Inside out: Lesbian, gay and bisexual appearance and embodiment

Editorial introduction

Introducing lesbian, gay and bisexual appearance psychology

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Popular terms like ‘gaydar’, ‘passing’, ‘straight-acting’ and ‘closeted’ signal the importance of appearance and embodiment and (in)visibility in lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) communities. Countless websites signal the importance of the visual presentation of self in LGB culture – spend a few minutes browsing the web and you can find (often decidedly tongue-in-cheek) discussions of, among other things, how to be a butch lesbian, the need for a bisexual haircut, and how to rate (gay) guys out of ten for ‘cuteness’ and sex appeal.

Lesbian and gay historians have highlighted the importance of dress and appearance in communicating sexual identities and preferences (to the wider world or just to those ‘in the know’) and in creating queer communities, and the ways in which queers have used the semiotic codes woven into clothing to produce the clothed body as a site of political action and resistance (Cole, 2000, Faderman, 1991). Lesbian and gay political movements have used dress and appearance both to ‘fit in’ and to ‘stand out’ (Hutson, 2010). For example, in the 1950s homophile organisations like the (predominantly white and middle class) Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) encouraged their members to dress like (white, middle class) ‘respectable citizens’ – “a mode of... dress acceptable to society” (quoted in Faderman, 1991: 180) – as part of their campaign for civil rights and assimilation. Lesbians were strongly urged to reject the butch style that was popular (particularly among working class women) in the 1950s because it was thought to reinforce negative stereotypes (Faderman, 1991; see also Hayfield, 2011). An early issue of the DOB journal The Ladder declared that: “The kids in fly front pants and with butch haircuts and mannish manner are the worst publicity that we can get” (quoted in Faderman, 1991: 180). Members of the
homophile movement were ‘good gays’, encouraging conformity to the rules of compulsory heterosexuality.

By contrast, in the 1970s, lesbian feminists argued that in order to express their resistance to heteropatriarchal culture, women should reject all aspects of appearance associated with dominant heterosexual femininity (butch style was again condemned, but this time as an outdated mimicry of heterosexual masculinity and butch lesbians were criticised for aligning with men and patriarchal privilege) (Creed, 1999). The lesbian feminist ‘look’, which was often heavily policed, was ‘androgyrous’: short hair, flannel shirts, blue jeans, no jewellery and no make-up (Rothblum, 1994).

Ever since early sexologists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Henry Havelock Ellis introduced homosexuality to the scientific gaze, sexuality scholars have been fascinated with the appearance of sexual inverteds. For both Krafft-Ebing and Ellis, the true female invert’s “preference for clothes cut in the fashion of men” (Krafft-Ebing, 1886/1997: 186) and “very pronounced tendency... to adopt male attire when practicable” (Ellis, 1906/2001: 140-141) was an outward expression of her inner masculinity; the “hermaphroditism of [her] soul” (Foucault, 1978: 43). Likewise, the male sexual invert’s “feminine ways” (Ellis, 1906/2001: 71) and fondness for “female clothing” (Krafft-Ebing, 1886/1997: 168) was interpreted as an outward expression of “psychic femininity” (Krafft-Ebing, 1886/1997: 166). Since the emergence of ‘gay affirmative’ psychology in the 1970s, some LGB psychologists have shared the early sexologists’ fascination with sexuality and appearance. Psychological research on LGB appearance and embodiment has focused on four main areas: (I) heterosexual perceptions of lesbian and gay appearance and embodiment; (II) ‘gaydar’ and the detection of sexual orientation; (III) body image; and (IV) appearance and clothing
practices. I now provide a brief overview of research in each of these four areas before introducing the three papers that constitute this Special Feature.

**Looking at LGB appearance and embodiment from the outside**

Research on heterosexual perceptions of lesbian and gay appearance and embodiment has shown a strong association between physical unattractiveness and homosexuality, and between femininity and male homosexuality and masculinity and female homosexuality (e.g., Dew, 1985, Laner & Laner, 1979, Unger, Hilderbrand & Mader, 1982). Studies have also found links between homophobia and perceptions of unattractiveness. Participants found to be less tolerant of homosexuality are generally more likely to associate homosexuality with unattractiveness. This body of research shows that the early sexologists’ gender inversion model of homosexuality underpins perceptions of homosexuality (Kite & Deux, 1987): the authors of one study concluded that “homosexual men and women are disliked because they are thought to display inappropriate gender-related mannerisms” (Laner & Laner, 1980: 339).

