



'Femme it up or dress it down': Appearance and bisexual women in monogamous relationships.

Journal:	<i>Journal of Bisexuality</i>
Manuscript ID	WJBI-2018-0203.R1
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	Bisexual, Monogamous, Appearance, women < Gender/Sexuoerotic, relationships < Gender/Sexuoerotic
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Abstract

This paper reports on findings from a qualitative study into the lived experience of bisexual women in monogamous relationships. Nineteen self-identified bisexual women from across the UK, who were either in a monogamous relationship or desired to be in one, were explored. Participants completed diaries and took part in telephone interviews. The data was analysed using Template Analysis (King, 2004) which identified themes from the data set. It appeared that women in different-gender relationships choose appearance markers that could be classed as lesbian orientated in a bid to illuminate their bisexuality. Women in same-gender relationships were more likely to opt for feminine appearance signifiers in a bid to avoid being identified as a lesbian based solely on their appearance. The study suggests that the gender of participants' partners matters with regards to their appearance decisions. However, despite the apparent influence of their partner's gender, bisexual women demonstrated a degree of flexibility and fluidity in their appearance choices.

KEYWORDS: Bisexual; appearance; women; relationships

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3 **‘Femme it up or dress it down’: Appearance and bisexual women in monogamous**
4 **relationships.**
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8 In a critical review of the psychological literature on appearance research Clarke,
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10 Hayfield, and Huxley (2012) provide some insight into why appearance cues have been
11
12 drawn on to evidence sexual identity. They demonstrate how early sexological
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14 understandings of ‘gender inversion’ (which was understood to refer to one’s gender role
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16 being incongruent with one’s physical sex), were used to illuminate those who hold same-
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18 gender attractions. For example, early sexologists such as Ellis (1906) believed that those
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20 who held same-gender attractions were oriented towards appearance choices of the other¹-
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22 gender in a bid to reflect their inner gender inversion. The term ‘invert’ was used to
23
24 communicate the belief that same-gender attraction was an ‘*inversion of sexual instincts*’
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26 (Taylor, 1998, p. 288). Gender role was understood to be a ‘natural’ reflection of biological
27
28 sex, therefore same-gender attraction was conceptualised as the person possessing the
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30 attributes of the other-gender. Krafft-Ebing (1927) understood female inverts as having a
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32 ‘*masculine soul, heaving in the female bosom*’ (p. 399). Whilst thinking has moved on
33
34 somewhat since the time of Ellis’ and Krafft-Ebing’s writing, in that sexual and gender
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36 identity is understood to be far more nuanced than they originally espoused (Butler, 2006),
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38 such a belief in relation to the role of appearance in same-gender attracted people continues
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40 (Clarke et al. 2012; Hayfield, 2011; Rothblum, 2010).
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45 Research into women’s appearance and presentation has been traditionally viewed as
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47 inconsequential or superficial (Brennan, 2011; Clarke & Turner, 2007; Frith & Gleeson,
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49 2004; Jeffreys, 2005). However, more recently the importance of appearance has been
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51 highlighted as meaningful in relation to the construction of identity (Blair & Hoskin, 2014;
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56 ¹ I utilise the term ‘other’ in this section to reflect the dominant Western societal conception that there were
57 only two corresponding genders to choose from – man/woman.

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3 Brennan, 2012; Chekola & McHugh, 2012; Clarke & Spence, 2012). Same-gender attracted
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5 women who choose not to adopt stereotypical lesbian appearance norms such as masculine
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7 or androgynous clothing or hairstyles (although it is important to understand that masculine
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9 looks are not the only option with respect to appearance for same-gender attracted women)
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11 (Eves, 2004; Luzzatto & Gvion, 2004) are more likely to be misrepresented as heterosexual
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13 (Rich, 1980; Wolfe & Roripaugh, 2006). This may, in-part, be due to the way in which
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15 heteronormative cultures appear to conceptualise same-gender relationships as mirroring
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17 heterosexual dyads (Heath, 2009)
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21 This renders their sexual identity completely invisible (Blair & Hoskin, 2014).

