

“It’s a Comparison Thing, isn’t it?”: Lesbian and Bisexual Women’s Accounts of How Partner Relationships Shape their Feelings about their Body and Appearance

Caroline J. Huxley

University of Warwick

Victoria Clarke

University of the West of England

Emma Halliwell

University of the West of England

Author Note

Caroline J. Huxley, Warwick Medical School, University of Warwick; Victoria Clarke, Department of Psychology, University of the West of England; Emma Halliwell, Department of Psychology, University of the West of England.

Correspondence concerning this manuscript should be addressed to: Caroline J. Huxley, Warwick Medical School, University of Warwick, Gibbet Hill, Coventry, CV4 7AL, United Kingdom. Email: caroline.huxley@warwick.ac.uk

### Abstract

Women's feelings about their body and their appearance are an important aspect of their lives, yet little is known about the ways in which partner relationships shape these feelings. There has been some debate about whether or not same-sex relationships offer protection to non-heterosexual (lesbian and bisexual) women from potentially harmful social appearance pressures, but there has been little empirical exploration of this issue. We contribute to the debate by presenting findings from a British qualitative study based on interviews with 15 non-heterosexual women talking about their feelings about their bodies and their appearance in the context of partner relationships. These accounts were analysed using a phenomenologically oriented form of thematic analysis and seven main themes were generated. The women suggested that same-sex relationships were both positive and negative influences in shaping their feelings about their body and appearance, highlighting the complexity of this issue. However, positive descriptions of empathy toward body and appearance concerns as well as diversity within same-sex attractions suggest that same-sex relationships have the potential to encourage women to feel happier with their bodies. This analysis also suggests that the theoretical debate is too simplistic and that a synthesized explanation should be explored in future research.

*Keywords:* body image, lesbianism, bisexuality, physical attractiveness, appearance, interpersonal relationships, interpersonal influences

## “It’s a Comparison Thing, isn’t it?”: Lesbian and Bisexual Women’s Accounts of How Partner Relationships Shape their Feelings about their Body and Appearance

An increasingly large body of research shows that women’s thoughts and feelings about their body size and shape (their “body image”) and their broader appearance (such as clothing choices, hair styles, make-up, and jewellery) are related to their psychological, social, and sexual well being (Davison & McCabe, 2005). Women in Western cultures are under social pressure to conform to heteronormative ideals which purportedly represent what (heterosexual) men find desirable in women (Bordo, 1993). Generally, lesbians are not concerned with being attractive to men and do not desire romantic/sexual relationships with men (Rothblum, 1994). Therefore, it has been suggested that they are somewhat protected from experiencing social pressures to conform to such ideals (Brown, 1987). In this paper, we present the first known British study to (phenomenologically) explore non-heterosexual (lesbian and bisexual) women’s perceptions regarding how their partner relationships shape their feelings about their own body and appearance.

### **Women’s Sexuality and their Feelings about their Body and Appearance**

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) argued that women are sexually objectified in Western culture because they are continually evaluated through the *male gaze* for their conformity to mainstream social “beauty” ideals. In this culture of evaluation, women begin to internalise the (heterosexual male) observers’ perspective and self-objectify, which leads to body and appearance dissatisfaction (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). More recently, feminist author Ros Gill (2008, p 41) has described a shift from objectification to sexual “subjectification.” She argued that whereas traditional objectifying images of passive women still exist, more frequently women are presented as active, desiring sexual subjects who aim to please themselves and whose

body gives them sexual power over men. Despite this shift, Gill argued that the process still results in women self-objectifying and experiencing body and appearance dissatisfaction (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Theorising about objectification tends to focus on heterosexual women (Moradi & Huang, 2008). Because lesbians (and bisexual women) may not be as concerned as heterosexual women in gaining (heterosexual) men's approval (Rothblum, 1994), such theorising may not be entirely applicable to non-heterosexual women (Haines, Erchull, Liss, Turner, Nelson, Ramsey & Hurt, 2008). According to Brown (1987), lesbians are empowered to reject the mainstream veneration of thinness because of their attraction to, and relationships with, other women. By loving women of diverse body shapes and sizes (different from the culturally idealised thin body), lesbians can begin to appreciate their own body size and shape. In contrast, Dworkin (1988) argued that lesbians are not protected from social pressures because they (like all other women) live in mainstream society, and therefore their appearance is compared (by others and themselves) to current cultural beauty ideals. For that reason, same-sex relationships cannot protect women from wishing and striving to embody beauty ideals (Dworkin, 1988). Essentially these perspectives differ in the value they place on different social contexts (the lesbian subcultural context or the wider heteronormative social context) and how these shape women's body concerns. Both of these arguments overlook bisexual women's experiences, and there is little discussion as to how their relationships and the social contexts they inhabit may shape their appearance concerns.

Research focussing on these issues is primarily quantitative and is concerned with potential differences between lesbian and heterosexual women. Such research has produced mixed conclusions: some studies have found that lesbians report significantly higher levels of

body satisfaction than heterosexual women (e.g., Polimeni, Austin, & Kavanagh, 2009; Strong, Williamson, Netemeyer, & Geer, 2000), whereas others have found no such differences (e.g., Legenbauer et al., 2009; Wagenbach, 2003). To date, no known research has found that lesbians report lower levels of body satisfaction than heterosexual women. In terms of objectification, lesbians have reported less *body surveillance* (that is, how often a woman monitors and prioritises her appearance) than heterosexual women, despite similarities in awareness of being sexually objectified (Hill & Fischer, 2008). This pattern suggests that although all women are similarly aware of a sexualised male gaze, lesbian (and perhaps also bisexual) women may be less concerned about conforming to societal beauty norms.

