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# The feminine target: Gender expression in same-sex relationships as a predictor of experiences with public displays of affection

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The extent to which sexual minority individuals present publicly as masculine, feminine, or both has been associated with their perceptions of threat and safety in public spaces. The current study investigates the role of gender expression in men and women's experiences of public displays of affection (PDAs) in same-sex relationships. Participants (N = 528) reported their own gender expression as well as that of their partner, perceptions of support for PDAs, PDA-related vigilance, general vigilance and overall PDA frequency. Men in same-sex relationships reported less frequent PDAs and greater PDA-related vigilance than women, while women reported greater overall variability in their gender expression than men. Multiple regression analyses show femininity within the participant (for men) or their partner (for both men and women) was associated with greater general and PDA-related vigilance. These findings align with previous research on femmephobia, in which femininity is described as making individuals feel 'targeted' for other forms of oppression (e.g., homophobia, sexism, transphobia; Hoskin, 2019). Although femininity was associated with greater vigilance, the association between masculinity within a same-sex relationship and vigilance was more tenuous, demonstrating evidence of masculinity serving as both a potential target for homophobic violence as well as a source of protection. The dual nature of masculinity was particularly salient among women in same-sex relationships, where masculinity tempered by femininity was associated with greater perceived support for PDAs but for women with partners low in femininity, the more masculine their partner, the greater their reported levels of vigilance.

**KEYWORDS:** Affection, displays of affection, femininity, masculinity, public displays of affection, same-sex relationships, sexual minority

In the early morning hours of May 30, 2019, Melania Geymonat and Christine (Chris) Hannigan were riding a double decker bus in the UK on their way home from a date (Manning, 2019; Said-Moorhouse, 2019). As they sat together on the bus, they were affectionate with each other, "simply enjoying the pleasures of life and being in love" (Manning, 2019, n.p.), when four teenage boys began to taunt the women, asking them to show them how 'lesbians' have sex, and demanding the couple kiss for the

boys' enjoyment. Eventually the boys began to throw coins at the women when they refused to kiss. Melania tried to diffuse the situation by talking and joking with one of the boys. Asked later to explain why she was friendly with her would-be attackers, she responded "forgive me if, as a Latina woman, from a place where we're used to being harassed, we try to get people to empathize with us so they don't assault us" (White & Geymonat, 2020, n.p.). Despite the attempt to diffuse the situation, it escalated and the

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boys ended up beating and robbing them. Melania attributed the attack to homophobia and sexism, explaining that women in same-sex relationships make “men feel displaced ... because they’re not invited, they’re not needed, and it drives them crazy” (White & Geymonat, 2020, n.p.). Chris also questioned whether the way the couple expressed their gender might have contributed to the attack and/or the subsequent media attention, wondering if matters would have played out the same way if they had not been “two conventionally attractive, cisgender, white women” (White & Geymonat, 2020, n.p.; Hannigan, 2019). What specifically made them a target: their feminine gender expression, their same-sex relationship, simply being women, or some combination of the above? This incident raises a question that has not hitherto been closely examined within the literature: What role does the gender expression of individuals within same-sex relationships play in shaping their experiences with public affection-sharing?

The experiences of Chris and Melania are not unique. Men and women in same-sex relationships face the prospect of violence whenever they share affection in public or otherwise allow their relationship to be ‘seen.’ It is well-established that sexual minorities face discrimination because of their sexual orientation and that these experiences of discrimination are associated with worse physical and mental health (Meyer, 1995, 2003). However, there is less recognition of how gender expression can act in addition to sexual orientation to shape the experiences of sexual minority individuals (Baams et al., 2013; Bettinsoli et al., 2020; Horn, 2007; Hoskin, 2019; van Beusekom et al., 2016). Gender expression refers to how a person publicly presents themselves in terms of femininity, masculinity, or androgyny, and can include behaviour and outward appearance such as dress, hair, make-up, body language and voice (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2014). Gender nonconformity is when an individual’s gender expression does not conform to societal expectations for their sex<sup>1</sup>. Expressing one’s gender in ways that do not conform to societal gender norms can increase the risk of being the target of discrimination and harassment, above and beyond the discrimination based on sexual orientation that sexual minority individuals already face (e.g., Anderson, 2020; Bettinsoli et al.; D’Augelli et al., 2006; Gordon & Meyer, 2007; Horn, 2007; Hoskin, 2019; Landolt et al., 2004; Plöderl & Fartacek, 2009; Rieger & Savin-Williams, 2012; Sandfort et al., 2007). In particular, expressions of femininity are strictly policed for both men and women, such that misplaced or unsanctioned femininity can make someone a target (Hoskin, 2019, 2020).

Rieger and Savin-Williams (2012) even go as far as to suggest that experiences of stigmatization and lower well-being among sexual minority individuals may be more strongly linked to their level of gender nonconformity than to their sexual orientation. For instance, individuals whose gender expression varies from

the established norms tend to experience worse outcomes, even within sexual minority populations. Rieger and Savin-Williams (2012) found that among high schoolers, gender nonconformity was negatively related to well-being, whereas sex and sexual orientation were not. For sexual minority men, more feminine presentation was linked to greater experiences of stigmatization and rejection, and lower levels of well-being, than more masculine presentation (D’Augelli et al., 2006; Meyer, 2003; Sandfort et al., 2007). Among sexual minority women, deviations from prescribed gender norms in either direction (i.e., presenting as ‘too masculine’ or ‘too feminine’) can place them at risk for harassment and discrimination. For example, more masculine sexual minority women experience more homophobic events and have higher levels of substance abuse and suicidality (Levitt et al., 2012; Plöderl & Fartacek, 2009; Rosario et al., 2008), while more feminine sexual minority women experience elevated risk of sexual harassment and assault (Hequembourg & Brallier, 2009; Lehavot et al., 2012) and are more likely to have their sexual identities treated as inauthentic, rendering them invisible within their own communities (Blair & Hoskin, 2015).

## Femmephobia and the Policing of ‘Appropriate’ Femininity

One reason why gender nonconformity may place sexual minorities at increased risk for discrimination is *femmephobia*, a process of systematically devaluing femininity in comparison to masculinity, and of policing femininity to ensure that it fits within certain narrowly-prescribed acceptable limits (Hoskin, 2017, 2020). Although both femininity and masculinity can be expressed in a variety of ways, two systems, patriarchal femininity and hegemonic masculinity, legitimize certain expressions of gender and devalue others, creating a hierarchy in which certain ways of expressing gender are idealized (Connell, 1987; Hoskin, 2020).