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23 Whilst feminine or 'femme' appearance markers are understood to signify a heterosexual
24
25 identity (Hiestand & Levitt, 2005) many women who are attracted to people of the same-
26
27 gender do choose to express their femme identity by adopting such appearance markers that
28
29 they understand are the opposite of assumed 'lesbian' style (Rothblum, 2010). Traditionally,
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31 women who present as femme have been most noticeably referred to in relation to their
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33 connections with 'butch' lesbians (Eves, 2004). As Rossiter (2016) argues, this has the
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35 effect of marginalising lesbian and bisexual women who hold or display 'femme' identities.
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37 Their lesbian or bisexual status is hidden unless they are in the company of their 'butch'
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39 partner. More recently femme has also come to be understood as a form of lesbian
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41 appearance. That being said, it is also the case that femme lesbians may find that they too
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43 are misread as heterosexual (Huxley, Clarke, & Halliwell, 2013; Levitt, Gerrish, &
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45 Hiestand, 2003)
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49 *Fashion matters*
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3 Brennan (2011) argues that it is the right of the sexual citizen to be recognised.
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5 Brennan suggests that one of the best ways to communicate one's non-heterosexuality is to
6
7 choose signs and signifiers that mark out one's queerness. Walker (2001) says,
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10 *'Privileging visibility has become a tactic of the late twentieth-century identity*
11 *politics, in which participants often symbolise their demands for social justice by*
12 *celebrating visible signifiers of difference that have historically targeted them for*
13 *discrimination'* (p. 868)
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19 The desire for visibility is underpinned by a need for social as well as interpersonal
20 recognition (Clarke & Spence, 2012; Clarke & Turner 2007). Barker and colleagues (2008)
21 have discussed how such recognition is important as it has been shown to have direct
22 consequences related to mental health (Meyer, 2003). LGBT+² visibility and recognition has
23 been shown to positively correlate with relationship quality and community support (Jordan
24 & Deluty, 2000; Morandini, Pinkus, & Dar-Nimrod, 2018). Those who feel less visible have
25 poorer mental health (Hatzenbuehker, 2009; Meyer, 2003) however, it is noteworthy to
26 point out that there are risks associated with visibility such as vulnerability, prejudice and
27 discrimination (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Daly, 2018).
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39 Utilising fashion to communicate sexual identity primarily depends on the culture's
40 ability to decode the message (Heller, 2006). In Western society, the fact that we have
41 recognisable lesbian appearance markers demonstrates that the surrounding culture may be
42 able to read and understand particular lesbian appearance norms. In effect, they are able to
43 decode such 'looks' as specifically lesbian (Brennan, 2011).
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54 ² For efficiency I use the acronym LGBT+ to refer to Lesbian (L), Gay (G), Bisexual (B), Transsexual (T) and (+)
55 Others. My use of the plus sign to represent 'others' in this context is my attempt to incorporate the breadth
56 of plurisexual identities that could be argued to warrant inclusion under the rainbow umbrella.
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3 Research has highlighted the ways in which being able to visually identify with others
4 who are considered to be the 'same as' oneself, makes it more likely that they will feel
5 accepted (Deci & Ryan, 2012). When one is recognised as a lesbian they are more likely to
6 have access to the in-group (of for example, lesbian communities). This is thought to afford
7 them the right to speak about lesbian culture and relationships, as they are validated by those
8 around them (D'Erasmus, 2004). The importance therefore of appearance should not be
9 underestimated in relation to issues of power, identity and voice. The dominant sexual
10 identity categories of heterosexual and homosexual are widely established (Yoshino, 2000).
11 However, whilst the identity category of bisexual is sometimes understood in relation to the
12 binary ends of heterosexual and homosexual, it is clearly not afforded the same level of
13 legitimacy and authenticity (Barker, 2007; Callis, 2013).
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27 Due to the fact that such categories are dichotomous, they subsequently fail to permit
28 any valid form of bisexuality that is not conceptualised as positioned in the middle of the
29 binary. This renders bisexuality as an unstable sexual identity (Fahs, 2009) as well as
30 perhaps contributing towards there being no appearance signifiers that explicitly relate to a
31 bisexual identity. Thus, bisexual individuals find themselves in a space where they have
32 little to no bisexual-specific signs and appearance mandates that mark them out as people
33 who find more than one gender attractive (Clarke, & Turner, 2007; Hayfield, 2013;
34 Hayfield, Clarke, Halliwell, & Malson, 2013). Therefore, if bisexual women wish to alert
35 others of their same-gender attraction potential, perhaps their only option is to shape their
36 appearance from an existing narrow set of recognisable lesbian appearance norms.
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49 However, as Simpson (2009) argues, what a 'lesbian look' looks like is hard to articulate:

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51 *Contrary to popular belief, there is really no lesbian fashion aesthetic. There's a 'look',*
52 *but it is hard to quantify and even harder to emulate if you're a newcomer to the scene. It*
53 *is one of those you-know-it-when-you-see-it things. And it only applies to the shorthaired*
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3 *stereotype-adhering among us; if you're high-femme, you're on your own. Queer women*
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5 *who come out in their 20s instead of their teens seem to be hit the hardest by the lesbian*
6
7 *fashion crisis. I have more than one bisexual friend who accustomed to dressing up to get*
8
9 *the attention of men on a Friday night is entirely at a loss when it comes to dressing for*
10
11 *other women. (p. 10)*
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14 As Simpson (2009) highlights, there are difficulties for lesbian and bisexual women
15 if they do not choose traditional lesbian signifiers, as choosing this option potentially leads
16 to being socially read as heterosexual, thus making their lesbian and bisexual identities
17 somewhat invisible.
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23 *What do bisexual women look like?*
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26 Little attention has been paid to issues of appearance for bisexual people in connection
27 with their sexual identities (Hayfield, 2011), as is the case in relation to 'femme' presenting
28 lesbians (Blair & Hoskin, 2014). The singer and performer Pink encapsulates some of the
29 issues associated with the relationship between sexual identity and dress when she says, '*I*
30 *should be gay by the way that I look and the way that I am. I just happen to not be*' (Pink,
31 2012). Although Pink does not claim to identify as bisexual, the quote above illuminates the
32 potential problem all women have in respect of incorrect assumptions being made about
33 them on the basis of what they wear. In relation to bisexual woman specifically, Hayfield
34 (2013) conducted research with a student population and found that bisexual individuals
35 were impossible to visually identify. Recruiting predominantly heterosexual participants,
36 Hayfield's (2013) research was interested in their perceptions of lesbian, gay, bisexual and
37 heterosexual appearance. Participants were aware of the dominant appearance norms that
38 are referenced in relation to these identities and they often drew on them despite
39 acknowledging that stereotypes such as lesbians presenting themselves as '*not very girly,*
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3 *wearing jeans and t-shirts to show masculinity, short hair*' (p. 19), was not likely to be
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5 representative of the general lesbian population. Participants did specify however, that it
6
7 depended on the *'type of lesbian'* (p. 19), highlighting that they were aware of perhaps other
8
9 ways in which lesbians present themselves.
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12 In addition, Hayfield (2013) found that although participants described 'femme'
13
14 lesbians, they were regularly spoken about in relation to 'butch' lesbians. This supports
15
16 other observations that the sexual identity of 'femmes' is more likely to be rendered visible
17
18 and thus validated in relation to their connection with 'butch' lesbians (Eves, 2004). Overall
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20 Hayfield's (2013) participants were not able to draw on a recognisable image in relation to a
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22 specific bisexual presentation. Hayfield's participants did however draw from other sexual
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24 identity types in relation to what a bisexual might look like. For example, looking more like
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26 a heterosexual or a lesbian. The inability to move beyond the sexuality binary demonstrates
27
28 the extent to which this made it problematic for Hayfield's participants to fully
29
30 conceptualise what a bisexual person would look like, even though they themselves
31
32 acknowledged that they were using stereotyped markers with which to talk about LGBT+
33
34 people. Significantly, a participant who self-identified as bisexual in Hayfield's research did
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36 provide researchers with an alternative description of bisexual appearance by utilising terms
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38 like *'Goth'* or the very term *'alternative'* itself (p. 21). Clearly these terms are not exclusive
39
40 to bisexuals and reference other groups in society (Lees, 1993). Researchers interested in
41
42 what a bisexual is understood to 'look like' have also identified similar appearance terms
43
44 when attempting to address this question (Hayfield, 2013; Hayfield, Clarke, & Halliwell,
45
46 2014). However, arguably these terms do not in themselves offer adequate descriptors as
47
48 mentioned above they are used in connection with various sub-groups (Goulding, Saren,
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50 Maclaran, & Follett, 2004; Lees 1993).
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Displaying identity

There are a number of contemporary research articles that explore bisexual identity (for example, Anderson, McCormack, & Ripley, 2016; Barker et al., 2008; Callis, 2013; Galupo, 2018; Gonzalez, Ramirez, & Galupo, 2017; Hayfield, & Huxley, 2015; Huxley et al., 2013; Jones, 2016; Maliepaard, 2017; Monro, 2015). Miller (2006), drawing on Goffman's (1971) work in relation to performativity highlights some of the problems facing bisexuals in respect of expressing their identity. Miller (2006) discusses their ability to 'do[ing] sexuality' as the ability to 'do bisexuality' *per se* is simply not available because sexuality is currently conceptualised in binary terms.

Hartman (2013) and Hartman-Linck (2014) observe that the sexual binary will always misappropriate one as either heterosexual or homosexual. They go on to refer to how it is often the 'display' rather than the performance that is more useful to the individual. Hartman-Linck (2014) distinguishes between what she terms 'wide' and 'limited' displays. Displays in this context are understood to relate to a target audience. A wide display intimates a large audience, such as unknown people in a public setting, and as such, requires mass understanding and interpretation of the display. Hartman (2013) and Hartman-Linck's (2014) research focusing on bisexual women in monogamous relationships with men, argued that her participants were more concerned with 'limited' displays. This was understood to relate to a smaller or more intimate audience, such as for oneself only or within a relationship and/or in the home. The researchers suggest that bisexual women are less concerned with the accuracy of decoding or readings of other people in a 'wide' context, and are instead more interested in bisexual displays in a limited setting, making the display more meaningful to them personally. Framed in this way then, participants use of such displays are an attempt to 'keep alive' their bisexuality as well as to reify their sexual identity to their 'authentic-selves' (Hartman, 2013; Hartman-Linck, 2014).

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3 As the quote presented above by Pink illustrates, appearance displays are not
4 necessarily always expressive of sexual preference. There are issues, then, in respect of
5 relying on such things as gender expression or appearance to convey one's sexual identity.
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7 However, the lesbian appearance norms the participants discussed in Hayfield's (2013)
8 research above, such as masculine clothing and hairstyles are arguably, well recognised in
9 society. Such appearance signifiers are often associated with women who are attracted to
10 other women. It is not surprising, then, that bisexual women draw from them in an attempt
11 to render themselves visible.
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21 The rendering visible of one's sexual identity is, according to Hayfield et al., (2013),
22 only possible through verbal statements that specifically state one's bisexuality. This is
23 problematic as disclosure can be dangerous for many bisexually-identified people,
24 particularly in terms of potentially opening themselves up to negative discrimination and
25 abuse (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Daly, 2018; Maliepaard, 2018). A recent on-line campaign
26 #StillBisexual, set up by bisexual activist Nicole Kristal in 2016 highlighted the specific
27 issues bisexual people face particularly in relation to visibility and identity authenticity
28 (Gonzalez et al., 2016). Hayfield et al., (2013) acknowledges the difficulties facing those
29 who identify as bisexual, more so than heterosexual and gay/lesbian identities, particularly
30 in terms of visibly communicating a bisexual identity to others. The inability to transmit a
31 bisexual specific identity often results in bisexual people being misunderstood as
32 monosexual. 'Passing' which is conceptualised as '*one either actively or passively*
33 *assum[ing] membership of heterosexual or homosexual communities*' (Maliepaard, 2017, p.
34 328) comes with its own set of challenges that can exacerbate feelings of identity invisibility
35 (Bostwick, 2012; McLean, 2008).
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3 Based on the relatively limited body of literature we know a little about bisexuality
4 and appearance (Hayfield et al., 2013; Taub 1999) and we have some limited understanding
5 of bisexuality and relationships (Hartman-Linck, 2014; Hayfield, Campbell, & Reed, 2018;
6 Lahti, 2015; Rodríguez-Rust, 2003; Rust, 1995). However, there have been previous studies
7 which have specifically considered how bisexual appearance plays out in the context of
8 relationships despite repeated calls for further research on these topics. This gap in the
9 literature was identified by researchers such as Taub (1999) and Hayfield et al. (2013) and
10 has therefore facilitated the focus of the current article which is to explore the appearance
11 choices of bisexual women in an attempt to illuminate the impact that the gender of one's
12 partner may have on their clothing and physical presentation to others.
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24 25 **Method**

