

**Clothes maketh the queer? Dress, appearance and the construction of lesbian,
gay and bisexual identities**

Victoria Clarke and Kevin Turner

Word count: 4,034

Correspondence

Victoria Clarke

School of Psychology

Faculty of Applied Sciences

University of the West of England

Frenchay Campus

Bristol BS16 1QY

Email: Victoria.Clarke@uwe.ac.uk

Tel: 0117 3282176

Fax: 0117 3284407

Victoria Clarke is a senior lecturer and member of the Critical Psychology Research Group in the School of Psychology at the University of the West of England. She has published two books (both with Elizabeth Peel) - *Out in Psychology* (Wiley) and *British LGB Psychologies* (Harrington Park Press) - and has conducted ESRC funded research on same-sex relationships (with Carole Burgoyne and Maree Burns). She is currently writing a textbook on *LGBTQI Psychologies* (Cambridge University Press) with Sonja Ellis, Elizabeth Peel and Damien Riggs and conducting British Academy funded research on civil partnership with Elizabeth Peel.

Kevin Turner obtained his BSc (Hons) in Psychology from the University of the West of England in 2006. His project was supervised by Victoria Clarke.

Clothes maketh the queer? Dress, appearance and the construction of lesbian, gay and bisexual identities

Introduction

In this short report of an exploratory qualitative study we consider whether a small group of younger British lesbians, gay men and bisexuals felt under pressure to conform to lesbian/gay appearance norms and used their clothing and appearance to actively construct and manage a visual identity as LGB.

One of the exercises the first author regularly uses when teaching about the socio-cultural construction of LGB identities involves students brainstorming their associations for the words 'lesbian', 'gay man' and 'bisexual'. For many students, the word 'lesbian' conjures up associations like 'ugly', 'butch', 'masculine', 'short hair', 'dungarees' and 'comfortable shoes' (see Peel, 2005). Whereas gay men are allied to style, fashion, grooming and effeminacy (witness all the 'makeover' television shows featuring gay men – *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *How Not to Decorate*). In short, many students have a clear *image* of the (stereo)typical lesbian and gay man. By contrast, students can identify (a smaller number of) associations for the word 'bisexual' (such as 'confused' and 'greedy'), but have no clear image of the typical bisexual. The centrality of the visual to lesbian and gay identity is readily apparent in popular cultural sources, such as *Queer* (Gage et al., 2002), that document the ways in which lesbians and gay men have used dress, hairstyling, jewellery, tattoos, piercings and other adornments to signify their sexual identity (or preferences). Although appearance norms have changed throughout history (Edwards, 1997, Faderman, 1991), it has been argued that dress and appearance constitute a primary way of asserting and displaying a lesbian and gay identity (Holliday, 2001). Lesbians and gay men use clothing and adornment to create a sense of group identity (separate from the dominant culture), to resist and challenge normative (gendered) expectations, and to signal their sexual identity to the wider world or just to those 'in the know' (Rothblum, 1994, Traub, 2003). At the same time, strategies of passing have made use of the semiotic codes woven into clothing (Skidmore, 1999). Giving the centrality of visual identity to lesbian and gay culture and communities, and the role of dress and appearance as key signifiers of sexuality and gender (Skidmore, 1999), it is surprising that very little research has been conducted on this aspect of lesbian and gay lived (and embodied) experience in LGB psychology. At the same time, perhaps less

surprisingly, research on fashion, clothing and appearance in feminist psychology (and in other fields) has tended to focus on heterosexual women (Frith & Gleeson, 2004).

The handful of psychological research examining the relationship between LGB identities and dress and appearance (e.g., Atkins, 1998, Cogan & Erikson, 1999, Krakauer & Rose, 2002) suggests that there are distinct lesbian and gay appearance norms. These norms centre on a butch or androgynous ‘look’ for women and a valorisation of youth, muscles, masculinity and a variety of ‘gay’ styles for men, and many people feel under pressure to conform to these norms in order to be accepted by other lesbians and gay men. Research on fashion and style in the humanities has provided similar findings (e.g., Holliday, 2001). This study aims to build on this literature and explore whether a small group of younger LGB people use their dress and appearance to emphasise and/or de-emphasise their sexuality and to identify other people’s sexuality.

