"I am who I am"? Navigating norms and the importance of authenticity in lesbian and bisexual women's accounts of their appearance practices

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Abstract

This paper explores how lesbian and bisexual women negotiate pressures to look like an authentic lesbian and an authentic individual in their accounts of their clothing and appearance practices. Thirty women responded to a 'paper and pen' qualitative survey about lesbian and bisexual women's dress and appearance. Two main themes were generated from the data: 'norms and conformity' and 'freedom and authenticity'. Conformity to appearance mandates raised questions about individual authenticity; the women negotiated this dilemma either by presenting their conformity as active and strategic, a means to an end (subverting normative assumptions of heterosexuality, being recognised by other non-heterosexual women) or as an almost unconscious expression of their inner dyke. For feminine and other non-conforming women their lack of conformity raised questions about their authenticity as a non-heterosexual woman (and their feminist credentials), and some of these women negotiated this dilemma by presenting their femininity as a subversion of heteronormative assumptions by showing that any woman can be a lesbian. We conclude the paper by highlighting the potential for over-reading sexuality in accounts of sexuality and appearance practices.

Key words: Appearance, authenticity, bisexual women, butch, clothing, dress, femme, lesbians, thematic analysis

Introduction

This paper explores how non-heterosexual women negotiate the dual (and competing) demands of being recognisable as an 'authentic' lesbian and as an authentic individual. Previous research suggests that in order to be visible and recognisable as a lesbian to others (to the wider world or just to those 'in the know'), non-heterosexual women are compelled to conform to a masculine norm (and in so doing, reinforce the norm, and make it harder for non-conforming women to be recognisable as lesbians) (Clarke & Turner, 1997, Levitt & Hiestand, 2004). In lesbian 'sub-culture', like in other sub-cultures, being recognised as an

authentic member requires work. In order to belong (Creed, 1999), to be above suspicion and to avoid being subject to a disciplinary gaze (rather than a gaze of recognition and desire), women have to signal their possession of, what Thornton (1997) has dubbed, sub-cultural capital. At the same time, conformity to a sub-cultural norm *raises* questions about authenticity and individuality. A collectivist identity implies a loss of individuality and self-authenticity (Widdecombe & Wooffitt, 1995), that is considered vital for the production of a meaningful personal identity in western culture (Riley & Cahill, 2005), in which there is an over-riding emphasis on being an unique individual (Gill, Henwood & McLean, 2005). This paper explores how women negotiate the following dilemma: How can one be recognisable and visible as a (authentic, beyond suspicion) non-heterosexual woman without compromising one's individuality?

The Study

The analysis is based on qualitative survey data collected from a convenience sample of 30 self-identified non-heterosexual women. The participants were recruited through local and national LGBT groups. Twenty-two women identified as lesbian, seven as bisexual (one of these women said she was 'just not straight', bisexual was a label of convenience) and one as non-heterosexual. The women were aged between 19 and 58 (with a mean of 34 years); 26 identified as white, three as British and one as Irish. Twenty of the women identified their social class as middle class (of these, four said middle class, with a working class background), eight as working class, two as other (one as middle *and* working class, and one as 'nouveaux rich'); 17 of the women were in full time employment, 11 in full time education, and two in part time employment *and* part time education. All of the women were out to at least one person, half were out to everyone they know, about two thirds were members of LGB groups and spent time on the 'gay scene'.

Qualitative surveys are a relatively novel method, and although they lack the flexibility and organic qualities of interviews (including the opportunity to prompt and probe and follow up on anticipated insights), they nonetheless have unique advantages for qualitative researchers (Frith & Gleeson, 2004, Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004). In this study, qualitative surveys enabled the collection of sizeable data-set from a geographically dispersed and 'hidden' population in a relatively short period of time and using minimal resources.

Qualitative surveys afford participants greater anonymity than interviews, which is an important consideration when researching LGB populations (Clarke, Ellis, Peel & Riggs, 2010). Although survey data can be 'thin', and lack the depth and richness of interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2012), the participant group was in general highly motivated, and many participants wrote detailed responses to the survey questions.

The survey consisted of 12 open-ended questions (as well as a demographic section with a mix of open and tick-box questions) and focused on issues such as whether the participants have ever used their dress and appearance to emphasise or de-emphasise their sexuality, whether they made any changes to their dress and appearance after 'coming out', and whether they have ever attempted to read off other women's sexuality from their dress and appearance. The survey responses were typed up and collated by question (and not 'corrected' in any way) and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) within a social constructionist framework (Burr, 2003).

Results

We identified two main themes in the data: norms and conformity, and freedom and authenticity. These themes represent two rather different ways of conceptualising dress and appearance in relation to lesbian/bisexual identities and communities. First that dress and appearance for lesbians (and, to some extent, bisexual women) is highly regulated, and women are compelled to negotiate their dress and appearance in relation to a strongly policed masculine/androgynous norm, and second that identifying as a lesbian/bisexual woman is a liberating experience, offering women the freedom to (appear to) be the 'real me'.

