

Cronfa - Swansea University Open Access Repository

This is an author produced version of a paper published in :
Journal of Health Psychology

Cronfa URL for this paper:
<http://cronfa.swan.ac.uk/Record/cronfa32004>

Paper:

Smith, M., Telford, E. & Tree, J. (2017). Body image and sexual orientation: The experiences of lesbian and bisexual women. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 135910531769448
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1359105317694486>

This article is brought to you by Swansea University. Any person downloading material is agreeing to abide by the terms of the repository licence. Authors are personally responsible for adhering to publisher restrictions or conditions. When uploading content they are required to comply with their publisher agreement and the SHERPA RoMEO database to judge whether or not it is copyright safe to add this version of the paper to this repository.
<http://www.swansea.ac.uk/iss/researchsupport/cronfa-support/>

Body image and sexual orientation: The experiences of non-heterosexual women

Abstract

Western cultures promote a thin and curvaceous ideal body size that most women find difficult to achieve by healthy measures, resulting in poor body image and increased risk for eating pathology. Research focusing on body image in non-heterosexual women have yielded inconsistent results. Eleven non-heterosexual women were interviewed regarding their experiences with body image. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) revealed that these non-heterosexual women experienced similar mainstream pressures to conform to a thin body ideal. Furthermore, participants perceived additional pressure to conform to heteronormative standards of beauty since the normalisation of homosexuality and the increase of LGBT representation in mainstream media.

Introduction

The sociocultural model (Stice & Agras, 1998) argues that body satisfaction is determined by the degree to which cultural ideals are internalised by the individual. Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) objectification model suggests that women are subject to objectification and sexualisation by the media, pressuring them to internalise an observer's gaze of themselves (Rothblum, 1994; Satinsky, Reece, Dennis, Sanders, & Bardzell, 2012). Due to these heteronormative standards of beauty, women will self-objectify, and monitor their body and appearance, in order to be desirable to men. Socio-

cultural models, including the objectification theory, are aimed mainly at heterosexual women, and do not take into account any possible differences in lesbian and bisexual women.

Female body image and sexuality

Brown (1987) suggests that non-heterosexual women may be protected from mainstream pressures to conform to a thin ideal, as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities reject heteronormative standards of beauty, and are more accepting of larger body sizes. Lesbian women are more likely to refuse oppression by mainstream norms of beauty, as they are not subject to a male gaze (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Conversely, Dworkin (1989) argues that non-heterosexual women have received the same socialisation process as heterosexual women, and are subjected to the same images and pressures from the media. Beren, Hayden, Wilfley, and Grilo (1996) further suggests that the damaging effect of a heterosexual socialisation may be internalised by the individual, counteracting any protection offered by the LGBT community.

Research focusing on body image and sexual orientation has often found lower levels of body dissatisfaction amongst lesbian and bisexual women (e.g. Conner, Johnson & Grogan, 2004; French, Story, Remafedi, Resnik, & Blum, 1996; Lakkis, Williams, & Ricciardelli, 1999). More recent research has suggested no significant differences in body dissatisfaction between heterosexual and non-heterosexual women (e.g. Grogan, Conner, & Smithson, 2006; Huxley, Clarke, & Halliwell, 2014; Peplau et al., 2009; Tiggemann, 2015), as well as similar levels of eating pathology (e.g. Austin et al., 2004; Feldman & Meyer, 2007). Conflicting results suggest that body image is a multi-faceted concept, of which may be different for non-heterosexual women than for heterosexual women.

Feminism and Affiliation to LGBT communities

Krakauer and Rose (2002) examined attitudes surrounding physical appearance in lesbian women. The majority of participants expressed feeling more comfortable with their appearance and less concerned with their body size and shape, once they had 'come out' as lesbian. In Cass' (1979; 1984) six stage model of gay identity formation, the person finds acceptance and a sense of belonging through engagement with the LGBT community, further isolating themselves from the heterosexual community and norms. Involvement with LGBT communities has been associated with less internalisation of heterosexual standards of beauty, and reduced body dissatisfaction (Chmielewski & Yost, 2012; Hanley & McLaren, 2015; Taub, 2003).

In other research, affiliation to LGBT communities has shown little to no effect on body image (Haines et al., 2008; Swami, & Tovée, 2006; Wagenbach, 2004). Conflicting findings could highlight tensions experienced by non-heterosexual women; as internal body shame or negative body image may be seen as inconsistent with the external values upheld by feminist and LGBT communities (Chmielewski & Yost, 2012; Haines et al., 2008; Kelly, 2007).

Internalised Heterosexism

Szymanski and Chung (2003a, 2003b) suggest that non-heterosexual women are more likely to experience body shame and low self-esteem, due to internalisation of their stigmatised status. Minority stress and internalised heterosexism is associated with poorer mental health outcomes (Cochran, Sullivan, & Mays, 2003; Herek & Garnets, 2007; Lewis, Derlega, Berndt, Morris, & Rose, 2002), and increased risk for suicide (King et

al., 2008; Wichstrøm & Hegna, 2003). Sexual minority women also display higher levels of eating pathology and body dissatisfaction (Austin et al., 2009; Hadland, Austin, Goodenow, & Calzo, 2014), due to low levels of self-esteem, depression, and body shame from internalised heterosexism (Huxley, 2013; Jones & Malson, 2011).