Method

Semi-structured interviews were collected from nine participants recruited through snowball sampling - three self-identified as lesbian, four as gay men, and two as bisexual women. The participants were aged between 18 and 22, all identified as able-bodied, eight as white and one as British-Asian, eight were full-time students, and one was full-time employed. All had spent time on the gay scene and were (more or less) out. The second author conducted and transcribed most of the interviews (one interview was conducted by the first author); both authors identify as non-heterosexual. Both authors allocated pseudonyms to the participants, and coded and analysed the data using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Three main themes were identified: (i) looking good and conforming to ‘the look’; (ii) reading others and negotiating your style; and (iii) resisting the uniform and being an individual. In the analysis that follows we discuss each theme in turn using examples of data.

Analysis

(i) Looking good and conforming to ‘the look’

Although some participants indicated that the gay scene gave the freedom to be, and to appear like, who they really are (and achieve a fit between their inner and outer selves), this freedom was in fact highly constrained. Participants were free to look like

a (typical) lesbian or a gay man but not to deviate from rigidly policed appearance norms. As Holliday (2001: 224) argued, the participants' accounts "make clear the power at work within the so-called 'emancipatory' discourses (and spaces) of queer". Although the policing of appearance norms was often conceptualised in individualising terms as bitchiness, it was clear that some participants had negative experiences of regulatory regimens on the gay scene (Holliday, 2001). The participants indicated that the 'gay scene' placed a particular premium on dress, appearance, style and fashion (and making judgements about people on the basis of their clothes and appearance). Laurie (a lesbian, aged 20) described the gay scene as "so bitchy" in terms of judging people's appearance, and Joanna (a lesbian, aged 22) commented that "in the gay community there is a massive thing with image". According to Stephen (a gay men, aged 20), "you have to look good for the gay scene". Dave (a gay man, aged 20) indicated that "you're judged straight away" when you walk into a gay venue. Participants responded to these expectations by making sure that they "make an effort" (Arthur, a gay man, aged 20) to look good: "I won't ever go out or to a gay club whatever if my hair's not right... the same with clothes, I won't just rock up in anything, I will have planned out carefully exactly what I wanted to wear" (Joanna).

Some participants reported experiences of receiving negative feedback (in the form of bitchy comments, disapproving looks and being ignored) because they failed to conform to appearance norms. Non-conforming people "can be made to feel like a bit of an outsider" (Laurie): "you see girls walk in and they've got a nice girly top on, long hair and make-up, and... the dykey lesbians in the corner gasp 'what's she doing here?'" (Martha, a lesbian, aged 22). Laurie, a feminine-appearing lesbian, reported numerous experiences of having her sexuality called into question: "'you're not gay, look at your shoes, you're wearing heels, look at your nails, you can't be gay'". Mark felt that more masculine men "are frowned upon for not conforming to the gay norm". He received negative feedback when he adopted a more masculine look: "I will get a lot more bitchy looks than if I went out with a tight white t-shirt on, where a lot of people would talk to me". Within the regimens of looking on the gay scene, participants actively construct their appearance to secure the right kind of look – a pleasurable, cruising look rather than an uncomfortable, disciplining look (Holliday, 2001; see also Gleeson & Frith, 2003, on relations of looking). Joanna observed "if

you haven't got the look right you kinda don't feel like you kinda fit in or like you don't get a second look".

