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Understanding Femmephobia Within Queer Communities: Insights From Gay Latino College Men

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ABSTRACT

Guided by the perspectives of 50 gay Latino men in college, this qualitative study examines notions of femmephobia within queer communities, the various ways it is manifested, and the effects it has on gay Latinos. Because femmephobia is not an outgrowth nor confined to queer communities, connections to systems of oppression are made. Data stem from interviews and participation in a private social media page with gay Latino men. Through a narrative approach, students' stories reveal that there is notable femmephobia at varying levels. Themes include: the downplaying of femininity, privileges and desirability of masculine men, the role of machismo and misogyny, and disinterest in femme men as a matter of "preference." Implications for practice are offered, which are especially relevant to higher education practitioners as they look to support students in a time when queer communities are under attack at local and national levels.

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> "Even in safe spaces, or queer spaces, it still happens where you go to a bar or a queer event. A masculine — assumed masculine presenting person — is presenting as more feminine, they are getting called a sissy or femme or whatever. So, there's also stigma within the community."
>
> —Cristobal

This quote demonstrates the complexities gay Latino men[1] face as it relates to femmephobia in queer[2] communities. Cristobal, a study participant, claims that even in queer spaces that are supposed to be safe, presenting femininely leads to name calling due to stigma. According to Hoskin (2019), femmephobia is the "systematic devaluation of femininity" (p. 687). It is prejudice and discrimination directed at someone who is perceived as feminine (Hoskin, 2013), which includes gay men. One of the issues here, however, lies in the conflation that exists between gender and sexuality. Although gay men can certainly be masculine, and research notes the value on masculinities among gay Latinos (Ocampo, 2012; Patrón & Rodriguez, 2022), society largely understands gay men as feminine. As such, many gay men are considered the antithesis of masculinity (Patrón, 2021b). Although femmephobia exists and

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may even be widespread within queer spaces, it is critically important to note that it is experienced differently across communities of color and that *it is in no way exclusive or inherent to queer communities*. On the contrary, femmephobia is an outgrowth of systems of oppression that socialize society at large to place value on genders, gender role expectations, and gender presentations. When certain individuals fail to meet the expectations or "unspoken rules" that are tied to a particular gender, they then become susceptible to different forms of discrimination, or even violence, including verbal and physical (Mallory et al., 2015), which is known to vary by racial/ethnic groups as well as gender (Meyer, 2012). For example, gay men may decrease in status for identifying as feminine and may perceive homophobic insults as attacks on their sexuality and gender whereas women may construct physical violence as severe, as they confront such violence differently from men (Meyer, 2012). Of note, these experiences are tied to hegemonic masculinities and misogyny.

Although higher education research on gay Latinos has examined how related concepts, such as heteronormativity, influences their experiences with love (Duran et al., 2020) and tensions between masculinities and connections to university staff and faculty (Patrón & Rodriguez, 2022), less attention has been paid to their encounters with femmephobia. Guided by the perspectives of gay Latino collegians, the purpose of this study is to examine notions of femmephobia within queer communities, the various ways it is manifested, and the effects it has on gay Latinos. Because femmephobia can negatively impact students' identities, have suppressive effects on their self-presentations, create unhealthy divides and conflicts amongst queer peers, and look differently across groups, it is critical to examine its role among an already marginalized group. This is especially the case given the complexities experienced by Latinos in relation to femmephobia. Findings from this study can then help guide institutional stakeholders as they work toward creating spaces where gay Latino men can experience and affirm a range of gender presentations. Because femmephobia is neither an outgrowth of nor confined to queer communities, connections to systems of oppression are made, as these are what ultimately guide attitudes and behaviors that society has about different groups of people (Patrón & Rodriguez, 2022). In fact, Patrón and Rodriguez are clear in noting that, "Social identities and the expectations structurally attached to them are connected to interlocking systems of oppression" (p. 151). Particularly relevant to this study are patriarchy and heterosexism.

Systems of oppression

Examining femmephobia within queer communities without accounting for interlocking systems of oppression would provide a distorted and one-sided perspective. Such view would place blame on individual people and queer

communities for femmephobic views without accounting for larger structures that directly and indirectly lead to harm. At the core, these systems are meant to "subjugate and oppress people of marginalized identities" (Patrón, 2023, p. 69). As a result of their ubiquitous nature and the way these inflict pain among communities of color, it is critical to consider the ways systemic oppression[3] is manifested. Previous research with Latino men has shown connections between social identities and systems of oppression and how these may affect the college experience (Patrón & Garcia, 2016). Patriarchy, for instance, plays a significant role. Despite its contestation, certain ideals are mostly agreed upon, including the notion of male dominance. According to Walby (1989), patriarchy is a "system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women" (p. 214).

Regardless of gender, patriarchy affects everyone in different ways (Patrón, 2021b). While Patrón notes that machismo is often used when discussing notions of patriarchy among Latina/o communities, it is not exclusive to Latinas/os. As a result, such ideals must be continuously disputed. In describing the prototypical understanding of machismo, Falicov (2010) notes that the better man is one that sires the most sons, dominates his wife, and can command respect from his children. In relation to queer Latinas/os, patriarchy can lead to barriers because of gender role designations (Patrón, 2021b). Latino men, for instance, are expected to exert masculinity in various ways, and while those that are gay can certainly display masculinity, gay men are largely perceived as feminine. These faulty conceptions may further lead to discrimination and oppression for queer individuals (Ocampo, 2014). Despite inaccurate and stigmatized associations between Latinas/os and patriarchy, it is important to recognize challenges to these conceptions. Falicov (2010) argues for a more strength-based approach to masculinity. By reviewing literature on the topic, Falicov found that respect, responsibility, loyalty, and altruism in the family unit are positive qualities associated with machismo, complicating the ways we think about patriarchy. Work by Hurtado and Sinha (2016) further elucidate intersectional understandings of machismo that highlight positive ethical positionings.

