

**An exploration of bisexual, lesbian, and heterosexual women's body dissatisfaction,  
and body hair and cosmetics practices**

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**Abstract**

Body image pressures for heterosexual women are well established. However, lesbian body image is less well understood, while bisexual women have largely been overlooked with the psychological literature. Further, women's investment in 'traditional' appearance practices associated with femininity are underexplored. The current study explored differences between 472 heterosexual, lesbian, and bisexual women on measures of body satisfaction, body hair practices, and cosmetics use. While there were no significant differences between body satisfaction scores, lesbian and bisexual women had more positive attitudes to body hair, and were less likely to remove hair from particular parts of their bodies, than heterosexual women. Cosmetics use was highest among heterosexual women, significantly lower among bisexual women, and lowest among lesbians. We argue that these results highlight the importance of exploring the distinctiveness of bisexual, lesbian and heterosexual women's appearance concerns and appearance practices.

**Keywords:**

Appearance; Bisexuality; Body Image; LGBT+; Make-up; Sexuality;

## **Introduction**

Within psychology 'traditional' beauty practices remain underexplored (Labre, 2002) despite feminist scholars in particular identifying their importance (e.g., Bordo, 1993; Riley & Scharff, 2013). In contrast, body image research is well established, with body dissatisfaction associated with negative physical and psychological outcomes (Grogan, 2008). However, most appearance research has focused on heterosexual women, while less is understood about lesbians and in particular bisexual women (Chmielewski & Yost, 2013; Taub, 1999). The aim of the current study was to explore whether there were differences between heterosexual, lesbian and bisexual women's body satisfaction and body hair and cosmetic practices, as part of a wider project exploring bisexual women's appearance and visual identities (Hayfield, 2011; Hayfield et al., 2013).

### ***Sexuality and body image***

The body image pressures facing heterosexual women are thoroughly documented (Grogan, 2008). Whether lesbians are subject to the same pressures as heterosexual women is less clear and there are two opposing theories within the psychological literature. The first is that lesbians may be immune to body image pressures and therefore have lower body dissatisfaction than heterosexual women (Brown, 1987). This was proposed on the basis that lesbians have defied the heterosexual norm and may therefore be well positioned to also defy the dictates of how women 'should' look (Brown, 1987). It is also possible that lesbians do not experience the appearance pressures of a sexually objectifying 'male gaze' in the same way as heterosexual women, due to lack of concern with being attractive to men (Brown, 1987; Hill & Fischer, 2008; Rothblum, 1994; Share & Mintz, 2002). Further, it has been suggested that lesbian

communities may be spaces where there is less emphasis on 'traditional' appearance ideals and more acceptance of diversity in body shape and size than in mainstream culture (Brown, 1987; Hill & Fischer, 2008; Share & Mintz, 2002). The second theory, first proposed by Dworkin (1989), is that lesbians are subject to the same cultural socialisation processes as heterosexual women. Therefore, because societal scrutiny of women's bodies is so ubiquitous, lesbians and heterosexual women may be equally susceptible to appearance pressures and body image concerns.

The results of research on lesbian body image and dissatisfaction have produced mixed results. A meta-analysis highlighted that while some findings have indicated that lesbians are less dissatisfied with their bodies than heterosexual women, other studies have found that lesbians and heterosexual women have similar body image concerns (Morrison et al., 2004). This pattern has continued in more recent research, with some studies reporting that lesbians have lower body dissatisfaction scores than heterosexual women (e.g., Alvy, 2013; Polimeni et al., 2009), and others identifying no significant differences (e.g., Peplau et al., 2009; Wagenbach, 2004; Yean et al., 2013). Researchers have also highlighted that there may be appearance ideals which are specific to lesbians, such as an athletic body type (Beren et al., 1997; Leavy & Hastings, 2010). It would seem that lesbian body images are particularly complex, perhaps because both lesbian *and* mainstream cultures affect women's feelings about their bodies (Huxley et al., 2011; Myers et al., 1999).