Supporting the findings of previous research (Krakauer & Rose, 2002, Traub, 2003), our data show that the 'real' lesbian look is butch or masculine, "very un-girly" (Laurie); "a sort of masculine way of dressing" (Martha); "a butch form of dress" (Holly, a bisexual woman, aged 23). There were lots of descriptions of the "typical lesbian" (Laurie), a woman who generally wore men's clothes, (baggy) trousers and had short, spiky hair: "the majority of lesbians will either wear jeans or combats, trousers obviously trousers and it will either be a vest top or t-shirt of some description" (Laurie). Although this style was acknowledged as stereotyped, it was also seen as real: "I know certain people who literally fit the stereotypical picture of butch lesbian" (Arthur). For most participants the "first trigger" (Holly) for identifying a woman as a lesbian was her hairstyle, "*the* lesbian haircut" (Holly): "if you've got short spiky hair and you're in the [gay club] and you're not a lesbian, then something's gone a bit wrong" (Laurie). Some participants thought that there was increasing diversity in lesbian style – "I know people from either end of the scale, like the butch lesbians and the effeminate lesbians, with everything else in between" (Arthur) - whereas others thought that women on the gay scene who look more feminine are "usually not the gayest of gays" (Joanna).

Some participants indicated that there are different types of looks within the genre of butch style: "the old school lesbian with like her *Ben Sherman* shirts and lumberjack shirts ... you've got your proper leather boots biker dyke lesbians, the sort of chav... all summer, it's just like *Addidas* shorts, trainers, t-shirts, sporty" (Laurie). These styles represent various (class-inflected) ways of doing/being lesbian, expressions of different emotional, sexual and political experiences. Martha noted that straight female and (butch) lesbian styles are very different, whereas straight and gay male style is (becoming) more similar.

Reflecting wider discussions about shifts in (heterosexual) men's relationship to fashion (e.g., Edwards, 1997), the participants indicated that styles and fashions that once unequivocally coded men as gay are now more ambiguous and "it's a lot harder" (Stephen) to read men's sexuality off their appearance and dress. Most of the participants mentioned "the metrosexual thing" (Stephen), some (straight) men's overt concern with fashion, grooming and style, and the ways in which this interferes with their "gaydar" (Mark). Arthur indicated that clothing is no longer a reliable

source of information: “I just don’t think you can solely rely on clothing as a give away... anymore”. Some participants felt that to successfully read men’s sexuality you also have to read their verbal and non-verbal practices: “like mannerisms, so the way that they walk, the way they talk... if they are gay there’s always going to be a huge campness about them” (Martha). Mark felt that he was read as gay because of his “mannerisms... my voice gives it away I think as well”. Stephen similarly noted that even though he doesn’t look as gay as he used to “people can still tell I’m gay, just by me walking, where I’ve grown up as being gay it kind of goes into the appearance of you”. Visible gayness is literally embodied, rather than written on to the body through clothing.

Other participants described the typical gay man as having (bleached) blond or highlighted hair and wearing tighter t-shirts, lower trousers, and generally more feminine styles and colours, more jewellery and more revealing clothes than do heterosexual men. Arthur thought that: “tight white t-shirts and the blond hair are major giveaways”. Dave had a colleague at work and “you can tell... he has got loads of rings, he’s got thumbs rings on both hands, and he’s got loads of jewellery, he wears loads of bands and like leather wrist bands and stuff like that”. Gay men are also typically trendier than heterosexual men, and more likely to display tell-tale signs of using beauty products like moisturiser and fake-tan and having spent time styling and accessorising their look (and generally subjecting themselves to the technologies of the body that some lesbians/feminists have sought to liberate women from, Holliday, 2001). Stephen commented “normally if they accessorise a lot maybe like a wristband can look quite gay... if they’ve made the effort say to wear two belts for fashion reasons like a studded belt or hair that’s a big giveaway as well”. Mark similarly noted that: “to me it’s their skin, as in whether it’s tanned or well looked after, eyebrows, hair, it’s more about practice management, than it is about the clothes that they wear”.