Equally important is the accounting of heterosexism, which is "an ideological system that denies, denigrates, stigmatizes [or segregates] any nonheterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community" (Walls, 2008, p. 27). Moreover, it protects power held by heterosexuals. For racially minoritized groups, consequences are exacerbated due to heterosexism and racism. According to Balsam et al. (2011), negative experiences related to racial/ethnic and sexual minoritized identities may lead to poor mental and physical health. Racism is known to inflict varying degrees of harm through institutional norms (Harper, 2012). While people of color may undergo racism within queer communities, they also experience heterosexism across contexts. Because heterosexism leads to negative outcomes for queer people, some opt

for ways to lessen such consequences. In examining experiences of homophobia, poverty, and racism, Díaz et al. (2001) found that gay and bisexual Latino men pretended to be straight at some point in their lives while others moved away from family to fully embrace their sexualities. Overall, Díaz et al. contended that negative health outcomes are connected to racial and sexual discrimination. Because college campuses are in no way exempt from systemic oppression, including racism, and are built on and reinforcers of inequities, it is important to keep these in mind in making sense of gay Latinos' collegiate experiences.

Gay Latino collegians

Despite an increase in studying gay Latinos, including students in postsecondary contexts, in recent years, literature has overlooked the role of femmephobia. Instead, research has focused on a range of topics— including coming out processes (Eaton & Rios, 2017; Patrón, 2021a), social identities (Camacho, 2016; Patrón, 2023), racialized experiences (Díaz et al., 2001; Patrón, 2021c), romantic relationships (Duran et al., 2020), and masculinities (Ocampo, 2012; Patrón & Rodriguez, 2022). In their qualitative study on social challenges, Eaton and Rios (2017) note that most participants had negative responses when disclosing their sexuality to family members, friends, and colleagues. These led to a loss of relationships, which according to participants, derived from homophobia. In the same thread, Patrón (2021a), through the employing of precarious familismo, noted disparate familial experiences, both adverse and supportive, when gay Latino collegians disclosed their sexuality.

Because social identities play a role in how gay Latinos experience college (Camacho, 2016; Patrón, 2023; Patrón & Garcia, 2016), literature has examined its specific roles. Camacho (2016) found that students utilized their ethnic studies courses to better understand their identities and that involvement with identity-based organizations allowed them to navigate multiple borderlands. Due to the polarizing racial climate in recent years, research has also examined its effects. Guided by racist nativism and queer critical theory, Patrón (2021c) found that gay Latinos experienced racialized incidents perpetrated by Trumpists on campus, including the classroom. These events involved verbal attacks and fear for their safety. Finally, recent literature has also employed portraiture methodology to make connections between gay Latinos' experiences with heteronormativity and love (Duran et al., 2020) as well as how notions of masculinity influence how gay Latinos develop relationships with university staff and faculty (Patrón & Rodriguez, 2022). Of note, this body of work has acknowledged the systemic oppression faced by gay Latinos as they navigate campus spaces (Duran et al., 2020; Patrón, 2023; Patrón & Rodriguez, 2022).

The aforementioned topics are certainly of great importance and make notable contributions to scholarship on gay Latinos within a postsecondary context; however, there remains a gap about the role of femmephobia across queer communities. Thus, Stewart and Nicolazzo (2018) called on education scholars to study femmephobia at the intersection with systems of oppression, which this study precisely attends to. Given a dearth of this literature, federal and local attacks on queer communities (Patrón, 2021c), and the master narrative on Latino men (Patrón et al., 2021), this study makes a significant contribution.

Theoretical framework

This paper is guided by Hoskin's (2013) theory of femmephobia. To better understand its functions, it is important to first define femme. According to Blair and Hoskin (2015), femme is conceptualized as an "identity that encapsulates femininity that is dislocated from, and not necessitating, a female body/identity, as well as femininity that is embodied by those whose femininity is deemed culturally unsanctioned" (p. 4). The authors go on to note that culturally-sanctioned femininity is reflected within what is considered "proper womanhood," which is primarily defined by white, heterosexual, cis women. Closely related, Blair and Hoskin note similarities between sanctioned femininity and patriarchal femininity, which utilizes gender policing to define womanhood while defining femininity in relation to sex assigned at birth.

In discussing femmephobia, Blair and Hoskin (2015) build on Hoskin's prior work to define femmephobia as "a type of prejudice, discrimination or antagonism that is directed at someone who is perceived to identify, embody or express femininely and towards people or objects gendered femininely" (p. 4). The researchers contend that femmephobia targets expressions of femininity that move away from notions of patriarchal femininity. Expanding on this conceptualization, research has noted various types of femmephobia. First, covert femmephobia is manifested structurally and ideologically and is a part of our daily lives, including language, work, ideologies, and gendering. For example, it is illustrated in the discourse of someone "looking gay," which is often directed at masculine perceived queer cis men (Hoskin, 2013). In this form of femmephobia, there is more value given to those gendered masculine. Second, overt femmephobia is closely related to misogynistic perspectives and is displayed through overt "contempt and devaluation strictly on the basis of perceived femininity, femme identity, or what is femininely gendered" (Hoskin, 2013, p. 34). Here, femmephobia arises due to perceived feminine gender and is manifested through things like belittlement, which is used to rationalize violence.

Third, femme mystification, serves to mystify femininity by dehumanizing feminine bodies (Hoskin, 2013). This form of femmephobia includes gender

policing, which seeks to dislocate femininity from humanness. The process of mystification artificializes femininity, thereby reducing feminine individuals as subhuman. Situating this artificial construction within a system of patriarchy upholds masculine dominance over femininity. Also in this process, "femme mystification operates by giving the appearance that femme identified folks are mythical" (p. 35). Lastly, pious femmephobia entails the shaming of the "feminine person or enactment through positioning the femmephobic offender as morally superior" (p. 35). It is here where femmephobic issues are regarded as superficial. Overall, pious femmephobia contributes to power disparities between the victim and perpetrator. While these forms of femmephobia are presented separately from one another, they typically overlap and may be exacerbated with various systems of oppression. Notably, each of these forms relies on gender policing, both institutionally and theoretically. We contend that it is experienced differently across communities of color.

