‘Never judge a book by its cover’?: Psychology students talk about gay, lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual appearance

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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 often considered unworthy of academic attention
Our appearance plays an important part in our identity and because we are read from 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)
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)
7 questions

- If someone asked you to describe what a (1. lesbian / 2. gay man / 3. bisexual woman / 4. bisexual man / 5. heterosexual woman / 6. heterosexual man) typically looks like, what would you say? (E.g. in what ways could you potentially recognise a (sexuality) from their appearance?)

- Is there anything else you’d like to add about appearance and sexuality?
(Early) Themes

- Resisting ‘stereotypes’
- Camp and Effeminate Gay Men (overvaluing of appearance)
- Butch (and Femme) Lesbians (undervaluing appearance)
- The Invisibility of Bisexuality
- Blokey blokes and girly girls

Conclusion

- Asking about appearance - brings (unprompted) understandings around embodiment

- Gay men and lesbians - excessive femininity and masculinity (inappropriate for their gender)

- Bisexuals - (literally) invisible

- Heterosexuals - ‘Blokey Blokes’ and ‘Girly Girls’


References