Norms and conformity

Will the real lesbian please stand up?

> "I know so many different styles of lesbian, it would be impossible to have a general description. Even so, my 'gaydar' works much better for women who dress in trousers and have short hair." (White, middle class lesbian woman, aged 53 [P93])

> "I thought the idea that all lesbians/bisexuals had cropped hair and wore butch clothes was just a stereotype. Until I ventured on to the gay scene, I thought those sorts of women hadn't existed for decades!" (White, working class bisexual ['just 'not straight'] woman, aged 21 [P89])

Many of the women commented on the diversification of lesbian (and bisexual) identities and lesbian (and bisexual) styles and that there is no longer a lesbian 'uniform' or 'dress code'. Some described appearance mandates as contextual and subject to broader shifts in fashion and politics; as well as regional and cultural variations. Some participants reported that dungarees were part of the lesbian 'uniform' in the 1970s, and in the 1980s, feminist lesbians had short hair, didn't wear make-up and wore home-made knit-wear. In the 1990s the typical lesbian was androgynous, wearing 'bovver boots' and checked shirts, and in the 2000s 'sexy' lesbians had short, heavily styled hair, wore boyfit jeans and ski, skate and surf brands such as *Fat Face*. Lesbian communities in the North of England, working class lesbian communities and older lesbians were presented as more 'conservative', that is, more likely to adhere to butch/femme appearance mandates. Some of the women presented lesbian masculinity as a "stereotype" (P65) or "cliché" (P62) rather than an accurate reflection of their or of other non-heterosexual women's clothing and appearance practices. However, despite nods to the diversification and mainstreaming of lesbian style, as the above quotations demonstrate, the coding of (visible) lesbians as masculine, "manly" (P70) and "dykey, butch" (P72) (or androgynous) prevailed (Esterberg, 1996). Masculine/androgynous women were presented as much easier to read as lesbian; some women commented that the 'lipstick lesbian' was a mere media creation, that 'real' lesbians are masculine (Hutson, 2010) or androgynous.

Policing and protecting lesbian space

Although, some women minimised the importance of appearance mandates, many discussed the regulation of dress and appearance (Holliday, 1999) and the coercive nature of the coding of lesbian visibility as masculine (Esterberg, 1996):

> "I did once wear a dress to a lesbian disco, and although nobody said anything I did get stared at. I felt judged." (White, middle class lesbian, aged 39 [P64])

> "Always felt less legitimate in LG spaces when I had longer hair." (White, middle class lesbian, aged 32 [P91])

> "I sometimes meet with suspicion until I verbally 'come out'." (White, working/middle class lesbian, aged 41 [P70])

Women who did not conform to appearance mandates reported feeling marginalised in lesbian space. Eves (2004: 487) argues that such gate-keeping practices (staring and being treated with suspicion) are designed to protect and preserve lesbian space and "the self-policing nature of the lesbian community is based on a defensive position of exclusion from dominant culture, and often produces a desire for boundaries and distinction, which promotes a policing of who is a lesbian".

Some of the participants reported that conformity to appearance mandates felt 'inauthentic', but necessary in order to be present as a lesbian to the self and, more importantly, to be recognised as a lesbian by other lesbians and to be positioned and to perform appropriately within the regimes of looking in lesbian space. Many participants presented conformity and visibility as important to younger lesbian and bisexual women and to women when they are first coming out, and constructing and negotiating an identity as lesbian/bisexual – a rigid outer identity provides a scaffold for the vulnerable and precarious inner identity (Clarke & Turner, 2007, Hutson, 2010). When the inner self lesbian becomes secure, it no longer needs to be held in place by the outer self, and other modes of identity expression become available.

Bisexual style

Most of the bisexual women and some of the lesbian women commented that bisexual (and queer) communities are more open and accepting and less rigid and policing than lesbian (and gay) communities with regard to dress and appearance. In bisexual spaces, women are freer to express their femininity and their individuality. Because of this, the participants reported that bisexual women are, in general, less visible and readable as non-heterosexual than (lesbian) women who conform to masculine/androgynous styles:

> "you can't usually tell if someone is bisexual by the way they dress but often they're people who dress in a way that draws attention to them, quite impressive or

provocative, often quite stylish and open-minded about how they dress. Bisexuals tend to look more feminine than lesbians, but not always." (White, middle class bisexual woman, aged 19 [P1])

"[Bisexual women's style is] generally similar to straight women but possibly more alternative. For example, coloured dreads/piercings and some with tattoos. Also, fashion tights like fishnets and more masculine dress like baggy jeans." (White, middle class bisexual woman, aged 22 [P61])

Only a few women (such as P1 and P61) indicated that there is something approximating a bisexual 'dress code', but a number mentioned that bisexual women tend to be more feminine than lesbians, androgynous, alternative, and provocative and flamboyant (see also Hayfield, 2011).

