

Visible Lesbians and Invisible Bisexuals:

Appearance and Visual Identities among Bisexual Women

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Abstract

A number of feminist scholars have argued that dress and appearance can be used to critique the dominant culture and explore alternative subjectivities. Research on non-heterosexual visual identities has explored the role that appearance and clothing practices can play in the construction of individual identities and collective communities. However, bisexual women are largely invisible in these discussions. The minimal existing research suggests that bisexual women are unable to communicate their sexuality through their clothing and appearance. This study explored how bisexual women manage their bodies and appearance in relation to their bisexuality. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 20 self-identified bisexual women and the data were analysed using thematic analysis. The participants reported particular visual aesthetics associated with an embodied lesbian identity; however, they reported no visual image of bisexual women. Nonetheless, despite their lack of access to a distinct visual identity, the women negotiated ways in which to incorporate their bisexual identity into their dress and appearance, and considered their bisexuality an important aspect of their identity, which they would like to be recognised and acknowledged.

Key words: Appearance; Bisexuality; Identity; Interviews; Thematic Analysis; Visual Identity

Introduction

Dress and appearance has traditionally often been dismissed as existing only to sustain women's amusement and as a topic not to be taken seriously (Blood, 2005; Bordo, 1993). Accordingly, research on appearance has often been marginalised as frivolous and unworthy of academic scholarship (Entwistle, 2000; Tseelon, 2001). However, more recently, scholars have argued that fashion can be used to critique the dominant culture by resisting mainstream norms (for example, of femininity) and exploring alternative subjectivities (Frith, 2003; Gleeson & Frith, 2003; Riley & Cahill, 2005). Feminist fashion theorists have also highlighted how dress and appearance has played an important part in articulating sexual desires and identities, particularly those associated with marginal sexualities that would otherwise be invisible, and in producing sexuality as an important aspect of identity (Entwistle, 2000; Wilson, 2003).

A number of scholars have documented how lesbians have made use of the semiotic codes woven into clothing and adornment to articulate their identities and desires to the wider world (or just to those 'in the know'), to resist heteronormative constructions of sexuality and gender, to pass as heterosexual, to create communities, and to produce the clothed body as a site of political action and resistance (Clarke & Turner, 2007; Eves, 2004; *Authors*, 2012; Rothblum, 1994). However, bisexual women have been largely overlooked in research on non-heterosexualities and dress and appearance, and therefore little is known about the role of visual identities in the construction of bisexual women's wider personal and social identities and communities (Clarke & Turner, 2007; Holliday, 1999; Taub, 1999).

The function of lesbian visual identities

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The term 'visual identity' is used in this paper to refer to the expression of personal, social, and cultural identities through dress and appearance. Identity can be worn upon the body so that appearance becomes 'a kind of visual metaphor for identity' (Davis, 1992:25), a 'significant marker' (Gleeson & Frith, 2004:104) of our wider identities (Gleeson & Frith, 2003). Through the construction of visual identity others are able to 'read' our appearance and interpret their understandings of what it indicates about our wider identities (Boulton & Jerrard, 2000; Frith & Gleeson, 2003; Gleeson & Frith, 2003). Therefore, visual identity is both an integral part of wider identity, and a tool of non-verbal communication through which social class, gender, race and ethnicity, age, consumption practices, cultural preferences, political beliefs, and sexuality can be conveyed and interpreted (Boulton & Jerrard, 2000; Entwistle, 2000; Freitas, Kaiser, Chandler, Hall, Kim, & Hammidi, 1997; Frith & Gleeson, 2003; Johnson, Schofield & Yurchisin, 2002; Johnson, Yoo, Kim & Lennon, 2008).

Most research on non-heterosexual visual identities has focused on lesbian women.

Unsurprisingly, given the historical association of lesbianism and masculinity (Faderman, 1991) the most commonly recognised aesthetic image of lesbians both within and outside lesbian communities is 'butch' (Maltry & Tucker, 2002; Taylor, 2007). A butch style encompasses short hair, minimal make-up, 'masculine' clothing, 'sensible' or 'comfortable' shoes, and particular styles of jewellery, tattoos, and piercings (Clarke & Spence, 2013; Clarke & Turner, 2007; Esterberg, 1996; Rothblum, 1994; 2010). Perhaps less well documented or recognisable are the '(hyper)feminine' lesbian visual identities such as 'femme' and 'lipstick lesbians' who may dress and appear in ways that are more closely associated with signifiers of femininity such as having long hair and wearing dresses, make-up and high heels (see, Hemmings, 1999; Levitt & Horne, 2002; Levitt & Hiestand, 2005;

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Maltry & Tucker, 2002, for discussions of 'feminine' lesbian identities and the ways in which they are understood to differ from heterosexual femininities). Further, lesbian looks are nuanced and ever-changing rather than monolithic (Clarke & Spence, 2013) and lesbian appearance can be subtly communicated through both *what* is worn and *how* it is worn (Clarke & Turner, 2007; Kaiser, 1998). Therefore some appearance norms and aesthetics including femme identities and, for example, ever changing brands or ways of wearing accessories such as belts and jewellery, allow lesbians to identify each other 'without being identifiable by the dominant culture' (Rothblum, 1994:92).