### **Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Appearance Norms**

It is not the case, however, that appearance is irrelevant and that lesbians (and bisexual women) are unconcerned with appearance. Esther Rothblum (1994) argued that appearance norms have always existed in lesbian communities. Research within both the United Kingdom and the United States has suggested that lesbian communities have appearance norms which differ from mainstream norms (Clarke & Turner, 2007; Krakauer & Rose, 2002) and that the most recognisable of these centre on a *butch* or masculine appearance (including “comfortable” shoes and short hair). However, the butch norm is not monolithic, and there are many different ways to embody butch style (Levitt & Hiestand, 2004). In contrast, *femme* lesbians are often invisible as lesbians and are frequently misread as heterosexual (Lev, 2008).

Historically, relationships between butch and femme lesbians (Walker, 2001) frequently involved a “role playing” element (Eves, 2004; Vanska, 2005). For example, *looking* butch meant *acting* butch and performing male roles (Crawley, 2002). However, this connection between appearance and role does not necessarily exist for contemporary butch women (Eves,

2004). Although butch/femme appearances and associated identities were popular (particularly within working class lesbian communities) in the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Faderman, 1991), radical feminist critique of their apparent replication of heterosexual gender roles in relationships between butch and femme women led to butch/femme identities being marginalized in the 1970s (Walker, 2001) in favour of an androgynous norm (Rothblum, 1994). Other theorists have argued that these women were not seeking to mimic heterosexuality but were instead asserting an alternative version of accepted heteronormative relationships (Davis & Kennedy, 1986; Nguyen, 2008). More recently, Eves (2004) reported that the popularity of butch/femme appearances was returning with the advent of Queer Theory as a form of radical political resistance to expectations of gender normativity. Queer theorists argue that butch/femme appearances do not mimic heterosexuality but instead represent subversive desire (Nguyen, 2008).

Adherence to butch or androgynous appearance norms can signal a non-heterosexual identity to (non-heterosexual) others (Clarke & Turner, 2007), providing opportunities to access non-heterosexual social spaces and meet other non-heterosexual women (Holliday, 1999). However, being visibly recognized as a non-heterosexual woman can result in negative consequences, including social stigma and homophobic physical and verbal abuse (Kelly, 2007). Butch or androgynous women can be regarded with hostility in spaces reserved for normative feminine women such as changing rooms (Eves, 2004). As for bisexual women, research generally suggests that visual recognition is not easy to achieve because no well-known, identifiable bisexual “look” exists (Clarke & Turner, 2007). Due to this lack of specific bisexual appearance norms, bisexual women may draw on lesbian or heterosexual styles (Taub, 1999).

### **Partner Relationships and Feelings about Body and Appearance**

As previously suggested, differences between lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual women's feelings about their body and appearance may (at least in part) be explained by the sex/gender of their partner (Brown, 1987). Existing quantitative research on body image and partner relationships has demonstrated how heterosexual women's perceptions that a male partner prefers a body shape different from his own (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2006) and negative appearance-related feedback from a male partner (Befort et al., 2001) are related to women's body dissatisfaction. Similarly, qualitative research has suggested that positive feedback from male partners has benefits in terms of women's confidence, self-esteem, and feelings about their body (Ambwani & Strauss, 2007).

However, although many similarities may exist between same-sex and heterosexual relationships, there are also many differences (Peplau, Fingerhut, & Beals, 2004). In a social context where heterosexual relationships are normative, non-heterosexual women have reported that a freedom from gender roles (for women who do not perform butch/femme roles), the unique effects of prejudice, and heightened intimacy and friendship with their partner are the defining features of their same-sex relationships (Peplau et al., 2004; Rose & Zand, 2000). Therefore, same-sex relationships may shape women's feelings about their body and appearance in unique ways.

Two studies (both US-based) have identified same-sex relationships as being important in shaping lesbian and bisexual women's feelings about their body and appearance. Lesbians have described how their female partner's attraction to them and acceptance of their body size have encouraged positive feelings about their own appearance (Beren, Hayden, Wilfley, & Striegel-Moore, 1997). These same women began to apply different standards of beauty to themselves

once they realised that they were attracted to women who did not necessarily conform to mainstream ideals (Beren et al., 1997).

Similarly, Taub's (1999) research with bisexual women concluded that some women feel protected from social appearance pressures when in same-sex relationships and vulnerable to these pressures when in relationships with men. Taub described how perceptions of a same-sex partner's intimacy with, and acceptance of, their body shape encouraged some of these women to feel more comfortable with their appearance. However, she also described how some participants felt a need to change their appearance in order to be attractive to women, suggesting that same-sex relationships may be linked to unique appearance concerns. Such concerns could include a need to conform to appearance norms prevalent within lesbian communities in order to "fit in" and be acknowledged as non-heterosexual (Clarke & Turner, 2007).

### **The Present Study**

In summary, existing (qualitative) research suggests that same-sex relationships may positively shape women's feelings about their body and appearance, but that there may also be unique appearance pressures within such relationships. Our study is part of the qualitative phase of a broader mixed-methods program of research into lesbian and bisexual women's "body image" (Huxley, 2010; Huxley, Clarke & Halliwell, 2009a; Huxley, Clarke & Halliwell, 2009b) and was guided by two similar (phenomenologically-oriented) qualitative approaches: experiential thematic analysis (TA; Braun & Clarke, 2006) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Both of these approaches are concerned with making sense of people's lived experiences and the meanings people attach to their experiences. Both assume that people are self-reflective beings capable of reflecting on and making meaning of their experiences. Thus these methods are appropriate for a study which aims to "give voice"



to non-heterosexual women's feelings about their body and appearance in the context of their partner relationships.