### Patriarchal Femininity

Patriarchal femininity refers to the norms and power structures that regulate femininity, narrowing its range of acceptable expressions of femininity (see McCann, 2020 for an overview; Hoskin, 2017), to those who are women, assigned female at birth, white, heterosexual, and passive. Those who deviate from any of these norms may be judged as not ‘properly’ feminine. Furthermore, patriarchal femininity suggests that femininity is an act performed by women to be pleasing to a male gaze (Hoskin, 2017). Reducing femininity to an act performed for men is one way in which patriarchal femininity operates to maintain masculine ascendancy.

Because of their sexual attractions, neither more masculine-presenting nor more feminine-presenting sexual minority women

1 Importantly, many scholars are critical of the concept of gender conformity/nonconformity, suggesting that it is dated and upholds medical/pathologizing frameworks (see van Anders et al., 2019). Moreover, a narrow vision of gender conformity can take focus away from gender expressions that deviate from societal expectations, even though they are still situated “within” the binary view of gender (e.g., femme; see Hoskin, 2020). For the purposes of the current study, gender nonconformity is reflective of deviations from societally expected gender norms, whether those deviations occur within or across the gender binary.

conform to norms of patriarchal femininity. More masculine-presenting sexual minority women eschew patriarchal feminine norms that dictate women must present femininely and not too masculinely. For more feminine-presenting sexual minority women, although they can be seen as conforming to some norms of gender expression, they violate patriarchal feminine norms that dictate women must be sexually available to men, and challenge the notion that femininity is solely for the male gaze (Hoskin, 2017). In this way, sexual minority women can be seen as a threat to hegemonic masculinity, as they challenge men's control over femininity and femininity's subordination to masculinity. If women's femininity is assumed to be 'done for men' (i.e., masculine right of access; Hoskin, 2017), then a woman whose femininity is not performed for the male gaze challenges male entitlement, resulting in 'aggrieved entitlement' (Kimmel, 2017). Men's 'aggrieved entitlement' has been connected to a variety of violent outcomes, including sexual assaults and attacks (DeKeseredy et al., 2019; Pemberton & Wakeling, 2009) like those experienced by Chris and Melania.

### Hegemonic Masculinity

Like patriarchal femininity, hegemonic masculinity dictates the 'correct' way to express one's gender. It defines the acceptable versions of masculinity in society and gives power to men who conform to hegemonic masculine ideals (Connell, 1992). Any expression of femininity by men, or those assigned male at birth, is a violation of hegemonic masculinity. Indeed, the repudiation of femininity has been noted as one of the key elements required to maintain the bounds of masculinity (Benevedes, 2015; Hoskin, 2020; Pascoe, 2007).

This process of monitoring for and repudiating any sign of femininity may fuel a portion of the discrimination and harassment directed towards sexual minority men (Hunt et al., 2016; Hoskin & Blair, under review). One means by which some men may defend their masculinity is by distancing themselves from femininity, including behaviours such as excluding and harassing gay men (Connell, 1995; Willer, 2005). Heterosexual men are more likely to endorse feelings of homophobia, especially towards more feminine men, when their masculinity is threatened, and men who derive more of their self-worth from their masculinity express greater transphobia when their masculinity is threatened (Ching, 2021; Glick et al., 2007; Theodore & Basow, 2000; Willer, 2005). In some cases, homophobia itself may not even reflect hostility towards gay men specifically, but instead reflect a more negative view of femininity in general (Lesch et al., 2017). Thus, under hegemonic masculinity, monitoring for signs of femininity in men, and responding with harassment and aggression when such signs are detected, is one way to uphold masculine norms and masculine superiority.

### Femmephobia

Both patriarchal femininity and hegemonic masculinity dictate 'appropriate' gender expressions, while privileging the masculine over the feminine. This process of devaluing femininity and policing its appropriate expression is known as femmephobia (Hoskin, 2017, 2020). While ample research suggests the

existence of femmephobia within the dominant culture, it is also found *within* the queer community (Blair & Hoskin, 2015, 2016; Serano, 2013; Taywaditep, 2001). Like heterosexual men, gay men also distance themselves from more feminine men (Hunt et al., 2016). Both gay men and lesbian women consider masculinity an attractive quality in a partner (Miller, 2015; Taywaditep, 2001), while often overtly shunning femininity (e.g., 'no femmes' on dating profile headlines; Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016; Hoskin, 2020). Femme-identified sexual minority women often have their sexual orientation questioned and face erasure and hostility from within the queer community (Blair & Hoskin, 2015, 2016). At its extreme, femmephobia may even be associated with violence (Hequembourg & Brallier, 2009; Lehavot et al., 2012). Türkoğlu and Sayılan (2021) found that femmephobia mediated the relationship between masculine ideology and transprejudice in cisgender men and women, showing how femmephobia is integral to upholding the notion of masculine superiority.

Taken together, previous research suggests that gender expression, particularly femininity, operates in addition to sexual orientation as a risk factor for discrimination and minority stress. Sexual minorities are aware of the hostility directed at violations of gender norms and may be more likely to regulate their behaviours as a couple, especially in public. Adjustments to couple-level behaviours, such as public displays of affection (PDAs), may mitigate the risks of transgressing gender norms and these adjustments may operate differently depending on perceptions of the gender expression of each individual within the relationship.

### Public Displays of Affection in Same-Sex Relationships

In the current study, we seek to explore how the gender expression of both members of a couple predicts PDA-related experiences. PDAs include any non-sexual physical actions that indicate affection within a romantic relationship. PDAs, such as extended hand-holding or kissing on the lips, are, at least within North American culture, generally interpreted as a clear indicator that two people are in a romantic relationship. PDAs thus become one manner in which sexual minority individuals can potentially signal or reveal their sexual minority status.

Engaging, or not engaging, in PDAs can be a challenging trade-off for sexual minority individuals. On the one hand, PDAs by their very nature are a way that a couple can openly acknowledge their deep emotional connection, thereby functioning as a source of dyadic closeness, commitment, and support. Not surprisingly, then, the ability to express one's affection openly is associated with increased relationship well-being (Kent & El-Alayli, 2011). Mixed-sex couples are free to reap these benefits by engaging in a wide variety of PDAs, limited only by one or both partners' personal preferences, and a basic respect for cultural, societal, or situational appropriateness. However, same-sex couples may not feel as free to engage in PDAs. The simple act of sharing affection in public may 'out' them as sexual minorities, thereby placing them at increased risk for discrimination and violence (Lu et al., 2019).