Research shows that when lesbians first 'come out' they often alter their appearance to achieve a lesbian aesthetic, which can enable pride in their sexuality, disavowal from the (gendered) dress codes of (heteronormative) mainstream society, and expression of (a non-heterosexual) self (Clarke & Turner, 2007; Eves, 2004; Levitt & Hiestand, 2005; Maltry & Tucker, 2002). The communication of lesbian sexuality through appearance can serve as a way to reject the gaze of heterosexual men and attract the gaze of non-heterosexual women (*Authors*, 2012; Luzzatto & Gvion, 2004; Rifkin, 2002). Further, because appearance norms can enable lesbians to identify each other, shared appearance has aided in the creation of communities, which have historically provided a safe haven away from homophobic or voyeuristic individuals (Eves, 2004; Krakauer & Rose, 2002). It is within these shared spaces that lesbian aesthetics may be most apparent, partly because appearance can serve as a 'membership pass' that indicates who belongs (Ciasullo, 2001; Luzzatto & Gvion, 2004). For this reason 'correct' dress becomes a mandatory requirement; a uniform or regime of shared space (Hutson, 2010). Some lesbians can feel pressured, constrained, or frustrated by the pressure to adhere to particular lesbian looks. If their appearance does not

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'fit' women can struggle to feel that they belong and may even have their authenticity questioned (Ciasullo, 2001; Levitt & Hiestand, 2005), for example, through unwanted comments, disapproving looks, or simply by being ignored (e.g., Clarke & Turner, 2007). Lesbians (in particular femme/feminine lesbians) who can 'pass' as heterosexual, deliberately or otherwise, may find that it is advantageous to do so (Maltry & Tucker, 2002; Rothblum, 1994). However they risk criticism from other lesbians for adhering to heterosexual norms or for being 'closeted' (Winn & Nutt, 2001). Lesbians who do make clear their sexuality through how they dress and appear risk rejection from wider mainstream culture; as a result visibility becomes vulnerability, because it can lead to societal disapproval, discrimination, and homophobic violence or attacks, which butch lesbians are more likely to be at risk of (e.g., Krakauer & Rose, 2002; Eves, 2004).

Bisexual visual identities

Only a handful of studies have explored bisexual women's appearance and clothing practices. Of these, some have included a small number of bisexual participants as part of wider research on non-heterosexual visual identities (Clarke & Spence, 2013; Clarke & Turner, 2007; Esterberg, 1996; Holliday, 1999; Huxley, Clarke & Halliwell, 2011; Rothblum, 2010). Some studies have found that although bisexual participants can identify lesbian appearance norms there are a lack of distinct appearance norms associated with bisexuality (Clarke & Spence, 2013; Clarke & Turner, 2007; Holliday, 1999). Bisexual women who participated in Huxley et al.'s (2011) research appeared to be concerned with being 'attractive' to men (particularly if in a relationship with a man) which meant being 'sexy' and 'feminine', often through engaging in traditional beauty practices. In Rothblum's (2010) exploration of butch and femme identities, lesbian participants described bisexual women

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as femme in appearance, whereas the bisexual women considered themselves to be either (or neither) butch or femme, or a 'little of both'. Thus some bisexual women may incorporate elements of both heterosexual femininities and lesbian masculinities into their appearance.

The only study to date to focus specifically on bisexual women's experience reported that some of the participants in relationships with men stated that they dressed as (what they perceived as) 'heterosexual' when partnered with a man (Taub, 1999). This was understood to involve body hair removal and making an effort to be 'pretty' and 'sexy' to maintain a 'traditional' version of femininity, because they 'felt more pressure to conform to heterosexual beauty standards' than the bisexual women in relationships with women (Taub, 1999:32-33). One participant also spoke about looking more traditionally feminine when she was in a relationship with a butch lesbian. This indicates that some bisexual women may change their visual aesthetic according to the gender of their current partner. However, some of the women who were in relationships with men had, by contrast, adopted a 'lesbian' aesthetic (through short hair and 'androgynous' clothing) either to 'prove' their non-heterosexuality, or because they were less concerned with men's assessment of their appearance. Further, some participants felt that their appearance was *unaffected* by the gender of their current partner, but had presented themselves as more androgynous or butch when they 'came out' as bisexual in order to 'fit in' with a lesbian aesthetic.

These findings indicate that bisexual women as a group may lack a distinct shared aesthetic and that instead their appearance is constructed in relation to both lesbian appearance norms and heterosexual femininities. While over the last twenty years there has been an

increasing body of research and theory discussing bisexual women's identities (e.g., Barker & Langdrige, 2008; Barker, Bowes-Catton, Iantaffi, Cassidy & Brewer, 2008; Barker & Yockney, 2004; Diamond, 2000; 2003; Morgan & Thompson, 2007; Rust, 1992; Thompson, 2007; Thompson & Morgan, 2008; Weinrich, 2002) , there remain only a handful of studies that consider bisexual women's *visual* identities and within the minimal existing papers in this area there have been numerous calls for further research on this specific topic (Clarke & Turner, 2007; Myers, Taub, Morris & Rothblum, 1999; Taub, 1999). The aim of the current study was to explore and give voice to bisexual women's perspectives and experiences of (bisexual) appearance and lived (visual) identities, to help understand whether appearance and clothing play a role in the construction of bisexual women's identities and communities. This is an important and interesting area to explore because so little is known about how bisexual women experience their appearance or what function it does (or does not) serve as part of their bisexual identity.

Method

A convenience sample of 20 self-identified British bisexual women volunteered to participate in face-to-face semi-structured interviewsⁱ as part of a wider programme of mixed-methods research exploring bisexual women's visual identities (*Author*, 2011; *Author*, 2013).

Recruitment

Bisexual women are a 'hidden population' (Hartman, 2011) and therefore a range of strategies commonly employed within lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) research were utilised (Fish, 1999; Rothblum, 2007) in order to recruit these UK participants.

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Six participants took part through friendship (three) and snowball sampling (three) via the first author's personal and professional networks. Seven responded to a call for participants placed in a local quarterly magazine, and seven were recruited through an advert placed in a UK bisexual bimonthly magazine (*Bi Community News*) and flyers distributed at Bicon (see, Barker et al., 2008, for information on these bisexual communities and the demographic of those who attend them). The adverts were headed with the words 'Are you a Bisexual Woman?' and invited participants to contact the first author via mail, email or telephone if they were potentially willing to participate in a confidential interview about their appearance, and to receive a no obligation information sheet (see below).