Smith and colleagues (2009) recommend in-depth semi-structured interviews as the ideal method for research with an experiential focus. For this reason, we selected face-to-face semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection to permit scope for participants to talk about what was important to them while allowing the possibility of comparison and the identification of themes across the dataset. IPA has a strong idiographic focus and a commitment to understanding the detail of individual experience. Smith et al. also recommend the collection of relatively small, purposively-selected, and homogenous samples to allow the researcher to maintain a focus on the details of individual experiences, as well as to identify common themes across a dataset. Whereas Smith et al. recommend the use of samples as small as three, they argue that "there is no right answer to the question of sample size" (p. 51). We generated what is a relatively large sample in IPA terms – a sample of 15 women – because we were interested in identifying common themes in non-heterosexual women's experiences (with the aim of informing future research in the area) as well as focusing on the detail of individual experiences.

## **Method**

### **Participants and Recruitment**

The first author conducted interviews with 15 women primarily living in urban areas within the United Kingdom (see the Appendix for information about each interviewee). Although the women ranged in age from 18 to 69 years, most (10 women) were aged 30 years or younger. The women were asked to choose their own pseudonym, to describe their sexuality in their own words (these terms are used to describe participants when directly quoting from the interviews), and to provide details about their current relationship status. Across the women, 10

were currently in a partner relationship (7 with other women [of these seven, there were two couples in the study] and 3 with men) and 5 were single. All participants had experienced at least one same-sex relationship, and most (8 lesbian/gay and all 4 bisexual women) had also experienced, and spoke about, relationships with men. Participants not currently in a relationship were asked to reflect on their previous or most important relationship when answering questions, although all participants tended to draw from their experiences across several different relationships.

We used recruitment strategies that are widely used in LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) research – advertising in LGBTQ community organisations and groups and “snowball sampling” (Clarke, Ellis, Peel, & Riggs, 2010). The resulting sample was diverse in locality and profession. However, the women were all able-bodied White women, who were mostly middle-class ( $n = 10$ ) and educated to undergraduate degree level or higher ( $n = 9$ ), and most identified as lesbian ( $n = 9$ ).

On enquiring about the study, potential participants were informed about the nature of the interviews. They were also told that the interviewer, supervised by a non-heterosexual woman (the second author), was a heterosexual woman who was committed to non-heterosexist and inclusive research, following guidance for both non-heterosexist research (e.g., Herek, Kimmel, Amaro, & Melton, 1991) and for researchers conducting research with people outside their own social group(s) (e.g., McClennen, 2003; Wheeler, 2003). In her qualitative study of lesbians’ body image concerns, heterosexual feminist researcher Nancy Asher (Asher & Asher, 1999) found that the disclosure of her heterosexuality helped with the development of rapport and the creation of trust between the participants and herself. Similarly, we found that openness about

the interviewer's sexuality was appreciated by the women and that this honesty helped to build a connection between the participants and the researcher.

The interviewer's "outsider" position made it easy for her to ask "naive" questions (Morrow, 2005) when participants may have assumed that an "insider" had prior knowledge. Conversely, because of her lack of experiential knowledge of lesbian communities, it is possible that during the interviews she did not follow-up on certain issues that a non-heterosexual researcher would have identified as important to discuss. However, there are many subtle ways in which a researcher can be an outsider or an insider (Hellowell, 2006) because many personal and social characteristics intersect to form our identities (Crenshaw, 1993). Consequently, a researcher can simultaneously be both an insider and an outsider (Hellowell, 2006). In the current study, the interviewer was also an insider because she was of a similar age to most participants and a White, middle-class woman who shared many of the concerns the participants had about their bodies. Informal discussion with participants after their interviews suggested that they had enjoyed "educating" a heterosexual woman about their lives.

### **Interview Guide and Procedure**

The interview guide was developed from a review of the literature and our own interests in conducting the study (the guide was reviewed and slightly revised after the first few interviews). The women were asked about how they thought their (same-sex and heterosexual) relationships had shaped their feelings about their body and appearance and whether they felt influenced by social expectations or stereotypes about same-sex relationships. Existing research into the social cognitive construct of "body image" does not distinguish between the clothed and unclothed body, however, influenced by previous qualitative research on appearance (Beren et al., 1997; Clarke & Turner, 2007; Taub, 1999), we felt it was important in our questions to

distinguish between women's feelings about their (unclothed) body and their feelings about their appearance. Following a review of the guide after the first few interviews, it was apparent that this was a meaningful (and helpful) distinction for the women. Example questions from the interview guide include: "Do you think that your feelings about your partner's body affect the way you feel about your body?" and "Has a partner ever commented on your appearance?" Interviews took place in locations selected by the participants (generally their homes) and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed orthographically (by the first author).