Positionality statements

Understanding that subjectivities play a role in the conduction of research, we find it necessary to share relevant aspects of our identities. I, Patrón, am a cisgender heterosexual Latino man that is cognizant of the privileges I am afforded. I grew up in a Latina/o household and community and attended predominantly Latina/o public schools. In these spaces, I found that masculinities and sexualities were consistently discussed in ways that conformed to patriarchal ideals. As a child, I did not understand the manifestations of systems of power, nor did I have the language or lens to critically interrogate these. Still, I noticed patterns in the ways people spoke about gender and sexuality. I was expected to be straight and embody masculine qualities while being directly taught to avoid certain behaviors (e.g., flicking my wrist when running and wearing tight clothing), as these were deemed feminine and would lead people to question my sexuality. I complied. As I grew older and learned about gender, sexuality, and systems of oppression, it became easier for me to challenge injustices. I understand my sexuality prevents me from fully knowing what it is like for participants to experience femmephobia. This, however, is not a goal of mine. Instead, I am invested in doing quality work that adequately illustrates the voices and critiques raised by gay Latinos.

I, Harper, am a Black gay man who has experienced femmephobia most of my life. "Stop holding your hand like that," my mom sternly and repeatedly insisted to me as a young boy. My dangling wrist was seemingly too girlie to her and others. As a teenager, I was the winner of a dance contest at school. My dad found out about it. Evidently, someone reported to him that I was dancing like a girl. "No father wants a fagot for a son," was his response to me. For many years throughout my childhood, peers often remarked and sometimes teased me for switchin,' a term used to describe how girls and women walk.

I internalized over three decades of homophobia, transphobia, misogynoir, and femmephobia. I was 32 years old when I met the man who is now my husband. I loved almost everything about him except his purse and bedazzled shoes. Throughout our now 16-year relationship, he has helped me confront and undo my internalized femmephobia. Today, I proudly embrace my femininity in all sorts of ways, including in how I talk, walk, and dress. I attempt to model what it could look like to be simultaneously feminine, masculine, highly respected, and most importantly, free.

Methodology and methods

In this study, we employed narrative methodology. According to Webster and Mertova (2007), narrative provides a rich framework for researchers to investigate the ways humans experience the world, as "It records human experience through the construction and reconstruction of personal stories; it is well suited to addressing issues of complexity and cultural and human centredness because of its capacity to record and retell those events" (p. 1). Because stories are constantly under construction due to new events, they do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, they are influenced by people and communities (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Stories can take various shapes, including biographical, autoethnographic, life stories, and oral histories (Creswell, 2013). Due to their versatility, narrative allows researchers to capture experiences holistically (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Individuals' narratives are situated within social, cultural, and institutional discourses and therefore should be accounted for in the researchers' interpretations. Importantly, this study derives from a larger investigation examining the experiences of gay Latino men in college in which the social and cultural were considered alongside systems of oppression. In the interviews, participants consistently and widely addressed issues of femmephobia.

Sample

Aligned with a purposeful sampling technique, literature recommends that researchers identify participants that are accessible, willing to share their experiences, and can speak to the phenomenon being explored (Creswell, 2013). According to Creswell, in a narrative study, the researcher chooses individuals that are convenient and that attract attention due to their marginalization. Consequently, only participants that met the following criteria were included: identify as gay, Latino, and enrolled in a higher education institution. The sample included a total of 50 participants from different colleges and universities. Twenty-six of the 50 participants were undergraduate students while the remaining 24 were in graduate school. Their class standing varied from first year in college to third year in graduate school. Participants' majors

Table 1. Participants' demographic information.

Pseudonym	Major/Program of Study	Class Standing	Race/Ethnicity	Sexuality
Cristobal	Social Work	Graduate Student	Mexican/Chicano	Queer
Dave	International Studies	Graduate Student	Hispanic	Gay
DJ	Public Policy	Undergraduate Student	Chicano	Homosexual
Drew	English/Media and Cultural Studies	Undergraduate Student	Latinx	Gay
Edgar	Sociology	Undergraduate Student	Mexican American/ Latino	Homosexual
Enner	Anthropology	Undergraduate Student	Latino	Gay
Ezekiel	Human Relations/Women's and Gender Studies	Undergraduate Student	Mexican American	Gay
Gio	Health Science	Undergraduate Student	Latino	Gay
Güerillo	Communications	Undergraduate Student	Mexican/Latinx	Gay
Gustavo	N.A.	Graduate Student	N.A.	N.A.
Ian	Physics, Math	Undergraduate Student	African Peruvian	Gay
Mariano	Education/Policy and Administration	N.A.	Latinx/Chicanx	Queer
Rafi	Historic Conservation	Graduate Student	Latino/Multiracial	Gay
Samuel	Physics	Graduate Student	Peruvian	Gay
Saul	Communication Management	Graduate Student	Mexican/Latinx	Gay
Sergio	Education	Graduate Student	Mexican American	Homosexual
Teo	Criminal Justice	Undergraduate Student	Hispanic/Latino	Gay

also extended from engineering to media and cultural studies. The number of participants was based on: the heterogeneity of the population (students with varying identities), groups of special interest, use of multiple subsamples (e.g., undergraduate and graduate students), and available resources (Ritchie et al., 2013). To provide more meaningful stories, findings are elucidated through a select group of participants (see Table 1). Students were chosen based on the depth of their discussion of femmephobia, especially since not all of them addressed it. Because narrative is concerned with depth, we opted for providing more context and room for stories, than brief illustrations with limited data from more students.

Data collection

Data collection stemmed from two primary forms. First, we co-created and co-hosted the *Summit for Gay Latino Male Collegians*. This event was designed to build community through a series of activities relevant to gay Latinos and higher education contexts. College men came from across the U.S. for the daylong event. At the end of the Summit, interested Latinos shared their contact information and Patrón followed-up with them. Second, Patrón disseminated a call for participants via social media. The call outlined a brief description of the investigation along with a link for interested students to sign up.

Aligned with narrative methodology, Creswell (2013) suggests for researchers to select individuals who have stories to share and to spend time with them in gathering these in different ways. As a result, data for this study emanate from two main sources, including individual interviews as well as participation

in a private social media page. Drawing from semi-structured, in-depth interviews, Patrón asked participants to broadly share their life stories starting with elementary school and bringing it up to the present. Understanding that narratives are meant to capture experiences at different life stages, participants were asked to discuss some of those more in depth (e.g., college).