26 27 *Diaries and interviews*

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30 Interviews are recognised as a popular and important qualitative method (Brinkman
31 2016; Lavis, 2010) with which to collect participant data (King, & Horrocks, 2010).
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33 Interviews allow researchers '*privileged access to a subject's lived world*' (Kvale, 1996, p.
34 125). The use of participant diaries has been reported to be useful for developing an insight
35 into a particular event, perspective or set of ideas (Iida, Shrout, Laurenceau & Bolger,
36 2012). The benefits of adopting more than one method of data generation to be used with
37 the same participants has been shown to be beneficial particularly with regards to obtaining
38 a robust understanding of participant experiences (Bowes-Catton, 2015; Daly, 2018; Frost,
39 & Nolas, 2011).
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51 The first author carried out telephone interviews with participants after they had
52 completed a diary for approximately one month. Participants were instructed to write down
53 anything they felt was relevant in their everyday life in relation to their sexual identity, such
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3 as, an actual experience, event, discussion, or emotion they felt. Participants were made
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5 aware that the diaries were intended to provide the researchers with initial insights into their
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7 day-to-day lives as well as contribute towards forming the basis of a later interview
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9 schedule.

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12 Participants approached diary writing in different ways. Some appeared to write on a
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14 daily basis, ensuring to include a submission at the end of every evening. Others included
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16 submissions which appeared to be a summary of the previous few days or in a few cases the
17
18 whole week. Often participants wrote retrospectively, having included an account on for
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20 example, a Monday, and returning to the account at a later date to embellish what was said,
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22 or to clarify points. The information included in the diaries also varied, with some
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24 participants writing in an almost bullet-point fashion; listing things they wanted to discuss in
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26 relation to their sexual identity. Others provided more story-like accounts of their
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28 experiences and thoughts that day.

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32 One of the advantages of diaries as a method of collecting data is that they enable the
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34 participant to record events or experiences as they happen, thus giving the researcher a more
35
36 immediate account of the story (Dillman, 2000). Participants can be seen to be more
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38 specifically involved in the process of both creating and controlling what is written and later
39
40 received (Elliott, 1997). This process of directly involving the participant in the construction
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42 of the data puts control back into the participants' hands in that, although the potential
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44 content of the diary has an agenda, it is up to the participant to define the boundary.

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48 The subsequent interviews (apart from one face-to-face interview) were carried out
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50 over the telephone and lasted approximately one hour. Participants in the current research
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52 resided across the United Kingdom therefore interviewing participants over the telephone
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54 enabled the researchers to access a group of people who, according to Hartman (2011), are

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3 like finding 'a needle in a haystack' (p. 64). In addition, one of the potential advantages of
4 interviewing participants over the telephone is that some of the social pressures are, to a
5 certain extent, removed (Holt, 2010; Trier-Bieniek, 2012). More specifically, it avoids the
6 potential problem of judgements and assumptions being made on the basis of one's physical
7 appearance and dress. Therefore, carrying out in-depth qualitative interviewing over the
8 telephone is one way in which to empower participants as they are not subject to the
9 physical presence of the researcher.
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18 *Recruitment and sampling procedures*

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21 Participants in this research were recruited on the basis of three essential criteria: 1)
22 they had to be a cisgender woman, 2) they had to identify as bisexual, and 3) they had to
23 either be in a monogamous relationship, or if not in a current relationship, they must desire a
24 monogamous relationship in the future. The rationale for the inclusion of this particular
25 criteria, was to explore the lived experience of bisexual women in the context of being in a
26 relationship, and so, assumed monosexual in sexual orientation, that is to be romantically
27 and/or sexually attracted to only one sex or gender (Klesse, 2011). Initially a purposive
28 sampling approach was taken in the recruitment of participants, but there was also a
29 'snowball' (King & Horrocks, 2010) aspect to the recruitment which developed as the
30 recruitment progressed. The first stage in recruiting participants involved placing a call for
31 participants in an online LGBT+ network group and placing an advertisement in *Diva*
32 magazine; a UK based magazine aimed at lesbian and bisexual women. In total nineteen
33 participants took part in this research and all were recruited from the UK. Participants were
34 aged between eighteen and fifty-two and predominantly identified as white, with one
35 identifying as black and one as mixed-race.
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3 Participants were furnished with as much information as possible both prior to
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5 consenting to take part in the research, and continually throughout the research process.
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7 Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point up to the writing up of the
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9 data. All participants were ascribed with a pseudonym to protect their identity. Ethical
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11 approval for the research was granted by the University of Huddersfield's School of Human
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13 and Health Sciences Ethics Committee. Care was taken to ensure that ethical procedures
14
15 were respectfully retained throughout the research.
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18 **Analysis and Interpretation**

