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# ‘A qualitative study of bisexual women’s appearance and identity’

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# **‘A qualitative study of bisexual women’s appearance and identity’**

- ◆ Background - the importance of sexuality and appearance
- ◆ Previous research
- ◆ Aims
- ◆ Using photomethodology in interviews
- ◆ Demographics
- ◆ Main codes and themes
- ◆ Conclusions and future plans



# Background

## Lesbians and gay men use appearance:

- ◆ To enable expression and communication of their sexuality for the purpose of:
  - creating a sense of group identity distinct from wider culture
  - sexual signalling
- ◆ Historically as a political tool to raise visibility and gain equal rights
- ◆ As a political statement and critique of the rigid dress codes of heterosexual society
- ◆ As pleasurable to look and be looked at

(Clarke and Turner, 2007, Walker, 2001, Holliday, 1999, Gamson, 1998, Esterberg, 1996)



# Previous research findings

## Taub (1999):

Women change their beauty practices according to the gender of their partner but no specific 'look' exists

## Holliday (1999):

One bisexual (man) pushes boundaries of uniform and wears bright colours but doesn't expect to be read as bisexual (indicative of a lack of bisexual look)



# Background

## Clarke and Turner (2007):

- ◆ *“lesbian and gay participants [...] had an existing vocabulary to make sense of the topic, [...] bisexual women struggled to make links between their sexuality and their dress and appearance ... a separate focus on bisexuals may be necessary to understand the specificity of bisexual visual identities”* (Clarke and Turner 2007:275)
- ◆ **In summary, very little is known about how / if bisexual women use their appearance**



# Aims

- ◆ To use exploratory techniques in order to begin to ascertain whether bisexual women use appearance tools such as clothing, body art and cosmetic/beauty practices in order to create a specifically bisexual visual identity, and to consider reasons why this might be important for them.



# Interview Study

- ◆ 12 bisexual women recruited
- ◆ Questions asked about their clothing and beauty practices and their ideas and thoughts around sexuality/bisexuality and appearance
- ◆ Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 2 hours
- ◆ Participants offered the opportunity to use photos as part of the interview (auto driven photo elicitation technique)



# Photo methodology

- ◆ Particularly useful in exploratory studies
- ◆ Can create a participant led interview:
  - overcomes the strangeness of the interview situation
  - lessens the limitations of the researcher constructed schedule, which is inevitably based on issues *the researcher* considers pertinent, allowing participants to provide unpredicted information
- ◆ *‘interviews conducted in conjunction with photographs [...] yield richer, more detailed, and more precise information’* (Frith and Harcourt 2007:1342)





# Preliminary analysis: Main codes and themes

1. Constructing bi/bisexual identities
2. Resisting looking 'too lesbian' vs 'too feminine'
3. Sexuality and appearance as a bi woman
4. Comforts and constraints
5. Traditional notions of constructing 'woman'
6. Piercings and tattoos
7. Communities/Scene/Friends



# Future Plans

- ◆ **More interviews**
- ◆ **Questionnaire study**



# References

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