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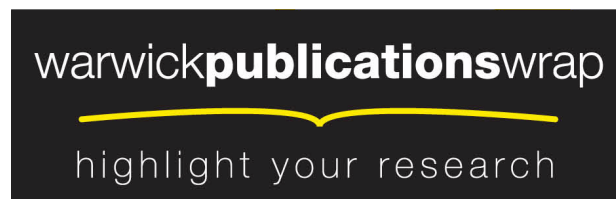
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**Lesbian and bisexual women's experiences of sexuality-based discrimination and their  
appearance concerns**

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# **Lesbian and bisexual women's appearance concerns and experiences of sexuality-based discrimination**

**Caroline J. Huxley**

## **Abstract**

Lesbian and bisexual women frequently experience sexuality-based discrimination, which is often based on others' judgements about their appearance. This short paper aims to explore whether there is a relationship between lesbian and bisexual women's experiences of sexuality-based discrimination and their satisfaction with the way that they look. Findings from an online survey suggest that discrimination is negatively related to appearance satisfaction for lesbian women, but not for bisexual women. It is argued that this difference exists because lesbian appearance norms are more recognizable and distinctive than bisexual women's appearance norms.

**Key words:** Appearance, bisexual, discrimination, non-heterosexual, lesbian

## **Introduction**

Discrimination based on a person's (homo)sexuality can take many forms, from physical assault to verbal abuse. The prevalence of such discrimination has been well documented (e.g. Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1994). The British-based lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) charity *Stonewall* recently conducted a survey of LGB adults and found that in the previous three years seventeen percent of respondents had been verbally insulted or harassed, and twenty percent had experienced a homophobic hate crime or incident, because of their sexuality (Stonewall, 2008).

Homophobic stigmatization, abuse and violence are associated with mental distress, mental disorders and substance abuse (Dean et al., 2000). A recent meta-analysis showed that LGB people are at a higher risk of anxiety, depression, suicide attempts and alcohol and drug dependence than heterosexuals (King et al., 2008). King and colleagues argued that the social hostility and discrimination that many non-heterosexual people experience must contribute to the prevalence of these negative psychological outcomes.

Sexuality-based discrimination may be initiated in different ways, such as voluntary disclosure of identity, visible participation in LGB culture or the adoption of a recognizable non-heterosexual appearance (Mays & Cochran, 2001). Lesbian communities differ from the mainstream by favouring unique appearance norms (Rothblum, 1994). The most recognizable of these appearance norms is 'butch' (Nestle, 1992). Butch lesbians often reject traditional cultural feminine norms to favour more masculine appearances, such as masculine clothes and short hair (Erickson, 1999). Research has found that butch lesbians are often negatively seen as 'muscular', 'overweight', 'unfeminine' and 'ugly' (Geiger, Harwood & Hummert, 2006). Recently, popular appearance norms for lesbian women have been described as 'boyish', androgynous and athletic (Huxley, 2010; Leavy & Hastings, 2010).

In contrast, appearance norms favoured by bisexual women are far less well defined and recognizable (Hayfield, 2011). As no archetypal bisexual 'look' exists, bisexual women may instead draw on either (or both) lesbian or heterosexual styles (Taub, 1999).

Appearance plays an important role for non-heterosexual women as it can be 'read' by others, visibly indicating sexuality to other LGB people (Clarke & Turner, 2007). Research shows how many lesbians actively adopt particular appearance norms after they come out in order to be 'read' as a lesbian (Krakauer & Rose, 2002). This visibility can be important as it allows women access to (protected and protective) LGB social space (Holliday, 1999). Feminine-appearing lesbians (i.e. those who do not conform to stereotypical lesbian appearance mandates) may have both their sexuality and their right to access LGB space questioned (Clarke & Turner, 2007). Accessing LGB communities is important to many lesbian and bisexual women as they are often a major source of social support (Rothblum, 2008). In contrast, women who are not concerned about being accepted within LGB communities may experience fewer pressures to 'look the part' (Huxley, 2010).

With fewer recognizable bisexual appearance norms, 'looking the part' and accessing what is often lesbian-dominated LGB social space<sup>1</sup> is harder for bisexual women (Hayfield, 2011). Consequently, while trying to retain a sense of authenticity, these women may also feel compelled to incorporate some stereotypically 'lesbian' norms into their appearance in order to

be recognized as non-heterosexual and feel accepted within LGB communities (Huxley, 2010; Taub, 1999).

