



Limit of Labels: Examining the ‘Masc’ and ‘Femme’ Labels in WLW Relationships Through Judith Butler’s Theory of Performativity

Graciel L. Apolo^{1,2} , Nikky S. Garo^{1,3} 

¹ Saint Louis University, Baguio City

² 2245700@slu.edu.ph

³ nsgaro@slu.edu.ph

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Limit of Labels: Examining the ‘Masc’ and ‘Femme’ Labels in WLW Relationships Through Judith Butler’s Theory of Performativity

Graciela L. Apolo^{1,2} , Nikky S. Garo^{1,3} 

¹ Saint Louis University, Baguio City

² 2245700@slu.edu.ph

³ nsgaro@slu.edu.ph

Abstract

Judith Butler’s theory of performativity emphasizes the idea that gender is constructed through a series of repeated acts. Within this framework, labels such as ‘masc’ and ‘femme’ can play a role in shaping gender identity and expression, especially in women-loving-women (WLW) relationships. Even though queerness is famously understood as a space for challenging gender norms, and WLW relationships to that extension should be a site for gender fluidity, the use of these labels in WLW relationships can reinforce patriarchal structures by replicating binary gender expressions. The act of labeling oneself or one’s partner as ‘masc’ or ‘femme’ is evidence of binary gender expression persisting even in queer spaces. More importantly, in the context of WLW relationships, it goes to show that even though labels like ‘masc’ and ‘femme’ can provide a sense of belonging, they can also limit gender expression and replicate gender binaries. Situating within Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, this article analyzes the use of labels such as ‘masc’ and ‘femme’ and doing performative acts of these labels, especially within the WLW relationship dynamics. The article contends that in using labels such as ‘masc’ and ‘femme’ which are fixed categories, we run the risk of becoming complicit in reinforcing patriarchal structures and power structures.

Keywords: gender, LGBTQ+ labels, queer identities, queer theory, theory of performativity, WLW relationships

INTRODUCTION

Despite an increased awareness of gender identities and expressions, the use of gendered labels such as ‘masc’ and ‘femme’, especially within WLW (women-loving-women) relationships, can reinforce rather than challenge gender norms and patriarchal structures. Studies on masc and femme identities often explore them as distinct categories within the queer and lesbian community

though the definition of these terms are complex and can be challenged any time of the day. Historically, the meaning of gender, at least within the queer and lesbian community has changed and shifted over time, holding a variety of meanings¹. The terms ‘masc’ and ‘femme’ are commonly used as descriptors to describe the masculine and feminine performances of queer individuals. Masc and femme identities and gender roles are usually essentialized as characteristics of lesbians². According to a study by Oberdorfer³, the masc identity is usually associated with women who lean more into the masculine gender expression while the femme identity is usually associated with women who lean more into the feminine gender expression. Masc-presenting women are viewed and represented as masculinized women with short hair, dressed in masculine clothing whereas femme-presenting women with long hair, makeup, and feminine clothing. However, these labels are far more complex than just their aesthetics. There is no universal definition of these terms because queer individuals have different reasons as to why they have identified with these labels. Nonetheless, identifying with these labels can create a sense of belonging and solidarity but at the same time, it also introduces a complex paradox. For example, within queer spaces and WLW relationships, these labels can indeed provide a framework for understanding one’s gender identity. In addition, women who are femme-presenting and identify with the label of ‘femme’ personally find validation and a sense of belonging through these labels. But again, the use of such labels runs the risk of perpetuating restrictive gender norms and expectations. The persistent use of labels such as ‘masc’ and ‘femme’ in WLW relationships is evidence of the pressure to conform to fixed notions of masculinity and femininity which can be harmful for women who don’t exactly fit into those categories⁴.

The usage of labels like those of ‘masc’ and ‘femme’ to describe one’s partner in women-loving-women (WLW) relationships is more common than one might think within queer communities. On the surface, these labels can provide

1 Heidi M. Levitt and Katherine R. Hiestand, “Gender within Lesbian Sexuality: Butch and Femme Perspectives,” *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 18, no. 1 (2006): 39–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10720530590523062>.