Internalised heterosexism may influence levels of self-esteem and body shame in non-heterosexual women, and these factors may indirectly impact on levels of body satisfaction, rather than pressure to conform to a thin body ideal, as proposed by the objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Lesbian and bisexual appearance and beauty norms

Different standards of beauty and appearance norms are prevalent within LGBT communities (Lev, 2008; Levitt & Hiestand, 2004; Taub, 2003). Non-heterosexual women were found to prefer a larger ideal body size (Alvy, 2013; Markey & Markey, 2013; Swami & Tovée, 2006), and placed more value on physical fitness and muscular physiques than heterosexual women (Aaron et al., 2001).

Discrepancies between body satisfaction could be explained by different subcultures among non-heterosexual women, such as ‘butch’ and ‘femme’ cultures, which emphasise different appearance norms and levels of femininity. Femininity may influence levels of body satisfaction and internalisation of heteronormative ideals, with more feminine non-heterosexual women experiencing greater body dissatisfaction and eating pathology than less feminine, ‘butch’, lesbians (Meyer, Blissett, & Oldfield, 2001). Additionally, ‘butch’ lesbians reject traditional female gender roles and objectification of

women (Crawley, 2002; Nguyen, 2008), resulting in less internalisation of heteronormative standards of beauty and greater body satisfaction.

Lesbian and bisexual women report feeling constrained to a different set of appearance rules to aid identification as non-heterosexual (Clarke & Turner, 2007). Eves (2004) concluded that ‘femme’ lesbians often felt frustrated at not being seen as an ‘authentic’ lesbian, and feeling unidentifiable to other lesbians. As well as internalising more heterosexual beauty norms, ‘femme’ and bisexual women may feel less connected to the LGBT community, due to feeling invisible and inauthentic, which may affect their overall well-being and body satisfaction.

The role of the partner and mate choice

Evolutionary perspectives of sexual attraction and partner choice (e.g. Bailey, Gaulin, Agyei, & Glaude, 1994; Buss & Schmidt, 2011) predict that women prioritise emotional connectedness over physical attractiveness when selecting a potential mate, ensuring stability for their offspring. Lesbian women may not prioritise physical appearance in a potential partner, but rather emotional bonds, therefore inadvertently protecting themselves from negative body image (Schäfer, 1977). Furthermore, as lesbian women are not trying to connect with male partners, they may be less inclined to conform to heteronormative standards of beauty (Siever, 1994).

Due to being attracted to both men and women. Bisexual women experience different challenges, and may prioritise their physical appearance in order to be desirable to men. Chmielewski and Yost (2012) concluded that bisexual women experienced more body satisfaction when in relationships with women. Bisexual women were also found to

provide and request more physical descriptors when advertising in a dating page of a non-heterosexual magazine (Smith & Stillman, 2002), suggesting that they may be more influenced by heterosexual relationship norms. Evolutionary perspectives may offer an alternative explanation for differences in body satisfaction between heterosexual and non-heterosexual women.

Aims of the current study

This study aims to contribute to existing literature by exploring possible factors that may influence body satisfaction in non-heterosexual women. This research will investigate the attitudes of non-heterosexual women, focusing on body image, body-related pressures, social and media influences, and the impact of LGBT communities. Qualitative inquiry will be used to incorporate these factors, as well as allowing for any new themes or ideas to emerge. To the researcher's knowledge, this is the first study to address all of these issues among non-heterosexual women.

Method

The current study investigated body image issues in non-heterosexual women using semi-structured interviews and qualitative analysis. Ethical approval was awarded by Swansea University's Department of Psychology Ethics Committee. Participants were over 18 years of age, female, non-heterosexual, and had no objections to being interviewed, which was audio recorded.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through the Swansea University Psychology Subject Pool, where the study was advertised for subject credits. The study was also advertised to Swansea University Staff and Student LGBT societies and committees, and through the student newsletter. The advertisement detailed the inclusion criteria, and interested participants were provided the e-mail address for the researcher.

Participants

A total of 11 self-reported non-heterosexual women (7 students, and 4 staff) responded to the advertisement, and were invited to attend an interview at one the research laboratories within the University's Psychology Department. Participants were given the opportunity to describe their gender and sexuality in their own words, as well as declare their age, occupation, marital status, and ethnicity. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym by the researcher to ensure full anonymity. The age of participants ranged from 18-54 (mean age= 27), and described themselves as female (n=11). The sample comprised of lesbian women (n=4), bisexual women (n=6), and a pansexual individual (n=1); the majority of which classing themselves as White/White British/White Welsh/Welsh/British (n=10), except for one who described her ethnicity as Indian. Four participants responded as 'Single', two were in a 'Civil Partnership', one responded as 'Not married/In a relationship', one as 'In a relationship with a woman', and three as 'In a relationship with a man'.

Procedure

The advertisement outlined the procedure of the study and provided a brief explanation of the study's aims, which were to explore body image dissatisfaction and the effect of societal norms on non-heterosexual groups.

Upon arrival, participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form, and given the opportunity to ask any questions. Participants were reminded that they were free to withdraw at any point during the study, and that they could by-pass any question, should they feel uncomfortable or reluctant to answer. The researcher and participant also discussed the reasons for the research, what the participants were required to do, how and why the information was being recorded, and how the data would be used. The participants were reminded that any identifiable information, such as names or places, would be amended, and any quotations would remain unidentifiable through the use of pseudonyms. Participants were also informed that the researcher was a heterosexual woman, as this has found to encourage openness and trust between the two parties (Asher & Asher, 1999).

