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‘A qualitative study of bisexual women’s appearance and identity’

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- Background - the importance of sexuality and appearance
- Previous research
- Aims
- Using photomethodology in interviews
- Demographics
- Main codes and themes
- Conclusions and future plans
Lesbians and gay men use appearance:

- To enable expression and communication of their sexuality for the purpose of:
  - creating a sense of group identity distinct from wider culture
  - sexual signalling
- Historically as a political tool to raise visibility and gain equal rights
- As a political statement and critique of the rigid dress codes of heterosexual society
- As pleasurable to look and be looked at

Previous research findings

Taub (1999):
Women change their beauty practices according to the gender of their partner but no specific ‘look’ exists

Holliday (1999):
One bisexual (man) pushes boundaries of uniform and wears bright colours but doesn’t expect to be read as bisexual (indicative of a lack of bisexual look)
Background

Clarke and Turner (2007):

- “lesbian and gay participants […] had an existing vocabulary to make sense of the topic, […] bisexual women struggled to make links between their sexuality and their dress and appearance … a separate focus on bisexuals may be necessary to understand the specificity of bisexual visual identities” (Clarke and Turner 2007:275)

- In summary, very little is known about how / if bisexual women use their appearance
To use exploratory techniques in order to begin to ascertain whether bisexual women use appearance tools such as clothing, body art and cosmetic/beauty practices in order to create a specifically bisexual visual identity, and to consider reasons why this might be important for them.
Interview Study

- 12 bisexual women recruited
- Questions asked about their clothing and beauty practices and their ideas and thoughts around sexuality/bisexuality and appearance
- Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 2 hours
- Participants offered the opportunity to use photos as part of the interview (auto driven photo elicitation technique)
Photo methodology

- Particularly useful in exploratory studies
- Can create a participant led interview:
  - overcomes the strangeness of the interview situation
  - lessens the limitations of the researcher constructed schedule, which is inevitably based on issues the researcher considers pertinent, allowing participants to provide unpredicted information

- ‘interviews conducted in conjunction with photographs [...] yield richer, more detailed, and more precise information’ (Frith and Harcourt 2007:1342)

Preliminary analysis: Main codes and themes

1. Constructing bi/bisexual identities
2. Resisting looking ‘too lesbian’ vs ‘too feminine’
3. Sexuality and appearance as a bi woman
4. Comforts and constraints
5. Traditional notions of constructing ‘woman’
6. Piercings and tattoos
7. Communities/Scene/Friends
Future Plans

- More interviews
- Questionnaire study
References