2 Susan Ardill and Sue O’Sullivan, “Butch/Femme Obsessions,” *Feminist Review* 34, no. 1 (1990): 79–85, <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.1990.11>.

3 Megan Oberdofer, “The Implications of Physical Beauty Norms on Gender Identity Development, Sexual Identity Formation, and Sense of Self in the Femme Queer Community” (master’s thesis, Smith College, 2011), <https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses/1052>.

4 Alexandria Colburn, “The Relationship Between Identity Dimensions, Gender Conformity, and Satisfaction with Life” (master’s thesis, Marquette University, 2009).

a way for queer women to express their gender identity and preferences within a romantic and loving relationship. Historically, the word 'queer' has held many meanings over time. During the twentieth century, it was used as a derogatory term to describe homosexuals, then in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the word 'queer' began to be reclaimed by gay and lesbian activists. Throughout this current discourse, the term 'queer' has been referred primarily to individuals that exist outside of the standards and expectations of heteronormativity⁵. Thus, this includes individuals with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions. And on the context of this paper, the term 'queer' is understood as something inclusive to encompass all women that won't exactly fit into the masc and femme identities. And by doing that, this ultimately indicates a rejection of the gender binary and fixed categories. The persistence to use these masc and femme labels raises a critical question: do they ultimately reinforce the very patriarchal system that the site of queerness seeks to challenge and dismantle? Despite the potential for queerness as a site to foster fluidity and challenge traditional gender roles, the continued persistent use of these labels can potentially replicate the binary structure that feminism aims to deconstruct. This issue is particularly pronounced in WLW relationships where there is a risk of replicating the power dynamics that marginalize women in a broader societal context. Despite the fluidity and resistance to the patriarchal paradigm that the concept of queerness offers, the use of labels such as 'masc' and 'femme' can unintentionally serve as a means to conform to traditional expectations of gender expression.

Historically, the masc/femme dynamics find their origin in the butch/femme dynamic noting that both dynamics are perceived to challenge the heterosexual norms⁶. Although the dynamic of a masc/femme WLW relationship does defy the patriarchal model because both women are of the same sex, it also can potentially reinforce or replicate a binary understanding of gender roles. This mirroring of heterosexual norms is sometimes evident in the stereotypes that a masc-presenting woman should be dominant, and a femme-presenting woman should be nurturing. This also suggests the idea that WLW relationships are merely an imitation of heterosexual relationships rather than offering an alternative model of intimacy and connectionn.

Thus, this article argues that the persistent use of established queer labels, specifically that of 'masc' and 'femme' in WLW relationships, although

5 Renée C. Hoogland, "Queer," in *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender*, ed. Fedwa Malti-Douglas (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 1235–36.

6 Joey F. Cooter, "Butch, Femme, or Neither? What Owning These Identities Means" (master's thesis, East Tennessee State University, 2014), <https://dc.etsu.edu/etd/2365>.

it seems to be just used as a tool to label one's partner or oneself in a romantic relationship, it functions as a performative act that reinforces the gender binary and ultimately reinforces patriarchal structures. Thus, this article further argues that the use of labels such as 'masc' and 'femme' restricts the potential for gender justice because it can reinforce the patriarchal structures inherent to traditional notions of gender roles. The persistence to use labels such as 'masc' and 'femme' highlights the tension between individual agency and gender norms and expectations within the performance of gender.

While queer spaces, especially that of WLW relationships can offer a site of gender fluidity and resistance to gender norms, the influence of culturally entrenched societal norms can lead women to replicate the very structure that feminism and queer theory seek to dismantle. Despite progress, heteronormative norms and expectations are pervasive and persistent even in queer spaces. The best example of this is the fact that heteronormativity is not just prevalent among those who adhere to it, but even among those who defy heteronormative norms and expectations. It is to be noted that in a society that disapproves of homosexuality, there is more of a demand and preference for a gender-complementary partner. This tension stresses the need to critically reflect on the performance of gender within WLW relationships, especially that of the use of labels within WLW relationships such as 'masc' and 'femme' because it can reinforce harmful stereotypes and limit the full spectrum of gender identity and gender expressions.