### **Analysis**

Although both IPA and TA focus on making sense of individual experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Smith et al., 2009), TA places a stronger emphasis on locating individual experiences within a broader socio-cultural context, which we think is important for a study concerned with the experiences and perspectives of a socially marginalised group. Although our analysis of the data is "inductive" – in the sense that it is data- rather than theory-driven – and aims to stay close to participants' language, concepts, and sense-making practices, our analysis is also informed by critical feminist and queer analyses of the patriarchal and heteronormative social context in which women live. Thus, our analysis invokes both a *hermeneutics of empathy* (the attempt to understand participants' experiences on their own terms) and a *hermeneutics of suspicion* (using theoretical concepts – such as "heteronormativity" – to make sense of participants' experiences) (Smith et al., 2009, p. 106). The analytic procedures of IPA and TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006) are very similar and centre on a process of immersion in the dataset, reading and re-reading the entries before developing codes (or "initial comments" in IPA terminology), and organising codes into themes and sub-themes. However, IPA procedures

require that each case is analysed individually before themes are sought across cases in order to maintain an idiographic focus, whereas Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend that each stage of analysis is conducted across the entire dataset. Because our primary emphasis is on themes/commonalities across the dataset, rather than the detail of individual experiences, we elected to follow the TA process of coding and generating themes across the dataset. (With the IPA case-by-case approach, there is a risk that the codes and themes generated for the first case become the lens through which the entire dataset is viewed and interpreted.) The first author read and re-read the transcripts, generated codes, and then organised these codes into initial themes. This initial analysis was reviewed and refined with the second and third authors. When we use direct quotes from participants, we signal our editing of the quote (such as deletion of pauses or stuttering) with a bracketed gap.

In our analysis we report the numbers of women who commented on a particular issue (at the request of the editors). However, these numbers should be interpreted with a degree of caution. Because of the semi-structured and (to some extent) participant-led nature of the interviews, the participants were not asked exactly the same questions, although all of the main topics were discussed with each participant. Therefore, it should not be assumed that, for example, when we report that “six of the women thought that appearance was as integral to same-sex relationships as it was to heterosexual relationships” (see below), that the remaining women thought the opposite. It may be that only some women discussed a particular issue or raised a particular point in their interviews.

## **Results**

We generated seven themes from the data. We begin by exploring the importance of a woman’s appearance in both same-sex and heterosexual relationships and then shift our focus to

perceived acceptance and understanding of body-related concerns within same-sex relationships. Next, we discuss same-sex attractions, body-related comparisons between female partners, and “transference” of body-related feelings within same-sex relationships. We next address how stereotypical expectations of same-sex relationships shape women’s feelings about their appearance. Finally, we focus on possible concern about men’s opinions.

There was much more discussion about the influence of same-sex relationships on the women’s feelings about their body and appearance, possibly because seven of the women were currently involved in such relationships whereas only three were in relationships with men. Across the women’s accounts, there were few examples of ways in which male partners shaped positive feelings towards women’s appearance so that men’s influence was experienced as largely negative.

### **Woman’s Appearance in Partner Relationships**

Although not specifically asked whether their appearance was important in their relationships, many of the women commented on this topic in relation to both their same-sex and heterosexual relationships. Six women thought that appearance was not as integral to same-sex relationships as it was to heterosexual relationships. Those who stressed this belief reported feeling fairly happy with their body shape and size. However, 9 women (notably those who had current, or previous, concerns about their body size and shape) were aware of how feeling attractive to their partner boosted their confidence. These women indicated that, although appearance was not the most important feature of same-sex relationships, it did play a role in terms of physical attraction.

In contrast, 11 of the 12 women who had engaged in relationships with men experienced expectations and pressures to be “attractive” to their partner. Attractiveness often involved being

feminine and “sexy,” and trying to attain a slender yet curvy figure. Three of these women reported that both men and women were socialised to expect women to look a particular way in order to be attractive to men:

That’s what society teaches us from quite an early age, that women are how they are because we’re trying to attract men... So I think that society enforces those stereotypes for men and women. And so, on the whole, yes I think there is more pressure...in being with a man, and almost not through any fault of the individuals involved. (Isabel, 30-year-old bi woman)

These women felt that pressure to be attractive within heterosexual relationships was mainly implicit because partners subtly encouraged the women to wear revealing, feminine clothes through praise and compliments. There was little discussion of male partners directly trying to manipulate the women’s appearance; however, two women had experienced weight-related taunting or teasing from male partners. For example, Rachel (62-year-old lesbian) thought that her ex-husband would make disparaging comments about her body shape: “at times when he wanted to...humiliate me.”

In contrast, 2 bisexual participants thought that men were actually less critical (“not fussy”) and judgmental of women’s bodies and appearance than women who used cultural beauty ideals as standards by which to judge or compare themselves to other women:

men are much more...forgiving about women’s bodies and women are very critical of each other’s bodies... Men don’t really care a lot of the time to be honest, I don’t think... I think women think much, men are much more critical of their bodies than they actually are... (Sookie, 47-year-old bisexual woman)

Laura suggested that pressures in heterosexual relationships stemmed from women's perceptions of men's narrow expectations of what the female body should look like. She argued that such expectations have been created and sustained through societal ideals and media portrayals of female beauty, but do not necessarily reflect individual men's actual preferences: "I think if you're bi you [...], or lesbian, have a broader appreciation of women's bodies yourself, and you maybe don't go for the kind of Barbie-doll type, you know, stereotype that men are meant to go for" (Laura, 27 year old bisexual woman). Laura's comments relate to ideas associated with Fredrickson and Robert's (1997) objectification theory: that under an appraising male gaze, women are taught to self-objectify by evaluating their attractiveness against current (heteronormative) ideals. Laura suggested that lesbian and bisexual women are aware that diverse body shapes, sizes, and appearances are attractive and that beauty is not limited to young, thin, feminine women.

