

# The Impact of Group Membership on Lesbians' Physical Appearance

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**SUMMARY.** The impact of lesbian group membership upon physical appearance was examined among 81 young lesbians (ages 18-30) who participated in a questionnaire study. Most participants indicated making distinct but modest changes in their physical appearance after coming out as lesbians. These changes were in the direction of their pre-coming out conceptions of lesbians as being butch or androgynous in appearance. A majority reported cutting their hair shorter, wearing more comfortable shoes, or adopting a less traditionally feminine appearance after coming out. Participants also said they significantly less often wore dresses, used makeup, and shaved their legs and underarms. A significant decrease in body weight concern also occurred after coming out. Other changes in physical appearance are discussed. Participants believed that the changes were influenced by the opinions of other lesbians,

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their desire to signal prospective partners, and by becoming more comfortable with themselves. Implications of these results are discussed in terms of peer group norms, group identity, and sexual signaling. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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Lesbian identity development has typically been conceptualized as the process of coming to know and accept one's sexual orientation as lesbian. Some changes that occur during the coming out process are intrapersonal, but many are interpersonal as well. If a newly out lesbian wants to become part of a lesbian community, she must find a way to demonstrate group membership. Physical appearance serves two important functions: it signals group membership and acts as a component of sexual signaling. Because these issues are likely to be salient for newly out lesbians, physical appearance is likely to change during the coming out period.

As a woman begins to present herself as lesbian, she must demonstrate that she belongs to the group. Physical alterations may carry great importance for a lesbian, and paying attention to one's dress is a way of signaling group membership (Cogan & Erickson, 1999; Rothblum, 1994). Especially at a time when one's family and heterosexual friends may be rejecting, approval from other lesbians is crucial. Therefore, newly out lesbians may turn to members of the lesbian community as experts. Many lesbians report taking cues from other lesbians when they first come out (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). We expected that the development of a lesbian identity would be reflected in changes in physical appearance, as women try to meet group standards or ideals. It is likely that such changes occur with greater strength when other lesbians suggest to a newly out lesbian that she does not "fit" in some way.

A second major function of physical appearance is to act as a sexual signaling system. One's attractiveness to and desire for women may be signaled by appearance. Because appearance has implications for dating, it becomes even more crucial to be recognized by and gain the approval of other lesbians. Studies of heterosexual dating have found that attractiveness plays a large role in who people like in both the short term and the long term (reviewed in Aronson, 1995). Attractiveness has been found to be central to sexual desirability among heterosexuals (Unger & Crawford, 1996). However, lesbians do

not hold the same beauty standards as does the larger society (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). This discrepancy suggests that some aspects of a woman's physical appearance may change over time as she comes out as a lesbian.

Standards concerning dress have varied historically among lesbian communities. For instance, the Daughters of Bilitis, a lesbian political organization that began in 1955, tried to counter the notion that lesbians were masculine, encouraging members to wear dresses and grow their hair long (D'Emilio, 1981). In other areas during the 1940s and 1950s, the standard for lesbians was either butch (stereotypically masculine) or femme (stereotypically feminine), and lesbians were supposed to commit to one or the other (Kennedy & Davis, 1993; Nestle, 1987). In the 1970s, middle class lesbians were expected to be feminists and to dress in an androgynous manner (Faderman, 1991; Newman, 1995). Currently, there seems to be a resurgence of interest in butch-femme (Munt, 1998), which has also been described as a "neo-femme renaissance," since the butch look has always been accepted to some extent among lesbians (Creith, 1996).

Lesbians may also have more room for variation in grooming than do heterosexual women. Wearing makeup, for instance, may be necessary in heterosexual contexts whereas it may be optional or even disapproved of in lesbian contexts. Body hair removal is another area where lesbians may have more room for personal variation. In a (presumably heterosexual) sample of college students, a woman with body hair was rated as less attractive than was the same woman without body hair (Basow & Braman, 1998). It has been suggested that the hairless ideal is sought in order to attract men (Basow & Braman, 1998). Lesbians may not seek to attain this ideal to the same extent as do heterosexual women. Lesbians may also be freer than heterosexual women to have a variety of hairstyles.

Other changes in lesbian appearance may have to do with nonverbal behavior, such as eye contact, posture, and stance. Because they are less overt than dress or speech, these behaviors may allow lesbians to recognize one another without risking societal disapproval. This may be particularly crucial when people do not feel that it is safe to publicly reveal their sexual orientation. By presenting herself in a manner that is subtle to the general public but recognizable to other lesbians, a lesbian may increase her chances of finding other lesbians in repressed or hostile environments. Among heterosexuals, men are rated as attractive when they maintain an open body posture and appear relaxed, but women with open body posture are rated as less attractive (Simpson, Gangestad, & Nations, 1996). It is interesting to speculate if this pattern would generalize to lesbians, who may reject the notion of women as submissive. Eye contact has also been cited as a way that lesbians recognize one another, and as a factor in lesbians' sexual approach one of another (Webbink, 1981).