A semi-structured interview style was used to allow for any new ideas or themes to emerge, and to gain an insight into individual experiences and opinions. The interview schedule was informed by the current literature surrounding body image, sexual orientation, LGBT communities, sociocultural influences, and beauty and body ideals. Questioning began by determining general levels of body satisfaction. Questions further developed this theme by asking their opinions on their ideal body, how appearance ideals affect their overall well-being, and a historical look at their experiences of body image dissatisfaction/satisfaction throughout their lifespan. Questions then focused on motivations, pressures and any other influences that may affect their body image, with

further probing about their level of affiliation to LGBT communities. The final part of the interview focused on how LGBT is presented within the media and whether this has any effect on their body image, their appearance preferences in potential partners, and appearance norms and ideals within the LGBT community. Bisexual women were asked an additional question regarding their partner choice, and focused on whether levels of body satisfaction were influenced by the gender of a potential partner. Interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes and were recorded using a Digital Voice Recorder and transcribed verbatim.

At the end of the interview, participants were provided with a de-brief form detailing relevant support services should they feel affected by any of the issues raised, as well as the contact details of the researcher and study supervisor. Participants were also given the opportunity to ask any further questions and discuss the research that is being conducted.

Data Analysis

Analysis was conducted using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996; 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2003). Following recommendations by Storey (2007), IPA was performed via a series of stages. The first stage was an iterative process of reading each transcript separately, and making notes in the left-hand margin regarding possible interpretations of experiences and concerns. The researcher then returned to each transcript individually, and using the preliminary notes, formulated themes in the right-hand margin to encapsulate the original interpretations. Following this, the transcripts were analysed collectively to consolidate preliminary themes into subordinate themes to

reflect any similarities across transcripts. The final stage involved grouping subordinate themes together to form a set of superordinate themes. The process was iterative, and each theme was checked against the transcripts to ensure accuracy and reliable interpretations. Once superordinate and subordinate themes were identified, the researcher began to select representative quotations from the transcripts.

Results

Three superordinate themes are presented: Body-Related Pressures and influences; Non-Heterosexual Pressures and Influences; and Partner Choice and Relationships. The themes presented will be supported with quotations from the original interviews.

Body related pressures and influences

All participants displayed an awareness of the heteronormative body ideal, implicating the ideal body as being tall, thin, toned and flawless. They also perceived the ideal body as curvy with large breasts, whilst remaining thin and slender. Most participants emphasised wanting to look healthy, rather than too thin, and aspired for a fit, athletic body.

When asked about the ideal body, some of the participants related this to media pressures and referred to celebrities, suggesting the ideal body is tailored around sociocultural influences. All participants were aware of media pressures, but the level of internalisation varied between participants. Four participants also related external pressures to other people, including family members and peers in school, suggesting that other people's responses to body size and shape are heavily influenced by societal pressures:

“My sense of worth, my self-concept was hinged on what size I was...to the point that my parents would say things like 'You will never amount to anything because you're fat', 'You'll never get a boyfriend', 'You'll never get a husband', 'You'll never get married and have children', 'You won't get a decent job', 'You'll never be successful because you're fat'” (Carmen, Lesbian).

In regards to body satisfaction, the majority of participants expressed low levels of satisfaction, four of which related this to external pressures to conform to a slim body ideal. The participants who expressed high levels of body satisfaction discussed how they have come to terms with their bodies and are now able to accept their bodies for what they are, highlighting adolescence as a time where they were most dissatisfied. Body satisfaction appeared to correlate with weight, with more body dissatisfaction experienced with weight gain in four participants, suggesting that non-heterosexual women are susceptible to pressures to conform to a thin body ideal:

“I think I have only had a real issue with body image in the last few years, since I have become heavier than I ever was in the past” (May, Lesbian).

One participant also experienced body dissatisfaction as she perceives herself as being too thin, suggesting that there is pressure to conform to a certain body ideal:

“I am just skinny, I can't really move onwards from that really and it just makes me feel a bit uncomfortable...People in general, they are quite critical on people who are skinnier, although there's a lot of body shaming on bigger people, there's a lot of body shaming on skinny people too” (Tracey, Bisexual).

Six participants expressed using exercise and dieting as a way of achieving a slimmer and more toned body ideal. Out of the remaining five participants, four did not partake in any exercise or dieting, and two exercised for enjoyment. Three participants also expressed problematic eating behaviour at some point in their lives, corresponding with times where they were feeling most self-conscious about their bodies:

“I went into a cycle of dieting, I went off the diet, dieted often, and got fatter, and fatter, and fatter...I had borderline eating problems in my teenage years” (Carmen, Lesbian).

All participants were aware of external pressures to conform to a thin, slender and toned body ideal, implicating the media as a key influence. All participants expressed body dissatisfaction at some stage of their lives, with just over half of the sample still experiencing low levels of satisfaction in their adult lives. Body dissatisfaction was also apparent in one participant who perceived herself as too thin.

Weight gain also appeared to influence levels of body satisfaction, with exercise and dieting used as a way of trying to gain this ideal figure in just over half of the sample. Three participants also discussed having experienced eating pathology at some point in their lives.

Non-heterosexual pressures and influences

Although all of the participants perceived the LGBT community as more accepting and less judgemental, the majority of participants did not feel this offered any protection from mainstream pressures to conform to a thin body ideal. Two participants further suggested that non-heterosexual women are at more pressure due to their sexual orientation:

“I think you have a bit more of a pressure because obviously you want to be attracted to someone of the same sex, and then you have an ideal of what the sex should [look like], so I think maybe there is a bit more pressure” (Lyndsey, Bisexual).

