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Queer(y)ing Consumerism: Butch Identity Expression and Consumer Culture

Kathleen M. Bradbury
St. Cloud State University

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**Queer(y)ing Consumerism:
Butch Identity Expression and Consumer Culture**

by

Kathleen Marie Bradbury

A Thesis

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Thesis Committee:
Dr. Glenn Davis, Chairperson
Dr. Judith Dorn
Dr. Beth Berila

Abstract

When we think about how our identities are constructed and expressed, how often do we consider the importance of physical and material signifiers? For many butch-identified lesbians, physical and material signifiers play a strong role in expressing identity, requiring the consumption of commodities in order to be read as “butch.” But what happens when these resistant commodities become marketable? Perhaps the physical signifiers of butch identity are initially donned as resistance, but the line between being a resistor and being a passive subject becomes blurred when resistance or transgressive behavior requires participation in broader capitalist culture. When butch identity is predominantly caught up in expressions of style—through attention paid to desired attire and clothing—butch identity may become an identity simply of style, stripped of the historically significant elements of gender resistance and social activism.

Building on Barry Brummett’s foundational work *A Rhetoric of Style* and Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, this thesis will explore how butch identity and style are connected to capitalism and consumerism. While butch subjects participate in capitalist consumer culture within print and web media, it is primarily in print media where we see the complex relationships between style, identity, and consumer capitalism. Narratives of butch identity on the web, by contrast, are comparatively limited in their critical analysis, a finding that is surprising given the typical assumption that online spaces are more democratic or open for individual expression. An analysis of these media therefore addresses the tension between resisting and participating in dominant culture. By considering opportunities for disidentification in both contemporary lesbian print culture and butch online spaces, it becomes apparent that

there are radical opportunities to queer the butch subculture's relationship with consumerism and capitalism.

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This thesis is dedicated to my fabulous queer family. Thank you for years of endless discussions on gender, identity, style, politics, and life. Thank you for challenging me to acknowledge my own biases and encouraging me to accept myself. Most of all, thank you to Krissy Bradbury, who willingly moved to the middle of nowhere with me so I could achieve this dream, proving that home is wherever I'm with you. I'm the luckiest.

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Introduction

On an idyllic June afternoon, my wife and I stroll hand-in-hand through Loring Park, weaving our way around the sponsored booths and navigating through throngs of people milling about. Clouds float across the Minneapolis skyline as the park pulses with the thumping beat of party music. We stake our claim on the sidewalk to watch our community celebrate through the streets of downtown—well, our community, along with 700 corporate sponsors. The love, joy, and pride are palpable. Rainbows and glitter and feathers and leather are all donned to show that WE ARE HERE and WE ARE QUEER.

As we sip our rainbow mimosas (\$20 each) and groan at the exorbitant cover costs for the club on this afternoon's agenda (\$25 per person), our friend clucks her tongue and reminds us that "Whatever, it's Pride." Unlike us, she has been saving money the whole year for this single weekend—she's even rented a hotel room (\$250 per night) for prime access to the festivities—because this weekend (more than anything else) is all about being seen. At what point did celebrating community become so damn expensive?

Pride and community building come at a hefty price tag in the 21st century. As Pride festivals gain more corporate sponsors and more businesses cash in on the uninhibited spending, we have to wonder about the cost of our community being so celebrated by corporations that financially benefit from our festivities. The tension between being accepted by mainstream society and being resistant to assimilation is undeniably evident surrounding Pride, but this tension is indicative of a deeper, daily struggle within the queer community. As the LGBT movement gains more legal rights, political acknowledgement, and media representation, the ultimate goal of such inclusion must be examined. Is it to gain citizenship and access into the heterosexual majority? What is lost when parts of the queer community are legitimized through laws or recognized for their spending power? Is there a cost to increased recognition?

With the recent legalization of same-sex marriage, the increasing number of out-and-proud celebrities, and the ability to purchase pro-Pride gear at Target, it's easy to assume that we are in a "post-closet" society where being gay is acceptable or even appealing. This assumption that everything is *fabulous* is slightly misguided; what was once an unacceptable or life-

threatening identity has now become an identity with niche market appeal, much to the benefit of large corporations. Instead of a movement based around politics, people can now express their rainbow identities with multi-colored Doritos or signify their lesbianism by driving Subarus to Eddie Bauer for a wardrobe update. In *Selling Out*, Alexandra Chasin argues that stylistic signs of queer identity (rainbow pins, equality stickers, certain brands of clothing and cars) serve to “[make] a statement... a ‘fashion’ statement. As usual, the reduction of politics to style implies that consumption can amount to political change” (120). Within this identity-based consumerism, we see strong elements of Lisa Duggan’s analysis of the new homonormativity—where LGBT politics does not “contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (179).

This depoliticized gay culture is also reflected in the way the relationship between queer identity and politics has changed. In a 2005 article entitled “Queer Anti-Capitalism: What’s Left of Lesbian and Gay Liberation,” Alan Sears reflects on the distinctly different experiences of claiming queer identity throughout the decades: “For a sizeable portion of the community, becoming a lesbian or gay man was not simply a personal lifestyle choice but also a political commitment. It is arguable that as we approach full citizenship our queer identities are no longer necessarily politicizing” (Sears 102). Now, in 2016, the possibility of “full citizenship” seems like it has been nearly reached, and the exigency of political mobilization is not as strongly felt. But the ideas of citizenship and community are intricately tied up with commodification, with open queer life thriving “primarily in commodified forms: bars, restaurants, stores, coffee shops,

commercial publications, certain styles of dress and personal grooming, [and] commercialized Pride Day celebrations with corporate sponsorship” (Sears 104).

Undoubtedly, this commodification of queer life suggests a complicated relationship between visibility, assimilation, identity, and capitalism. It seems as though the more social recognition the LGBT movement gets, the more this visibility becomes tied up with consumer capitalism:

Commodified queer space appears...as a set of market niches, in which people live their sexuality through the purchase of specific goods and services...In this context of commodification, a person becomes visible as ‘queer’ only through the deployment of particular market goods and services. (Sears 108)

Manifesting in niche markets, where bodies are commodified and “lifestyles” are sold, queer visibility seems to have less to do with political or social imperatives and more to do with looking and consuming in certain ways. Socialist Sherry Wolf expresses concern about the false correlation between advancement and consumerism: “This rainbow-festooned market...equates success and achievement with ownership, fashion...and the attainment of gay cultural bling” (159). Addressing how the consumer market has a bread and circuses effect, Wolf argues, “In the absence of any organized means to achieve genuine political and social power, LGBT folks are offered capitalist society’s substitute, niche consumer ‘power,’ that is, the option to spend one’s money on products whose advertisers pander to some notions of gay middle-class desire” (158). As Wolf mentions, the power of the LGBT movement becomes less threatening through its displacement into the consumer sphere, and the community’s identity is concurrently shaped to reflect sanitized ideals of queer respectability as defined by marketers.

The relationship between identity and consumer capitalism is extremely complicated, and scholars from several fields (marketing, politics, and queer theory, to name a few) have

examined this complexity without coming to a clear consensus on whether the benefits of citizenship outweigh the costs of assimilation.¹ Katherine Sender notes the ever-present “tensions between invisibility and limited visibility, between typification and stereotyping, and between needing to find telegraphic ways of representing gayness and doing so at the expense of gay people” (13) surrounding debates about visibility and marketing. These tensions suggest that issues of visibility and assimilation (particularly within consumer culture) are much more complicated than a simple liberatory/assimilationist binary opposition allows. Theorizing about proper consumption tactics and the slippery slope to assimilation may be a beneficial intellectual exercise, but for those of us living in the United States, we must acknowledge our undeniable position as consumers in a capitalist society. The always-already existence of queer culture within consumer capitalism, combined with the understanding that all marketing “both creates and distorts the cultural identities it represents” (Sender 19), requires us to move beyond simplistic, totalizing arguments supporting complete separatism or assimilation and examine how these ideological tensions play out on queer bodies and in queer experiences.

A strong opportunity for analyzing the relationship between queer identity and consumer capitalism is present in expressions of style. Because the queer community is so diverse and includes a multiplicity of identities and expressions, queer style as a whole is too vast an arena for a specific examination of the intricate relationship between identity and consumer capitalism. Instead, this thesis will focus specifically on butch-identified lesbians in contemporary culture.

¹ See Daniel Wardlow’s collection, *Gays, Lesbians, and Consumer Behavior: Theory, Practice, and Research Issues in Marketing*; Alexandra Chasin’s *Selling Out*, and M. V. Lee Badgett’s *Money, Myths, and Change*.

Butch Identity, Style, and Political Resistance

When people say that someone looks like a lesbian, most often these judgments are based on how closely she adheres to our society's conflation of butch style with lesbian style in general. Short hair, menswear, and an undeniable swagger are all elements of butch style that allow individuals to be categorized as lesbian. Lisa Walker, in *Looking Like What You Are: Sexual Style, Race, and Lesbian Identity*, attributes this "persistent construction of butch as the 'magical sign'" (201) to the visibility of the butch, and the conflation of butch with authentic lesbianism is "based on her 'blatant' representation of sexual deviance" (202). Although the assumption that all lesbians are butches and vice versa is not a fair one to make, the very prominence of butch style within the lesbian community requires us to not overlook the significance of style in identity and community politics.

The assumed authenticity ascribed to butch lesbians has its roots in the beliefs of late 19th-century sexologists who believed that gender inversion defined homosexuality, rather than a person's choice of sexual partner (Kennedy and Davis 324). In this regard, the medical attention was commonly placed on the masculine lesbian because her gender inversion was the concern that needed to be addressed and fixed. Although medical discourse has developed beyond the "gender inversion" theory, this assumption that the true lesbian is the butch lesbian is still prevalent in society as a whole as well as within some LGBT communities. This expectation causes some lesbians to assume that butch style provides tell-all signals of lesbian identity, which leads to assumptions or expectations of what "looking like a lesbian" should be. The expectation of easily coded traits, such as a short haircut or masculine clothing, and the

satisfaction received when one easily “reads” a butch lesbian, may suggest that if someone wants to be read as undeniably lesbian, acquiring a butch style will make it so.

Butch identity stems from butch-femme culture, one of the most visible aspects of lesbian history. In their influential historical narrative, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, Kennedy and Davis explain the prevalence of butch-femme roles in the lesbian community: “Before the 1970s, their presence was unmistakable in all working-class lesbian communities: the butch projected the masculine image of her particular time period—at least regarding dress and mannerisms—and the fem, the feminine image; and almost all members were exclusively one or the other” (5). Though Kennedy and Davis’s research focuses specifically on a butch-femme community in Buffalo, NY, they note that there are many commonalities between the Buffalo community and other working-class lesbian communities in the United States.

Butch-femme communities developed out of working-class bar culture in the 1940s, (Kennedy and Davis 39). Adopting a butch or femme role was a social imperative, as the roles distinctly marked women as lesbians and showed that they wanted to participate in the lesbian community:

No matter what a particular lesbian personally thought or felt about the butch-fem code, whether assuming a role identity felt like a natural expression of her being or something imposed, she needed to adopt a role. [...] Only then could she participate in the community and receive its benefits. (Kennedy and Davis 152)

Adopting a butch or femme role rendered lesbians visible, which developed a sense of community and created a more navigable arena of courtship. In order to express their gender identities, butches and femmes developed a highly coded system of style and mannerisms, though the butch code has been far more specific than the femme code.

In the 1940s, butch “flags” consisted of heavily starched shirts, tailor-made slacks, masculine shoes, and a short haircut. It’s important to remember that for most butches, the goal was not to pass as men, but rather, to create a way to recognize each other and challenge mainstream expectations (Kennedy and Davis 167); therefore, the social meaning of adopting a butch gender expression was “to announce...to the straight world that one is different” (169). Additionally, both butches and femmes in the 1940s modeled their mannerisms on male and female behavior in Hollywood movies, suggesting that their constructions of gender were based on exaggerated and extremely performative gender expressions. The contrast between butch and femme also encouraged developing gender identities in comparison to their opposites, and the relational contrast between butch and femme further solidified the identities.

These stylistic and behavioral components of butch and femme carried through into the 1950s, but minor stylistic details changed based on social class and race. For example, Black studs (an alternative term for butch) expressed distinctive tastes that incorporated more formalwear than their white, working-class counterparts. Although some stylistic elements changed, the standard ideal images of butch and femme remained pretty similar (Kennedy and Davis 164-166). However, in the later 1950s, a stronger sense of policing developed among butch women. Many butch women thought it was desirable to present as butch as much as possible (even if there may be negative consequences in the workplace or on the street) and looked down on women who wouldn’t take the risk of dressing butch all the time (Kennedy and Davis 176). These earlier forms of policing, in addition to the exclusion and isolation experienced by women who did not fit into butch-femme roles (Kennedy and Davis 174), foretold the future policing of authentic lesbian identity in the queer community.

As time has passed, butch and femme identities have continued to change, suggesting that they are dynamic and continually constructed identities. Even in the later years of the 1950s, women more frequently swapped between butch and femme roles (Kennedy and Davis 348); these swaps usually happened before or after relationships, not during, but this change still suggests more room for gender play than previous understandings of butch-femme. By the 1980s, butch-femme roles became “no longer a social necessity,” and Levitt et. al suggests that “claiming femme or butch roles became purely an action of self-definition in this decade, and these identities emerged into different social contexts” (100). However, the lack of “social necessity” hasn’t prevented people from identifying as butch or using butch style to express their identities.

Although butch identity has developed beyond its historical roots, the generally assumed definition of butch consists of a combination of masculine presentation and a more aggressive attitude within the lesbian community. Kennedy and Davis add that “The key element in creating the butch’s identity was an active recognition that she was different—aggressive, autonomous, and/or interested sexually in women—and taking the step to represent herself as such and to build a life that accommodated that difference” (385). The butch attitude can manifest as stubbornness or as a lack of emotion, which S. Bear Bergman believes is necessary “in order to exist in the face of cultural norms, or there would be no such thing as butch” (21). It is also important to note that the decision to adopt more masculine mannerisms and style doesn’t necessarily mean that all butches want to be men. While some are able to pass as men in society, they don’t have full access to “institutionalized male power in the economic and political sphere” (Kennedy and Davis 379), nor do they necessarily have a desire to obtain male privilege.

In the past few decades, butch identity has become more self-defined and complex, but there are a few common characteristics that are frequently expressed in butch-femme anthologies and butch narratives such as Bergman's *Butch is a Noun*. Throughout the essays in *Butch is a Noun*, we develop an understanding of butches as givers, protectors, problem solvers, and cuddly yet gruff tough guys who would do anything for their femmes. However, even the assumed dyad of butch-femme is being challenged as more butches acknowledge their attraction to non-femmes. Current understandings of butch identity have also become more inclusive of non-binary and fluid gender identities. For example, someone who identifies as a butch lesbian and then decides to transition is still able to use the term butch in self-definition. As we see in personal narratives and through expressions on social media, butch and femme identities seem available for anyone to use—to any degree—in self-definition.²

While some people may consider their butch identities to be innate and natural, the seemingly “natural” element of butch identity does not negate that butch identity—like any other identity—is constructed and performative. As Judith Butler explains, this belief of inherent natural gender shows that people “become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one’s belief in its necessity and naturalness” (“Performative Acts” 903). What is actually happening in this assumed innateness is that the gender script of “butch” has been performed and repeated so many times that it has become a daily ritual. Therefore, although

² While there is more room for self-definition, policing of who is allowed to identify as butch and femme is still present. Some individuals demand that butch and femme remain specifically lesbian identities, and any use by non-lesbians is a violent appropriation. Inherent in this policing is an assumption about what being a “lesbian” means, which then turns into what being a “woman” means.

butch may seem natural for many who take on this identity, butch is still a constructed and performative gender identity.

The most visible way gender identity is performed is through style. While style often refers to the physical signifiers one chooses to adorn his or her body, a discussion of style should also include behaviors and mannerisms. In *A Rhetoric of Style*, Barry Brummett describes style as “a complex system of actions, objects, and behaviors that is used to form messages that announce who we are, who we want to be, and who we want to be considered akin to” (xi). Style thus helps us develop categories that allow for us to express who we are and to whom we want to be connected. When “cohesive clusters of style—movement, gesture, speech, vocabulary, decoration, and the like”—are present, it is possible to make inferences about one’s identity based on that style (Brummett xii). In her 1993 article entitled “Body Rhetoric: A Study in Lesbian Coding,” Jan Laude explores how lesbians have coded their bodies to be “read” through a series of postures, mannerisms, public displays of affection (or lack thereof), and eye contact. Certainly those elements can be considered when discussing butch style in person, but it’s a little more difficult to discern those elements when observing how style is used through print and digital texts. However, examining these elements (when present) together with physical signifiers allows for a general understanding of butch style.