More recently research has focused on the detection of lesbianism and homosexuality from visual cues (what gay men and lesbians often refer to colloquially as ‘gaydar’, a combination of ‘gay’ and ‘radar’). Researchers have consistently found that heterosexuals (and lesbians and gay men) accurately judge (significantly better than chance) ‘sexual orientation’, often based on very ‘thin slices’ of visual stimuli such as a 10 second silent video clip (Ambady, Hallahan & Conner, 1999) or a 50 millisecond exposure to a photographic image (Rule & Ambady, 2008). There is evidence that the accurate detection of sexual orientation is underpinned by a gender inversion theory of homosexuality (Johnson, Gill, Reichman & Tassinary, 2007). The findings of one study showed that both computer-generated and real
faces that were judged to be more gender inverted were more likely to be judged as gay or lesbian. Furthermore, the use of stereotypic gendered cues to judge sexual orientation increased the accuracy of perceiver judgements, except when judging photographs of gender atypical targets (here judgements were consistently less accurate than chance) (Freeman, Johnson, Ambady & Rule, 2010). Until very recently, there has been little interest in the detection of bisexuality. Ding and Rule (2012) found that although perceivers could accurately (above-chance levels) identify heterosexual men and women, and lesbians and gay men, bisexual men were only identified at chance. Furthermore, participants believed bisexual men to be significantly different from heterosexual men but not from gay men, and bisexual women significantly different from heterosexual women but not lesbians, and bisexual targets were consistently mistaken as gay/lesbian. Ding and Rule concluded that a “straight-non straight dichotomy” (p. 165) underpins judgements of sexual orientation.

**Looking at LGB appearance and embodiment from the inside**

LGB psychologists have also been interested in lesbian and gay appearance and embodiment from ‘the inside’. Early research on sexuality and body image concerns, and related issues such as eating and exercise attitudes and behaviour showed that lesbians are slightly more satisfied with their bodies than heterosexual women and heterosexual men are slightly more satisfied with their bodies than gay men (Morrison, Morrison & Sager, 2004). It has been argued that lesbians are more tolerant of diversity in body size (Brown, 1987), whereas the gay male community is ‘obsessed’ with physical appearance (Blotcher, 1991/1998). More recent research on body image has focused on lesbians and heterosexual women and gay and heterosexual men and the gendering of body ideals. The argument is that men value physical attractiveness in a partner more than women and men’s investment
in appearance “creates appearance-related pressures for heterosexual females and gay males” (Tylka & Andorka, 2012: 57). Critiques of the body image literature (e.g., Atkins’, 1998, Kane, 2009) have highlighted the ways in which this literature pathologises gay men and reinforces stereotypes of them “as obsessed with their appearance” (Kane, 2009: 20). Furthermore, it is argued that this literature tends to feminise gay men and masculinise lesbian women by simplistically equating gay men with heterosexual women and lesbians with heterosexual men, and thus, implicitly drawing on, and recycling, a gender inversion model of homosexuality (Kane, 2009). Kane (2009) also criticised the body image literature for reinforcing a binary (homosexual/heterosexual) model of sexuality; the responses of bisexual participants are typically either ‘discarded’ (Reilly, Rudd & Hillery, 2008: 318) or included in the homosexual group. In 2002, Rothblum highlighted a lack of data on the body image of bisexual people and a decade later we still know very little about bisexual body image (but see Taub, 2003, Hayfield, 2011).