The process of coming out as lesbian may also be accompanied by a shift in body weight concern. Because lesbians are socialized in the dominant society, it seems that they should be at equal risk for weight concern and eating disorders as are heterosexual women. However, lesbians seem to be under-represented in the eating-disordered population (Brown, 1987). It has been proposed that lesbian identity may act as a buffer that moderates the amount of negative attitudes about the female body and the extent to which a woman adheres to socio-cultural norms. For example, lesbians have reported higher ideal weight and more positive feelings for several aspects of their bodies than have heterosexual women (Bergeron & Senn, 1998). Likewise, heterosexual women in the same sample scored higher than did lesbians on a scale of internalization of societal norms. Research has also demonstrated that lesbians who were involved with lesbian/gay activities reported less concern about shape and less dieting behavior than did those lesbians not involved in community activities (Heffernan, 1996). Lesbians have rated weight as being the least important part of women's attractiveness, which suggests that lesbians may experience less pressure to conform to thin ideals (Heffernan, 1999). However, other studies have shown that lesbians do not significantly differ in body dissatisfaction from heterosexual women (Beren, Hayden, Wilfley, & Grilo, 1996). Additionally, lesbians have reported significant differences between their current and ideal weights (Cogan, 1999).

It seems likely that any buffering process is gradual, and that lesbians who have been out for longer will have less strongly negative feelings about their weight than will lesbians who have been out for less time. Thus, we hypothesized that women would report less body weight concern after coming out than they reported prior to coming out. We also expected that lesbians who had been out for a longer period of time would demonstrate less concern about their body weight than would lesbians who had more recently come out.

In summary, we examined the ways in which lesbian identity development affected physical appearance, including clothing, grooming, personal adornment (such as makeup and jewelry), nonverbal behavior, and body weight concern. It was expected that lesbians' physical appearance would become less stereotypically feminine along these dimensions from pre- to post-coming out.

## **METHOD**

### ***Participants***

Lesbians between the ages of 18 and 30 ( $N = 81$ ) were recruited from gay and lesbian community events and gathering places in a midwestern city to

participate in the current research. The mean age of participants was 23 years ( $SD = 3.2$ ). The majority (80%) was White and most had completed at least some college (81%). Two-thirds reported that they were in a committed relationship. Participants indicated that they first thought they might be lesbians at a mean age of 13 years ( $SD = 4.5$ ) and were sure they were lesbians at a mean age of 18 years ( $SD = 3.1$ ). Most reported being “very much” out to their heterosexual friends ( $M = 5.90$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ) and their immediate families ( $M = 5.52$ ,  $SD = 1.93$ ) and moderately out at work ( $M = 4.46$ ,  $SD = 2.35$ ) (7-point scale, 7 = out to all). In addition, a majority (55%) reported at least some involvement with gay and lesbian community organizations.

### **Measures**

Participants completed a paper and pencil questionnaire that included questions about physical appearance. These questions were part of a larger study. Participants were asked to describe several aspects of their physical appearance. Four open-ended questions asked about: (a) participants’ pre-coming out conception of what “a lesbian” looked like, (b) changes they had made in their appearance after coming out, (c) the extent to which any changes in appearance were due to coming out, and (d) what they learned from other lesbians about what a lesbian “should” look like.

Additional quantitative measures asked participants to rate the following: how recognizable or visible they were as a lesbian in terms of appearance (6 items; 7-point scale, 7 = entirely); their reasons for making changes in their appearance after coming out (7 items; 7-point scale, 7 = very much); and their general reasons for dressing as they do (7 items; 7-point scale, 7 = very much). Participants also described how often they engaged in nine dress and grooming practices (e.g., wore makeup) at two points: (a) before coming out and (b) currently (9 items; 7-point scale, 7 = always). Participants were also asked to describe their favorite outfit.

Body weight concern was assessed with the Goldfarb Fear of Fat Scale (Goldfarb, Dykens, & Gerrard, 1985). This 10-item scale has high internal reliability (Cronbach alpha = .85), high test-retest reliability ( $r = .88$ ), and demonstrates divergent validity between women with eating disorders, repeat dieters, and non-dieting women (Goldfarb et al., 1985). Items are rated on a 4-point scale (1 = very untrue, 4 = very true).