Procedures

Ethical approval for the study was granted by (*university department*) ethics committee and ethical guidelines were adhered to throughout. Through the recruitment strategies outlined above, potential participants were emailed an information sheet which included details of the study. The information sheet advised participants that the first author identified as bisexual (although those recruited through friendship networks, snowballing and the bisexual community were likely to already be aware of this) because it has been suggested that shared sexuality can encourage participation. It has also been argued that researchers who hold the same identity positions as those of their participants are more likely (through their 'insider' position) to ask pertinent questions, understand the perspectives of participants, and be trusted to portray participants' lives, all of which hold the potential to produce deeper and more 'meaningful' data (see, LaSala, 2003 for a discussion of the potential benefits and challenges of insider research). Participants also provided informed consent and completed a short demographic questionnaire. Interviews were conducted by

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the first author at a location most convenient to participants. This most often meant that these women invited the researcher to visit their homes for the purpose of the interviews, which lasted from 43 minutes to 2½ hours (mean = 92 minutes). Participants chose their own pseudonyms, which are used when reporting the results.

Participants

As noted above, bisexual women are a hidden population and engaging women to participate was a challenging task. Despite attempts to recruit in a variety of ways the participants were ‘the usual suspects’ (Braun & Clarke, 2013:77) of research in that most of the women were white, middle class, able-bodied and well-educated and aged between 19 and 53 with a mean of 33. A detailed summary of the key demographic information is shown in Table 1.

Participants were also asked about their involvement with LGBT and/or bisexual communities. Responses included bisexual community events such as BiCon (see, Barker et al., 2008) and BiFest (7 participants), and/or wider LGBT associations such as friendships, social groups, work related societies (10 participants), and the commercial LGBT ‘scene’ (5 participants). Two women reported no association with any communities. The participants were not specifically asked which identity labels they had used in the past; however, some made reference to having previously identified as ‘lesbian’.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Interviews

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The interview schedule was developed based the first author's knowledge and experience and on previous literature, then read and reviewed by the second author and by peers. It included, for example, questions about whether/how participants managed their appearance (e.g. clothing, tattoos and piercings, specific grooming practices such as hair styling, make-up, and body hair removal) in relation to their bisexuality (e.g. *do you think your appearance is influenced by your being bisexual / do you try and look bisexual?*). They were also asked if they could recognise sexuality through appearance and whether a 'bisexual look' existed (e.g. *do you think it's possible to read other people's sexuality through their appearance? do you think that there is such a thing as a bisexual look?*). The women were asked if their appearance changed when they first identified as bisexual (e.g. *do you remember making any changes to your appearance around the time you identified as bisexual/ when you were coming out?*) whether their friendships and relationships influenced their appearance (e.g. *do friends influence how you look / do you think your appearance is influenced by your partner / have you changed how you've looked according to the gender of your partner?*) and about their participation and appearance practices within bisexual and wider LGBT communities depending on each participant's community involvement (e.g. *does your dress change according to where you are going out on 'the scene' / attending bisexual community events?*). Semi-structured interviews permitted participants to raise other issues that were relevant to them, which is of particular importance when researching a marginalised group and seeking to 'give voice' to that group, while ensuring that the main areas of interest were explored with each participant (Willig, 2008).

Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim (Willing, 2008). Thematic analysis was chosen as the most appropriate analytic method to fit the aim of providing a rich analysis that mapped the overall data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Analysis was based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines and was undertaken within a social constructionist framework (Burr, 2003). An inductive approach was chosen, where analysis begins with the data rather than being based on pre-existing theory, as is appropriate when there is little existing research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Analysis focused on representing the women's experiences, and gaining a deeper and more nuanced understanding of *their* perspectives, hence semantic themes that are able to represent the women's voices are presented here (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The first author became intimately familiar with the data during interviews, reflections, field notes, and transcription. Interviews were read and re-read by the first two authors and notes made on margins and elsewhere (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data was coded line-by-line (e.g., every line of data was coded) and initial codes were collated into multiple Microsoft Word documents. As broad patterns became apparent both within, and across, the data codes were developed into six themes. A number of thematic maps were used to assist and assess these distinct but interlinked themes, and analysis was an on-going iterative process that moved backwards and forwards between the data and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the final stages analysis was reviewed by the authors and themes were defined, named, and reviewed further. Data extracts have been edited (e.g., unnecessary detail has been removed) to aid readability and comprehension.

Results and Discussion

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Three themes related to appearance and are reported here: *Visible Lesbians*, *Invisible Bisexuals* and *(In)Distinctly Bisexual*. The other three themes related to 'biphobia' and therefore are reported elsewhere (Author, 2011).

Visible Lesbians

The participants described a 'lesbian look', which was understood as a way for lesbians to express their identity and differentiate themselves from 'other women' (Entwistle, 2000; Esterberg, 1996). There was some mention of 'femme/feminine' lesbians (Krakauer & Rose, 2002; Rothblum, 2010), but the most predominant and frequently reported image was of 'butch' 'masculine' or 'manly' lesbians (Eves, 2004; Levitt & Hiestand, 2005). A lesbian was recognisable ("stood out a mile") when she was 'more like a man' (Amy) and had 'the really manly kind of look' (Blue). The women portrayed lesbians as masculine through a lack of engagement with traditional practices of femininity, such as wearing particular (feminine) clothes, having longer and more heavily styled hair, wearing make-up and removing body hair (Krakauer & Rose, 2002). Millie mentioned 'the slightly suspicious possible masculine haircut', which she felt 'brings us to the area of body hair. Lesbians are perceived as being more hairy, or not quite so keen on having a shave' (see, Basow, 1991; Krakauer & Rose, 2002). Gemma had 'never *quite* understood the sort of lesbian look because I've always thought, "why try and ... defeminise?"' (Gemma). Gemma's use of the word 'defeminise' suggest that lesbians actively *reject* traditionally feminine practices rather than a masculine look being an expression of an essential butch identity (Eves, 2004).