Such risks may be particularly acute for men in same-sex relationships. Due to its violation of hegemonic masculinity, any

sharing of physical affection between two men in public can potentially serve as a catalyst for harassment and violence in Western cultures (Connell, 1992; Davies, 2020; Hoskin, 2020). O'Handley and colleagues (2017) found that viewing pictures of PDAs between two men elicited physiological stress responses in a group of heterosexual men similar to the physiological response elicited by viewing disgusting images.

Although any PDAs between two men are often enough to trigger femmephobic and homophobic reactions, these reactions may be heightened in instances where one or both partners have a more feminine gender expression. Lu et al. (2019) found that men in same-sex relationships who were described as 'noneffeminate' worried that expressing affection towards their partners in public would out them (Lu et al., 2019). The men who were not comfortable being outed in public were also more likely to police the gender performance of other gay men, including their own partners. Their partners in turn reported moderating their own gender performances in public to manage the anxieties of their partner.

Similarly, in a South African study of men in same-sex relationships, having a partner who feared being stigmatized was associated with a greater likelihood of modulating one's affection in public (Lesch et al., 2017). In addition to linking PDAs with the degree of outness, this study also found that negative reactions towards gay men were more frequently a result of their violation of gender norms, rather than their sexuality. Here, femmephobia operates beyond homophobia to police the behaviour of sexual minority men. Fear of discrimination due to violating norms of masculinity may explain why many gay men believe it is important for both themselves and their partners to look and behave in a masculine fashion (Sánchez & Vilain, 2012). Overall, emerging research suggests that for men in same-sex relationships, PDAs with a partner must be carefully regulated, in most cases being minimized, due to concerns about being outed and therefore becoming a target of harassment or violence. Such concerns may be intensified when at least one partner presents more femininely.

For women in same-sex relationships, PDAs may not be as strictly regulated, particularly if both partners present as feminine. In a study by Lesch et al. (2017), some lesbian couples noted that they avoided discrimination when referring to each other as friends in public and not directly acknowledging their romantic relationship. This finding demonstrates the greater latitude given to women's affection sharing with each other, compared to that of men. In much of North American culture, when two men share physical affection it often marks them as being in a romantic relationship with one another (Bank & Hansford, 2000). In contrast, physical signs of affection shared between women may be categorized as platonic (e.g., sisters, friends). To an extent, this misperception of the relationship may rely upon gender expression and be protective. In Lesch et al.'s study (2017), two lesbian couples reported that they did not receive severe discrimination and harassment because they "don't look like dykes" (Lesch et al., 2017, p. 143).

However, when other visible signs of heterosexuality are violated, women may be placed at a greater risk of discrimination and harassment (Hoskin, 2019). If one or both women in

a same-sex couple present as more masculine, it may increase the likelihood of categorizing their affection-sharing as romantic, and therefore increase the potential for negative responses. For this reason, some women may elect to conceal their relationships or their identities in public for their own safety, despite the potential effects of such closeting on their well-being (Meyer, 2003).

Women in couples where both partners have more feminine gender expressions may be more likely to be perceived as sisters or friends by onlookers, making them less likely to be targets of homophobia, but simultaneously making it more likely that their romantic relationship will be dismissed. Rather than a benefit, many feminine sexual minority women describe these experiences as being forced back into the closet and increasing feelings of invalidation (Blair & Hoskin, 2015, 2016). Further, if they engage in more overt signs of affection that clearly signal the nature of their relationship, they increase the risks of femmephobic and homophobic violence, fetishization, objectification, harassment, and discrimination.

In summary, the small body of literature focusing on PDAs and gender expression suggests that men in same-sex relationships are likely to face discrimination for even minor displays of affection or femininity. They may therefore be inclined to strictly monitor and regulate both their own and their partner's expressions of affection and femininity in public. On the other hand, women in same-sex relationships have more freedom to engage in some PDAs, due to more general societal acceptance of affection-sharing between women. However, these women may also have to monitor and regulate affection-sharing and gender expression carefully. Straying from patriarchal feminine norms may increase their risk of harassment or violence.

## THE CURRENT STUDY

In the current study, we will examine how gender expression (femininity and masculinity) in cisgender and transgender men and women in self-identified same-sex relationships is linked to PDA experiences. Based on previous literature, men who present as more masculine may engage in PDAs less frequently, for fear of being outed or violating masculine norms (Lu et al., 2019). However, given hegemonic masculinity norms that see femininity as unacceptable in men and as a legitimate target for harassment or violence, it is also probable that higher levels of femininity in either partner could be associated with less frequent PDAs, less perceived support for PDAs, and heightened vigilance for signs of danger.

There is less literature on PDAs and gender expression for women in same-sex relationships. Overall, women may engage in more frequent PDAs than men in same-sex relationships, given the greater social acceptability for women's affection-sharing and that affection-sharing is itself a norm of femininity (Bank & Hansford, 2000). Still, their PDAs may also be accompanied by heightened vigilance and perceptions of a lack of societal support for such displays given baseline risks of violence against them as sexual minorities. Gender expression in both partners will be assessed on an exploratory basis. Heightened masculine gender

expression in one or both partners may more readily mark them as a romantic couple, increasing the risk of homophobic violence. Heightened feminine gender expression is more complex. On the one hand, femininity might make PDAs more acceptable (albeit invisible), if it makes it more likely that the relationship will be coded as non-romantic. On the other hand, if the relationship is coded as romantic, heightened femininity in either partner may trigger sexual harassment, disapproval, or even violence due to challenging patriarchal feminine norms (i.e., masculine right of access) and subsequent feelings of aggrieved entitlement.

Overall, then, given the lack of previous research and the complexities of potential reactions, the current study is primarily exploratory. It assesses how frequency of PDAs, perceptions of support for PDAs, PDA-related hypervigilance, and general hypervigilance can be predicted by the gender expression of both partners in same-sex relationships.