### **Acceptance and Understanding**

Seven women thought that female partners showed a unique understanding of, and sympathy for, body-focused anxieties. These women perceived a degree of shared appearance-related experiences between themselves and their female partner, including social pressure to conform to mainstream ideals (particularly around body size) and "natural" bodily changes or processes such as menstrual-related bloating. In the view of these women, such mutual experiences created a unique sense of understanding and empathy between partners. Jolim (27-year-old lesbian) thought that women were able to understand each others' needs when voicing dissatisfaction with their appearance; they do not necessarily want reassurance, compliments or solutions to "the problem," they just want someone to listen to them. This perception of shared



understandings helped to foster a sense of acceptance within their relationships, which encouraged the women to be less anxious about their body size and appearance:

Well there's bound to be much greater empathy, isn't there? Because, because, you know, she's got the same sort of body as me, in terms of sort of gender and general overall things [...] I think there's more empathy, more, kind of, understanding about issues and problems and how you feel and so on in, in a way that I never experienced in all my, kind of, relationships with men... (Sylvia, 49 year old lesbian)

Jolim, however, thought that gender sameness was not enough, and that a partner's body size influenced their capacity for understanding and empathy. She felt that partners who were a similar size as herself (she described herself as "overweight") could understand her body anxieties more than slimmer partners could because they experienced the same societal pressures to lose weight. Although Tove (37-year-old lesbian) accepted that there is a *potential* for increased understanding between women, she suggested that such perceptions could be inaccurate and that it should not be assumed that other women have experienced similar emotions or anxieties about their body.

In contrast, 6 women were critical of male partners because they felt that they could not comprehend or sympathise with their body-related concerns in the way that female partners could. Research suggests that men view women's body image concerns as being far less severe and damaging than women themselves do (Bosson, Pinel & Thompson, 2008), which may account for this lack of sympathy. These women also thought that male partners were often critical about the "natural" changes in women's bodies that female partners were seen to understand.

### **Same-sex Attractions**

Attractions to other women had a positive influence on 5 participants' feelings about their body. These women felt that their negative feelings about their own body size were ameliorated by their appreciation of curves, diversity in body shape and size, and attractions to women who they perceived to be larger than themselves. Such attractions somewhat negated the validity of cultural beauty ideals:

...when I got into a relationship with a woman, then I became much, much, much more relaxed about my body because she was fucking gorgeous and she wasn't super skinny, so you just click that she's gorgeous, she's got a tummy and she's got a bum but she's gorgeous [...] so why am I making such a fuss about having a bit of a tummy? (Isabel, 30-year-old bi woman)

At the same time, 5 women thought that larger female bodies were not "attractive," contradicting the notion that a diversity of body sizes and shapes are accepted within lesbian subcultures (Myers, Taub, Morris, & Rothblum, 1999). The notion of healthy body weight also ran through three of these women's accounts and was particularly noticeable when they discussed the "health implications" (Philios, 22 year old lesbian) of themselves or a partner being "large." From the women's standpoint, they were concerned about weight and body size from a health perspective rather than an aesthetic perspective. Indeed, this emphasis on "healthy" body weights was presented as a resistance to the cultural idealization of thinness:

I'm all for people not being overweight [...] when it comes to sort of obesity and things I see that more of a health issue than an image issue, and I wouldn't see that as an issue about someone's appearance I'd see it as an issue about their health generally and, and that would not be something that I'd find attractive at all. (Laura, 27 year old bisexual woman)

However, because thin, toned, “fat-free” bodies are widely equated to physical health (Burns & Gavey, 2004), it could be argued that these women still subscribed to the cultural imperative for thinness.

### **Comparisons Between Same-sex Partners**

Most of the women were keenly aware of the potential for body and appearance comparisons between same-sex partners. Ten participants indicated this process by actually comparing their body size, or a particular body part, to that of their partner’s. Some of these women felt more confident in their appearance if they were slimmer, or more self-conscious if they were larger, than their partner:

...it’s like, you know, obviously having female, constant female friends and because they’re more, you’re more intimate with each other, so you know every-, er... every bit about them, and it’s a comparison thing, isn’t it? Erm, [my recent ex-girlfriends were] very, very slim, I suppose that’s made me always feel bigger. ‘Cos I know when I’ve been with other people who are either taller than me, or a little bit bigger, it’s made me feel like a skinny runt. (Sally, 25-year-old lesbian)

Jolim (27-year-old lesbian) called such comparisons and concerns about body-size discrepancies between partners, a “lesbian thing.” However, only 1 participant, Philios (22-year-old lesbian), who emphatically denied experiencing body anxieties despite reporting disliking her “too skinny” UK-size eight (US-size four) frame, acknowledged that she was aware of partners comparing themselves to her.

### **“Transference” and Influence**

Five women thought that female partners directly influenced their feelings about their body through seemingly non-intentional transference of their partner’s body-related emotions.

Positive feelings and body-confidence were passed between partners, just as negative feelings and bodily anxieties were. Such transference often focussed on the women's feelings about their body size, with a partner's "relaxed" approach to her body encouraging them to relax about their own body size.

