“I CAN’T BUILD UP AN IMAGE IN MY HEAD OF BISEXUALITY”: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF BISEXUAL WOMEN NEGOTIATING APPEARANCE AND VISUAL IDENTITY

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Overview

- Background
- The functions of visual presentation
- The invisibility of bisexuality
- The study
- Early themes
- Discussion
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 research often considered unworthy of academic attention
Our appearance plays an important part in our identity and because we are often read from our 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)

It is generally assumed that what one chooses to visually present to others will give accurate information about the internal or inner-self (Holland, 2004; Holliday, 1999).
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

(Clarke & Turner 2007; Walker 2001; Holliday 1999; Gamson 1998; Esterberg, 1996; Ainley, 1995)
The Invisibility of Bisexuality

- Bisexuality is rarely acknowledged, and therefore invisibilised, within
  - mainstream media
  - lesbian and gay communities
  - psychology/sexology/psychotherapy and in academia (Barker & Langdridge 2008)

- There is an overlooking of bisexuality as a potential identity position’
  (Barker & Langdridge (2008:389))
The Study

- **Aim:** To explore how and why bisexual women use appearance practices such as clothing, body art & cosmetic/beauty practices in order to create a bisexual visual identity

- Semi-structured interviews with twenty self-identified bisexual women

- Data analysed using thematic analysis
Emerging Themes

- The invisible bisexual
- The visible lesbian
- Actively managing appearance I: “It’s that look in between”
- Actively managing appearance II: The ‘policing’ of appearance
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Conclusions

- Despite a distinct lack of ‘bisexual look’ the bisexual women in the study actively managed their appearance in differing ways and in relation to different spaces.

- Implications of invisibility? Important for future research to investigate further the specificities of bisexual invisibility.

- Your thoughts and questions?
References

References