

Boys: The Rise of the Lesbian BF*

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While the phrase may feel like a TikTok-era invention, the dynamic it describes is anything but new. Lesbian cultures have always produced elastic vocabularies, often bending and reconfiguring straight terms into queer vernacular. The “lesbian boyfriend” is simply the latest iteration of a long tradition of queer world-building through language.

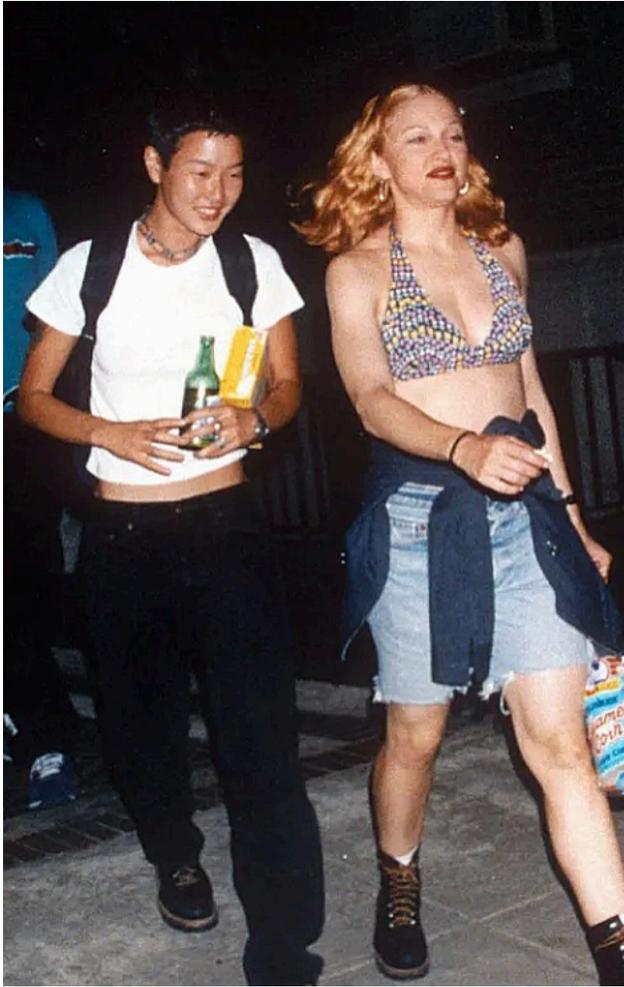
The most prominent instance of the “GF BF” in recent mainstream discourse occurred when Lily-Rose Depp, speaking about her relationship with rapper 070 Shake (Danielle Balbuena), referred to her partner as her boyfriend. The internet, predictably, split down the middle: some

celebrated the irreverence, while others accused Depp of forcing a heteronormative framing onto a queer relationship. One Instagram commenter crystallised this discomfort, writing: “since 070 Shake’s pronouns are she/her, it kinda feels like Lily’s trying a little too hard to frame the relationship in a somewhat heteronormative light.”

Such anxieties are not new. During the “sex wars” of the 1970s and ‘80s, many lesbian feminists argued that butch–femme couplings were little more than caricatures of heterosexual pairings. This reading, however, reduces a complex history of gender non-conformity into a simplistic charge of imitation. Butch–femme dynamics were never about recreating heterosexuality, they were about reconfiguring it.

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Depp is hardly the first to fold ‘boyfriend’ into a sapphic context. In the 1990s, model Jenny Shimizu became something of a lesbian-BF blueprint, dating both Angelina Jolie and Madonna. On the set of *Foxfire*, Jolie admitted, “I fell in love with her the first second I saw her. I would probably have married Jenny if I hadn’t married my husband” – casting Shimizu in the role of would-be husband rather than girlfriend. Shimizu’s brief but intense connection with Madonna was equally coded: as she later recalled, ‘You’d get a phone call like, “Hey can you meet me at my Paris show...” and I’d go over to her hotel at 4am, have sex, then fly back to Milan.’ In both cases, Shimizu embodied the charged, rakish energy of the boyfriend figure: desired, pursued, and folded into a language of intimacy that queered the role from within.



Another contemporary iteration of the “lesbian BF” is front and centre in the life of reality-TV turned queer-icon **Gabby Windey**. Since coming out in August 2023, she’s been dating comedian and writer Robby Hoffman, who exudes lesbian bf energy. Windey has described their connection as “love at first sight” and confessed that Hoffman is the “best” partner she’s ever had. Their dynamic – Hoffman’s reassurance, Windey’s joy – is full of playful, affectionate energy. Windey says that dating Hoffman has made her “more confident,” letting her lean into her femininity and strength like never before, an example of the benefits of the lesbian boyfriend inversion, showing how re-appropriating

the boyfriend role can free up new forms of expression within queer relationships, allowing partners to experiment with gendered language and intimacy without being bound to its original, heteronormative scripts.



The language may be contemporary, but the practice is not. In the early 20th century, Gertrude Stein referred to herself as Alice B. Toklas's "husband." A century earlier, Anne Lister and Eliza Raine wrote to each other as "husband and wife." These terms did not assimilate queer couples into straight life; they destabilised the categories altogether. To name a girlfriend as "boyfriend," "husband," or even "wife" within a lesbian context was to take a word weighted with patriarchal expectation and use it against itself, queering its edges until it signified something uncontainable.

By the mid-20th century, butch–femme dynamics became visible in working-class lesbian bars across America and Europe. For many, this was not simply a style of dress but a system of survival. Gender performance became a coded language, one that both invited connection and defended against a hostile outside world. As writer and activist Joan Nestle later described, these dynamics offered a "lesbian-specific way of deconstructing gender" – not an imitation of straightness, but a radical reimagining of intimacy itself.



When transplanted into lesbian relationships, the boyfriend is severed from his heterosexual baggage. To be called a boyfriend does not mean a partner is masculine, nor does it exclusively imply they perform traditional "male" tasks. As

Them writer Quispe López notes, “the term is meant to be irreverent – it’s not that deep. The naming of a ‘lesbian boyfriend’ is often not as much a rigid label like how we view pronouns and gender identity today, but more so a playful or perfunctory acknowledgement of someone who contains multiple gender expressions their partner wants to honour.”

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Of course, every reclamation carries its risks. The lesbian boyfriend is harmless so long as it remains playful, a deliberate re-appropriation of gender roles. Problems emerge if the term is used to smuggle toxic masculinity into queer relationships — control, dominance, entitlement, or even emotional detachment dressed up as “boyfriend behaviour.” Scholars like Jack Halberstam have long noted that butch identities can simultaneously undo and reproduce patriarchal logics, depending on how they are lived.

This is the tension at the heart of the lesbian BF: it is a tool, not a template. It can fracture gender categories or it can repeat them, depending on the intent behind its use. What matters is that it remains a site of play rather than performance-as-duty, a way of naming devotion that resists being flattened into hierarchy.

At its best, the lesbian boyfriend challenges the assumption that intimacy must always replicate straight models. It allows queer couples to bend the rules of naming, styling, and desiring until something new emerges. In doing so, it gestures

towards a more expansive understanding of gender expression in relationships. To be someone's lesbian boyfriend is not about becoming a boyfriend in a heteronormative sense. It is about exposing the fragility of the category itself, and showing how love can make even the most rigid words bend, forging it into something new, playful and hot.