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Queering Executive Presence

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Abstract

On an annual basis, Fortune releases the top 500 revenue-generating companies in the United States, referred to as the Fortune 500 collectively. The leadership team of these organizations is under scrutiny for their lack of diversity at the upper levels of management. In fact, in the history of releasing this report, there has only been one out lesbian in the CEO position (appointed in 2018). This phenomenological study of lesbians who are the senior executive levels of Fortune 500 companies seeks to understand their lived experiences within corporations to better understand what barriers, if any, exist for lesbians at the highest levels of corporations. What resulted was a discussion and insight into how these high-level leaders are redefining executive presence to incorporate more of who they are authentically versus the mold of a leader that they have been coached to or observed during their ascent to the top of corporate leadership ranks. The goal is to challenge the academy and corporations to utilize theories, such as queer theory, that push outside of traditional research to understand and fix issues related to gender more thoroughly.

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Queering Executive Presence

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Keywords: Fortune 500 | lesbian | executive presence | leadership | executives | queer theory

“I got hired...with a blue mohawk.”

– Vice-President of Fortune 500 company

A vast majority of the research about gender and sexual orientation and the nature of work does not come from business schools, but instead comes from social sciences or humanities centers in the academy. By most estimates, business schools are about ten years behind in any research that involves non-mainstream theories such as a queer theory (Parker, 2016). This research will attempt to center queer theory in the leadership attribute of executive presence and share how lesbian women are queering gender in the workplace. This push to look at gender expression and experience differently is a direct call from the academy to challenge how “organizational femininities and masculinities might be queered...” in order to disrupt gender binaries (Rumens, deSouza, & Brewis, 2019).

This research will challenge business schools and for-profit corporations to re-evaluate their practices of recruiting, retaining, and promoting leaders based on their gender identity or expression in the workplace. While the CEO positions of Fortune 500 companies are largely male dominated, this research opens the opportunity challenge the script that is still being written about how female leaders should act in the workplace (Dozier, 2017). Workplace efforts to advance more women to C-Suite positions have not been effective in the last several decades with hardly any movement in the number of women who are CEOs in the Fortune 500 ranks in

the last several decades (Sandberg, 2013). With the findings of this research, corporations and business academies can look to theories that are not historically informed when it comes to issues of human resources policies, including issues of diversity and inclusion, in a nontraditional, and potentially more effective manner.

Background

Due to traditional gender expectations in society, men and women experience the impact of executive presence differently since appearance and mannerisms are impacted by gender roles in the workplace. This concept will be explored through lesbian women who decide how to dress to reflect both their gender identity and sexual orientation based on the norms of those two categories. Specifically, the researcher will be using queer theory to identify how executive presence gets redefined if you are not heterosexual, or if one does not present according to the female gender expectations.

Executive Presence

Executive presence is understood to be a key requirement to moving up the corporate ladder. Executive presence encompasses qualities related to appearance, decision making, ability to command a room, and trust-worthiness (Beeson, 2012). One of the largest studies on executive presence in 2012, theorized that executive presence is categorized in the following three themes: appearance, communications, and gravitas (Hewlett, Leader-Chivée, Sherbin, Gordon, & Dieudonne, 2012). Much of the understanding of executive presence is from industry articles and non-peer reviewed journals. What little research does exist indicates that appearance can be an immediate derailment of an individual's career (Hewlett, et al, 2012). One such article takes this a step further to articulate that unless someone has mastered appearance, no other skill mastery matters. And in this case, appearance is defined as “voice, speech, and physical bearing” (Shirey, 2013, p. 374). This concept was reinforced in a study in which over 96% of career counselors (e.g. practitioners) confirmed they coached those looking for a job on how they look (Yates, Hooley, & Bagri, 2017).