## METHOD

### Recruitment and Procedure

Participants were recruited in 2019–2020 via posts on social media and an undergraduate pool from Acadia University. Participants had to be 18 years old, be able to complete the study in English, and have a current romantic partner. Interested participants read a description of the study and consent form online, after which they were able to complete the online survey that took participants an average of one hour to complete. Participants were given the option to enter into a prize draw for gift cards or received course credit if from the undergraduate pool. The current analysis uses only a portion of the measures collected.

### Participants

The complete dataset contained participants of all sexual orientations ( $N = 1615$ ), but only participants in self-identified same-sex relationships were used in the present analysis. A total of 528 participants reported being in a same-sex relationship (207 women, including 8 trans women; 321 men, including 33 trans men). Respondents reported the gender identity of their partner. Three women in same-sex relationships indicated their partner was a trans woman and 22 men in same-sex relationships indicated that their partner was a trans man. Four percent of the women's relationships in the sample included at least one trans woman and 12% of the men's relationships in the sample included at least one trans man. Most participants identified as lesbian or gay (60% women, 82% men) or bisexual (18% women, 9% men).

Analyses for men and women were conducted separately. The women in our sample had a mean age of 27.33 ( $SD = 9.28$ ) and reported similar ages for their partners ( $M = 27.81$ ,  $SD = 9.12$ ). Age for both self and partner ranged between 18 and 64 years old. Men in the sample were slightly older ( $M = 31.61$ ,  $SD = 11.60$ ), and they also reported similar-aged partners ( $M = 32.27$ ,  $SD = 12.10$ ). Age ranges for self and partner were between 18 and 78 years old. The average length of the relationships for women was 3.07 years ( $SD = 4.70$ ), with roughly half (48%) reporting

that they lived with their partner. Men's relationships were slightly longer on average, at 5.07 years ( $SD = 6.44$ ) and they were more likely to be living together (58%), likely due to their higher average age. Just over two thirds of participants reported being in intraracial white relationships (69% women, 70% men), followed by mixed-race relationships (15% women, 24% men), and intraracial racialized relationships (16% women, 6% men). Of those who reported their geographic location, most were from Canada, United States, or United Kingdom (93%).

## Measures

### Gender Expression

Participants indicated how masculine and (separately) how feminine they appeared, on an average day. Participants were asked to think about how they generally present themselves to the world and how others see them. The questions were: "In general, how masculine do you appear on an average day?" and "In general, how feminine do you appear on an average day?" Participants responded to each question using a sliding scale ranging from 0 (*Not at all masculine/feminine*) to 100 (*Extremely masculine/feminine*). Masculinity and femininity were not mutually exclusive, and participants could rank themselves anywhere from low to high on both. Participants answered the same questions about the gender expression of their romantic partner.

### Frequency of Affection Sharing

Given that no validated measures of physical affection sharing in public (i.e., PDAs) existed in the literature, multiple items were created to measure how often participants engaged in PDAs. Participants were presented with a definition of PDA, which was "your preferred method of sharing physical affection with your partner in a non-sexual manner" when others were present. They were also instructed that if their responses would differ depending on who was present, they should respond with what was typical for them. Participants were then asked to respond on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7) to items beginning with the question stem "When I am in public with my partner..." followed by statements that corresponded to PDA behaviour (e.g., "I often share affection with my partner"). The scale had excellent reliability in the current sample ( $\alpha = .93$  for women;  $\alpha = .95$  for men).

### Perceived Support for Affection Sharing

A 10-item measure of perceived social support for a couple engaging in PDAs was adapted from Sprecher and Felmlee's (1992) Network Support Index and Lehmler's (2012) Societal Marginalization Scale, which measure perceived support for a romantic relationship. Items were modified by replacing social support for *one's relationship* with social support for *sharing affection with one's partner*. The measure asks about perceptions of support from family, friends, and society in general: for example, "to what degree do you think your family disapproves/approves of you sharing physical affection with your partner?" Items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicated

greater perceptions of approval. A mean score was created and items on the scale cohered adequately (women,  $\alpha = .68$ ; men,  $\alpha = .78$ ).

### PDA-Related Vigilance

We measured the extent to which individuals felt a greater sense of awareness and vigilance related to their surroundings when sharing affection with their partner in public by adapting the first five items from the *Brief Hypervigilance Scale* (Bernstein et al., 2015), and adding an additional six items created by the authors. An example item is “When sharing affection with my partner in public, I feel that if I don’t stay alert and watchful, something bad will happen.” Participants responded to each of the 11 items using a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from *not at all like me / never true* (1) to *very much like me / always true* (5). The scale had excellent reliability in the current sample ( $\alpha = .94$  for women;  $\alpha = .95$  for men).

### General Vigilance Scale

Bernstein and colleagues’ (2015) 5-item Brief Hypervigilance Scale was adapted to measure general levels of hypervigilance across all contexts, including alertness and vigilance to signs of threat. In addition to items 1–5 from the Brief Hypervigilance Scale, 2 items were developed and added for this study. Participants reported on experiences over the last month regarding how often each statement related to them. An example item was: “As soon as I wake up and for the rest of the day, I am watching for signs of trouble.” A 5-point Likert-type scale was used, ranging from *not at all like me or never true* (1) to *very much like me or always true* (5). The scale had excellent reliability in our sample ( $\alpha = .90$  for women;  $\alpha = .88$  for men).

## RESULTS

### Preliminary Analyses

#### Mean Differences by Gender

Basic gender differences for each variable were first explored by completing an independent-samples *t*-test for each study variable

(See Table 1). Men rated themselves and their partners higher on masculine gender expression than did the women, whereas women rated themselves and their partners as higher on feminine gender expression than the men. The men’s gender expression scores were more extreme and showed less variability than the women’s. Men (and their partners) were high in masculine gender expression and low in feminine gender expression; women (and their partners) showed the opposite pattern, but with more moderate scores. Women’s gender expression scores also showed significantly more variability than men’s. Men in same-sex relationships reported lower PDA frequency and higher PDA-related vigilance. There were no gender differences in perceived support for PDAs or general hypervigilance.

### Bivariate Correlations

We also conducted bivariate correlations between all study variables, for men and women separately (see Table 2). Although all correlations are shown for context, our primary focus is on the associations between gender expression for both self and partner, and the outcome variables.

As seen in Table 2, for men, gender expression variables were associated with both PDA-related and general vigilance. More feminine gender expression in both participant and partner was associated with heightened general vigilance. For PDA-specific vigilance, only the partner’s gender expression was significant. Participants with partners who expressed themselves as more feminine, and less masculine, were more vigilant about engaging in PDAs. Neither partners’ gender expression was associated with PDA frequency or perceived support for PDAs, at the bivariate level. For women, the only significant correlation was that those with more feminine-expressing partners reported higher general hypervigilance.

