



QUEER CAFÉ LGBTQ INFORMATION NETWORK
Gender Expression

Gender expression refers to the ways in which we each manifest masculinity or femininity. It is usually an extension of our gender identity, our innate sense of being male or female. Each of us expresses a particular gender every day, by the way we style our hair, select our clothing, or even the way we stand. Our appearance, speech, behavior, movement, and other factors signal that we feel (and wish to be understood) as masculine or feminine, or as a man or a woman.



For some of us, our gender expression may not match our biological sex. That is, while other people see us as being male or female, we may or may not fit their expectations of masculinity or femininity because of the way we look, act, or dress.

Butch and Femme

“Butch” and “femme” are terms used in the lesbian and gay subculture to ascribe or acknowledge a masculine (butch) or feminine (femme) identity with its associated traits, behaviors, styles, and self-perceptions for both men and women. The terms are used as a descriptor of one’s appearance or mannerisms and not for one’s desire or identity.



“Butch” and “femme” are terms used to describe a person’s gender expression, interactive performance, or public presentation. And it is important to remember that one’s gender expression does not always match one’s gender.

“Femme” usually describes a person whose public presentation is more feminine or girly. “Butch” (stud, dyke, masc) usually describes someone whose presentation is more masculine or manly. Both men and women may even prefer to express themselves in an androgynous way, which might be viewed as more gender neutral.

Women

In describing lesbians (gay women), most people recognize a spectrum of identity ranging from “femme” (heels, miniskirts, full makeup, purses, perfect nails) to “butch” (t-shirt, jeans, flannel shirt, short hair, not into hairspray and lip gloss).



On the femme end of the spectrum, lesbians are sometimes described as “lipstick lesbians.” On the butch (stud) end of the spectrum, lesbians typically express themselves in a more tomboy or masculine way.

Femmes do not usually pass as lesbians unless they are with a butch partner, because they conform to traditional standards of femininity. Otherwise, you usual can’t tell that a femme lesbian is gay. In a couple, she is typically the girlier one in the relationship.

Men

In using the femme-butch spectrum to describe gay men, people might observe the more effeminate, flamboyant, campy, girly traits at one end (femme) and the more stoutly, manly, masculine traits at the other end (butch).



On the femme side, gay men might be more stylish and meticulously groomed, and referred to as a “twink” or an “otter.” Meanwhile, on the butch side, a gay man might be more rustic and brawny and referred to as a “hunk” or a “stud.”

Gay men might appear straight in appearance, grooming, and mannerisms and express themselves as conventionally masculine. They might appear as a biker or lumberjack type and express themselves in a hypermasculine way. They might appear as fastidious and ostentatious and express themselves in an effeminate way.