The tangible impact of appearance decisions for women is that their looks potentially can be held against them when the time comes for promotions (Caven, Lawley, & Baker, 2013). Research indicates that women appearing as more masculine are perceived to be more competent and financially successful (Rule & Ambady, 2009), but women who adhere to more traditional feminine stereotypes are treated better in the workplace (Leskinen, Rabelo, & Cortina, 2015). This dichotomy puts women in an interesting predicament when navigating the workforce. Do they adhere to traditional gender roles to be well-liked or do they move outside gender roles to be more successful? This dilemma was best summed up by a participant in a research study who attempted to explain the goal of women leaders in the workplace by stating: “[the woman] visually captures the male [look], but [is] still feminine” (Dagley & Gaskin, 2014, p. 203). According to a Harvard Business Review article, 53% of the respondents identified what they felt was the appropriate dress for women to get ahead, such as, conservative clothes, understated make-up, long fingernails, and appropriate skirt length (Hewlett, 2011). It is important to note that what was missing from the article is the acknowledgement of subjectivity. For example, what is the definition of a short skirt that is not too short? Or wearing make-up that is understated, or not flashy, and who defines it? One company attempted to address this issue in 2010 for all their employees through a 43-page dress code document. For their female

employees, it included the proper length of skirt (knee-length), proper amount of make-up (light foundation and no black nail polish), and the proper number of accessories (no trendy or showy jewelry) (Berton, 2010). Researchers contend that this dress code continues to put women in subordinate positions to men due to the amount of effort that required for women to dress professionally (Bartlett, 1994).

Outward appearance is linked to professionalism and is used to convey power hierarchy in the workplace (Rumens & Kerfoot, 2009). Since historically wearing suits have been important to male leaders, suits have also become increasingly important for women, precipitating a style of dress referred to as power dressing: masculine-cut suits, large shoulder pads, neutral colors, and high heels (Brewis, Hampton, & Linstead, 1997). The power suit both helps women to align with the male leaders as well as serve as a significant distinction between female executives and female secretaries (Flicker, 2013). This positioning of gendered clothing and looks is positioned squarely in heterosexism.

Heterosexism is defined as heterosexuality being viewed as superior to homosexuality and is frequently reinforced by the societal and cultural norms and expectations in society (Gedro, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2004). This is directly related to the notion that dress is directly related to heterosexuality (Mizzi, 2012). Research that has found heterosexuality, in the case of outward appearance, implying both that the women are straight and that their dress is pleasing to men in the workplace (Dellinger & Williams, 1997). In a society where heterosexuality is the norm, this can be challenging for lesbians, since being a lesbian can be hindering to one's advancement. In fact, even being a perceived as a lesbian by not confirming to gender norms could impact a heterosexual woman. If a woman does not conform to gender expectations of physical appearance, the suspicion that arises is that she is a lesbian (Dellinger & Williams, 1997).

Lesbian Attire

In the workplace, lesbians oftentimes decide to either conform to the style of dress that projects heterosexuality or conform to a style that projects their sexual orientation as a lesbian and then weigh that against their workplace cultural norms for appearance and executive presence. Workplace attire choices is a topic that occupies more of the mind of lesbian women as compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Rumens & Kerfoot, 2009). Although both embrace power suits, or styles of dress that convey a higher place on the power hierarchy, when it comes to choices regarding make-up, jewelry, and hair style, they convey a certain sexual orientation. For example, typical outward lesbian expressions may imply a masculine way of dressing, such as wearing men's clothes, trousers, vest, t-shirts, and short spiky hair (Clarke & Turner, 2007). However, the term "butch" lesbian suggests an outward expression tending to resemble their male counterparts. Conversely, lesbian femmes mostly resemble their heterosexual counterparts, but they are subject to having their sexual orientation questioned by the lesbian community (Clarke & Turner, 2007). Lesbians need to decide how to dress to project professionalism in the workplace while balancing their identity outside the workplace.

Clothing can be a form of signaling to others, both within and outside the LGBT community, that suggests one's sexual orientation (Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005). For example, many lesbians who wear make-up are often identified as heterosexual (Dellinger & Williams, 1997). In determining her labels in the workplace, the lesbian executive needs to decide if she is going to minimize her sexual orientation through clothing.

Queer Theory

In the literature, researching women in the workplace, feminist theory has historically been used most often to discuss the impact of gender roles. Feminist theory assumes that women identified as heterosexual and were bound by the natural or societally assigned roles of men and women. This resulted in many marginalized women being excluded from the focus of the movements, including lesbians (Evans & Chamberlain, 2015). This led the author to look at additional theories to provide the conceptual framework for this research. Queer theory initially entered the academic lexicon in 1990, when DeLauretis (1999) used this phrasing as a title of a conference. Queer theory pushes beyond the heterosexual notion and attempts to understand the fluidity of gender and sexuality across the human experience outside the heterosexual assumption (Gedro & Mizzi, 2014). In early research utilizing queer theory, the participants or issues connected directly to the LGBT-community or involved LGBT-participants.