### Main Study Analyses

#### Analytic Strategy

We used regression analyses to explore whether partner gender expression accounted for significant variance, over and above actor (i.e., participant) gender expression and to assess whether

**TABLE 1.** Descriptives and *t*-tests Examining Gender Differences in Gender Expression and PDA Variables

	Men	Women	t-tests		Men	Women	t-tests
	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>t</i>		<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>t</i>
Actor	22.17	56.69	18.52 <sup>a</sup>	PDA Frequency	3.42	4.43	7.74 <sup>a</sup>
Femininity	(19.41)	(24.44)			(1.84)	(1.56)	
Partner	18.25	64.57	23.24 <sup>a</sup>	PDA Support	4.47	4.54	1.26
Femininity	(18.56)	(26.33)			(0.89)	(0.72)	
Actor	70.84	33.89	-19.46 <sup>a</sup>	PDA Vigilance	3.08	2.82	-2.87 <sup>a</sup>
Masculinity	(18.69)	(25.17)			(1.18)	(1.04)	
Partner	75.76	28.98	-23.71 <sup>a</sup>	General Vigilance	2.40	2.49	1.18
Masculinity	(19.23)	(26.20)			(0.94)	(0.97)	

Note. *M* and *SD* represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. *t* represents the *t*-statistic

<sup>a</sup> significant at  $< .01$ .

masculine and feminine gender expressions interacted in predicting the outcomes.

Eight hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted: four dependent variables (frequency of PDA, perceived support for PDA, PDA-related vigilance, and general hypervigilance) were analyzed separately for men and women. At Step One, actor's masculinity, femininity, and the masculinity-femininity interaction term were entered into the regression. Then, at Step Two, partner's masculinity, femininity, and masculinity-femininity interaction terms were added, to see if partner gender expression accounted for variability in PDA-related variables above and beyond actor gender expression. Masculinity and femininity of both actor and partner were centered at 0 to facilitate the creation of the interaction terms. Using Cook's distance, multivariate outliers that asserted an outsized influence on the

regression line were removed. Between 2 and 7 multivariate outliers were removed for each analysis.

### Results for Men

As shown in Table 3, for men, no betas were significant in the regressions, even though several correlations had been significant at the bivariate level. As can be seen in Table 2, there were relatively strong correlations amongst the gender expression variables for men. When the variables were entered together into the regression equations, this overlapping variance was removed, leaving little unique variance to predict the outcome variables. The only trend was for general vigilance. Here, the gender expression variables of both actor and partner accounted for a significant portion of the variance, but no significant main effects or interactions were found.

TABLE 2. Men and Women Bivariate Correlation Matrix

	Actor Masculinity	Actor Femininity	Partner Masculinity	Partner Femininity	PDA Frequency	PDA Support	PDA Hypervigilance	General Hypervigilance
Actor Masculinity	-	-.762*	.318*	-.214*	-.041	.045	.022	-.041
Actor Femininity	-.844*	-	-.178*	.332*	.027	.032	.063	.118*
Partner Masculinity	-.046	.100	-	-.787*	-.040	.036	-.082*	-.076
Partner Femininity	.193*	-.082	-.862*	-	.065	.031	.131*	.180*
PDA Frequency	.008	.021	.028	-.038	-	.464*	-.506*	-.199*
PDA Support	-.030	.032	-.091	.111	.447*	-	-.443*	-.179*
PDA Hypervigilance	.074	-.029	-.011	.064	-.483*	-.380*	-	.516*
General Hypervigilance	.005	.064	-.094	.184*	-.141*	-.064	.479*	-

Note. Men above the diagonal, women below the diagonal.

\* significant at < .05.

TABLE 3. Regressions for Men

	PDA Frequency		PDA Support		PDA Hypervigilance		General Hypervigilance	
	F	R <sup>2</sup>	F	R <sup>2</sup>	F	R <sup>2</sup>	F	R <sup>2</sup>
<i>Step One</i>	.065	.001	1.842	.018	1.68	.016	1.771	.017
	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>
Actor Femininity	-.003	.764	.007	.064	.010	.062	.006	.131
Actor Masculinity	.000	.986	.008	.062	.012	.037 <sup>a</sup>	.009	.045 <sup>a</sup>
Actor Masc X Fem	.000	.793	-.000	.556	.000	.810	-.000	.886
<i>Step Two</i>	<i>F</i>	$\Delta R^2$	<i>F</i>	$\Delta R$	<i>F</i>	$\Delta R$	<i>F</i>	$\Delta R$
	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>
Actor Femininity	-.007	.525	.004	.423	.010	.113	.003	.603
Actor Masculinity	-.008	.447	.004	.412	.011	.116	.003	.528
Actor Masc X Fem	-.000	.957	-.000	.397	.000	.830	-.000	.925
Partner Masculinity	.006	.601	.007	.146	-.002	.750	.006	.247
Partner Femininity	.018	.145	.008	.127	.001	.895	.012	.061
Partner Masc X Fem	.000	.828	.000	.107	-.000	.235	-.000	.450

Note. *F*, *R*<sup>2</sup>,  $\Delta R$ , *p*, *b* represent the F-statistic, R squared, R squared change, p-value, and beta value, respectively.

<sup>a</sup> denotes significance at less than .05.