Recognition of a woman's sexuality is not limited, however, to other members of LGB communities, and being visibly 'out' as lesbian can put people at risk of experiencing stigmatization or discrimination (Kelly, 2007). Evidence from a recent qualitative study has suggested that lesbians are often aware that their safety could be endangered if their appearance is 'read' as non-heterosexual within mainstream environments (Huxley, 2010). Huxley found that discrimination, which was perceived to be a consequence of being 'read' as lesbian, was associated with negative feelings about appearance, as one participant said:

"It's been hard work to get to a place where I feel ok [...] I still do get homophobic comments off the street [...] it has an impact, because it's based on appearance, because it's based on how you, you look" (p. 111).

This research also found that lesbians are often aware of negative social stereotypes that they look 'unattractive'; one participant commented that "the word 'lesbian' and the word 'ugly' are in the same place in the dictionary" (p. 111). However, this expectation of 'unattractiveness' did not alleviate the social pressures these women felt to look 'attractive' (according to mainstream ideals) and instead contributed to sexuality-specific appearance-related anxieties.

Thus, evidence to date suggests that while appearance is central to sexual identity it is also potentially problematic within wider (heterosexist) society. Many women report that it is important to be recognised as lesbian or bisexual and therefore experience some pressure to adhere to particular appearance norms (Huxley, 2010). However, visually displaying a non-heterosexual identity can also lead to experiences of discrimination and negative social expectations (Kelly, 2007). Experiencing these conflicting pressures could lead to appearance anxiety. To date, no research has focussed on this possible relationship. As appearance concerns are linked to negative psychological outcomes, such as depression and lowered self-esteem (Davison & McCabe, 2005), this is an important issue to explore. The aim of this short paper is to quantitatively explore the relationships between lesbian and bisexual women's

appearance satisfaction, experiences of sexuality-related discrimination, and commitment to LGB communities.

## **Method**

### **Design**

This study is part of a wider programme of research exploring women's body image and sexuality (see Huxley, 2010; Huxley, Clarke & Halliwell, 2011; Huxley et al., 2012). A cross-sectional survey design was employed, with measures presented in the form of an online survey.

### **Participants**

In order to target a large and diverse sample of women, several recruitment techniques were used (Dean et al., 2000): a group providing details about the research and a link to the survey was set up on a social networking website and all female contacts of the author were invited to join; adverts were placed in three magazines published in the South-West of England; and flyers were handed out at the annual lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans (LGBT) *Pride London* festival. Additionally, several participants snowballed the survey information to local and national LGB networks that they were involved in. Potential participants were informed that the survey explored how lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual women feel about their body and appearance, and what factors may influence their feelings. Although heterosexual women were also invited to take part in the survey, the focus of this paper is lesbian and bisexual women's experiences of sexuality-related discrimination.

A total of 232 lesbian, bisexual and non-heterosexual women completed the survey. Although only British women were targeted during recruitment, a small number of women (n=12) from North America, Europe and Asia also took part. When asked to choose the term that best described their sexuality 119 (51.29%) chose the term "lesbian", and 89 (38.36%) chose "bisexual". Twenty-four women (10.34%) selected the term "non-heterosexual" but as this number is too small to conduct meaningful analyses these women were removed from the data set. The age range of the lesbian participants was 18 to 67 years old (mean = 34.88 years old, SD = 10.43), and of the bisexual participants was 18 to 62 years (mean = 32.66 years old, SD =

9.80). Body Mass Index (BMI), a standardized measure of weight relative to height, was calculated from participants' self-reported height and weight (weight [kg] / height<sup>2</sup> [m]). The BMI range for lesbian women was 16.79 to 54.44 (mean = 25.27, SD = 5.85) and for bisexual women was 18.50 to 48.84 (mean = 25.47, SD = 5.47). Participants were also asked to self-describe their ethnicity, and over ninety percent described themselves as "white", while the rest described themselves as either "mixed race", "Asian", or "black".

## Measures

Demographic questions were predominantly open-ended to let participants describe themselves in their own words. To allow participants to self-identify their sexuality while also providing meaningful groups for statistical analysis, one categorical question was used: "which of these terms best describes your sexual identity?". The options provided were: "lesbian", "bisexual", "non-heterosexual" (as heterosexual women were also included in the wider research study, the option "heterosexual" was also presented).

The *Body Esteem Scale* (Mendelson, Mendelson & White, 2001) was used to measure appearance satisfaction (10 items), weight satisfaction (8 items) and attributions of positive evaluations about appearance to others (e.g. "people my own age like my looks") (5 items). Participants are required to indicate how often they agree with each item on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "never" (0) to "always" (4). In this research, all subscales had good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = appearance .72; weight .80; and attributions .72).