Little is known about bisexual body image or body dissatisfaction (Alvy, 2013; Chmielewski & Yost, 2013; Davids & Green, 2011; Rothblum, 2002; Taub, 1999). In a review of the literature on sexuality and body image, Rothblum (2002) theorised that bisexual women may have their own set of appearance values, independent of lesbian or

heterosexual women. Alternatively, bisexual women may consistently feel less pressure than heterosexual women, but slightly more than lesbians (Rothblum, 2002). In light of some of the findings of existing research, it is also possible that bisexual, heterosexual, and lesbian women could have similar body dissatisfaction scores.

The lack of empirical research on bisexuality can be attributed to conceptual and methodological issues. The lack of focus specifically on bisexual women could be attributed to monosexism, where monosexual identities (e.g., lesbian, gay, and heterosexual) are privileged and taken to be the norm. Consequently, bisexuality is invalidated and therefore dismissed (Gonzalez et al., 2017). Researchers have sometimes merged data from lesbian and bisexual women (e.g., Austin et al., 2004; Wagenbach, 2004). The assumption that seemingly underpins the conflation of lesbian and bisexual women's data is that both groups will have the same (or very similar) body dissatisfaction scores (Davids & Green, 2011). This may reflect 'one drop' theories of sexuality, where *any* same-sex attraction or behaviour is understood to be evidence of 'homosexuality' (Zinik, 1985). It may also be informed by the dominance of binary models of sexuality, where homosexuality and heterosexuality are assumed to be the only valid identity positions (Clarke et al., 2012; McLean, 2008; Petford, 2003; Zinik, 1985). The result is that these studies overlook the possibility that lesbian and bisexual women's body dissatisfaction scores may differ (Davids & Green, 2011). Other authors have acknowledged that bisexual data may be distinct from lesbian data, but have omitted bisexual participants due to small numbers (e.g., Beren et al., 1996; Share & Mintz, 2002). It could be argued that this overlooking and omission of bisexual participants serves as an example of bisexual erasure, which has been linked to the invisibility and oppression of

bisexuality and bisexual people (e.g., Barker & Langdrige, 2008; Gonzalez et al., 2017; Yoshino, 2000).

However, some authors have identified the importance of analysing bisexual data separately. In one such Australian study, Polimeni et al. (2009) found no significant differences between lesbian and bisexual women's body image, but concluded that bisexual women had a higher risk of disordered eating behaviour, based on other measures of weight control practices. Davids & Green (2011) investigated body dissatisfaction and eating disorder symptoms in a US sample of bisexual, lesbian, gay and heterosexual participants. Based on hierarchical regression analyses their findings indicated that for bisexual women higher body mass index (BMI) may be associated with body dissatisfaction, whereas higher self-esteem could be associated with lower levels of body dissatisfaction. In a study focused on mental health, Koh & Ross (2006) identified a number of significant differences between lesbian and bisexual women. These included that bisexual women were more likely to have tried to lose weight, or have had an eating disorder, than lesbians or heterosexual women. Despite this, there were no significant differences between lesbians, bisexual women, or heterosexual women in self-perceptions of weight (Koh & Ross, 2006).

In qualitative research, a recent interview study focused specifically on bisexual women's body image (Chmielewski & Yost, 2013). The authors identified that while bisexual women had similar body image concerns to those of heterosexual women, they were also able to position themselves outside the thin ideal. They did so in a variety of ways, including focusing on other aspects of their bodies such as their physical abilities, or by resisting heteronormative ideals and embracing bodies of different shapes and sizes.

These bisexual women also faced unique challenges that reflected binary understandings of sexuality, and the authors reported that participants had to negotiate where they and their bodies fitted in a space in between 'feminine and masculine, heterosexual and lesbian' (p. 232). The authors concluded that biphobia, complex relationships with lesbian and heterosexual communities, and partner relationships, all contribute to bisexual women's experiences of their bodies (Chmielewski & Yost, 2013). Overall, there is a small but gradually increasing body of research which indicates that bisexual women have distinct experiences of their bodies and body image.