In order to consider the function of butch style and how it interacts with capitalist structures, we must now shift our analysis to understanding style as a rhetorical tool. First, style is rhetorical because it is a language that requires a dialogic interaction between the speaker/presenter and their audience. Brummett argues that style is a “means for communication” that is “hardly unidirectional; we both generate meaningful signs and also read

the signs of others” (35). In a Bakhtinian sense, the presentation of a style can be seen as an utterance. However, the utterance is not meaningful without an audience. Our utterances of style are always “oriented toward an addressee, toward who that addressee might be” (Bakhtin 1215). This addressee, according to Bakhtin, is presumed to be similar to us: “we presuppose a certain typical and stabilized social purview...we assume as our addressee a contemporary” (1215). While style may be used to signify a disconnect between a subculture and dominant culture, style is more effectively used to signal membership in a specific community and is recognized by members of that same community.

Style is also rhetorical because it functions as a political language that expresses the values and ideologies of the culture; it is not a surprise that style is a site of political action and a tool to influence and express struggle. Through expressions of style, marginalized groups in particular are physically signifying their audacity to exist as a counterstatement to dominant, hegemonic culture. Brummett argues, “their marginalization makes such stylistic expression of identity always already an act of political struggle” (96-97). Their physical existence demands recognition, which can be understood as a political act. Lisa Walker, in her explorations of lesbian identity and visibility, further explains the importance of visibility and its reliance on style:

Demanding visibility has been one of the principles of late-twentieth-century identity politics, and flaunting visibility has become one of its tactics...To be invisible is to be seen but not heard, or to be erased entirely—to be absent from cultural consciousness. In the face of silence and erasure, minorities have responded with the language of the visible, symbolizing their desire for social justice by celebrating identifiable marks of difference that have been used to target them for discrimination. (1)

In the case of lesbian style, Walker suggests that butch style more visibly flaunts difference, as the physical signs such as clothing and mannerisms demand that people be aware of the butch's difference. While style provides opportunities to politically resist hegemony, Hebdige argues that "the challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them. Rather it is expressed obliquely, in style. The objections are lodged, the contradictions displayed...at the profoundly superficial level of appearances: that is, at the level of signs" (17). Although according to Hebdige, style may not be directly confronting hegemony, the very ability to cause conflict with style suggests that style communicates as a political language, however superficial it may seem.

In the context of butch subculture, butch style serves to function not only as a way to express queer and lesbian desire but as a defiant resistance of patriarchal expectations of femininity. The presence of style markers on the butch body that traditionally are connected to masculinity have the capacity to destabilize normative understandings of gender identity. When we consider the butch's masculine performance, we note that masculinity is removed from the male body, thus severing an essential line between sex and gender presentation. This very act of imitation makes the instability of gender obvious by suggesting that masculinity and femininity can be adopted, constructed, and performed in a variety of ways.

Judith Halberstam's extensive analysis of alternate masculinities in *Female Masculinity* also suggests the radical potential of separating masculinity from male bodies. For example, Halberstam argues that masculinity "becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body...the shapes and forms of modern masculinity are best showcased within female masculinity" (2-3). When butch-identified subjects express their

masculinity through style, then, the very determined nature of traditional masculinity is questioned—an inherently political act. Halberstam notes that “female masculinity is most threatening when coupled with lesbian desire” (28), and this coupling is what is most commonly seen in representations of butch identity. The butch’s stylistic adoption of masculinity threatens hegemonic structures by displacing the expected “male right” to power, which is derived “from assuming and confirming the non-performative nature of masculinity” (Halberstam 235). When masculinity is displaced from the male body and used for queer purposes, as in the case of butch identity, we see a contest over the meaning of masculinity, a contest that has significant political implications.

One of the ways butch style resists heterosexual patriarchy is through the excorporation of symbols of oppression—most notably, the clothing of men. According to Brummett, excorporation is “a recurring strategy for the marginalized...to appropriate a sign of their marginalization and to turn its meaning, to make of that sign a means of refusal of disempowerment” (105). Excorporation occurs when a sign of oppression is pulled out from mainstream commercial culture and turned on its head; the sign acquires new meaning within the subculture (105). One example of this in butch style is the excorporation of the tie—the ultimate symbol of affluence and power in a predominantly male-run capitalist sphere. When the tie is incorporated into butch style, a power struggle occurs. The symbol of power is transferred onto bodies that have been denied that power, and this discord is felt by dominant society. However, excorporation only works until the sign becomes too popular, then “the sign and, if possible, the group who appropriated it must be neutralized and in some way incorporated back into

mainstream culture” (Brummett 105). Adding to the blurred instability of power and gender, the incorporation of the tie is a fashionable way to give the finger to patriarchal power.

Comprised of recognizable signifiers of lesbian identity, butch style is frequently celebrated and appropriated in fashion and popular culture, especially compared to butch style’s historical reception. As Henri Lefebvre notes, “That which yesterday was reviled today becomes cultural consumer-goods, consumption thus engulfs what was intended to give meaning and direction” (Lefebvre qtd. in Hebdige 92). In the historical case of butch identity, physical and material signifiers were adopted in order to be read as a gay other (both by inside and outside audiences), and the adaptation of traditionally male signifiers caused the butch body to be seen as a site of resistance of heteronormative gender expectations. However, these once politically purposeful adoptions of resistant style are now often seen as mere “fashion statements” (Orleans 58).

Although style may always contain political significance, its heavy reliance on material signifiers links it with the consumption of commodities. Hebdige argues that “subculture is concerned first and foremost with consumption...It communicates through commodities even if the meaning attached to those commodities are purposefully distorted or overthrown” (94-95). We see the meaning of commodities distorted and overthrown in butch style, where suspenders and the bow tie come to signify genteel forms of masculinity removed from the traditionally male body. Additionally, instead of defining themselves by what they do (such as being a teacher, a student, or a gymnast), subjects in late capitalism define themselves more frequently by what they own or consume (Brummett 68). The material signifiers of butch style allow for

butches to be read even before they move or open their mouths, placing a large emphasis on commodities that signify butch style.

So what happens when these resistant physical and material signifiers become marketable? Perhaps the physical signifiers of butch identity are initially donned as resistance, but the line between being a resistor and being a passive subject becomes blurred when resistance or transgressive behavior requires participation in broader capitalist culture. Indeed, style's heavy reliance on signifiers sets up subcultures such as butch communities to be viewed ideal niche markets that businesses may consider to be lucrative profit-making opportunities. Lisa Walker notes, "The desire for visibility, for cultural and social recognition, still drives our political agendas even in the face of our awareness that in a consumer culture, 'mainstream' visibility can be a vehicle for commodification" (212). Recalling Danae Clark's statement in her article "Commodity Lesbianism" that "capitalist enterprise creates a tension...the result of [which] is that capitalists welcome homosexuals as consuming subjects but not as social subjects" (192), the relationship between consumerism and style reflects the reality of queer citizenship: consumption rights do not equal actual rights.

Although undeniable tension between identity, style, and consumer capitalism is exhibited in everyday life, contemporary representations of butch identity in print and digital narratives provide an arena for its analysis. In this thesis, I will explore how butch identity is connected to capitalism and consumerism. While butch subjects participate in capitalist consumer culture within print and web media, the representations in print media show the complex relationships between style, identity, and consumer capitalism. Narratives of butch identity on the web, however, are comparatively limited in their critical analysis, a finding that is

surprising given the typical assumption that online spaces are more democratic or open for individual expression. Analysis of these media therefore addresses the tension between resisting and participating in dominant culture—a predicament that is at the heart of queer politics. At what point are visibility and the rights that go along with it compromised by complicit participation in systems of oppression?

Chapter One: Butch Representation in Print Texts

The examination of the relationship between capitalism and butch identity can begin with analyzing how contemporary lesbian texts develop the roles of butches as participants in or critics of capitalism. While many characters are described using traditional butch signifiers of style (which, as mentioned in the introduction, can be considered always already politically resistant), these texts show characters whose identities are complexly connected to consumer capitalism *beyond* their resistant style. To various degrees, butch characters are also commonly used to challenge other capitalist issues such as urban sprawl and gentrification.³ Although these issues are not directly related to commodified identities, resistance and activism regarding urban sprawl and gentrification provide opportunities for individuals to take action against broader systems of capitalism, thereby complicating their relationship to it.

The complexity of the relationship between identity formation and participation in consumer capitalism is crucial because it acknowledges the lived experience and the constant struggle of reconciling commodification and resistant politics. Since individuals are always already commodified and cannot completely withdraw from capitalist systems, a strong critical analysis would show both awareness of an individual's role in consumerism and opportunities for resistance. While characters that completely refuse to participate in consumerism can be empowering in their radicalism, their all-or-nothing approaches to participation in capitalist systems ultimately ignore the reality of living in a Western society. An identity constructed as fully against consumerism will ultimately not succeed nor address the true complexity of the relationship between identity and commodification; instead, it promotes an idealized,

³ This may be a historical remnant of the thriving working-class butch-femme communities and the butch community's history of participating in labor unions.

unattainable, and essentialized identity⁴ with potentially harmful consequences such as promoting an essentialized view of lesbians, privileging the butch lesbian narrative, and vilifying femmes and non-butch identified individuals.

In order to find texts that would suit an analysis of the relationship between butch identity and consumer capitalism, I conducted a brief survey of contemporary lesbian literature from 1995-2015. The designated 20-year time span aligns with the rise of public internet access, the rise of queer theory within the academy, and an increasingly LGBT-friendly society with a larger public awareness of LGBT issues. Using the lists of Lambda Literary nominees and winners, lists of lesbian fiction on popular websites such as AutoStraddle and Amazon, and Goodreads community forums about lesbian fiction with specific focuses on butch characters, I reviewed the synopses and formulated a relevant list. (Memoirs were excluded in order to prevent a personal narrative from standing as indicative of the wider community.) After reading the selections, I narrowed my list to four award-winning texts that contained butch-identified characters:

1. *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* (2008), Alison Bechdel; 2009 Ferro-Grumley Award for LGBT fiction, 2014 Lambda Literary Trustee Award for Excellence in Literature, 2014 MacArthur Genius Award
2. *The Butches of Madison County* (1995), Ellen Orleans; 8th Annual Lambda Literary Award for Humor (1996)
3. *The Creamsickle* (2009), Rhiannon Argo; 22nd Annual Lambda Literary Lesbian Debut Fiction (2010)

⁴ Elizabeth Grosz defines essentialism as an “attribution of a fixed essence” that is considered to be a given, universal, and natural essence of all individuals within the category (47). In this thesis, essentialized identity reflects this assumed inherent, fixed essence and the homogeneous effect of essentialized notions of identity.

4. *The Difference Between You and Me* (2012) Madeline George, Junior Library Guild selection, ALA Rainbow List selection, Kirkus Best Teen Book of 2012, Atlantic Wire's Best Complicated Romance of 2012. (While this book was not a Lambda Literary award finalist or winner, it was favorably reviewed on the Lambda Literary website.)

For the purpose of this thesis, these works will serve as a representative sample of contemporary lesbian literature, but are not intended to be viewed as a complete or exhaustive representation.

This thesis analyses how butch-identified characters express and perform their butch identities by observing their relationships to aspects of consumer capitalism. Beginning with the texts that engage in the most sophisticated analysis and critique, I've arranged the texts on a reverse gradient scale, starting with *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* and culminating with *The Difference Between You and Me*. This structure allows me to examine the works in relation to each other and also prevents simple binary classifications between "conscious" texts and "complicit" texts. As comparatively less sophisticated than the other texts analyzed, *The Difference Between You and Me* still deals with issues of consumer capitalism, but the essentialist construction of the characters leaves little room for examining the complex intersection of identity and capitalist systems. While some analysis of the relationship between butch identity and consumer capitalism is present in all the chosen literary texts, the level of critically conscious interaction between butch identity formation and consumer capitalism is not automatically high. This variation in sophistication allows us to see the possibilities for representations of critically conscious butch identities while reminding us that genre, audience, and the author's subject positions all affect the complexity of the relationships between their butch characters and broader capitalist systems.

The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For

One of the most notable examples of a lesbian text doing cultural critique on commodity capitalism is *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* by Alison Bechdel.⁵ As a compilation of selected *Dykes to Watch Out For* comic strips from 1987-2008, the collection traces the lives of a community of lesbians and their friends “living in a midsize American city that may or may not be Minneapolis” (Bechdel, *Dykes*). Hailed as a hybrid of high and low culture, Bechdel’s work incorporates politics, theory, love, and the lived experiences of lesbians in late capitalism into one humorous and self-aware text. A diverse lesbian community is portrayed, with the characters ranging in ethnicity, socioeconomic status, occupation, and gender. While many of the characters are based on lesbian stereotypes, Bechdel’s use of hyperbole and humor allows readers to relate to the representations while she parodies recognizable (and often unquestioned) essentialist identities. Additionally, the interactions between such diverse and strongly-willed characters call attention to the limits and flaws of common lesbian identities. The dykes point out each others’ foibles and learn to work together as a community despite disparate views and character traits, and the dialogic nature of the text prevents one essential narrative from being privileged over another. Bechdel’s creation of such a diverse group of queers is refreshing in an era where essentialist identities often go unquestioned in representations of lesbians in texts and other media.

The style displayed by the characters in *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* is not thoroughly discussed, partly because the illustrations are able to do the work that text in traditional novels must do. Space is limited in the comic strip—and Bechdel believes

⁵ Future in-text citations will refer to *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* as *Dykes*.

“recognizable characters and familiar scenarios are what make a strip endure” (*Indelible* 63)—so she adorns her characters in relatively consistent outfits throughout; therefore, a thorough textual discussion of each character’s style is unnecessary. However, from an analysis of the pictorial representations of the main butch-identified characters, it’s possible to note some trends in butch style. As Bechdel’s “nucleus of the strip” who “embodies all the values I assumed were part of being a lesbian when I first came out,” (*Indelible* 65), Mo is shown in a simple striped shirt (either a turtleneck or t-shirt) and pants that both look gender-neutral. Her hair is cut short in what Bechdel calls a “k.d. lang wedge” (*Dykes* xvi), and no other accessories (besides her coke bottle glasses) are shown. Mo’s style is low-maintenance, which contradicts the traditional assumption that women put a lot of effort into their appearances. Her style also suggests a more casual and moderate butch style that leans toward an androgynous aesthetic.⁶

In comparison, Lois’s style is a bit more radically butch, as she wears muscle tees adorned with political statements and wears her hair in a flat top, a common butch haircut. Lois’s style is undeniably butch and does not suggest any effort to be read otherwise. Lois also becomes a drag king, which allows her to experiment with adopting even more masculine signifiers of style, such as adding faux facial hair and binding her chest to make it appear flatter. As the comic strip progresses, her drag persona becomes more integrated into her everyday life, and Lois becomes a “gender-blending role model to trans-identified Janis” (Bechdel, “Cast

⁶ In “Saturday Night: Part 1” (Bechdel, *Dykes* 11), Mo chooses her wardrobe for the evening and contemplates how her style will be perceived. After considering a cut off Everlast tank (“too butch”), a Womyn’s Herstory Project t-shirt (“Too P.C.”), a collared shirt and blazer (“too Miami”), and a leopard print camisole (“too much”), she settles on a striped tank that serves as a wardrobe staple. Mo is aware of how her style communicates with others and she makes her stylistic choices based on the message she wants to send to her audience.

Biographies”).⁷ An additional expression of butch identity is seen in Clarice, the hard-working “father figure of the strip” (Bechdel, *Indelible* 65). Though Clarice is butch-identified and in a butch-femme relationship with Toni, her job in the justice system requires her style to adhere to conventional aspects of femininity. She wears professional skirts and jewelry to work in order to be respected and fit in, exemplifying how some butch people must adjust their style in order to get by in society. Clarice’s need to don traditionally feminine business wear sets Mo off on a rant because she fears Clarice is trying to assimilate into heteronormative society, but Clarice views her participation in the system as “infiltration...we’ll slip inside and change things right under their noses” (Bechdel, *Dykes* 79). Even as Clarice’s style becomes less feminine when she gets a more open-minded job as an environmental lawyer, her style reflects the “power suit” butch professional who should be taken seriously in a predominantly male workplace.

While these representations of butch style can be read as political, Bechdel does not limit her characters’ political resistance and cultural critique to physical signifiers. More notably than other texts, the characters in *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* are educated, informed, and involved in political resistance. The consumer consciousness and sociopolitical critique performed by many of the characters prevents readers from simply equating their resistance with their butch style; rather, the complexity of how these characters participate in consumer capitalism reminds readers that donning a resistant style may make a political statement, but it does not serve as the ultimate or highest form of critical participation. For the most part, all the

⁷ Lois’s exploration of drag performance and her stance as a trans ally (in contrast to Mo’s lesbian-feminist women-only views) allows Bechdel to examine the differing opinions of butch identity, gender performance, trans authenticity, and acceptance within the lesbian community. See “Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum” and “Drag Kings: Masculinity and Performance” in Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity*.

characters are continually engaged in critical conversations about race, gender, sexuality, politics, and capitalism. For example, characters are conscious about their consumption patterns by supporting small businesses (like Madwimmin Books) over corporate chain businesses. Several characters (Sparrow, Lois, Ginger, and Stuart) choose to live communally, allowing them to share resources and support each other in a more invested way. While cohabitation in mainstream media is typically represented in a heteronormative sense, with a couple in a committed relationship sharing a single domestic space, the communal household in *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* consists of several adults (only two of whom have romantic connections) living together in a shared environment. This type of communal living challenges standard assumptions of what makes a family while also resisting the homonormative push to be palatable queers by following normative social customs.

