

In D. Atkins Looking Queer:
Body Image and Identity in
Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, and
Transgender Communities

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Beauty Mandates and the Appearance Obsession: Are Lesbians Any Better Off?

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“Being female means being told how to look.”¹ For heterosexual women, the beauty standard is unavoidable: the images stare at us from magazines, billboards, TV screens, department store makeup counters—the list goes on. But what, if anything, does this heterosexual women’s beauty ideal mean for lesbians? To date, there has been little examination of the impact of the dominant culture’s beauty standards on lesbian communities. It is likely that, prior to coming out, lesbians are pressured to conform to the same appearance norms as heterosexual women. However, does coming out then free lesbians from these norms, allowing them to find their own, unique styles? Or, alternatively, is female beauty socialization carried over into lesbian communities? Do lesbians impose appearance standards of their own—standards perhaps as restrictive and narrow as heterosexual norms? Drawing on prior research, as well as on interviews with twenty lesbian and bisexual women from across the United States, this chapter examines ways in which female beauty mandates have impacted lesbians and raises questions about the relative freedom from such mandates currently experienced by lesbians in their own communities.

As girls and women, both lesbian and heterosexual women are socialized by the dominant culture to value physical attractiveness. Research suggests that this socialization remains with lesbians even after they come out. For example, in a study of body dissatisfaction among heterosexuals, lesbians, and gay men, Pamela Brand, Esther Rothblum, and Laura Solomon found that lesbian and heterosexual women were more dissatisfied with their bodies than were gay and heterosexual men.² The authors suggest that gender may, therefore, be a stronger predictor of body dissatisfaction

than sexual orientation. A similar study found that lesbians, heterosexual women, and gay men experienced a similar degree of body dissatisfaction, significantly more than heterosexual men.³ This study suggests that perhaps both sexual orientation and gender are implicated in negative body image.

Our interviews—with mostly white women from a variety of class backgrounds, geographic locations, and ages—supported the research findings indicating that lesbians continue to be affected by female appearance norms after coming out. Said one lesbian:

Let's face it. The traditional standards of beauty for women are basically the same whether you're gay, straight, bisexual, or whatever. Looksism is as strong in the lesbian community as anywhere, if not more so. Women are more critical of other women than men are.

Said another:

Even though my feminist and lesbian political awareness tell me that I am accepted, I am definitely affected by the beauty and size standards of this culture. . . . As a young woman, I used my beauty as a source of power. I used it for dominance over—and sometimes comfort from—lustful boys. I used it to manipulate, to gain friends, to get the attention I needed. . . . Now, I try not to pay attention to . . . the glory of women who have managed (even for a short time) to take off a few pounds.

A third woman added that she continually feels internal appearance pressure—to lose weight, in particular—even though she has recently come out into a lesbian community where dieting is looked down upon:

I am not at all happy with my weight right now. . . . I think that fat acceptance is a stronger issue in the queer community than elsewhere, and I don't have a problem with that. What makes me feel funny is the [implication that being fat] is something you are supposed to be happy about and proud of, when I'm neither happy nor proud.

Thus, while beauty norms are still felt by lesbians even after coming out, some argue that coming out frees women, at least partially, from heterosexual appearance mandates. For example, Brand, Rothblum and Solomon's research found that heterosexual women and gay men—both groups of people concerned with attracting men—reported lower body weights and more weight preoccupation than heterosexual men and les-

biens—groups not concerned with attracting men.⁴ The authors suggest that because coming out removes women from competition for male attention, male standards of beauty become less important. Lesbians, then, may feel less pressure to conform to a certain appearance norm.

A number of women interviewed for this chapter remarked that in the lesbian community there is greater acceptance of physical appearances not consistent with the dominant culture's norms. Many lesbians stated that their views about themselves and their appearance changed dramatically after coming out. They reported feeling both freer to abandon traditional female appearance styles and to experiment more with those styles.

For example, one woman remarked:

After I came out, I started to question the clothing I wore, the style of my hair, jewelry, makeup, the playing dumb thing. I cut off all my hair, I stopped shaving my legs and armpits, I stopped wearing makeup, and I literally burned my bra. I felt stronger, even more powerful than I had before. I wasn't playing dumb; I was playing tough.

Another stated:

[After] I moved into a lesbian household, [a housemate] introduced me to lace and lingerie. I found out that as a lesbian—a femme lesbian—I could celebrate my body. I could *be* in my body for the first time. I could look in the mirror and have what I saw be okay. Be more than okay—be fantastic! For me, femme is the strongest, most powerful place I can be.