### ***Sexuality and 'traditional' beauty practices***

For women to remove body hair, particularly from eyebrows, legs, and underarms, is so socially normative that it is virtually an obligatory practice within western culture (e.g., Tiggeman & Hodgson, 2008). Body hair is a social norm that 'dictate[s] gender in narrowly prescribed ways', (Fahs, 2012:3), to the extent that for women to have visible body hair is to have 'bridged the boundaries between masculinity and femininity' (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003:335). It is perhaps not surprising then, that research has reported high percentages of body hair removal among women. For example, Toerien et al. (2005) found that 99.71 per cent of their sample of (mainly heterosexual) women in the UK had removed some body hair during their lives. Similarly, Tiggeman and Hodgson (2008) identified that 96 per cent of their Australian student sample (whose sexuality is not reported) regularly removed leg or underarm hair. Reasons cited for body hair removal have commonly included compliance with social norms and wanting to feel clean, feminine, and attractive to men (e.g., Tiggeman & Hodgson, 2008; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004). However, in one study, women who did *not* remove their body hair had

higher self-esteem scores, perhaps because women with lower self-esteem find their bodies less satisfactory and feel pressure to adhere to cultural expectations (Tiggeman & Kenyon, 1998). In another study, women with negative attitudes towards their body hair also reported higher levels of body disgust (Tiggeman & Lewis, 2004).

Women with body hair have been perceived by others as significantly more aggressive, and less sexually attractive, sociable, intelligent, or happy, than women without body hair (Basow & Braman, 1998). Accordingly, women with body hair have reported hostile responses from others, including homophobic and heterosexist reactions, evidencing cultural links between sexuality and body hair (Fahs, 2012). Some research findings indicate that lesbians (and perhaps bisexual) women are less likely to remove their body hair than heterosexual women (Basow, 1991; Labre, 2002). In one qualitative study bisexual women reduced hair removal (and cosmetics use) after coming out as bisexual (Taub, 1999), which indicates that some bisexual women may resist beauty practices, just as lesbians are theorised to do. These findings could suggest that some lesbian and bisexual women question patriarchal expectations around (feminine) appearance, perhaps due to being less invested than heterosexual women in being attractive to men. Little research has explored cosmetics and existing studies generally assume women are heterosexual. In older research, it was theorised that women used make-up to compensate for poor body image, because those who were dissatisfied with their bodies were more likely to value make-up and spend longer applying cosmetics (Cash & Cash, 1982). Cosmetics use has also been significantly associated with public self-consciousness, hence some women may wear cosmetics due to concerns with others' perceptions (Cash & Cash, 1982). More recently, researchers in France concluded that

women may either use make-up as a form of camouflage to decrease negative self-perceptions (which was linked to anxiety) or to promote a positive self-image (which was linked to extroversion and higher self-esteem scores) (Korichi et al., 2008).

Most research has focused on self and others' perceptions of make-up. Cash et al., (1989) reported that women were more satisfied with their own reflection when wearing make-up than when not. These participants also predicted that others would perceive them as more attractive with make-up, and indeed, men rated their photographs as significantly less attractive without make-up. Similarly, photographs of women wearing full facial make-up have been rated as most attractive, compared to women with no or partial make-up (Mulhern et al., 2003). Indeed, photographs and computer images of women wearing make-up have been perceived as more attractive, feminine or sexy than images of women without make-up (Cox & Glick, 1986; Jones & Kramer, 2016; Mileva et al., 2016; Russell, 2009; Workman & Johnson, 1991) and as healthier and more confident (Nash, et al., 2006). However, while students rated pictures of women wearing make-up as more attractive than women not wearing make-up, they were also more likely to attribute negative personality traits, such as vain, unfaithful, shallow and cold, to those wearing make-up (Huguet et al., 2004). Findings in this area have been contradictory. In one study, make-up was associated with *positive* personality traits such as modest, honest, intelligent, warm and friendly (Richetin et al., 2004). However, in earlier research, ratings of personality did not vary according to cosmetics use (Workman & Johnson, 1991). In some research, photographs of women wearing cosmetics have been associated with high-status professions (Nash et al., 2006; Richetin et al., 2004), while in another study, women *without* cosmetics were rated as more professionally capable, and as

having higher earning potential than those wearing make-up (Kyle & Mahler, 1996). This may depend on the job; women wearing make-up have been negatively evaluated for certain professional roles (e.g., secretary), but not for others (e.g., accountancy) (Cox & Glick, 1986). These apparent contradictions may, in part, be to do with how much make-up women wear; it could be that 'too much' make-up is linked with over-investment in appearance and associated with vanity and lack of authenticity (Huguet et al., 2004). It is clear that findings are mixed and limited to mainly experimental studies, often with student populations. However, it would seem that make-up does significantly affect how women are evaluated by others, and that those who wear less cosmetics are likely to be perceived differently from those who wear more.