To explore these dynamics, this article applies Judith Butler's theory of performativity which argues that gender is not an inherent trait but a performance through a series of repeated acts. These performances are propelled by societal norms that individuals unconsciously enact and reinforce through a process Butler calls 'citation'⁷. This process makes gender appear natural therefore masking its socially constructed nature. In the context of WLW relationships, the use of labels such as 'masc' and 'femme' can be understood as a performative act to conform to the preconceived notions of masculinity and femininity. This dynamic is further demonstrated by the pressure on women in WLW relationships to prove their attraction to women, especially if they previously dated men. This pressure can lead to an exaggerated performance of either masculinity or femininity to legitimize their sexual orientation⁸. These performance acts though can be empowering on the surface because they empower a marginalized identity but they can also inadvertently contribute

7 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203824979>.

8 Cooter, "Butch, Femme, or Neither?"

to the replication of the gender binary. This paradox is further complicated by running into the risk of replicating conventional masculine and feminine dynamics that are usually seen in heterosexual relationships.

Drawing upon Judith Butler's theory of performativity, this article explores the usage of queer labels, specifically that of 'masc' and 'femme'. This article argues that even though these labels are a way to express one's queerness or identity that exists outside heteronormativity, they can also contribute to the naturalization of the gender binary even within lesbian relationships and queer relationships. The repetition of performances traditionally tied to the masculine and feminine performance of gender creates an illusion of a natural order, often mirroring the heterosexual gender binary. Whether women are aware of it or unaware, it now becomes a script for gender expression, thus limiting the full spectrum of how queer women can express their gender. The article also examines the historical roots of these labels, recognizing their historical significance as a tool for resistance in heteronormative spaces. Ultimately, the article emphasizes a fluid and more nuanced understanding of gender within queer spaces and warns against the use of language and labels that can perpetuate harmful gender norms. By challenging the strict categorizations of the gender binary, this article hopes to encourage queer women to perform their gender unapologetically without feeling the need to conform to the gendered expectations of being a 'masc' or a 'femme'.

Historical context: Butch/femme dynamic

Queer labels, specifically that of 'masc' and 'femme' are contemporary iterations of gendered expression within queer communities, particularly in the context of women-loving-women (WLW) relationships. These labels are historically rooted in the butch/femme dynamic, a cultural framework that first emerged in the early 20th century. The 'butch' is often characterized by its rejection of femininity in favor of masculine-coded traits and behaviors, whereas the 'femme' embraced aspects of conventional femininity. The butch/femme dynamic was often seen as a form of resistance against the gender binary, at least at that time⁹. For instance, it provided a site for lesbians to express their sexuality and build a space in a society that largely isolated them¹⁰. These labels and identities, however, were not without any criticism.

9 Joan Nestle, ed., *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992).

10 Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315021157>.

Some feminist scholars argued that by adopting masculine and feminine roles, butch and femme women were simply mirroring heterosexual relationships¹¹. In the second wave of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s, androgyny also became a dominant aesthetic within queer circles which led to a decline in the visibility of the butch/femme identities¹². However, in the 1980s, the interest in butch/femme identities resurfaced, reframed within a post-feminist context. This renewed interest underscores the fluidity and significance of these identities, challenging the notion that they were simply rigid limitations of heterosexual norms and behaviors¹³.

The historical context of butch/femme identities is important to understanding the contemporary use of 'masc' and 'femme' labels in WLW relationships. Despite the fact these labels may appear to be just an updated version of the butch/femme dynamic, some subtle nuances and distinctions need to be considered. One key distinction is the increased emphasis on self-expression and the rejection of rigid definitions. Contemporary understandings of queer labels, specifically that of 'masc' and 'femme' acknowledge even more of a broader spectrum of gender presentations and challenge the notion that these labels necessitate specific relationship dynamics or even sexual roles.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler¹⁴ argues that in Western culture, sex, gender, and sexual orientation are conceptualized as closely aligned, essential attributes. It is understood that biological sex is binary (male/female), essential, and natural, and it forms the foundation for binary gender. If they are born with biological parts that would classify them as a male, then they are expected to embody traits that are traditionally associated with men. Likewise, if they are born with biological parts that classify them as female, then they are expected to embody traits that are traditionally associated with women. Butler¹⁵ goes into great detail about how gender is performative, and whether one understands this or not, it is important to stress that gender must be viewed as something performative rather than an innate characteristic of a human person. Butler

11 Charles Horton Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order* (New York: Routledge, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203789513>.