The time and effort the women's partners spent on their appearance also seemed to rub off on them. For example, Louise (27-year-old lesbian) recalled how her ex-girlfriend spent less time and effort on her clothing and appearance than she did. Louise started to do the same as she felt uncomfortable with the discrepancy between her partner's "scruffiness" and her effort to look "smart." Partners also influenced these women's appearance through sharing clothes and imitating admired hair styles. The women contrasted such influence with a need for individuality and to look distinctive, particularly when a physical similarity became apparent and partners began to look alike:

When in a, in a lesbian relationship [...] you start looking the same. Which is worrying, erm... er, you start, I think because you're around each other you, you're borrowing each other's clothes possibly [...] and you do, you start buying really, really similar clothing and you do have to stop yourself and go "no, we've got identical clothing, just slightly different sizes." (Philios, 22 year old lesbian)

Philios' comments echo the popular cultural notion that lesbian couples "merge" together and begin to look alike (Burch, 1982).

### **Stereotypical Expectations**

Six women's feelings about their appearance were affected by (predominantly heterosexual) others' stereotypical expectations about the gender expression of partners in same-sex relationships. The notion that all lesbian relationships conform to butch/femme dress codes

and roles was often referenced. Five participants cited incidents where they or their partner had been called “butch” or “the man,” and were assumed to fulfil a “male” role within their relationship, based on the degree of masculinity/femininity of their appearance. Tara (23-year-old gay woman) had frequently encountered the assumption made by both other lesbians and heterosexual friends that she was looking for a “butch” partner because of her “very feminine” appearance: “Oh I do get lots of, like, butch women coming up to me because they think I’m very feminine, that’s what I’m, that’s what I’m looking for [...] even in the gay community, erm, there’s that stereotype there, definitely, yeah.”

Although 9 women reported that others’ assumptions did not cause anxiety for them, 6 became conscious about how they dressed and how they would be perceived in public space with their partner. Five of these women reported not wanting to be perceived as butch, which translated into pressure to ensure they did not look masculine, did not conform to butch appearance norms that are often popular within lesbian communities (Clarke & Turner, 2007; Rothblum, 1994), and did not desire butch-appearing women. The women did not offer to explain their resistance to looking butch or desiring butch women, except to say that they liked women who “looked like women,” “not women who looked like men” (Louise, 27-year-old lesbian). Within Western society, non-normative sexual identities, gender identities, and gender expression are marginalised and devalued, and negative social constructions of butch lesbians include the notion that they are “aping men” (Levitt & Hiestand, 2004, p. 617). Louise reflects this notion by suggesting that butch women look “like men” rather than embodying a certain lesbian style. These women seemed to distinguish between *looking* butch and *being* butch: they thought that if people saw them as masculine then others would assume they performed a male role within the relationship.

In contrast, throughout the interviews there was no explicit discussion of femme visual identities and appearance norms. However, some women did discuss their clothing and hairstyles in terms of femininity (for example, their feelings about skirts, dresses, make-up and long hair, all of which were seen as “feminine” aspects of appearance). The women’s accounts of their appearance and visual sexual identities reflected the invisibility of femme women in lesbian communities (Lev, 2008).

Six women highlighted the importance of wearing clothes in which they felt comfortable, rather than what simply looked “good.” For these women, the term “comfortable” reflected both physical comfort, and, as Ruth Holliday (1999, p. 481) has described, the comfort derived from the “degree of fit between the outside of one’s body and its inside...the ’imaged’ or ’true’ self.” However, Helen (30-year-old lesbian) felt a tension between wanting to wear “comfortable” clothes while simultaneously wanting to deter both heterosexual people from making judgements about her role within her relationship with another woman (by not appearing *too* butch) and lesbian women from questioning her authenticity as a lesbian (by not appearing *too* femme). Ultimately Helen wore clothes that she thought communicated a message about her lesbian identity, but in which she felt less comfortable:

I actually feel there’s pressure not to [wear feminine clothes], being with a, being with a female. ‘Cos I, I actually quite like, wear-, if I’m dressing smart, I’ll wear a skirt as opposed to trousers [...] and I actually find it quite difficult if I want to go out with [my girlfriend], that I have to think about, hang-on if someone were going to, going to make a judgment about me ’cause I’m a lesbian wearing a skirt, that I’m, not, I’m just experimenting, I’m not really a lesbian that, erm, that I’m “the female” and she’s “the male,” that whole stereotypical opinion that people have.

When Isabel (30-year-old bi woman) was in a same-sex relationship, she experienced pressures to conform to lesbian appearance norms, which she did not experience in relationships with men. Conformity to lesbian appearance norms is one way for women to gain recognition and acceptance within lesbian communities (Clarke & Turner, 2007). Such desires may be accentuated for bisexual women, who can often feel alienated within lesbian social space (Bower, Gurevich, & Mathieson, 2002; Gurevich, Bower, Mathieson, & Dhayanandhan, 2007). Like Helen, Isabel may have felt a need to be seen as authentic and not simply “experimenting.” Two participants were getting married – the term they used to describe their civil partnership (a civil partnership is a form of legal recognition for same-sex relationships in the UK that involves similar rights and responsibilities as marriage, but is not named as marriage; Clarke, Burgoyne, & Burns, 2007) – to each other a few weeks after their interviews. Both independently mentioned how they had delayed making the decision to get married because they did not know what to wear for the ceremony. Same-sex couples often reference heterosexual social norms in discussing their relationship, particularly when describing traditionally heterosexual institutions such as marriage (Clarke, et al., 2007). These women initially felt constrained by the lack of social norms for dress at same-sex weddings, and they referred to heterosexual bridal traditions in their deliberations. Eventually, however, they found the absence of expectations to be liberating: “We’re having a completely unconventional wedding in a lot of ways [...] we’re having the wedding we want and I can dress, I can wear what I like!” (Sylvia, 49-year-old lesbian).

