"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

Valuing Appearance Research

- 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

The Invisibility of Bisexuality

- Bisexuality is rarely acknowledged, and therefore invisiblised, 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 <u>actively</u> 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?

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