Four out of five participants over the age of 25 also expressed that the pressure to conform to an ideal body has increased over time, as there was more acceptance over larger body sizes, prior to the normalisation of homosexuality:

“There were a lot more women that I met who were larger and very muscular as well. I think nowadays, I think because it has become more integrated into normative culture, I think there are even greater pressures...What I can see in the social trends over the last twenty years is that identity is being prescribed by the media, just the same as straight identities” (Carmen, Lesbian).

There was a general consensus that there is a pressure to conform to certain fashions and appearance mandates, rather than in body size or shape. The amount of perceived pressure to conform to these appearance norms varied between participants. Some participants stated that they dress a certain way in lesbian spaces to integrate into the community, and to be recognised as non-heterosexual:

“I spend half my life dressing one way, which I'm perfectly comfortable with, but you wouldn't even know I'm gay, and then the rest of the time going out to lesbian spaces where I actually have to dress like a lesbian or else they'll see I'm some sad, fat, straight woman sitting in a bar.” (Carmen, Lesbian).

All participants were aware of different fashion trends among lesbian women, emphasising the difference between butch, Femme and Lipstick lesbians. The majority of lesbian participants over the age of 25 did perceive themselves as either butch or femme, whereas the younger participants did not identify to a particular category, suggesting that current trends may be moving away from the butch/femme categories. One participant who identified herself as butch, explained how she felt empowered as a butch lesbian, as she was able to escape heteronormative pressures to conform to a thin body ideal:

“I had very short hair, tattoos, wore a lot of dungarees and army boots and it made me feel strong, and it made me feel powerful, it didn't matter what size I was...because no-one could touch me, because I was being a lesbian...I was happier with myself body image...because I was able to step aside a bit from that sort of heteronorm of you know, you got to have this lovely perfect body” (Carmen, Lesbian).

All participants perceived more acceptance of homosexuality in recent years. All of the participants who were over the age of 25 commented that there is less discrimination against homosexuality than when they were ‘coming out’, suggesting that perhaps homosexuality is now more normalised and more accepted:

“I'm nearly 30, and there's a lot more teenagers who say they're lesbian now, whereas when I was that age you couldn't openly say it, was getting bullied or having a hard time,

um, whereas now you see them walking hand in hand in the street... I think it's a lot more acceptable to be lesbian now, especially in schools" (Courtney, Lesbian).

In regards to media, all participants recognised that non-heterosexual women are less represented. How media representation affected body satisfaction varied between participants. Majority of participants suggested that non-heterosexual women tend to conform to heteronormative standards of beauty, when represented in the media:

"[Whilst discussing a lesbian melodrama] They are all thin, what a surprise. There is one woman of size on there, um, who isn't involved in anything like a sexy scene...and there is one time she has an intimate encounter with another character, and it is the only scene in the whole six series where a larger woman is presented as sexy, or is even incorporated into anything...in this whole iconic, ground-breaking lesbian melodrama, around for six seasons, not a single woman of size" (Carmen, Lesbian).

Although participants commented that the LGBT communities are more accepting of different body sizes and appearances, it does not appear to protect them from body dissatisfaction and pressures to conform to a body ideal.

Participants discussed different appearance standards among non-heterosexual women, referring to butch, femme, and lipstick sub-groups. Pressure to conform to these appearance norms varied between participants, with many referring to issues with identification and recognition as a contributory factor. Among those identifying as butch, empowerment and strength was reported, as well as the rejection of heteronormative standards of attractiveness. Current appearance trends were also discussed, with many participants expressing the disappearance of the butch/femme groups in recent years, and a current trend towards a thin and boyish appearance.

All participants expressed an improvement in LGBT representation in mainstream media. The majority of participants perceived LGBT characters to promote heteronormative standards of beauty, referring their experiences to television series and

magazines. These participants also inferred that this media representation can be very influential, as there is little representation of non-heterosexual women in mainstream media.

Partner Choice and Relationships

Out of all the participants, only three women gave a preferred body type in a partner. Among them, the desired body type was thin, but not too thin. Each of these participants believed that this attraction influenced their own body ideal. The remaining eight participants all discussed no preference in the physical appearance of a partner, selecting personality as the main attraction. One participant suggested that personality is an important factor when finding a partner as there is little choice due to being a minority group. Similarly, one participant believed that her preference for personality was due to her sexual orientation, as, being pansexual, she is attracted to others regardless of their biological gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, or ethnicity or background:

“I'm attracted to people regardless of like gender or sex, so if they're trans[Sexual/Gender], fine; if they're inner sex, fine; if they're straight...that's fine; just whatever they're doing it's fine, I'm OK with it...It probably helps to be honest, because I just don't really care, they can just do whatever they want and I don't care. If I like you, I like you. It doesn't matter what else you got going on” (Sue, Pansexual).

Three out of four lesbian participants expressed feeling more comfortable with their bodies when in a relationship. They discussed how being in a relationship with another woman promoted more understanding and reassurance regarding body satisfaction.

However, the majority of bisexual/pansexual participants believed being with a woman resulted in less body satisfaction, as they would compare themselves to their partner:

“When I'm with a woman, because we've got the same sort of thing...I tend to compare us, so I'm like 'You've got bigger boobs than me' and like 'this is the way your body shape is, and mine is different from yours'...When I'm with a guy, it's totally different” (Sue, Pansexual).

The majority of participants prioritised personality over physical appearance. Those who suggested a preference appeared to prefer someone similar to that prescribed by the body ideal: Slim, but not too thin. Those who stated a preference for a certain body type also felt that this influenced their own body ideal and body satisfaction. Similarly, five out of eight participants who preferred personality to physical appearance presented with moderate to high levels of body satisfaction, although only two participants believed their body satisfaction to be determined by their preference for personality.