In recent research, queer theory has become to mean “transgressing social norms” (Thomas, 2017, p. 569) or “rethinking the stable” (Drabinski, 2013, p. 96). This builds upon earlier research in that queer can be both an identity and a means to challenge the status quo. In this research, the author seeks to learn from queer theory how gender and sexual orientation in leaders queers executive presence.

Research Purpose and Question

Prior to 2018, there has never been an out lesbian CEO of a Fortune 500, or even a Fortune 1000 company (Boulton, 2013).* In 2018, Beth Ford was appointed CEO of Land O’Lakes and she identifies as an out lesbian (Gilchrist, 2018). In addition, among the highly-paid C-level executives (such as Chair, President, Chief Executive Officer, or Chief Operating Officer) of Fortune 500 companies, only 6% are women (Eagly & Carli, 2008) and if we expand it to the top five roles, only 14.2% are women (Linder, 2016) with an unknown percentage of these women identifying as lesbians. A gap in the literature strongly suggests for a significant need for research regarding issues that affect LGBT leaders in the workplace.

This research intends to drive a more inclusive understanding and representation of gender and to challenge the barriers that traditional gender roles have placed on women in the workplace, specifically related to lesbians. These perceptions can inform our understanding of how professionalism and executive presence is navigated when the traditional gender roles are not adhered to by female leaders in the workplace. The hope of this research is recommendations for employees who desire to enhance corporate environments to be more supportive and affirming of leaders who challenge traditional gender roles.

Analysis

The purpose of this phenomenological research was to better understand the lived-experiences of lesbian senior executives in Fortune 500 companies. Since it is unclear the number of women that currently occupy these levels of an organization, this research will employ a phenomenological method to document the experience of lesbian leaders in Fortune 500 companies. The goal was to learn about the lived experience of upward mobility lesbian executives in Fortune 500 companies. This research was informed from queer theory.

Self as Researcher

In research, the researcher must decide how they are going to present themselves in the research to ensure an ethical process (Walshaw, 2008). The researcher identifies as a lesbian who is employed at a Fortune 500 company. Her current role is reporting to and supporting senior executives in the capacity of a human resources executive.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is understanding the influence the researcher has on the interview and the information-gathering process (Berger, 2015). Reflexivity is important to integrate into the process to be mindful of the role of self as researcher. This also ensures the constructivist point of view is ethical in nature (Merchant & Willis, 2001). The researcher created a space for participants to share their story in a manner that was safe for them. This included sharing the statement of informed consent prior to our meeting, reviewing it at the beginning of the interview and re-iterating the ability to decline participation at any point before, during, or after the interview, and asking the participants to review and provide feedback on the final research document.

Triangulation

Trustworthiness in qualitative research ensures the rigor of a study that includes credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability (Guba, 1981). The discussion below will show how this research covered these four areas in the research process.

Credibility

Credibility is understood as to how much truth, or confidence in the truth, there is in the findings (Guba, 1981). Shenton shares that one of the most common ways to ensure qualitative credibility is to utilize research methods that are well-established (2004). To ensure that the researcher has met the criteria, many qualitative research articles were reviewed to ensure that the most current standards of publication were being adhered to. This included reviewing experts in the field of descriptive phenomenology (Belousov, 2016; Giorgi, 2009/2012; Husserl, 1999), and reviewing phenomenological practices such as diary entries and field journaling after each interview and analysis session (Morrell-Scott, 2018), and the importance of storytelling for marginalized communities (Lincoln, 1995; Ward & Winstanley, 2004). By utilizing these best practices shared above, the researcher adopted such practices as journaling after each interview and throughout the coding process and employing questions to encourage storytelling on the part of the participants.