Alex stated that men were surprised to find out that she was in a relationship with a woman because 'they think "oh, but she doesn't conform to my stereotype of a butch lesbian [...] I

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thought lesbians were all ugly and hairy and horrible but she's not". This shows how butch lesbians are positioned as not succeeding at being women, seemingly unattractive through their 'failure' to comply with (heteronormative and 'feminine') conventions of beauty and appearance (Krakauer & Rose, 2002). Matilda noticed some:

'attractive' women in a gay club: 'I remember saying to my cousin, "they *can't* be lesbians" (*laughter*). I mean they all looked like supermodels. And then afterwards I thought "that's such a ridiculous thing to say and why did I think that that was the case".

That Matilda was able to draw on identity 'stereotypes' for lesbians, despite not regularly attending LGB communities, indicates the broad visibility of lesbian looks and looking (Peel, 2005). Berni and Blue socialised on 'the scene' and were able to provide nuanced and different 'types' of lesbian looks which echoed those identified in lesbian popular culture (e.g., Phineas, 2008) and in academic research on lesbian appearance (Clarke & Spence, 2013; Clarke & Turner, 2007). Berni discussed 'bulls' (bull-dykes), and 'baby dykes' whereas Blue mentioned the 'stone dyke' and 'the trendy androgynous dyke'. These specific terms represent a variety of 'different expressions of lesbian female masculinity' (Nguyen, 2008:666) and the women's use of them demonstrates both that multiple lesbian looks continue to exist and that these women could recognise them (Clarke & Turner, 2007; Winn & Nutt, 2001).

Lesbian looks not only encompassed the *adorned* body but were also written *on* the body. The most evocative examples of embodied lesbian identity were provided by women who had previously identified as lesbians and/or socialised in LGBT communities. Marie

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discussed how a particular lesbian acquaintance 'made it very obvious, even in the way she'd stand, and the way she walked, so it was like almost a *swagger* which I found quite common with a lot of lesbians'. Emily described 'the confident, butch lesbian and that's how they walk and do their *swagger*'. A 'lesbian walk' or '*swagger*' conjures a confident assertion of lesbian identity, a way in which lesbians can recognise each other (Esterberg, 1996).

'*Swagger*' is a term associated with masculinity (Johnson, Gill, Reichman & Tassinari, 2007); hence there were strong links between lesbian *bodies* and masculinity, just as with lesbian *dress* and masculinity.

Another way in which lesbian identities were perceived as embodied (by a few of the women) was through 'attitude'. Alex described lesbian appearance as 'Jeans, Doc Martens, no make-up, short hair ... pretty angry (*laughs*)'. When Adele was asked how she would spot a lesbian she said: 'One of the big things is the attitude. Really. Just 'don't mess with me' kind of attitude (*laughs*). And that's before I've spotted the short hair'. However, when Elizabeth (who previously identified as a lesbian) was asked how she would recognise a lesbian she stated that these notions were not necessarily accurate:

You have to look really miserable for a start (*laughter*) [...] you've gotta have this atmosphere of "don't come anywhere *near* me or I'm gonna beat you up". This is stereotypical because none of my friends are like this at all, but if I saw someone in the street and I was to go "oh they're gay" these are the reasons why. So yeah, normally short hair, piercings, [...] and the attitude that tells me [...] I find there is an attitude to people, I can tend to tell whether they're gay or not just by how they are. I can't tell from a picture but I can tell from talking to somebody.

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It was clear that appearance *alone* is not enough to mark a woman as a lesbian and that an active and embodied identity also plays a part (Ambady, Hallahan & Conner, 1999).

Accordingly participants often discussed lesbian identity in such a way that appearance (outer self) appeared to be conceived of as an authentic representation of identity (inner self). This has been referred to as 'vertical representation', where appearance is understood to be a projection of the 'true' self (Riley & Cahill, 2005:263; also see, Clarke & Spence, 2013). Alex, Adele and Elizabeth all laughed when talking about this topic, which may signal its riskiness and indicate their awareness that they could be heard as offensive or 'speaking out of turn' because they are outsiders to the category 'lesbian'. In their discussions of lesbian looks the women created a picture of lesbian identity being visible both on, and through the body, with the combination of the correct wardrobe, the right haircut, and embodiment of sexuality, which creates an authentic (Hutson, 2010; Clarke & Spence, 2013) and recognisable lesbian (Esterberg, 1996).

Invisible Bisexuals

Whereas lesbian *visual* identity was positioned as an integral part of a *wider* lesbian identity, by contrast these bisexual women could not describe a distinct bisexual visual identity. Even when asked directly, participants struggled to talk about bisexual looks, and all of them stated that bisexual women are not recognisable from their appearance. This suggests that a bisexual look *cannot* be talked about because it does not exist:

I don't *know* many people who are bisexual so ... I can't build up an image in my head of bisexuality. [...] there's very few people who are out there as bisexual (Roxy).

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I've never even thought about "oh bisexual look" because the way I've always done it is "gay going out on the scene, straight going out with David" (*laughs*) as opposed to "bisexual" (Elizabeth).