### **Concern about Men’s Opinions**

The women who had experienced a number of relationships with men indicated that their degree of concern about men’s opinion influenced whether they would engage in mainstream

feminine beauty practices and body shaping behaviours. This discussion was particularly noticeable in the bisexual women's accounts, and concern about men's opinions reflected how anxious they were about being the subject of the male gaze. Objectification theory states that women's concern about the male gaze is connected to their desire to conform to cultural ideals of female beauty (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). For example, Mae (18-year-old bisexual woman) stressed that she wanted to be perceived as "pretty" by men and feel accepted within mainstream society, and consequently she experienced more pressure to look "good" for men than she did for women.

The 3 other bisexual women, however, felt more committed to lesbian communities than to mainstream society, and they expressed little concern about being favourably assessed by men. Their lack of commitment to mainstream society was associated with a critical awareness of pressures to be "attractive" and a resistance to societal beauty ideals and practices. This apparent lack of concern about the critical male gaze did not always result in complete rejection of all beauty ideals, however, as Isabel (30-year-old bi woman), who was not explicitly asked about the male gaze, suggested that a small part her does still care:

I wouldn't be trying to catch the gaze of men, and in fact I would actually avoid...looking at men, I think. So I, I couldn't give a shit about their approval. [But] I'm sure there is a part of me that still does. I tried to stop shaving my armpits, and I found it very, very difficult, [...] I obviously do care about that gaze on some level or I wouldn't have that issue with, with stopping shaving my armpits.

For the lesbian women, concern about *women's* opinion was related to adoption of lesbian appearance norms and rejection of mainstream beauty practices. These women were most conscious of their appearance when they were looking to meet a female partner, or were



spending time in lesbian social space. They felt nervous that their appearance would be (negatively) evaluated if they did not appear to conform to appearance mandates and that they would be refused access to lesbian social space (Clarke & Turner, 2007). They felt compelled then to spend time and effort on their appearance to ensure that they both looked “good” and met expectations around their appearance, when they were spending time in lesbian space.

Obviously when you’re dealing with a group that’s concerned about sexuality, you can’t get away from the fact that people are there to meet other people. It’s not just for the support, but a lot of people go for meat market, so just to pick up someone, or, you know, to find someone there. I did it. [...] Erm, so you always want to try and look good, in case someone nice comes along. (Pat, 27-year-old lesbian)

### **Discussion**

Our research demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between lesbian and bisexual women’s partner relationships and their feelings about their body and appearance. Our analysis highlights how both the lesbian subcultural and the wider mainstream social contexts of same-sex relationships can shape women’s feelings about their body and appearance. The 11 lesbians in our study described how their partners’ and other people’s expectations of and assumptions about their relationships had the potential to influence their body and appearance-related feelings. Differences were identified by these women in the social appearance pressures experienced within same-sex and heterosexual relationships, with some women experiencing pressure to look feminine and “sexy” in relationships with men, but to conform to lesbian appearance norms when in relationships with women. However, all women expressed unease with butch appearances, denying attractions to butch women.

The four bisexual participants we interviewed reported similar influences on their feelings about their body and appearance as the lesbian women. However, these bisexual women were more aware of the ways in which male partners shaped their feelings about their body and appearance. Some of the bisexual women appeared to experience a tension between desires to be seen as attractive by men and their resistance to mainstream beauty norms. This conflict tentatively suggests that these women may experience unique appearance pressures. The degree of their concern about the male gaze may shape this tension, although a lack of concern was not sufficient for them to reject all mainstream beauty norms and practices. Three bisexual women were currently in different-sex relationships and one desired a male partner. These current attractions to (specific) men could explain why these women felt unable to completely reject conformity to the appearance norms that men (more broadly) are purported to find desirable.

Our analysis, then, suggests that the theoretical debate between Brown (1987) and Dworkin (1988) is too simplistic. Same-sex relationships cannot be described either as being protective of women's feelings about their body and appearance (Brown) or as having no protective influence on women's experiences of prevalent cultural norms and expectations (Dworkin). It appears that both positions have some currency, and a synthesized explanation should be explored in future research. It is possible that the relevance of each stance varies between individual women and their partner(s): if a woman's experiences of same-sex relationships and the associated unique appearance pressures are more positive than negative then she may be protected via a 'buffering effect' (Sabik, Cole & Ward, 2010). However, if her experiences are primarily negative (if she frequently engages in body-based comparisons with her partner, for example) then no protective "buffer" may be provided.

For bisexual women, the picture may be even more complex because other influences (such as the degree of their concern about the male gaze and commitment to lesbian communities) may also shape their feelings about their body and appearance. The findings from our study suggest that bisexual women's experiences may be unique and thus are deserving of further academic attention in their own right.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Like other researchers studying LGBTQ populations, we experienced great difficulty in recruiting bisexual women (Hayfield, 2011). We were only able to recruit four bisexual women, three of whom were in monogamous relationships with men and one was single (and desired such a relationship). Although these women expressed many similar opinions, there were also some divergences, particularly related to their experiences of same-sex relationships, that could not be further explored in the interviews due to the small number of women taking part. There is very little qualitative research on bisexual women's feelings about their body and appearance (and bisexual women tend to be ignored, or deliberately excluded, from quantitative research on body image; e.g., Strong et al., 2000; Wagenbach, 2003) so we echo existing calls for further research in this area (Beren et al., 1997; Clarke & Turner, 2007). Research with bisexual women in same-sex (and polyamorous) relationships could provide particularly unique insights.