To complement interviews, Patrón also collected data via a private social media page in which only participants and he were a part of. The page not only allowed gay Latinos to validate each other's experiences and build community but also discuss and make sense of their experiences. To facilitate this process, Patrón asked participants to broadly share their thoughts on femmephobia; ways they have been affected by it, whether directly or indirectly; and the influence of femmephobia in the ways they show up across contexts. Moreover, participants discussed notions of femininity and femmephobia when sharing about homophobia and what it means to be gay and a man. Of importance, although there were 50 participants total, 30 of them were interviewed a second time. Since the capturing of stories may require several interactions with the researcher, it made sense to follow-up with participants for purposes of clarifying and providing additional context.

Data analysis

In discussing various forms of analysis, Riessman (2008) notes a typology made up of four analytic approaches. This study engages in a thematic analysis. According to Riessman, there is no set of rules in doing this work, as the type of data one uses may influence how it is ultimately analyzed and shared. Thematic analysis can be interpreted as a way of identifying and analyzing patterns in qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). It provides a systematic procedure for creating themes. In turn, themes allow researchers to organize and report what was found or what they choose to highlight, meaning that they play an active role in the process. The goal is not to summarize the data but to interpret its key features (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Thematic analysis is partly defined by its flexibility as it can be applied to data samples ranging from 1–60, or more, participants, making it apt for this study.

All interviews were professionally transcribed prior to the analytical process. Patrón then immersed himself in the data by reading all the participants' stories without making note of anything. Next, he re-read all the transcripts while writing notes and preliminary codes on the margins. Once Patrón had a solid list of codes, he defined them for consistency. Aligned with femmephobia, sample codes included femme men as unwanted and preference for masculine men. These are consistent with Blair and Hoskin's (2015) assertion that femmephobia targets feminine expressions. In the following step, Patrón placed the codes within larger concepts. Because data from the social media page did not need to be transcribed, he simply transferred it from the social

media platform to a word document. Patrón then followed the previous steps. Next, he input the codes and transcripts to NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software. There, Patrón was able to code all the data. Once coded, it was easier for us to identify patterns and as a result, formulate themes.

Findings

Gay Latino men's narratives revealed widespread femmephobia in queer communities and the various ways they experienced it. Specific settings included educational spaces, gay bars, and among peers. Themes include the downplaying of femininity, privileges and desirability of masculine men, the role of machismo and misogyny, and disinterest in femme men as a matter of "preference." Notably, there is much overlap across themes, leading participants' stories to be suitable across findings.

Downplaying femininity

Most students in this study expressed comfort with their sexuality. This level of comfort, however, varied by context (larger college town, university campus), as there were spaces in which they had to modulate aspects of their identities. The downplaying of their femininity was a deliberate attempt from gay Latinos under varying circumstances— from wanting to fit in to safety concerns. This was the case for DJ, who shared,

> When I go out on a regular night, I do my best to look more or less masculine. No-to-minimal makeup, not too short of shorts, nothing too feminine. It's because too many times I've gotten "why do you have to be so gay (whatever that means)," "no fats, no fems," "you make it hard for 'normal' gays" and the like. It's just a lot easier for me to be a little more masculine in some spaces and avoid these conversations.

Even though DJ expressed comfort with his gender and sexuality, he understood that looking feminine would draw others' attention and therefore was conscious of his presentation. Downplaying his femininity was a deliberate action to avoid contact and possible attacks. When going out on dates, DJ contemplated whether he should bring his bag or whether he should fill his eyebrows, which are typically regarded as feminine behaviors. Initially, DJ put a lot of thought into the ways he showed up. With time, however, he learned not to care, "I don't give a shit. I don't have the energy to care, at this point . . . I don't care what these other little, white hypermasculine gays have to say." As a Latino that wanted to be accepted in a predominantly white space, DJ initially felt as if he had to adhere by whatever standards gay white men set, "I'm just looking for a little bit of acceptance, can someone accept me? And then realizing the outward community is very nasty . . . the gay community here is a little hypermasculine."

Although gay communities in his college town and campus take pride in the sense of belonging for queer individuals, DJ contends that it is not as glamorous as it is made out to be, especially not for femme or nonwhite men. DJ's experiences are an illustration of the intersections of femmephobia aligned with whiteness and racism, which is known to have varying effects on communities of color (Harper, 2012).

Similarly, Ezekiel engaged in behavior that made him appear less feminine and more masculine. Much of it was due to the geographical and social context he found himself in. Ezekiel shared that femme behavior by men is not accepted in his home state outside of the entertainment scene. Within queer communities, "Femmephobia is easily seen, in my experiences, in hookup apps like Grindr and Tinder where most profiles in [state] would say 'straight acting,' insinuating that masculinity is the standard for being seen as attractive in a romantic and sexual way." Due to his context, Ezekiel avoided looking femme, "I steer clear of acting in a feminine way around most of my surroundings in [state] because I have to assume the homonormative role as the perfect gay that acts like a 'straight masculine' guy who happens to like dudes." Even though Ezekiel described his personality as "naturally expressive and flamboyant," he found himself deepening his voice as well as policing his hand gestures to make sure they "fit in" within the different contexts he inhabited on campus, including queer spaces. These settings included his fraternity, campus administration, and peers. Due to stigma attached to femme men, Ezekiel shared that it got to a point that he felt relaxed entering college spaces that are unwelcoming.

As a child, Gio recognized that he had femme tendencies. At first, he did not think much of it because it was part of what he saw on TV. Whenever there was a gay character in any given show, Gio shared that they were "really feminine, the stereotypical gay." Thus, he viewed it as something normal that he could also do. With time, however, Gio noticed that he was being teased whenever he did something that was deemed feminine,

> after things like that [being teased], I kinda started closing off to people. It's just something that I didn't want people to think because they would say like, "Oh, why do you act like this?" Or "Why do you talk like that?" Or "Why do you walk like that, or run like that?" Just anything that kind of made you seem different and so, I would just stop doing any of that. I didn't want people to think I was different.

