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# Lesbians as a subcultural community: style representation of the self through consumption



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## Abstract

Homosexuality is no longer detested by legislation in some countries and nor being seen as taboo which nobody would ever think of or discuss about. Studies on the queer community have also prospered and come under various debates. Historically and currently, lesbians appeared to be having more invisibility than gay men do, that fewer topics are solely targeted on lesbians, without being mixed together with other groups within the LGBT (Lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgenders) community, despite the increased lesbian exposure in non-political fields, such as the media. This paper intends to create discussions on the ways personal *styles* are presented and perceived within the lesbian subcultural community by individual lesbians through consumption, basing on in-depth semi-structured interviews with lesbians from Sweden and Taiwan. Style in this paper is contextualized mainly as dress modes, bodily appearance and adornments. From the interviews I found different degrees of femininity and masculinity expressed by each respondent, and their ways of interpreting and make sense of their own bodies and comments on other styles. There is an apparent lack within the current gender discourses to support cross-dressing and other acts which contradict the conventional way of doing gender. Differences in one's self-taste of style representation and her conception of gender also lead to different degrees of acceptance to certain styles and behaviors.

## Table of Contents

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>                                    | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>1. PURPOSE &amp; RESEARCH QUESTIONS</b>                | <b>9</b>  |
| <b>2. METHODOLOGY</b>                                     | <b>10</b> |
| 2.1. EMPIRICAL DATA                                       | 10        |
| 2.2. REFLECTIONS AND LIMITATIONS                          | 11        |
| <b>3. THEORY</b>  | <b>13</b> |
| 3.1. SUBCULTURE AND STYLE                                 | 14        |
| 3.2. MODERNITY AND SELF-IDENTITY                          | 16        |
| 3.3. BODY – GENDER – IDENTITY                             | 18        |
| <b>4. DISCUSSION - LESBIAN COMMUNITY AS A SUBCULTURE?</b> | <b>19</b> |
| 4.1. DRAG KINGS   | 23        |
| 4.2. TOMBOYISM  | 23        |
| 4.3. BUTCH-FEMME  | 24        |
| <b>5. ANALYSIS</b>  | <b>26</b> |
| 5.1. A SHORT PRESENTATION OF THE RESPONDENTS              | 26        |
| 5.2. SYMBOLIC PATTERNS OF LESBIAN STYLES?                 | 27        |
| 5.3. PERCEPTIONS BY THE SELF AND OTHERS                   | 30        |
| 5.4. ATTITUDES ON ANDROGYNOUS AND OTHER STYLES            | 35        |
| <b>6. DISCUSSION &amp; CONCLUSION</b>                     | <b>39</b> |
| <b>7. REFERENCES</b>                                      | <b>43</b> |
| <b>8. APPENDIX</b>  | <b>45</b> |

## 1. Introduction

Homosexuality can be regarded as an extraordinary subject that has been viewed and treated in two opposing attitudes throughout the history in different times and societies. Dating back to the ancient Greek time, there had been implicit same-sex relationship between Achilles and Patroclus during the Trojan War presented in Homer's classical epic *Illiad* (12<sup>th</sup> century BC), as for that of women, the well-known poet Sapphos and her home land Lesbos (6 century BC) become where the term "lesbianism" has derived from. The ancient Greek world famously celebrated relations between the males, seeing the love of beauty as an initiation into philosophy (Aldrich ed., 2006, p 7), while in the Far East, there had been no exception towards same-sex intimacies either. Throughout Chinese history, there exist various terms depicting homosexuality in literally metaphorical ways such as "the cut sleeve"<sup>1</sup>, "half-bitten peach"<sup>2</sup> and "Long Yang and the fish", all of which are famous stories which signify same-sex intimate behaviors among males.

The term "homosexuality" first appeared in late 1860s, invented by a Hungarian doctor (Ibid., p 11). Yet before such terminology achieved its popularity and wide usage, sexual acts between the same-sex have been considered as pathetic and even a crime throughout Europe, when psychology came into its existence and flourished under development, not to mention the persecution of homosexuals due to the dominating Judaeo-Christian legacy on the continent for centuries before the term was created. In 1974, "homosexual" was removed by the American Psychiatric Association from its DSM-II<sup>3</sup>, and 1990 by World Health Organization. With the ongoing LGBT<sup>4</sup> activist movements worldwide from the beginning of last century, homosexuals have been demanding more equality in all aspects, as well as to eradication of social exclusion, in terms of visibility, anti-discrimination and human rights.

More attractions have been focused on the *queer world*, more in a cultural sense, rather than the clinical objects to be studied upon. It is undeniable that there have been more documentation on gay men than lesbian women throughout the history; the establishment of penal code against

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<sup>1</sup> 斷袖 (duanxiu)

<sup>2</sup> 分桃 (fentao)

<sup>3</sup> Sexual Deviancy section of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

<sup>4</sup> Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgenders

homosexual intercourse was more or less targeted at sodomy, a male-aimed law. The scarcity of historic records has somehow determined the invisibility of lesbians. The situation is of similarity in the current world. Gay culture seems to be more penetrative than its lesbian counterpart with regards to public visibility mainly through mass media dissemination. When speaking of the term homosexuals, there have been more studies on men than women; even in some that include both homosexual men and women, less focus and discussions have been carried out on the lesbian part. Does gay experience be reciprocally applicable to the lesbians? I do not believe so. In terms of cultural representation, lesbians, as a sub-group under the big umbrella of homosexuals, whose cultural representation could not be over-generalized and overlooked.

The Scandinavian states are considered to be the pioneers when speaking of development of the LGBT rights in Europe, even worldwide, that the legal reforms in these countries have taken place at a relatively early time. In Sweden, homosexuality was legalized in 1944, equal age of consent in 1978 along with Norway; while its anti-discrimination law was passed in 1987 and the same case for Denmark, these were the earliest in Scandinavia. Additionally, 1995 is the year when the enactment of the same-sex partnership law carried out in Sweden. The recent inspiring news of the country's recognition of same-sex marriage, enabling homosexuals the right to wed at major churches starting from May 2009, makes it the 7<sup>th</sup> in the world to do so.<sup>5</sup>

Being gay-friendly in legislation signifies the country's high tolerance and respect for people with different sexual orientations, what is then the social atmosphere like in Sweden? The situation is being depicted as "thoroughly infused with heterosexism" by Ross and Landström in their article *Normalization versus diversity: lesbian identity and organizing in Sweden and Canada*, despite the liberal attitude towards homosexuals in general, and has "severe consequences for the life of lesbians in Sweden, who experience invisibility as a major problem" (Briskin & Eliasson ed., 1999, p 311).

The significant breakthroughs on LGBT legislation reforms are owed to the ongoing movements pushed by dedicating gay/lesbian organizations throughout the years. According to the authors, one dominating (in terms of size and influence) lesbian and gay rights organization is regarded as a tradition in Scandinavia. The most representative organization in Sweden

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<sup>5</sup> The rest of 6 countries which legally recognize same-sex marriage are: Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, South Africa and Spain, so do some states in the U.S

would be *RFSL*<sup>6</sup>, the national organization for gay and lesbian rights, to lobby all levels of government to advance the discourse of equality and accommodation (Ibid., p 312); lobbying and distribution of knowledge among its members are the main tasks of *RFSL*. Under the domination of *RFSL* in gay and lesbian rights affairs, it is more likely for its lobbying activities to be carried out more in a more effective and more unison in voicing common interests of the LGBT.

Social and cultural activities among lesbians in Sweden in the 1990s, Ross and Landström point out that “most Swedish lesbians never organize as *lesbians*” concerning interest-sharing and other leisure activities, they get along with people regardless of their sexual orientation and identity as long as they share something in common. The occasions when lesbians do unite and speak as *lesbians* are most likely to be a need for “confirmation of identity”, as the authors mention the difficulty of lesbian signification in the country, when the news of the Swedish well-known pop singer Eva Dalhgren’s partnership registration with her girlfriend Eva Attling in 1996 was released, there were tremendous excitement among the lesbians, as they felt it made a striking boost to the lesbian visibility in public. Typically Swedish lesbians meet in small groups, yet there was a very unusual case of the establishment of the largest lesbian group LN! (Lesbisk Nu!). The initial emergence of LN! was to counteract the marginalization of lesbians mainly due to male domination within *RFSL*, which was against the national organization’s claim to work for the well-being of LGBT groups (Ibid., pp 314 – 315).

Despite the presentation of the appreciation and tolerance toward same-sex desire in the ancient Chinese history at the beginning of this section, homosexuality had also been seen as a pathological mental disease in the contemporary Chinese history<sup>7</sup>, mostly due to the introduction of Western scientific knowledge into the country; it remained to be a taboo both culturally and socially, thereby both gay and lesbians have been enduring oppression, being in constant identical crisis within the heterosexist society and pervasion of concepts which are not only “straight” but traditional as well, such as filial piety<sup>8</sup>, marriage engagement to “carry on the family’s name”<sup>9</sup>, and so on. Since the Republic of China’s political split in 1949, the above-

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<sup>6</sup> Riksförbundet for Sexuellt Likaberättigande

<sup>7</sup> *Contemporary* Chinese history refers to the time from 1911 onwards, after the Revolution of 1911, the establishment of the Republic of China.

<sup>8</sup> 孝道 (xiao dao)

<sup>9</sup> 傳宗接代 (chuan zong jie dai)

mentioned situation had been similar on both sides in nationalist Taiwan and communist China, though under two different regimes. Below I will briefly present the development of LGBT movements in Taiwan, where I originally come from.