In regards to gender, three out of four lesbian women felt more confident with their bodies when in a relationship. Among the bisexual and pansexual participants, only one woman expressed feeling more self-conscious when with a man. Three of the bisexual and pansexual participants felt more dissatisfied with their bodies when they were with a woman, as they believed they compared themselves to their partner's bodies.

Discussion

This study explored body image issues of non-heterosexual women, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. This chapter summarizes and synthesises findings which suggest that body image is a multi-faceted concept among non-heterosexual women, of which cannot be explained solely by sociocultural models.

Body-Related Pressures and Influences

All participants described themselves as being aware of external pressures to conform to a thin, slender and toned body ideal, implicating the media as a key influence. Family and

peers were also mentioned as influential pressures, but related this back to societal expectations of attractiveness. These findings provide support for Dworkin's (1989) hypothesis that non-heterosexual women are as susceptible to body dissatisfaction as heterosexual women, due to receiving the same socialisation process. With regards to the objectification model (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), only one participant felt that their success was dependent on achieving the thin body ideal, suggesting some support for the theory.

All participants aspired to a fit and athletic body, providing some support for Aaron et al. (2001), who found that non-heterosexual women placed more value on physical fitness and muscular physiques. Just over half of the sample still experience low levels of satisfaction in their adult lives, supporting previous research that non-heterosexual women are as susceptible to body dissatisfaction as heterosexual women (e.g. Grogan, Conner, & Smithson, 2006; Huxley, Clarke, & Halliwell, 2014; Peplau et al., 2009; Tiggemann, 2015). Body dissatisfaction was also apparent in one participant who perceived herself as 'too thin', suggesting there is a certain body ideal to conform to.

Furthermore, a majority of participants described exercise and dieting as a tool to try to gain their perceived ideal figure, suggesting that there is a pressure among non-heterosexual women to conform to mainstream body ideals. These findings are in line with research by Grogan, Conner and Smithson (2006) who found that lesbian women engaged in similar levels of exercise and dieting as heterosexual women, in order to achieve a thinner, more toned, body. Furthermore, three participants discussed having experienced eating pathology at some point in their lives, suggesting that non-

heterosexual women are also at risk for eating disorders, in line with previous research (e.g. Austin et al., 2004; Feldman & Meyer, 2007).

There did not appear to be any differences between the amount of pressure, body satisfaction levels, or dieting and exercise behaviour between women of different ages or sexual orientation.

Non-Heterosexual Pressures and Influences

Affiliation to the LGBT community did not appear to influence body satisfaction, as six participants expressed low levels of body satisfaction regardless of their attitudes and involvement with LGBT communities. These findings provide support for research carried out by Haines *et al.* (2008), Swami and Tovée (2006) and Wagenbach (2004), who found that affiliation to LGBT communities had little to no effect on body satisfaction. Furthermore, the majority of participants perceived the LGBT community as more accepting of different body sizes and appearances, but did not feel that this protected them from body dissatisfaction and pressures to conform to a body ideal. The findings here do not support Brown's (1987) theory that LGBT communities offer protection from heteronormative pressures regarding beauty and appearance.

Appearance norms among non-heterosexual women highlighted the presence of different sub-groups, namely 'butch' and 'femme' sub-cultures. Most women did not identify as either a 'butch' or 'femme' lesbian, and so it was not possible to explore whether femininity effects body satisfaction. Some participants did discuss changing their appearance when in non-heterosexual environments, suggesting that appearance norms may be an important aid for identification and recognition, supporting findings by Clarke and Turner (2007), and Eves (2004).

Participants discussed how these sub-cultures appear to be disappearing along with the normalisation of homosexuality. Due to the perceived disappearance of the 'butch' lesbian, many participants expressed that there is an increased pressure to conform to the heterosexual body ideal. Furthermore, the disappearance of the butch/femme cultures may have resulted in less rejection of heteronormative standards of beauty and more internalisation of mainstream appearance norms and body ideals.

Participants over the age of 25 also expressed levels of discrimination during times when perhaps homosexuality was less accepted by society. They discussed rejecting heterosexual norms and identifying as a 'butch' lesbian as a result of discrimination, describing how this resulted in them feeling empowered. These findings are in line with Crawley (2002) and Nguyen (2008), who found that the butch appearance is related to the rejection of heteronormative standards of beauty. Since the normalisation of homosexuality, however, there is less shame and stigma attached to homosexuality (Ahmad & Bhugra, 2010; Hooghe & Meeusen, 2013), and so there may be less need to reject heteronormative standards.

With the increase of LGBT representation in mainstream media, many women expressed feeling liberated and able to freely express their individual styles. However, many noted that heterosexual standards of beauty are represented within LGBT media, which may increase pressures to conform to mainstream ideals of body and appearance. Furthermore, in relation to the gay identity formation theory (Cass, 1979; 1984), non-heterosexual women may depend on LGBT characters in mainstream media when coming to terms with their homosexuality and dealing with isolation (Gomillion and

Giuliano, 2011; McKee, 2000), resulting in more internalisation of mainstream body ideals.

Partner Choice and Relationships

The majority of participants prioritised personality over physical appearance, thus providing support for evolutionary perspectives of sexual attraction and partner choice (e.g. Bailey et al., 1994; Buss & Schmidt, 2011). Those who stated a preference for a certain body type also felt that this influenced their own body ideal and body satisfaction. Similarly, most participants who preferred personality to physical appearance, presented with moderate to high levels of body satisfaction, suggesting their own body satisfaction may be determined by their preference for personality.