Due to its biweekly serial publication, the comic has the ability to engage with current issues in a timely manner, which also allows for characters to develop a critical consciousness beyond their style or the general plotline. Characters protest against the various wars and foreign engagements between 1985-2007, they fret about Bush and lament about Clinton's inability to follow through with his promises, and they advocate for the environment, women's rights, and a variety of other liberal social and political interests in essentially real time. No issue or organization, regardless of its supposed ally status, is spared the scrutiny of these dykes; they have, for example, choice things to say about pro-LGBT organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign. In "Balm Blast," Mo accuses the HRC of selling out and describes it as a "**@#!*! CLOSELY-HELD CORPORATION, RUN BY A BUNCH OF WHITE, POWER-HUNGRY MARKETING STRATEGISTS WHO'RE PACKAGING OUR LIVES INTO A**

COMMODITY THEY CAN SELL TO PAY THEIR SALARIES!” (Bechdel, *Dykes* 206). This critique of commodified activism reflects a common sentiment in the queer community while also noting how queer people are complicit in their relationship to capitalism—rather, there is ample opportunity to participate in their own commodification.

While the characters’ overt critiques of capitalism and politics are too exhaustive to document (ranging from blatant criticisms of corporate takeovers to Mo’s desire to craft everyone’s Christmas gifts from scratch in order to not feed into consumerism), another form of covert critique is present through Bechdel’s use of disjunctive word-image juxtaposition. Andrei Molotiu, faculty member at Indiana University Bloomington, describes disjunctive word-image juxtaposition as “the text and the visuals contain different pieces of narrative information referring to two or more parallel events; related to the notion of polyphony.” This term makes it possible to describe how details that are not the explicit focus of the action (present in word balloons or captions) add additional meaning to the comic.

In *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*, the disjunctive word-image juxtaposition allows political critique to nearly always be present in the form of background details (such as captions of media broadcasts, titles of books, or t-shirt slogans), even when politics or capitalism are not the explicit focus or topic of the comic. Bechdel inserts satirical and real newspaper headlines and book titles that comment on current events and political movements, a tactic that destabilizes the boundary between reality and fiction. Gabrielle Dean notes this juxtaposition as well: “Signifieds that do exist and those that exist only in the imaginary space of the comic strip intermingle freely, challenging the authority of the symbolic” (215). This juxtaposition is seen in “Latest Exploits,” when Mo confronts Sydney about selling their erotic email exchanges to a

men's magazine. While the conversation between them is the main focus, newspaper headlines in the background lament the corporate nature of the Human Rights Campaign, reading "MILLENIUM [*sic*] MARCH ON WASHINGTON HAWKS LGBT COMMUNITY MARKET TO HIGHEST BIDDER," "VISIBILITY (FOR CORPORATE SPONSORS) A SOLID PLANK OF MARCH PLATFORM," "THE BRAND-BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES ARE STAGGERING' REPORTS MMOW FLACK," and "MARCH ORGANIZERS TO CRITICS: 'HEY! VISUALIZE ABUNDANCE!'" (Bechdel, *Dykes* 228). In this comic, the visibility-through-commodification of the queer community is exposed and critiqued through the satirical headlines while the lovers quarrel.

Bechdel also adorns the characters' shirts with political logos and phrases, and she incorporates the "background noise" of the television or radio into scenes where characters are engaged with other issues. For example, in "Only Disconnect," Mo and Sydney argue about Sydney's obsession with purchasing new entertainment devices and how she's avoiding dealing with her cancer in healthy ways. While the couple fights, the news program in the background is captioned at the bottom of each comic frame. Here we learn that George W. Bush is petitioning for his reelection and evading questions about his excessive spending (Bechdel, *Dykes* 305). This televised interview thematically connects to the argument Mo and Sydney are having about money. This interdependent juxtaposition⁸ of social commentary/critique with standard images of everyday life suggests that politics are woven into the characters' lives; they cannot completely separate their private moments from their political situations. Ultimately, the interconnected relationship between the characters' lives and political commentary shows how

⁸ Interdependent word-image juxtaposition describes how images and words work together to make a complete story or unified event (Molotiu; McCloud 155).

critiques of capitalism can go beyond expressions of style; due to the prevalence of politics in the private sphere, a more critical consciousness is needed to address everyday concerns.

However, not all of Bechdel's characters are motivated by a critical consciousness. An exception to the group's political resistance is Sydney, a femme-identified professor with a superiority complex and a spending problem. Sydney is the only character that seems to participate more complicity in commodity capitalism, and stands in stark contrast to the resistant efforts of the other characters. Appearing in the comic in 1995 (notably, when queer theory really started to take off), Sydney represents the educated elite of academia who spend too much time in their pessimistic theoretical worlds than in practical reality. She's so fully steeped in academic feminist and queer theory that she can't really ever step out of theorizing. Initially when she appears, her intellectual pessimism and pompous attitude are so repellant to Mo that she doesn't want anything to do with her. But eventually, Mo becomes more attracted to Sydney's moral depravity and comments on Sydney's "rakish, debauched, sort of charm" (Bechdel, *Dykes* 173); the women then become a couple, despite their disparate views on nearly everything.

Coming from a privileged background, Sydney has no boundaries with her father, who pulls strings to connect her with book agents and other people within the academy. These attempts to benefit from her father's connections suggest that she is not only willing, but also eager, to participate in academia's patriarchal hierarchy—despite her women's studies background (Bechdel, *Dykes* 273). She also takes after her father with her exorbitant spending; her outrageously high credit card debt doesn't stop her from constantly buying the latest gadgets and clothes. For example, Sydney and her father purchase \$700 cell phones for each other for

Christmas and she offers to buy Mo new clothing with her father's money (Bechdel, *Dykes* 195; 212). More concerningly, as the community tries to make sense of the events of 9/11, Sydney purchases a new suit (much to the chagrin of Mo) and sarcastically notes that purchasing commodities is her patriotic duty (Bechdel, *Dykes* 269). This frivolous spending seems shallow compared to how the other characters choose to consume, and it also comments on the mid-1990s push in advertising to access the gay dollar. Although Sydney's income is not substantially high, her consumption patterns fit perfectly into the behavior of the idealized "dream market" of gays and lesbians with a disposable income and "a near-rabid desire for consumption" (Wardlow 1). Sydney's role as the uncritical consumer shows a stark contrast to Mo's self-righteous conscious consumption and reflects the varied ways in which the queer community consumes.

Notably, consumer capitalism takes on an erotic role in Sydney's narrative as money and sex are perpetually linked. For example, Sydney is "busted" for what Mo assumes to be a late-night sexually-charged phone call in "Bewitched, Bothered, & Betrayed" and "Busted." When Mo confronts a guilty-sounding Sydney, Sydney claims "Mo, I just couldn't help myself. The temptation was too much" (Bechdel, *Dykes* 226). But while Mo is concerned that Sydney is cheating, Sydney feels guilty because she just got caught ordering a silk camisole despite her massive debt. Sydney then justifies her spending by eroticizing the garment: "I know I promised to quit spending so much money, but...it was just so sexy! Hmm? Don't you think? Like something Martha Stewart might wear under one of those shapeless sweaters?" (Bechdel, *Dykes* 226). Mo's subsequent arousal gets Sydney off the hook for her consumerism.

Spending money seems to be a turn on for Sydney, and Mo abandons her usually politically-correct self-righteousness to engage in capitalism-themed kink. To spice up their relationship, the couple role-plays as Martha Stewart and a pool girl (Bechdel, *Dykes* 189). Since Martha Stewart is a symbol for domesticity, consumerism, and capitalist corruption, the fact that Sydney finds this role so erotic aligns her with consumer capitalism. The power play between Sydney-as-Martha and Mo-as-Pool-Girl shows the dominant power of a wealthy white woman over the hired help and suggests there is something sexy about exploiting an underprivileged person who is financially reliant on the wealthy class. The couple's actions show a direct connection between eroticism and capitalism, suggesting that consumer capitalism infiltrates and affects even the most private of spheres—her intimate relationships and sexuality.

Sydney's erotic consumerism is noted by J.K. Gardiner, who believes Sydney's exploitation of her private relationship "opens both a self-referential critique of the morality of publication and a political critique of the way capitalism eroticizes consumption" ("Queering Genre" 197). Sydney (ever the self-serving capitalist) secretly sells their sexually charged exchanges verbatim to "PantHouse," a gentleman's magazine, for \$1000. When one of Mo's friends alerts her to the story, Mo confronts Sydney and accuses, "You took something meaningful and genuine and you **sold** it! Thousands of depraved men and probably **Lois** are jacking off to it **right now!**" (Bechdel, *Dykes* 228). Mo's reference to her life being turned into titillating material for men shows that this betrayal is seen as the ultimate sellout. Mo is furious over her sex life being exploited, and Sydney's actions are a clear example of her willingness to participate in her own commodification and to make a profit off her own queer sexuality.

Although Sydney is a femme-identified character, this extended analysis of her character construction is vital because she further complicates Mo's identity and relationship to capitalist structures. The sexual fantasy provides a way to tie the ever-critical Mo directly to capitalist systems, albeit as an erotic scenario. Mo thinks Sydney has the "moral sensibility of a jackal" (Bechdel, *Dykes* 229), but she remains in a relationship with Sydney for the rest of the text. Even Bechdel notes in a 2003 interview that Sydney is the "evil women's studies professor" (London 10). Sydney thus serves as both a morally deficient femme foil to Mo's hyperconscious liberalism and an acknowledgment of how unattainable essentialized anti-capitalist identities are. Gardiner notes that the "political commentary always acknowledges immersion in a pervasive market and consumer culture as well as being contrasted with the counter-cultural world of the primarily lesbian characters" ("Bechdel's *Dykes*" 95). Through Mo's relationship with Sydney, we see that the relationship between identity and consumer capitalism is too complex to allow for individuals to fully extract themselves from the system.

Although Sydney does provide an opportunity to see the impossible reality of Mo's idealism, Sydney's role as the complicit consumer with no redeeming morals raises concern about how femme characters are negatively represented in literature.⁹ However, Sydney is certainly not represented without critique or without a sense of hyperbole, and her position as

⁹ Femme characters, when they are present, are often painted as inauthentic or inadequate lesbians. In her analysis of femme narratives, Clare Hemmings argues that "femme subjects continue to be produced as inauthentic perverts in comparison to their butch chaperones" (453) and notes, "femmes continue to be positioned as 'soon to become' heterosexual within both mainstream and lesbian discourse" (454). Rebecca Beirne notes the tendency for femme or feminine lesbians in lesbian pulp novels of the 1950s-1960s to end up in heterosexual relationships, "abandoning and at times vigorously rejecting her lesbian desires" (103). Beirne also notes that "feminine-coded characters are consistently associated with vanity and narcissism in the text, as well as (often sexual) duplicity" (107). See also Lisa Walker's *Looking Like What You Are* for a historical study of feminine lesbians in literature.

one voice among many others adds complexity to the narrative of the lesbian community. In *The Indelible Alison Bechdel*, Bechdel explains her reasoning for adding Sydney: “I was getting bored writing about such paragons of virtue all the time, and wanted a character who was really insufferable. Sydney’s over-it-all postmodern attitude has added a fresh and much needed perspective to the strip” (68). This “insufferable” postmodern voice reminds readers of the frequent discord between gay and lesbian studies and queer theory, and this dialogic nature—the airtime Sydney gets despite her frequently horrendous views—better reflects the multiplicity of opinions within the lesbian community and allows for the presence of simultaneous critique of and participation in capitalist systems. Through the dialogic nature of the comics, Bechdel attempts to approximate the complexity of living in the Western world. Indeed, it seems as though no one character is fully “complete in her own right, but together they produce a puzzle-picture of the community of choice. . . . The reader’s identificatory pleasure depends not on her assimilation of any one character as an ideal” (Dean 212). Instead, readers identify with the whole group as representative of lesbian life in all its complexities and with all its differing voices. Offering Sydney’s voice as a relief to the overwhelming liberalism of the other characters also challenges the liberal lesbian-feminist idealism of Mo, suggesting a much more complex relationship to capitalist structures than simply one-sided resistance.

An additional reason why *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* is successful at exposing and critiquing consumer capitalism is that the “humor and joking are based on in-group and out-group relationships” (Raikas qtd. in Beirne 174). As Beirne accurately notes, the in-group for Bechdel’s text consists primarily of lesbians and other queer folk, and “the aspect of the humorous exchange between author and reader that ‘maintains group solidarity’ is

particularly significant because it allows Bechdel to be much more critical of various aspects of lesbian cultural practices than would perhaps otherwise be deemed acceptable” (174). Readers of Bechdel’s texts would most likely understand the significance of political activism within the lesbian community and be familiar with how queer communities negotiate between choosing to assimilate into heteronormative culture or remain separate. This tension between mainstream culture and the lesbian subculture requires the characters to address issues of assimilation as they find themselves caught between “a widening of opportunities and acceptance for alternative families and sexualities but a simultaneous broadening of a corporate market culture that swallows its rivals and threatens the identity of those whose sense of self has been tied to a GLBTQ or specifically lesbian subculture” (Gardiner, “Bechdel’s *Dykes*” 93). There are no easy answers given in Bechdel’s text, no direct manual for how to successfully avoid the mainstream, but the dykes’ commitment to continual dialogue about the issues keeps the conversations going, even if they don’t really go anywhere.

Being within this in-group gives Bechdel the space to be critical about many aspects of the lesbian culture, but it also requires readers to have a “subcultural knowledge” (Beirne 174) that allows them to understand the jokes and criticism. Because a great majority of the humor and criticism examines unresolved social and political conflicts within the lesbian community, the comic recognizes how individuals cannot completely escape the realities of living under capitalism and thus encourages readers to maintain a critical consciousness toward politics and capitalism. The dialogic interaction of the dykes—and their continual struggle to reconcile their commodification with their resistant politics—exemplifies the complex relationship between butch identity, consumer capitalism, and agency.

The Butches of Madison County

Using humor and hyperbole to comment on the commodification of lesbian identity is also a tactic used in Ellen Orleans' humorous novella, *The Butches of Madison County*. The short piece is a parody of both *The Bridges of Madison County* and the lesbian romance genre. While the primary focus of the text is romance, Orleans also incorporates humorous scenarios that call attention to the commodified lesbian body. For example, in a transformative love scene, a middle-aged (previously heterosexual) farm wife named Patsy experiences an awakening of her lesbian identity when she falls for Billie, a butch passing through her small, sleepy Iowa town. As the women prepare for their first sensual night together, listening to Enya and eating artichokes to set the mood, Patsy emerges from the shower—reborn into the world of Sappho. But Patsy faces a conundrum: how does she clothe her newly-minted lesbian body? She chooses to don “high-cut underwear and a sports bra” covering up with “a pair of soft white trousers and a deep red tank top that Pete considered trashy” (Orleans 65). Patsy then decides to raid her daughter's closet and hesitantly adds a torn-up basketball hoodie to her outfit, saying “It's my first night as a lesbian...I guess it's okay if I don't know what to wear” (Orleans 65).

While the first few items—the underwear, sports bra, and white trousers—don't seem to say much except to comment on Patsy's lack of traditional sex appeal, the red tank top, which adds the first splash of color on Patsy's white palate, holds more significance. We're told that Pete (her husband) considers the tank top to be trashy. For Patsy to choose this tank top shows a moment of rebellion; she is no longer simply Pete's wife, nor must she still obey his heteronormative expectations of modesty. As she stealthily steals her daughter's athletic

sweatshirt and dons the torn-up hoodie, Patsy resists her heteronormative image again, reconstructing her physical appearance to read as transgressively as her new sexual identity.

After taking the time to choose her first outfit as a lesbian, Patsy acknowledges “it’s okay if I don’t know what to wear” (Orleans 65). This loaded statement can be interpreted in two ways. First, perhaps Patsy is humorously commenting on the stereotype that lesbians have no fashion sense; she may be throwing her sense of style out the window along with her heterosexual identity. While this interpretation is possible, an alternative reading reflects an awareness of the constructed nature of identity. In this moment, Patsy recognizes the importance physical signifiers have on constructing her lesbian identity compared to her previously held heteronormative identity. In Patsy’s statement, there is an implicit suggestion that lesbian bodies are attired with elements of resistance, and turning these initial resistant clothing choices into a sense of style is not automatic—rather, the physical appearance of the lesbian is thoughtfully constructed, developed through practice, and embedded through repetition.