Barely any research has focused specifically on sexuality and cosmetics. In US qualitative interviews with heterosexual and lesbian women, some of the heterosexual and all of the lesbian participants noted that there was 'a link between heterosexuality and makeup' (Dellinger & Williams, 1997:160-161). Lesbian participants who did not wear cosmetics reported that colleagues and managers suggested they ought to, while other lesbians reported that they specifically wore cosmetics to avoid potential comments and criticism from others, and to further their professional lives (Dellinger & Williams, 1997). Similarly, other researchers have identified that within particular professions such as teaching, it may be desirable to avoid drawing attention to sexuality, and that one way to do this is to adhere to the gendered rules of heterosexuality (see, Connell, 2012). However, if heterosexual women's investment in appearance is to please and attract men, theoretically lesbians, and possibly bisexual women, could be less invested in cosmetics (Dellinger & Williams, 1997; Taub, 1999).

### ***The relevance of feminism***

Feminism has links both with appearance and sexuality (see, Riley & Scharff, 2013; Rudman & Fairchild, 2007). Negative stereotypes of feminists include that they are unattractive, particularly to men (Hinds & Stacey, 2001; Rudman & Fairchild, 2007). This may be because second-wave feminists critiqued, and were often understood to reject, traditional beauty practices, hence feminism and femininity became seemingly incompatible (Riley & Scharff, 2013; Rudman & Fairchild, 2007). Feminists' rejection of dominant appearance standards has been explored as a protective factor in the development of body image concerns. Findings have been mixed with no firm conclusions reached (see, Murnen & Smolak's, 2009 meta-analysis). Similarly, some have found links between feminist beliefs and reduced body depilation (Basow, 1991), while others have found no significant differences (Tiggeman & Kenyon, 1998). However, the notion of the unattractive feminist who rejects traditional beauty practices may have been superseded by third-wave/post-feminism which embraces a 'new-found reconciliation between feminism and femininity'<sup>ii</sup> (Hinds & Stacey, 2001:153).

Overall, it is clear that women may feel under some pressure to adhere to gendered appearance norms. The extent of this pressure may in part relate to sexuality and feminist identity. Rejecting normative appearance practices is complex both in relation to individuals' experiences, and the evaluations of others. Yet, it is possible that rejecting these practices may have psychological benefits. In sum, within psychology there is minimal research on cosmetics and body hair, particularly in relation to sexuality. While there is some body image and dissatisfaction research with heterosexual and lesbian women, bisexual women have been largely overlooked. The current study addresses this

research gap. Based on existing evidence we hypothesize that heterosexual women will experience greater body dissatisfaction and engage in more depilation and cosmetics use than lesbian women. Comparisons involving bisexual women are exploratory as there is minimal research with this group.

## **Method**

### **Participants and recruitment**

All the authors identify as feminists. The first author identifies as bisexual, the second author as heterosexual, and the third as queer. These identifications informed the focus of the study and development of the questionnaire, as well as the types of recruitment strategies utilised and the interpretation of the data. A sample of 472 women (268 heterosexual; 119 lesbian; 85 bisexual) were recruited via purposive and snowball sampling (e.g., LGBT Pride; community magazines; social networks). Participants were 18-67 years ( $M_{age} = 33$ ), mainly white (93 per cent), educated to degree level or higher (82 per cent), employed (71 per cent), middle class (72 per cent), and able-bodied (94 per cent). The majority were in relationships (68 per cent) and had no children (78 per cent). Of the bisexual participants, 35 per cent were single, 36 per cent were in a relationship with a man, 13 per cent were in a relationship with a woman, and 14 per cent were in a relationship with more than one partner.