Roxy attributed the lack of visual image of bisexuality to wider bisexual invisibility and Elizabeth indicated that neither a bisexual look nor a meaningful bisexual identity exists. These quotations arguably reflect binary and monosexist models of sexuality (Clarke & Peel, 2007; Hemmings, 2002), which demarcate heterosexuality and homosexuality as the only valid identity positions (Bowes-Catton, 2007; Fahs, 2009; McLean, 2008). When asked about the possibility of recognising other bisexual women and bisexual looks, many of the women responded by speaking about lesbian appearance. This emphasised the existence of lesbian looks and indicated the significance of visual identity in marking out sexuality, because these women acknowledged that they did evaluate other women's sexuality based on their appearance (Wollery, 2007):

I think I always forget that people might be bi (*laughs*) [...] I do still think "oh that person, they look a bit like a lesbian". And then I might come back from that and think "ooh they might be bisexual" but it's not a sort of instinctive "a ha! You have that look" (Eddy).

Because bisexuality was understood as invisible and unrecognisable on the body, communication of bisexuality ('coming out') required explicit verbal statements rather than the subtler appearance cues that lesbians are able to share (Krakauer & Rose, 2002; Winn & Nutt, 2001):

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I think more than anything it'll come up in *how* I talk, or what I talk about, more likely than through my image (Lucy).

If you want to be visible as a bisexual it's usually a verbal thing, you have to do the declaration of coming out, rather than the more subtle communications [...] I'm extraordinarily resistant to noticing (*laughs*) that other people are bi [...] and it's not until somebody actually hits me round the head with a large stick that I realise that people are bi ... I don't know if you'd call that invisible or just cluelessness (Eddy).

Unlike Eddy, we interpret the women's inability to recognise other bisexual women not as 'cluelessness' (a lack of sub-cultural capital, Thornton, 1997), but as a reflection of their lack of visual identity, which renders them literally invisible *as* bisexual women. Another way in which sexuality is revealed is through assumptions based on partners' gender (Barker & Yockney, 2004). These women were aware that by talking about or being seen with a partner, they were assumed by others to be heterosexual, or lesbian, but never bisexual:

I don't go round saying "hello my name's Betty, I'm bisexual". You just don't do that. So the natural way to come out is to say, "oh I've got a partner, *she's* so and so". And people do assume that you're lesbian [...] so then you have almost a second coming out to say "oh no, actually, I'm bi and not lesbian" (Betty).

Betty may not expect to be read as bisexual, but it was clearly important to her that people were aware of her sexuality. Lesbians can 'play the pronoun game', a term which refers to the concealing of partner gender by avoiding gender pronouns and instead using terms such as 'they' and 'my partner' (Plummer, 2010). However, heterosexual women (be they aware of it or not) and lesbians who wish to 'come out' can use pronouns to *reveal* their sexuality,

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something which monogamous bisexual women cannot do. Claire had been in a monogamous relationship with a man for several years, which had made her feel that others perceived her as heterosexual: 'and I found that really difficult, I felt like I was disappearing'. Claire now had the same male partner *and* a female partner. This enabled her to be more expressive of her bisexuality and 'come out':

I just talk about my girlfriend or whatever, *and* my boyfriend and it is weird 'cos your partner does kind of get used as this symbol of your sexuality (Claire).

However, even in Claire's situation, unless she appeared with, or spoke about, both partners simultaneously, she still had to actively 'come out' as bisexual if she wished to reveal her bisexuality. Similarly, Ruth indicated that polyamory doesn't always automatically convey bisexuality:

I just think it's *so* hard to read anyone as bi that most people would read me as gay if I was on my own or with my girlfriend and, "straight but (*whispers*) probably secretly a lesbian" if I was with my boyfriend. Or even just straight if I was with my boyfriend (*4 second pause*). So many people have assumed that I was straight because I mentioned men to them (Ruth).

Ruth's talk reflects dichotomous understandings of sexuality, whereby there are *only* two options ('straight' or 'gay') (McLean, 2008, Fahs, 2009). Therefore bisexuality does not exist as a meaningful possibility (Barker & Langdrige, 2008). Bisexuality was understood to be invisible, hidden behind the masks of what were seemingly heterosexual or lesbian relationships. However, to refer to relationships as 'heterosexual' or 'lesbian' rather than as 'other-sex' or 'same-sex' perpetuates bisexual invisibility because it overlooks the possibility

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that the relationship involves a bisexual person (Barker, Richards, Jones, Bowes-Catton, Plowman, Yockney & Morgan, 2012). These bisexual women's stories of their appearance and relationships positioned bisexuality as lacking visibility or tangibility. Their lack of clear bisexual visual identity meant that they were unable to 'come out' or express their bisexuality through appearance, and the perception was that others made inaccurate assumptions about their sexuality and relationships due to the invisibility (conceptually and literally) of bisexual people and their identity. It is worth noting that a bisexual 'look' may also be less identifiable than particular lesbian appearances due to incongruence between behaviour and self-identity (Diamond, 2000; 2003; Esterline & Galupo, 2013; Morales Knight & Hope, 2012; Preciado & Thompson, 2012). This means that some women who behave bisexually may not identify as such, and those who *do* identify as bisexual may be as different as they are similar in their sexual practices and wider cultural associations. While the women in this study self-identified as bisexual, these types of complexities around categories of identification and behaviour complicate the issue of researching bisexual appearance, hence a lack of bisexual 'look' may in part reflect a lack of unanimity across those who choose to adopt the label 'bisexual'.

(In)Distinctly Bisexual

Despite the overwhelming sense that there was no visible bisexual look, nonetheless the women provided complex narratives that indicated that they were searching for ways in which their bisexuality *could* become recognised through dress and appearance. Sometimes the women discussed bisexual appearance in ways which placed it 'in between' a 'lesbian look', and a 'heterosexual look'. This mirrors the notion that bisexuality represents the mid-point on a continuum of sexuality between homosexuality and heterosexuality (Kinsey,

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Pomeroy & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin & Gebhard, 1953). Accordingly, just as this construction of bisexual identity relies on the construction of homosexual and heterosexual identities as polar opposites, so this version of a bisexual visual identity relies on the construction of lesbian and heterosexual visual identities as polar opposites. Gemma positioned heterosexual appearance as an exaggerated version of *femininity*, and therefore directly opposite to butch lesbian *masculinity*, when she discussed meeting a bisexual woman on a blind date:

I would have been quite intimidated if somebody really butch had turned up [...] I suppose in my head I wanted to try a relationship with a *woman* so, why play down womanly attributes? [...] But saying that if she had turned up in high heels and a little skirt and her cleavage hanging out I would have been equally as like “whoagh”. It’s not that I want a male kind of cliché of feminine beauty, it was just something, she was natural, she was gentle, she was curvy, she wasn’t covered in make-up and tottering on high heels.