The first large-scale gay pride parades took place in Taiwan in 2003, with about 1,000 participants<sup>10</sup>, the theme of the debut was to make homosexuals visible. It was the first gay pride parade among the Chinese-speaking regions. Since then it has become an annual event; in the 2007 parade, the number of participants sharply increased to 15,000, making it the largest pride parade in Asia ever.<sup>11</sup>

Before 1990s, homosexuals hardly have any open visibility or attention in the Taiwanese society, in terms of social gathering, media coverage, or cultural presentation of any kind. Yet in the beginning of 1990s, small homosexual groups began to emerge among universities, lobbying for the inclusion of homosexuals on a legal basis. Although there have not been any formal legislation against homosexuality, homophobic atmosphere have been manifest in Taiwan.

Discrimination and humiliation toward homosexuals can be sensed in various media reportages, as well as by public authorities through power abuse, all of these have contributed to the dissemination of negative images of homosexuals to the masses. In the decade between 1990 and 2000, more and more LGBT groups founded, not only as social actors pushing for more rights, activities organizing, but as service providers for LGBT people too, offering help and support on stigmatizing issues, relationship handling with partner or family. The internet has also become a popular means for lesbian to interact with each other. Thousands of lesbians participate actively online in virtual spaces, as for a lot of them it is difficult to make friends and discuss about same-sex desire and relevant problems in everyday heterosexually dominated life, the internet then becomes the emotional outlet for lesbians, as well as a meeting point for friendship/partner seekers, activity organizers, hobby lovers and etc.

Homosexuality is becoming more common in the entertainment industry. In 2004, the American film *Brokeback Mountain* by the Taiwanese director Ang Lee gives homosexuals a startling boost on their visibility, since then there are more and more local movies on homosexual love depiction. Actors or artists with an androgynous appearance (feminine

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<sup>10</sup> Taipei Times, "We are homosexuals! We Love You!", 2003/11/02

<sup>11</sup> Taiwan LGBT Pride official site

looking man or masculine looking woman) have gained sound popularity, something that has not occurred before; however when facing media's anticipation on their sexual orientation, they often have to make "clarifications" or it might influence their careers within the industry.

Sadly speaking, the development of Taiwan's legislation change does not match that of the lesbian/homosexual culture; in 2007 the country passed a legislation banning sexual orientation discrimination at work. The lobbying attempts made by various local NGOs and organizations so far have appeared to be rather unsuccessful. Nevertheless it is undeniable that the increasing visibility of homosexuals in Taiwan would be the biggest breakthrough that has been achieved throughout the decades.

Living in a society where consumerism largely dominates, congested with all sorts of marketing and branding of commodities, together with the emphasis on individualism, consumption is no longer merely for self-need, the consumers's attempt to be visible as an individual, as well as a representation of taste, status ... etc. To gay and lesbians, *visibility* is even more important, as Frietas, Kaiser and Hammidi put, "because it provides a space in which to live as gays and lesbians". Different groups may have different ways to reinforce identification and sense of belonging between their members, as well as to differentiate from other. Frietas, Kaiser and Hammidi suggest that "[c]itizenship in the G&L [Gay and lesbian] communities . . . may be marked through the deployment of *style*" (Wardlow ed., 1996, p 85).

Being relatively new concerning gender and queer studies, my interests toward the queer community have grown in recent years, especially the lesbians, not only due to several close friends I knew shockingly "came out" to me, but also the increasing visibility of the homosexuals in general. In this paper I wish take *style* as the core concern, to be more specific, *style within a subcultural context*, to which the lesbian community will be appointed, along with further elaborations on self-identity and gendered body. The concept of *style* here will be focused mainly on appearance of the body, including dress modes and adornment. As style is constructed and maintained through consumption of goods, which would add another focus of this paper: the linkage between lesbians, the bearers of their individual styles, as well as being an everyday consumer.

## 1. Purpose & Research questions

This paper is a hermeneutical study which aims at establishing a *discussion on how personal styles are presented and perceived within the lesbian subcultural community by individual lesbians through consumption*, by talking with lesbians from Sweden and Taiwan about their preferences on styles (bodily appearance, dress modes and adornments). Personal style is not merely a presentation of self preferences on one's body but also subject to public gaze, constantly influenced by the codes and modes of interaction within one's social circles in daily lives, either within the lesbian circle or out. I am interested in understanding how style, self, and lesbian identity intertwine with each other. Therefore the research questions of this paper will be outlined as below:

- What is (are) the symbolic pattern (s), if any, in the lesbian community in regard to style representation?
- How are styles of the lesbian individual being perceived by herself and her surrounding? How do lesbians maintain their styles?
- How has the notion "gendered body" influence lesbians' attitudes toward androgynous style and others?

The intention of this paper is not to produce generalizations on lesbians from the respective countries, but rather to focus on the experiences of lesbians as *individuals* who belong to a group which can be regarded as a subcultural community. I would base my analysis on the established talks with them, so it is a qualitative research on individual cases, which shall be the nature of this paper, as one may call it.

## 2. Methodology

In previous sections I have presented the background information from which my motivation for this paper has derived, as well as the research problems I intend to work with. In this section I would further elaborate on methodologies I adopt for the rest of the study. This essay consists of two main parts: one incorporated with theoretical discourses and concepts, and another with the empirical data of interviews together with a discussion and analysis; it is a qualitative study based on experiences from individual lesbians, as noted earlier, through personal interviews.

### 2.1. Empirical data

The empirical data of this paper is gathered through the use of qualitative method of interviews. To access people's experiences of everyday life through investigation the qualitative interview is the most unique, sensitive and powerful way to use as a method (Kvale, 1997, p 70). Again it is not my intention to produce some sort of *generalizations* on lesbians from the respective countries in regard to their styles and such, therefore the qualitative method of data gathering is more preferable than the quantitative one, so to speak. In the interviews, the researcher will be taking up the role of the interviewer, while the persons from the target group would be the researcher's respondents. The interviewer not only asks the questions and keeps track of what the respondents have said, but interprets them and alters tempo and direction of the dialogue if necessary.

I have conducted interviews through several ways: 1) face-to-face interviews; 2) phone interviews; 3) online interviews by IM<sup>12</sup> software and email. The reason for adopting various ways of interviews is mainly due to geographical boundaries between the interviewer and the respondents, while also partly due to my personal illness that has resulted in using online interviews by IM and VoIP<sup>13</sup> software, i.e. Windows Live Messenger and Skype, as well as meeting personal preferences of the respondents. The nature of individual interviews with the respondents is semi-structured, while having a general guideline of questions semi-structured interviews it also provides rooms for the interviewees to elaborate on certain aspects which may not be within the interviewer's initial "expectations" yet may be interesting and valuable

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<sup>12</sup> Instant messaging

<sup>13</sup> Voice over IP

to the researcher's study. During the semi-structured interviews the researcher must also learn how previous experiences and dispositions of interviewees are related to their situation in social life, while at the same time avoid getting "lost", resulting dialogues that are directionless.

I have conducted a total of nine interviews with nine respondents. Four of them are ethnically Swedish and live in Sweden, while the rest are local Taiwanese. Eight of the respondents consider themselves as lesbians, while one remains to be uncertain but have been in relationships with female only. Six are within the age 20 to 23 years old, while the rest are between 36 to 39 years old. The group can be categorized into full-time students, full-time workers, and job seeking graduates. English is the language used when interviewing the Swedish respondents and Chinese (mandarin) is being used for those in Taiwan, and has been further translated into English.

## **2.2. Reflections and Limitations**

The respondent searching process has been harder than I have expected, which is done mainly through the internet. Period of illness have prevented me from visiting the places in Malmö in person where I can possibly find suitable respondents, such as clubs, organizations and so on. I also regard language as a limitation when looking for respondents in Sweden, as some replied asking if I speak Swedish. As being insufficient in Swedish, my choices of local resource accessing (e.g. information, community...) become more limited in this sense. As well as interviewing the Swedish respondents with questions dealing with their personal experiences and preferences, I believe English is not the best language for such interviews.

For the interviews conducted online by chatting with the respondents by Windows Live Messenger, Skype, and email, I am aware of the advantages and disadvantages of adopting the methods respectively. The interactions with the respondents via Windows Live Messenger are synchronous online interviews, and the good things by using chat technology are that the interview questions can be organized and presented in a clear way toward the respondent as in written form as well as for the respondent to answer them, while at the same time the interviewer is able to bring the conversation "back" to topic quickly if it is going too far; however one of the biggest drawbacks is the lack of verbal and visual cues which can result two things: 1) it becomes difficult to interpret and assess how the questions and replies are being interpreted; 2) the respondent can be simultaneously engaged with something else which

may result her offering incomplete, normative, or simple answers due to her distracted mind. For the case of Skype, I made phone interviews through its phone calling feature. The advantage of telephone interviews is the interviewer is able to receive verbal cues from the respondents as being more expressive and secondly, speaking is faster than typing. Yet telephone interviews lack facial expressions and gestures, and it is also quite likely that the respondent may not be fully concentrated in the interview process. Having interviews questions posed through email is seen as asynchronous online interview, as opposed to instant chatting. Among all methods it offers the respondent amplest time to structure their answers but the least flexible, as the questions are put in a fixed ways beforehand and the interviewer is unable grasp and influence the ways how the respondent interpret and answer the questions until s/he gets the reply back.

Moreover, it is also likely that words given by the respondents are distorted in various ways, which could possibly due to length of time that has passed by, or deliberate concealment because of the respondent's personal sensitiveness, or a feel of shame, which all may result in an altered version of story.