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21 The analysis and interpretation of data reported in this paper was carried out using a
22
23 specific type of thematic analysis called Template Analysis (King, 2004; 2012). Template
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25 Analysis allows for the inclusion of a priori themes, and takes a relatively structured
26
27 approach to the analysis of data. However, it is also flexible and can be adapted to meet the
28
29 needs of research across different domains and topics (Brooks, McCluskey, Turley, & King,
30
31 2015). Although Template Analysis is not bound to a specific epistemological position, the
32
33 current research was underpinned by Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology (see for
34
35 example, Ricoeur, 1992). One of the outputs of this approach to analysing and interpreting
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37 data is a template that represents the dataset and the relationships within it.
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41 The data reported here focuses on the section of the Template* concerned with the
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43 clothes participants wore, their hairstyles, and how they reported being perceived by others.
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45 Two themes labelled 'breaking out of the look' and 'chameleon' form the focus of the
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47 current paper. The first of these themes relates to the fact that there appears to be a limited
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49 number of ways in which participants can express their dress and appearance. Participants
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51 can either choose feminine mandates which are broadly understood to more directly tie in
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53 with a heterosexual identity (Blair & Hoskin, 2014) or an androgynous or masculine style of
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3 dress that is understood to reflect a lesbian sexual identity (Hayfield et al., 2013). One
4 interpretation is that participants' appearance choices disrupt assumptions related to their
5 sexual identity based on the gender of their partner. It represents a form of resistance to
6 being pigeon-holed into a way of dressing that is assumed to correlate with the gender of
7 their partner and their sexuality. The second theme refers to the ways in which participants
8 respond to situations and people that demonstrates both flexibility and fluidity in terms of
9 their appearance choices.
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17 18 *Breaking out of the look*

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21 Participants in the current research suggested that in general, lesbians were
22 identifiable by certain markers related to masculine or 'butch' appearance norms. Although
23 participants accepted that this was a rather one-dimensional view of lesbian appearance
24 norms, they also acknowledged that it reflects more widely held stereotypical views (Blair
25 & Hoskin, 2014; Huxley et al., 2013; Taub, 1999). In general, participants expressed a
26 desire to not conform to assumed stereotypical lesbian or heterosexual ways of presenting or
27 dressing. Those participants who were in same-gender relationships expressed a strong
28 resistance to conforming to the lesbian stereotype.
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40 *I don't go for all the usual lesbian ways of looking. I wear glam type feminine clothes*
41 *and lots of make-up. I wear my hair and nails LONG. I hate the 'lesbian' look of short*
42 *hair, no make-up bushy eyebrows . . . it isn't how I see myself and it certainly isn't*
43 *something I would find attractive in a woman. [Pippa]*
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49 Kate expressed a similar sentiment in that she was aware that other people held particular
50 appearance expectations of women in same-gender relationships. By not conforming to that
51 'look' she concludes, that this leaves people potentially guessing about her sexual identity.
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3 *Went to have my hair cut today... Actually, I'm growing it – I've been growing it*
4 *for a couple of years now...I mention this as I think it's quite relevant to my*
5 *bisexual identity... I quite like the fact that it doesn't fit in with the stereotype of*
6 *a woman in a relationship with a woman, that my appearance leaves people in*
7 *doubt about what my sexuality might be. [Kate]*
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14 However, participants who were in different-gender relationships expressed a
15 rather different perspective preferring to select appearance signifiers that by their
16 own admission could be interpreted as 'butch' by other people,
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20
21
22 *My mum has told me that my new hair cut looks "a bit butch". [Sian]*
23

24 Or personally referenced as 'butch',
25

26
27 *Quite a lot of how I dress has a lot to do with my sexual identity . . . when my*
28 *best friend and I went to Oxford for the weekend a couple of years ago, I joked*
29 *about my terrifically butch nightwear. [Elaine]*
30
31
32
33

34 One of the consequences of being in a dyadic relationship with a person of the same-
35 gender or different-gender is that it tends to overshadow a bisexual identity (Hartman-Linck,
36 2014; Taub, 1999). Assumptions are made about a person's sexual identity based on the
37 gender of their current partner (Diamond, 2007; Hartman, 2013). Participants understand
38 that their same and different-gender attractions remain hidden in the context of their dyadic
39 relationship. Therefore, one way in which participants can disrupt what others assume is
40 their monosexual identity, is to select appearance styles that do not neatly correlate with
41 their misassumed sexual identity. It is perhaps also the case that by drawing from such
42 appearance signifiers participants can 'keep alive' (Hartman, 2013; Harman-Linck, 2014)
43 their bisexuality in that they are able to express an aspect of themselves that is assumed to
44 no longer be active by virtue of the fact they are in a monogamous dyadic relationship.
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3 The bisexual women in this research were continually facing challenges related to
4 finding ways of expressing their bisexuality particularly given that they were in
5 monogamous relationships. Such items as clothes and hairstyles were important to
6 participants as a means by which they could express their bisexual identity. All participants
7 were aware that a 'butch' or androgynous aesthetic was associated with female same-gender
8 attraction and those participants who were in different-gender relationships articulated a
9 desire to be read and decoded as a woman who was potentially attracted to the same-gender
10 also.
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20
21 *I worked hard to get there – to looking & feeling like a gay woman... I wear my*
22 *hair in a quiff because it feels more masculine that way. . . I'm just a bisexual*
23 *girl dating a straight boy why does it matter to me that the rest of the world*
24 *knows that I'm not entirely straight? Because I worked too hard to not let it be*
25 *known. [Paula]*
26
27
28
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30
31