Just as there are different lesbian styles, there are different gay male styles and the participants felt that these formed a hierarchy, which, while not presented as organised around social class, was clearly class-inflected. Mark for instance used the metaphor of a biscuit tin to describe the value placed on different gay styles:

“it’s a biscuit tin okay you have like your ultimate biscuit which is like your McFitty! or your digestive and they are the kind of guys that like really nice clothes like their D and G [*Dolce & Gabbana*] and like their *Jean Paul*

Gaultier and their like *Moschino*... they're kind of at the top... but then you've got like your pink wafers who are normally like your hairdressers and they fake tan and bleach their hair and kind of wax and everything else like that and they buy a t-shirt from *Primark* [budget clothing store] and stitch anything onto it".

As Holliday (2001: 220) noted, "access to credit and capital determines who can wear what, and thus who can be what". But, men cannot simply buy their way to the upper echelons of the biscuit tin, the wrong people in the right clothes are all too obvious: "you can just spot it like a mile away" (Mark). You cannot 'fake it' through your dress and appearance, you must fit your clothes and your clothes must fit you, in more ways than one.

Some authors have argued that markers of queer identities have more subtle and sophisticated and have moved away from generic styles towards specific clothing labels and particular looks (Edwards, 1997). Lesbian/gay style in general was presented as more "relaxed" (Tessa) and less formal than mainstream straight style. A "very kind of gay, lesbian thing to do" (Joanna) was "wearing a pair of *Calvins* [brand of underwear] popping out of your trousers" (Joanna). This was identified as a sexual style, "yeah it's there, you can see it, whatcha gonna do about it?" (Mark). A number of clothing labels and shops were identified as distinctly lesbian/gay: "like everyone was in *Bench* for ages" (Laurie); "*Top Man*'s got some stuff that's really, really camp" (Dave). Particular body and facial piercings and tattoos also had the potential to be "very lesbian, very gay" (Laurie), but it "depends where you have them really" (Dave). Joanna thought that having a tongue piercing is "quite a lesbian thing to do" because of the sexual meanings attached to this type of piercing. Similarly, Stephen commented that for men tongue piercings "can be quite gay because of blow jobs". Other piercings (lip, nose, ear cartilage) could both be read as gay and as "straight goth" (Dave). Lesbians and gay men use piercings to "make a statement" (Mark) (presumably about their sexuality) and to affirm their identity, especially when they are first coming out.

Whereas the participants' talk provided evidence of appearance norms for lesbians and gay men, there was no indication of there being a bisexual look. Neither of the bisexual women thought that they dressed in "any particular way" (Holly).

(ii) Reading others and negotiating your style

As the data presented so far indicate, the participants often attempted to read off people's sexuality from their dress and appearance: "I do look at what they're wearing" (Laurie). Certain styles were coded as lesbian/gay and regarded as "major giveaways" (Arthur) of people's sexuality, as "just quite gay" (Joanna), "tell tale" (Dave), and "blatantly obvious" (Arthur).

Some participants were conscious of being read themselves (particularly when they more rigidly conformed to appearance norms); even their mothers had noticed: "we were walking down the street erm she turned to me and said 'oh you're making a statement with your hair, like people are looking at you, they can tell'" (Joanna). Mark felt that he is read "all the time"; on a shopping trip with his mother "she said 'there were quite a lot of men looking at you when you were walking down the street'". Others thought that they were less easy to read. Dave, for instance, who had a more formal style (something that many of the participants associated with looking straight), thought that this clothing concealed rather than revealed his sexuality: "I normally go out in a shirt which makes it harder to tell than if I'd gone out in a tight t-shirt then people would have known".

Many participants' account of their style conformed to 'the look', and some rather ruefully acknowledged this: Joanna reflected "god I sound so gay" (Joanna). Dave thought his routine for getting ready to go out "sounds really gay, doesn't it?" The participants assessed and evaluated other lesbians' and gay men's appearance, and the meanings and positioning associated with particular styles, and used this information, along with the feedback they had received on their own appearance, to construct their current style. For many this style was "a bit gay but not too much" (Mark) (but what counted as 'too gay' was to some extent context specific – visiting the grandparents versus being 'out on the pull'). Clothing that was 'too gay' was generally very butch or very camp and "just not appealing to the same sex" (Stephen). Joanna thought that looking like "a complete and utter gay... it's just not attractive".