12 Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* (New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi: Simon & Schuster, 2016).

13 Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*.

14 Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

15 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203828274>.

argues that the idea of sex as a binary (male/female) is a cultural norm enforced through social norms and expectations. If sex is a product of social norms and expectations, it suggests that sex is also performative, just as gender is such as the ways individuals can understand and express the sex they have been assigned at birth through bodily gestures, how they present their self, and how they behave contribute to the construction and reinforcement of the gender binary. This connects to the broader theory of performativity of Judith Butler in that gender is not something individuals inherently possess (biologically) but something individuals attain through repeated customized acts. If sex is already imbued with cultural meanings and subject to social norms and expectations, it becomes inseparable from gender, making the distinction between sex and gender meaningless. The term 'performativity' comes from Austin's theory of performative utterances which describes statements that not only reflect actions but also perform the very actions they utter - in other words, it is in the act of speaking that this reality is created. Butler then argues that gender works this way. It is not a decision made once one is a man, a woman, neither, or either; rather, it is a process, an ongoing, continual reiteration of social norms and expectations. Queer identities are always under construction thus emphasizing their fluidity and the nature of performativity. These repetitive acts bring into being the meaning - and that is of someone's gender identity¹⁶. Some of these acts may constitute new meaning or add new significance to the identity while some of these acts may also reinforce already existing ones. Butler continues by saying that there is no pre-existing gender identity just waiting on the horizon to be expressed. It is in this context that the term 'performative' comes into play because it precisely refers to the idea that the act of doing something brings it into being. According to an article by Çınar, this performativity is not simply about doing one act, but it gains its meaning and power through the repetition of customized acts. This repetition in return solidifies the performances and creates opportunities to an extent to disrupt the gender binary.

It is important to remember that even though Butler does emphasize the performative nature of gender, they also recognize that individuals do not have a radical say in choosing or controlling these performances. To some extent, the performative acts one does are relative to the constraints of an already existing society. Gender performances are always situated within broader historical and cultural contexts that shape and yet limit the possibilities of performance. Every person is not born with a blank slate; rather, they are already born into the physical world that is already filled with expectations, conventions, and scripts that shape the perceptions of what it is to be a man or a woman. There are norms

16 Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

in which everybody is born - gendered and racial norms that dictate what kind of person they shall become. Each time someone does that, they actively play a part in reinforcing the gender binary. Similarly, there is a lot of research for instance, in psychology that supports Butler's theory of performativity. This is consistent with the research of Bosson et al.¹⁷ in which they found that those who fail to perform gender correctly face negative consequences - a significant point that builds on Butler's argument that the gender binary is maintained to uphold the patriarchal system. Additionally, social psychologists like Kurz and Donaghue explored how gender is constructed through language and interactions echoing Butler's theory of performativity¹⁸.

The illusion of a fixed gender identity exists precisely because it is performed daily and constantly every day to the point that it creates a sense of coherence over time. As such, it means that these acts of performance are derived from an essential and coherent identity. Once again, however, Butler says that such a notion of a fixed identity does not exist. There is no mold of gender identity that makes these performative acts happen. The idea somehow that gender is determined through biology, therefore making it a natural thing comes from how everyone is supposed to carry out the same set of scripts given to them at birth but it is important to remember that some individuals play out these scripts without being aware that gender identity is a social construction. Some people spend their entire lives believing that only the male and female binary exists and that such norms that are perpetuated by the gender binary are only right and natural. Truthfully, one could argue that it is only the strict consequences of not conforming to the gender binary that make everybody do their gender in almost an identical homogenous fashion to the point that everyone believes that the only gender identities that exist are that of a man and a woman because almost everybody does the same thing every day in a similar way.