Our participants were predominantly young, White, middle-class women who are often ubiquitous within research on non-heterosexual populations (Morris & Rothblum, 1999). This limitation may result from purposive and snowball methods of recruitment (Dunne, 1997). Although these methods resulted in recruitment of participants both locally (within South-West England) and nationally, it is extremely difficult to recruit samples that include a wide range and diversity of women within non-heterosexual communities (Clarke & Peel, 2007). Feminist

sociologist Taylor's (2007) research on working-class lesbians showed how lesbian social space is seen as "middle-class" by working-class women and inclusion is based on conformity to specific visual cues. Many of the lesbians in the current study felt a connection to lesbian communities and a desire to be accepted there. Research with working-class lesbians may reveal different findings about ways in which partner relationships shape women's feelings about their body and appearance.

In terms of race and culture, evidence suggests that Black, Latina, Asian, and other racially marginalised lesbians experience tension between specific cultural appearance norms and the typically White beauty ideals of lesbian communities (Lyle, Jones, & Drakes, 1999). Quantitative research has demonstrated that although Black women are less likely to accept and "internalise" White beauty ideals than White women (Jefferson & Stake, 2009), they are still vulnerable to a preoccupation with their weight and dieting (Mitchell & Mazzeo, 2009). Together with cultural variations in gender expression within same-sex relationships (Blackwood, 1999; Elliston, 1999), it could be argued that race and culture may play a significant role in affecting how partner relationships are connected to women's feelings about their body and appearance. It is important to fully understand how sexuality and race may affect women's feelings about their body and appearance, and we suggest that this is an area in need of further research.

The researcher's explicit openness about her heterosexuality may have influenced some women's choices to participate in the study. Although heterosexual researchers have argued that explicit disclosure of their heterosexuality was beneficial during the recruitment of lesbians (e.g., Asher & Asher, 1999), a number of openly lesbian researchers have reported that some lesbians were only willing to take part in their research because they had explicitly "outed" themselves as

non-heterosexual (Clarke, Kitzinger, & Potter, 2004; Dunne 1997; Kitzinger, 1987). In the current study, four women made initial inquiries about the research but failed to respond after they had received further information which included the researcher's sexuality, and it is possible that this disclosure deterred them from participating.

### **Conclusion**

Our research gives voice to a group of women currently underrepresented in both qualitative and quantitative research on women's feelings about their body and appearance. The lesbian and bisexual women in our study described how their same-sex relationships were a source of both body-focused comfort and concern, highlighting the complexity of the connections between women's partner relationships and their feelings about their body and appearance. Positive descriptions of empathy towards body-focused and appearance concerns as well as diversity within same-sex attractions suggest that women's same-sex relationships have the *potential* to encourage women to feel happier with their bodies. Sociocultural appearance pressures are becoming ever more detrimental to women's psychological and physical health (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 2002), and much could be learned from same-sex relationships (Dunne, 1999) about how all women could be protected from body and appearance concerns.

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## Appendix

## Participants' Demographic Information

Name	Age (yrs)	Sexuality	Gender	Ethnicity	Disability	Highest Qualification	Occupation	Class	Current Partner	Relationship Length	Children (number)
Holly	69	G	W	W - B/I	No	No	Ret	Wo	F	8 yrs	2
Tara	23	G	F	W - B/I	Yes*	Ma	Emp	Mi	S	**	0
Helen	30	L	F	W - B/I	No	Ma	Emp	Wo	F	9 mths	0
Jolim	27	L	F	W - B(M)	No	AL	Stu	*	F	1 mth	0
Louise	27	L	F	W - B/I	No	AL	Emp	Mi	S	**	0
Pat	27	L	W	W - B/I	No	Deg	Emp	Wo	F	8 mths	0
Philios	22	L	F	W - B/I	No	Deg	Emp	Mi	S	**	0
Rachel	62	L	F	J - E	No	PhD	Emp	Mi	F	8 yrs 6 mths	2
Sally	25	L	F	W - B/I	No	Deg	Emp	Mi	S	**	0
Sylvia	49	L	F	J - E	No	PhD	Emp	Mi	F	8 yrs 6 mths	2
Tove	37	L	F	W - B/I	No	Deg	Emp	Mi	F	10 yrs	0
Isabel	30	Bi	W	W - B/I	No	Deg	Stu	Mi	M	2 yrs 3 mths	0
Laura	27	B	F	W - B/I	No	Ma	Emp	Mi	M	5 years	0
Mae	18	B	F	W - B/I	No	AL	Stu	*	S	**	0
Sookie	47	B	U	W - B/I	Yes †	*	Stu	Un	M	20 years	1

*Note.* Codes for entries are: Sexuality (G: Gay, L: Lesbian, Bi: Bi, B: Bisexual); Gender (W: Woman, F: Female, U: Undecided); Ethnicity (W

- B/I: White British/Irish, W - B(M): White British (Mixed), J - E: Jewish/European Jewish); Highest Qualification (No: No qualifications, AL: A-

Level, Deg: Degree, Ma: Masters, PhD: Doctorate); Occupation (Emp: Paid/Self employment, Ret: Retired, Stu: Student); Class (Wo: Working,

Mi: Middle, Un: Undecided); and Current Partner (M: Male, F: Female, S: Single).

\* = no (additional) data provided. \*\* = n/a. † - dyslexia.