The final area of appearance research that has attracted the attention of LGB psychologists is appearance and clothing practices in non-heterosexual communities. Rothblum (1994: 92) argued that “the lesbian community has always had norms for physical appearance” and that these norms serve two main purposes: providing subtle codes for the communication of sexuality (and sexual preferences), allowing lesbians to recognise each other, and providing a group (sub-cultural) identity distinct from the dominant culture. Similarly, in gay male communities “fashion is used as a major means of expression of gay sexualities and a means of differentiation for individuals both from the straight society and within the complex tribal structures of the gay community” (Schofield & Schmidt, 2005: 321).
A number of studies have noted a “coercive element” (Esterberg, 1996: 277) to appearance mandates in lesbian communities and the marginalisation of lesbians and bisexual women who do not conform to such mandates (Taylor, 2007). Feminine-appearing lesbians and bisexual women in a number of studies have reported feeling marginalised and politically suspect in lesbian space and experiencing pressure to conform to butch/androgynous appearance norms (Levitt, Gerrish & Hiestand, 2003, Taub, 2003). Hutson (2010: 225) similarly noted the operation of coercive appearance mandates on the gay scene and the importance of ‘looking good’ and ‘looking the part’ for gay men, and the hegemony of “tight shirts, tight pants, and a well-groomed presentation”.

Research on appearance and clothing practices has found little evidence of bisexual appearance norms (Clarke & Turner, 2007, Rothblum, 2010, Hayfield, 2011). In one of the few studies of bisexual women’s appearance practices, Taub (2003) reported that many of her participants “spoke of adopting their own appearance standards that seem to fall between the stereotypical ‘feminine’ appearance norms for women, and the stereotypical lesbian appearance norms” (p. 21).

**Introducing the Special Feature**

The three papers in this special feature all make important contributions to the psychology of LGB appearance and embodiment and extend and develop the existing literature in exciting ways. First, Caroline Huxley contributes to the literature on sexuality and body image by exploring the relationship between appearance satisfaction and sexuality-based discrimination (which, Huxley argues, is often based on the visual recognition of sexuality) among lesbian and bisexual women. Huxley shows that lesbian women were more likely to report experiences of discrimination the less satisfied they were with their appearance;
there was no such relationship between appearance satisfaction and discrimination for bisexual women (and bisexual women reported experiencing significantly less discrimination than lesbian women). Huxley speculates that bisexual women are less vulnerable to discrimination because there are less visual cues associated with bisexuality and consequently bisexuality is less easy to detect than lesbianism.

Nikki Hayfield returns to the earliest strand of LGB appearance psychology – heterosexuals’ perceptions of lesbian and gay appearance – and provides a qualitative exploration of (predominantly heterosexual) university students’ perceptions of the ‘typical’ appearance of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and heterosexuals. She shows that although the participants identified appearance norms for lesbians and gay men they presented these as stereotypes of lesbian and gay appearance rather than as accurate reflections of how real lesbians and gay men appear. Furthermore, in reporting that the participants struggled to identify appearance norms for bisexual people, Hayfield provides important empirical evidence of the socio-cultural invisibility of bisexuality.

Finally, Victoria Clarke and Katherine Spence contribute to the small but growing body of research on appearance and clothing practices by exploring lesbian and bisexual women’s accounts of their appearance practices and in particular the ways in which the women discursively negotiated a dilemma of authenticity. Clarke and Spence argue that lesbian and bisexual women are compelled to negotiate the dual demands of sub-cultural authenticity (looking like an authentic non-heterosexual) and individual authenticity (looking like an authentic individual). They found that their participants deployed various discursive resources for negotiating this dilemma from an essentialist butch discourse to challenging
the link between lesbianism and masculinity by arguing that any woman (with any style) can be a lesbian.

As the brief overview of existing appearance psychology has shown most research is based on a binary (homosexual/heterosexual) model of sexuality, and the exclusion of bisexuality. By contrast, the papers in this Special Feature are all inclusive of bisexuality. Although appearance research is often dismissed as trivial and fashion is typically viewed as a site of oppression, it is hoped that this Special Feature will convince readers of the importance of appearance in the lives of LGB individuals and communities and the need for further (inclusive) research on LGB appearance and embodiment.

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References


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1 A number of sexuality scholars have noted a distinction in anti and pro-gay rhetoric between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ gays; the ‘good homosexual/dangerous queer’ binary (Smith, 1994). The good gay conforms to the rules of compulsory heterosexuality; they ‘know their place’. Dangerous queers are those who ‘ flaunt’ or are ‘militant’ or ‘missionary’ about their identity’ (Millibank, 1992: 25).