = .102, CI_{95} [-0.27, 0.02])\), but was significant for the model with BMI, \((b = -0.02, t = -1.99, p = .048, CI_{95} [-0.03, -0.00])\).7 BMI was thus significantly related to meta-perceptions of femininity when moderated by meta-perceptions of sexual orientation. We probed the interaction by testing the conditional effects of BMI at the two levels of perceived sexual orientation. Increased BMI was significantly related to decreased meta-perceptions of femininity among women perceived as queer \((p = .018)\), but not among women perceived as heterosexual \((p = .973)\). Figure 1 depicts this relationship.

The significant moderating role of meta-perceptions of sexual orientation held when we excluded eight women who reported being perceived as lesbian \((b = -0.17, t = -2.00, p = .047, CI_{95} [-0.34, 0.00])\), with conditional effects at the two levels remaining similar (perceived bisexual, \(p = .021\); perceived heterosexual, \(p = .973\)), though the overall model was no longer significant \((p = .08)\). We urge caution in the interpretation of these effects given the multiple tests and corresponding risk of type I error.

Discussion

In this research, we built from femme theory and critical fat studies to examine how bisexual women’s body size shapes their experiences of fem(me)ininity. The present work is novel in examining fatness and fem(me)ininity among bisexual women specifically, as prior research has broadly focused on queer women. The specific experiences of bisexual women – including experiences of invisibility, monosexism, and unique bisexual stereotypes – necessitate attention to this identity intersection. Despite the scaffolding provided by previous research on gender expression, body size, and sexual orientation, we found
little support for our hypothesis. Nevertheless, these data provide insight and suggest a novel role of sexual orientation perception in explaining bisexual women’s experiences of fem(me)ininity.

**Primary findings**

We hypothesized that bisexual women’s self-reported gender expression would not be related to body size, but that meta-perceptions of gender expression would be associated with body size given women’s diverse fem-(me)ininites and ability to reclaim the meanings of fem(me)ininity. As expected, self-reported gender expression was unrelated to body size, indicating fatness did not impact women’s self-expressions of femininity. However, meta-perceptions of femininity were generally unrelated to body size, whether measured via BMI or self-perception. We hypothesized that meta-perceptions of femininity would be impacted by body size given fatness violates norms of traditional femininity, thus fat women should be unlikely to be perceived by others as expressing (traditional) femininity (Taylor 2020). We expected that fat women would thus report being seen by others as more masculine, however, the present data suggest that fatness did not impact meta-perceptions of bisexual women’s femininity.

The present findings contrast with literature suggesting fatness leads others to perceive queer fem(me)inine women as more masculine (Arteaga 2013; Taylor 2020). Previous literature does not focus specifically on bisexual women, suggesting there may be a unique role of fatness among fem(me)
inque bisexual women relative to fem(me)inine queer women at large. Common stereotypes about bisexual women (e.g., their identities are illegitimate or they are secretly heterosexual) may be uniquely salient in informing perceptions of bisexual women's femininity, and may overwhelm any potential contribution of their body size to perceptions of their femininity. It is also possible the present measurement paradigm could not capture masculinizing effects of fatness; for example, women's meta-perceptions – their beliefs about how others perceive their gender expression – may not accurately reflect others' perceptions. Literature on reflected appraisals, which examines individuals' beliefs about how others perceive them, has noted complications in the reflected appraisal process such that reflected appraisals do not necessarily capture others' perceptions (e.g., Felson 1990; Hergovich, Sirsch, and Felinger 2002). Meta-perceptions of femininity may thus have been overly informed by individuals' self-perceptions of femininity. The moderate correlation between the two variables lends some support to this reasoning. However, reflected appraisals on gender expression demonstrate utility in predicting some outcomes (e.g., self-rated health; Hart et al. 2019). Future work should further investigate self- and meta-perceptions as they relate to gender expression, body size, and sexual orientation. Work in this area has traditionally employed qualitative paradigms, which allow for more in-depth understandings of lived experience. We advocate for the coupling of qualitative and quantitative analyses to further investigate how fatness, fem(me)ininity, and bisexuality intersect.