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### 3. Theory

I become aware of the insufficiency to discuss *style* alone if I wish to study style representation of lesbians, although it is to be the core of my study. *Style* in a contextualized form is what seems to be more desirable. I find it most appropriate to link subcultures and styles together. Subculture is an important topic worth looking into, as there are various alternative cultural communities that coexist with the mainstream hegemonic culture, and it is through all kinds of *styles* that these subcultures express and outstand themselves. I believe the same case applies to the LGBT groups, under which there are subcultures of their own. Lesbians, though appear to be having more invisibility than gays do, do have characteristics which undoubtedly make them to be considered as a unique subculture, rather than “the female version of gay men”. Dick Hebdige’s brilliant work on subculture and styles offers plenty of insightful information in this sense.

By initially establishing style as a contextual element of subculture as the major concept of this paper, it is then necessary to have a few other sub-concepts so as to grasp the working questions to a fuller extent. As the empirical data of this paper are personal experiences of several lesbians, their presentations may vary from case to case, showing uniqueness as an *individual*. To better understand the respondents’ perceptions both on self and others in relation to style representation, I will introduce relevant discourses on *identity* by Anthony Giddens, specifically his discourses on the relationship between identity shaping, modernity and consumption.

*Gender* is an inescapable element when studying lesbians and identities, as well as not to neglect the body which functions as a carrier of style; thus I also incorporate a gender twist to this study by referring to significant and valuable works within gender studies, notably by Judith Halberstam, Judith Butler and etc. Living in a gendered society (in most cases, a binary of male and female), the socially-constructed gender stereotypes are so influential that they determine how one should look and act according to their gender. The meaning of the creation of the linkage between gendered bodies and styles is three-fold: 1) it offers ample space upon which the discussions are based; 2) it contributes the ways how I designate and conduct qualitative research; 3) it deepens the reflection on empirical data as well as its analysis.

Previously I have also referred to my target group, i.e. lesbian individuals, as consumers, yet I

contextualize consumption by treating it as an act that is being done in everyday life as routines, a way by which personal styles are constructed. therefore I will not go in depth into the consuming behaviors, that is, formal discourses on consumption theory would be absent.

In short, the theoretical framework of this paper is dominated by the concept of *style* within a *subcultural* context, followed by *identity* and *gender*, which are the main components of my research. These components are closely intertwined with one another and I believe they are the best choices to strengthen the empirical data.

### 3.1. Subculture and Style

We live in a world full of complex power relations and hierarchies. Those with more power and thus become dominant in the society; let it be persons, communities, organizations, nations, or languages, ideologies, culture ... what one would call “mainstream”, while the remaining which apparently are less influential would be categorized as non-mainstream. Subcultures, in this sense, are the distinct cultural phenomena emerged out of the mainstream culture to which they belong. As for the major themes of subculture, Hebdige deployed Genet’s main elements of subculture, which are:

- The status and meaning of revolt
- The idea of style as a form of refusal
- The elevation of crime into art (Hebdige, 1979, p 2)

In the early years when cultural studies is being established in the universities, it was debated whether it should be defined as “a standard of excellence” or “a ‘whole way of life’”; it was Barthes who further created new possibilities for contemporary cultural studies, by his application of a linguistically-originated method to systems outside the language, which solved the ambiguous position of cultural studies, as well as established a bond between moral convictions and popular themes. (Hebdige, 1979, p 10) One of his most significant notions would be the incorporation of myths and signs attempted to examine the mass culture, as he believes that there are underlying hidden messages of the artifacts in our daily lives that need to be revealed and interpreted, “showing how all the apparently spontaneous forms and rituals of contemporary bourgeois societies are subject to a systematic distortion, liable at any moment to be dehistoricized, ‘naturalized’, converted into myth” (Ibid., p 9). Barthes accomplishment,

however, also urged a need for a more analytical framework of cultural studies. Being a part of the theorization process, the term “ideology” received a much wider use and increased popularity. Trying to define the notion more precisely, Hebdige introduces the discussion first in the relationship between ideology and consciousness: “[Ideology] thrives beneath consciousness”, and it is incorporated into people’s normal common sense in everyday discourse. Then he further presents Althusser’s view of ideology as unconscious and structures that they impose on the vast majority of men. Therefore, all aspects of culture possess a semiotic value, and the most taken-for-granted phenomena can function as signs. The sign does not merely acts as a medium of mirroring one single reality. It is crucial to disentangle the codes through which meaning is organized; we have to try to understand the power distribution within our society, between various groups and classes. The groups which outstand themselves with a better stance, more say, possessing the chance and ability to set up rules, establish and organize meanings thus formulate the dominant discourses about reality and dominant ideology, both represents the interests of the dominant groups (Hebdige, 1979, pp 9 – 15).

Subculture is attached to the dominant mainstream culture in the capitalist society, that is, *hegemony*. Hegemony, in Hall’s words, is

a situation in which a provisional alliance of certain social groups can exert ‘total social authority over other subordinate groups, by winning and shaping consent to that the power of dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural. (Hall, 1977)

Hebdige states that subcultures are exactly the representations of the challenge to such hegemony, yet indirectly, but expressed through *style*. *Style* is coded with myths and signs, and significance, “its transformations go ‘against nature’, interrupting the process of ‘normalization’” (Hebdige, 1979, pp 17 – 18). Up to this point, one may start wonder: what can be regarded as *style* then? It is obvious that in his work, Hebdige put much more emphasis on explaining what subcultures are like, rather than being clear-cut in defining what style actually *is*, as subcultural representations. While reflecting on Genet’s novel, Hebdige mentions styles are “made up of mundane objects which have a double meaning” (Ibid., p 2), later on in the chapters on the ways style function within subcultures, he gives a seemingly clearer statement on the boundaries of style: “[t]he subcultural stylistic ensembles – those emphatic combinations of dress, dance, argot, music, etc...” (Ibid., p 101). Hence it is not only the appearances of members within the subcultural community but also their behaviors that lie within the notion of the subcultural *stylistic* representations.

### 3.2. Modernity and self-identity

To better supplement the topic of this paper and to contextualize the target group at an individual basis as well as beings living in the modern society, therefore it is important to adopt discourses on modernity and self-identity; here I would deploy parts of Giddens' work.

The world we live nowadays is like embellishments of the advancement of technology, dazzling mass media, easier migration movements, intense communications worldwide, globalized products marketed by multinational companies, and so on. All these seem to make our life more "colorful", as we are constantly exposed to wide varieties of information, making choices out the greatly diversified environment in which we are living. To rephrase in Giddens' words, "modernity confronts the individual with a complex diversity of choices" (Giddens, 1991, p 80), the first one tends to think of would be lifestyle, by relating it to consumerism; Giddens further states that one shall not merely do so by remaining at the fundamental but to reflect upon that "we all not only follow lifestyles, but in an important sense to do so – we have no choice but to choose" (Ibid., p 81). *Lifestyle*, in Giddens' definition, is "a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces", as well as "routinized practices, the routines incorporated into habits of dress, eating, modes of acting and favored milieux for encountering others". Practices and routines are central in defining what lifestyle is, for Giddens these practices not only fulfill utilitarian needs, but also they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity, and the routines do not remain unchanged, they are subject to change due to the mobile nature of self-identity. Decisions people make in everyday life are central to the formation of such routinized practices, for instance, what to wear, what to eat, the ways of self conduct at places such as work/school...etc. not only about *how* to act, but *who* to be (Giddens, 1991, pp 80 – 81). It is most common to relate the notion of lifestyle with consumption, yet Giddens reminds that it is incorrect to relate lifestyle only to activities outside of work, as work determines the poteiteal lifestyles one may possibly have (Ibid., p 82)

We, as individuals, living in the current world, are out of question being influenced by the plurality of choices at all extents. What are the factors that have caused us wandering in alternatives of all sorts regarding our daily lives, deciding upon and adopt them? Giddens provides four noteworthy aspects in his analysis:

- The fact of living in a *post-traditional order*: that identity emerges from choice, instead of

ascribed;

- *Pluralization of life-worlds* by Peter Berger: modern social life of people is much more segmented than pre-modern cultures, local community is no longer dominant, the division between private and public spheres is more apparent, and pluralization especially in roles and norms occurs in each of them. Under such intersections and overlapping of domains, each individual tends to negotiate identities which are multiple as well as contradictory;
- *Methodological doubt* of modernity: there are no fixed guidelines of things but multiple possibilities, authorities do not hold the eternal truth, instead, their expertise is provisional. The reflexivity of modernity is far from close to certainty;
- Prevalence of *mediated experience*: with the ongoing popularization and globalization of media, and its ways of information dissemination both obviously and subtly, the traditional connection between “physical setting” and “social situation” has become undermined; the audience are offered settings that are juxtaposed with settings and potential lifestyle choices, which the individual may never come into contact personally. Mediated experience by mass media is thus translated into consumer choices of modern life, constructing new communalities and differences between preconstituted forms of social experience. (Giddens, 1991., pp 82 – 84)

In all, its broad encompassment in definition makes *self-identity* a slippery term to grasp, as the change in political, economic, and social structure results fluidity in people’s lives, therefore modernity makes “individual” and “self-identity” distinctive. Self-identity is closely related to one’s continuous and all-pervasive reflexivity of the *self*, whereby time plays an important role; it is a coherent phenomenon, a trajectory of development from the past to the future presuming a narrative, as Giddens have suggested. Body awareness, in Giddens view, is an extension of self reflexivity, which he focuses much on the awareness of exercising and diet; yet these aspects will not be further elaborated in this paper. Anyhow I agree with him saying body awareness as “constructing a differentiated self” (Ibid., p 77), in a general sense. As mentioned in the previous sections, it is undeniable that gender norms and stereotypes have penetrative impacts in our daily lives, and it is hard to ignore the fact that our behaviors are coded in gender norms (e.g. masculine & feminine attributes) would no doubt has direct influences on self-identity and its affiliated body awareness, the bodily expressions through styles. Next I am

about to discuss the influence of gender on body and identity.