Gemma cleverly carves a space to position bisexuality by rejecting both an implicitly excessive lesbian ‘masculinity’ and an equally exaggerated heterosexual ‘femininity’. The butch lesbian will ‘defeminise’ (a word used earlier by Gemma) to the extent that she is barely a woman, whereas a heterosexual woman will reveal ‘too much’ of her body and ‘over do’ femininity through high heels, short skirts, and cleavage. That this image is associated with heterosexuality (and heteronormativity) is made clear through Gemma’s description of this as a *male* cliché of beauty (Riley & Cahill, 2005). Gemma frames bisexuality as a balance, ‘somewhere in the middle’ of these two extremes, and as the appropriate way to appear:

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For me it was kind of not being one way or the other, it wasn't being overly feminine, to the point that you're just kind of "right, look at my boobs" and not sort of, underly feminine as like "I'm never going to wear a skirt" it's kind of somewhere in the middle that's kind of just natural (Gemma)

She was not alone in using this strategy. Millie actively constructed a 'bisexual look' from a blend of pretty (feminine heterosexual) and utilitarian (masculine lesbian) dress:

I worry that I don't look very feminine sometimes [...] I do definitely consider it and although I don't tend to wear kind of frilly things or skirts, I tend to feminise my look with accessories and pretty shoes and bags and stuff. I think I like to combine looking a bit, quite sort of masculine, I don't really know what the look would be really, I suppose quite utilitarian, with the quite pretty look which is possibly an interesting parallel to my biness.

Other women saw appearance in a way that was more reflective of understandings of bisexuality as a fluid mixing of homosexuality and heterosexuality (Lingel, 2009), hence less 'in the middle' and more a *blending* of genders and sexualities:

I used to kind of think that I had to be *either* all femme, or all butch and suits and no make-up or all make-up and dresses and stuff [...] I'm more willing to cross over now and to mix stuff. So I was wearing like a fairly masculine jacket but with my bra poking out of the top and it was quite a girly bra [...] not feeling that I have to be one or the other (P16, Ruth).

You're gonna get some women that look completely straight, you've got your little heels and your short skirts, handbag, and massive earrings and tottering out, they're

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probably not gonna be gay [...] then you're gonna get your huge butch dykes with the carpets under their arms, attitudes, and they're probably not gonna be straight, so you've got your two extremes. And I think then there's that look in the middle, where ... there's a little bit of something there, from either side. They're the ones that are gonna be bisexual [...] it's probably in that mish mash (Elizabeth).

The balancing or combining of 'lesbian' and 'heterosexual' looks was far from clear cut or easily identifiable and these women struggled to identify exactly how to 'look bisexual', but nonetheless some of them grappled with doing so.

The women who drew on queer theories (Butler, 1990/2006) of bisexual fluidity as holding the potential to break down identity categories (Barker, Richards & Bowes-Catton, 2009) sometimes spoke of their visual identity as free from constraints and as an unregulated identity:

I think it [bisexual appearance] is so much harder to pin down (*laughs*). But in a way that's how it should be isn't it, because we are harder to pin down. We are not gonna say "I'm this or I'm that". For me the statement of being bisexual is not just about sexuality. It is a statement about, I'm not gonna fix myself into a rigid identity just because it makes somebody else feel comfortable. I am keeping my options open as a human being so ... I'm gonna keep my options open in terms of my appearance as well (Rose).

Even though in some ways it's a loss that there isn't any obvious community and obvious look, at the same time it's very liberating. Because you don't feel you have to conform to someone's idea of how you're supposed to be [...] I think straight girls

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have to conform an awful lot, and I think gay girls have to conform an awful lot but if you're bi then you've kind of got a freedom of options and so you can modify the way you look more for yourself and how *you* want to attract someone rather than the idea of how you're *supposed* to attract someone (Marie).

For Marie, her sense of the freedom of bisexuality means that she was able to express an authentic version of herself (Riley & Cahill, 2005). This mirrors research on lesbian and gay appearance in which coming out is associated with a freedom to express the true (queer) self (Clarke & Spence, 2013; Hutson, 2010). Marie was not the only participant to value authenticity; for example, Blue stated 'I'm not straight, and I don't want the whole world to see me as straight because I'm not'. Blue saw her bisexuality as existing in its own right, distinct from lesbian sexuality or heterosexuality, and wanted to communicate this authentic sexuality in her dress and appearance (Clarke & Spence, 2013; Riley & Cahill, 2005). The lack of bisexual visual identity allowed these women a freedom of sorts and a form of (potentially ongoing) authenticity and self-expression (Clarke & Turner, 2007; Hutson, 2010). However, this also meant that they were *not* able to communicate their bisexuality to others, because there was no recognisable or distinct visual code for bisexual women to draw upon, or for others to identify.