Such reactions and questioning came from people in queer communities and beyond, including his cousins and peers at school. To avoid the scrutiny, Gio policed himself to appear less femme.

Like other participants, Cristobal was comfortable with his gender and sexuality, and even challenged what "we are continuously taught of 'this is boy, and this is girl.'" In challenging such practices, Cristobal detached himself from social constructs he was taught from a young

age. It was impossible, however, to escape gender expectations and femmephobia in their entirety. Even though Cristobal understood femmephobia as a larger construct, he mentioned that even "queer spaces," which are meant to be safe, can still be problematic and oppressive.

> Even in safe spaces, or queer spaces, it still happens where you go to a bar or a queer event and a masculine – assumed masculine presenting person is presenting as more feminine, they are getting called a sissy or femme or whatever. So, there's also stigma within the community around masculine folks presenting on the femme spectrum.

When specifically discussing how his masculinity and femininity are expressed, Cristobal made it clear that he "codeswitches" depending on the environment, especially for safety reasons and as a personal choice,

> if I go to events, or maybe I'm walking in public, I'll tend to present more masculine for safety reasons. It's not fun being accosted in public because of your gender presentation and so you gotta be mindful and aware of when and where I feel safe to express femininity because not everybody's cool with it.

Because even safe spaces are not safe, Cristobal continually assessed the environment he was in before deciding whether to be himself.

Similarly, although Güerillo knew he was gay early in his life, he understood that it was frowned upon, especially for feminine men. As Güerillo grew older, he carefully explored his sexuality. Soon after, he decided that he could not continue such exploration, as it would have led to larger issues.

> As I was exploring more my sexuality, I got scared. Then, something in my head clicked like; "oh no, if you fall too deep into this rabbit hole, you're never going to get out and that straight version of yourself that you tried to work for all this time will never happen." That kind of clicked in my head and then I got super-scared.

Upon graduating from high school, Güerillo felt that it was going to be easier for him to open up about his sexuality. That, however, was not the case because of internalized homophobia,

> I would see other gay guys at my high school, super-feminine, super-extra, and when I saw them, I felt myself cringing and being angry. You know, not wanting to see them. But it wasn't until later when I started to deconstruct that I was scared of seeing myself in them. I was scared of what they meant, and I was scared of being as open as they were.

Güerillo expressed anger toward femme men because he was taught that it was bad. He noticed the mistreatment femme men received inside and outside of school, so he avoided such behaviors and ultimately downplayed his femininity. He saw gay men being "ridiculed and picked on." Such ridicule was a reminder for Güerillo to avoid being femme, unless he too wanted to get mistreated. More importantly, Güerillo recognized that his fear and anger was more about being as free as gay femme men in his school.

Privileges and desirability of masculine men

As discussed above, within a system of patriarchy, masculinities are desired and deemed valuable among men. Consequently, it is no surprise that gay Latinos discussed the privileges (e.g., access, acceptance, value) afforded to masculine men. Drew, for instance, mentioned that there is a lot of privilege and accessibility to things for gay men that are straight passing, fit, and have facial hair. Essentially, "anything that makes you look more like a heteronormative cis man." In fact, it has gotten to the point that queer men get "uncomfortable whenever there are femme men," leading to a divide within queer communities. According to Drew, "for other men that are more out there [femme], you can definitely tell that other men are looking over at them, or making faces, or getting uncomfortable if they start to get too loud." Ultimately, Drew contended that "there's a lot of femmephobia in our community." In the interview with Edgar, he too expressed privileges afforded to masculine men, especially for "fit guys. If you're fit, attractive guy, you're gonna have people's respect in the gay community, even if you don't know them." On the other hand, Edgar noted that femme men do not have the same privileges and thus are at the bottom. Ultimately, Edgar contended that physical appearance determines the ways gay men are treated and privileges they have access to.

In the same vein, Enner made it clear that "gay men accept other gay men, except if they're super femme or are extra." Like Drew and Edgar, Enner mentioned that there is an ideal body image that men must adhere to in order to be considered attractive in the community, leading to privileges. In his hometown, he noticed that a lot of gay men had gym memberships to get closer to the ideal and masculine image. Enner felt that gay men must pass to be accepted. Otherwise, they are viewed and treated differently. He found this irritating "because it's a community that's supposed to be acknowledging and helping further empower each other."

Like other participants, Saul spoke to the emphasis on image and looks within queer communities, which he classified as a "very superficial space" where men who are more fit and lighter skinned are valued, and others are pushed to the margins.

> The darker you are, the bigger you are, the more femme you are, the lower you are . . . and it's shitty because if you don't fit that, you're pushed to the margins even more within the community that's supposed to uplift and support you.

For example, if someone is being super femme and has nails, they will be perceived in a negative way. Saul was clear in that being masculine is such a desirable quality in gay communities, whereas femme men are undesirable. Taking it a step further, being masculine and white is "like you're golden" and will not have a problem dating, according to Saul. He continued, "You're

easier to digest within the community itself, but also in mainstream society because you fit — you're white. You're physically attractive. So, that positions them at the top of this hierarchy." On the other end are darker skinned men as well as those that embody any sort of femininity. Even for men that are bottoms, they cannot be "too feminine because at that point, you're basically a woman." Saul contended that unfortunately there are unspoken rules about who and what is deemed worthy and who and what is not. If gay men, do not fall within the worthy category, they are not viewed as a viable option in the dating environment and have less privileges. Again, and like DJ, we see the role whiteness and racism play in being accepted within queer communities and society at large.

Lastly, Sergio was explicit in saying that there are privileges for gay men perceived as masculine or that can pass, if desired. He recognized that he falls into such category, "I have a huge privilege in the sense that I'm not categorized and put into that box of being femme, because even in the gay community, femme gays are still looked down upon, judged, and talked about being extra." Sergio shared being able to walk into any space and people not assuming or questioning anything about his sexuality. Like Saul, he spoke to the desirability and acceptance of masculine men who are also top,

> Usually masculine people, it's like, "Oh, you're a top." So, if you're a top, you're considered closer to being heterosexual. If you're a femme – like all your masculinity has been taken away because people perceive you as a bottom, so as bottom is someone who's being submissive of a male. So, the closer you are to being heterosexual, you definitely have more privilege, and there's more respect for you.