However, Butler stretches further to argue that "gender is not merely descriptive, but a tool to maintain and enforce already constituted power relations." The central argument of Butler's theory is that of compulsory heterosexuality where they argue that heterosexuality is not a natural orientation but rather the standard that is socially enforced in the interest of maintaining the patriarchal paradigm. Butler argues that the strict classification of the gender binary (male/female) is performed compulsorily to maintain the

17 Michelle K. Ryan and Nyla R. Branscombe, *The SAGE Handbook of Gender and Psychology* (SAGE Publications, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446269930>.

18 Tim Kurz and Ngaire Donaghue, "Gender and Discourse," *The SAGE Handbook of Gender and Psychology* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2013), 61–80, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446269930.n5>.

already prevalent norms and expectations of heterosexuality. With all this, it is also significant to note that Butler does not argue against whatever gender identity individuals choose to identify with. They would be in total violation of the very basis of queer theory and feminism if they did. Instead, Butler criticizes the concept of fixed gender identities such as a 'man' or a 'woman'. Nonetheless, many scholars have built upon and given critiques to Butler's theory of performativity. Trittin and Schoenborn, for instance, explored how the concept of performativity can influence how queer identities can be constructed, especially in workplace settings¹⁹. Zapkin also critiqued the idea of symbolic gestures and labels as tools for resistance and insisted that individuals should advocate for more direct action²⁰. Still, despite these criticisms, Butler's theory of performativity provides a framework for understanding gender identities and how its constructed within the context of this article.

The theory of performativity holds that gender is not a person's biological identity but rather an identity formed by repeating specific behaviors, outfits, and even language that creates the appearance of a consistent gender identity. This also applies when individuals use labels like 'masc' and 'femme' to describe themselves or their significant other - they are performing this act, enacting certain traits, behaviors, and aesthetics that correspond to the social constructs and expectations of masculinity and femininity.

Women who embrace the 'masc' identity or masculine-presenting women appropriate behaviors or identities that usually men assume like wearing traditional masculine clothing, speaking in a particular way to emulate qualities tied to masculinity, or perhaps even an assertive role in a relationship. In return, women who also identify as 'femme' or feminine presenting women perform femininity through behavior and styles that are usually culturally associated with women such as wearing traditional feminine clothing or adopting a more caring and submissive role in a romantic relationship. In the case of WLW relationships, the usage of labels like 'masc' and 'femme' works as a script to guide women on how they should express or perform the gender identity that they chose. In most cases, the significance of these labels lies in the fact that queer identities go unrecognized if they don't perform according to what those labels establish and what the norms and expectations are that

19 Hannah Trittin and Dennis Schoenborn, "Diversity as Polyphony: Reconceptualizing Diversity Management from a Communication-Centered Perspective," *Journal of Business Ethics* 144, no. 2 (August 2017): 305–22, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-015-2825-8>.

20 Phillip Zapkin, "Culturally Homeless': Queer Parody and Negative Affect as Resistance to Normatives" (Graduate College Dissertations and Theses, 2011), <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/graddis/245>.

have become associated with those particular labels. Research suggests that dominant communities have the tendency to force minority communities to be recognized and this recognition takes precedence over other aspects of someone's identity²¹. This can lead to a situation where individuals are reduced to being representatives of a certain group or community rather than who they are as a person such as their achievements in life. Additionally, research also suggests that the pressure to perform pre-defined categories may only just hinder queer individuals from expressing their gender identities authentically²².

Queer labels are not neutral but are rooted in power relations²³. The term 'queer', for example, has been historically controversial and has been taken as a slur but over time, it has been reclaimed as a term and symbol for resistance. Similarly, labels like 'masc' and 'femme' also act as a tool of power negotiations to create spaces within heteronormative settings. Although these performances are gender self-expressions of queer identities, they inadvertently reinforce the same binary that these women choose not to participate in. Despite recent attempts over decades to challenge and resist the gender binary, the concept that there are only two fixed gender identities, namely man and woman, has deeply been ingrained into society. This binary often shows itself in expectations of romantic relationships where one person should be dominant, and the other one should be submissive has influenced even same-sex relationships such as WLW relationships. This is more complicated in the case of a WLW relationship because women involved in this relationship might unwittingly or consciously bring along with themselves internalized gender scripts and this can potentially pressure their 'masc' or 'femme' partner to perform their gender in ways that are traditionally tied to masculinity and femininity.