A sixty-year-old lesbian echoed this feeling of freedom:

When I look at [heterosexual] women my age, they look frumpy. I'm glad I don't have to look like them.

Thus, while the idea that lesbians are less affected by the dominant culture's beauty mandate was not universally accepted among the lesbians interviewed for this chapter, the theme of "freedom" from appearance norms after coming out was a unifying factor.

This seeming contradiction—that lesbians are affected by the dominant culture's beauty norms and yet feel "freed" from these norms after coming out—raised other questions. How does the heterosexual beauty mandate creep into lesbian communities? Are lesbians truly "freed" from all appearance norms, or do they merely set up their own norms in opposition

to those of the dominant culture? Although appearance norms in lesbian communities differ from heterosexual norms, are the lesbian norms any less rigid?

An examination of lesbian history shows that lesbian communities have always had norms for physical appearance. Rothblum notes that, as the dominant culture's norms for female appearance have changed over time, so have the norms of the lesbian community.⁵ An important difference between the two norms, she says, is that while the dominant culture's norms have to do primarily with how women can attract men, lesbian norms have served a dual purpose: to allow lesbians to identify each other, and to provide a group identity that is distinct from that of women in the dominant culture.

In a review of U.S. lesbian history and culture in the twentieth century, Lillian Faderman found appearance to be an important part of lesbian life.⁶ She notes that in the 1920s, being lesbian became chic among bohemian women. Black and white lesbians in Harlem and Greenwich Village began to form distinct subcultures, for which appearance lent a sense of group identity. Later, during World War II, women began to take factory jobs where they had to wear pants. This provided the opportunity for lesbians who hated dresses to continue to wear pants after the war, with less need to fear negative reactions.

By the 1950s, Faderman continues, the butch/femme style emerged in lesbian communities. Although butch/femme culture encompassed far more than just a dress code, appearance was nevertheless a significant feature. Butch/femme styles allowed lesbians to identify one another, as well as affording lesbians a way of expressing themselves as separate from the dominant culture. Among poor and working-class lesbians, butch/femme identity became a rigidly enforced code. Lesbians who were not clearly butch or femme were termed *kiki* and were unwelcome in places lesbians gathered. At least part of this rigidity had to do with fear. If a woman in a bar was not clearly butch or femme, other lesbians would be afraid to approach her, lest she turn out to be a policewoman who did not "know how to dress."

For refusing to be invisible to the dominant culture, working-class and poor butch/femme lesbians paid the price for their "free" expression during all-too-common police raids and beatings. In contrast, middle-class and wealthy lesbians of the 1950s usually avoided butch/femme styles and were more likely to pass as heterosexual. Faderman quotes the Daughters of Bilitis' newsletter, which urged its middle-class readership to adopt "a mode of behavior and dress acceptable to society" (p. 180). This idea that

lesbians should conform to dominant appearance norms is still present in lesbian communities today, and it is a common source of conflict.

While the appearance norms of the dominant culture changed radically during the 1960s, Faderman reports that lesbian norms remained fairly constant until the dawning of the feminist movement in the 1970s. At this time, androgyny replaced butch/femme as the accepted appearance style. Flannel shirts, blue jeans, work boots, no jewelry or makeup, and short hair became *de rigeur*. Among lesbians, this norm was as rigidly enforced as the butch/femme code had been enforced in the years prior. In *The Lesbian Erotic Dance*, Joann Loulan describes how butch/femme lesbians of this time period were ostracized for aping heterosexual styles and how this attitude persists in lesbian communities today.⁷

According to Rothblum, the 1980s and 1990s have reflected "greater diversity" in the lesbian community.⁸ She points out that in the last twenty years, lesbians of a variety of ethnicities and cultures have become more visible to the dominant culture, often forming communities of their own. Additionally, butch/femme styles have undergone a renaissance. The S/M subculture has become more visible. Lesbian mothers have had more success keeping custody of children, and more lesbians are getting "married" to one another and having babies. In the last twenty years, then, it is possible that lesbians have begun to be less rigid in the extent to which they hold one another to standards of "appropriate" appearance and behavior.

Among the women interviewed for this piece, though, there was no agreement about the relative rigidity or flexibility of appearance norms in lesbian communities. It may be that a woman's degree of involvement with the lesbian community, the number of years she has been out, her age, her area of geographic residence, and other factors affect the degree to which she is exposed—and feels she must conform—to lesbian appearance norms.