### **Measures**

***Feminism.*** The *Feminism and the Women's Movement Scale* (FWM) (Fassinger, 1994) measures attitudes towards feminism (e.g., *feminism has positively influenced*

*relationships between men and women*). The scale was reliable in this sample (Cronbach's alpha:  $\alpha = 0.70$ ).

**Body Satisfaction.** Two scales of the *Body-Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults* (BES) (Mendelson et al., 2001) were used: 'BE-appearance' (e.g., *I like what I see when I look in the mirror*) and 'BE-weight satisfaction' (e.g., *I am satisfied with my weight*). The scales are reliable and valid for an adult sample (Mendelson et al., 2001). There was good reliability for both appearance ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ) and weight ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ) subscales in this study.

**Body Hair.** The *Women and Body Hair Scale* (Basow & Braman, 1998) measures attitudes to body hair (e.g., *body hair on women is ugly*)<sup>iii</sup>. The reliability in this study was good ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ). The *Body Hair Alteration Scale* (BHAS) was developed specifically for this study to establish whether, and whereabouts on the body, women removed *or altered* their body and facial hair. This was following the recommendation of Toerien et al. (2005) who highlighted the importance of analysing hair removal and alteration practices by specific body location. Questions started with '*Do you remove (i.e. pluck, shave, wax etc.) and/or alter (i.e. remove some of, bleach, etc.)...*', then asked about armpits, legs, eyebrows, other facial hair and the bikini line. These questions were chosen based on the existing literature which indicates that it is from these parts of the body that hair is most commonly removed or altered (e.g., Toerien et al., 2005). This scale was reliable ( $\alpha = 0.79$ ).

**Cosmetics.** Women responded to a single-item question '*How often do you wear make-up?*' on a Likert scale ("1 = never to "7 = always").

## **Procedure**

Ethical approval was granted by the Faculty Ethics Committee at the University of the West of England (UWE). British Psychological Society (2014) and UWE ethical procedures were adhered to throughout the research. The questionnaire was available online where participants were presented with an information sheet before being asked to provide their informed consent, which was required for them to be able to progress to the questionnaire. All questions were presented in the same order to all participants. If participants completed the demographic questions and started the questionnaire, then their responses were considered to be meaningful and were therefore included in the analysis even if they did not complete the survey fully.

## Results

Kolmogorov-Smirnov / Mahalanobis tests indicated that the data was normally distributed. The means and standard deviations are shown in Table 1.

<<Insert Table 1 about here>>

There were no significant differences between the mean ages,  $F(2, 449)=2.44, p=0.09, \eta^2 = 0.01$ , or BMI scores,  $F(2, 449)=.93, p=0.39, \eta^2 < 0.01$ , of bisexual, lesbian and heterosexual women. However, levels of support for feminism differed significantly according to sexuality,  $F(2, 468)=11.16, p=0.00, p<0.001$ . Bonferroni post-hoc tests identified that bisexual women ( $p<.01$ ) and lesbians ( $p<.001$ ) scored significantly higher on support for feminism than heterosexual women. There was no significant difference in scores between bisexual and lesbian women ( $p>.05$ ). Subsequently where differences according to sexuality are found, additional analysis is run controlling for feminism to examine whether differences in feminism affected results.

### ***Body-satisfaction***

A MANOVA revealed that there were no significant differences between the body esteem subscales associated with sexuality,  $\lambda = 0.98$ ,  $F(4, 924)$ ,  $F = 1.40$ ,  $p = .23$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.01$ .

### ***Beauty practices***

A MANOVA with attitudes to body hair, overall body depilation, and cosmetics use as dependant variables revealed a significant main effect of sexuality  $\lambda = 0.81$ ,  $F(2, 443)$ ,  $F = 16.47$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.10$ . At univariate level there was a significant difference for attitudes to body hair,  $F(2, 443) = 18.72$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.08$ , body hair removal  $F(2, 443) = 14.60$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.06$ , and cosmetics use,  $F(2, 443) = 46.34$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.17$ . Post-hoc tests showed that lesbian and bisexual women reported more positive attitudes to body hair, and lower levels of body hair removal, than heterosexual women (all  $p$  values  $< .01$ ). Lesbian and bisexual women did not significantly differ on these variables. In contrast, lesbian women reported lower levels of cosmetics use than bisexual women ( $p = .02$ ), or heterosexual women ( $p < .001$ ). Additionally, bisexual women reported lower levels of cosmetics use than heterosexual women ( $p < .001$ ).