Although the importance of physical signifiers is deeply embedded in Patsy’s realization of her lesbian identity, the parodic tone of *The Butches of Madison County* urges us to examine just what function this commodity-heavy passage aims to serve. An initial reading suggests a reality of lesbian identification construction, but the hyperbolic nature of the text leads me to read this passage as simultaneously acknowledging the commodified lesbian identity and critiquing the reliance of identity construction on commodities. Additionally, an earlier moment in the text where two older butches explain the historical developments of butch and femme identity demand that this passage is read as a critique. Sage butch Mamie recounts, “Butch. Femme. [...] It’s just a sexual energy that grew clothes,” and another butch chimes in, “Back

then, it *meant* something for a woman to wear pants. In this decade, butch and femme are just fashion statements” (Orleans 57-58). These critiques of current butch and femme identity suggest an overwhelming reliance on clothing to signify identity. This scene is quickly followed by Patsy’s wardrobe scene, linking a critique of butch and femme commodification to a lesbian’s participation in constructing her identity through physical signifiers.

Additionally, the novella touches on how people use style and commodities to identify with a desired community. At the beginning of the novel, Billie recounts her coming out experience and recalls purchasing a VW bug after becoming restless with her town’s scene, which was “a purchase that granted her full-fledged membership in the lesbian nation” (Orleans 14). Beyond any bodily expressions of style, it is purchasing that car that completes her orientation into the “lesbian nation.” The car—typically considered to be a symbol of freedom—takes on additional meaning in the context of the lesbian experience; instead of simply being a symbol for independence, it now becomes a signal of lesbian identity. This small detail of Billie’s life shows a significant process of excorporation by the lesbian community; VW most likely did not intend for their cars to be a tell-tale sign of lesbian identity, but the large lesbian VW ownership made the bug serve as a purchase to gain membership and identify with the community.

The simultaneous commodification of lesbian identity and its critique shown in *The Butches of Madison County* suggests a complicated connection between lesbian identity and systems of consumerist capitalism. While the tongue-in-cheek tone of this short novella urges us to look deeper and consider the purpose of such parody, it doesn’t cancel out the fact that the material signifiers of style *are* used to perform lesbian identity. Regardless of how self-aware or

critical individuals are when constructing their identities, it still remains necessary to rely on material signifiers—one simply cannot escape some sort of participation in consumer culture.

Compared to *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*, *The Butches of Madison County* is not as resistant to capitalist systems. Due to the text's brevity and humorous genre, there is no room for Orleans to fully develop critical consumers or political activists who engage with other systems of capitalism. However, the work this brief piece does is still significant, as it acknowledges individuals' reliance on material signifiers. This acknowledgement that style is always already commodified shows an awareness of the complex relationship between commodification and agency; while no strategies are offered to reconcile the relationship, the mere acknowledgement encourages readers to laugh at and recognize their own reliance on physical signifiers. We laugh at Patsy's fashion and agree with the sage butch's evaluation of current butch-femme culture because we recognize some relation (though not necessarily a completely truthful connection) to our reality. Humor thus serves as a way to self-reflect and relate within the safety of a lesbian in-group, and this first step of self-reflection and seeing ourselves within the characters has the potential to raise awareness of critical consumerism.

The Creamsickle

A significant shift in how texts navigate the relationship between identity and consumer capitalism can be seen when we switch from media such as comics and parodic novellas to traditional novels. As a glimpse into a San Francisco community of young butches and gender-variant individuals, *The Creamsickle* by Rhiannon Argo is another text that addresses the relationship between butch identity performance and consumer capitalism. However, this novel is less sophisticated and successful in its exploration of the relationship and does not fully reflect

the complexity of life in Western capitalist societies. The narrative follows Georgie, a “baby butch” lesbian and a group of her friends dubbed “The Crew,” consisting of “Butches, Bois, Boyish Girls, BG’s whatever you call us” (Argo 21), as they navigate the streets (and sheets) of San Francisco on their skateboards. As the motley crew of queers copes with fleeting romances, heartbreak, and being broke, they all know that they are always welcome at The Creamsickle, their run-down rental home. When Georgie becomes too impoverished to be supported by her friends, she resorts to becoming an exotic dancer at a strip club. This new job requires her to enter the world of femmes, where she explores her more fluid and changing gender identity. As Georgie gets back on her feet, The Creamsickle is purchased by gentrifiers and the crew is served with an eviction notice—though (in an overly convenient ending) the friends’ leases are eventually bought out with large sums of money that help them move forward.

Throughout the narrative, the characters are constantly navigating the relationship between self and society, between being themselves and becoming themselves, and between their identities and consumer capitalism. However, Argo’s devotion to realism and reflecting the casual thoughts of the characters prevents the text from deeply analyzing how the characters critically engage with capitalist systems. While there are several connections between identity expression and commodification, the vignette-sketch style of the text prevents issues from being thoroughly examined. The characters’ lack of critical engagement thus minimizes the critical significance of the text; participation in capitalist systems is present, but the conversation around such issues remains relatively limited.

One connection between identity expression and commodification is seen in Georgie’s exploration of femme identity in order to have a job at a strip club. Though Georgie begins the

novel identifying as butch, she is so broke and desperate that she takes a job as a stripper, a role that requires her to become more feminine in order to appeal to her male audience. Georgie is taken under the wings of several femmes who work at The Minxy and is educated in femme power, loyalty, and proper body waxing. Though Georgie is really only femme-for-hire, femme performance begins to permeate into her life, making her gender expression more fluid. Having a butch-identified person put on a femme persona in order to make money suggests that femininity can be commodified and used to benefit the individual, but it also suggests that the feminine female body is one to be sold—simply by becoming more of a femme stripper, Georgie’s body acquires more value and she makes more money. Georgie’s increasing value as a femme also suggests that butch bodies are less valuable, or at least less marketable, to a male-dominated industry such as strip-clubs, further exemplifying that butch style is resistant to appeasing patriarchal, heteronormative desires. While Georgie blurs boundaries between butch and femme in her non-work life, the strip club requires her to perform an essentialized femme identity; any signs of masculinity (such as body hair or masculine postures) diminish her sex appeal and therefore her profit. As Georgie reconciles her need to eat with her qualms about stripping, we see her wrestling with the complex dilemma of the allure of making a profit and remaining true to her principles.

Additional moments of resistance are present throughout the text as the characters react to and question capitalist ideals, such as the legitimacy of the “American Dream” and gentrification. These moments (despite their brevity) tie formative identity moments directly to capitalism and consumerism in both critical and complicit ways. First, the fact that Georgie and The Crew are living in relative poverty allows for capitalism and finances to be part of casual

conversation.¹⁰ Members of The Crew rely on each other both financially and emotionally, and The Creamsickle is a common location for people to crash as they figure out more permanent housing. However, as members of The Crew start to dissipate and follow their own needs and desires, Georgie struggles to find steady work and ultimately cannot afford food. The Crew's communal living experiment isn't effective at supporting each individual, and Georgie must apply for government assistance. This plot twist allows readers to witness Georgie's emotional and psychological experiences with getting food stamps and shows the complex realities of reconciling desperate need with guilt over receiving assistance.

Requiring assistance to survive does not support the “bootstraps” mantra of American individualism, and it forces people to self-elect into a system that maintains control over basic resources. Georgie's guilt over needing food stamps causes her to quickly max out her card partly due to her generosity, but more notably because The Creamsickle's residents are allowing their lovers to help themselves to the “free” food (Argo 143-44). Georgie finally confronts one girl who retorts, “What you get it for free anyways [*sic*]. What? You mean we can't *all* get hooked up by the government?” (Argo 144). This belief that Georgie is not entitled to keeping her own assistance—and that they all should be “hooked up by the government”—suggests a queering of the intended use of government assistance. Instead of feeding Georgie adequately for a month, the lovers in the communal house believe the resources should be used to benefit the largest number of people. Although the (un)critical consumption of resources could be seen as a

¹⁰ An exception to the poverty of the group is Cruzer, who has a significantly higher cash flow thanks to her mother's remarriage. However, Cruzer severely lacks money management skills and frequently runs into financial trouble.

small act of resistance, the scene ultimately exposes a terse reality of what is needed to survive within a capitalist country that does not equally provide for all its citizens.

The most complex depiction of participation in consumerism occurs when the group changes their binding technique, inspired by a trans man named Luc who starts to spend time at The Creamsickle. Georgie, Soda, and Cruzer run to Walgreens so Soda can purchase a back brace because “bois are starting to use them to press their tits down” (Argo 107).¹¹ Even though Soda is the only person who planned to purchase a binder, Cruzer and Georgie try them on and are impressed at how effective they are, so they purchase them, as well, starting a trend within the community. Georgie recounts, “The next day Tiny and Coby go buy binders too. They tell a bunch of other kids, and all the bois in the neighborhood collectively put all the Walgreens out of stock” (Argo 107). As Walgreens gets requests to restock and meet the market demand, Georgie notices how the trend takes off, observing “I look around The Vine one Monday night, and I notice that just about every boi in the bar has a flat-as-a-board chest. The binder is an integral part of boyish-girl style, now that it’s so easy to get” (Argo 107). The relative accessibility makes this back-brace-turned-binder a hot commodity and (even more important to our characters) a key component to being identified as part of the butch boi community.

While the change in binders is an example of fashion trends directly profiting a big corporation through consumption, the use of a back brace for the alternative purpose of binding is a prime example of taking a standard commodity and queering it for a non-heteronormative purpose. Using back braces in this queer context is beneficial to the purchasers and therefore a less complicit interaction with consumerism than it initially seems. Not only do the wearers find

¹¹ Compared to their previous method of using an ACE bandage, the back braces are easier and more comfortable to wear, and they are more effective in flattening the chest (Argo 107).

a more comfortable way to bind, but they also are able to meet their needs with a potentially less expensive product (as many binders fall in the \$30-60 range, depending on quality). This queering suggests an aspect of control over commodities through dislodging them from their traditional usage and excorporating them into butch subculture. The characters in *The Creamsickle* may not have been fully aware of the power behind the excorporation of the back brace, but as readers we are able to see how this functions as an alternative to purchasing a more expensive binder from a company that markets specifically to this population.

The binder scenario shows the most sophisticated understanding of the complex connection between identity and consumer capitalism in *The Creamsickle*. Certainly there are opportunities to view The Crew's actions as critically conscious, although the absence of their internal thoughts prohibits me from believing they were acting with a developed sense of agency. Compared to *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*, *The Creamsickle* does not engage with capitalist systems as critically as it potentially could. While the characters definitely deal with capitalist themes, the novel's analysis is limited and leaves the reader with a feeling that the text is *almost* critical but not nearly enough to be overtly so.

This assessment of the novel not reaching its critical potential is most evident in the concluding chapters when The Crew takes an artistic stand against the gentrification of their neighborhood. Georgie notices that houses in their neighborhood are being remodeled and rented to wealthier people: "I would tick them off one by one when I skate by. *Another one taken by the man!* Our house was on the edge of historic Liberty Hill, a hot spot for revamped million dollar homes" (Argo 224). As their neighborhood becomes a more lucrative location for investors to create high-end real estate, the crew is informed that *The Creamsickle* has been sold. While the

group is dismayed over the prospect of finding new places to live, they decide they must honor The Creamsickle and their collective lives there by throwing an art party in order to “go out with a bang” (Argo 239). Because they know the building is going to be renovated for new condos, property damage is not a concern; they allow people to tag the walls with spray paint, they build a beer can castle, and they create collages on the walls.

However, while The Crew’s artistic resistance to gentrification could be viewed as fueled by anti-capitalist principles, the resistant art is not the primary focus of the ending scenes, limiting the potential for critical commentary. Instead, Argo explores how the characters mourn the loss of their house and their collective home as they party and engage in one last sexual contest (241); this focus unfortunately shifts the attention from the potentially radical artistic resistance to the depressing reality of young adults partying to avoid their struggles. The effect of this unrealized potential for resistance suggests an attitude of apathy toward the complex reality of existing within capitalist society, and it also limits the opportunities for critical engagement. In addition to the characters being too intoxicated to do anything of substance, the novel conveniently ends with the Crew discovering that they each receive several thousand dollars as a result of being evicted. The payout gives the Crew hope for their futures, and they plan how they’re going to spend their money (Argo 243-244). While Soda plans to save the money to pay for top surgery, Georgie “want[s] to live an endless skate summer in Brazil, and Cruzer . . . announces that with that amount of cash she could get one thousand six hundred and eighty Vicodins” (Argo 244). Cruzer immediately cashes her check and begins flagrantly spending the money, deliriously happy about holding \$4000 at once (Argo 248). The novel ends before we know exactly how the money affects the fates of The Crew, but it is clear that the money will

make their lives a bit easier, as the stress of scraping by is temporarily alleviated. Though a stronger political statement could have been made by The Crew refusing to take the money, their ultimate need for additional cash flow outweighs taking a stance against gentrification.

Although *The Creamsickle* certainly addresses issues of butch identity, gender fluidity, and alternative living, the characters do not provide as much commentary on their resistance as the dykes of Bechdel's comic, nor do they critically participate in capitalist systems. A reader can interpret the scenes above and dissect them for anti-capitalist sentiments, but the minimal self-awareness of the characters challenges these moments of resistance. What good does it do to incorporate an everyday object such as a back brace if one isn't cognizant of the resistance? Does it matter that The Crew tends to swap clothing and other necessities instead of purchasing new ones if they're doing it out of necessity, not principle? It's possible to argue that the characters in *The Creamsickle* express their butch identity less by their physical signifiers and resistance and more through their perpetuation of misogynist attitudes toward feminine women and sexual relations. While their style is important, it is the characters' attitudes that exert the strongest influence on being read as butch. Since many of the butches perpetuate this misogynist, bravado-filled persona, the range of butch identity produced in the novel is ultimately both reductive and essentialist. At times, the "day in the life of a young struggling butch" feeling implies that to be butch is to get high, get laid, and get by; much of the narrative focuses on the interpersonal relationships between The Crew and their love interests, while the moments of anti-capitalist resistance could be considered mere footnotes in a survival narrative. Nevertheless, the slight moments of resistance, such as milking the food stamp system or vandalizing their own house, suggest ways to cope with our inevitable participation with capitalism and all its systems.

This ability to find coping strategies shows a complicated relationship with consumer capitalism, one that is both participatory and somewhat critical. While it may be impossible and unrealistic to derail capitalism, one can find comfort in exploiting a flawed system, find joy in celebrating the unvalued, and ultimately benefit from the capitalist system of gentrification.

The Difference Between You and Me

While Argo's *The Creamsickle* was not unproblematic in its depictions of butch identity and participation in consumer culture, the small moments of resistance to systemic inequality allow for some potential models for how to interact with consumer capitalism. When we make the switch to Madeline George's 2012 young adult novel, *The Difference Between You and Me*, however, anti-capitalist activism is a key element of the plot, but opportunities for critical participation are over-simplified and essentialized, thus resulting in a less sophisticated (and ultimately damaging) analysis of the relationship between identity and consumer capitalism.¹²

The novel explores the tension between public and private spheres as it focuses on the relationship between two girls—Jesse and Emily—who couldn't be more different. Jesse is a politically radical teenage butch who secretly posts anarchist manifestos around the school. Emily is the hyper-feminine perfectionist obsessed with her reputation; as the Vice President of Student Council and as one half of the high school's heterosexual "it-couple," Emily takes her self-imposed position as a role model seriously. But the girls' differences don't stop them from secretly meeting in a bathroom once a week for a steamy hookup; only when their lives outside of the bathroom stall start to overlap do problems arise in their private paradise. Through an

¹² While a younger audience may be assumed given the novel's young adult status, to assume that a lack of sophisticated analysis is due to its YA classification wrongly assumes that the audience would be incapable of understanding complex relationships without easy resolution.

unpaid internship at StarMart (a Walmart-like corporation that threatens to wipe out local businesses), Emily becomes directly aligned with the evils of big business and capitalism. When Jesse befriends another radical named Esther, she turns her resistance into activism and works with her community to prevent StarMart from moving into their town. Through her campaign against StarMart, Jesse is pitted against Emily and realizes that the personal is, indeed, political. Jesse's painful journey to an ultimate dismissal of Emily's desire evokes the feeling of a young activist learning about the necessity of personal sacrifice in order to make a difference in the community. While this anti-capitalist plotline suggests an underlying critique of consumerism, the novel's essentialized and stereotypical character and plot constructions cause the text to fall into the trap of promoting an oversimplified and unrealistic message about the dangers of capitalism.

George's reliance on essentialized and stereotypical identities is initially apparent through her descriptions of Jesse's style. The first description given of Jesse is of her "huge, scuffed fisherman's boots" that provide a stark contrast to the tittering girls primping in front of the bathroom mirror (George 5-6) and an even more oppositional distinction from Emily's cashmere sweaters and pearls. Right away, it's clear that Jesse is different, and her alternative looks are further emphasized when the primping girls police her right to be in the bathroom, asking "Don't you know this is the *girls'* room?" (George 9). The bathroom incident, a frequent occurrence for Jesse and other butch or gender nonconforming people, ends with one girl incorrectly gendering Jesse and calling her a dyke (George 12). Jesse then steps in front of the mirror and we learn that "She doesn't look like much. Dark, angry eyes, messy thatched-roof haircut the color and texture of straw, clenched fists, square shoulders, ringer tee, cargo pants, fisherman's boots" (George

13). In addition to her body language expressing physical tension in clenched fists and squared shoulders (two physical attributes often joined to masculinity), she is wearing clothing commonly considered to be one of the standard outfits of butch lesbians. And while Jesse may assert her butch identity through material signifiers, the way she acquires these commodities is through thrift stores; this thrifting can be conceived as resistance to the capitalist notion of acquiring the newest, best commodities. By purchasing her blue tux from a thrift store, for example, she is able to participate in consumer culture in a more mindful way, thus deepening the significance of her alternative, resistant style.