Another element of credibility is engagement with the group that is being researched (Shenton, 2004). The author attended numerous conferences between 2013 and 2017 to present on this topic idea as well as to meet with like-minded researchers, both experts in the topics of qualitative research and cultural diversity. The conferences where the researcher has presented at include the Academy of Human Resources Development and the Midwest Academy of Management. In addition, the researcher conducted approximately 12 informational interviews with leaders, diversity and inclusion experts, and executive coaches to better understand the experience of senior executives in Fortune 500 Companies, including the nuances of those that

identify themselves as being a part of the LGBT community. These interviews were conducted outside of the formal interview group and were completed prior to embarking on a research proposal. In addition, the researcher connected with other leaders in Fortune 500 LGBT Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) throughout the country to understand the issues that their organizations were facing in leadership. This involved meeting individuals and leaders at the Annual Out & Equal Summit hosted by Out & Equal. This involvement and education enhanced the researcher's own experience as a leader in the business world for nearly 20 years. Out of those 20 years, she was an out-lesbian for 10 years. This experience, combined with the academic analysis and research with peers, lends to the credibility of the researcher to embark in this analysis.

Transferability

Transferability is understood to be how applicable the findings are to other situations or research (Morse, 2015). In qualitative research, there are multiple ways to enhance the potential for transferability to future studies such as providing thick descriptions, theoretical sampling, and providing a study that is on the cutting edge of change (Slevin & Sines, 2000). The researcher will provide thick descriptions of each of the interviews including in-depth indicators of the environment surrounding the data collection (Holloway, 1997; Morse, 2015). Thick descriptions will allow researchers to determine if the data can be applicable to other settings or research based on the descriptors. In addition, the author can be contacted to obtain the full research process to allow future researchers to decide if the data collected in this research are transferable or not (Anney, 2014). The recommendation of having theoretical sampling versus random sampling of the audience was carried out using purposive sampling and snowball techniques as identified for qualitative research. This research is identified on the cutting edge of change as highlighted as lack of research for lesbians in the upper echelons of the workplace and the evolving nature of gender identity and expression in the workplace.

Confirmability

Confirmability is understood to be how little bias there is in the research findings. This can include how neutral the researcher is in discussing and interpreting the findings (Guba, 1981). Although there are many activities that can lead to confirmability, the researcher took great care to document and journal each of them throughout the research process. This included journaling and logging the process of coming to the research topic, journaling after each interview, and adding notes to the coding throughout each interview. Reflexivity and self-identification as a researcher is clearly outlined in this document to further share the potential bias that the research was attempting to eliminate throughout the research process.

Dependability

Dependability is understood to be how repeatable the findings are for future research as a method for ensuring that the data reflects a phenomenon that is being observed (Amankwaa, 2016). When it comes to repeating lived-experiences of participants, it can be impossible to repeat exactly, but understanding the process and method can allow future researchers to mimic the method to come as close as possible to the research to add to the dependability of the research.

Another way to enhance dependability is to have the research findings peer reviewed for accuracy (Amankwaa, 2016). This research document was reviewed by three peers, each with a different background and experience in research and/or the topic area at hand. In addition, all the participants were contacted after analysis and five out of six participants have responded and provided feedback that has been incorporated into the research.

Purposive Sampling and Snowball

The population of interest was LGBT executives in Fortune 500 companies. The sampling unit consisted of lesbians fewer than four positions away from the CEO of their organization (sample titles: director, vice president, senior vice president, or chief executive). The researcher started with a purposive sampling method, which is intentionally connecting to those the researcher knows based on personal working experience. After each interview, each participant was asked if they knew anyone who would be willing and be able to participate; otherwise known as a snowball method (Petersen & Valdez, 2005). This allowed for additional access to participants who might otherwise be hard to locate. In addition to the purposive sampling and snowball, the researcher connected with LGBT executive groups on LinkedIn to solicit potential participants or connections to potential participants. In total, over 40 connections were made to contact potential participants resulting in six qualified participants for the research study. This acceptance rate is not unusual in hard to reach populations; and those of sexual minorities have been identified as hard to reach populations (Ellard-Gray, Jeffrey, Choubak, & Crann, 2015). The barriers were identified based on the sexual orientation of the participants, but also the public and visible status of the leaders in Fortune 500 companies. All of the participants had administrative assistants who are engaged in the daily calendar of these leaders, including the calendar of private or personal events. This presented another barrier of access to ensure privacy and confidentiality of leaders, especially those that are not out at work.