Women in the context of WLW relationships even as they challenge the gender binary by being in a same-sex relationship are still influenced by pervasive societal norms and expectations of how men and women should behave and because these are often heteronormative, it is always in the assumption that heterosexuality is the default gender identity. Heterosexual

21 Lotte Holck and Sara Louise Muhr, "Unequal Solidarity? Towards a Norm-Critical Approach to Welfare Logics," *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 33, no. 1 (2017): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2016.11.001>.

22 Dr Luke Ward and Dr Siân Lucas, "You're Trying to Put Yourself in Boxes, Which Doesn't Work': Exploring Non-Binary Youth's Gender Identity Development Using Feminist Relational Discourse Analysis," *Journal of Gender Studies* (2024), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09589236.2023.2172557>.

23 Heiko Motschenbacher and Martin Stegu, "Queer Linguistic Approaches to Discourse," *Discourse & Society* 24, no. 5 (2013): 519–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926513486069>.

privilege according to Butler, operates by naturalizing itself and presenting itself as the default and the norm²⁴. The use of labels such as ‘masc’ and ‘femme’ within WLW relationships can unintentionally mirror this dynamic. By replicating familiar characteristics and behaviors usually associated with traditional and restrictive presentations of masculinity and femininity, it creates the illusion of a natural order that is similar to the heterosexual gender binary to even queer relationships.

Repetition and naturalization of gender roles. That is to say that by doing this, it can contribute to the repetition of gendered performances reinforcing more that the fixed categories of the gender binary are natural and inevitable. This repetition does indeed create a sense of stability and coherence within the relationship but it also reinforces the idea of gendered roles as something that is fixed and unchangeable. If gendered performances continue to be replicated within WLW relationships, it also follows that it contributes to the naturalization of traditional and restrictive gender roles. Compulsory heterosexuality is a concept that describes the social pressure that normalizes and privileges heterosexuality which can in more than one way influence the dynamics of relationships, even within spaces that aim to challenge heteronormativity²⁵. This influence can particularly manifest in the usage of queer labels, specifically, that of ‘masc’ and ‘femme’. The norms and behaviors influenced by societal norms and expectations reinforce the heterosexual matrix, a framework that reinforces the idea of fixed categories of identities such as that of a man and a woman. The repetition of ‘masc’ and ‘femme’ roles, even within WLW relationships can unintentionally contribute to the naturalization of the gender binary.

And when queer labels like ‘masc’ and ‘femme’ becomes naturalized, it means that what was initially seen as just a means of performing one’s gender within a relationship, will be seen now as an important aspect of how women should behave and perform their gender in a WLW romantic relationship. It makes it seem like these identities and roles are inherent to same-sex relationships and these are how WLW relationships should be performed and not because it is only merely a product of societal conditioning. The repetition of gendered performances creates a sense of familiarity, making it difficult to imagine other ways of being in a WLW relationship. Labels like ‘masc’ and ‘femme’ even though they originate within the context of queerness, usually draw their definition from the heterosexual matrix which defines gender in binary terms (man/woman). It is important to note however that the repetition

24 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.

25 Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

is not necessarily always negative. Still, if it is a repetition of certain acts that are traditionally associated with masculinity and femininity, it can be problematic because it can be used to naturalize and reinforce restrictive gender norms that limit women and in this case how women can express themselves, especially within a romantic relationship. Women may feel pressured to conform to the perceived expectations of being a 'masc' or being a 'femme' thus suppressing aspects of their gender expression that fall outside of these labels.

Although the use of queer labels such as 'masc' and 'femme' is, initially, a way in which one can express their queerness in a society dominated by heterosexual identities, the continued use of the labels may perpetuate a notion that gender, within the context of even queer relationships, would always have to be gendered. Judith Butler, for example, posits that the heterosexual matrix has a pervasive role in dictating how even queer individuals can perceive gender and sexuality which can have implications for how they interact with other queer individuals. Even when queer women can be actively trying to deconstruct or dismantle the idea of the gender binary such actions are sometimes still rooted in the heterosexual matrix. The actions themselves are not freely chosen by queer women but are determined by societal norms and expectations created through the heterosexual matrix.