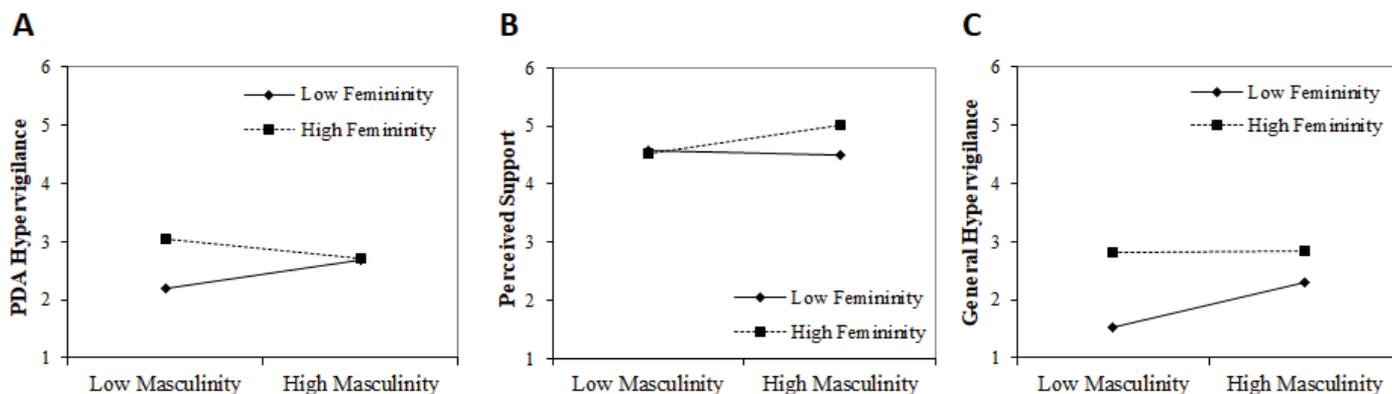
**Results for Women**

As shown in Table 4, for women, the participants' own self-reported gender expression (actor effects, entered in Step One), did not account for a significant amount of variance in any of the dependent variables. However, partner effects (entered in Step Two), accounted for significant variance in all dependent variables, with the exception of PDA frequency.

When predicting actor's perceptions of outside support for the couple's PDAs, there was a significant interaction between partner's masculinity and femininity (see Table 4). As can be seen in Figure 1a, when actors rated partners as low in femininity, partner's masculinity was not associated with perceived support for PDAs. However, when actors rated partners higher in femininity, then higher perceptions of partner masculinity

were associated with higher perceived support for PDAs. Thus, the highest perceived support for PDAs was reported by those women who saw their partners as presenting as *both* relatively feminine *and* relatively masculine.

When predicting actor's PDA-related vigilance, there was also a significant interaction between partner's masculinity and femininity (see Table 4). As seen in Figure 1b, when women rated their partners as low on masculinity, there was an effect of partner's femininity, such that having a more feminine partner was associated with relatively higher PDA-related vigilance. When partner masculinity was high, PDA-related vigilance was moderate, regardless of partner femininity. Taken together, the highest levels of PDA-related vigilance were seen in women whose partners were high in femininity and low in masculinity.



**FIGURE 1.** Actor Perceptions of Support for PDAs, PDA-Related Vigilance and General Hypervigilance Predicted by Partner Gender Expression  
 Note. High masculinity and high femininity plotted at the 84<sup>th</sup> percentile; low masculinity and femininity plotted at the 16<sup>th</sup> percentile.

**TABLE 4.** Regressions for Women

	PDA Frequency		PDA Support		PDA Hypervigilance		General Hypervigilance	
	F	R <sup>2</sup>	F	R <sup>2</sup>	F	R <sup>2</sup>	F	R <sup>2</sup>
<i>Step One</i>	.718	.011	.561	.008	1.411	.021	1.271	.019
	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>
Actor Femininity	.002	.847	-.002	.557	.012	.042 <sup>a</sup>	.010	.073
Actor Masculinity	.006	.441	.000	.877	.009	.115	.010	.059
Actor Masc X Fem	-.000	.226	-.000	.343	.000	.578	.000	.753
	<i>F</i>	$\Delta R^2$	<i>F</i>	$\Delta R$	<i>F</i>	$\Delta R$	<i>F</i>	$\Delta R$
<i>Step Two</i>	.520	.015	<b>2.259<sup>a</sup></b>	.057	<b>2.487<sup>a</sup></b>	.050	<b>3.283<sup>a</sup></b>	.073
	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>
Actor Femininity	.010	.321	-.003	.527	.005	.497	.001	.896
Actor Masculinity	.014	.156	.000	.963	.003	.633	.003	.663
Actor Masc X Fem	-.000	.158	-.000	.349	.000	.281	.000	.393
Partner Masculinity	-.011	.305	.001	.797	.007	.317	.008	.268
Partner Femininity	-.016	.124	.003	.569	.013	.049 <sup>a</sup>	.017	.009 <sup>a</sup>
Partner Masc X Fem	.000	.480	.000	.016 <sup>a</sup>	-.000	.010 <sup>a</sup>	-.000	.012 <sup>a</sup>

Note. F, R<sup>2</sup>,  $\Delta R$ , p, b represent the F-statistic, R squared, R squared change, p-value, and beta value, respectively.

<sup>a</sup> denotes significance at less than .05.

Partner gender expression predicted actor's general hypervigilance. There was a main effect of partner femininity, which was qualified by an interaction between partner masculinity and femininity. As seen in [Figure 1c](#), those whose partners were high in femininity had high levels of general hypervigilance, regardless of their partner's masculinity. For those whose partners were low in femininity, hypervigilance increased with increasing partner masculinity.

## DISCUSSION

In the wake of the London UK bus attack on Chris and Melania, the couple questioned whether the story would have garnered equal media attention if they had not been two 'conventionally attractive,' feminine women. This valid point about the types of 'appropriate' hate crime victims that the media is interested in portraying extends further to a matter of how gender expression in same-sex couples may shape their experiences of sharing affection in public and, in particular, their perceptions of risk associated with such behaviour. In the current study we asked: How does the gender expression of both partners within same-sex relationships predict their experiences with public affection sharing? We begin by pointing out differences in PDAs and gender expression between the men and women in our sample, before exploring the nuances of gender expression more closely. There, we examine two themes that seemed to suffuse our findings: femininity as a target and masculine gender expression as both a target and a shield.

### Comparing Men's and Women's Overall Experiences with PDAs and Gender Expression

On average, men in our sample reported less frequent PDAs than women, and also reported higher levels of PDA-related vigilance. These findings support past research showing that sexual minority men face greater sanctions than sexual minority women for their PDAs ([Bank & Hansford, 2000](#)) and their relationships in general ([Bettinsoli et al., 2020](#)). Men in same-sex relationships violate the norms of hegemonic masculinity simply by the nature of their relationships ([Connell, 1992](#)). These violations of hegemonic masculinity can result in discrimination or harassment, especially from heterosexual men, who seek to distance themselves from the femininity associated with same-sex attraction in men.