Overview of the Participants

Mary

Mary is a married Christian, a Midwest native, and a 47-year-old director. Her career background is diverse and includes fields such as automotive, retail, and conglomerate organizations (e.g. corporations that have multiple holdings and are listed as a conglomerate on the Fortune 500 index), mostly at Fortune 500 companies. As she reflects on her career, she feels that corporate America best reflects who she is as a person, stating that she probably “had a briefcase in 3rd grade.” She is married without children and currently resides in the Midwest.

Although she frequently expresses comfort in corporate America, she acknowledged that throughout her undergraduate college program, she fought hard against anything that appeared traditional. She moved to New York City from the Midwest, worked for a company that allowed her to be a young lesbian, exploring the nightlife, and the adventure of her 20s. It was not until she decided to apply for a Master of Business Administration (MBA) Program outside of New York that she decided to take her career aspirations more seriously. Her MBA experience allowed her the opportunity to intern for a Fortune 500 Company, and she felt at home. She felt that going to this internship, and eventually taking up a job there, was a homecoming for her professionally.

Mary identifies as a “middle of the road” type of woman and lesbian, not fitting into either one of the defined roles for traditional female roles or for lesbians, but instead finding her authentic identity. She believes in coming out at work because it helps to “break the ice” with her team and helps to build “trust and empathy with their leader to tell them something that is going on with their life that could potentially be impacting work.” Throughout the interview, Mary’s warmth was exerted in the way Mary answered questions, probed further, and offered up the desire to support this research to help progress her lesbian, and other female, peers.

Patricia

Patricia is a 37-year-old director. Her background includes areas such as marketing, health and beauty, and non-profit organizations. Corporate America has been a part of her goal plan since she was a child when she used to dream of being the CEO of Coca-Cola. This desire to lead at this high level led her to graduate school where she felt she needed to get an advanced degree to fulfill her career goal of becoming CEO. She shares that she has been out since before college and was specifically recruited for a Fortune 500 Company at Reaching Out MBA (ROMBA) conference which is focused on recruiting LGBT-identified graduate students. She is married with children and currently lives on the East Coast.

Patricia has actively been involved with her current company’s Employee Resource Group (ERG) and has been involved with an LGBT ERG as long as she can remember. She sees being a part of an ERG as an extension of her LGBT Leadership experience in college. Throughout the interview, she spoke multiple times about the importance of mentors and advocates in senior positions who have guided her and supported her taking on more responsibilities. Specifically, she speaks of one mentor, Janet, who is an out lesbian executive who paved the way for her to be an out lesbian in her organization especially as she moved up the leadership ranks. In exploring professionalism and workplace appearance, she discussed how seeing someone else having a successful career has allowed her to be more authentic in her role at work. She further explains that based on her haircut and style, she believes many people assume that she is a lesbian. She continues to share multiple times throughout the interview that being outside of the traditional heterosexual female gender norm could have allowed her to make decisions on not being an out lesbian at work, but her gender expression encouraged her to authentically live out in a different way than someone else, who might have passed as a heterosexual woman.

Linda

Linda is a 45-year-old vice president. Her background includes multiple industries including retail, the United States Military, e-commerce, and consulting. Throughout the interview, she shares that she has “never thought about not being out.” She iterates that gender expression, more than sexual orientation, has more of an impact on her identity and potentially her career. In fact, before the interview formally started, she shared how she had a meeting with her leaders to discuss the lack of lesbian representation in Fortune 500 companies as way to engage leaders to care about diversity and inclusion initiatives. She is married with three kids and currently resides on the West Coast.

Linda identifies as “super butch at work.” She explains for the most part this has not caused any issues, but she did share one experience in which this resulted in a negative annual review. She received the feedback about her lifestyle and recommendations and was asked to dress in a

more feminine manner. As a self-identified confident individual, this challenged her emotionally. She held onto that review for close to a decade before finally letting go of the review and the emotional impact it had had on her gender expression during her career.

Barbara

Barbara is a 45-year-old vice president. The industries she has experience in are retail, manufacturing, and design. Her long-range goals include being a CEO or in a C-Suite role, which will allow her to “shake this shit up.” Throughout the interview, she often spoke of her experiences using her role, or positional power, for advocacy. She is married and has one child. She currently resides in the Midwest.