Affiliation to LGB communities was measured by an adaptation of the *Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure* (Phinney, 1992), which was originally developed to assess commitment to ethnic identity. The scale consists of two subscales: identity search, and belonging and commitment, which can be combined to produce one measure. This scale was used because the author could find no scale that specifically measures commitment to both lesbian/bisexual communities and commitment to lesbian/bisexual identities (although there are scales that measure the frequency of involvement in LGB-specific activities). In the adapted scale, the terms "ethnic background" and "ethnic group" were replaced with the terms "LGB background" and "lesbian, gay and/or bisexual 'community'" where appropriate. These terms were used in

order to acknowledge that bisexual communities may exist separately from, or in conjunction with, lesbian and gay communities. Respondents indicate their agreement with items using a four-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (4). This adapted scale had high internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha = .93).

The *Experiences of Discrimination* scale (Krieger, Smith, Naishadham, Hartman & Barbeau, 2005) was used to measure the frequency of experiences of sexuality-related discrimination. The scale was originally developed to assess the frequency of ethnicity-based experiences of discrimination (Krieger, 1990; Krieger & Sidney, 1996; Krieger et al., 2005), and was adapted to focus on sexuality-related discrimination that was based on assumptions made about appearance. This scale was chosen as the author could not find a scale that specifically measured the frequency of experiences of sexuality-based discrimination in different public settings. This specificity is important, as it involves judgements being made about a person’s sexuality based predominantly on their appearance. Participants are required to indicate how often they have experienced discrimination in nine different situations, such as “at school” or “getting medical care”, using the following options: “never”, “once”, “2-3 times” or “4 or more times”. In the adapted scale, the term “because of your race, ethnicity, or colour” was changed to “because people have made assumptions about your sexuality based on your appearance”. In the original measure, participants are also required to indicate how they responded to this discrimination, however, for this research the frequency of such experiences is the primary area of interest and consequently responses were not measured. Internal reliability for this adapted scale was good (Cronbach’s alpha = .76).

## **Procedure**

The survey was available online for six months. The front pages of the website provided details about the survey, including the research topic, why it was important to research, how long it would take participants to complete the survey, and how they could withdraw if they chose to. Once participants had read this information, they completed a consent page. The measures were then sequentially presented to participants (as part of a more extensive survey of women’s sexuality and body image): the body esteem scale first, followed by the measure of affiliation to LGB communities and the Experiences of Discrimination Scale.



## Results

In order to examine whether there were differences between the experiences of lesbian and bisexual women, Analyses of Covariance (ANCOVAs) were conducted controlling for both age and BMI (which are known to be significantly related to appearance satisfaction, Tiggemann, 2004), with sexuality as the independent variable. No significant differences were found between lesbian and bisexual women on appearance satisfaction:  $F(1, 187) = 0.46, p = ns, \eta^2=0.00$ ; weight satisfaction:  $F(1, 187) = 1.81, p = ns, \eta^2=0.01$ ; or attributions to others:  $F(1, 187) = 1.55, p = ns, \eta^2=0.01$  (see Table 1). However, bisexual women reported significantly more affiliation to LGB communities than did lesbian women:  $F(1, 167) = 13.99, p<0.001, \eta^2=0.08$ , and lesbian women reported significantly more experiences of discrimination than did bisexual women:  $F(1, 167) = 6.87, p<0.01, \eta^2=0.04$ .

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Separate correlation analyses (again controlling for age and BMI) were conducted for lesbian and bisexual women, exploring the relationships between the variables. For lesbian women, experiences of discrimination were negatively related to both appearance satisfaction and affiliation to LGB communities (see Table 2).

[Insert Table 2 about here]

For bisexual women, experiences of discrimination are not related to appearance or weight satisfaction, but are negatively related to affiliation to LGB communities (see Table 3). Affiliation to LGB communities was also negatively related to attributions to others.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

## Discussion

As expected, experiences of discrimination were negatively associated with lesbian women's appearance satisfaction. It seems that experiences of discrimination (often based on visible recognition of sexual identity) are related to dissatisfaction with appearance (the visual cues that initiate the discrimination) for this group of women. However, due to the nature of the analysis it is not possible to draw conclusions about causality. This analysis provides support for

qualitative findings that indicated that for some lesbian women homophobic discrimination is associated with appearance concerns (Huxley, 2010), and highlights the multiplicity of negative consequences associated with sexuality-based discrimination.

In contrast, there were no such links between bisexual women's experiences of discrimination and their appearance satisfaction, and, like previous research, these women reported experiencing significantly less discrimination than did lesbian women (Friedman & Leaper, 2010). This difference may be due to lesbian appearance norms being more well-known and distinctive, and therefore more easy to 'read', than bisexual norms (Clarke & Turner, 2007). As bisexual women do not have such distinguishing appearance norms, they may be less recognizable as non-heterosexual, and therefore at less risk of experiencing sexuality-related discrimination. However, the women's perceptions of the visibility of their sexuality (i.e. how much they thought they conformed to lesbian or bisexual appearance norms) were not measured, so this cannot be confirmed.