With regards to gender, the majority of lesbian women felt more confident with their bodies when in a relationship. Among the bisexual and pansexual participants, only one woman expressed feeling more self-conscious when with a man, whereas the majority were more dissatisfied with their bodies when with a woman. Participants explained that they were more likely to compare their body size and shape with their partner, if their partner was a woman, contradicting findings by Chmielewski and Yost (2012).

Study Limitations and Future Research

Due to non-heterosexual women being a minority group, there were difficulties in recruiting participants to the study. The sample therefore included both staff and students of different age groups, therefore, the participants were diverse in terms of their employment status and represented an older population than originally anticipated.

However, this did raise an important discussion point, regarding changes associated with the normalisation of homosexuality, of which was not anticipated by the researcher.

Furthermore, there was only one participant who did not identify as either lesbian or bisexual. As far as the researcher is aware, there is no body image research regarding other non-heterosexual groups, such as pansexual. Future research should consider focusing on other LGBT groups, as well as body image issues in transgender individuals at various stages of gender reassignment.

Furthermore, it is recognised that although not all participants were students, they were all from a University population. Therefore, participants here were predominately white women, with high educational status. Therefore, future research should seek to explore ethnicity in the context of body dissatisfaction and sexual orientation. However, it is recognised that it is difficult to recruit a wide range of diverse women among non-heterosexual samples (Clarke & Peel, 2007).

Future research focusing on body image issues in non-heterosexual women may benefit from exploring different age groups to identify if the normalisation of homosexuality has influenced pressures to conform to mainstream notions of appearance and beauty. Furthermore, future research should seek to explore rural and urban areas, to see if perceived discrimination results in a greater rejection of heteronormative standards of beauty and appearance.

Conclusions

The study presented here, found that non-heterosexual women do not appear to be protected from mainstream body ideals and appearance norms. Although, LGBT communities are perceived by participants, as more accepting of larger body sizes and alternative styles, this does not appear to protect them from body dissatisfaction. Media representation of LGBT, fashion norms among non-heterosexual women, and partner

choice, appear to influence levels of body satisfaction. Body image among non-heterosexual women is therefore a multi-faceted concept, of which cannot be solely accounted for by any one theory, such as the objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and sociocultural models (Stice & Agras, 1998).

One framework, which may be helpful in understanding the results presented in this study, is the gay identity formation model by Cass (1979, 1984). Prior to the formation of a gay identity, non-heterosexual women would have received the same socialisation process as heterosexual women, including external pressures from the media. Upon realisation of their sexual orientation, the individual undergoes a process of cognitive and behavioural changes. During this time, the individual may seek acceptance from other LGBT individuals, therefore rejecting the heterosexual society and their associated norms (Cass, 1979; 1984). Since the normalisation of homosexuality, however, there is less shame and stigma attached to homosexuality, and the individual may not feel the need to reject heteronormative standards as they feel accepted within the general society (Ahmad & Bhugra, 2010; Hooghe & Meeusen, 2013). Although, they may seek other LGBT individuals during the gay identity formation, the individual may not discard their heterosexual socialisation process, as they have not been rejected by that society. This would lead to the same mainstream pressures as heterosexual women, making them as susceptible to body dissatisfaction.

References

- Aaron, D. J., Markovic, N., Danielson, M. E., Honnold, J. A., Janosky, J. E., & Schmidt, N. J. (2001). Behavioural risk factors for disease and preventive health practices among lesbians. *American Journal of Public Health*, 91(6), 972-975.
- Ahmad, S., & Bhugra, D. (2010). Homophobia: An updated review of the literature. *Sexual and Relationship Theory*, 25(4), 447-455.
- Alvy, A.M. (2013). Do lesbian women have a better body image? Comparisons with heterosexual women and model of lesbian-specific factors. *Body Image*, 10, 524-534. DOI:10.1016/j.bodyim.2013.06.002.
- Asher, N. S., & Asher, K. C. (1999). Qualitative methods for an outsider looking in: Lesbian women and body image. In M. Kopala and L. A. Suzuki (Eds.), *Using Qualitative Methods in Psychology* (pp.135-144). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Austin, S. B., Ziyadeh, N. J., Corliss, H. L., Rosario, M., Wypij, D., Haines, J., Camargo, C. A., & Field, A. E. (2009). Sexual orientation disparities in purging and binge eating from early to late adolescence. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 45, 238-245. DOI:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2009.02.001.
- Austin, S. B., Ziyadeh, N. J., Kahn, J. A., Camargo Jr., Colditz, G. A., & Field, A. E. (2004). Sexual orientation, weight concerns and eating-disordered behaviors in adolescent girls and boys. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 43(9), 1115-1123. DOI:10.1097/01.chi.0000131139.93862.10.