Barbara discussed her experience of being an out-lesbian. In her family, and while growing up in New York City, it was not unusual to know, live with, and interact with individuals belonging to the LGBT community. In her own family, she acknowledges that being a lesbian was not anything special, since she had numerous cousins who also identified as being lesbians. It was not until she moved to the Midwest and started doing an internship that she was confronted with the choice of whether or not to be out at work. Prior to this, she never gave any thought about it and was unsure as to how to navigate her sexual orientation due to the lack of forethought before entering the workplace. She did come out immediately and felt that her decision would set into motion her desire to be out for the rest of her career.

Throughout her career, Barbara credits having a mentor who was African American and was truly authentic in a predominately white work environment. This inspired Barbara to continue to be herself and that as herself she can be successful. One example of her authenticity is when she was discussing her hairstyles, both during interviews and throughout her career which includes a blue mohawk and being bald at various points

Elizabeth

Elizabeth is a 50-year-old senior vice president. Her industry experience includes technology, project management, risk management, security, consulting, telecom, and change management. She came out very early in her career as a lesbian because, in her words, she “didn’t want to find out after I got a job that they didn’t want me because I was gay.” Elizabeth is married without children and resides in the Midwest.

Currently in the male-dominated technology field, Elizabeth reflected at multiple points throughout her interview that she thinks gender has had more of an impact on her career than her sexual orientation. She explains that gender is something constantly visible and something that she is aware of at conferences, in meetings, and amongst her leadership. Elizabeth also discussed that being in IT in a male-dominated environment allowed her to be more flexible with her clothing options and her words described it as a “glorious time to be a lesbian” based on not feeling required to wear skirts or more feminine types of clothing.

Margaret

Margaret is a 53-year-old senior vice president. Her broad work experience includes the following industries: manufacturing, medical, healthcare, and the food industry. Margaret is married with children and resides in the Midwest.

At the beginning of Margaret’s career, she was not an out lesbian at work. She provided insight into the experiences in which she would dress in a feminine manner and use gender neutral pronouns to hide her sexual orientation from her leaders and peers. She shared that at a point in her career, she made a promise to herself that if she ever reached a certain level in the organization, she would be out. When she reached what she viewed as an executive level in the organization, she no longer used her dress to cover for heterosexual and lived her work-life as an out lesbian. This included talking about her partner and eventually her children.

Results

Queering Gender

Sixty-six percent of the participants desire to be the CEO of a large corporation. This led to research discussions around what they perceive as barriers, if any, to advancement in their career. All six shared that their sexual orientation was not a barrier to their advancement as far as they knew, but their gender identity as a woman played the biggest barrier to advancement. All the participants examined what they see as a barrier to the role of CEO within their corporation for lesbians. In this research, all shared their thoughts and experiences that women still have a significantly harder time than men in climbing the ranks of the corporate ladder.

The participants reflected on their views of gender identity and discussed how their identity as a lesbian rejected the traditional western female stereotypes. At the beginning of my interview with Linda, she acknowledged that “gender expression has been something that has been a bigger deal to me than being a lesbian.” Our discussion focused on the expectations that women have in the workplace to look and dress in a certain manner in order to be promoted. Two of the women shared extensively about their gender expression as a butch lesbian. They expressed this more masculine gender expression felt more like a barrier to advancement than their sexual orientation as a lesbian.

Mary shared that her identity as a lesbian sent the signal that “she’s not going to have a lot of distractions at work. She’s not going to get involved in scandals. She’s going to be more responsible.” Three others echoed a similar sentiment, and they said that they were different than traditional heterosexual women and felt that this was a source of success, pride, and reliability in their role. Research has attempted to understand this phenomenon as internalized sexism, which is defined as internalizing the negative and limiting messages about women in society (Szymanski, & Henrichs-Beck, 2014). Another explanation in the research, for the views that the participants held about heterosexual women in their work environment, is the notion that women are culturally raised to compete with other women as compared to competing with men (Woudstra, n.d.). I recommend, after many months of trying to find literature to support what this response to heterosexual women, these women are queering traditional gender role expectations of women in the workplace. They are challenging from inside the binary what it means to be identified as a woman. Initially, as the researcher, I found this surprising to hear participants refer to heterosexual women as dramatic, involved in scandals, caring about clothing labels, or being less responsible based on their beliefs and support of their female peers. Then after reflection and research, I have come to understand this is a way of challenging the traditional gender roles. In other words, what could the binary look like if women were not positioned in contrast to men? Or if women were not positioned to be pleasing to men? Instead, these women looked at their manner of appearance as reflecting who they are authentically as a woman,

lesbian, wife, friend, etc. in relationship to the image they wanted to project versus their expectation of how they should project in these highly visible positions.