Freedom and authenticity

One of the most striking features of the data was the emphasis on authenticity and on dressing for comfort (primarily psychological comfort) and being oneself (being true to oneself, Vannii & Franzese, 2008) after coming out as lesbian/bisexual (see also Eves, 2004, Holliday, 1999, Hutson, 2010, Levitt & Hiestand, 2004):

"I felt more comfortable with who I was and was no longer living a lie to my family and friends." (White, working class lesbian, aged 19 [P2])

"since coming out I wear clothes that I want to wear and feel comfortable in. Previously I have worn things to fit in to the crowd but now I feel I can wear what ever I want and I am more confident in my appearance." (P2)

"I no longer make efforts to wear skirts, dresses to make myself attractive to men. I wear more casual clothes and less makeup. I wear what I feel comfortable wearing which is less feminine than before I came out as I now have nothing to hide." (White, middle class lesbian, aged 34 [P74])

For many of the participants, coming out as lesbian/bisexual gave them the freedom to resist heteronormative constructions of femininity and to achieve a fit between their inner

and outer selves; or between their "inner self-values" and "external appearance" (Hutson, 2010: 220). As Ruth Holliday (1999: 481) argued:

> "the naturalizing discourse of comfort... signifies the comfort one feels from the degree of fit between the outside of one's body and its inside (not blood, guts or organs, but the 'imagined' or 'true' self) - the way in which identity is mapped onto the body. Comfort means in this case expressing externally that which one feels inside. In other words, there is a wish to close the gap between performance (acting) and ontology (being), a desire to be self-present to both oneself and others."

The women had various strategies for closing the gap between their inner and outer selves and managing the dilemma of authenticity (being recognisable both as an authentic lesbian and an authentic individual).

The essential butch

Many of the women presented (their) masculine/androgynous style as an authentic reflection of their inner self, others presented "looking like a lesbian" (P70) as something they actively and strategically constructed for certain contexts. This latter (smaller) group of women reported that they would "consciously butch up" (P67) in order to feel a sense of belonging and membership of lesbian space (or to avoid the disciplining gaze of other lesbians). These women indicated that looking like a lesbian was important for being visible as a lesbian in straight space, "to pull" (P62) (and secure the right kind of look - a look of recognition and desire) and to subvert normative assumptions of heterosexuality. These women did not 'play' with their appearance to subvert norms or to highlight the constructed nature of gender, as queer theory would suggest (Butler, 1990); rather they indicated that they actively manipulated their appearance to express a mobile sense of self. For example, one woman commented that: "I like to use my clothes to express who I am and how I am feeling on certain days. Some days I want to wear heels, stockings and a skirt, other days when I am feeling boyish I wear more the sort of thing you would expect a lesbian to wear." (White, middle class lesbian, aged 46 [P69]) So, this group of women retained their individuality by presenting their conformity to appearance mandates as a self-conscious and strategic means to an end.

For the women who were lesbian inside and out, their accounts indicated that they weren't consciously so, their style was not a performance, an act, they were simply being (and expressing) themselves:

> "My hair changed into a lesbian cut before I even realised I was gay so I think it's a gradual process you don't often realise is happening." (British, working class lesbian, aged 19 [P82])

> "I feel fraudulent in feminine clothes and am becoming more butch again because this has always been my natural garb long before I knew I was gay." (White, middle class lesbian, aged 35 [P78])

> "Since a small child I was always the most comfortable in trousers/shorts…" (White, middle class lesbian, aged 50+ [P65])

Some of these women didn't label themselves as possessing a masculine, androgynous or 'dykey' (visibly lesbian) style or garments but reported somewhat reluctantly that others might: "I guess others would describe it as dykey" (P75); "I guess they are probably 'lesbian shoes'" (P82). Moreover, their inner dyke often leaked out (note the passive voice in P82's response - 'my hair changed' rather than 'I changed my hair') through their styled body before they were 'consciously aware' of their sexuality. For the 'authentic butch' butchness was "an unmalleable aspect of the self, so essential that it even preceded their awareness of that label" (Levitt & Hiestand, 2004: 609). In the data quoted above, and other similar extracts, there is a delightful contrast between the authentic and honest, and the dishonest and fake, which highlights the over-riding importance of individual authenticity (Eves, 2004, Hutson, 2010, Levitt & Hiestand, 2004).

