

‘Never judge a book by it's cover’?: Psychology students talk about gay, lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual appearance

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The (Under)Valuing of Appearance Research

- ◉ Clothing is a major way to modify the body – embodied self includes tattoos/piercings, styling/dying of hair and managing the body in how it appears
- ◉ But clothing/fashion seen as depoliticised and appearance often considered unworthy of academic attention

Valuing Appearance Research

- ◉ Our appearance plays an important part in our identity and because we are read from appearance, our visual presentation of ourselves can be argued to be 'anything but superficial' (Gleeson & Frith, 2003:7).
- ◉ The clothed self as 'a kind of visual metaphor for identity' (Davis, 1992:25)
- ◉ We can use appearance as a tool, either to hide, or to become noticed (Frith, 2003; Gleeson and Frith, 2003)

Functions of Appearance Norms for Lesbians and Gay Men



- Dressing 'the part' enables expression and communication of sexuality
 - sexual signalling / coming out
 - creating a sense of group identity distinct from wider culture
 - historically - as a political tool to raise visibility and gain 'equal' rights
 - as a political statement / critique of the rigid dress codes of heterosexual society
 - as pleasurable to look and be looked at

The qualitative questionnaire

7 questions

- If someone asked you to describe what a (1.lesbian/2.gay man/3.bisexual woman/ 4.bisexual man/ 5.heterosexual woman /6. heterosexual man) typically looks like, what would you say? (E.g. in what ways could you potentially recognise a (sexuality) from their appearance?)
- Is there anything else you'd like to add about appearance and sexuality?

(Early) Themes

- ◉ Resisting 'stereotypes'
- ◉ Camp and Effeminate Gay Men (overvaluing of appearance)
- ◉ Butch (and Femme) Lesbians (undervaluing appearance)
- ◉ The Invisibility of Bisexuality
- ◉ Blokey blokes and girly girls
- ◉ See: Hayfield, N. (2013) "Never judge a book by its cover?": Students' understandings of lesbian, gay, and bisexual appearance. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 4(1), 16-24.

Conclusion

- ◉ Asking about appearance - brings (unprompted) understandings around embodiment
- ◉ **Gay men and lesbians** - excessive femininity and masculinity (inappropriate for their gender)
- ◉ **Bisexuals** - (literally) invisible
- ◉ **Heterosexuals** - 'Blokey Blokes' and 'Girly Girls'

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