Tangible Impacts on Performance

Linda, who initially acknowledged that her sexual orientation had not limited her career, did share an experience when her sexual orientation was referenced in an annual review. Linda discusses an experience in which she received feedback based on her sexual orientation, or her “lifestyle” as a lesbian, as it was discussed in the review. The literature is limited on the topic of LGBT employees and their performance reviews. However, the research on gender bias in performance reviews is vast. It is estimated that women are 1.4 times more likely than men to receive critical subjective feedback (Cecchi-Dimeglio, 2017). Another participant who experienced critical subjective feedback regarding her looks was Barbara. Barbara discussed receiving feedback on her looks, specifically her hairstyle, to which she responded, “That’s really disappointing that we would [care] more about the package that shows up than the business impact.” In both situations, Linda and Barbara acknowledged that their work performance was exceedingly good and surpassed any expectations. This feedback was specifically about their appearance.

The participants were asked about their experience of being an out lesbian and the potential positive impacts it had in their career. A deeper conversation continued in discussing how being a lesbian has proved to be a positive experience for being a leader in any way. Three out of the six participants discussed how it breaks down barriers on their team and brings out results in terms of being a better leader:

“I think being a lesbian has actually improved, for me personally, it’s actually, when I started leading people that I think helps really break the ice with people who report to me...you know people kinda see into your life as a leader a little bit it really brings a lot of trust and empathy and it allows them to feel comfortable talking to their leader about maybe something that is going on in their life that could potentially be impact their work,” (Mary).

There has been one set of research that argues that those that work for gay men report 35% higher levels of engagement compared to their peers who work for non-gay bosses (Snyder, 2006). The reasoning is based on the experiences that gay men had to navigate in their life from growing up in heteronormative environments to navigating rigid masculine emotional expectations. This allows a leader and employee relationship that is more flexible and authentic (Snyder, 2006). There is not currently any research on the impact of having lesbians who are leaders, but it could be argued that this navigation, although not the same, is similar.

Queering Executive Presence

The concepts of appearance, dress, and executive presence were explored throughout the interviews. Most participants discuss that they do not see their sexual orientation as a factor while determining how to dress. Instead, they see their clothing choices related to their role, their location in the country or in the world, and who they plan on interacting with on a daily basis. Patricia shared that she is “dressing a little bit nicer, but I would also if I were straight, too.” Linda shared that she wears what every executive does in her area “jeans and sneakers and a t-shirt and a hoodie.” But, when she travels to the main headquarters office, she “dress[es] up a little bit more,

but I still wear men’s pants and men’s shirts.” She goes on to further explain that this is how she culturally adjusts to the environment (Linda). Barbara shares that not necessarily her clothing, but her hairstyle had been a point of discussion throughout her career since at various points she has been bald, had a blue Mohawk, and had generally “always had short hair.” When discussing about times in her career when she attempted to change her look, she reflected that it was not to “look less lesbian.” Instead, she reflected that the culture seeps in, and she “was trying to fit a mold at the time that was more acceptable.” Elizabeth reflects on professionalism and considers dress to be a function of one’s leadership role and, she tried to “do something else to distinguish yourself in some way.” She expands that this is in regard to being a leader of people and dressing nicer such as in a “shirt with a collar” (Elizabeth). Five out of six participants acknowledged they had never used clothing to minimize their sexual orientation. Instead, they see clothing as a part of their professionalism, and, more specifically, their role in the company. The only participant who was intentionally closeted at one point in their career, Margaret, acknowledged wearing more feminine clothing when she was closeted. In reflecting on her idea of professionalism, she stated that early in her career, she did “the whole dress for success, look like all of the other women and everything else for a long time.” She went on further to state that at her place in her career now, “the only person I dress up for is the CEO” (Margaret).