However, the women involved in bisexual communities (who had also been unable to identify a bisexual look when initially asked) made reference to particular looks specific to (bisexual) communities. The most frequently mentioned look was of 'Goth' which refers to a subcultural community which first emerged in the late 1980s, centred on particular rock music and fashion. It involved dyed black hair and 'predominantly black clothing, offset by heavy jewellery' (Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995:14). Alex said: 'There's a sort of academic,

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under thirty, politically aware, possibly Goth'. Claire agreed: 'If you asked me what I think would be a very visible look, I would say Goth on the bisexual scene is a big look'. Ruth had noticed that at Bicon 'there were loads of people who I would broadly classify as Goth' while Adele commented that Bicon is 'very varied, but the one look that I've seen the most has been a Goth sort of look'. Despite these women noticing a Goth appearance in bisexual space, this 'Goth potential' does not make bisexuality visible for a number of reasons. First, rather than being conspicuous or strikingly apparent (it does *not* "stand out a mile"), instead a Goth look is only a possibility that has to be actively searched for. Second, because a Goth look does not belong *exclusively* to bisexual women, and not all bisexual women choose to subscribe to it, bisexuality does not necessarily become visible through it. Third, Goth is not the *only* look that is available; rather an array of looks exists in bisexual space (the women varied in their own styles *and* they expected that other bisexual women would also vary in their styles). Finally, a Goth look may exist, but was only specifically referred to and recognised *within* bisexual space. Claire identified that 'corsets are a big look and [dyed] red hair is a big look' and she was asked whether she could read other people as bisexual:

I think I sometimes do. And I think that I also successfully read people as alternative and I think that a lot of what bi people do [...] is that they look a bit alternative, so if someone's got a nose-ring, or someone's got dyed hair, or multiple piercings or tattoos or ... something interesting that reads a bit alternative about the way they look (Claire).

Ruth also associated bisexual identity with other 'alternative' styles of dress, including 'Emo' which is a youth culture (evolved from Punk and Goth) largely focused on being '(Emo)tional' and listening to particular styles of music. The 'look' is androgynous clothing

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styles with dark eye make-up, black nail-polish, and (dyed) dark or black hair (Haines, Johnson, Carter & Aurora, 2009):

I'd be more likely to assume that people who look like Goths, or skaters, or emos, or the kind of ... hippy indie rock end of the young people's cultural spectrum. I'd think it was more likely that they would be bi.

Due to the range of looks, their multiple meanings, and the ambiguity around their association with (bi)sexuality, these forms of dress and appearance do not function with any meaning outside the bisexual community. Instead, bisexuality ultimately remains hidden and invisible.

Conclusion

This research has directly responded to calls by psychologists for studies that focus specifically on bisexual women and their appearance and visual identity. These bisexual women could recognise distinct lesbian visual identities but could *not* describe an equivalent bisexual visual identity in the same way, which is consistent with previous research (Clarke & Spence, 2013; Clarke & Turner, 2007; Holliday, 1999). In contrast to previous findings, these bisexual women did not report that they changed their appearance according to the gender of their partner, or to be attractive to men when in a relationship with a man, which is somewhat in contrast to previous findings (Taub, 1999; Huxley et al., 2011).

The themes presented in this paper were *Visible Lesbians*, *Invisible Bisexuals* and *(In)Distinctly Bisexual*. These themes reiterated the ways in which wider western culture understands (gender and) sexual identity as dichotomous (Bowes-Catton, 2007; Fahs, 2009; McLean, 2008). This was a dominant notion across participants and throughout the data and

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such conceptualisations serve only to overlook or dismiss bisexuality. With this in mind, it is not surprising that the women had no clear sense of bisexual visual identity. They could not choose to look bisexual; instead they could only (not) look lesbian or (not) look heterosexual. Despite this, appearance was clearly important to them, and they actively managed their appearance in ways which reflected their understandings of their bisexual identities more widely. Some participants in this study positioned themselves as trying to find a space *in between* heterosexual (feminine) and lesbian (masculine) appearance norms, similar to bisexual participants in previous research who described themselves as neither butch nor femme, or a little of both (Rothblum, 2010). Despite a range of *potential* and *possible* ways that bisexual women *might* choose to look the women's accounts indicated that bisexual women are unable to be seen or be recognised by each other in the same way that (some) lesbians can be. This has implications for bisexual women's wider sense of visibility within western culture. Without appearance norms, bisexual women are less likely to be able to express their identities, 'come out' through their appearance, or form coherent communities through shared dress and appearance in the ways in which lesbians have been able to (Entwistle, 2000; Winn & Nutt, 2001). However, similarly to participants in other studies of lesbian and bisexual appearance, these bisexual women positioned the lack of rigid constraints around bisexual appearance as liberating, and embraced the freedom which their identity allowed them (Clarke & Spence, 2013). It would be useful to conduct further research with more bisexual women which developed the types of questions asked of this small sample of participants in light of these findings.

In the interviews, participants suggested that (masculine or butch) lesbian looks may, by conventional standards, be assumed to be physically unattractive (Rothblum, 1994).

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However, the women also recognised that lesbians could choose to adhere to other (more 'sexy') looks such as boyish butch, androgynous, or femme. Although these looks may lead to less negative evaluations by heterosexual people (see, Rothblum, 1994), they may leave more feminine lesbians (similarly to bisexual women) feeling unable to express their sexuality, and these women may also be accused of 'passing' and enjoying the privileges associated with heteronormative heterosexuality (Eves, 2004; Winn & Nutt, 2001).

Interestingly, the participants also explicitly spoke of heterosexual appearance, which they associated with (a seemingly exaggerated) femininity.