By looking at other gay men Dave had learnt that he didn't look gay enough and had begun to purchase more gay clothes: "a lot of the time I've thought that I look a bit over dressed". Arthur was aware of the pressures to look gay enough: "in the back of your head... you're thinking if you want to feel included then you have to". Mark reported feeling uncomfortable being out on the town with a friend who had a very gay style: "from then I think make sure your t-shirts are always going to the end

of your jeans”. Mark and Stephen had also revised their style from more to less gay (“more normal”, Stephen) as a result of having relationships with more masculine and straight acting men: “I just saw how he dressed and you know if that’s what appeals to me and I start looking like that then maybe that will appeal to other people as well” (Stephen). However, Stephen’s look was still gay: “not straight normal [but] fabulously normal”, straight with a twist. Mark thought that “men are gay because they fancy men, so they wouldn’t want to go for someone who emulates too many feminine qualities”. In addition to a hierarchy of styles organised around class, credit and consumption, some participants subscribed to a hierarchy of masculinity, with straight acting (and indeed, straight) men as the most desirable sexual objects and effeminate men the least (Nardi, 2000).

Participants also used the information they garnered from looking at others (and from being looked at) to “gauge [their] level of entry to gay space” (Mark) and to assess where they can “dunk [their] biscuit”: “you don’t want to like fit into like the chubby category or the bondage category or the queen category” (Stephen). Stephen sought to look “perfect... people like the ideal person”. As Holliday (2001: 229) suggests, the participants were “creating an idealised self in the gaze of the other”.

(iii) Resisting the uniform and being an individual

There was a tension around conforming to appearance norms; some participants indicated a competing pressure to have a distinctive look, to stand out and to draw attention to oneself (Edwards, 1997). Participants felt that many people went out on the gay scene to find sex or a romantic/sexual partner. Precisely what makes LGB people extraordinary in straight space – their sexuality – is what makes them ordinary in queer space. So, participants were faced with the challenge both of conforming to appearance norms (or risking censure or, perhaps even worse, invisibility) and of looking distinctive. Participants sought to, at times, express their individuality rather than conform to the regulatory discourses of queer (Holliday, 2001).

A number of participants discussed an evolution of their style from more to less gay. Participants chose to look gayer when they first came out to affirm and to display to others that they were comfortable with their identity: “just to let people know that I’m okay about being gay” (Stephen). Visual displays became less necessary when the participants were more secure in their inner identity and had come out in other ways; they could shift from being a stereotype to being an individual. One

of the negative connotations of looking too gay was the loss of individuality. Some participants negotiated this tension by indicating that their look was the product of happenstance rather than any particular desire to slavishly conform to lesbian/gay appearance norms: “my style is not ‘I’m gay’, this is my style, and it just happens to reflect my gayness” (Martha). Joanna had more confidence to be herself: “now I can be how I wanna be, dress how I wanna dress, and I feel comfortable in more masculine types of clothes”. Luckily for Joanna, the style in which she is “most comfortable” conforms to lesbian appearance norms (Holliday, 2001). Mark felt that being gay was an important part of who he was, but not all that he was: “I don’t want it to be the only thing people notice me for”. Mark wanted to “be me”, to retain a sense of individuality and not get “lost in the stereotype”. He felt that some gay men “look too perfect, whereas I’m more individually liberated, I look at them and think who is this person? They are literally a Ken doll”.