### 3.3. Body – Gender – Identity

Besides the influences which penetrate people's minds internally and abstractly, we shall not neglect the exterior, visible carrier of the self, through which each of us is being exposed to the world we exist, in the sense of space and time – the body. The human body, as Giddens writes: “[...] is not just a physical entity which we ‘possess’, it is an action-system, a mode of praxis, and its practical immersion in the interactions of day-to-day life is an essential part of the sustaining of a coherent sense of self-identity”.

Thereby several significant features are of relevant to the body:

- Appearance: covers everything of the surface of the body, including modes of dress and adornment;
- Demeanour: determines how appearance is used by the individual within generic settings of day-to-day activities, i.e. how the body is mobilized in relation to constitutive conventions of daily life;
- Sensuality of the body: the dispositional handling of pleasure and pain;
- Regimes: to which bodies are subject.

In the pre-modern society, one's appearance was closely related to his/her social status and more or less restricted in standardized ways, the degree of individualization was very limited, even none. Even today in the world of modernity, the linkage between appearance and social status still exist, and dress “remains a signaling device of gender, class position and occupational status” (Giddens, 1991, p 99) The social construction of “rules” and “demands” regarded as “appropriate” under the categorization of genders have never come to a cease, Giddens indicates that one adjusts his/her appearance and demeanour accordingly to such constructed “demands” perceived by themselves under certain settings (Ibid., p 100).

Similarly, Judith Butler analyzes Mary Douglas's perception on the body as “established through markings that seek to establish specific codes of cultural coherence”, saying that “any discourse that establishes the boundaries of the body serves the purpose of instating and

naturalizing certain taboos regarding the appropriate limits, postures, and modes of exchange that define what it is that constitutes bodies” (Butler, 1990, p 178)

As it is a gendered body that we possess, once the body becomes dissonant with the socially constructed gender norms, it becomes problematic due to such destabilization. Gender, in Monique Wittig’s view, is being understood as “the workings of ‘sex’, where ‘sex’ is an obligatory injunction for the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize itself in obedience to a historically delimited possibility ... as a sustained and repeated corporeal project”, Butler thinks gender “is a performance with punitive consequences ... we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right”, regarding them as gender deviant; gender, is “... the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions ... the construction [gender] ‘compels’ our belief in its necessity and naturalness” (Butler, 1990, p 190).

#### **4. Discussion - lesbian community as a subculture?**

So far I have discussed what *subculture* is, its core themes and the role *style* plays within; secondly I shift the focus to a more *individual*-inclined perspective, on *self-identity* and modernity, both of which have largely influenced the ways styles are formed and represented; thirdly I incorporate a feministic approach on discussing gendered *bodies*, as the feminist argument of suggesting gender as further dimension in studying social bodies is an essential category of analysis for understanding human embodiment (Wincup, 1998), as well as applicable to the topic of this paper. As a wrap-up for the above mentioned concepts and discourses from various perspectives, I will then discuss how lesbian community could be regarded as a subculture, together with some notable elements.

Lesbian is a term used in the English language to describe sexual and romantic desire between

females.<sup>14</sup> Therefore being a lesbian means that a person of female sex is both emotionally and sexually attracted to people of the same sex, a person who prefers only women as their sexual objects, instead of men; that is, women whose *sexual orientation* is inclined to those of the same sex are being defined as lesbians. Then, how could sexual orientation, mostly seen as a collateral category together with class, race and etc., which a group of women who share in common, be considered as a subculture? In this section I will present the concepts still basing on the aforementioned work by Hebdige on subculture.

Subcultural subjects have a diversified coverage, from teddy boys, mods, skinheads, hippies, punk, rudies to rock, reggae, rap music, just to name a few from the western world. Once one engages in one of these groups, it would be quite unlikely to have a second belonging in the rest of them; one reason is that these groups do not emerge at the same timescale; each has their heydays at different periods of time, though some of the subcultures do coexist simultaneously, however the chance would be slim for a situation of being a punk as well as a member of the hip-hop community to occur, as tensions and hostility do exist between these youth subcultures, within the cycle of resistance and defusion (Hebdige, 1979, p 130).

Lesbian, on the other hand, resembles a relatively stable label, as considering one's sexual orientation as an internal attribute, a *fact* that a woman has homosexual desire through confirmation, and therefore identifies herself with the term. No doubt, a lesbian could either be a punk, a hippie, a reggae lover, a B-girl, and many more as well as crossing all classes and ethnicity.

Possessing the feature of being an “accommodating” identity that is different from the majority classifications of subcultures, lesbian community does share quite a few aspects of a subculture. Hebdige presents an analysis on the features and functions of a subculture, which derived from the research made on groups of teddy boys, punk, etc. He considers Phil Cohen's discourses on subculture studies “still furnishes the most adequate model available for a reading of subcultural style” (Ibid., p 77). Cohen thinks that subculture has an underlying function of being an expression and resolution of the contradictions which remain hidden or unresolved in the parent culture (Cohen P., 1972), here the contradiction(s) would be the term being mostly used in correspond to the term homosexuality – heterosexuality. Yet this binary is heavily slanted, heterosexism occupies as the mainstream notion in every aspects of our social structure.

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<sup>14</sup> Oxford Dictionary, Second Edition, 1989

Chrys Ingraham gives a critical reflexive review on hetero-normativity, focusing on the ways how it is socially organized and transmitted to the masses living under the capitalist society, i.e. its construction as normative. Ingraham thinks heterosexuality “is not only socially produced as dominant but is also taken-for-granted and universalizing” (Ingraham, 2002). The heteronormative notion is strengthened through various rituals and relevant commodity commercialization by enterprises, such as weddings. It is not heteronormativity *per se* that needs to be under scrutiny but its penetrating process of “naturalization” and “normalization” that leads the creation of such term and how it shall be perceived and used. The term “heteronormativity” is created by Michael Warner in his anthology *Fear of a Queer Planet*, in which he relates the concept to Monique Wittig’s idea of social contract (Warner, 1993, p xxi). Wittig regards social contract as heterosexuality by saying: “[t]o live in society is to live in heterosexuality ... Heterosexuality is always there within all mental categories” (Wittig, 1992, p 40). Ingraham points out that “institutionalized heterosexuality constitutes the standard for legitimate and expected social and sexual relations” and “heteronormativity insures that the organization of heterosexuality in everything from gender to weddings to marital status is held up as a model and as ‘normal’”.

I observe the pervasion of heteronormativity conjures up the stigmatization of homosexuals on their living as gays/lesbians, and their engagement in relationships with the same-sex, as the contradictory (?) “other” to the unquestioned mainstream heterosexual model within the society. The predefined heteronormative assumptions in daily lives have tended to led homosexuals undergoing a harder time facing clashes between the inner self and external restraints, such as gender stereotypes (formulated under the heterosexual context), omnipresent dominating heterosexual images on mass media, negative stereotyping on homosexuals, public and private discriminations, and so on. No matter this *otherness* is defined by self-perception or by the mainstream dominant groups, wittingly or unwittingly, when coming across the term *lesbian*, it is obvious to find its difference with other subcultural subjects as skinheads, mods, and punk, in terms of associating it with a clear-cut image of style - “what-you-see-is-what-you-get”. And it even seems easier for the case of gay men. Another notable characteristic of subcultural styles is its construction of an alternative identity which communicated a perceived difference (Hebdige, 1979, p 89). Being a community in contradiction to the heteronormative society, nowadays striving for more attainable resources in all fields, I agree with what Freitas, Kaiser

and Hammidi have mentioned in their article on the significant role which *visibility* is playing among gay and lesbian communities. Style, though indefinite and numerous, may be incorporated into lesbians as resistance to the mainstream heterosexuality norm, as well as reinforcement of self-identity, representing an *otherness* no matter wittingly or unwittingly; and finally, transmits their refusal towards the hegemonic norm – one of the major themes of subculture.<sup>15</sup> However, lesbian community does not manifest their revolt through crime acts which could be carried out in art forms (e.g. graffiti sprays on infrastructure), like many other subcultures, such as hip-hop gangs, punks, mods and skinheads, have usually done, nor does it symbolize social deviant acts (e.g. vandalism, swearing, fighting...) as part of the “innovative style” within the community to “brand” itself. In most cases, it has been due to these acts that the subcultures have gained media’s attention. Media does cover lesbian relevant news, yet the negative reportage on excessive sex of gay does not mean sex could be considered as an element of lesbian culture in the same sense. I agree with Judith Halberstam’s statement that “The growing visibility and indeed respectability of lesbian communities to some degree facilitate the emergence of masculine young women” (Halberstam, 1998, p 6). Masculinity is a key concept in the lesbian culture, not only as a sign but also the ways of it being an attribute coded and interpreted by lesbians through their acts. Then we might start wonder: what is *masculinity*? I would quote Halberstam again on her pertinent views towards masculinity:

Masculinity in this society inevitably conjures up notices of power and legitimacy and privilege; it often symbolically refers to the power of the state and to uneven distributions of wealth. Masculinity seems to extend outward into patriarchy and inward into the family; masculinity represents the power of inheritance, the consequences of the traffic in women, and the promise of social privilege. But, obviously, many other lines of identification traverse the terrain of masculinity, dividing its power into complicated differentials of class, race, sexuality, and gender. If what we call “dominant masculinity” appears to be a naturalized relation between maleness and power, then it makes little sense to examine men for the contours of that masculinity’s social construction. (Ibid., p2)

The denaturalization made by arguing masculinity is not a male-only privilege opens up discourses to be established on female masculinity, and moreover, lesbian masculinity. A general term stands for lesbian masculinity: *butch*, which is a lesbian vernacular term for women who are more comfortable with masculine gender codes, styles, or identities than with feminine ones (Nestle J. ed., 1992, p 467). The experiences from queer and female show clearly how important it is to recognize alternative masculinities when and where they emerge. Just as

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<sup>15</sup> See section 4.1 Subculture and style, p 13

it is hard to define what masculinity actually is, and what types of masculinity there are, there is not merely one kind of lesbian masculinity; instead, the masculinities are expressed through diversified forms. These forms are meaningful in lesbian culture shaping; their clash with the existing dominant gender order and organization tend to make one rethink the ways gender have been constructed, to distinguish what is “acceptable” and “deviant”. In the following paragraphs I will present some of them which are notable: the drag kings, tomboyism, and the butch-femme role playing.