In order to examine whether differences in levels of support for feminism accounted for variations in appearance attitudes and practices according to sexuality, feminism was added as a covariate into the MANOVA model. There was a significant effect of feminism,  $\lambda = 0.90$ ,  $F(3, 407)$ ,  $F = 15.09$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.10$ . However, the main effect of sexuality was still significant at multivariate,  $\lambda = 0.85$ ,  $F(2, 409)$ ,  $F = 11.45$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.08$  and univariate levels.

In order to explore the body hair practices further, a second MANOVA was performed on individual body hair items. This analysis revealed a main effect of sexuality,  $s\lambda = 0.89$ ,  $F(2, 443)$ ,  $F = 5.18$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.06$ ). Significant differences were identified on body hair practices related to armpits ( $F(2, 443) = 9.53$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.04$ ), legs ( $F(2, 443) = 14.18$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.06$ ), and eyebrow hair ( $F(2, 443) = 19.20$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.080$ ). In each case heterosexual women reported significantly more body hair removal than lesbian and bisexual women (all  $p < .05$ ) but there were no significant differences in the extent to which lesbian and bisexual women removed body hair from these sites. There was a significant main effect of sexuality on bikini line hair removal,  $F(2, 443) = 4.67$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.02$ , in this case, lesbian women reported less hair removal than heterosexual women ( $p = .02$ ) but bisexual women did not significantly differ from lesbian or heterosexual women. There were no significant differences in the alteration of other facial hair  $F(2, 443) = 0.46$ ,  $p = .63$ ,  $\eta^2 < 0.01$ ).

When levels of support for feminism were controlled in this analysis, the main effect of sexuality was still significant at multivariate level,  $\lambda = 0.90$ ,  $F(2, 409)$ ,  $F = 4.64$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.05$  and univariate level, with the exception of bikini line hair which was no longer significantly associated with sexuality,  $F(2, 409) = 1.73$ ,  $p = .18$ ,  $\eta^2 < 0.01$ .

## **Discussion**

There were no significant differences between body-esteem scores of bisexual, lesbian, and heterosexual women. These findings resonate with Dworkin's (1989) theory that heterosexuals and lesbians may have similar body dissatisfaction, which has also been identified in some previous research (e.g., Morrison et al., 2004; Peplau et al., 2009). Critically, this study also contributes new knowledge regarding bisexual women, who in

this study had similar body dissatisfaction scores to those of both heterosexual and lesbian women. These findings fit well with research which has concluded that lesbians and heterosexuals are socialised within a patriarchal society, where because women's bodies are universally understood as sexual objects all women are objectified both by men and by other women (Hill & Fischer, 2008). Developing our knowledge and understanding of body dissatisfaction is important due to the links between body image and physical and psychological wellbeing (Grogan, 2008). More recently, some research has discussed the potential impact of social media on young women's body dissatisfaction (see, Andsager, 2014), and future researchers could further explore whether or how this differs according to sexuality. There is also minimal focus on bisexual men and analysing their data separately from gay men is also important (Davids & Green, 2011).

In this study, there were significant differences according to sexuality and beauty practices. Heterosexual women agreed significantly more than lesbian or bisexual women with statements which described body hair as disgusting, uncomfortable, unfeminine and unattractive. Lesbian and bisexual women had more positive attitudes to body hair and lower scores on body hair removal from their underarms, legs, and eyebrows, compared to heterosexual women. This evidences the importance of analysing specific parts of the body when exploring hair removal practices (Toerien et al., 2005). Bisexual and lesbian women reported that they engaged in less body hair removal, hence they were seemingly less focused on maintaining the hairlessness norm than heterosexual women (Basow, 1991; Fahs, 2012; Taub, 1999). There were few significant differences between lesbian and bisexual women on body hair removal. If the differences between heterosexual and