Additionally, the juxtaposition of Emily and Jesse through chapters that alternate between the girls' point of view creates an over-simplified binary opposition between them. Taking on urban sprawl (while an impossible problem for a teenager to solve) is cast as heroic in George's novel, a point that is emphasized by the privileged spot of Jesse's narrative in the text. Noticeably, George emotionally invests in Jesse's narrative while painting Emily as the stereotypically naïve and self-centered femme, and the alternating chapters do not seem remotely balanced. In an interview with YA author Malinda Lo, George defends her choice to trade between third person for Jesse's chapters and first person for Emily's chapters by explaining that first person narratives are more limited and are "often deluded and self-serving...I gave the deluded first person to Emily, the character who's least in touch with her own motivations and most involved in fabricating elaborate self-justifications to allow herself to continue to act hypocritically." The third-person narrative, then, is reserved for Jesse because George "wanted to give her version of the story more cred and legitimacy" (Lo). This added legitimacy therefore encourages readers to sympathize with Jesse's desire to look outward and help the community,

and Emily's involvement with big business is painted negatively, despite the fact that Emily's misguided actions are fueled by positive (though naïve) intentions to build community partnerships and acquire sponsorship and funding for school programs. The binary opposition between the two girls and the limited use of Emily's voice makes it clear that complacent participation with large corporations is not behavior that George condones in her readers. When Jesse eventually takes a stand against Emily in protest over the school dance's StarMart sponsorship, her resistance is not simply against Emily, but against capitalism and urban sprawl, further casting her as the undeniable hero of the tale. However, even though Jesse's narrative is in the more sophisticated third-person, it still participates in a largely uncritical and essentialist portrayal of butch identity as it is related to consumer capitalism. Although Jesse's narrative arc does progress from passivity to activity as her sense of identity strengthens, the text ultimately perpetuates an all-or-nothing approach to participation in capitalist systems and does not address the true complexity of living in a capitalist society.

The Difference Between You and Me has been considered a progressive coming-out novel by scholars such as Caroline Jones, who argues that there is an "explicit link between girls' sexual subjectivity and their agency—understanding and embracing her own sexuality opens to a young woman the possibilities and potential inherent in that understanding" (76).¹³ This link between sexuality and agency can undeniably be seen in Jesse's political and personal standoff with Emily. However, the lack of sexual agency permitted to Emily as she refuses to accept her

¹³ Jennifer Mitchell also argues that *The Difference Between You and Me* can be considered a more evolved coming-out narrative because it shows more than one queer experience. However, I'd argue that the queer experiences in the novel are not as groundbreaking as Mitchell suggests; rather, they rely on the stereotypical roles of "anti-assimilationist butch lesbian" and "confused (probably bi-not full lesbian) femme not willing to give up her straight privilege."

queer desire suggests that she should be punished for her naïve participation in hegemonic systems such as capitalism and heteronormativity.¹⁴ While there is power in emphasizing the importance of resistance, community activism, and valuing oneself, the message from Emily's point of view suggests that people who follow the rules and act in accordance with their expectations will ultimately be denied full agency. This novel sets up an "either you're for us or against us" mentality, and that dichotomy prevents any middle ground between participation in or resistance to consumer culture.¹⁵ While Jesse's flat-out resistance to the StarMart takeover is perceived as honorable, it doesn't account for the complex relationship between identity and consumer capitalism. It may be empowering for young adult audiences to see Jesse blossom into her authentic self through her activism, but it sets up an unattainable expectation of resistance that doesn't account for the complexity of being a subject who is always already commodified.

In addition to promoting an unattainably resistant relationship to capitalist structures, the binary opposition in *The Difference Between You and Me* also has a negative consequence for femmes: femme vilification. As the femme-identified person in the relationship, Emily is not only represented as the character who cannot overcome her flaws, but she is also represented as less critically conscious and more complicit in her commodification than Jesse, her butch counterpart. Just as Sydney's consumerism balances Mo's critical consciousness in *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*, Emily serves as the willful consumer in *The Difference Between You and Me* to offset Jesse's radical politics. Through their uncritical participation in consumer

¹⁴ Additionally, reviews of the novel point to the inherent biphobia and femme-phobia apparent in the construction of Emily as the naïve, yet still guilty, villain.

¹⁵ Though the StarMart struggle is an important part of the plot, few reviews of the novel discuss the strong anti-corporate message, emphasizing instead the relationship between the two very different girls.

capitalism, both of these femme characters commodify and exploit themselves and their loved ones. Considering that both of these femme characters are also often on the wrong side of moral issues (with Emily desiring secrecy and Sydney choosing to cheat), these texts seem to argue that participation in consumer capitalism is evidence of moral deficiencies. In addition to negatively representing femmes, this representation makes the butch counterparts' negative qualities (in Mo's case, her self-righteous intolerance; in Jesse's case, her initial lack of action to back up her word) seem less significant in comparison. However, the distinct difference in the level of sophistication and complexity between *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* and *The Difference Between You and Me* causes Bechdel's text to be less problematic than George's novel. Bechdel more effectively commits to a dialectic atmosphere that prevents Sydney from being simply evil, and she develops Sydney's voice as thoroughly as the voices of other characters. On the other hand, George's admittedly biased treatment of the girls' voices prevents a true dialogue from occurring; Emily and Jesse are never on equal ground, thus preventing Emily's motives from being seen as anything but naïve and complicit.

George's reliance on tropes of lesbian identity isn't too surprising, as there is certainly some benefit to calling on recognizable lesbian roles when constructing characters. But relying on stereotypes or one-sided tropes holds additional consequences in Young Adult fiction. Young adult novels can be argued to have a more complex role in readers' lives than traditional fiction due to the fact that they are aimed at individuals who are in their formative years. Cook et al. note the significance of LGBT fiction in identity formation:

While heterosexual young adults look to their peers for models, LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) young adults are less likely to have ready access to LGB peers with whom they can identify...Therefore, media sources that portray gay and lesbian

characters are often the only source that LGB young adults have for non-heterosexual role models. (152)

Given the impact of YA characters on the identity formation of young queer readers, George's essentialized construction of the characters and their blunt relationships to consumer capitalism is more concerning. If readers are faced with overly simple or essentialized identities, such as Emily's or Jesse's, they may feel that they have limited options for expressing their identity, despite the infinite and complex possibilities for identity expression.

Not only do YA texts such as *The Difference Between You and Me* serve to inform expectations of queer identity, but they also serve as a record of what it is like to be a queer coming-of-age in the early 21st century. As individuals increasingly record their lives through online social media accounts, it becomes vital to analyze how these digital texts connect to broader cultural questions about identity and community. When the target audience of YA novels (individuals between 14-22) begin to document their own lives through social media sites such as Tumblr—when these individuals begin actively constructing and archiving their identities—we have to consider how their ideas of selfhood are shaped by the media they consume. Is there a link between representations of identity in print and digital texts? Do emerging media provide more opportunities for people to negotiate the complex relationship between their identities and consumer capitalism? As we move into examining digital identity narratives constructed on Tumblr, these questions suggest that we need to address the implications of these complex relationships and consider ways in which to encourage more thoughtful consumption through the use of digital tools.

Chapter 2: Butch (Self) Representation on Tumblr

While butch identity in contemporary lesbian literature has a relatively complex relationship with consumer culture, the texts are limited representations of the butch experience because they are fictional creative works. A more valuable and complete analysis would consider how butch identity is constructed in relation to consumer capitalism in lived experience, and the Internet provides a virtual space for individuals to express and manage their lived realities and identities. As a continually crossed borderland between reality and fantasy, the Internet gives people the opportunity to construct their identities in a manner that combines their lived experiences with the conventions and possibilities of the creative world.¹⁶ Narratives and identities expressed on micro-blogging sites such as Tumblr allow for a glimpse at such identity construction due to their relative accessibility and their function as tools designed for personal expression. Additionally, Tumblr's free and quick publication function and the ability to archive material make the site particularly well suited for such examination. However, despite the freedom of self-expression and self-publication provided by Tumblr, an analysis of digital narratives on the site shows relatively limited and simplistic expressions of butch identity. When these digital narratives are compared to literary narratives, the significantly lower level of critique in the digital landscape suggests that a strong critical consciousness is lacking. Whereas the print texts used style and further engagement in other capitalist structures to show the complex relationship between identity and consumer capitalism, the online narratives do not move beyond superficial expressions of style. Instead of using an online platform to express the

¹⁶ See *Digital Borderlands* (Fornäs, Klein, Ladendorf, Sundén, & Sveningsson) for studies on various border relationships present in digital media and Internet research.

complexities of individual existence in capitalist society, butch blogs on Tumblr therefore perpetuate essentialist notions of butch identity and uncritical consumerism.

The lack of individual expression on Tumblr blogs is surprising because it contradicts the assumed freedom of expression and protection from reality that online spaces usually provide.¹⁷ Although the Internet was developed for and primarily used by the military and people in scientific and academic fields, the 1990s heralded a new era of Internet usage when it became more accessible to the public.¹⁸ T.V. Reed labels the first phase of this more public Internet use as the “avant-garde countercultural” stage. The Internet came to be seen as a “potential cyberutopia embodying the values of ‘peace, love, and understanding’ at the heart of hippie ideology” (Reed 33). Users during this stage, predominantly located in the San Francisco area, became increasingly critical of the country’s focus on money, war, and “selfish forms of excessive individualism,” all which caused “soul of America to be lost in a sea of excessive consumerism” (Reed 34). Thus, these people were hopeful that the Internet would prove to be “a free, open new form of communication beyond the control of corporations and the government could radically change the country and the world for better” (Reed 34).

Considering the avant-garde countercultural movement, one can see some clear connections between the ideals of the cyberutopia, queer politics, and politics of consumption. The desire to use the Internet as a tool for communication and the hope that this technology could be used to resist hegemony are concepts that (while idealistic) have inspired many an

¹⁷ Hinton and Hjorth claim that the internet is “inherently democratising [sic]” and has been considered such by early internet theorists (71-72). Additionally, Reed argues that the web has the potential to break up patterns of hegemony and cultural imperialism, but “only action—through critical digital culture analyses, social protest activism, and political lobbying—will make the wider democratic potential of digital cultures a reality” (80).

¹⁸ See Reed’s *Digitized Lives* for a thorough history of the Internet.

isolated or marginalized individual to enter online spaces. Early scholarly research explains the opportunities for individual expression and community building among queer individuals, and the relative accessibility of the Internet allows marginalized and previously silenced voices to speak out about and for themselves.¹⁹ Some of the Internet's characteristics that aided in this development of queer cyberspaces are its disembodied format, its capacity to form communities that transcend geographical boundaries, and its increasingly accessible format.

Part of the liberatory potential of the Internet comes from its disembodied format: "The Internet is a very non-transparent medium, where gender, sexuality, identity, and corporeality are beyond the plane of certainty. The boundaries delineated by cultural constructions of the body are both subverted and given free reign in virtual environments" (Reid, summarized in Ross 345). By virtually creating themselves in their ideal image, users can be whoever they want to be. However, especially in more recent culture, authenticity is highly valued online, and users must balance their needs for privacy with the "need for community based on identification with others through sameness" (Rak 176). Users can show that their online identities match who they "really are" by providing glimpses backstage into their offline lives. By posting selfies, connecting with others, and maintaining a sense of realness in the text they compose, blog users who are perceived to be more authentic can develop strong relationships with their audience.

Another empowering element of the Internet is its promotion of community formation, especially given the Web's central and integral role in everyday life and social interactions. Online community building is crucial for marginalized individuals who may not have physical access to communities in real life due to location or safety concerns. Michael W. Ross explains,

¹⁹ See the works of Alexander, Rak, Reid, and Ross.

for example, that many scholars in the 1990s noted the symbiotic growth of online communities:

People who might have hid their sexual interests for social and legal reasons can now congregate electronically and discuss these issues openly, often while still maintaining their anonymity. Such electronic congregation may not only constitute, but also create, communities of identity and interest which were previously not possible due to stigma or the relative rarity of particular sexual interests. Thus, the Internet may actually shape sexual communities. (349)

These electronic congregations allow people to connect with others who have similar desires, an act that provides people with a sense of validation and belonging and which may have a strong impact on one's sense of self-worth. Especially for young queers in rural areas, such validation and support may make the difference between life and death.

Additionally, the Internet's increasing accessibility provides a creative space for people to self-publish work that may not adhere to normative, socially-accepted standards of discourse. Whereas printed texts require a publishing agency for production and distribution—significantly limiting the voices that are able to be discovered in the wide sea of hopeful manuscripts—digital texts can be published and distributed online with little to no overhead costs. While social media sites are still owned by corporations, the erasure of the publishing “middle-man” allows for a more direct connection between authors and their audiences. Thus, marginalized groups who have previously been (or currently are) subject to censorship can utilize the Internet as a tool for publication and expression. In “Queer Webs: Representations of LGBT people and communities on the World Wide Web,” Jonathan Alexander states, “Internet technologies offer individuals—and groups—revolutionary ways to represent themselves by...experimenting with different modes of representation” (69). This opportunity for experimentation suggests a hopeful and liberatory potential for online texts that challenge normative rhetorical discourse and allow

creative expression that resists normative textual traditions.²⁰

Though scholarship on the queer potentiality of the Internet has been predominantly positive, some scholars point out the implications of queer migration from reality to virtual worlds. Through an analysis of “homo-pages,” Alexander discovered that they tended to replicate “an essentialist understanding of gay identity, which narrates gayness as the core and relatively unchanging component of selfhood around which all of the other ‘plots’ of one’s life are organized and come (contextually) into meaning” (“Homo-pages” 86). Additionally, Alexander also notes the homogeneity of these queer online spaces, with a “distinct lack of class, racial, and ethnic diversity” present in the sample pools (101).²¹ For historically marginalized communities, particularly queer communities, an opportunity to create ideal virtual lives and histories can be a way to develop a stronger sense of community and identity, but a thriving virtual life doesn’t necessarily carry over into reality offline. In his 1995 article entitled “Birth of the Cyberqueer,” Donald Morton critically points out that

Cyberspace is a bourgeois designer space in which privileged Western or Westernized subjects fantasize that instead of being chosen by history, they choose their own histories. By manipulating the machines, the user-subjects write virtual histories according to their desires and seek to evade present historical conditions. Cyberspace is thus symptomatic of the (post)modern displacement of need by desire (the material by the ideal). (375)

The opportunity to “evade present historical conditions” in an effort to create a more supportive and personal online arena is just as appealing in 2015 as Morton suggests it was in 1995, and this

²⁰ An example (both in format and content) of resisting normative rhetorical traditions is present in Alexander and Rhodes’s online essay, “Queer Rhetoric and the Pleasures of the Archive.” Published solely online, this scholarly article queers expectations of traditional scholarly papers by allowing for less linear navigation (instead of reading from top to bottom, readers can jump around in the text), juxtaposing images and videos within the text, and challenging the Aristotelian appeals to logic.

²¹ Rak also notes this homogeneity (179-180).

trend is particularly evident in how integral technology and social media are in everyday life. The developments of the Internet in the past twenty years have provided new interfaces and platforms for people to design their fantasy spaces, and the microblogging site Tumblr is one prime example of such technology.

Developed in 2007, Tumblr touts itself as a “global platform for creativity and self-expression” that is “deeply committed to supporting and protecting freedom of speech” (“Community Guidelines”). Using several simple buttons, bloggers can create content with photos, text, and links. A dashboard (a live feed similar to Facebook’s News Feed) displays posts by blogs that users follow, and posts can be “liked” or reblogged to the user’s own followers. These tools allow users to create their own unique blog space, personalize the layout and content flow, and create digital tapestries of their own individual lives and desires.

Tumblr is distinct from Facebook and Twitter because its communities form based primarily around shared interests and themes rather than real-life social networks.²² Bercovici explains, “If Facebook is where you check in with your real-life friends and Twitter is how you keep up with current events, the Tumblr experience can be boiled down to people expressing themselves publicly.” Tumblr is clear with users that all content posted is public unless settings are specifically adjusted, but based on the relatively low crossover between real-life social networks and Tumblr communities compared to Facebook, users have more room to publicly (or anonymously, if so desired) express themselves in a safer network. This has significant benefits

²² For a thorough overview of social media sites and Web 2.0 culture, see Hinton & Horth’s *Understanding Social Media*.

for queer individuals who may self-censor out of necessity on more popular networks.²³ Queer individuals are especially able to take refuge in Tumblr's space; whereas identity expression is still heavily policed on Facebook and other sites since multiple audiences are streamlined into one newsfeed, the niche communities formed on Tumblr allow for freer expression with fewer dangers of conservative employers or family members viewing queer-related posts. The perception of relative freedom for self-expression on Tumblr and the site's possibilities for forming communities make it a well-suited arena for studying butch style, particularly because people are choosing how they represent themselves to their online audiences.