#### **4.1. Drag kings**

Speaking of performative acts, the 1990s United States has witnessed drag king culture as becoming a subcultural phenomenon. Halberstam’s discussions on drag kings in her book *Female Masculinity* are strikingly inspiring for further reflections and understandings in depth on drag kings and the theatrical act of masculinity performance by women. She defines drag king as “a female (usually) who dresses up in recognizably male costume and performs theatrically in that costume ... a drag king performs masculinity (often parodically) and makes the exposure of the theatricality of masculinity into the mainstay of her act.” What is the difference between drag kings and male impersonators, who have been a theatrical tradition for more than 200 years? It would be that the drag king show is a recent phenomenon, and the ultimate goal of male impersonators is to stage a plausible performance of maleness, instead of parodying (Halberstam, 1998, p 232). Drag king performances, not only by being theatrical, also expose the structure of dominant masculinity by rehearsing the repertoire of roles and types on which such masculinity depends. By highlighting the tricks and gadgets of the sexism on which male masculinity depends, the shows intend to bring to light the artifice of dominant masculinity.

#### **4.2. Tomboyism**

Historically, the term *tomboy* has crossed gender and class, and its definition has undergone several changes. The most common definition used by contemporary times came into existence

by the late 1800s, which simply means a frolicsome girl given to sport and other boyish ways.<sup>16</sup> Studies on tomboyism mostly deal with relationships between childhood “cross-sex” behaviors and lesbianism, from a psychological point of view. From time to time tomboys have to cope with the problematic presumption of being lesbians and “male-wannabes”, although both notions have refuted by psychological explanations.

Tomboysim is once constantly under dispute and altered in its definition over the years since its initial emergence in reference in the early 1970s (Saghir & Robins, 1973), from pathological identification to acceptable social behavior, a natural stage that all women would possibly go through during their childhood times (Safir, Rosenmann & Kloner, 2003). Halberstam characterizes it as “... associated with a ‘natural’ desire for the greater freedoms and mobilities enjoyed by boys” (Halberstam, *op.cit.*, p 6). However the case is that it enjoys much tolerance until puberty is on its corner, everything come to a halt to the girl. Going against the gender conformity of female adolescence would pretty much mean the girl as well as a tomboy would have to undergo a “reshaping” process which they experience repression, punishment and restraint, so as to develop the “right” femininity as a woman; sticking to the status-quo of being a tomboy would mean punishments and exclusion from the social communities.

### 4.3. Butch-femme

Besides what has been said in the previous paragraphs on *butch*, another common definition for it is as an adjective used to describe one’s gender performance, and a masculine of either gender can be described as butch, while “femme” is the term for those who appear to be feminine ones.<sup>17</sup> *Butch-femme* has become a manifest code for coupling among the lesbians. As a form of sexual role-playing, *butch-femme* culture had its heyday during the 1940s and 50s United States, being considered as a norm in gay communities, which showed their visibility mainly in public spaces as bars.<sup>18</sup>

However, *butch-femme* started to be denied by some lesbian feminists in the 1970s, who criticized as being a low imitation of the heterosexual couple stereotype. Notable researchers within the gender studies such as Judith Butler and Judith Halberstam both consider the

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<sup>16</sup> glbtq, an encyclopedia of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer culture

<sup>17</sup> Compact Oxford English Dictionary

<sup>18</sup> Butch-Femme-Transguy forum

rejection as inappropriate; Butler argues that “[t]he repetition of heterosexual constructs within sexual cultures both gay and straight may well be the inevitable site of the denaturalization and mobilization of gender categories. The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into the relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy.” (Butler, 1990, p 43), while Halberstam comments on it by describing its consequences: “[t]he suppressing of role playing ... by lesbian feminists ... further erased an elaborate and carefully scripted language of desire that butch and femme dykes had produced in response to dominant culture’s attempts to wipe them out.” (Ibid., p 121)

Of course, as these terms serve the function of identification, their meanings are however, fluid and subject to change from time to time. Butch and femme are the most generalized form of these lesbian identities, there are “soft butch”, “stone butch”, “lipstick butch”, as well as “soft femme”, “hard femme” and etc.

Bars, as Kelly Hankin points out, are contributive and beneficial sites for the emergence and development of lesbian subcultures, especially the butch-femme, in three aspects: first, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, constructions on promoting heterosocial lives are made built in dance halls and spread onto the streets, encouraging more interactions between men and women. In other words, these fields had become *heterosocialized*; second, under this heterosocializing process, public drinking spaces no longer remain to be all-male dominated, therefore the preservation of male homosocial drink spaces provides references for lesbian women; third is the bars’ paradoxical nature enabling “privacy in public”, which is attractive for lesbians to cultivate a public identity that might bring them romance and community as well as them being ostensibly shielded from the public gaze. (Hankin, 2002, pp 6 – 7)

Post-War butch-femme bar cultures in America are vividly depicted in novels such as *Stonebutch Blues* written by Leslie Feinberg and Joan Nestle’s *Restricted Country*.

Having given a brief overview on some cultural signs and phenomenon within the lesbian community, one can observe that all these characteristics have made manifest of lesbians being regarded as a subculture with a distinctive vocabulary, and manner of expression, and style and dress.

## 5. Analysis

### 5.1. A Short presentation of the respondents

My target group consists of lesbians. Nine persons have participated in interviews with me, covering the age group within 20 and 40 years old, ethnically and geographically from Sweden and Taiwan. Eight persons have identified themselves as lesbians, while one is uncertain yet has only been in relationships with the same sex. Table 1 outlines the basic information of the respondents; in this paper, respondents' names are presented in pseudonyms which are made up either by themselves or by me.

| <b>Respondent</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Occupation</b>  | <b>Nationality &amp; Residence</b> |
|-------------------|------------|--|------------------------------------|
| Anna              | 21         | College graduate   | Sweden                             |
| Susan             | 37         | Career counselor   | Sweden                             |
| Karen             | 36         | Financial sector worker in a company                         | Sweden                             |
| Lisa              | 39         | Economist  | Sweden                             |
| Sue               | 21         | Student  | Taiwan                             |
| Lin               | 22         | College graduate   | Taiwan                             |
| Chang             | 22         | Webshop owner & freelance lecturer on online business making | Taiwan                             |
| Saint             | 22         | College graduate   | Taiwan                             |
| Ting              | 21         | Student  | Taiwan                             |

**Table 1**

As I tend to treat each respondent as individuals, it is not presumed that their experience and opinions will have any representative meaning of the lesbian community as a whole.

## 5.2. Symbolic patterns of lesbian styles?

After having conducted interviews with the nine respondents, it becomes apparent that all of them have different looks and styles. When the respondents are told to describe their own dressing and appearance, much emphasis is put on *comfort* and *simplicity*, as crucial reasons for what they prefer to wear:

When I am not working, I wear military trousers, big jeans ... t-shirts, jackets, training [suits], it is relaxed and sporty. (Susan, 37)

In the winter times, I prefer to wear trousers, because I think it is easier to wear them, since it is quite cold, I like to wear both tights and trousers on top, they are warm and comfortable ... and in the summer time I wear more skirts and dresses as I find them comfortable during the season. (Karen, 36)

I usually wear jeans and Timberland shoes, and Polo shirt would be the top ... they are so free and comfortable [to wear]. (Chang, 22)

I rarely have accessories on, because I want to have a simplistic feeling, which is why I do not make too much adornment. It would mostly T-shirts and jeans [I wear now], the T-shirts with really simpler patterns on (laughs), comparing with what I have been wearing before ... I like clothes that are not complicated, for example, a plain color T-shirt, its color should not be at a high degree of saturation, kind of like the MUJI<sup>19</sup> style ... even if the T-shirt has great designs and patterns I would not buy it if it is brightly colored. (Lin, 22)

Though there is a wide difference among the respondents in terms of physical look, such as height, build, hairdo and etc, I do observe the prevalence of certain apparels which are central to the respondents' daily groom, for instance, Polo shirts and shirts.