In Sergio's perspective, being femme is not only an indication of having your masculinity stripped but also of being a bottom and therefore docile. On the other end, being masculine demands respect and garners privilege as it is supposed to be the "default" for men, especially when considering the role of patriarchy. Sergio contended that the power dynamic is one directional and that masculine men are not excluded or looked down upon under any circumstances. On the contrary, the dynamic "is definitely top to bottom" with femme men constantly being judged.

The role of machismo and misogyny

Although manifestations of systems of oppression are not always easy to detect, gay Latinos identified both cisnormativity and misogyny in the oppression of femme men. In a discussion between participants, Gustavo and Samuel went back and forth about femmephobia in queer communities. Samuel began by sharing "my perception is that our more feminine fellows bear the greatest stress and exposure to harm, both from inside and outside the lgbtq community." At the same time, Samuel recognized that those that are more femme are

more courageous in striving for LGBTQ rights and freedom due to their visibility. Gustavo thanked Samuel for sharing such perspective and offered,

> Femmephobia is real and has many consequences. In my experience, femmephobia is a direct outgrowth of internalized homophobia with traces of toxic masculinity anchored by ideals of cisnormativity. The often lazy, and unnuanced, reliance on ideas of machismo within Latino communities for example. I've experienced it from dating, to sexual violence, to my professional identity within in the academy. Sadly, it often isn't until I draw upon forms of toxic masculinity (i.e., physical and/or discursive violence) that folks will back down.

Gustavo was explicit in his understanding of femmephobia and ways it is sustained. In his perspective, femmephobia is a direct outcome of systems of oppression which Latinos, in this case, are socialized within. This femmephobia is then translated across contexts for Gustavo and it is not until he too engages in behavior that is informed by systems of oppression that people will stop. Samuel agreed.

Mariano shared stories about his upbringing as a gay Latino. He noted going through many hardships due to lack of acceptance of his sexuality in spaces he frequented. This included his home where machismo was prevalent. Even within gay communities, Mariano felt that femme men were looked down upon and treated differently.

> A lot of times, the more flamboyant gay men are seen as less desirable. So, like we're gay, right but being masculine is still a thing. And so, gay men still only date masculine gays. Or like "oh, he's too gay." At the end of day, I'm like 'bitch you're still fucking gay, you still like men but like they still try to hold onto this heteronormativity of society and in doing so, they exclude dating more flamboyant men.

Mariano argued that all gay men are still gay, regardless of whether they possess masculine or feminine qualities. Despite this, Mariano contended that gay men still try to uphold heteronormative norms that are sustained by society through machismo ideals.

After declaring widespread femmephobia within "safe spaces" and verbal attacks on femme men, Cristobal continued by stating that there is definitely "fear or stigmatizing of femininity or females in general, I think there's a lot of misogyny within the queer and gay community, for sure." Intimate relationships were no exception, as gays look for more straight acting guys due to stigma and fear toward femme men. In his college years, Cristobal encountered microaggressions on a regular basis when presenting femininely. This was the case in fraternity spaces or simply when walking on campus when he was called "fagot" and the like. Overall, he sensed that masculine gay men walk with a higher sense of privilege.

Rafi experienced positive intimate relationships with both feminine and masculine gay men but found that "in general femme guys are more likely to get shat on socially. Yeah, totally." While Rafi understood that at a societal

level, including queer spaces, feminine men are oppressed, he was still surprised by the level of femmephobia he witnessed, "it always kind of freaks me out when there's a lot of anti-femme, when guys who are very masc don't like or don't date femme guys." According to Rafi, there is a lot of anti femme feelings toward men because there's a lot of misogyny in gay male spaces, "but there aren't any women around to receive that misogyny," and so it gets redirected toward any guy that exhibits femme behavior. Rafi provided an interesting take on the functions of femininity, masculinity, and gender roles in society and especially within gay communities,

> if you're gonna go by these rigid gender norms, if you see yourself as masc, it would kind of make more sense for you to take a femme guy if you were trying to hold on to these ideas of what men and women are. But I don't think a lot of guys question it that way.

Rafi's take is an important one as it juxtaposes societal expectations related to gender norms with what actually happens in queer communities. In one sense, if gay men are trying to uphold societal expectations, then it makes sense for them to be interested in femme men, as that would more closely resemble traditional notions of relationships and masculinities, which are highly valued. Still, Rafi concluded that gay men do not see it in this manner, particularly due to misogynistic views.

Disinterest in femme men as a matter of "preference"

Findings up to this point have shown the various ways that femmephobia is manifested in queer spaces. Despite these mostly being expressed in overt ways, that is not always the case. Study participants made comments about the ways gay men often express disinterest in femme men as a matter of "preference." Rooted in femmephobic and patriarchal ideals, "preference" is utilized to cover deeper feelings about men that embody femme qualities. Dave, for instance, shared,

> I have also heard from other gay men that if you like men, they expect the men "to act like a guy otherwise I could be dating a woman instead," making the argument that as a gay man, you want to be interested in a man who behaves in a cisnormative way.

According to Dave's experiences, gay men are gay precisely because they are interested in other men who behave like men, otherwise they would be involved with a woman. Even one of Dave's gay friends made a comment about not being able to stand gays that are "all girlie," as they are still men, followed by praising Dave for not being like that. Dave went on to share that although being femme is not necessarily rejected within queer communities, when it comes to sexual or romantic encounters, he has noticed gay men be hesitant with femme men or "straight up femmephobic," tying back to notions of preference. Femme men may be supported in terms of their gender

expression, but gay men would generally not want to date them. At the same time, like Rafi, Dave made connections between heteronormative and gay relationships,

> when it comes to a heteronormative relationship, there tends to be very rigid gender roles. You know, there's a construct that makes for heteronormative relationships. There really wasn't one for gay individuals. They, we, mimic a lot of the heteronormative relationships.

Heteronormative relationships value patriarchal ideals where men are supposed to embody "manly" traits. For Dave, these same ideals apply to gay relationships. Within gay communities, there is "too much emphasis" on looking a certain way, leading feminine men to be looked down upon.