Women in same-sex relationships may have more leeway to share affection without their relationship being noticed, thereby explaining greater frequencies of PDAs than reported by men ([Bank & Hansford, 2000](#); [Lesch et al., 2017](#)). However, in addition to their relationship going 'unseen,' women also face the risk of their affection being eroticized ([Hoskin, 2019](#)). The greater acceptance of women sharing affection with each other in public is premised upon women's affection being categorized as platonic and not indicative of a romantic or sexual bond ([Blair & Hoskin, 2015](#); [Hoskin, 2019](#)). This misperception of their relationship may provide an uncomfortable buffer through which their affection may not draw immediate violence, but may

generate unwanted sexual attention. Indeed, Melania described attempting to 'befriend' her would-be attackers and make light of the situation in an attempt to diffuse it and avoid a violent confrontation. However, when women do not acquiesce to such requests, the situation can quickly turn violent, as it did for Chris and Melania. Thus, although women's affection may be less likely to trigger immediate violence, having their relationship either ignored or eroticized is still not affirming for women in same-sex relationships ([Hoskin, 2019](#); [Meyer, 2003](#)), which may explain why there was no difference between men and women in our sample in terms of their perceived support for PDAs. Indeed, when participants are asked to report on their perceptions of support for their PDAs, they are most likely not thinking of their ability to stealthily hold hands without being 'detected' as a couple, but rather, are likely to consider whether they feel that others are generally accepting of their genuine expressions of affection as markers of their romantic relationship.

Beyond PDA-related differences, the men and women in our sample also differed from each other with respect to gender expression. Men's gender expression followed a more stereotypical pattern than the women's. Men rated themselves and their partners high on masculinity and low on femininity, whereas women rated themselves higher on femininity than masculinity, but both scores were in a more moderate range. Women also showed more variability in their own and their partner's gender expression ratings than men. These findings suggest that it is more problematic for men to venture into the realm of femininity than it is for women to venture into the realm of masculinity. This is unsurprising, given societal norms that regulate expressions of femininity more than masculinity. Even though norms dictate that women must be feminine, they are not as heavily penalized when they incorporate aspects of masculinity into their gender expression, thus allowing for greater overall variability in gender expression.

Perhaps in part because they were less variable in their gender expressions, we also saw closer matching between self and partner's gender expressions for men in our sample than for women. There were no significant correlations between self and partner's gender expression for women, whereas for men the correlations were positive and significant. This overlap is likely why we saw some bivariate associations between gender expression variables and outcome measures for men, but they disappeared when both actor and partner gender expressions were entered together into the regressions. When the overlapping variance between the two partners' gender expressions was removed, there was little unique variability left.

### Feminine Gender Expression as a Target

Femininity has a long history of devaluation ([Hoskin, 2020](#); [Kierski & Blazina, 2009](#)). Those who are highly feminine experience slut-shaming and objectification ([Ringrose & Reynold, 2012](#)), and are treated as incompetent, unintelligent ([Banchefsky et al., 2016](#)), and not worthy of respect ([Menzie, 2020](#)). Our findings indicate that feminine gender expression, by either men or women, may serve as a risk factor in the context of same-sex

relationships, necessitating higher levels of PDA-related and general vigilance. For men, bivariate correlations indicated that more femininity in either partner predicted higher levels of general vigilance and higher partner femininity predicted higher levels of PDA-related vigilance. These findings are perhaps not surprising, as ample past research has found that femininity in men makes them more of a target for harassment and violence (Glick et al., 2007; Pascoe, 2007).

For women, the highest levels of PDA-related vigilance were felt by women whose partners were high in femininity and low in masculinity, while the highest levels of general vigilance were reported when women had partners high in femininity, regardless of the partner's masculinity. Highly feminine women are often hyper-sexualized by others and their femininity is construed as being performed for the male gaze (Hoskin, 2017). Heterosexual men may be more likely to harass women in same-sex relationships where one or both partners are highly feminine, as the women violate norms of both patriarchal femininity and hegemonic masculinity by challenging men's entitlement to femininity (Kimmel, 2017). Men's reactions to overt displays of femininity that are not reserved for the male gaze can trigger violent reactions (DeKeseredy et al., 2019), thereby making femininity a target.

Thus, either being more feminine (for men) or having a partner perceived as more feminine (for both men and women) may serve to elevate an individual's awareness of their surroundings, both within and beyond the context of PDAs. What our data cannot reveal, however, is whether this effect is the result of a partner's *actual* levels of femininity functioning as a target for unwanted and potentially violent responses, or whether it is an indication of the participant's own internal sense of benevolent femmephobia. Our ratings of partner gender expression in the present study come from the participant and may not reflect how the partner would report their own gender expression. Given the devaluation of femininity within LGBTQ+ communities (Blair & Hoskin, 2015, 2016), some participants' own concerns about the fragility of femininity or its need for protection may inflate their perceptions of their own partner's femininity, thereby resulting in greater PDA-related and general vigilance. Alternatively, women in same-sex relationships with feminine partners may be acutely aware of their own role in subverting the idea that femininity is performed for the male gaze and remain vigilant to the risks associated with them 'usurping' feminine-presenting partners from men.

Future research should assess whether the association between perceptions of a partner's femininity and general or PDA-related vigilance may be mediated by the participant's own femmephobia, particularly among individuals who rate themselves as less feminine than their partner. Further, dyadic reports of gender expression, as well as measures of onlookers' actual responses to same-sex PDAs as a function of gender expression would further elucidate the extent to which femininity functions as a target for negative attention, versus the extent to which perceptions of risk may be shaped by subtle forms of femmephobia within the relationship itself.

Although general vigilance varied based on the gender expression of a participant's partner, there were no overall gender

differences in reported levels of general vigilance between men and women. This is somewhat surprising given that women are generally more vigilant than men (e.g., more aware of their surroundings, more concerned about walking alone at night; Calogero et al., 2020). In the larger study from which this data is drawn, individuals in same-sex relationships consistently reported greater vigilance than those in mixed-sex relationships (McKenna et al., 2019). This finding suggests that a sexual minority status, over and above gender, serves as a salient risk factor for violence. Men in same-sex relationships are thrown into the realm of femininity, and its associated dangers, by the very nature of their relationship and their attraction to other men. Women in same-sex relationships face both the general threats directed at women as well as threats based on their sexual identity. Thus, both sexual minority men and women are forced to be more vigilant than their heterosexual peers.