Despite Tumblr's goal of being considered a place for free expression, we see some significant constraints with what types of butch identity expression are visible and identifiable.²⁴ Instead of a diverse range of butch expression, a survey of butch-identified blogs suggests a perpetuation of essentialist notions of butch identity, stripped of much of their political or critical power. Users exemplify less critically conscious participation in consumer culture, and an awareness of the individual's role in capitalist systems is virtually non-existent (or at least never divulged through posts). Unlike the literary representations addressed in the previous chapter,

²³ Through their research on queer identity management and political self expression on social networking sites, Fox and Warber noted how many young queer users felt more comfortable expressing their identity on sites like Tumblr over Facebook. They discovered that users frequently turned to Tumblr as arenas for expressing gay identity (Fox and Warber 90).

²⁴ In his analysis of homepages, Charles Cheung argues that homepages are an emancipatory genre but the emancipatory potential is "limited and often not fully exploited" due to the factors of commercial control over content and ideological forces that "suppress the expressiveness" of authors (274, 281). This suppression is done through offering cookie-cutter templates through commercial homepage providers and through homepage content control. Tumblr users also get to choose among a variety of templates (or they can make their own themes, which requires much more technological savvy), and content is also regulated (though to a much lesser degree) in order to uphold the Tumblr Community standards.

there is no acknowledgment of the connection between the individual and capitalist systems. Users are instead constructing their own narratives based primarily on physical stylistic signifiers. While it is impossible to articulate exactly why the critique is absent, this phenomenon of expressing simplified and essentialized identities could be indicative of complacent commodification and potentially signify a strategic mechanism that allows users to cope with the overwhelming complexity of reality. The dangerous effect of this unrealized critical potential is that it simplifies representations of butch experience to one essential, homogeneous narrative and removes the political aspects of butch identity, and in doing so perpetuates uncritical consumer behaviors that ultimately commodify the individual and render them complicit in the capitalist machine.

Methodology and Limitations:²⁵

In order to find blogs of butch-identified users, I used the search option on my Tumblr dashboard, which yielded two categories of results: blogs and posts that utilize the hashtag butch (hereafter noted as #butch). In addition to analyzing posts under #butch, I also examined ten individual butch blogs (instead of #butch posts), which allowed me to trace specific individuals over a series of 50 posts to see how the users utilized their blogs to express their butch identities.

Blogs were selected according to the following criteria:

1. The user must self-identify as butch, either through indication in their personal description, their user url, or through using hashtags

²⁵ This project was deemed IRB-exempt by the IRB at St. Cloud State University. Despite Tumblr blogs being publicly accessible, I felt it was necessary to respect the anonymity of bloggers, as the original intent of their blogs may not have included research projects. Therefore, no direct quotes or traceable signifiers are provided. While this choice limits the amount of specific textual analysis possible, it was more important to protect the identities of the bloggers. See Appendix for IRB documentation.

2. The user must be over 18 or age unlisted. Any self-identified minors were excluded.
3. The blog must be a personal blog, meaning that the blog does not serve as a community submission-based blog or as a corporate/company blog. Personal blogs usually have some personal information and photos provided.
4. The sample pool must contain blogs from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. Although the butch Tumblr community is overwhelmingly white (and the boosted posts that get the most views are of white users), I believed that a more diverse sample pool would show a broader range of butch identities. A diverse sample also prevented me from drawing conclusions about the butch community based on one privileged racial background.
5. The blogs must belong to users outside of my personal social circles, both in reality and online. This ensured that I was interpreting the posts only as an outside audience member without additional personal information from a real-life encounter or connection.

After the blogs were selected, I noted any reference to gender or sexual identity in their “about me” description, noted the hashtags commonly chosen to tag selfies, and coded the fifty most recent posts on each blog. Using a numeric range of 50 posts allowed for the sample set to be similar in number, regardless of whether a user posted once per week or 100 times per day. After coding the posts, I examined the archives of each blog to determine whether the fifty blog posts were similar to the user’s standard content and to develop a richer understanding of how the users typically used their blogs. Each post was then sorted into a thematic category that best represented my “audience perception” of the material: LGBT/gender/sexuality, racial and social justice, consumerism (posts specifically about clothing, interior design, services received such as

haircuts, and other products that the user liked or desired), and other (posts about animals, nature, food, and other topics).²⁶

In order to respect each user's choices of how they identify, I will only use labels that they have assigned to themselves. Labels used to describe racial and ethnic identities were recorded when present, though only one white person identified as white. Therefore, whiteness was presumed through photos and based on a lack of any additional information in original uploads or racially-specific reblogged material. Any gender pronouns used reflect the pronouns preferred by the individual user. When preferred pronouns are not listed, I will employ the singular and gender-neutral "they."

Due to time constraints, the sample pool was limited to ten blogs, and the number of posts from each blog was limited to fifty posts. This research, therefore, is not indicative of the whole butch community on Tumblr, but it does suggest the emergence of a trend regarding how individuals' identities interact with capitalist systems. Additionally, because Tumblr is a relatively new social blogging site, the age range of butches is younger, with the oldest user identifying as 43. I was unable to find any blogs of older butches, which greatly impacts the types of butch expression and style that are present. Nevertheless, this research still presents valuable information regarding the butch community on Tumblr and should encourage other researchers in the future to more thoroughly examine how narratives are constructed using this growing media platform.

²⁶ Each categorization reflects my interpretation of the material as an outside audience member and therefore is not indicative of the user's intent for the material. Because Tumblrs are constructed for an audience (as previously discussed), it was therefore appropriate and valid to use an audience interpretation for coding purposes.

Community Demographics and Basic Use of Tumblr:

The specific butch-identified blogs that were analyzed belonged to individuals under the age of 43, with most users identifying or appearing to be in their mid-20s. Most individuals described themselves with multiple labels, including butch, queer, lesbian, trans, FTM, non-binary, and dyke. The aforementioned labels were used as hashtags to describe selfies, in addition to #genderfluid, #androgynous, #gay, #stud, #tomboy, and others. Only one user (Blog 6) noted an attraction or interest in men by noting that they were queer/bi. Additional demographic information is provided in Figure A.

Figure A: Demographic Information and Labels Used

Blog Label	Gender Identity/Sexual Orientation	Hashtags commonly used to describe selfies	Race/ Ethnicity
Blog 1	queer, masculine	#queer, #qtpoc, #qpoc	Black
Blog 2	FTM	#ftm, #butch, #queer, #latina #latin@	Puerto Rican
Blog 3	lesbian, dandy, softbutch, queer	#queer, #butchesandbabies	White
Blog 4	butch woman, queer, trans	#butch, #queer, #trans, #genderfluid, #dyke, #babydyke, #androgynous, #gay, #lesbian	White
Blog 5	butch dyke, She/Her pronouns, lesbian, neither cis nor trans	#me	Black
Blog 6	poly, queer, bi, princess butch, dyke in my spare time	n/a	White
Blog 7	tomboy, dyke	#tomboy, #butch, #boi, #taken, #dyke	Asian
Blog 8	Lesbian, not straight	#butch, #singlelesbian, #girlslikegirls,	Filipin@

		#girlslookingforgirls	
Blog 9	non-binary	#RealLiveTransAdult, #butch, #transmasculine, #queer	White
Blog 10	preference to marry woman noted	#lesbian, #dyke, #butch, #stud	White

The type and topic of posts varied from user to user, suggesting that there was not a specific method to express identity. Rather, individuals' identities were expressed through interlocking pieces that pertain to a variety of topics. As expected, butch identity was incorporated into a more complex identity, with nearly all users expressing interest in topics that are not directly related to butch or queer identity. Within the range of posts, three individuals—Blog 4, Blog 5, and Blog 9—used text to further express their butch identities beyond assigned labels or photos. Butch and queer identity was supported by references to queer popular culture and reblogging posts about LGBT issues. All individuals used their photos to express their butch style to the audience and relied on signifiers such as clothing, body language, and their hashtags to denote their butch presence.

Based on the demographic information gleaned from the blogs included in this project and the representations of butch in general hashtag searches, it appears that there is a limited range of who is claiming butch.²⁷ Unlike the femme identity, which is claimed by people of all genders and sexualities,²⁸ butch identity on Tumblr is typically restricted to people who identify as women, genderqueer, or trans and excludes heterosexuals, cisgender men, and MTF trans

²⁷ This finding further reflects the surprising level of homogeneity within queer online spaces, as found by Rak and Alexander.

²⁸ Based on a preliminary survey of #femme posts, it was apparent that a variety of people, including some male-born people also claim the label.

people. In fact, it seems as though no individuals who have been identified as male at birth are claiming the butch label on Tumblr. This limited sense of who can participate in the butch community seems to echo Lori Rifkin's tongue-in-cheek conclusions on "who can belong to the butch club" based on reviewing the scholarly literature on butch identity (160). Rifkin cites the following as requirements for card-holding butch members: "First, and foremost, a woman must be a lesbian.... 'Butch'... is explicitly denied to non-lesbian women" (160). Additionally, butches must remain consistent in their presentation as butch, "never present [themselves] as traditionally feminine in order to appeal to a male gaze," and must only present their butchness for other women (Rifkin 160). These regulations for belonging to the butch club were supported by the blogs used in this research.

Although the blogs and photos I analyzed are tagged as #butch, many users also used additional labels such as #queer, #lesbian, #ftm, #gay, #tomboy, and others. The practice of claiming multiple labels or hashtags allows users' posts to be distributed to a broader audience, providing greater exposure and more opportunities for community connections through marketing the self. Though users may be employing multiple labels to express a multi-faceted self, I believe that users place much more emphasis on their physical performances of identity than on specific labels. The aforementioned patchwork-quilt element of self-labeling also reflects how "lesbians from Generation X and more recent generations may be less personally identified with such terms [butch and femme]" (Tate 23). Additionally, the use of multiple labels in self-description confirms Joy Hightower's conclusion that "Labels have become less important in indicating a sexual preference and therefore they provide more fluid descriptions" (33). Adding that online spaces provide more opportunities for users to "identify across multiple points of the

‘lesbian continuum,’” Hightower continues, “It is the body that served as both a permanent fixture and a creative tool...Labels remain important markers of lesbian sexuality, yet in some cases, bodies matter more than self-proclaimed labels in constituting a desirable identity” (33). A picture is worth a thousand words, and it is the image that upholds the authenticity of butch identity in the eyes of the user and their audience.²⁹

Certainly a hashtag will allow other users to see the photo or content initially, but the content (not the label) is what draws potential followers and audience members in. By allowing oneself to be placed into multiple subject positions, butches on Tumblr are then expected to follow the discourses of each community and the expected cultural script, which manifests predominantly through expressions of style. Individuals must therefore prove that their stylistic presentations match their labels in order to achieve a sense of authenticity, which I argue ultimately commodifies and essentializes the range of expressions available. While donning multiple labels may seemingly provide multiple ways to express a more complex self, the range of style expressed by people using #butch is relatively limited and consistent.

Clearly users find a need to be read as butch on Tumblr, but what purpose does being read as lesbian in an online forum serve, especially with our society’s current attitude of moderate acceptance and tolerance for GLBT folks? Jan Laude notes how the sociopolitical context for being read as lesbian has changed from “one of defensive masquerade in the 1950s to one of pride in the 1980s” (107). Following that trajectory, it’s important to consider our current sociopolitical context, where queer people often are more accepted and enjoy significantly more

²⁹ While a hashtag could also be perceived as an ironic and self-conscious way to signal identities, I believe this use of labels is less of an ironic performance and more of a bandwagon effect.

rights than ever before (even though those rights can come at the expense of assimilation). Certainly there is still the occasional need to send out the lesbian bat-signal unbeknownst to heterosexual culture, and pride is still something that encourages expressions of style. However, the need to be read as a lesbian may be less fueled by politics and more motivated by belonging to a group of similar individuals.

Butch Style on Tumblr

What can be gathered from Tumblr shows some current trends with butch style, but these trends should not be seen as indicative of all butch culture. While the emphasis placed on self-definition allows for a variety of interpretations of butch style to appear, the representations of butch style are not extremely diverse, suggesting that users are thoroughly aware of how adhering to group conventions of style allows users to be visible as butch. From the Tumblr users who have self-tagged their photos or blogs as butch, the use of menswear, regulated facial expressions, and masculine body language are common trends used to express butch style.

In examining the photos under the butch hashtag, the physical signifiers commonly worn or promoted as fashion inspiration consist of tailored pieces usually associated with menswear (vests, ties, bowties, suits). Individuals in more casual photos wear band t-shirts, v-necks, and button downs (including flannel) to evoke a relaxed vibe. Common accessories are beanies, fedora hats or baseball caps with wide brims, either worn backwards or at an angle. While the occasional user has long hair, the majority of photos tagged under #butch consist of short-haired individuals, with undercuts, comb-overs, pompadours, or the Justin Bieber shag. Some users also wear makeup, mostly on the eyes and brows. Facial expressions are stoic and serious or consisted of a half-smile, half-smirk with few or no teeth showing. Close-up photos often consist

of a head cocked to one side with a stoic face and furrowed brow. (Most users have at least one close-up that repeats these compositional elements.) Full-body shots are taken at a variety of angles, with predominantly masculine body language, such as having the legs spread in a strong stance or squaring the body directly to the camera lens. Other common postures include sharp angles and flexed muscles. While the extremity of one's butchness varies from person to person, the majority of users seemed more androgynous than stone butch, suggesting a shift away from historic representations.

Through the practice of distributing selfies, these butch-identified users express their own individual interpretations of butch gender expression. Though photos show a range of ways that users adopted masculine body language and masculine signifiers, the repetition of the close-up suggests that there are certain compositional expectations of butch selfies. Certainly, in order to position oneself as a member of a community one must adopt the signifiers of that community. By participating in a ritualized expression of butch close-ups, these users simultaneously place themselves within the expected presentations of butch identity and perpetuate the expectations of that presentation.³⁰ This trend suggests that butch users repeat expected performances of butch identity that are “always already” existing outside their identities. In their article entitled “Queer Rhetorical Agency: Questioning Narratives of Heteronormativity,” Wallace and Alexander recount Butler's argument regarding agency and discourse:

Any accounting of agency must recognize that we are always already embodied by discourses that are not our own. The very languages we use to describe ourselves—our identities, our relations with others, our positioning in the world—are given to us and carry the weight of past significations, past meanings that

³⁰ Some users express an understanding of participation in these ritualized expressions. For example, Blog 5 acknowledged that one selfie reflected the popular body stance and facial expression emulated in the photo. Although Blog 5 took a moment to call out and parody a norm of lesbian selfies, she also posted multiple selfies that replicated the stereotypical expression.

continue into the present, shaping our sense of who we are and what we might be. (797).

In the case of the repetitive composition of butch selfies, the visual discourse exists outside of the users' photos. Thus, any repetition of these posturings calls up past significations and meanings that strengthen the highly codified nature of butch physicality displayed through selfies.

As a way to communicate identity and belonging, these stylistic utterances on Tumblr are often geared toward an audience that shares similar interests and identifiers as the user. In the case of butch blogs, the audience also tends to have an in-group knowledge of LGBT life and customs, which makes it more likely for users to have their gender identities read correctly. However, Brummett reminds us that style is a language, and people do not have "complete control over what the constitutive elements of the language mean" (33). While people cannot ensure that an audience interprets their style in the desired way, there are strategies for encouraging a more accurate reading. If individuals participate in ritualized expressions of style within an already formed community (for example, if a femme-identified lesbian expressed her femme identity within a lesbian bar), then it is more likely for the audience to correctly read the style. Additionally, the use of hashtags in online forums takes some of the guesswork away by suggesting how the user intends their style to be perceived.

But, not unlike offline society, the inability to be properly read leads to micro-aggressions and severe gender policing by those who disagree with people's use of the label. When it comes to style, Walker believes "the impulse to privilege the visible... can replicate the practices of the dominant ideologies which use visibility to create social categories on the basis of exclusion" (209). In a society where many people find community and belonging online, the

ritualized expressions of style serve as a way to determine who “we” are in contrast to who “they” are, sometimes at the expense of people who want to belong. While the policing of style can lead to ostracization, expressing butch style is still an effective rhetorical maneuver designed to include oneself in the Tumblr butch community and to create a sense of belonging.

Even when individuals find their place in a group, such as the butch community, there are still constant negotiations between individual identity and the group. A desired coherence *within* the imaginary community encourages members to “display signs that are hegemonically consonant with their imaginary communities” (Brummett 123).³¹ This suggests that a subculture or an “imaginary community can be controlling and dogmatic, constraining and limiting the subjects and identities that form in alignment with them” (Brummett 123). On Tumblr, butch style is both regulated by the self (through choosing blog material) and by the imagined community (through reblogging and liking posts to show approval).³² In his analysis on identity construction through homepages (a precursor to blogging websites), Charles Cheung argues that this audience feedback provides validation for and recognition of self-identity (279). However, the regulation of what material is desirable and disseminated suggests that, despite the opportunities for free, individual expression, members are expected to behave in particular ways that reify butch style.