Aligned with Dave's perspective, Teo expressed that while he has not personally experienced femmephobia in queer communities, he has seen it with his gay friends, particularly when going out to bars. In such instances, they make negative comments about the more feminine men. Even when it came to things as simple as talking, Teo's friends refrained from engaging with femme men because they preferred not to. Teo recognized that his friends would "rather dance and chat with a guy who is more masculine, because it was their preference." Personally, Teo had no issues with masculine or feminine men. However, he also admitted that the treatment femme men receive lead him to present more masculine at times.

Similar to Rafi, Ian discussed having intimate experiences with both feminine and masculine men, yet he too expressed a "preference for masculine men." This preference was due to "the closeness between feminine men and females," which he has been with but is not attracted to. Ian did not like the idea of people having to change aspects of their identities or gender presentation but understood that it was a larger issue. In the same thread, Drew stated that "cis-normative LGBTQ+ and heterosexual folxs tend to stereotype and/or stigmatize femme presenting individuals. This kind of attitude fuels femmephobia which tends to be normalized by using words such as 'preferences' that attempt to shield their own innate biases." Drew's point very much connects to Dave's initial comment about the tendency to frame disinterest in femme men as a matter of preference. For Drew, it is precisely the use of coded language, such as "preference," that is deployed by gay men to hide and protect their biases, ultimately contributing to the exacerbation of femmephobia in queer communities.

Discussion

Because hierarchies are pervasive in most societies, dominant groups are associated with positive social values and subordinate groups are associated with negative social values (Walls, 2008). These structures and ideologies are

upheld by attitudes and beliefs that justify such stratification. In the case of participants in this study, heterosexuals and men that embody traditional performances of masculinities sit at the top of the hierarchy, are considered the norm, and are afforded privileges. Conversely, gay and femme-presenting men are at the bottom, are perceived as deviant, and are targets of discrimination. From the perspectives of gay Latinos, this study demonstrates the value placed on masculinities within the queer communities they inhabit and, more importantly, the discrimination and devaluing of femininity when embodied or practiced by men, which aligns with previous scholarship. For instance, in assessing the importance of masculinity among gay men, Sánchez and Vilain (2012) found that out of a sample of 751 gay men in the U.S., a majority classified masculinity as important for themselves and their partner. Moreover, they wished that their behavior was more masculine and less feminine, as anti-effeminacy was associated with negative feelings about being gay. Similarly, Ocampo (2012) found that gay Latino men paid careful attention to their presentation of self to display their masculinity; were uncomfortable using "gay" as a self- descriptor due to its feminine connotation; and sanctioned friends who did not follow masculine gender norms.

This study makes an important contribution to growing scholarship on gay Latino students within postsecondary contexts (e.g., Duran et al., 2020; Eaton & Rios, 2017; Patrón, 2021a, 2021c, 2023). Although the sample involves college students, it is important to highlight that femmephobia was experienced beyond educational confines. Findings illustrate different ways in which femmephobia shows up for participants, which are consistent with various types of femmephobia discussed by Blair and Hoskin (2015), particularly overt and covert. For one, notions of femmephobia led gay Latinos to downplay their femininity. When going out, participants questioned whether to engage in behaviors deemed feminine and felt the need to conceal aspects of their identities, including not using any make-up, making sure that their clothes is not too feminine (e.g., short shorts), not being expressive or flamboyant, and avoiding carrying any bag that resembles a purse. While such things are not negative, they disrupt notions of patriarchy that define what a man is and, as a result, can do. Patriarchy teaches men that they must be dominant over women (Falicov, 2010; Patrón, 2021b). If the point is to exert dominance and strive to be the manliest man, then engaging in behavior that even remotely resembles a feminine identity is frowned upon. As such, moderating their femininity was a viable option for participants. DJ, for instance, wanted to avoid being questioned about his gender expression while Cristobal codeswitched for safety reasons. According to Hoskin (2013), overt femmephobia acts as a type of policing, which participants in our study experienced, leading them to be acutely aware of their level of femininity. The decision to present less femininely does not take away

from the comfortability gay Latino men have about their sexuality. On the contrary, participants conveyed comfort with their queerness. However, the consequences of embodying femininity are real and must be accounted for.

Spatial context played an important role, as less welcoming spaces meant presenting less femininely. Gay Latino students continuously shared that even what are meant to be safe spaces, like queer communities, are not. Ezekiel noted that femmephobia in his home state led him to assume a heteronormative role. In fact, it had gotten to a point in which he felt "relaxed" being in spaces that are not welcoming to him, such as his fraternity and around campus administrators. Given that masculinity claims spaces and geographies (Hoskin, 2019), it makes sense that participants felt like they had to adjust their level of femininity as a form of precaution. Hoskin contends "masculine entitlement over space and people contributes to the hegemonic heterosexual imperative of difference between, yet complementarity of, femininity and masculinity" (p. 696), which is ultimately maintained by femmephobia. Although in a different context, this finding is consistent with research noting queer student dissatisfaction and marginalization within what are meant to be safe spaces (Garcia, 2015). Garcia found that LGBTQ resources, including queer resource centers, are not as welcoming for certain groups of students, such as Latinos. Due to a lack of diversity in programming within queer spaces, gay Latino collegians in Garcia's study opted for Latina/o identity-based groups and resources.

Participants in our study also discussed privileges that are afforded to masculine men. This notion is consistent with Hoskin (2019) who notes that masculinity is not only socialized to take but there is also a "cultural imperative of masculine right of access" (p. 695). Gay Latino students frequently made comments about the relevance of looking straight, including having facial hair and being fit and how these things lead to a higher status. This higher status may lead to power disparities between victims and perpetrators, as noted through pious femmephobia (Hoskin, 2013). Looking fit, for example, is respected within queer communities, as shared by Gio. A step further, Edgar contended that physical appearance ultimately determines how gay men are treated and the privileges they have, or not, access to. We see this exact case with Sergio, who claimed having a "huge privilege" as a result of looking straight. This finding is consistent with research illustrating the policing of gay Latinos on their bodies, dress, and gestures to create a perception of heteronormative masculinity, which gives them the privilege of navigating their campus without being interrogated (Patrón & Rodriguez, 2022). Although only acknowledged by two participants, it is also important to highlight the role of whiteness. Saul, for instance, is clear in that whiteness defines beauty, thereby making someone more attractive and desirable as well as granting them privileges.