Finally, participants were asked to report their degree of involvement with the gay and lesbian community, their age at various stages of coming out, and the degree to which they were out to significant people in their lives. Demographic information also was requested.

### *Procedure*

The first author reviewed the purpose of the study with the participants, who were invited to participate individually or in small groups.

## *RESULTS*

As expected, lesbians reported making definite changes in their physical appearance after coming out. Taken as a whole, both the open-ended responses and ratings of physical appearance measures suggested that the changes were meant to convey group membership as well as to serve as a sexual signal to prospective lesbian partners. In response to the first open-ended question, participants' pre-coming out conceptions of what "a lesbian" looked like strongly resembled the classic butch lesbian stereotype. In response to this question, about 78% of participants (N = 63) described their pre-coming out notion of a lesbian as involving one or more of the following attributes or style of clothing: butch, masculine, short hair, stocky, muscular/athletic, no makeup, comfortable shoes, jeans, T-shirt, and/or leather jacket.

In their responses to the second open-ended question, most lesbians (73%) reported making changes in their appearance after coming out that were moderately in the direction of the butch stereotype. Four categories of appearance were described as being most affected, including getting a shorter haircut (57%), wearing more casual or masculine/androgynous clothes (43%), making changes in grooming habits such as no longer wearing makeup or shaving legs and underarms (20%), or getting a tattoo (36%) or body piercing (40%). Additionally, many participants reported a post-coming out weight gain (44%) or loss (39%), with 15% indicating that they had both gained and lost weight since coming out.

Third, coming out was viewed as most influential in the decision to get a body piercing (41%), followed by a change of hairstyle (38%), losing weight (32%), getting a tattoo (24%), and gaining weight (13%). The desires to convey group membership and signal prospective partners were among the reasons lesbians gave for changes in appearance. For example, one woman wrote: "women are attracted to more shorter haired lesbians," and another wrote, "I cut my hair to look more gay. I got another piercing in my ear because I thought it was the thing to do . . . I wanted to be recognized by other lesbians." Others were less sure of their reasons, like the participant who wrote that her haircut was "probably due to coming out. Needed outward physical change to match my inner change." Finally, some women felt that coming out gave them more freedom to be more fully themselves, such as a lesbian who wrote "I was

no longer concerned [with] what boys found attractive so I was more comfortable dressing how I wished.”

In a fourth open-ended question inquiring about “how other lesbians said you should look,” a majority (63%) indicated they had been told to look more butch or androgynous if they wanted to be recognizable as a lesbian. Specific suggestions included getting a shorter haircut, wearing more T-shirts and tennis shoes or baggy, androgynous or masculine clothes, not shaving legs or underarms, cutting fingernails shorter, and acting more confident.

Ratings on the physical appearance measures paralleled the open-ended responses. As expected, participants indicated having made distinct changes in their appearance since coming out, on average, about five years ago. These changes tended to be moderate overall (see Table 1). On a 7-point scale (1 = not at all; 7 = entirely), participants’ mean score for change of appearance was 3.61 ( $SD = 1.88$ ) since coming out as lesbian. When asked the extent to which these changes were due to coming out, participants gave a mean rating of 3.39 ( $SD = 1.98$ ), indicating the changes were somewhat attributable to the coming out experience. Most participants felt that they were somewhat recognizable as lesbians and rated various aspects of their appearance as slightly indicating to others that they were lesbian. Specifically, the item concerning “body language” was most highly endorsed, followed by eye contact, posture/stance, overall appearance, and clothing. As one participant wrote, “a straight person is very unlikely to [recognize me] because I am usually not that stereotypical. Another lesbian has a better chance of picking up on mannerisms, etc.” However, some participants did not feel recognizable at all, like the woman who wrote “I don’t think I look like what most people think lesbians look like.”

Participants next rated the extent to which each of seven reasons had influenced the changes they had made in their appearance since coming out (see Table 1). “Grew more comfortable with myself” was the most highly rated item. As one participant wrote, “I felt more comfortable about myself. I realized who I was and that the best thing I could do would be to make myself happy with what I liked.” “Other lesbians” was the next most highly endorsed reason. This was reflected in the response: “sometimes, I dress a little more masculine hoping other lesbians will recognize me as a lesbian and maybe conversation will ensue.”

Participants also rated the importance of seven reasons for dressing as they do. Being comfortable and expressing their personalities received the highest ratings, followed by looking attractive and attracting women. One woman wrote, “there is a different aesthetic at work in the lesbian community than in the straight community. Therefore, though I’m still trying to appear attractive, the attempt has different manifestations (i.e., short hair, somewhat butchy clothes).”