**Exploratory findings**

Moderation analyses demonstrated that, among bisexual women perceived as queer (generally as bisexual), fatter women tended to be read as more masculine/less feminine whereas fatter women perceived as heterosexual were not perceived as more masculine/less feminine. However, this effect did not hold when self-perceived body size, rather than BMI, was tested as the moderator, despite the high correlation between BMI and self-perceived body size ($r = .71$). BMI may more closely represent body size information available to perceivers given that BMI is a rather objective measure (though an inaccurate representation of fatness), while self-perceived body size is often inaccurately estimated (e.g., Shafran and Fairburn 2002). BMI thus may be a more valid moderator of relationships pertaining to meta-perceptions. With BMI as a moderator, we found that as women's fatness increased, women perceived as queer tended to be perceived as more masculine/less feminine – a pattern which did not hold for women perceived to be heterosexual. The distribution of these data suggests that this effect was driven by thinner women perceived as queer also being perceived as highly feminine, rather than by fatter women perceived as queer being perceived as particularly
masculine (see Figure 1) – suggesting a mechanism different from what we hypothesized. We theorized a cultural association between fatness and perceived butchness/masculinity would drive this effect, but an inverse association – between thinness and perceived femininity – occurred. That thin women perceived as queer also reported being perceived as highly feminine – but thin women perceived as heterosexual did not – may suggest greater variability in perceptions of femininity among (perceived) queer women than heterosexual women. That is, bisexual women perceived as heterosexual and reported stable rates of perceived femininity across fatness, suggesting that perceptions of (hetero)femininity may be more stable, and/or less rooted in the body, than perceptions of queer femininities. Indeed, for women perceived as heterosexual, traditional femininity may be assumed – given the association of heterosexuality and traditional gender expression – rather than informed by perceptual evidence (e.g., body size) which may lead to more variable perceptions of femininity.

Though the largest proportion of our sample reported being perceived as heterosexual (63.3%), almost one third of women (32.4%) reported that others perceived them as bisexual. This finding was surprising given theoretical and empirical notions that bisexual identities are invisible and imperceptible (i.e., lack of appearance signifiers as bisexual; misclassification experiences as either heterosexual or lesbian; Hoskin 2019; Huxley, Clarke, and Halliwell 2014). Participants may have interpreted the item assessing meta-perceptions of sexual orientation as asking about perceptions of their identity legitimacy among those whom they are out to (e.g., those in my life who know I am bisexual recognize my sexual orientation as legitimate and thus perceive me as bisexual), rather than as investigating appearance-based stereotyping more generally. Furthermore, participants may indeed visually signal bisexuality and thus be perceived as such; some bisexual women report resisting heteronormative assumptions through the creation of “bisexual displays” through participation in queer activities and communities and cultivation of queer esthetics (e.g., bisexual flags, bisexuality-themed artwork; Hartman-Linck 2014). Our findings may point to changing trends in bisexual visibility.

**Limitations**

Primary limitations arise in the realm of measurement – discussion of which may spark future research toward more feminist and comprehensive assessment. Our measure of femininity entailed a bipolar scale anchored at masculine and feminine (such that the two are situated as dichotomous and mutually exclusive), failing to capture the numerous ways individuals incorporate and understand masculinity, femininity, androgyny, and other gendered expressions (van Anders 2015). Furthermore, our measure of self-perceived femininity (GEM; Lehavot, King, and Simoni 2011) demonstrated only moderate
reliability. We selected this measure given its development, validation, and use with queer women, and it is unclear why the reliability of the measure was lacking in the present sample. Additionally, the findings pertaining to meta-perceptions of femininity may be limited by our reliance on asking the participant to assess how others perceive them, which invokes issues of the extent to which participants take or understand the perspectives of others (see Green, Rimes, and Rahman 2018). However, such reflected appraisals of femininity demonstrate predictive utility beyond self-perceived femininity (e.g., in predicting women’s health-related outcomes; Hart et al. 2019), suggesting meta-perceptions are important to capture in femininity research. Finally, women may take on fem(me)inine identities co-constituted by their fatness in varying ways (e.g., fem(me)inities of resistance), and current measures do not capture these expressions and experiences of fem(me)inity. Taken together, these measurement limitations – particularly the lack of quantitative measurement tools to assess femininities of resistance and other fem(me)inine identities – stand to reason that the study of fem(me)inity necessitates a methodological revolution. Theories of fem(me)inity provide a rich conceptualization of experience yet to be reflected by extant quantitative measurement, though some initial steps toward integrating these theories into measurement have been taken (see Hoskin et al. 2019, 2020).