Besides T-shirts, I also wear Polo shirts and shirts. For me, shirts are just like jackets. (Lin, 22)

Well, shirt is what I am exactly wearing now. Polo shirts or shirts are what I wear most of the time, with jeans or sweatpants underneath. (Ting, 21)

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<sup>19</sup> [www.muji.com/](http://www.muji.com/)

Sometimes I like to wear androgynous stuff, like Polo shirt or T-shirt, a bit more loose-fitted than average feminine clothes, together with jeans and sneakers. (Sue, 21)

When being asked if they think there is a “lesbian look”, the responses are once again going in all directions. Both Chang and Sue depend much upon their own “gaydars” to distinguish the lesbian population in their everyday lives:

[I]t is sort of like a special type of eye contact, a sort of [lesbian] feeling; I find it hard to describe what it is. (Sue, 21)

I think it is the eye expressions or something. For some unknown reasons I can just tell if somebody is [lesbian] or not, without paying attention to her outfit ... at most times I get it right. (Chang, 22)

However, the intuitive “gaydar” of lesbian distinguishing is not a “gifted” ability which every lesbian will possess and rely upon; some respondents deny the existence of an exclusive lesbian look by emphasizing on the *diversity* of styles congested within:

Among the lesbians, I mean lesbians as a society, there are girly ones, butchy ones, sporty ones ... I think I am in the middle. (Susan, 37)

The range of lesbians’ appearance is very broad. Everyone is unique, so I do not think there is a lesbian look. (Saint, 22)

[A]s I see in my lesbian friends, they are all [in] different styles. I do not think there is a special look. I think it is more the friends you choose [to be with], because obviously if you look at your friends, they kind of like having the same style. I think it is more to do with what kind of person you are, not with your sexual orientation ... at least I have not seen that “trend” (giggles) ... I think we all got different styles. (Karen, 36)

The “lesbian look” is treated as a single unifying notion, which apparently varies according to *personal* preferences, having little relevance to being lesbian or not; that is, personal preferences occupy a higher priority than one’s sexual orientation. In this sense, it is not be wrong to suggest that the lesbian community itself is a combination of various *subcultures*, as there is no common unitary style that is “owned” by the whole community members. But is this merely the case so? I find other respondents have another way of perceiving the notion.

Lin, a T<sup>20</sup>, as she claims, tells me what she thinks about the “lesbian look”:

Lesbians are categorized into Ts and Ps, P is like the normal girls you see, and T seems to be tougher than those average girls [externally], but I am not sure what it is like within their hearts, as some Ts are really feminine-minded ... generally speaking, Ts are androgynous, strong-minded, tougher [than average girls], and reliable. This is my opinion based on myself as a T. Some people think Ts are just imitating men, somehow I do not agree with that. (Lin, 22)

Anna also shares her opinion by elaborating more in details:

There is a typical lesbian look, like dyke on bike, butch, short hair. Other than that there seems, at least in Sweden, to be having a relation between political activism and sexuality. Homosexual men have schlager, parades and whatnot, and lesbians have more activism, more red-wing [shoes]<sup>21</sup>, so that influences their style of course. Palestina-shawl, Converse shoes, and other of these things. Many of them are feminists, so feminist symbols also occur frequently. (Anna, 21)

Here the focus becomes the subculturally constructed *gender identifications* within the lesbian community which determine the styles of lesbians. Each of these “roles” represents a typical style, be it internal attributes or the external ones. Though the styles do individually signify certain attributes and outfits, and are also constantly influenced and in combination with personal characteristics and beliefs (e.g. feminist), after all, they do not just exist by themselves; they attach together and being contributive in forming the lesbian subculture as an entity. For outfit, the majority of respondents stress the comfort and simplicity to be their priorities for apparel selection, which I believe does not make them “stand out” among other subcultural groups, as the priorities are no less conventional than what average people would do.

Then we have seen how the seemingly easy question have been defined and perceived by the respondents in different perspectives (focus on personal style & focus on lesbian gender roles) and aspects (internally & externally), and the difference in understanding “the lesbian look”

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<sup>20</sup> In Taiwan, lesbian subcultural gender identifications are developed under the major categories of T, P, and none. T usually refers to the lesbians who dress and behave in masculine ways and are sexually attracted to feminine women, or the so-called *butch*, yet the term T derives from tomboy, which does not mean the same thing as its original meaning used in the West. P, on the other hand, refers to lesbians who have feminine attributes, i.e., *femme*, as it is called in the West, while None lies in between the two, as being a more androgynously looking and behaving lesbian who is versatile according to her partner.

<sup>21</sup> [www.redwingshoes.com](http://www.redwingshoes.com)

among the respondents more or less reflects the inconstant nature of subculture, as Hebdige have concluded: “[t]he relationship between experience, expression and signification is [...] not a constant in subculture. It can form a unity which is either more or less organic, striving towards some ideal coherence, or more or less ruptural, reflecting the experience of breaks and contradictions.” What can be summarized here is that the respondents who are in their thirties seem to be less aware of and attached to the subculturally constructed notions in the lesbian community, focusing more on individual tastes and personal preferences concerning their outfits, while the younger respondents are more aware of the lesbian “roles” and their symbolic signs and traits.

### 5.3. Perceptions by the self and others

All respondents consider their styles as either *sporty* or *casual*. In Susan’s view, one is what she/he dresses: “I think what I dress is me. It is relaxed, sporty... instead of buying 10 T-shirts at a time, I would rather just a buy a thing I really want, [which] should be brands like Puma, Nike, Adidas ...”

As a full-time worker, there is a contrast between what Susan wears at work and off work:

[...] I make it clear between my job and private. I want to look professional at work, and black trousers<sup>22</sup> can never be wrong in the working environment, it is safe!

...

When I am not working, I wear military trousers, big jeans ... T-shirts, jackets, training [suits] ... I am especially fond of black and green ... it is like green, gray, black [most of the time] but you see, I am wearing this pink shirt today, so there are exceptions sometimes ... people at work are surprised to see my outfit in spare time, as they tend to think Susan is a person with order, serious, probably a bit conservative ... they were shocked too when I joined their discussion on tattoos, as I told them I have one as well.  
(Susan, 37)

Comparing with Susan, Karen states that there is not much difference in her appearance

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<sup>22</sup> What Susan was wearing the day I interviewed her.

between work and private:

[I]n our office you don't have to dress that much, so I usually wear jeans, a nice top or something, like nice cardigan, nice shoes ... you know, leather shoes. That is basically I wear both for work and off work. Now in the summer time I wear more dresses. (Karen, 36)

While I asked Karen what style she would describe herself as, *sporty-chic* was the answer she gave me:

I dress up with jeans but quite feminine as well, obviously with a blouse or feminine top to go with, so it is maybe *chic* and *sporty*, in sort of a combination ... my fiancée thinks I dress very elegant[ly]. She would not probably describe me as sporty but *chic*, as she loves to see the way I am dressed when I go to work, she says 'oh you look so elegant and chic'.

(Karen, 36)

Anna also thinks herself as the sporty type, by saying: "I have always my frisbee in my bag that I would play with, that is also the reason why I do not like to wear skirts and high heels." (Anna, 21)

Yet some respondents' experiences have somehow reflected that it is not always easy to appear in the styles they desire at some occasions. Lin told me how groups of different generations treat her style: "[s]ome people, especially the elderly ones, would say things such as 'oh, how come you got such androgynous look? You look like a guy', while people of my age actually think I look pretty good in the way I dress. Nowadays there are more and more androgynous looking girls, but it still remains unacceptable to the older generations, as they tend to think it is like a he-she [style]."

Besides the disapproving comments from the older generations, misrecognitions are also being carried out in several ways. For instance, it is not uncommon for androgynous or masculine looking lesbians are placed in incidents which they found their gender becomes mistaken by others, the most common confusion would be the "bathroom incident", as Lin further elaborates:

... it used to occur quite frequent that I am mistaken as a guy, everyone freak out by the

time I entered the [public] toilet, I felt as if I have come to the wrong place. But I hardly get mistaken now ... there are more androgynous looking girls, so they have gotten used to it. (Lin, 22)

Ting has also come across the same thing:

Once I was going to the bathroom in the airport, my hair was super short back then, because I had just got it shaved you know, and two guys followed me into the lady's bathroom without noticing until they entered, I find it so funny ... but they don't, they almost cried!

...

I happened to go to the bathroom at McDonald's, usually the old cleaning grandma-like person will be outside [the bathroom], you know... and she blocked me from entering [into the bathroom]!! She even waved the mop at me and insisted that I should take the men's side, I could not help it so I went to the men's, what else can I do? Well, it was also a bit crowded [in the women's side] then, otherwise I would argue with her, since it is weird too to go to the men's! (Ting, 21)

Saint recalls the scene when she was mistaken as male:

It [misrecognition] happens all the time. At the restaurant where I worked part-time, people often addressed me 'sir' ... I couldn't help it ... then I become accustomed to it. (Saint, 21)

If the above incidents are gender misrecognitions in an indeliberate way, that the respondents are being mistaken in distinctly gender-segregated public spaces, mostly due to their appearances, which resulted a direct "male categorization" being imposed on them, followed by the awkwardness, be the respondent herself or those who have mistreated the respondents after their "real" gender is being revealed, then the ridicule on one's "unfeminine", or gender-ambiguous attributes would be a deliberate one. Sue recalls what was like back in middle school: "I was called by other boys as a 'tomboy'; in a more degrading tone ... perhaps it was because I was really manly behaving." Anna also mentions that "[o]n the streets some will smile at you and ask whether I am a man or woman." No matter it is mockeries or teasers from peers or strangers, they can all be seen as "punishments" to those whose appearance and

behaviors, mostly cross-gender, simply do not fit into gender normality.