lesbian and bisexual participants were due to concern with attractiveness to men, it would be expected that bisexual women's scores would differ from lesbians' scores. That lesbian and bisexual women's scores did not significantly differ therefore indicates that both groups refrain from removing body hair for reasons other than attractiveness to men (Tiggeman & Kenyon, 1998; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003). Heterosexual women's attitudes to body hair indicate that negative connotations of body hair are upheld among these women. In turn, this suggests that lesbians and bisexual women may be subject to hostile responses to their body hair, but are perhaps prepared to dismiss such responses (Basow & Braman, 1998; Fahs, 2012; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003). Future research should explore the strategies and investments that allow bisexual and lesbian women to resist dominant pressures around culturally endorsed body modification. There were no significant differences between participants for facial hair. This could be due to floor effects as mean facial hair scores lay at the midpoint and suggested that most of these women only 'sometimes' or 'rarely' removed or altered facial hair.

Heterosexual women were most likely to wear cosmetics, lesbian women the least, and bisexual women in between. This offers some support for previous findings that make-up is closely linked with heterosexuality (Dellinger & Williams, 1997). There could be implications for bisexual and lesbian women who wear make-up less frequently than heterosexual women. These include that when not wearing make-up they may be evaluated by others as less attractive than women wearing make-up (e.g., Mileva et al., 2016; Russell, 2009; Workman & Johnson, 1991). However, it is less clear how lesbian and bisexual women who wear make-up infrequently will be evaluated by others in terms of their personality or professional status, due to the contradictory findings of previous

research (e.g., Huguet et al., 2004; Kyle & Mahler, 1996; Nash et al., 2006; Richetin et al., 2004). Further, the single scale item used in this study was insufficient to capture the nuances of make-up use. Little research captures the ways in which women's make-up use may vary according to the time of day, or the occasion for which they are wearing make-up, nor how individual women's make-up styles may vary, and this could be an area that future research explores further.

Finally, overall, these results indicate that lesbian and bisexual women are more likely to identify as feminists. However, feminism had relatively little impact on the results (with the exception of bikini line hair removal). This suggests that differences are driven more by sexuality than by feminist identity, or that those who identify as feminists do not necessarily reject traditional appearance norms in the ways they once did (Hinds & Stacey, 2001; Riley & Scharff, 2013).

These novel findings make a unique contribution to the literature and demonstrate that some differences do exist between lesbian and bisexual women's. This is particularly important because it provides further evidence of the necessity of focusing specifically on bisexual women and analysing their data separately from that of lesbian or heterosexual participants (Davids & Green, 2011; Koh & Ross, 2006; Polimeni, 2009). One limitation of this study was that the sample sizes were too small to analyse results according to bisexual women's relationship status. This is important, because bisexual women's beauty practices, body image and body satisfaction may change depending on whether they are in 'different-sex' or 'same-sex' relationships, or both (Chmielewski & Yost, 2013; Huxley et al., 2011; Taub, 1999). Future researchers could also include those who identify with other plurisexual identities, such as pansexual and queer, to provide further insight

into the complex relationships between sexuality and body image. Further, previous studies have identified both similarities and differences in body dissatisfaction between cisgender and trans participants, hence trans and non-binary body image is a particularly important area of further exploration (see, Jones et al., 2016).

This study had a large sample size with a diverse age range. Purposive sampling techniques aimed to meaningfully include lesbian and bisexual women. This aim was met with 57 per cent heterosexual, 25 per cent lesbian, and 18 per cent bisexual participants, although we note that these ratios may not reflect the general population. However White, middle class, well-educated women were overrepresented in this study, hence our participants were to some extent 'the usual suspects' of psychology research (Braun & Clarke, 2013:58). This limits the results and has implications in terms of the generalisability of the findings. For example, a meta-analytic review reports that while in some studies Black women were found to be less dissatisfied with their bodies than White women, in other studies there were no significant differences (see, Roberts et al., 2006). Some research has also found that other racial and ethnic groups have differing levels of body dissatisfaction (e.g., Bucchianeri et al., 2016). These findings evidence that race and ethnicity are an important factor to consider in developing our understanding of body image. Similarly, while little explored, the relationships between body dissatisfaction, age, education and social class, may all be similarly complex (e.g., Grogan, 2008; McLaren & Kuh, 2004). Therefore, it is important that future researchers focus not only on separating out bisexual participant's data from lesbian and heterosexual women's, but on addressing other aspects of identity and how these may intersect in complex ways (Tylka & Calogero, 2011).