32 In relation to participants who were in same-gender relationships, it appeared to be
33 less about transmitting a message related to being attracted to people of a different-gender
34 and more about a desire to not, as Pippa intimates in the quote presented earlier, 'look like a
35 lesbian'. Participants acknowledged that this came with both positive and negative
36 consequences, depending upon the context or situation they were in. For example,
37 participants discussed feeling a sense of inauthenticity particularly in respect of accessing
38 entry into lesbian bars and clubs. Some participants cited how because they were not
39 dressed in stereotypical 'lesbian' attire they felt they had to prove their relationship was
40 'real' by physically performing their relationship to others.
41
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51
52 *Because me and my girlfriend look, both, both look quite straight so I think, We*
53 *are quite girly...there's been times when we've gone into, into town and, and*
54
55
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57

1
2
3 *it's almost like we've just basically, we've got to a snog out the way so that*
4
5 *everybody goes oh you're one of us. [Rebecca]*
6
7

8 Participants often made sense of their appearance by positioning themselves in
9
10 relation to lesbian looks which does fundamentally give them the choice of looking like a
11
12 lesbian (e.g., masculine) or not looking like a lesbian (the latter effectively being looking
13
14 feminine and therefore heterosexual). Clearly participants feel they can only choose from
15
16 two distinct 'looks' (lesbian or heterosexual). This further renders a bisexual specific
17
18 aesthetic somewhat problematic to attain. It appears that participants in different-gender
19
20 relationships express a need to illuminate to other people their same-gender attractions,
21
22 whilst participants in same-gender relationships wish to distance themselves from the
23
24 stereotypical lesbian aesthetic and not necessarily highlight their attractions to men.
25
26

27
28 Participants discussed their ability to change their appearance depending on where they
29
30 were going, or who the intended audience was. This involved practices of developing
31
32 alternative ways of presenting themselves, depending upon the context and the people they
33
34 would be encountering. Often these decisions were strategic in the sense that they actively
35
36 wanted others to have a particular perception of them based on their appearance. One of the
37
38 ways they did this was by choosing appearance signs and signifiers that were not consistent
39
40 with their assumed sexual identity based on the gender of their partner. Paula explains,
41
42

43
44 *I've got a bit of a crush on one of the trainees at school, he's a, he's male and I*
45
46 *find, on some days I will, I will dress quite femininely, if I'm, if I know that I'm*
47
48 *gonna be spending a lot of time in his company... because I want to feel a bit,*
49
50 *you know, a bit flirty and a bit attractive to men... whereas if I'm like, say I'm*
51
52 *with my rugby girls... for example... I will be a bit more, like sort of, tomboyish,*
53
54 *masculine in my appearance.*
55
56
57

1
2
3 A number of participants, irrespective of the gender of their current partner,
4
5 described chameleon-like behaviour in respect of their appearance choices. Participants
6
7 demonstrate both fluidity and flexibility in relation to projecting their appearance as they do
8
9 on occasion, at will, select styles from both masculine and feminine domains. Rather than
10
11 resisting stereotypes, they chose to use them and subvert them for their own ends. Clearly
12
13 this exacerbates the difficulties associated with identifying a bisexual specific appearance.
14
15 It appears that participants have a good understanding of what is expected appearance-wise
16
17 from those in heterosexual and lesbian spaces such as bars and clubs. Therefore, it could be
18
19 the case that participants are able to strategically select their 'looks' as a way in which to
20
21 signal to others that they belong in the space, and/or identify with the occupiers of the space.
22
23 In addition, participants perhaps utilise clothing choices as part of a safety mechanism.
24
25 Participants can feel comfortable and safe in the knowledge that they have not drawn
26
27 negative attention to themselves.
28
29
30

31
32 *Join the protest in London. Nearly get kettled. Feel very glad not to be visibly*
33
34 *queer, can avoid the police so much more easily. [Jacky]*
35

36
37 *Maybe because I am bisexual it means that sometimes I can kind of femme it up*
38
39 *even more and then if I feel like it dress it down and no-one will really say too*
40
41 *much. [Honor]*
42
43

44 Participants understand that by selecting signs and styles from recognisable
45
46 appearance norms does at times contribute towards their invisibility as bisexually
47
48 identifying women and instead reinforces assumptions related to lesbian and heterosexual
49
50 identity. However, the limited appearance options available to participants makes it neigh on
51
52 impossible for them to select 'looks' or signifiers that specifically can be read as bisexual. It
53
54 appeared that a number of participants who were in same-gender relationships expressed a
55
56
57

1
2
3 preference to look feminine, suggesting that existing stereotypical heterosexual appearance
4
5 norms are somewhat desired.
6
7