These results have wider implications in relation to bisexual women's sense of self and social and psychological well-being. A small body of research indicates that bisexual people may be at higher risk of poor mental health (e.g. anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicidality) than lesbian and gay, and heterosexual people (Barker et al., 2012; Bostwick, 2012; Ross, Dobinson & Eady, 2010). It has been suggested that this could be attributed in part to the invisibility of bisexuality (Barker et al., 2012). If bisexuality remains an invisible and stigmatised identity then bisexual women are likely to feel that their sexuality lacks validation. In turn this can leave them feeling overlooked, marginalised, isolated, and, stigmatised. Therefore it is not surprising that the invisibility of bisexual people may have a part to play in their feeling that they lack social or cultural support. Some research concluded that compared to heterosexuals, bisexuals received 'less positive support from family' and 'more negative support from friends' (Jorm, Korten, Rodgers, Jacomb & Christensen, 2002:424) and other researchers tentatively made links between the invisibility of bisexuality and a lack of community support (Ross et al., 2010).

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These are all areas that clearly warrant further investigation in order to develop a greater understanding of the links between invisibility and mental and physical health. It would also be useful to consider and research the effectiveness of strategies that could help to rectify the invisibility and invalidity of bisexuality. It is important that future research meaningfully includes and represents bisexual participants in order to overcome the exclusion of bisexual identity and to legitimise and validate bisexual people and their sexuality. There are also wider implications of this research beyond just (bi)sexuality. First, the findings of this research reiterate that dress and appearance are not trivial matters but instead are an important aspect in the construction of our everyday personal and social identities (Boulwood & Jerrad, 2000; Freitas et al, 1997; Frith & Gleeson, 2003; Gleeson & Frith, 2003). There are also implications of invisibility which arise from this study of bisexual women but which apply more to society more widely. Authors have noted that those who are most visible are more clearly represented and therefore are commonly most dominant and validated. Those who are less visible are un/less represented and therefore are open to being overlooked and oppressed, misunderstood and misrepresented as othered (and this was apparent in much of these women's wider discussions). Further, to be able or to become visible can be a powerful tool which serves multiple functions including the rectification of misrepresentations (see, *Author*, 2013; Brighenti, 2007; Gamson, 1998).

There are also limitations to this study. As noted above, most participants were able-bodied, well-educated, white, and middle class, which suggests that despite efforts to recruit a range of participants (especially in the later stages of the project) traditional (LGBT) methods of research (such as friendship networks and snowball sampling whereby participants are likely to have similar backgrounds to that of the researcher) may not be

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sufficient to effectively achieve diverse samples (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Clarke, Ellis, Peel & Riggs, 2010). The specificity of this sample implies that these findings cannot be generalised to all bisexual women. However, efforts were made to gain a range of participants, and not all women fell within the over-represented categories mentioned above. Further, these women differed in terms of their community involvement (bisexual, LGB, or none), their age, and the length of time they had identified as bisexual. It is worth noting that there were patterns of meaning identified across participants within this data which mirrored (as well as moved beyond) previous studies, and this increases the credibility of these results. However, despite their shared experiences, bisexual women are also likely to have different understandings of their identities due to the complex interconnections between their (bi)sexuality and other aspects of their personal identities. The notion of intersectionality highlights how diverse identities (e.g., bodily ability, race & ethnicity, gender, sexualities) interact and inter-relate with wider structural systems of oppression (e.g., disabilism, racism, sexism, heterosexism) (Crenshaw, 1993; Fish, 2008). Research which explores the lived experiences of black and ethnic minority (BME), working class, and less able-bodied participants than those in this study would be useful to develop knowledge of these under-represented categories. Despite the limitations of the sample, the findings do nonetheless make a number of important theoretical and psychological contributions to the (bi)sexuality and appearance literature.

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Table 1: Summary of demographic information:

Pseudonym*	Age	Ethnicity**	Class	No. of years bisexual	Relationship(s) (who with / what type)
Gemma (P1)	29	White (British)	Middle	Always	Woman/ Cohabiting
Betty (P2)	30	White (British)	Middle	5	Woman/ Cohabiting
Emily (P3)	31	White (British)	Lower Middle	11	Man/ Serious but living apart
Millie (P4)	28	White (British)	Middle	16	Man/ Cohabiting
Berni (P5)	26	White (British)	Working	15	Woman/ Casual
Sarah (P6)	22	White (British)	Middle	7	Single
Elizabeth (P7)	33	White (British)	Middle	4	Man/ Cohabiting
Roxy (P8)	32	White (Caucasian)	Upper	Always	Woman/ Civil partnership
Alex (P9)	47	White (Welsh/British)	Middle	22	Woman/ Civil partnership
Sandy (P10)	19	White (Irish)	Working	1	Woman/ Casual
Rose (P11)	53	<i>Did not answer</i>	'I don't know'	33	Man/ Cohabiting
Amy (P12)	49	White (British)	Comfortable/ Working class	36	Man/ Married
Marie (P13)	24	White (British)	Middle	10	Man/ Cohabiting
Claire (P14)	32	White (British)	Middle/ Working	8	Man x2/ Woman Married/ casual/ long term
Eddy (P15)	32	White (British)	Middle	17	Man/ Cohabiting
Ruth (P16)	30	White (British)	Lower Middle	15	Man/ Woman Long-term/ New
Matilda (P17)	29	White (British)	Lower Middle	12	Man/ Casual
Adele (P18)	39	Black (British)	Working	15	Woman x2/Man
Lucy (P19)	31	White (English)	Middle	3	Single
Blue (P20)	37	White (European)	Working /Middle	1	Man/ Married

* The numbers in brackets refers to participant number (e.g., Participant 1 is P1).

** The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland consists of the individual countries of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. While most defined participants defined themselves as *White (British)* some women described their ethnicity in relation to specific country (e.g. *White (English)*).

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ⁱ Interviews were supplemented by the use of photomethodology (Frith, Riley, Archer & Gleeson, 2005; Harper, 2002), which was deemed an ideal tool for exploring visual identity. To avoid discouraging potential participants it was made clear that participation was appreciated with or without the use of photographs. These photos, which were predominantly of participants and their clothing, were used to generate discussion and as yet have not been analysed as data hence they are not mentioned in the analysis section of this paper.