## Conclusions

The current study aimed to explore whether there were differences in body-esteem and beauty practices according to sexuality. There were no differences between the three sexuality groups in body-esteem, but there were differences in body hair (attitudes and practices) and cosmetics use. Bisexual women's body hair attitudes and practices were similar to lesbians, but they fell between heterosexual and lesbian women in cosmetics use, even when feminism was accounted for. This demonstrates that bisexual women should be acknowledged as a category distinct from lesbian or heterosexual women (Chmielewski & Yost, 2013; Davids & Green, 2011; Polimeni et al., 2009). Therefore, to combine the results of lesbian and bisexual women in research is to overlook the distinctiveness of bisexual women and potentially bias lesbian data. Future researchers could fill knowledge gaps by purposively recruiting enough participants to be meaningfully inclusive of bisexual men and women and exploring bisexuality in more depth (Davids & Green, 2011). These findings make a valuable contribution to the literature and future research can build upon this work to further explore how participants of different genders and sexualities understand and manage their appearance, and what impact this has on their wellbeing.

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**Table 1.** Means and standard deviations for each variable among heterosexual, lesbian and bisexual women.

	Sexual identity		
	Heterosexual <i>M (SD)</i>	Lesbian <i>M (SD)</i>	Bisexual <i>M (SD)</i>
Age	32.25 (10.14)	34.77 (10.43)	32.74 (9.96)
BMI	24.71 (5.22)	25.30 (5.90)	25.52 (5.52)
Feminism	3.48 (.43) <sup>ab</sup>	3.66 (.52) <sup>a</sup>	3.68 (.55) <sup>b</sup>
Body esteem: appearance	3.26 (.79)	3.36 (.69)	3.14 (.74)
Body esteem: weight	2.98 (.94)	3.11 (.92)	2.81 (.92)
Body hair attitudes	3.19 (.80) <sup>ab</sup>	3.65 (.88) <sup>a</sup>	3.69 (.78) <sup>b</sup>
Body hair alteration	3.67 (.92) <sup>ab</sup>	3.12 (1.11) <sup>a</sup>	3.25 (.86) <sup>b</sup>
Armpits	4.33 (1.01) <sup>ab</sup>	3.81 (1.37) <sup>a</sup>	3.98 (.99) <sup>b</sup>
Legs	4.11 (.99) <sup>ab</sup>	3.54 (1.37) <sup>a</sup>	3.52 (1.14) <sup>b</sup>
Eyebrows	3.77 (1.34) <sup>ab</sup>	2.84 (1.61) <sup>a</sup>	3.12 (1.37) <sup>b</sup>
Other facial hair	2.63 (1.59)	2.46 (1.55)	2.59 (1.59)
Bikini line	3.42 (1.26) <sup>a</sup>	3.00 (1.52) <sup>b</sup>	3.06 (1.20)
Make-up	4.84 (1.87) <sup>a</sup>	2.88 (1.95) <sup>a</sup>	3.63 (1.70) <sup>a</sup>

*Note.* Groups sharing the same superscript differ significantly

<sup>i</sup> In Basow's study, women were asked to rate their sexuality on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'exclusively heterosexual' (63 per cent) to 'exclusively lesbian' (12 per cent). Due to small numbers in the middle of the range (12 per cent 'primarily heterosexual', 6 per cent 'bisexual' and 8 per cent 'primarily lesbian'), Basow merged these groups to form one 'larger bisexual group' (1991:92). In doing so, some of the women's sexual identities have been (possibly inaccurately) defined for them, hence results should be interpreted cautiously.

<sup>ii</sup> Also see Riley & Scharff (2013) for an overview of critical feminist readings of post-feminism and contemporary beauty practices.

<sup>iii</sup> In the *Women and Body Hair Scale* (Basow & Braman, 1998) the item 'Women need to remove body hair in order to appeal to men' was altered so that the word 'partner' replaced 'men'.