

Will the real lesbian please stand up? Constructing and resisting visible non-heterosexual identities through dress and appearance

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Aims

- How lesbians and bisexual women negotiate the discursive structures of gender and sexuality through their everyday clothing and appearance practices
 - The usefulness of queer theory as a description of how lesbians and bisexual women experience themselves as lesbians and bisexual women (Esterberg, 1996, Eves, 2004, Weston, 1993)
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The data

- Thirty women provided qualitative questionnaire data
 - Convenience sample – LGBT groups
 - 22 lesbian, 7 bisexual, 1 non-heterosexual
 - 19-58 years (mean: 34 years), 26 white, 3 British, 1 Irish
 - 20 middle class, 8 working class, 2 other
 - 17 FT employment, 11 FT education, 2 PT employment/education
 - All out to at least one person, about half out to 'everyone'
 - About two-thirds members of LGB groups and spend time on the 'gay scene'
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Themes

- Norms and conformity
 - Freedom and authenticity
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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, 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])
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Norms and conformity - policing and protecting lesbian space

- “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])
 - “other dykes expect you to follow this code [‘Arthur and Martha’] and don’t understand if you don’t fit this particular mould.” (White, middle class lesbian, aged 48 [P66])
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Norms and conformity – bisexual style

- “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])
 - “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])
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Freedom and authenticity - Freedom to be me

- “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])
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Freedom and authenticity - the essential butch

- “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])
- “I wouldn’t know where to start trying to dress fem.” (P82)
- “Can’t do dresses, I look like a man in drag.” (Irish, working class lesbian, aged 45 [P75])

Freedom and authenticity - Not hiding, not shouting, just me...

- “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 do not like being a gay flag ship walking round the streets” (British, working class lesbian, aged 45 [P73])
 - “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])
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Conclusions and future directions

- Dress and appearance important for constituting and negotiating lesbian identities and lesbian space
 - There is a coercive element to the coding of lesbian visibility (Esterberg, 1996)
 - “The chief characteristic of the sexually inverted woman is a certain degree of masculinity... There is... a very pronounced tendency among sexually inverted women to adopt male attire when practicable. In such cases male garments are not usually regarded as desirable chiefly on account of practical convenience, nor even in order to make an impression on other women, but because *the wearer feels more at home in them*” (Henry Havelock Ellis, 1901, p. 141, emphasis added).
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Conclusions and future directions

- 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 (Walker, 1993)
 - Emphasis on the 'writerly text' and not the 'readerly text' – Kessler & McKenna (1978) argued that in relation to the construction of gender in everyday life, the bulk of the work is done by the perceiver not the displayer
 - Although it is acknowledged that rendering a plausible account of a social category is an interactional and institutional accomplishment (West & Fenstermaker, 1995), there is a tendency to read practices off monologic interview narratives
 - A need to analyse practice 'on the ground'
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