³¹ The construction of identities in relation to this desired coherence points to the recursive nature of identity expression and group membership. While individuals adjust to fit the group ideal, the group ideal fluctuates based on how the individuals interpret and re-present the idealized group image.

³² This self-regulation and regulation by norms exemplify the regulatory nature of discipline and its function as a tool for normalizing as theorized by Foucault; “the power of normalization imposes homogeneity” while simultaneously drawing attention to differences between individuals (184). See Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*.

Consumerism and Engagement with Capitalism

When analyzing the content of the individual ten butch blogs, the prevalence of posts (largely by the white users) that engage in consumer culture suggest that users place a strong emphasis on material elements of identity over other parts of identity, such as political values and personal philosophies. Although this is not surprising, given the highly capitalist consumer culture we live in and the prominence of images over text on Tumblr, this enthusiastic participation in consumer culture is not challenged or critically addressed by the users. Whereas each print text in the previous chapter described some level of self-awareness regarding participation in capitalist systems, this consciousness is virtually nonexistent on the Tumblr blogs; rather, the narratives are structured around patterns of consumption that don't hold any additional significance to the individuals. One example of frequently reblogged material that referenced consumption or commodities is fashion spreads of masculine attire containing masculine-of-center models. These spreads often carried links to purchase the clothing and occasionally also included links to the models' blogs as a way to gather followers. Photos of attire and accessories also appear without models, disconnecting the material signifiers from the body. When the clothing items are separated from a butch body, the significance of the style is stripped away. While bow ties or tailored suits may signify resistance to patriarchal hegemony when they are paired with female masculinity, they hold no political potential when viewed in a vacuum. Certainly the presence of the photo on a butch blog allows for some connection to butch identity, but the absence of the transgressive body minimizes the politically resistant potential of the commodities.

Users also show their uncritical participation in consumer culture through selfies and photos that highlight new attire and purchases.³³ For example, Blog 7 posted a large number of selfies with nearly identical compositional elements (posture, facial expression, presence of phone in shot) but with different T-shirts that showed personal interests (such as sci-fi fandom) and new purchases. Additionally, the owner of Blog 9 identified as a stylist and clothier and thus was more prone to mention products for sale (products they used, purchased, and designed), with 23 of their posts directly suggesting the purchase of a product. While Blog 9's product suggestions often advertised retailers within the queer community, the extremely high cost of the items advertised restricted who could own the product; maintaining a community connection to elite clothiers was honored at the expense of using affordable products to reflect butch style.

Finally, butch individuals may express an always already political style online, but that resistance often comes at the price of participating in their own commodification. One of the ways in which butch style is covertly commodified on Tumblr is through the way Tumblr users create and distribute content they like, which allows advertisements and style spreads to be distributed with little to no work done by corporations that own the images or products. This highly effective and desirable strategy for marketing and publicity places the power of commodification in the hands of the users. While the company may create one original post, the community of Tumblr users can multiply the image and distribute it as inspiration, often with a link to purchasing the items. Reed notes the immense profits corporations make from user-produced content: while the ability to produce content may make users feel empowered, "all the

³³ The uncritical consumerism depicted in the selfies is not meant to minimize the empowering effects selfies may have on individuals. Rather, the goal here is to show how the analyzed selfies contain little or no critique of consumer capitalism.

participatory culture on the Web has not seriously challenged the content dominance of the main culture industries...and in many ways they have benefitted from these products of free labor incorporated into their sites and platforms” (44). Within the Tumblr butch community, fashion spreads of suits and ties in particular contain links to company websites in order for users to acquire material signifiers that read as butch. The ability for users to produce their own content transforms the users into “prosumers,” a term Alvin Toffler introduced to describe the “progressive blurring of the line that separates producer from consumer” (qtd. in Fuchs 594). As producers and consumers of content, Tumblr prosumers create and promote their desired material, constructing their style and promoting commodities in one fell swoop.

Although users definitely show their participation in consumer capitalism, no commentary or analysis was provided in the posts, nor did people express elements of their identities that challenged their consumption or relationship to broader capitalist systems. The sole exception to this trend was a critique of commodification appearing on Blog 5 (created by a Black user who identifies as anti-capitalist and politically radical). In a photo caption, the user ironically notes her attempt to imitate the traditional butch selfie composition with her facial expression, posture, and angles. While the user still participated in constructing a commodified butch expression, her acknowledgement and awareness of playing a part suggests that there are opportunities for people to engage more critically with the complex relationship between identity and consumer capitalism. However, this one example does not make up for the absolute lack of critique on other blogs. Within the community, this silence ultimately reduces the complex relationship between identity and consumer capitalism, which not only perpetuates complicit

participation in the system but also limits the level of individual conscience that can appear on the blogs.

An additional concern lies in how uncritical consumerism is specifically tied to white Tumblr users compared to their non-white counterparts. With the exception of Blog 7, who identified as Asian, white users had significantly more references to consumerism through posts about desired or attained material items, services received, or high-end interior decorating inspiration. Comparatively, non-white users rarely referenced desired material items or other previously mentioned aspects of consumerism. Instead, they were more prone to blogging about racial or social justice issues, two topics that were rarely addressed on blogs by white users.

This noticeable silence on blogs by white users surrounding discussions of racial and social justice suggests that along with ignoring the complexity of subjectivity in a capitalist society, the flagrant consumerism exposed has an additional consequence—it creates a “bread and circus” effect that allows users to elide the bigger issues. While the blogs weren’t completely void of boosting social justice issues, the amount of other material featured suggests that activism is not a critical aspect of White online identity narratives. This relative lack of socio-political engagement suggests these ten blogs do not follow the trend of activism that has historically been associated with queer communities. The prevalence of posts about racial justice on blogs by people of color and the lack thereof on blogs by white users implies that social activism seems to be tied more closely to racial identity than butch identity, and social issues are important to users based on how they are individually affected by the issue. Social activism seems to be tied more closely to racial identity than butch identity. Though many white users commented on LGBT issues such as marriage equality, typically with generic “love is love”

sentiments, the lack of concern for other marginalized populations, and the minimal acknowledgement of intersectionality within the GLBT community, was apparent through their relative silence.

I believe this silence reflects a greater cultural trend of privileged populations overlooking actual racial and economic issues in order to focus on the pleasant. This trend has been noted in representations of queer communities outside of personal blogs, including the TV show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. E. Tristan Booth suggests that “the *Queer Eye* series reduces gayness to ‘elements of fashion and grooming, while other elements of queer culture, such as social issues, relationships, or queer resistance remain absent’ ([Berila and Choudhuri] para 31)” (413). Booth adds, “The series basically depicts gay as a position of privilege, since the viewer is rarely confronted with poverty, racism, discrimination, or violence” (414). By focusing only on the pleasant elements of makeovers and design, the opportunity to discuss important social issues is eliminated. Similarly, when Tumblr users fill up their blog queue with animal or fashion-themed posts, any space for queer resistance through social justice is minimized, overshadowed, and in some cases completely eliminated.

Although social justice issues other than racial issues were promoted in the blogs, the issue and manner in which this was done often tied back to consumer culture.³⁴ For example, Blog 9 promoted social justice issues by directly tying the issues to purchasing a product; in order to raise money for the Red Cross, people could purchase a special pocketknife that donated a portion of proceeds to the organization. Unlike posts about racial justice, which demanded

³⁴ Marriage equality may be an important issue, but one of the biggest beneficiaries of more people having access to marriage is the wedding industry, whose consumer market has exponentially increased thanks to marriage equality.

community action and accountability, these social-activism-through-consumerism opportunities did not call for real revolutionary change, but rather commodified activism by making a material good representative of social justice.

The blogs that participated so excessively in consumer culture aid in perpetuating the importance of the gay (usually white) dollar. Recalling Booth's statement that *Queer Eye* positions gay identity as a position of privilege as a "good gay" consumer or desiring to be a "good gay" consumer, Kessler states in her analysis of class issues in *The L Word* franchise, "... 'good gays' are (or who they should want to be)—good-looking, flashy, upwardly mobile purchasers" (601). Add this desire to be "good gays" with the aspirational gap prevalent in United States consumer culture, and advertisers espousing the value of highly sought-after queer consumers with a large disposable income,³⁵ and the queer community (in this case, the butch community) become active participants in a consumer market that pacifies the resistant elements of queer identity in favor of the superficial elements that support capitalism.

The technique of replacing resistance with an economically-beneficial distraction such as fashion is not a new phenomenon. As Richard Butsch explains in his article "Reconsidering Resistance *and* Incorporation," the incorporation of subcultural resistance into commodities for dominant consumption often occurs through fashion and style. He adds, "Hebdige said that oppositional ideas, such as these subcultures, are often subverted by being commodified and

³⁵ This stereotype of the ideal queer consumer with refined taste and money to blow is fully based off affluent white gay men and is therefore not indicative of the reality of many queer people. However, the lack of social and political activism and the prominence of consumerism on the white Tumblr blogs analyzed suggests that this stereotype is perpetuated in their behaviors. Regardless of their ability to act on their desire to participate in consumer culture, the perpetuation of pro-consumerist behaviors connects the users back to the prototype for the ideal queer consumer.

resold as fashionable styles, stripped of their more dangerous content... blunting the class and political content of their message” (Butsch 91). When butch identity is predominantly caught up in expressions of style—through the posting of desired attire and clothing—butch identity can become a mere fashion statement, stripped of the historically significant elements of gender resistance and social activism. As companies catch on to the lucrative butch aesthetic, butch identity risks being “treated by corporations as simply sources of new products of style” (Butsch 93).

Identity construction occurs on Tumblr as users blog their narratives, whether or not they are conscious about such constructions. In their study on young adult social media use, Waechler et al. stress social media’s important role in helping young adults negotiate the developmental challenge of identity achievement by providing a “cultural context” for identity development, experimentation, and reflection (159-165). Waechler et al. conclude, “Through the public performance, they reify their selves, i.e. through the self-presentations intended for a more or less public audience they make themselves real” (165). Through this sample of Tumblr blogs, it is apparent that individuals are making themselves real by projecting idealized versions of themselves. According to Cheung, this idealized projection reflects how personal blog spaces allow for “more polished and elaborate presentation, with more control over ‘impression management’...the ‘sign vehicles’ used in the homepage self-presentation are more subject to manipulation” (275). Indeed, this desire to control self-presentation may be a coping mechanism for those who feel as though they lack control over their presentation in face-to-face interactions (Cheung 275). It’s apparent that personal blogs on sites such as Tumblr allow for individuals to

experiment with how their identities are constructed, and Cheung suggests that individuals cope with uncertain identities by constructing a “coherent self narrative”:

In such a coherent self-narrative, we successfully make ourselves the protagonists of the story, and we know clearly who we are, how we became the way we are now, and what we would like to do in the future—all these elements help to give us a stable sense of self identity. (278)

As users post material to stabilize their identities, their blogs then become reflective archives that allow them to establish consistent identities. However, identity establishment on Tumblr is further complicated by the overwhelming homogenization of butch identity and the need to create virtual histories that evade the current historical situation of the user.

While there is some comfort to be found in presenting an ideal image of oneself, this self-regulation ultimately results in a perpetuation of limited and essentialist notions of butch identity. There may be safety in adhering to the approved images in an predominantly visual community such as Tumblr, and perhaps this essentializing itself is a strategy to cope with the complexity of life within consumer culture. Instead of acknowledging the complexities inherent in the relationship between identity and consumer capitalism, perhaps users simplify their expressions in order to avoid grappling with a tension that, ultimately, cannot be completely negated. Nevertheless, even the act of acknowledging one’s position as a consumer provides a gateway for a critical awareness of how identity is directly connected to capitalist systems.

The print and digital texts of the butch community serve not only as potential historical records of what it means to be a butch in late capitalism, but they also serve as potential models for how to be a butch by modeling typical behaviors and ways of participating in capitalist consumer culture. Certainly the danger of such models is that the status quo will be minimally challenged, thus preventing future opportunities for engagement in anti-capitalist queer rhetoric

and activism. When the dominant flow is not disrupted, hegemonic structures will not be challenged, thus further minimizing the political significance of butch identity while normalizing butch commodification. The goal is then to determine how the critique of consumer capitalism in print texts can be incorporated into online butch spaces. While the total dismantling of consumer culture is not a realistic goal, there are possibilities for using social media platforms such as Tumblr in ways that disrupt, question, and critique capitalist consumer culture in order to encourage the conscious consumption of commodities.

Conclusion: Reconciling Commodification, Identity, and Agency

As shown through the analysis of contemporary lesbian print texts and butch Tumblr blogs, the relationship between style, identity, and consumer capitalism is undeniably complex. A brief examination of Tumblr blogs might even suggest a bleak future for the butch community; as more people participate in discourse systems that encourage homogeneous, essentialized, sanitized expressions of identity, it is tempting to assume that the commodification of butch identity is wholly negative. However, one main goal of this thesis is to show that the relationship between identity and consumer capitalism is overwhelmingly complex and therefore cannot be simplified into either/or binary constructions of liberation or exploitation. Instead of eliminating or erasing the connection between identity and consumer capitalism (an impossibility), we should focus our attention on how to find rhetorical agency and resistance within the system; we must look for opportunities to queer our understanding of how identities are constructed in relation to capitalist structures.

The concern about the political ramifications of commodification is justified, as minority groups and subcultures must always be aware of potential avenues for exploitation by dominant culture. Even more concerning is the thought that subcultures such as butch communities on Tumblr might be complicit in their exploitation by supporting and promoting the very structures that commodify them. Judith Butler discusses the futility of such definitive judgments, stating “subversive performances always run the risk of becoming deadening clichés through their repetition and, most importantly through their repetition within commodity culture where ‘subversion’ carries market value. The effort to name the criterion for subversiveness will always fail, and ought to” (*Gender Trouble* xxiii). Therefore, as tempting as it may seem to condemn

butch style for being too caught up in consumer culture for its own good, I think the always already commodified nature of style requires us to look beyond simple black and white condemnations and consider butch style's resistant potential that is present within its commodified state. Instead of shutting down butch style's resistant potential, we must shift our conversation to focus on agency and how butch-identified people use their style to express their agency.

It would be easy to assume that commodification simply exploits butch subjects for their buying potential and positions them as docile subjects who are able to express their identities simply on a surface level through material signifiers that ultimately benefit capitalist hegemony. Indeed, this concern is present in Clark's analysis of the relationship between the lesbian community and consumer culture:

Because style is a cultural construction, it is easily appropriated, reconstructed and divested of its original political or subcultural signification. Style as resistance becomes commodifiable as chic when it leaves the political realm and enters the fashion world. This simultaneously diffuses the political edge of style. (193)

As concerning as this political diffusion may be, however, Hebdige reminds us that it is difficult to “maintain any absolute distinction between commercial exploitation on the one hand and creativity/originality on the other, even though these categories are emphatically opposed in the value systems of most subcultures” (95). Given this tenuous distinction between exploitation and originality, then, the final goal is to further complicate our understanding of commodification and agency to find liberatory or resistant potential within a flawed system.

In butch subjectivity, we see the double-bind of postmodern subjectivity—subjects only become subjects to the extent that they subject themselves to specific discourses. As Butler

argues in *Bodies that Matter*, “there is no ‘I’ who stands *behind* discourse and executes its volition or will *through* discourse...the ‘I’ only comes into being through being called, named, interpellated, to use the Althusserian term” (171). This sentiment is far from being a fatalist dismissal of any possible agency; rather, it requires us to consider how agency is a socially constructed and contextual resource (Geisler 12). Similarly, Wallace and Alexander call for individuals to “see themselves as “socially, culturally, and historically constructed subjects who write and are written by linguistic tools that are themselves imbued with meaning from previous discourse” (798). When we consider our subjectivity and agency to be culturally constructed, we are encouraged to think critically and consciously about our use of discourse. Are we unquestioningly using the discourses we have been hailed to use, or are we allowing ourselves to consider alternative discourses (or at least be aware of how discourse is never our own)?

Perhaps the use of previously constructed discourse (such as the label butch or butch style) to signify identity is not either an empowering act of agency or a manipulative exercise of hegemonic power, but rather an opportunity to reconsider our assumption of the connection between autonomy and agency. When political signifiers (such as elements of butch style) are used to express identity, we are always already connected to what those signifiers mean in the past, present, and future. Butler argues that “what is called agency can never be understood as a controlling or original authorship over that signifying chain, and it cannot be the power, once installed and constituted in and by that chain, to set a sure course for its future” (*Bodies that Matter* 166). Therefore, agency doesn’t necessarily come from a use of original discourse or autonomous signifiers, but rather comes from “the compulsion to install an identity through repetition” (*Bodies that Matter* 167). Instead of considering agency as something that creates

individual autonomy, we should consider agency as having the capacity to act based on the context in which we are currently situated.