- Bailey, J. M., Gaulin, S., Agyei, Y., & Gladue, B. A. (1994). Effects of gender and sexual orientation on evolutionary relevant aspects of human mating psychology. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 66(6), 1081-1093. DOI:10.1037/0022-3514.66.6.1081.
- Beren, S. E., Hayden, H. A., Wilfley, D. E., & Grilo, C. M. (1996). The influence of sexual orientation on body dissatisfaction in adult men and women. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 20(2), 135-141. DOI:10.1002/(SICI)1098-108X(199609)20:2<135::AID-EAT3>3.0.CO;2-H.
- Brown, L. S. (1987). Lesbians, weight, and eating: New analyses and perspectives. In Boston Lesbian Psychologies Collective (Ed.), *Lesbian Psychologies: Explanations and Challenges* (pp.294-310). Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Buss, D. M., & Schmitt, D. P. (2011). Evolutionary psychology and feminism. *Sex Roles*, 64, 768-787. DOI:10.1007/s11199-011-9987-3.
- Cass, V. C. (1979). Homosexual identity formation: A theoretical model. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 4(3), 219-235. DOI:10.1300/J082v04n03_01.
- Cass, V. C. (1984). Homosexual identity formation: Testing a theoretical model. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 20(2), 143-167. DOI:10.1080/00224498409551214.
- Chmielewski, J. F., & Yost, M. R. (2012). Psychosocial influences on bisexual women's body image: Negotiating gender and sexuality. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 37, 224-241. DOI:10.1177/0361684311426126.

- Clarke, V., & Peel, E. (2007). *Out in Psychology: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer Perspectives*. Chichester, UK: Wiley.
- Clarke, V., & Turner, K. (2007). Clothes maketh the queer? Dress, appearance and the construction of lesbian, gay and bisexual identities. *Feminism and Psychology*, 17(2), 267-276. DOI:10.1177/0959353507076561.
- Cochran, S. D., Sullivan, J. G., & Mays, V. M. (2003). Prevalence of mental disorders, psychological distress, and mental health services use among lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults in the United States. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 71(1), 53-61. DOI:10.1037/0022-006X.71.1.53.
- Conner, M., Johnson, C., & Grogan, S. (2004). Gender, sexuality, body image and eating behaviours. *Journal of health psychology*, 9(4), 505-515. DOI:10.1177/1359105304044034.
- Crawley, S. L. (2002). "They Still don't understand why I hate wearing dresses!" An autoethnographic rant on dresses, boats, and butchness. *Critical Methodologies*, 2(1), 69-92. DOI:10.1177/153270860200200110.
- Dworkin, H. S. (1989). Not in a man's image: Lesbians and cultural oppression of body image. *Women and Therapy*, 8, 27-39. DOI:10.1300/J015v08n01_03.
- Eves, A. (2004). Queer theory, butch/femme identities and lesbian space. *Sexualities*, 7(4), 480-496. DOI:10.1177/1363460704047064.
- Feldman, M. B., & Meyer, I. H. (2007). Eating disorders in diverse lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations. *International journal of eating disorders*, 40, 218-226. DOI:10.1002/eat.20360.

- Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T-A. (1997). Objectification Theory: Toward understanding women's lived experiences and mental health risks. *Psychology of women quarterly*, 21, 173-206. DOI:10.1111/j.1471-6402.1997.tb00108.x.
- French, S. A., Story, M., Remafedi, G., Resnick, M. D., & Blum, R. W. (1996). Sexual orientation and prevalence of body dissatisfaction and eating disordered behaviors: A population-Based study of adolescents. *International journal of eating disorders*, 19(2), 119-126. DOI:10.1002/(SICI)1098-108X(199603)19:2<119::AID-EAT2>3.0.CO;2-Q.
- Gomillion, S. C., & Giuliano, T. A. (2011). The influence of media role models on gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 58, 330–354. DOI:10.1080/00918369.2011.546729.
- Grogan, S., Conner, M., & Smithson, H. (2006). Sexuality and exercise motivations: Are gay men and heterosexual women most likely to be motivated by concern about weight and appearance? *Sex Roles*, 55, 567-572. DOI:10.1007/s11199-006-9110-3.
- Hadland, S. E., Austin, S. B., Goodenow, C. S., & Calzo, J. P. (2014). Weight misperception and unhealthy weight control behaviors among sexual minorities in the general population. *Journal of adolescent health*, 54, 296-303. DOI:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2013.08.021.
- Haines, M. E., Erchull, M. J., Liss, M., Turner, D. L., Nelson, J. A., Ramsey, L. R., & Hurt, M. M. (2008). Predictors and effects of self-objectification in lesbians.

Psychology of Women Quarterly, 32, 181-187. DOI:10.1111/j.1471-6402.2008.00422.x.

Hanley, S., & McLaren, S. (2015). Sense of belonging to layers of lesbian community weakens the link between body image dissatisfaction and depressive symptoms. *Psychology of women quarterly*. Advance online publication. DOI:10.1177/0361684314522420.

Herek, G. M., & Garnets, L. D. (2007). Sexual orientation and mental health. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 3, 353-375. DOI:10.1146/annurev.clinpsy.3.022806.091510.

Hooghe, M., & Meeusen, C. (2013). Is same-sex marriage legislation related to attitudes toward homosexuality? *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 10(4), 258-268.

Huxley, C. J. (2013). Lesbian and bisexual women's experiences of sexuality-based discrimination and their appearance concerns. *Psychology and Sexuality*, 4(1), 7-15. DOI:10.1080/19419899.2013.748239.

Huxley, C. J., Clarke, V., & Halliwell, E. (2014). A qualitative exploration of whether lesbian and bisexual women are 'protected' from sociocultural pressure to be thin. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 19, 273-284. DOI:10.1177/1359105312468496.

Jones, R., & Malson, H. (2011). A critical exploration of lesbian perspectives on eating disorders. *Psychology and Sexuality*, 4(1), 62-74. DOI:10.1080/19419899.2011.603349.