From the talks with the respondents I also recognized use of certain items which I regard them as a *solution* for style maintenance during different occasions. These solutions can be further summarized according to the nature of their functionalities. Anna told me what she has used in order to prevent nasty interactions from men:

You cannot get a T-shirt with lesbians on it [out in the stores]. I tried to get it online, in order to prevent touchy guys approaching me at the clubs. For example, there is one T-shirt that says 'Hey mister, do you have a sister?' ... I am also trying to find if there is anything that connects lesbians and video games together. My friend once had a T-shirt that has both a pacman and a pacgirl, two pacmen and two pacgirls, and three pacgirls. And there is another one with the sentence 'my other T-shirt is your girlfriend', and that does not make things so straightforward. (Anna, 21)

Anna does not use political symbols in her daily appearance, but only under certain occasions; the T-shirts mentioned above not only serve as a visible sign of her gayness but at the same time a cautious sign against the heterosexual men's approach.

Yet it is not necessarily for every lesbian to adopt items which can make their sexual orientation obvious to all. At some occasions the problems can be as mundane as anyone. Karen, a trousers-lover, finds the trousers do not suit her:

In Sweden I have a problem finding other trousers which would fit me...before it [height] was not really a problem. After I have lost a lot of weight then it became more of a problem. It is not really the length, as if the trousers are too long you can always pull them up.

As Karen describes, the trousers become too big for her after she becomes slimmer than before, which makes her harder to choose the trousers, along with her height problem, as she appears to be much shorter than the average Swedes. Then she learns to cope with the situation:

[N]ow I got used to it, I know which clothes to buy, what I like what I don't, what fits me and what don't. Around here [the town where I live] I know which shops I can go into. So I don't really go into the others [shops], because obviously, if you go into ten stores and you try on ten different trousers and they are all too big and (laughs), it gets kind of depressing. But I don't feel that anymore ... I found a solution, you know, there is no

point of trying on the clothes that you are not going to fit anyways, I just choose the labels that suits me. I got a few favorite brands ... like Esprit, Pepe<sup>23</sup> are the few that I like. (Karen, 36)

Lin also experiences sizing problems while choosing for clothes, but a bit more than that:

I was shopping at one of the Uniqlo<sup>24</sup> [clothing] stores in China, I picked up a cardigan, a men's cardigan, because the lady's one is too small for me, you know, I am 'bigger' [build], so that is why I took the men's cardigan. Then the shopkeeper came and reminded me that I am in the men's section, and suggested that I should turn to the lady's section by saying 'this is men's clothes' to me. But anyhow I insisted in buying the cardigan ... You know, apparels from Uniqlo are usually very small, they are made in Japanese sizes, I would definitely not going to fit into women's largest size, out of question! So I buy men's clothes ... I have no idea why they prevent me from buying it [the cardigan], just because they define them as men's wear does not mean girls cannot wear them; of course I can. (Lin, 22)

The denial Lin received during shopping by the shop assistants reflects an aspect of how deeply gender stereotypes have rooted in people's everyday perceptions, that men's wear "are for mens", and girls should "go to the lady's section". From Lin's words, she regards her personal preference to choose men's clothing and is annoyed by the "guide" "naturally" made by the shop assistant, as she is doubtful toward the rigid and clear demarcation between male and female apparels. When I asked what type of clothes she usually wears, she replied "I am more inclined to [wear] unisex clothings, I guess. And I would not go for men's clothings on purpose.", and she expressed her opinion on what "unisex" clothes means to her:

Despite the fact that they [the shops] would categorize certain kind of garments into men's or ladies', but to be honest, it does not really matter if it is a man or woman who is wearing, it suits both. To me, that is unisex clothing.

(Lin, 22)

Compression bra was another notable item which popped up during our conversation, as Lin continues:

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<sup>23</sup> [www.pepejeans.com](http://www.pepejeans.com)

<sup>24</sup> [www.uniqlo.com](http://www.uniqlo.com)

My first time wearing compression bra was the year as a college freshmen from a butch friend who told me about it. I wear it because it makes me look better in the unisex clothings which are not merely designated according to female bodily curves. Therefore compression bra fits me better with the clothing. (Lin, 22)

Chang also says she started to use compression bra since the age of 18, in order to “have a perfect look in shirts”, she further explains:

I dislike my breasts being way too outstanding when I wear shirts, it doesn't look nice; they are kind of like a burden for me, as it is D cup that I am having ... so I want to make them to look smaller. (Chang, 22)

We have not only seen different tastes and preferences of styles the respondents have showed respectively and the ways they make sense of these styles on their own bodies, but also the perceptions made by themselves and by their surroundings. It becomes obvious that feminine-related styles have received more approval than the gender-ambiguous styles. Doubt is not merely expressed by those who find androgynous (or sometimes masculine) style looking butches odd, the lesbians themselves also doubt the mainstream as well as traditional gender discourses, it is apparent that there still lacks a prevalent discourse in interpreting the androgynous styles. The fact that the bodily denial and forbiddance of those whose sex does not correspond to her gender, no matter what social class she belongs to, would be naturally perceived as queer and unusual due to her androgynous appearance; the significance of breast binding, as Su concludes, is the exert of self-power on the body possessed by the butch, and the meaning of power is the reactionary of her body being perceived by others in a dissonant way against the mainstream norms.<sup>25</sup>

To proceed, I wish to look more into depth on how the dominant discourses on the gendered body have influenced respondents' view on such androgynous styles and other type of styles.

#### **5.4. Attitudes on androgynous and other styles**

As there are some occasions that it is problematic to solely define certain styles as either feminine or masculine, and from the previous talks some respondents have memorable

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<sup>25</sup> Taiwan Cultural Studies Monthly, vol. 49, 2005/08/25

experiences on gender misrecognition, verbal tease, and so on. I further asked my respondents what they think of androgynous styles, or, one being gender-neutral means to them.

In the way how Ting perceive, it is apparent that she associates the androgynous styles directly with lesbianism, as if androgyny is a symbol which brands the lesbian community, especially the butch population:

I think it [the androgynous style] is just a trend for the time being. Since there are more and more [androgynous looking] actors and singers in the entertaining industry [in Taiwan], they bring the thing on, and it becomes a blast ... to be frank, there ain't many real ones [lesbians], even if you fuck around it doesn't mean that you really are [a lesbian].

The above comment resembles what Freitas, Kaiser and Hammidi has referred as "symbols [that] are continually stolen from L&G [Lesbian & Gay] cultures" (Wardlow ed., 1996, p 100), as the respondent thinks that the increasing popularity of androgynous styles does not equal to a increasing number of "pure" lesbians; it is provisional, a stage for the young seeking excitements which will lead them to somewhere else.

Sue, Chang, and Anna express their comments by focusing more on the external distinguishability:

It is like one can be either in a man look or a woman's, which seems confusing at first but you can still tell which sex the person belong to. Androgynous people can have good relationships with both boys and girls. It is like brotherhood when they are together with guys and sisterhood with girls." (Sue, 21)

I would say it [the androgynous style] means difficulty of telling one's sex by appearance. (Chang, 22)

I like people whom I cannot tell the gender of half of the time, I guess. I like when guys look like girls, but when girls look like guys, I get scared! I don't find it attractive, that's all. But I do get happy sometimes just to see people being who they want to be. (Anna, 21)

On masculine butch style of looking, Susan also expresses her disfavor:

[I]t is more 'man' for me, I mean, I am a lesbian, a woman! Women body is beautiful, why do you have to wear men's clothes? (Susan, 37)

Again it is the question of how one perceives, makes sense, as well as appreciates her own female body under the prevailing gender construction. In Susan's view cross-dressing is not what she thinks a "good" way of body appreciation, and one should rather stay at the "female" side of dressing. In this sense, wearing men's clothing, then, will be a kind of "refusal" of admitting one's biological given body. Lin's perception once again makes things become less definite:

[Androgynous style] is like a nondescript style, in between male and female, very ambiguous; you cannot find a specific boundary between men and women, it is moving back and forth between the two, it can be male and female. The [Taiwanese] society is getting more open now, and androgynous style is receiving more acceptance than before, you can say that there are more [visibly] Ts than before, they might exist for times but they become more encouraged to express themselves due to the open atmosphere we have now in the society.

(Lin, 22)

Karen also expresses her positiveness towards the change in social atmosphere, which opens up alternatives for being "trapped" in the binary gender system:

I would think about the different things that has been discussing in the [Swedish] society now about gender, I mean, they are talking about gender neutral toys for children, clothing for children that we shouldn't divide them into the girls' section and the boy's section ... The discussions are like one or two years ago, that we started to discuss more if we affect our children from the beginning falling into patterns on being a boy ... and how we can prevent this.

Moreover, Karen stresses that *individual* should be prioritized before *gender*:

I think it is important to have discussions on being gender neutral, because before we have focused too much on gender instead of the individual, I mean that's what the whole discussion is about in Sweden regarding to children, that we shouldn't focus so much if they are a boy or girl, you know, they are persons, individuals, and we are all different ... and it's not like all boys are the same and all girls are also the same, and like to do the same thing.