TABLE 1. Mean Ratings for Items Assessing Lesbian Visibility and Reasons for Appearance (N = 81)

Measure	Mean	(SD)
Lesbian Visibility Items (7-point scale, 1 = not at all, 7 = entirely)		
How recognizable are you as a lesbian?	3.82	(1.93)
Identifiable as a lesbian by body language	4.36	(1.94)
Identifiable as lesbian by eye contact	4.26	(2.11)
Identifiable as lesbian by posture/stance	3.96	(2.05)
Identifiable as lesbian by overall appearance	3.89	(1.99)
Identifiable as lesbian by clothing	3.83	(1.92)
Reasons for Appearance Change (7-point scale, 1 = not at all, 7 = very much)		
Grew more comfortable with myself	5.73	(1.89)
Other lesbians	4.28	(2.14)
Age	3.91	(2.27)
Partner/lover	3.67	(2.27)
Feminist politics	3.49	(2.24)
Demands of job/work	2.87	(2.07)
Family	2.08	(1.47)
Reasons for Dressing as You Do (7-point scale, 1 = not at all, 7 = very much)		
To be comfortable	6.58	(0.99)
To express my personality	6.06	(1.29)
To look attractive	5.81	(1.30)
To attract women	4.86	(1.99)
To be accepted by other lesbians	2.98	(1.87)
To be accepted by heterosexuals	2.73	(1.83)
To make a political statement	2.39	(1.85)

Differences in the extent to which participants engaged in nine dress and grooming behaviors before coming out versus currently were assessed using t-tests. Significant differences in five behaviors were observed (see Table 2). In contrast to pre-coming out grooming practices, lesbians' current practices involved wearing comfortable shoes significantly more often and wearing makeup and dresses and shaving their legs and underarms significantly less often. No difference was found between pre-coming out and current frequency of wearing high heels, lingerie, earrings, or other jewelry. These changes might be related to peer group norms. For example, one participant wrote, "No



TABLE 2. Mean Ratings of Pre-Coming Out and Current Physical Appearance Measures<sup>1</sup>

Physical Appearance Items	Pre-coming out		Currently		<i>t</i> (80)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Wear comfortable shoes	5.96	(1.65)	6.31	(1.24)	-2.48*
Shave legs	6.09	(1.53)	6.15	(1.78)	2.43*
Shave underarms	6.59	(1.15)	6.15	(1.78)	2.20*
Wear makeup	3.23	(2.04)	2.66	(2.12)	2.08*
Wear dresses	2.90	(1.75)	2.50	(1.76)	2.01*
Wear high heels	2.27	(1.65)	2.04	(1.74)	1.40
Wear lingerie	2.52	(2.01)	2.56	(2.00)	< 1
Wear earrings	4.86	(2.38)	4.91	(2.53)	< 1
Wear other jewelry	5.25	(1.79)	5.56	(1.77)	-1.73

<sup>1</sup>Responses to the questions, "In non-work situations, please rate how often you did the following before coming out/currently." 7-point scale, 1 = not at all, 7 = always.

\* *p* < .05

one told me how I should look, but as I got to know more about lesbians, I had more of an idea of what a lesbian might wear."

The last question focused on participants' favorite outfit. This question was aimed at providing a visual image of how young lesbians presented themselves. All but two participants wrote a specific description of their favorite outfit, and a majority of those responding (84%) described attire that was butch, masculine, or androgynous in appearance rather than traditionally feminine. Commonly mentioned items of clothing included the following:

- Pants (cargo pants, jeans, or comfortable shorts were mentioned frequently)
- Shirt (T-shirt, tank top, or button down shirt)
- Belt
- Jewelry (silver when mentioned)
- Comfortable shoes (Doc Martens, Birkenstocks, Tevas, sandals, boots, sports shoes)
- Colors (mostly black, blue, white, khaki, or camouflage)

A strong concern for appearance was reflected in the detail provided by some participants, particularly in terms of signaling group membership. For in-

stance, one lesbian wrote: “My favorite outfit: a pair of button fly Levi baggy jeans, with this tan (khaki) color shirt with my blue and tan plaid shirt over it. I feel this outfit screams, ‘I am a lesbian!’” Sexual signaling also was conveyed by clothing, as described by another participant who indicated her favorite outfit was: “[An] A-frame tank top (white), with big baggy khaki colored jeans with white stitching. Black belt. Black shoes. The ladies love it.”