Affiliation to LGB communities was negatively related to experiences of discrimination for both lesbian and bisexual women. Such communities can be an important source of social support (Rothblum, 2008), and this support is associated with a decrease in low self-esteem, depression, suicidal thoughts and other adverse mental health effects (Dean et al., 2000). It is possible that the supportive nature of such communities can protect women from the negative effects of homophobic discrimination. In the current research, bisexual women reported more affiliation to LGB communities than lesbian women, but this affiliation was negatively related to attributions of to others. This means that the more bisexual women felt affiliated to LGB communities the less they thought that other people approved of their appearance. While bisexual women may incorporate some stereotypically 'lesbian' norms into their appearance, they also often try to remain visually authentic to their bisexual identity, in order not to be misread as 'lesbian' (Huxley et al., 2012). Therefore, bisexual women who are involved with lesbian-dominated communities may feel that their appearance is being negatively evaluated. It is a limitation of this research that participants were not asked to distinguish between the social group that they felt affiliated with (if any); whether it was mainly lesbian, bisexual or an inclusive community, as it is not possible to draw firm conclusions about why affiliation may be

linked with appearance dissatisfaction for this group of bisexual women. Future research could explore the (possibly) different appearance norms that operate within different non-heterosexual communities, and how they are related to women's experiences of discrimination and their appearance satisfaction.

### **Limitations**

The homogeneity of the participant sample (predominantly white, middle-class lesbian and bisexual women) is problematic. Women from diverse social classes, ethnic and racial backgrounds, and who identify as 'non-heterosexual' or 'queer', may experience unique prejudices (e.g. Bowleg, Huang, Brooks, Black & Burkholder, 2003), and unique tensions between specific cultural appearance norms and the predominantly white middle-class ideals of LGB communities (Lyle, Jones & Drakes, 1999; Taylor, 2007). Future research should explore these women's experiences of discrimination and how they may link to their appearance concerns. Furthermore, the current research did not explore the intersection between sexism and heterosexism. How lesbian and bisexual women experience 'gendered heterosexism' (Friedman & Leaper, 2010) in relation to their appearance should also be explored in future research.

The measures used in this study make it difficult to draw firm conclusions about any link between discrimination and appearance satisfaction. Participants were not asked to describe the extent to which they thought they conformed to lesbian or bisexual appearance norms or their sexuality was 'visible' from their appearance, as such questions were not congruent with the aims of the wider research project. Therefore, it is not possible to identify how appearance satisfaction is linked to experiences of discrimination. Additionally, this research used scales that were adapted for the study, and further research is needed to validate their use.

In conclusion, while it is known that sexuality-based discrimination or abuse is associated with negative psychological outcomes (King et al., 2008), current findings suggest that, for lesbian women, appearance concerns could also be related to such prejudice. Future research should further explore this connection to shed more light on the multiple contexts and consequences of heterosexist and homophobic discrimination.

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## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Non-heterosexual social space has traditionally been established and dominated by lesbians and gay men (D'Augelli & Garnets, 1995). Although bisexual-specific communities do exist and are gaining popularity, many bisexuals often still feel alienated and somewhat unwelcome in 'LGB' communities (Bower, Gurevich & Mathieson, 2002).

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*Table 1: Means and standard deviations of bisexual and lesbian women's scores on all measures (with age and BMI controlled)*

Variable	Mean (Standard Deviation)	
	Lesbian	Bisexual
Appearance Satisfaction	2.25 (0.63)	2.20 (0.57)
Weight Satisfaction	2.44 (0.84)	2.30 (0.75)
Attributions to Others	3.08 (0.69)	3.20 (0.62)
Affiliation to LGB communities	2.14 (0.63) <sub>a</sub>	2.53 (0.65) <sub>a</sub>
Experiences of Discrimination	6.94 (6.37) <sub>a</sub>	4.48 (6.20) <sub>a</sub>

*Note:* means with the same subscript significantly differ



Table 2: Correlation matrix for lesbian women (with age and BMI controlled)

Variable	2	3	4	5
1 Appearance Satisfaction	0.59***	0.45***	0.01	-0.20*
2 Weight Satisfaction		0.25**	0.12	-0.07
3 Attributions to Others			-0.19†	-0.04
4 Affiliation to LGB communities				-0.20†
5 Experiences of Discrimination				

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , †  $p = 0.06$

*Table 3: Correlation matrix for bisexual women (with age and BMI controlled)*

Variable	2	3	4	5
1 Appearance Satisfaction	0.49***	0.54***	-0.18	-0.04
2 Weight Satisfaction		0.46**	-0.16	0.18
3 Attributions to Others			-0.32**	0.11
4 Affiliation to LGB communities				-0.28*
5 Experiences of Discrimination				

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$