- Kelly, L. (2007). Lesbian body image perceptions: The context of body silence. *Qualitative Health Research*, 17(7), 873-883. DOI:10.1177/1049732307306172.
- King, M., Semlyen, J., Tai, S. S., Killaspy, H., Osborn, D., Popelyuk, D., & Nazareth, I. (2008). A systematic review of mental disorder, suicide, and deliberate self-harm in lesbian, gay and bisexual people. *BMC Psychiatry*, 8, 70. DOI:10.1186/1471-244X-8-70.
- Krakauer, I. D., & Rose, S. M. (2002). The impact of group membership on lesbians' physical appearance. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 6, 31-43. DOI:10.1300/J155v06n01_04.
- Lakkis, J., Williams, R. J., & Ricciardelli (1999). Role of sexual orientation and gender-related traits in disordered eating. *Sex Roles*, 41(1-2), 1-16. DOI:10.1023/A:1018829506907.
- Lev, A. I. (2008). More than surface tension: Femmes in families. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 12(2-3), 126-143. DOI:10.1080/10894160802161299.
- Levitt, H. M., & Hiestand, K. R. (2004). A quest for authenticity: Contemporary butch gender. *Sex Roles*, 50(9-10), 605-621. DOI:10.1023/B:SERS.0000027565.59109.80.
- Lewis, R. J., Derlega, V. J., Berndt, A., Morris, L. M., & Rose, S. (2002). An empirical analysis of stressors for gay men and lesbians. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 42(1), 63-88. DOI:10.1300/J082v42n01_04.

- Markey, C. N., & Markey, P. M. (2013). Gender, sexual orientation, and romantic partner influence on body image: An examination of heterosexual and lesbian women and their partners. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 31(2), 162-177. DOI:10.1177/0265407513489472.
- McKee, A. (2000). Images of gay men in the media and the development of self esteem. *Australian Journal of Communication*, 27, 81-98.
- Meyer, C., Blissett, J., & Oldfield, C. (2001). Sexual orientation and eating psychopathology: The role of masculinity and femininity. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 29, 314-318. DOI:10.1002/eat.1024.
- Nguyen, A. (2008). Patriarchy, power, and female masculinity. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 55, 665-683. DOI:10.1080/00918360802498625.
- Peplau, L. A., Frederick, D. A., Yee, C., Maisel, N., Lever, J., & Ghavami, N. (2009). Body image satisfaction in heterosexual, gay and lesbian adults. *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, 38, 713-725. DOI:10.1007/s10508-008-9378-1.
- Rothblum, E. D. (1994). Transforming lesbian identity. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 18, 627-641. DOI:10.1111/j.1471-402.1994.tb01051.x.
- Satinsky, S., Reece, M., Dennis, B., Sanders, S., & Bardzell, S. (2012). An assessment of body appreciation and its relationship to sexual function in women. *Body Image*, 9, 137-144. DOI:10.1016/j.bodyim.2011.09.007.

- Schäfer, S. (1977). Sociosexual behaviour in male and female homosexuals: A study in sex differences. *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, 6, 355-364.
DOI:10.1007/BF01541180.
- Siever, M. D. (1994). Sexual orientation and gender as factors in socioculturally acquired vulnerability to body dissatisfaction and eating disorders. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 62(2), 252-260. DOI:10.1037/0022-006X.62.2.252.
- Smith, C. A., & Stillman, S. (2002). What do women want? The effects of gender and sexual orientation on the desirability of physical attributes in the personal ads of women. *Sex Roles*, 46(9-10), 337-342. DOI:10.1023/A:1020280630635.
- Smith, J. A. (1996). Beyond the divide between cognition and discourse: Using interpretative phenomenological analysis in health psychology. *Psychology and health*, 11, 261-271.
- Smith, J. A. (2004). Reflecting on the development of interpretative phenomenological analysis and its contribution to qualitative psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 1, 39-54.
- Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2003). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods* (pp.51-80). London, UK: Sage.
- Stice, E., & Agras, W. S. (1998). Predicting onset and cessation of bulimic behaviours during adolescence: A longitudinal grouping analysis. *Behaviour Therapy*, 29, 257-276. DOI:10.1016/S0005-7894(98)80006-3.

- Storey, L. (2007). Doing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. In E. Lyons and A. Coyle (Eds.), *Analysing Qualitative Data in Psychology* (pp.51-64). London, UK: Sage.
- Swami, V., & Tovée, M. J. (2006). The influence of body mass index on the physical attractiveness preferences of feminist and nonfeminist heterosexual women and lesbians. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 30, 252-257. DOI:10.1111/j.1471-6402.2006.00293.x.
- Szymanski, D. M., & Chung, Y. B. (2003a). Feminist attitudes and coping resources as correlates of lesbian internalised heterosexism. *Feminism and Psychology*, 13, 369-389. DOI:10.1177/0959353503013003008.
- Szymanski, D. M., & Chung, Y. B. (2003b). Internalised homophobia in lesbians. *Journal of lesbian studies*, 7, 115-125. DOI:10.1300/J155v07n01_08.
- Taub, J. (2003). What should I wear? A qualitative look at the impact of feminism and women's communities on bisexual women's appearance. *Journal of bisexuality*, 3(1), 9-22. DOI:10.1300/J159v03n01_02.
- Tiggemann, M. (in press). Considerations of positive body image across various social identities and special populations. *Body Image*, (2015), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2015.03.002>.
- Wagenbach, P. (2004). Lesbian body image and eating issues. *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality*, 15(4), 205-227. DOI:10.1300/J056v15n04_04.

Wichstrøm, L., & Hegna, K. (2003). Sexual orientation and suicide attempt: A longitudinal study of the general Norwegian adolescent population. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 112(1), 144-151. DOI:10.1037/0021-843X.112.1.144.