Additional complications arise in attempting to quantify fatness. We used BMI, though we recognize the limitations of this approach: BMI cutoffs are arbitrary, BMI is an imprecise measure of fatness, and BMI is weaponized in the “war on obesity” (Cooper 2010; Gailey 2014). Further, BMI does not account for muscularity or other facets of body composition and is thus an inaccurate measure of body fat. Likewise, our measure of self-perceived body size was limited by medicalized terminology (e.g., “overweight”) as a proxy for fatness. Precedent does exist, however, for using BMI as a somewhat objective measure of fatness, even in feminist, critical work which rejects BMI on similar grounds (Gailey 2014). Despite the value of these measures in the present work, alternative approaches to quantitatively measuring fatness would be valuable. For example, allowing participants to select from body silhouettes of varying size and shape for representing themselves may provide a more relevant means of assessing body size, particularly at its intersection with fem(me)inity, as certain types of fatness (e.g., “fat in the right places”) may be associated with certain fem(me)inine identifications (see Taylor 2021).

Further, in capturing only limited aspects of gender expression and body size, the present research leaves other aspects of gender expression unexplored, including those that may confound judgments of sexual orientation. However, there is scant literature to suggest what aspects of gender presentation produce perceptions of bisexuality. Person perception research suggests gender atypicality is associated with perceptions of bisexuality (e.g., Lick, Johnson, and Rule 2015), though additional findings suggest gender atypicality
is associated with non-heterosexuality generally rather than bisexuality specifically (Ding and Rule 2012). Further, heterosexual people are unable to identify distinctive appearance norms for bisexual people (Hayfield 2013), and bisexual people do not report strong bisexual appearance norms (Hayfield 2011; Huxley, Clarke, and Halliwell 2014). Thus, though there are likely additional factors contributing to perceptions of bisexual women as heterosexual or queer, prior literature does not provide firm ground for theorizing.

Conclusion

Examining gender expression and body size among bisexual women, we found both self-perceived and meta-perceptions of gender expression to be generally unrelated to body size. Additionally, among bisexual women perceived as sexual minorities (mostly as bisexual), being bigger in size was related to being perceived by others as less feminine. To our surprise, a large minority of women in our sample indicated that others perceive them to be bisexual, a novel finding considering past literature has indicated the imperceptibility of bisexuality. The present results, taken together, suggest perceived sexual orientation may be an important factor in understanding how fatness, gender expression, and sexuality interact to produce the multiple marginalization faced by fat fem(me)inine queer women. Our results point to the need for closer examination of bisexual women’s experiences at the intersection of fatness and fem(me)inity. We propose that fem(me)inine bisexual women’s unique experiences of hyper-(in)visibility, and corresponding experiences of oppression, should be the focus of future research and instrumental in developing novel measures of fem(me)inities.

Notes

1. Following Taylor (2020), we use “fem(me)inine[ity]” to refer to embodiments of femininity which make space for critical reimaginings of “femininity,” including femme identifications. We use “feminine[ity]” to refer to patriarchal, hegemonic notions of femininity.
2. We use queer to refer to LGBTQ+ identities broadly (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and additional identities).
3. Consistent with van Anders (2015), we utilize “branched” as a neutral reconceptualization of divergence or misalignment.
4. We borrow the language of meta-perceptions from social psychological work on meta-stereotyping (i.e., an individual’s beliefs regarding the stereotypes that outgroup members hold about the individual’s social group; Vorauer, Main, and O’Connell 1998).
5. There are limitations of this measurement, including its masculine-feminine dichotomy and that participants may take on fem(me)inine identities which are impacted by their fatness, but not captured by a measure of gender expression (e.g., fem(me)ininities of resistance).

6. Given low reliability and that the original measure did not indicate validation on sexual minority women of varying body size, we tested whether body size disrupts the reliability of this measure. We split data by self-perceived body size (underweight/average and overweight) and reran tests of internal reliability to produce an alpha coefficient for each group. Analysis of the two alpha coefficients with cocron (Diedenhofen and Musch 2016) revealed no significant difference in coefficients between the two groups. See supplemental material.

7. We reran the model with self-perceived femininity as a covariate. The result remained significant ($p = .043$) and all trends were in the same direction.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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