An essentialist butch discourse (Eves, 2004) draws on the common sense ideology of what Riley and Cahill (2005) call 'vertical representation', where the outer surface expresses the inner self. Deploying this discourse allowed these women to manage the dilemma of authenticity; their conformity to appearance mandates is a happy coincidence, not artifice. These women drew on the notion of an authentic dyke self to argue that their clothed body was an expression of an intrinsic self-identity.

Not hiding, not shouting, just me...

For other women, the creation of a meaningful personal identity involved actively or incidentally resisting normative conceptions of lesbian visual identities and sexual styles:

> "I just want to be different. I want my clothes to express who I really am and because of stereotyping I like to go against the grain a bit. People expect me as a lesbian to be vegetarian and to be boyish so I like to surprise them by being a meat eater and wearing skirts!" (White, middle class lesbian, aged 46 [P69])

> "I did wear some more boyish clothes, hairstyle at some point in the past, but now wear whatever I like, and enjoy being feminine (and yes, I'm feminist too)" (White, middle class bisexual woman, aged 40 [P76])

These women drew on discourses of individuality and authenticity to justify their deviation from appearance mandates. They emphasised that they were not hiding their sexuality, and neither were they 'shouting' about it, they were simply being themselves, expressing their inner self. Being themselves had a political dimension, however, for these women, masculine and androgynous women are not the only ones resisting heteronormative assumptions through their dress and appearance practices, feminine women can subvert heteronormative assumptions by infiltrating straight space and showing that any woman can be a lesbian. We suspect that a number of women oriented to the political aspects of appearance because of concerns about 'letting the side' down: note P76's comment 'and yes, I'm a feminist too'.

Discussion and conclusions

Our findings support those of existing (mostly US) research, which demonstrates the importance of appearance mandates for constituting lesbian identities and lesbian space (e.g., Eves, 2004, Hutson, 2010, Walker, 1993), and the dominance of coming out narratives in which the woman is free to close the gap between her inner and the outer self by resisting heteronormative constructions of femininity and embracing lesbian style (Clarke & Turner, 2007, Hutson, 2010). Dress and appearance seem to be far less important for constituting bisexual identities and bisexual space, but this needs further exploration (Clarke & Turner, 2007). This study also confirmed the notion that "there is a coercive element to the coding of lesbian visibility" (Esterberg, 1996: 277); non-conforming lesbians and bisexual

women reported being treated with suspicion in lesbian space. The findings also showed that conformity to appearance mandates raised questions about individual authenticity; the women negotiated this dilemma either by presenting their conformity as active and strategic, a means to an end (subverting normative assumptions of heterosexuality, being recognised by other non-heterosexual women) or as an almost unconscious expression of their inner dyke. For feminine-appearing and other non-conforming women their lack of conformity raised questions about their authenticity as a non-heterosexual woman, and some of these women negotiated this dilemma by presenting their femininity as a subversion of heteronormative assumptions by showing that any woman can be a lesbian.

The participants indicated that the space most associated with the regulation of lesbian visual identities is the commercial 'gay scene', whereas, in the past, lesbian feminist communities assumed a central role in the regulation of visual identities. Some older participants reported that the lesbian feminist era of the 1970s/1980s constituted the pinnacle of the policing of lesbian appearance, and there is now greater acceptance of diversity (and non-conformity) in appearance. Some participants commented that lesbians, particularly younger lesbians, have become more invested in appearance, and pressures to look like a 'sexy lesbian' have increased in the last decade or so. Like Hutson's (2010) participants, our participants rarely used the terms 'butch' and 'femme' to describe themselves, but often described other women using these terms. Overall, the data suggest that the normative lesbian look in the late 2000s, at least in some lesbian communities, is 'softer' and more boyish than it has been in the past; that a woman who would have been considered just 'dykey' in the 1980s would now be considered a 'full scale butch' (P92).

Most of the women were invested in creating a coherent identity (Weston, 1993); their narratives drew on an essentialist model of coming out as self-discovery, in which the individual arrives at the final truth of their identity. Although some women experienced their identities as mobile and multiple, only a handful discussed (consciously) 'playing' with their appearance in order to expose gender as a social construction (Butler, 1990).

It is important to highlight that there is potential for over-reading sexuality into women's narratives when asking women to speak as lesbian or bisexual and for privileging sexuality over race and class (Taylor, 2009, Walker, 1993). We highlight this potential because the

dilemma of authenticity the participants negotiated is similar to that experienced by women (and men) who are members of subcultures, where the clothed body and visual identity is an important element of displaying sub-cultural capital. There is significant overlap between our data and data collected for research into the Goth, Punk, Hippy, and Body Art sub-cultures (e.g., Riley & Cahill, 2005, Widdecombe & Wooffitt, 1995). Furthermore, this study, like other research on sexuality and appearance, was predominantly based on the views of white, middle class women and future research should explore the intersections of race and class and sexuality and seek more diverse samples.

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