### Masculine Gender Expression as Both Target and Shield

We turn next to exploring the findings related to masculine gender expression in sexual minority women. Our findings suggest that sometimes masculinity can serve as a shield for women, but when not mixed with a degree of femininity, it can also make them a target. Masculine promotion or privilege has been theorized to occur within the context of LGBTQ+ communities (Hoskin, 2020), such that a more masculine gender expression can at times be valued over a more feminine gender expression, for both men and women. We saw some evidence of masculine promotion or protection within our sample. Men whose partners were higher in masculinity showed lower levels of PDA-related vigilance. Women whose partners were moderately high in masculinity perceived more support for their PDAs, but only when their partner was also high in femininity. Thus, a degree of masculinity in women can provide a sense of protection or societal approval, but only when it is tempered by 'appropriate' levels of femininity. Note, of course, that the reverse does not ever appear to be true; even a small drop of femininity in men is sufficient to demote them in social status (Dahl, 2017).

Thus, some degree of masculinity may sometimes be protective for sexual minority women, but such protection is highly tenuous. 'Too much' masculinity can have its costs. For example, women in same-sex relationships whose partners were lower in femininity reported greater general and PDA-related vigilance as their partner's masculinity ratings rose. Similarly, when women's partners were low in femininity, their perceptions of support for PDAs plummeted. Thus, while moderate or low levels of masculinity combined with some degree of femininity may be protective for women in same-sex relationships, once the masculinity crosses an invisible threshold and increases too much, or exists in isolation from femininity, it may bring about the risk of homophobic violence. In other words, once a partner's masculinity is sufficiently high to denote a stereotypical sexual minority aesthetic (i.e., the lesbian aesthetic; Gunn et al., *under revision*), affection within that relationship may more readily be interpreted as denoting a same-sex relationship and therefore remove any

opportunity for negotiating their way out of a violent situation and more immediately make the couple a target for homophobic violence.

Once again, however, we must be cautious in interpreting the overall meaning of these findings, as our only knowledge of the partner's gender expression comes from the participant, and not the partner themselves. Thus, similar to how participants may not accurately report their partner's femininity, they may also make errors in reporting their partner's masculinity. Here, instead of femmophobia, we may see the role of internalized homophobia at play. In other words, is the greater sense of vigilance associated with a more masculine partner for women in same-sex relationships the result of the actual potential for homophobic threats or a reflection of the participant's own levels of internalized homophobia and a potential concern about being 'outed' by a more masculine partner? The latter would be similar to [Lu et al.'s \(2019\)](#) finding that gay men with greater concerns about being stigmatized were more likely to control or regulate the feminine gender expressions of their partners. Whichever the explanation, it appears that when masculinity in women lacks the requisite degree of femininity to serve as a buffer, masculine promotion becomes less salient, moving the woman into what [Hoskin \(2020\)](#) refers to as the 'effeminate' realm in which they become a target for homophobic violence.

### The Role of Gender Expression in Identifying Romantic Couples

One remaining finding that does not fit under either of the above themes is the low level of PDA-related vigilance among women whose partners were rated as low in both masculinity and femininity. It is possible that individuals with less expressive gender may be less 'readable' to onlookers. In perceiving others, especially romantic couples, individuals may 'default' to the most common interpretation until faced with evidence to the contrary. Consequently, individuals low in masculinity and femininity may be perceived as blank slates onto which others place their own perceptions and assumptions. In the case of detecting a same-sex couple, it may be that either behaviour is required (i.e., affection) that would not be expected among a non-romantically associated dyad, or, the gender expressions of the individuals must be readily read as queer. For sexual minority individuals low in masculinity and femininity, their gender may be less readable, and they may therefore pass through the world with others making 'default' assumptions, allowing their PDAs to go undetected as markers of their sexual identity. For example, if they are holding hands with someone, they may be read as being in a mixed-sex relationship (i.e., the affection signals a relationship, the ambiguous gender results in an assumption of the 'norm'). If they are not sharing affection with their partner, then the couple may be read as either a same-sex or mixed-sex dyad, without the degrees of femininity or masculinity required to make them a target. However, we know very little about how individuals identify romantic couples or the role that affection may play in this process. Future research should explore the role of gender expression, gender composition of a relationship (mixed-sex vs.

same-sex), and affection sharing behaviour in onlookers' ability to identify romantic dyads.

### Limitations

Although the present study adds several novel findings to the literature on gender expression and how it operates among same-sex couples, some limitations should be considered when interpreting our findings. As noted earlier, we only have one partner's reports of their own gender expression and their partner's, thereby limiting what we can know about the dyadic process. Further, what we can state about gender expression is based on two single-item measures of femininity and masculinity which focused on how participants 'appeared.' Participants may have emphasized physical and overt expressions of gender, but interpretation of the question likely varied. Multidimensional aspects of gender expression (e.g., physical appearance, mannerisms, voice) may reveal whether particular expressions are most salient for PDA outcomes. Additionally, although our sample was inclusive of transgender individuals, we did not explore how their experiences of gender expression may vary from the cisgender participants. There is also evidence to suggest that gender expression operates differently as a function of race. For instance, [Everett and colleagues \(2019\)](#) found that Black and Latina sexual minority women who reported higher masculinity also reported less victimization, but the opposite was found for white sexual minority women. Finally, variation in attitudes towards same-sex relationships vary between the three countries where most of our participants were living (i.e., Canada, US, and UK; [McDermott & Blair, 2012](#)). Given these differences in attitudes, future research should explore differences in same-sex couples' experiences of affection sharing, given the differences in gender norms and expectations between different countries and cultures.

### CONCLUSIONS

Overall, our findings suggest that feminine gender expression is associated with heightened vigilance in both men and women in same-sex relationships. For women, masculine gender expression can provide a small amount of protection, but only when it is combined with an appropriate degree of femininity. As important as combating sexual prejudice is, our findings support the growing body of literature that suggests it is equally important to increase acceptance of gender diversity and fluidity, particularly with respect to femininity ([Serano, 2013](#); [Hoskin, 2019](#)). So long as femininity remains a risk factor, we will not see the end of many forms of violence. Femininity that is seen as inappropriate or misplaced can serve as a trigger for violence, whether that be violence directed at gay and bisexual men, trans people, lesbians and bisexual women, or heterosexual women. Even heterosexual men are at risk, as even the slightest deviation from hegemonic masculinity into femininity can trigger harassment, ostracism, and violence. The strict regulations placed upon what is deemed 'acceptable' femininity and the limitations on who may safely express femininity constrict the ability of everyone to freely embrace all aspects of their identities.

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