8 There is a contradiction between participants in different-gender relationships
9
10 expressing a need to make clear their same-gender attractions through their dress and
11
12 appearance in the above theme versus participants in different-gender relationships feeling
13
14 they present as feminine to their male partners in the theme presented below. Whilst this
15
16 appears to be the case it is important to highlight the complexity in how participants made
17
18 sense of their appearance according to the context they were in
19
20

21 *Chameleon*

22
23
24 The theme of chameleon differs from the previous theme in that it draws attention to
25
26 the ways in which in participants in different-gender relationships, in-particular, feel a sense
27
28 of personal obligation to present themselves using a feminine aesthetic. Participants who are
29
30 in, or were reflecting on a time when they were in different-gender relationships, felt that
31
32 they should make more of an attempt to present themselves as feminine.
33
34
35

36 *I think in the past when I have been in relationships with men and more so I*
37
38 *think when I was married I really was aware of my femininity and looking girly.*
39
40 *I guess I made more effort to look sexy to compliment him. [Pippa]*
41
42

43 This was even more the case if they were meeting up with their male partner.
44
45

46 *I decided that I really wanted to throw myself into the date & dress up a little bit*
47
48 *for him. This morning before work, I styled my hair differently. Softer & girlier*
49
50 *than it had been in previous weeks. I wore a blue & white strappy floaty (hello*
51
52 *cleavage) top & I put on some mascara & eyeliner on. The girlier I feel the*
53
54 *happier I am to play it straight. [Paula]*
55
56
57

1
2
3 Similar to participants in Taub (1999), Huxley et al. (2011), and Hayfield's (2013)
4 research, these women reference an awareness, that a certain amount of feminine 'dress-up'
5 is expected from women who are in different-gender relationships. However, the
6 interpretation here is rather than simply conforming to expected gender norms the women
7 are actively seeking to subvert and use the norms to present a particular aspect of their
8 sexual identity if they feel warranted to do so.
9
10
11
12
13
14

15
16 *My other female friends who are bisexual are similar to me in that they can be*
17 *very masculine or very feminine at any given time and that they'll happily*
18 *switch between the two...as opposed to having one look and sticking to it. [Sian]*
19
20
21
22

23 Participants clearly consider the choices they have in relation to how they want to look and
24 present themselves to those around them. Bearing in mind that not all participants are 'out'
25 as bisexual to everyone in their lives, may well result in some consideration in relation to
26 how they want to be read in particular contexts. Participants may want to avoid questions
27 about their sexual identity which would put them in situations where they might feel
28 uncomfortable. Thus the ability to draw from dominant heterosexual feminine appearance
29 norms could be understood to serve a pragmatic function for them. For example, Pippa has
30 not disclosed her sexual identity to her work colleagues or her family.
31
32
33
34
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39
40

41 *I think dressing femininely goes against what people expect lesbians to look*
42 *like...I mean ok I am not a lesbian I am bisexual but I have a girlfriend and not*
43 *presenting like one makes it less likely that other people like my mum or people*
44 *at work will think I am one.*
45
46
47
48
49
50

51 It could be argued that bisexual women who choose not to disclose their sexual identity
52 inadvertently further contribute towards the invisibility of bisexuals and consequentially this
53
54
55
56
57

1
2
3 adds to the limited amount of understanding related to what a bisexual woman may look
4
5 like.

6
7
8 One of the criticisms levelled at bisexual women who are in different-gender
9
10 relationships is the assumed heterosexual privilege they have access to by virtue of their
11
12 relationship status. The avenue appears to be open for them specifically to both queer and
13
14 heteronormalise their appearance if they so wish. However, bisexual women in same-gender
15
16 relationships also engage in queering and heteronormalising their appearance. They too,
17
18 could be interpreted as subverting both lesbian and heterosexual stereotypes if they feel they
19
20 want to. The flexibility participants make in respect of their appearance choices, positions
21
22 these bisexual woman as chameleon like, in that they can, and do, move between gendered
23
24 constructions of what is considered both feminine and masculine. However, it important to
25
26 note that sitting alongside this assumed flexibility also exists a constraint. Due to society's
27
28 reliance on simplistic binary codes of appearance it appears there are only two choices
29
30 participants can make. By utilising one appearance mandate it can be argued that this
31
32 strengthens the binary of both heterosexual and lesbian ways of dressing and appearance
33
34 (Brennen, 2011)
35
36
37

38 **Conclusion**

39
40
41 The findings presented here support previous research in highlighting the important
42
43 role that appearance has in relation to signifying to others one's sexual identity (Clarke &
44
45 Spence, 2012; Hayfield et al., 2014; Taylor, 2008). Brennan (2011) points out that there are
46
47 signifiers to be drawn on if one wishes to be read as someone who is interested in the same-
48
49 gender, yet still desires to remain hidden within the heterosexual majority. This is
50
51 particularly true amongst bisexual women interviewed in different-gender relationships as
52
53 the image they project by their own admission falls under the 'butch' spectrum of the binary
54
55
56
57

1
2
3 umbrella. It is feasible to consider that other people, ‘queer’ or otherwise, will de-code their
4
5 look as not heterosexual, if not bisexual specifically. The current research points to the
6
7 lengths that some bisexual women go to in terms of their appearance when moving in and
8
9 through different spaces. It also highlights the way in which participants make appearance
10
11 choices based on who they will come into contact with, and the appearance message they
12
13 wish to leave others with. The absence of a specific bisexual style and stereotypical way of
14
15 dressing is evident in Amy Andre’s blog in 2011 when she writes,