Finally, participants in this study discussed how disinterest in femme men is often framed as a matter of preference. While it is true that people have their personal preferences in terms of the identities, personalities, and looks they desire, it does not exempt femmephobia from playing a role, especially when considering patriarchy. Given that femme men "bear the greatest stress and exposure to harm," as Samuel argued, it is no surprise that some queer communities frame disinterest in them as mere preference. Drew was clear in arguing that stigmatization of femme men fuels femmephobia, which is then normalized precisely because of words like "preference." Interestingly, Drew notes that such actions are an attempt to protect innate biases. Drew's assessment aligns with Güerillo's experiences. Güerillo shared that he would cringe and be angry at classmates that were "super-feminine." These feelings, he acknowledged, were a result of seeing himself within such men but not having the autonomy to be as open as they were. This finding aligns with Ocampo's (2012) finding that gay Latinos expressed preference for aggressive and assertive men, which are masculine traits, as well as men in traditionally masculine occupations. Such preferences were framed while actively devaluing and discriminating feminine roles.

Implications

Femmephobia is real, widespread, and has tangible consequences in the lives of gay Latino collegians. Although it is not confined to a particular space, because this study involves college students, it is important that higher education constituents (e.g., administrators, faculty, staff) be actively involved in fostering spaces that are not only welcoming and supportive but educative about systems of oppression. Despite femmephobia's existence beyond the college context, it does not absolve university stakeholders with power from playing a role in mitigating its effects. Systems of oppression, which are at the core of the issue, are prevalent in higher education institutions, making them partially responsible in combatting the issues presented here.

Through participant narratives, we get a glance into femmephobia's varying manifestations. Gay Latinos expressed regulating their physical appearance within queer communities to present less femininely, fit in, and as a safety measure. Much of this is due to the master narrative about what it means to be manly, acceptable behavior, and notions of worthiness, all of which are defined by systems of oppression. Thus, it is imperative for higher education stakeholders to educate the campus community not just about what femmephobia means but also the ways it is enacted and the consequences it has on students. This can be done through informational sessions or panels throughout the year. Although this study specifically accounts for Latino men, reality is that femmephobia may affect anyone, regardless of gender and sexuality, making it applicable to an entire campus community. Gay Latinos should

not have to worry about or consider the ways they may be perceived and treated within their fraternities or around campus administrators, as shared by Ezekiel. Due to the nature of systemic oppression, these are not always easy to identify, especially not for privileged groups. Thus, having intentional discussions about the ways these show up and how they can be mitigated, is a crucial step in creating a more welcoming environment.

With the narratives shared here, practitioners are more knowledgeable about the experiences of gay Latinos and as a result need to develop better support systems. Because Latinas/os have their unique culture and values and Latino men may be affected by systems of oppression in particular ways, it is important to be cognizant of these in developing meaningful programming. Beyond the educational aspect, it is critical for campus stakeholders to provide necessary resources for gay Latinos to prioritize their wellbeing. Individual and group counseling along with mentoring and social events should be a part of the campus culture. Again, these need to account for issues that this group of students deem important on their campus and that are related to their identities (e.g., socialization of Latino men, values placed on masculinities among Latino men). What these ultimately look like will be dependent on the issue and context at hand. Practitioners and administrators should not wait until a negative incident affecting their queer students takes place before they react or provide resources. They need to be proactive to ensure students are supported from the start. The administering of a campus wide climate study that assesses and evaluates the culture of the institution, particularly as it pertains to queer communities, and even Latino men, may be an important undertaking. The climate study's findings may shed light on different programming and services that can enhance the culture of the institution and can influence future strategic plans.

Related to research, scholars doing work with Latino men in postsecondary contexts have recently identified and called on the research community to carefully employ an intersectional lens throughout the design of a study and not just combine identities (Patrón & Burmicky, 2023). While we center the perspectives of gay Latinos here, we did not necessarily explore the role that their race/ethnicity played. Thus, additional scholarship is needed to interrogate the role of race/ethnicity at the intersection with sexuality, for example, in relation to femmephobia. Following Patrón and Burmicky's advice, this must be done at various stages of the research process, including in defining the purpose, developing the interview protocol, and outlining the findings. Moreover, because systems of oppression are at the core of femmephobia experienced by gay Latino men in this study, it is important to explore how these systems are manifested. We accounted for patriarchy and heterosexism, but a thorough investigation of whiteness and racism alongside femmephobia may yield important results. Two gay Latinos in this study briefly alluded to notions of whiteness. Thus, it is important to design a study that accounts for

the ways it is manifested and connected to femmephobia. At the same time, it is important to center racism and how it may shape femmephobia.

Conclusion

This study illustrates the important role that notions of femmephobia play for gay Latino men within queer communities. Unfortunately, the effects are manifested in negative ways. Students' narratives highlight the downplaying of femininity, desirability of masculine men, the role of machismo and misogyny, and disinterest in femme men as a matter of "preference." In making sense of these themes, it is critical to account for the role of systems of oppression, namely patriarchy and heterosexism as these inform the value placed on varying sexualities and genders, gender roles, and gender presentations. Accounting for systemic oppression further removes responsibility from queer communities, as we strongly argue that femmephobia is in no way inherent to them. Because, to our knowledge, this is the first study to examine femmephobia among gay Latinos in college, we hope that future research builds on the conceptualization and findings offered here.

Notes

1. Because the call for participants used the language of "gay Latino," students are referred to as such in this paper. The terms "gay Latino men" and "gay Latino" are used interchangeably. Meanwhile, "Latina/o" is used when referring to men and women as a group. When reviewing literature, we use the language that is consistent with said scholarship.
2. Queer is an umbrella term that refers to gender/sexual/romantic identities that do not align with societal norms.
3. We understand that there are various systems of oppression that intersect and lead to harm for gay Latino men. For purposes of this study, we focus on patriarchy, heterosexism, and femmephobia.

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