The reaction from all the participants to the question about whether the participant identified as a prototypical lesbian resulted in either a chuckle or a quizzical expression. Mary responded with “I don’t even know what that means.” Four of the six responded to the question by discussing their short hair styles. Based on the reaction to this initial line of questioning, I probed further by asking the participants to share if being a lesbian had hindered or helped their upward mobility in their company. There were two different threads in the responses. One was to discuss how they self-selected their employment, either by asking questions during the interview to screen the employer or to work for a corporate setting, which best fit their personality and style versus another type of workplace setting. The general sense that the researcher got from the participants is that they have a certain sense of freedom to choose for themselves regarding how they want to show up and that authenticity in their leadership style is the supreme goal of achieving strong executive presence. This theme could allude to the notion that as more diverse women get to the top of the corporate ladder, there will be an adjustment to how executive presence will be defined. This puts forward the question of what it means for women? Do they conform to a male idea of executive presence or forge their own path? In the case of the participants, they chose to forge their own path.

Discussion

The leaders in this research highlight the manner in which executive presence is changing for women, or any employee who does not fit the typical masculine-defined leadership mold. And as companies continue to expand what a leader could look like, it will eliminate the barriers to leadership positions based solely on appearance. Women continue to be the center of the feminist movement, however, inclusivity is increasingly more important for finding space for intersecting identities to have a seat at the table (Abrahams, 2017). This was shared by Linda in her interview by expressing that she “wants to help those that are underrepresented be represented.” In specifically looking at the next generation in the workplace, early research indicates that more than a majority identify as LGBT. Only 48% of those between the ages of 13 and 20 identify themselves as “exclusively heterosexual” with the remainder identifying as lesbian, gay,

bisexual, or another identity besides heterosexual (Laughlin, 2016). This further justifies why a company should and must care about their LGBT-identified employees.

As Fortune 500 companies continue to enhance their recruitment, retention, and advancement strategies, they must care about how their diversity strategies align to these talent strategies to ensure they are recruiting, retaining, and promoting the best and brightest talent. It is projected that the workforce is currently in a decline and in the next five years the workforce will decrease by 2.1%, which requires tightening of the talent pool (“HR’s Next Recruiting Challenge...,” 2003). Early indications reported that this tightening did occur and that the talent pool is continuing to tighten (Desilver, 2017). Applicants will continue to be in the driver’s seat when deciding who they want to work for and how long they want to stay. In the executive ranks, this is an even more urgent of an issue with only 30% staying in their role for more than two years (Baldwin, 2017). And once an executive reaches the CEO level, their average tenure is not much longer at 4.6 years (Blazek, 2015). Based on the research presented in this paper, there are multiple implications of the companies who are desiring to advance their diversity recruitment, retention, and advancement strategies.

Limitations

The limitations of this study relate to the sample size in the research. Due to the nature of the positions, the exposure for their companies, and the barriers to identifying lesbian leaders, the sample size reflects the nature of the research. Another limitation is that all the women are currently out in their workplace. Multiple avenues were considered attempt to recruit participants who were not currently out to better understand their workplace experience. In addition, by all career standards, these women are successful.

Another limitation was the race of the participants. Outside of one of the participants, the rest identified their race as white. When discussing gender and sexual orientation, the intersection with race is important when understanding the impact of queering a workspace. This can present different for a white person versus a person who identifies of a different race.

Future Research

The current research focuses on lesbians who have achieved high-ranking status. It is recommended for future research, to understand the full career spectrum and the impact of identifying as lesbian to research various levels of being out and career levels to better understand this phenomenon over the course of a career. This limited scope of this research could be expanded to a more generalizable quantitative research study that includes various members of the LGBT community. This could include researching the experiences of gay men at senior executive levels to better understand the experience of masculine identities, looking at mid-level lesbian leaders to understand their experience in moving up the corporate ladder while potentially queering the gender binary, and researching lesbian senior leaders that are in the closet or hiding their sexual orientation in the workplace. This will further explore how early and what type of barriers lesbians face as they enter the workforce and potentially what tactics are utilized to navigate these barriers. In the context of queer theory, this research can be expanded on by looking at other marginalized communities and how they are navigating cultural norms that could be in conflict with workplace norms.

Author Note

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