The participants took pains to emphasise their individuality and expressed pleasure in the ‘uniqueness’ of their clothes, jewellery and so on. They also constructed their consumption of designer labels as appropriately motivated: “I’m not one of those flashy people whereby I have to have designer, it’s just that I naturally prefer like all the designer stuff” (Joanna). Joanna indicated that her style was her own: “I don’t look at other girls and think ‘yeah I wanna look like that’ I just think I wear what I wear and I know what suits me”. The participants were keen to emphasise that they were not slaves to fashion – their adoption of particular lesbian/gay styles was not contingent on these being trendy “I buy it because I like it not because it’s in fashion” (Stephen). Arthur sees a lot of people in his circle with tattoos but “I wouldn’t say that makes me want to get one”. Stephen knew someone with two tongue piercings so he got three but “not because of her, but because I like being an individual”. The participants positioned themselves (and their preferences) in a socio-cultural vacuum, free from the pressures of the gay scene (Holliday, 2001).

Conclusion

The participants understood themselves to be active agents in the negotiation of their dress and appearance but they also (at times) were constrained by lesbian/gay appearance norms. The participants know who and what they are on the inside and they manipulate their appearance when they wanted to express this inner essence and to be recognised as queer.

Although dress and appearance are often seen as trivial and unworthy of academic attention (Frith & Gleeson, 2004), it is clear from this and other studies that they are an important part of the everyday realities of (at least some) lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, and of the performativity of identity (Skidmore, 1999). Larger scale research is needed that incorporates the experiences of those groups typically excluded from LGB psychological research, and this study, namely, older, working class, non-white, rural LGB people who don't have access to the gay scene. It is also important to consider the intersections of class, race, culture, age, ability and sexuality in the construction of a visual identity. A separate focus on bisexuals may be necessary to understand the specificity of bisexual visual identities. Whereas the lesbian and gay participants in this study had an existing vocabulary to make sense of the topic, the two bisexual women struggled to make links between their sexuality and their dress and appearance (other than in heteronormative terms of using their sexuality/femininity to attract men). There is also much potential for productive links with work on consumption, fashion and style in other disciplines, and with more traditional psychological research on body image.

References

- Atkins, D. (Ed.), (1998) *Looking queer: Body image and identity in lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgendered communities*. New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Cogan, J. C. & Erikson, J. M. (Eds.), (1999) *Lesbians, levis and lipstick: The meaning of beauty in our lives*. New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Edwards, T. (1997) *Men in the mirror: Men's fashion, masculinity and consumer society*. London: Cassell.
- Faderman, L. (1991) *Odd girls and twilight lovers: A history of lesbian life in twentieth-century America*. New York: William Morrow.

Frith, H. & Gleeson, K. (2004) Clothing and embodiment: Men managing body image and appearance. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 5, 40-48.

Gage, S., Richards, L. & Wilmot, H. (2002) *Queer*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press.

Gleeson, K. & Frith, H. (2003) Getting Noticed: Using Clothing to Negotiate Visibility. *Psychology of Women Review*, 5(2), 7-11.

Holliday, R. (2001) Fashioning the queer self. In J. Entwistle & E. Wilson (Eds.), *Body dressing* (pp. 215-31). Oxford: Berg.

Krakauer, I. D. & Rose, S. M. (2002) The impact of group membership on lesbians' physical appearance. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 6(1), 31-43.

Nardi, P. (2000) 'Anything for a sis, Mary': An introduction to gay masculinities. In P. Nardi (Ed.), *Gay masculinities* (pp. 1-11). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Peel, E. (2005) Effeminate 'fudge nudgers' and tomboyish 'lettuce lickens': Language and the construction of sexualities in diversity training. *Psychology of Women Section Review*, 7(2), 22-34.

Rothblum, E. D. (1994) Lesbians and physical appearance: Which model applies? In B. Greene & G. M. Herek (Eds), *Lesbian and gay psychology: Theory, research and clinical applications* (pp. 84-97). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Skidmore, P. (1999) Dress to impress: Employer regulation of gay and lesbian appearance. *Social & Legal Studies*, 8(4), 509-29.

Taub, J. (2003) What should I wear? A qualitative look at the impact of feminism and women's communities on bisexual women's appearance. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 3(1), 10-22.