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

Nikki Hayfield
Centre for Appearance Research (CAR)
University of the West of England (UWE)
Bristol

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

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

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

Some content removed as it is not yet published

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?

References

- Ainley, R. (1995) '*What is She Like?: Lesbian Identities from the 1950s to the 1990s'* London: Cassell.
- Barker, M. & Langdridge, D.(2008) 'Bisexuality: Working with a Silenced Sexuality' *Feminism & Psychology* 18(3): 389–394.
- Barnard, M. (1996) '*Fashion as Communication*' London: Routledge.
- Blasius, M. & Phelan, S. (1997) 'We Are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics' London: Routledge
- Bordo, S.R. (1993) '*Unbearable weight: feminism, western culture, and the body*' Berkeley: University of California Press
- Clarke, V and Turner, K. (2007) 'Clothes maketh the queer? Dress, appearance and the construction of lesbian, gay and bisexual identities', *Feminism & Psychology* 17(2): 267-276.
- Cogan, J.C. & J.M. Erickson (1999) (eds) *'Lesbians, Levis and Lipstick The Meaning of Beauty in Our Lives'* New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Davis, F. (1992) '*Fashion, Culture, and Identity'* Chicago: Chicago University Press
- Entwistle, J. (2000) '*The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory'* Cambridge: Polity Press
- Esterberg, K.G. (1996) '"A Certain Swagger When I Walk": Performing Lesbian Identity' in S. Seidman, '*Queer Theory/Sociology*', Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd pp 259-279.
- Frith, H. (2003) 'Introducing the Body: (In)visibility and the Negotiation of Embodied Identities', *Psychology of Women Review* 5(2):3-6.
- Frith, H. and Gleeson, K. (2004) 'Clothing and Embodiment: Men Managing Body Image and Appearance', *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* 5(1) 40–48.

References

- Gamson, J. (1998) ‘Publicity Traps: Television Talk Shows and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Visibility’, *Sexualities* 1(1) 11-41
- Gleeson, K. and Frith, H. (2003) ‘Getting Noticed: Using Clothing to Negotiate Visibility’, *Psychology of Women Review* 5(2): 7–11
- Guy, A and Banim, M. (2000) ‘Personal Collections: Women’s Clothing Use and Identity’, *Journal of Gender Studies* 9(3): 313-327.
- Holland, S. (2004) ‘*Alternative Femininities: Body, Age and Identity*’ Oxford: Berg
- Holliday, R. (1999) ‘The Comfort of Identity’, *Sexualities* 2(4): 475-491.
- McLean, K. (2008) ‘Inside, Outside, Nowhere: Bisexual Men and Women in the Gay and Lesbian Community’ *Journal of Bisexuality* 8(1): 63-80.
- Orlando, L. (1997/1991) Extract from ‘Loving Whom We Choose’ in M. Blasius & S. Phelan (1997) ‘We Are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics’ London: Routledge
- Taub, J. (1999) ‘Bisexual women and beauty norms: A qualitative examination’, *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 3(4): 27-36. In J.C. Cogan and J.M. Erickson (eds) *‘Lesbians, Levis and Lipstick The Meaning of Beauty in Our Lives’* New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Tseelon, E. (2001a) ‘Fashion Research and Its Discontents’, *Fashion Theory,* 5(4): 435-452.
- Tseelon, E. (2001b) ‘Ontological, Epistemological and Methodological Clarifications in Fashion Research: From Critique to Empirical Suggestions’ in A. Guy, E. Green and M. Banim (eds) ‘*Through the Wardrobe: Women’s Relationships with Their Clothes’* New York: Berg
- Walker, L. (2001) ‘*Looking Like What You Are: Sexual Style, Race and Lesbian Identity*’, New York: New York University Press