Role of language. It is worth noting that, at this point, labels both empower and limit women in the sense that they are tied to different individual experiences and motivations. According to Butler, language is not just a representation of reality but an agent that actively participates in creating realities. It reflects not only the social structures in place but also creates and reinforces them through repeated acts of speech and labeling; the language queer women use, for instance, to categorize and define themselves, or others has an important impact on how women perceive the world and how they interact within it. It is easy to understand and distinguish that these labels are merely basic descriptions of what or who women like whether it is in a romantic, sexual, or personal setting. But if they are repeated persistently especially if it is in a specific community that recognizes these labels, they gradually build power and influence and become more than mere labels. They become sites of power that define which expressions of gender are acceptable even within queer circles. It can lead to the naturalization of the gender binary into the very spaces that should be fluid from the start.

The power of language to shape reality is relevantly significant at both individual and collective levels. At an individual level, the constant use of labels such as 'masc' and 'femme' can have an impact on how queer women perceive themselves as well as how they are supposed to act in romantic loving relationships. At a collective level, widespread usage of these labels also forms

a shared reality at least in the queer spaces wherein some gender expressions are deemed acceptable and are thus more visible. This makes for a hierarchical structure which is more of a reproduction of the larger patriarchal system. Of course, the power of language isn't always wielded intentionally or even negatively. Queer women who are in WLW relationships may use these labels simply to just show their affection or preference for women. However, one must always remember that there are broader societal forces that shape these terms and consistently using them and their performances, even in harmless ways, can perpetuate harmful gender norms. Similarly, through repeated gendered performances, it is not about eradicating the use of labels but encouraging to be critically aware of how language works as a tool of power and promoting more nuance and fluid understanding of gender in queer spaces or queer settings.

CONCLUSION

This article explores the persistent use of 'masc' and 'femme' labels within the context of women-loving-women (WLW) relationships, arguing that despite the site of WLW relationships' potential for self-expression and gender fluidity, these labels function as performative acts that reinforce the gender binary and subsequently patriarchal structures. Applying Judith Butler's theory of performativity, this article argues that even within queer spaces which seek to challenge the gender binary, these labels still contribute to the naturalization of the gender binary. The use of queer labels, specifically that of 'masc' and 'femme' becomes a performative act in which queer women in the context of WLW relationships are expected to perform behaviors and styles aligned with societal expectations of masculinity and femininity. The repetition of these performances often influenced by compulsory heterosexuality creates an illusion of natural order that reinforces the strict gender binary.

Furthermore, the analysis brings to light how such labels become a guiding script to gender expression in the context of WLW relationships, deciding which behavior is proper, and thereby ultimately replicating stereotypical dynamics of heterosexual relationships. Through consistent use of these labels, they turn out to become sites of power that decide appropriate gender presentations, restricting queer women in their gender identity and expression, at least in the context of WLW relationships. It is necessary that people become more critical of how strong language can be depending on how it is used, particularly in the promotion of bad gender norms thus there must be a more fluid, nuanced understanding of gender beyond the limitations of the gender binary.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Graciela L. Apolo is currently pursuing their Master's degree in the Master Arts in Philosophy program at Saint Louis University, Baguio City, Philippines. They previously graduated with Latin honors with Bachelor of Science in Philosophy, majoring in Applied Ethics at Mindanao State University - Iligan Institute of Technology in 2023. Their research interests usually lie in the areas of Applied Ethics, Critical Theory, Metaphysics, Feminism, Gender Studies, and Popular Culture.

Nikky S. Garo is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Saint Louis University in Baguio City, specializing in Critical Theory, Eco-Feminism, Philosophy of Education, and Gender Studies. He actively contributes to academic discourse through research published in national, international peer reviewed journals and Scopus indexed journals. Beyond his scholarly work, he serves as Adviser of the New Louisian Philosophical Society (NEOLOUPHIS), guiding student initiatives in philosophical inquiry and leadership. He also holds the role of Extension Coordinator of the Department of Philosophy, overseeing outreach and extension programs that connect philosophical education with community service, reflecting his commitment to inclusive education, gender equality, and Indigenous rights.