Finally, a one-way repeated measures ANOVA examined weight concern as measured by the Goldfarb Fear of Fat scale. Participants were classified into two Time Out groups (Out < 5 years;  $N = 41$ ; Out  $\geq 5$  years;  $N = 40$ ) using a median split based on time since coming out (defined as the age they felt sure they were lesbians). The repeated measures were the pre- and post-coming out scores of weight concern. As predicted, a significant interaction effect indicated that both coming out and length of time out had a significant effect on body weight concern, [ $F(1,79) = 4.93$ ;  $p < .05$ ]. Lesbians had less body weight concern after coming out ( $M = 17.07$ ,  $SD = 5.93$ ) than before coming out ( $M = 18.40$ ,  $SD = 6.82$ ). In addition, lesbians who had been out longer than five years had less weight concern ( $M = 15.70$ ,  $SD = 4.55$ ) than lesbians who had been out less than five years ( $M = 18.69$ ,  $SD = 8.08$ ). Lesbians who were out longer than five years were also significantly older than lesbians who were out for less time ( $M = 24.6$  vs.  $21.8$  years, respectively,  $t(79) = -4.26$ ,  $p < .005$ ).

## DISCUSSION

As predicted, participants in the present study reported making clear changes in many areas of their physical appearance after coming out as lesbians in the direction of becoming more butch, masculine, or androgynous—or at least less feminine. These changes highlight the importance of peer group norms and support Blumstein and Schwartz’s (1983) finding that lesbians have different beauty standards than does heterosexual society. The results of the present study are also consistent with Kitzinger and Wilkinson’s (1995) sample, in which many participants reported taking cues from other lesbians when they first came out. The importance of peer group norms was evident in the responses of many participants. As one woman wrote, “Everyone likes my hair short better when compared to pictures they’ve seen of me with longer hair. One lesbian friend told me earrings ‘didn’t seem like me,’ so I stopped wearing them. Everyone reinforces baggy clothes and big shoes and teases someone for dressing ‘femmy.’”

Participants also reported a significant decrease in body weight concern after coming out. This is consistent with previous research suggesting that lesbians have less negative feelings about their bodies than do heterosexual women

(e.g., Bergeron & Senn, 1998). Additionally, participants who had been out for longer reported less weight concern than did those who had been out for less time. This suggests that while lesbian ideals may be less thin or less extreme than heterosexual ideals, it takes time for a woman's body weight concern to decrease. This is consistent with the Beren, Hayden, Wilfley, and Streigel-Moore (1997) study that found similar body esteem between lesbian and heterosexual college students (assuming that most lesbian college students have been out for less time). However, several participants attributed their negative feelings about their bodies before coming out to adolescence. It could be that age is a factor in body weight concern as well as coming out, but it was not possible to separate the effect of age from length of time out in the present research.

There are several limitations to the current study. First, the generalizability of the results is limited. Because self-identified lesbians were recruited, the sample is unrepresentative in terms of degree of comfort with and disclosure of one's lesbian identity. Therefore, these results may not generalize to lesbians who do not publicly identify as such. The sample is also limited by age, because only lesbians between the ages of 18 and 30 were recruited. Therefore, the findings may be specific to this age group. Finally, the participants were mostly White, and were more highly educated than the general population. An additional limitation is that the retrospective design of the study may have had certain demand characteristics that could have influenced participants' responses.

In future research, it would be interesting to assess whether peer group norms are differentially important at different points of the coming out process. In this study, all participants were fairly young and many were in the early years of coming out. It is possible that as a woman's identity as a lesbian becomes more integrated into her identity as a person, peer group norms become less important. This possibility is reflected in the following participant's response: "I went through a period of all-out change . . . because I thought that's what I had to do to be a 'real' lesbian. Now, . . . I've basically gone back to being me—my hair is longer again, I wear my normal clothes. The changes for me were mental. I had to realize I was gay, and my appearance wasn't going to change that and make it any more true." Peer group norms may be less salient for lesbians who have been out for a longer time and who feel a greater sense of belonging to a lesbian community. This is consistent with Myers, Taub, Morris, and Rothblum (1999), who found that more newly out and younger lesbians and bisexual women experienced greater pressure about their appearance than did those women who were less newly out and were older. As lesbians age, they may not feel the same pressures to adopt a certain appearance as do younger lesbians. On the other hand, lesbians who have been out

longer may feel even less influenced than younger lesbians by traditional feminine (heterosexual) beauty standards and may more strongly endorse the appearance norms of the lesbian community. Additionally, the need to signal other lesbians as sexual partners might remain relevant and encourage continued conformity to peer norms.

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