In addition, Karen carried on the topic on social openness and her emphasis on individual

development by sharing more remarks on her awareness towards the butch look:

[I]n the beginning when it [the Swedish society in general] was not so open maybe this was the way for women to kind of *rebel*, saying “hey! We don’t want to be in this kind of little girl that we are brought up to be ... I’m not like that!”, so in this way they dress more like a man [...] it is also important to show the children that just because you are born into a woman doesn’t mean you have to be in certain way and same as being a man [...] to be more like an individual, to do the things you like to do and dress the way you like to. (Karen, 36)

Butchness, as Karen mentioned, represents a kind of *revolt* in reaction to the rigid gender conceptions then, and gains more visibility as social atmosphere changes, and she express her respect towards it, although she does not necessary like the style personally, which reminds me of Gidden’s words again. In his discussion on lifestyles and life plans, Giddens states that “[s]omeone who is committed to a given lifestyle would necessarily see various options as ‘out of character’ with it, as would others with whom she was in interaction.” (Giddens, 1991, p 82). By having established certain tastes and preferences in daily life, it is most likely that the person would be more inclined to appreciate and admire others who appear to be similar in the way s/he is like. In response to my question “what are your turn-ons/off in regard to personal style(s) when looking for a partner?”, Susan, a sporty person as presented earlier, replies:

I like more sporty types ... I think I have been attracted to [the combination of] jeans and training [suits] and jeans and blouse ... I really don’t like people wearing vests with buttons, and a T-shirt within ... that is too much! I also don’t like [those wearing] either too masculine or girly (turns seductive tone) stuff, like dresses, they are too girly. I like something that is simple and stylish, not those ‘cheap’ looking, or too many things at a time. (Susan, 37)

Lin mentions simplicity and tidiness are of high importance and attractiveness, which are quite similar to her own taste of grooming:

Generally, I am into styles which are neat and tidy ... shabby looks and unnecessary garments are really turn offs for me. (Lin, 22)

Karen says what upsets her the most is the woman does not have a “style” at all:

...Turn-off...I think it would be that there is no style at all, you know, really boring styles:

no designs, no *curves*, many big T-shirts hanging and trousers that do not fit, something like that ... other than that, I think I am quite open to different styles as long as you have one, any style! The thing is that the person doesn't care about themselves and you don't have a style, which would be the turn-off. (Karen, 36)

Once more *curve* is being stressed, that it is appreciating for one to express her womanly bodily curve by what she wears, and definitely not in loose fits (i.e. "hanging" big T-shirts and trousers ...etc), which is "discouraging", signaling the lack of self-awareness, a person with no "style"; then we might come to the conclusion that a woman's sexuality is maintained through the expression of her curves by her style, while the concealment of the curves would be perceived as defeminized, something gender deviant.

The words by the respondents on the notion "androgyny" can therefore be understood in two aspects: 1) cross-gender appearance – its distinguishability and symbolic "trademark" as originally lesbian and its further popularization partly due to a comparatively more open social atmosphere; 2) cross-gender behaviors – shall be embraced as *individual* attributes rather than *gender* ones. It is apparent to see the natural inclinations on preferring those in styles of what they think of themselves are. No matter it is external appearance or internal conceptions on androgynous styles are concerned, *female body* remains to be central of the discussion and we have seen different degrees of approval and disapproval on cross-dressing and mannish-looking women, notably on presentations on bodily curves.

## 6. Discussion & Conclusion

The conversations with the respondents on their style representations have mainly covered topics on the "lesbian look", respondents' self-perception and that from others, ways of maintaining their styles, the influences of the "gendered body" notion on their understanding and interpretations of androgynous and some other styles. Under each general topic additional discussions are generated and interpreted; it has been obvious that there are variations in respondents' answers, due to different ways of perceiving the terms, of which not only age, occupation, culture are influential factors but also the extent and the frequency the respondents interact within the larger subcultural lesbian community.

As every respondent differs individually from one another, there would be no expectation from me to see the responses as being universal. There is not only one “lesbian look”, but many; it could be any look as long as one like, but it may also be on the basis of subculturally constructed *roles* that one defines herself as. Like the majority of people, the respondents pay attention to the comfort of dressing, and perceive themselves as either sporty or casual, yet they dress differently from each other, as well as having been treated in entirely different ways. There are indeliberate misrecognitions by their gender and deliberate sneers and glances as some sort of “punishment” made toward the defeminized or androgynous lesbian. Further several items are used by respondents to maintain their style, either on a daily or occasional basis, serving different purposes, such as signifier of her sexual orientation, an alternative of being short in height or unfit in normal ladies’ clothes, or the change of bodily curves by binding breasts. It is manifest that the society in which the respondents live in have little awareness in providing discourses other than what the traditional and mainstream gender binary system has been offering, to “make sense” of the androgynous, sometimes masculine looking women, due to their way of appearance with their social gender being inconsistent with the pre-existed gender stereotypes. Also among the respondents there are both opposing and supporting attitudes on wearing men’s clothes, and the degree of positively value one’s inherent physically female bodily curves as well as whether to demonstrate them in the “female” or some other ways.

The aim of this paper is to discuss how personal *styles* are presented and perceived by lesbians as members of a subcultural community via daily consumption. The contextualization of style between subcultures provides a major basis for such topic which I wish to research upon, along with further elaborations on individuals in regard to modernity and gender. By talking with lesbians as well as treating them as individuals, I want to know their opinions and experiences on aspects of the lesbian community as a whole and in general, herself as an individual as well as what she thinks of others react to her style, lastly their personal attitudes on what androgyny mean to them and other styles which they are either in favor of or not; these are what mainly constitutes my discussion of this paper. After having interviewed the respondents I become more asserted that *androgyny* is an important topic of the discussion, not only has it often being used as a signifier of the homosexual group, but also its controversial, diversified and seemingly amorphous feature which has becomes more manifest through its growing

prevalence. The embraced ideal of individuals as being “who they want to be” or to “do the things you like and dress the way you like to” does not simply applicable to everyone, as we can see from the incidents told by some respondents, through which I have learnt different degrees of self-acceptance on style as well as their own body, between *individuality* (freedom to choose and adopt) and *gender* (what a woman can/cannot be like) of each respondent due to their background differences and personal preferences. Since the lesbian community itself is full of diversities concerning personal appearances, making it a bit different from those which are apparently homogenous and unified, for instance, mods, punks, hard rocker, teddy boys and such, it is crucial to look at how its members, their identity as a lesbian and an individual, organize meanings through style representation, while their experience also more or less reflects current gender discourses. In addition, one has to bear in mind that to what extent are the respondents committed to the lesbian community, as Hebdige puts: “[i]t [commitment to a subculture] can represent a major dimension in people’s lives – or it can be a slight distraction, a bit of light relief from the monotonous but none the less paramount realities of school, home and work.” (Hebdige, 1979, p 122)

It is undeniable that the post-traditional, modern, and heteronormative world in which we live is congested with *choices*, and they are not getting any less, but more and more. From the daily mundane stuff such as what to eat or wear to bigger decisions, we are always making choices, choosing *who* we want to be and *how* we should act. Yet the pluralization of lifestyles does not lead to a pluralized gender discourses which could offer alternative and influential terms and explanations on those that do not lay within the traditional dichotomy between male and female categorizations. Lesbians, be they masculine, feminine or androgynous looking, cannot fully escape from the dominant hegemony of the binary gender system which sometimes could be conventional and rigid. The presentation of memorable experiences from some respondents does not mean some sort of victimization of individual lesbians facing oppressions in their daily lives but exactly shows the insufficiency of current discourses which I have been discussing previously.

There have been some twists and turns in the research process of this paper when collecting empirical data. People who are serious and willing to participate in the study appeared to be less than anticipated. It is also my first time to adopt online interviews, both synchronous and asynchronous, and I become aware of the different effects by using different ways on various

respondents, that is, changes in structuring interview questions and the modes of interaction are necessary, in order to achieve the goal of this paper desirably. Under the stress of time shortage I am actually surprised to see the amount of information generated from the respondents, as well as by their sometimes rather unexpected and inspiring thoughts and comments, which is what I consider as the exclusive part of the qualitative research process.

Back to the core concepts of subculture mentioned in the theory part, that *revolt* and *refusal* are the keywords having the most emphasis on. Firstly and most apparently, lesbians is a group as oppose to heterosexuals, since their preferences on the same-sex both emotionally and sexually already express a type of *refusal*, that is, not to choose the opposite-sex; secondly, preferences on staying “politically-incorrect” by some respondents by cross-dressing or concealment of bodily curves and breasts in order to meet the “conventional” ideal. In this sense, the usage of conventional items on one’s own pre-defined conventional body through *unconventional* ways also symbolize meanings of *refusal* as opposed to appear or act in the ways which seem to be more “acceptable and desirable as female” by others – *revolt* against conventions on females.

Of course, androgyny and gender deviant styles are not exclusively owned by lesbians alone; they could be found in any other group across gender, race, and ethnicity. This paper sheds light mainly on personal experiences and preference of lesbian individuals; it also provides references if similar researches are to be carried out targeting on the dynamics of other communities within the LGBT group such as gays and transgenders, how do these groups negotiate meanings through their styles? Or, in-depth studies could also take a closer look at the subcultural elements of the lesbians, such as drag king shows, within different national contexts.

## 7. References

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## Images

Cover image, t.A.K.e 2 – featuring real live lesbians  
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## 8. Appendix

### General outline of interview questions

1. Please describe your current dress.
2. What do you usually wear? Why?
3. What style would you describe yourself?
4. Do you have any references on dressing in general? What are they?
5. What style(s) do you like?
6. When do you start to dress the way you are now? What was it like before?
7. How do you perceive yourself in the way you dress? What kind of person does it make you?
8. How do others perceive your style?
9. How much does appearance matter to you?
10. What are the good/bad sides of grooming in your desired style?
11. What are your turn-ons/offers when in regard to personal style(s) when looking for a partner?
12. Do you think there is a lesbian look?
13. What does androgyny (gender-neutral) mean to you?