Queer(y)ing Consumerism—Disrupting the Discourse

We can find agency in style despite its always already commodified nature through queering our sense of rhetoric à la Alexander and Rhodes by “reworking...identifications to disrupt and reroute the flows of power, particularly discursive power” (“Queer Rhetoric” Introduction). Clark suggests some hope in the fact that “lesbians *as lesbians* have developed strategies of selection, (re)appropriation, resistance, and subversion in order to realign consumer culture according to the desires and needs of lesbian sexuality, subcultural identification, and political action” (197). In the case of butch style on Tumblr, this could take the form of users choosing only to reblog posts that support businesses within the queer community, limiting the circulation of simple fashion spreads by mainstream designers who are cashing in on female masculinity as fashionable to make a buck. Users could also pay attention to the cost of the clothing advertised and attempt to replicate the styles with cheaper, more accessible options or goods from companies that ethically support their workers. Additionally, users could signal boost fashion spreads that contain butch-identified models, further maintaining power through representation within the community. These actions would show strategies of selection that resist total incorporation back into dominant culture.

One other way that butch users on Tumblr can (and occasionally do) complicate the commodification of butch style and resist incorporation is to further disrupt the idea of static identity through presenting multiple images of the self that challenge essentialist, homogeneous images of butch identity. The implication of such disruption is that it becomes impossible to pin

down a totalizing sense of butch style. This can be done through José Muñoz's strategy of disidentification:

Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture. (31)

Certainly we see “recycling and rethinking encoded meaning” in the ways that butch style uses codes of dominant masculinity as a starting point for style. By recycling signifiers of dominant masculinity, butch individuals create an altered meaning that cannot be read as simply reproducing dominant masculinity. But the use of disidentification can challenge the homogeneity of butch representation on Tumblr; individuals can be aware of their multiple subject positions and how dominant discourses affect the construction of ideal butch style. In the example above of a butch blogger (Blog 5) ironically commenting on their participation in perpetuating a standard butch stereotype, they both participate in the dominant butch discourse and call it out—disrupting the expectation that this dominant physical discourse is the correct way to perform.

The concepts of disidentification and disruptive rhetoric have been used in previous analyses of online media activism, particularly in Matthew Vetter's experimental queer activism on Pinterest. Vetter notes how Pinterest “performs rhetorical work on its users' notions of gender identity and directs their consumer behavior” and suggests examples for how to “‘queer’ a technology by acknowledging and challenging its ideological, political, or rhetorical agenda.” Vetter attempts to queer Pinterest by pinning anti-consumerist content from outside of the

Pinterest sphere, which he hopes will disrupt the standard non-critical flow of Pinterest activity. By incorporating subversive content into an arena that is overwhelmingly gendered and consumerist, Vetter attempts to “appropriate social networks through methods of disidentification in order to expose and subvert heteronormative and pro-consumerist mechanisms.” His call for exposing and subverting hegemonic systems encourages critical awareness of how digital tools construct our lives, and I believe that such awareness is the first step in encouraging critical consumerist engagement on sites such as Tumblr. Queering our use of digital tools means that we also are “empowered to appropriate those tools for our own ends, and for the ends of those silenced and marginalized by mainstream discourse” (Vetter).

Despite the anti-assimilationist undercurrent of disidentification, Muñoz stresses that it doesn't mean that the undesirable or bad components of identity are unquestionably dispelled: “it is not to willfully evacuate the politically dubious or shameful components within an identificatory locus” (12). Instead, these elements must be considered as vital components that expand and complicate identity beyond simple socially-acceptable identities (Muñoz 29). In *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*, Rosemary Hennessy also notes the importance of disidentification, proclaiming that it is a “historically necessary strategic step right now in the United States” in order to address broader capitalist structures (230). Again, the call for disidentification is not a refusal of the parts of identity that are politically suspect, but rather, to disidentify encourages a “critical ‘working’ on them” (Hennessy 230). Acknowledging (not eliminating or ignoring) and queering the complicated relationship between identity and consumer capitalism, therefore, are ways to disidentify with dominant capitalist culture and find new ways to make meaning within the system.

We must not forget that the construction and expression of the self is performative, especially online, where the glimpses we get into people's lives are consciously chosen to create an ideal image. Examining agency on Tumblr is therefore a tricky task, as it is impossible to accurately pin down the intent or true "meaning" behind the content users produce and distribute. But an understanding of butch style and the way this style functions on an individual and communal level allows us to consider how people rhetorically use style to construct themselves and others as desirable bodies. We must also not forget that too often, "agency for queers... is sometimes only possible in the dominant public sphere to the extent that they can rhetorically position themselves as both challenging and maintaining the... narratives of the dominant culture" (Wallace and Alexander 817). While Tumblr provides access to a counterpublic sphere that has the opportunity to destabilize heteronormative dominant culture, it is important to remember how butch subjects are not living solely in this counterpublic. The freedom for self-expression online does not necessarily carry over into the real world; hence, the very act of code-switching from a queer-oriented sphere to a heteronormative public can serve to maintain dominant narratives, as it suggests an appropriate time and place to more fully express butch style in order to be read as queer.

Although the commodification of style does complicate the ability for butch style to subvert dominant heteronormativity, participation in consumer culture does not fully strip subcultures of their political agency. Instead of considering consumerism and political activism as binary oppositions, we should consider the potential to disidentify within capitalist structures in order to consciously inhabit multiple subject positions. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler also resists this creation of totalizing oppositions:

Performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a 'pure' opposition, a 'transcendence' of contemporary relations of power, but a *difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure*. (184, emphasis added)

Perhaps, then, expressions of butch style on Tumblr should not be wholly condemned for their commodified ties or their proclivity toward homogenizing ideal butch style. Rather, we should consider the political and resistant potential being done within a system that is always already flawed, always already geared toward the subjugation of its participants. The power struggle between commodification and political agency may be an unavoidable side effect of living in late capitalism, but through consciously understanding our participation in the system, we can use our rhetorical agency to disidentify and potentially disrupt the unquestioned commodified nature of queer bodies.

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Phone: 320-308-4932

Name: Kathleen Bradbury
Address 6077 Mill Run Rd.
Monticello, MN 55362 USA
Email: kwatson@stcloudstate.edu

**IRB PROTOCOL
DETERMINATION:
Exempt Review**

Project Title: Queer(y)ing Consumerism: Butch Identity Expression and Consumer Culture

Advisor Glen Davis

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol to conduct research involving human subjects. Your project has been: **APPROVED**

Please note the following important information concerning IRB projects:

- The principal investigator assumes the responsibilities for the protection of participants in this project. Any adverse events must be reported to the IRB as soon as possible (ex. research related injuries, harmful outcomes, significant withdrawal of subject population, etc.).

- For expedited or full board review, the principal investigator must submit a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated on this letter to report conclusion of the research or request an extension.

- Exempt review only requires the submission of a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated in this letter if an extension of time is needed.

- Approved consent forms display the official IRB stamp which documents approval and expiration dates. If a renewal is requested and approved, new consent forms will be officially stamped and reflect the new approval and expiration dates.

- The principal investigator must seek approval for any changes to the study (ex. research design, consent process, survey/interview instruments, funding source, etc.). The IRB reserves the right to review the research at any time.

Good luck on your research. If we can be of further assistance, please contact the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 320-308-4932 or email lidonnay@stcloudstate.edu. Use the SCSU IRB number listed on any forms submitted which relate to this project, or on any correspondence with the IRB.

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1st Year Expiration Date: 12/13/2018

Type: Exempt Review

2nd Year Approval Date:

2nd Year Expiration Date:

Today's Date: 12/14/2015

3rd Year Approval Date:

3rd Year Expiration Date:



OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND
SPONSORED PROGRAMS
ST. CLOUD STATE UNIVERSITY

IRB Application

Use of EXISTING DATA Involving Human Subjects

PROJECT AND RESEARCHER(S)

Project Title: **Queer(y)ing Consumerism: Butch Identity Expression and Consumer Culture**

Project Summary (3-5 sentences): **This project will analyze literary texts and public blogs by butch-identified users to determine how butch identity is connected to capitalist consumerism. I will analyze whether participation in consumer culture is offered with or without critique or conscious awareness. By considering how butch-identified individuals participate and critique consumerism, I will explore opportunities for conscious consumerism within online texts.**

Project of Using Existing Data - Start Date: **1/1/16** End Date: **6/1/16**

Principal Investigator (PI): **Kathleen Bradbury**

Type of Research: faculty/staff undergraduate masters/certificate doctoral

Mailing Address: **6077 Mill Run Rd, Monticello MN 55362**

Telephone: **612-616-0347**

Email: **kwatson@stcloudstate.edu**

Advisor or Course Instructor (if PI is a student): **Dr. Glenn Davis, English Department**

Other Investigators:

If you collaborate with an individual from another institution, the research must be submitted to that institution's IRB as well, and a copy of the approval letter must be filed with SCSU's IRB.

RESEARCH DEFINED

FOR THE PURPOSE OF ST. CLOUD STATE UNIVERSITY'S INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD AND IN COMPLIANCE WITH FEDERAL REGULATIONS, RESEARCH INVOLVING THE COLLECTION OR STUDY OF EXISTING DATA GATHERED FROM HUMAN SUBJECTS MAY BE SUBJECT TO REVIEW BY THE IRB:

- Existing data from the classroom was NOT obtained through: active manipulation; testing a research question; course activities, outcomes and/or evaluations which deviated from those defined in the original syllabus; or having a research agenda when the data was gathered.
- *If any of these activities occurred during the data collection, the data collected does not meet the criteria of existing data; therefore, stop here and complete the full IRB application.*
 - *If none of these activities occurred during the data collection, continue with this application.*
- No new data will be collected from participants for this project.
- *If new data will be collected, stop here and complete the full IRB application.*
 - *If no new data will be collected, continue with this application.*
- If no data set is involved AND only publicly available works will be used for a book or literature review, an IRB application or review is not required. Stop here.

TO PROCEED WITH THIS FORM, THE FOLLOWING MUST APPLY IN ORDER FOR IRB REVIEW AND EXISTING DATA TO BE APPLICABLE:

- Proposed project is a systematic investigation, including research development and testing
 Proposed project is designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge
 Research involves the analysis of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens or diagnostic specimens which was gathered from human beings.

Which of the following best describes your data:

- A. Sources for the data are publicly available but the data set is not (check all that apply):
- Data set from federal or state government program/agency available to the general public (census data, etc.)
 - Data set used for public sources such as newspapers, reports, books or journals
 - Data set used for published documents such as thesis or dissertations
 - Other – please explain:
- B. Data was obtained through the classroom using standard educational practices/classroom/workshop/data/ program evaluation (check all that apply):
- All students received the same syllabus at the beginning of the course
 - All students were expected to participate and complete the activities outlined in the syllabus
 - Classroom procedures did not involve a control group
 - Anonymous data obtained from the SCSU Office of Strategy, Planning and Effectiveness
 - Other – please explain: **No classroom data used.**
- C. Or explain how data was obtained: **Data was obtained from looking at publicly available blog posts posted on Tumblr and tagged under the keyword "butch." These posts are considered existing data, as the investigator is not requesting information or participation.**

SPONSORS

Is there potential or confirmed external funding sources for this research project? No
 Yes Funding Agency Account #

CERTIFICATION STATEMENT

The undersigned acknowledge: 1) application represents a complete and accurate description of the proposed research, 2) research will be conducted in compliance with IRB recommendations and requirements, 3) research will not begin until IRB approval received, 4) modifications will not be made prior to obtaining IRB approval, 5) PI responsible for reporting to the IRB any adverse or unexpected events, 6) PI to report to IRB any significant new findings which develop during the course of the study and increase the risk to participants and 7) expedited or full IRB approval in effect for up to one year and PI is responsible to request continuing review or file final report (exempt research is exempt from continuing review process).

Investigator Name/Signature _____ Date _____

Advisor/Instructor Name/Signature _____ Date _____

PROVIDE AS MUCH DETAIL AS POSSIBLE TO ENABLE IRB REVIEW OF YOUR PROJECT

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Briefly summarize the proposed research and its significance. Include the following; 1) research question/hypothesis, 2) research design, including independent/dependent variables if appropriate and 3) relevant theory:

1: My research question is "How is butch identity related to capitalist consumerism in literary texts and public blogs?" I hypothesize that while literary texts provide conscious critiques of participation in consumer culture, online public blogs show participation in consumer culture without critique or critical awareness.

2: The research design is to analyze how blog users present their identities through the use of commodities and whether their posts suggest an uncritical or unconscious participation in consumer culture. I will rhetorically analyze butch style and use the blogs as textual artifacts to form generalized understandings of participation in consumer culture for butch-identified individuals.

3: The theories I'll be using are queer theory, feminist theory, and rhetorical theory.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

Describe all methods and procedures you will perform. Explain the data involved with this research project.

1. I will examine and analyze Tumblr blogs for posts about commodities and determine how these posts express butch style and identity. I'll code the posts by category to determine how many posts reflect consumerism, and I will code posts that seem critical or conscious of consumerism in particular and capitalism in general. I will analyze the rhetorical maneuvers blog users use to express their identity and style and determine the relationship between commodity use/promotion and identity expression.

EXISTING DATA REVIEW

1. What/who is the source from which the data set was obtained?
Tumblr Users generate their own data from their public blogs. One does not need a login or an account to access the data. Additionally, I will not be participating on the blog or communicating with the Tumblr users.
2. What does the data set consist of? Provide as much detail as possible. (i.e. list of specific questions asked, etc.)
Data set will consist of personal identifiers as provided by the blog user and images/posts on their publicly available blog.
3. What was the intent when the original data was collected?
Personal blogging site used for entertainment and self-expression of users.
4. When was the original data collected? (timeframe)
The original data is preexisting on the internet, but I will be analyzing posts that could potentially date back to 2007, when Tumblr was created. Since users are perpetually creating new data, the website functions as a live feed; thus the data will be continually developing.
5. Was IRB approval obtained for the original data collection?
 - Yes, name of institution which approved the research, PI name and IRB approval date. Also, attach IRB approval letter:
 - No and data collected six months or more prior to this proposed use
 - No and data was collected less than six months from this application date; explain why IRB approval was not obtained: **No data collected, though the data does exist from less than 6 months from application date as material is constantly being added to blogs.**

6. If data set is not publicly available, explain the process taken to gain permission to use the data set. Attach a letter of cooperation from the entity/person to state their involvement with the initial data collection, how data will be de-identified prior to its release, why data currently exists, where was it collected, etc.):

SUBJECT POPULATION

7. Number of participants: **10-20**
8. Age range of participants (if age 17 or under, explain why minors' data is being used): **Over age 18, no participants that are listed under the age of 18 will be used.**
9. Describe the participants' understanding of the use of the data as originally collected.
The existing data is in the form of publicly accessible blogs. Therefore, the participants' understanding is that it is data on their own public blogs.

PARTICIPANT PERSONAL IDENTIFIERS

10. Does the data set you will have access to contain direct or indirect personal identifiers?
- Yes No Direct (i.e. name, local address, permanent address, email address, phone number, social security number, date of birth, identification number, tech ID, medical record number, license number, photograph(s), biometric information, etc.)
- Yes No Indirect (i.e. race, gender, age, language, ethnicity, zip code, IP address, major, associated organization(s), etc.)
11. If yes to direct or indirect identifiers, please describe the personal identifiers: **Personal identifiers are present based on what each individual blogger posts about themselves. Therefore, some blogs may contain direct identifiers such as their name and indirect identifiers such as sexual orientation, gender identity, race, age, ethnicity, major, language, zip code, and general area of residence. Each blog also has a distinct user url which can be considered an identifier.**
12. If direct or indirect identifiers will be removed prior to you obtaining the data set, list which identifiers the set will represent: **n/a**
13. Will you remove the identifiers from the data set or otherwise aggregate the data in such a manner whereby participants cannot be identified either directly or indirectly?
- If yes, explain how: **The names and user urls of the bloggers will be removed, as well as the zip code, general area of residence. Each blog will be numbered for reference within the article, but anonymity will be protected. Age will not be documented in the data set. The identifiers used will be gender identity, sexual orientation, as well as ethnicity and race. By nature of this study, it is assumed that all users are butch identified.**
- If no, provide justification why identifiers are necessary:
14. Are you using any direct quotes from previous participants?
- No, direct quotes will not be taken from any existing data
- Yes, participant direct quote(s) will be used. Explain when and how approval was received or why consent can no longer be obtained:

CONFIDENTIALITY

15. Explain how you will maintain confidentiality of the data or protect from disclosure to the public or other researchers or non-researchers not involved with this study. Describe those who will have access to the data other than the principal investigator or other investigators. How will you securely store the data set and how long do you intend to keep it?

I will store all data on my password-protected laptop. The data sets will be backed up in paper copy in a locked file cabinet at my residence, 6077 Mill Run Rd Monticello MN 55362.

16. Do you anticipate any future use of the data? No If yes, please explain: **The data may be used in the future if I turn my thesis into a larger work, such as a dissertation, book, or scholarly article.**

IRB APPLICATION CHECKLIST

- IRB training completed
- All questions answered on IRB application
- Application fully signed
- Written support letter from the individual providing the original data set
- Submit completed IRB application to Research and Sponsored Programs in AS 210