16
17
18 *How can someone wear their bisexuality on their sleeve, if people’s assumptions about*
19
20 *our sexuality are based on things like haircuts? . . . I think the bi community needs to*
21
22 *come together and decide on one hairstyle, and that will be the bi hairstyle. . . . What I*
23
24 *am talking about is developing a signifier, an aesthetic, a queer/clear marker for*
25
26 *bisexuality.*
27
28
29

30
31 In the current research women in same-gender relationships articulate a desire to not
32
33 conform to the stereotype of what a lesbian should look like. They actively avoid drawing
34
35 from appearance mandates that are likely to be de-coded as lesbian. These women are in
36
37 same-gender monogamous relationships, and so understand that their sexual identity is
38
39 misassumed lesbian based on the fact they are in a same-gender relationship. One of the
40
41 ways these women can challenge such assumptions is to draw from appearance signifiers
42
43 that traditionally are not considered to be related to lesbian style and visual aesthetics such
44
45 as feminine clothing and shoes etc. Opting for feminine or femme appearance markers does
46
47 two things. First, it enables them to not ‘look like a lesbian’ and second, potentially
48
49 challenges assumptions of their sexual identity based on the gender of their partner.
50
51

52
53 Women in different-gender relationships also face the same issue in respect of their
54
55 sexual identity being assumed heterosexual because they are in a relationship with a man.
56
57

1
2
3 They opted for appearance signifiers that are classed as lesbian orientated. They do this for
4
5 two reasons. First, like women in same-gender relationships, their sexual identity is
6
7 misappropriated, and so drawing from stereotypical lesbian appearance signs (such as
8
9 clothes and hairstyles) they are able to disrupt sexual identity assumptions based on the
10
11 gender of their partner. Second, these women wish to be read as a woman who are attracted
12
13 to the same-gender. It appears that participants in different-gender relationships utilise their
14
15 appearance as a strategy related to keeping alive (Hartman-Linck, 2014) their bisexuality,
16
17 more so than women in same-gender relationships. The focus for these women appears to be
18
19 related more specifically to avoiding the aesthetic related to lesbian appearance. It is perhaps
20
21 pertinent to point out that wearing clothes or choosing hairstyles that could potentially 'out'
22
23 a woman's sexual identity is potentially problematic. Not all bisexual women in the present
24
25 research desire to proclaim their sexual identity to all and sundry and so may well utilise
26
27 clothing and style to avoid other people's suspicions. With that said, it is the case that
28
29 women already face limited options in respect of appearance choices. Signs and signifiers
30
31 are primarily conceptualised as either feminine, and so understood as heterosexual or
32
33 masculine, signifying lesbian. Thus, forging out a bisexual specific style appears
34
35 problematic when considering that currently appearance choices are very much
36
37 circumscribed. The present research contributes new knowledge and shows how participants
38
39 make sense of their bisexuality and appearance in multiple and differing ways depending
40
41 upon the gender of their partner,
42
43
44
45

46
47 Bisexual women in monogamous relationships are an under-researched group
48
49 (Hartman-Linck, 2014; Klesse, 2011) and the challenges they face in expressing their
50
51 identity are not yet fully understood. It is also the case that, within this group of bisexual
52
53 women, the experiences of those in same-gender relationships are in some ways different to
54
55 those in different-gender relationships. Thus, the ways in which the gender of one's partner
56
57

1
2
3 can influence and affect a bisexual women's sense of identity and visibility needs to be
4
5 more explicitly considered. Researchers need to be aware that bisexual women in
6
7 monogamous relationships are not a homogenous group who experience their bisexuality in
8
9 the same way. In addition, bisexual women in monogamous relationships may well be
10
11 partnered with a person who self-identifies as lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual (and of
12
13 course other plurisexual identities such as, pansexual, fluid, queer etc.) and, as such, the
14
15 particularities of their experience as bisexual women in a binary-orientated world needs to
16
17 be better understood.
18
19

20
21 There were a number of limitations with respect to the current research. For example,
22
23 participants were included in the study if they self-identified as bisexual. It is plausible to
24
25 consider that had I widened the inclusion criteria and incorporated other plurisexual
26
27 identities, the findings would perhaps be somewhat different. Participants in the current
28
29 research were all cisgender women, and it is pertinent to point out that research suggests that
30
31 the majority of transgender women identify as plurisexual, if not bisexual specifically
32
33 (Gonzalez et al., 2017; Morandini et al., 2018). It is important therefore to acknowledge that
34
35 transgender people may have particular experiences of their sexuality and appearance that
36
37 could not be captured in this research. Future research could investigate how appearance
38
39 may factor into how they too, mark their sexuality.
40
41

42
43 Whilst it is hoped that the current research will further contribute towards our
44
45 understanding of some of the challenges faced by bisexual women in monogamous
46
47 relationships, ongoing exploration of the current research findings are warranted. Future
48
49 research could utilise a larger sample of bisexual and other plurisexual women as well as
50
51 include more diverse ethnic minorities, as the current research is limited in respect of a
52
53 relatively small sample size. This is further compounded by the fact that the majority of
54
55 participants identified as white and middle-class. Nevertheless, the current research has
56
57

1
2
3 illuminated the different ways in which the gender of one's partner can subtly influence
4
5 bisexual women's appearances choices.
6

7
8 (* A full copy of the Template is available on request from the first author)
9

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