Among the women we interviewed, age and length of time since coming out greatly affected the degree to which lesbians felt they needed to conform to these norms. Younger and newly out lesbians felt more appearance pressure than did older lesbians and lesbians who had been out for a number of years. Two lesbians over forty, for example, expressed great satisfaction with their bodies and appearance styles:

I've been out for fifteen years. As a sick, fat, middle-aged woman, being a lesbian is a wonderful gift. I love my aging body!

I'm an outspoken dyke activist. I have no "clothes dilemmas." At work I wear comfortable cotton pants, blazer, white shirts. . . . I can always tell the straight women: they're the ones wearing sweaters.

A twenty-five-year-old bisexual woman who has been out for a decade said:

As I've gotten older . . . it has become less necessary for me to blend in with the queer community. I know I'm queer now, and I don't need everyone else to be able to see it when they look at me.

Likewise, the lesbian quoted earlier, who said she "played tough" right after coming out, stated:

I don't feel restricted at this point to one standard of beauty. I no longer own a flannel shirt. My construction boots are buried under layers of pumps and granny boots. I wear lipstick when I want, and my hair is long.

In contrast, comments by teenage, newly out lesbians reflect frustration with lesbian appearance norms and anxiety about "fitting in":

It's very grouped out here. They want to make sure that people in their group meet all their requirements. It's very excluding. You have to meet specific requirements, or when they first see you, you're out. I think it's stupid. I could fit in almost any category.

I dress differently [since coming out] . . . more pants, less skirts, no dresses . . . no heels. My hair is much shorter. I have also noticed that if I'm going to a festival, or a women-only event, I choose what I wear carefully. I think about it, which I normally wouldn't do.

Thus, it seems that women's experiences of appearance norms in the lesbian community change over time. It may be that women feel more pressure to "fit in" and to be "recognizably lesbian" when they first come out, especially if one is actively dating. Later, and perhaps after having found a partner, women feel freer to express their personal styles.

Another theme that emerged in our interviews was a feeling that there are a variety of appearance norms within the lesbian community, with corresponding pressures to conform to each norm. For example, contrast the responses of women to the question, "Is there a lesbian aesthetic?" Two women summarized the "androgynous" aesthetic well:

I think there's a general aesthetic. It hasn't changed much since the 70s. It's the androgynous look: short hair, round glasses, scarf around the neck . . . Some wear earrings; some wear leather jackets; some wear denim. . . . There are different versions, but they are all based on the same template.

I think there's more tolerance for some types of "appearance" (e.g., facial hair, overweight, man-tailored clothing), but there is also so much suspiciousness about traditionally "feminine" norms of dress.

Others felt that there were different aesthetics for different subcultures within lesbian communities. For example, the butch/femme subculture was said to have its own appearance norms, different from those of other parts of the community:

There's a butch standard. The classic butch is a diesel dyke: crew cut, broad shoulders, no tits, slim hips, able to pass as a man. . . . If you say "femme," people will say she has long hair, wears skirts, makeup, heels . . .

We get pressure from both cultures: heterosexual and lesbian. They are different aesthetics. For heterosexual women, the image that is put out is . . . a fourteen-year-old boy with tits. Butch lesbian imagery comes from macho gay men. Nowhere is womanness allowed to be expressed. . . . I'm not sure if there is a femme aesthetic. We're trying to create it now.

Thus, while lesbians interviewed for this project seemed to feel that there are appearance norms in their communities, there was little agreement about what those norms are.

An additional theme that emerged in these interviews was that virtually all of the butch/femme lesbians complained that they are excluded and/or viewed as being overly "sexual" by others in their communities. Some of these women hypothesized that, because they represent a challenge to the "androgynous" lesbian aesthetic, they face harassment and exclusion:

I get a lot of crap, hostility, anger—bullshit like that from other lesbians because I'm an extremely butch woman, very masculine-looking. I've been run off sports teams, out of towns, out of houses, and been falsely accused of sexually assaulting someone. Lesbians are very good at turning on each other. I find that butch lesbians tend to be aloof from groups of lesbians for just that reason.

Femmes are not accepted because they're treated as if they are trying to pass as straight. Femme lesbians . . . may become invisible in the lesbian culture. [They] lose the support, the contact that may occur. I think the 1970s did [butch and femme lesbians] a huge injustice. The feminists . . . said, "Thanks for starting this movement; now vacate!"

Butch and femme lesbians also expressed feelings of being “left out” and “singled out”:

It's harder as a butch, definitely. I *am* the lesbian ideal as far as how butches are supposed to look: big, strong, masculine-looking, short hair. I have a great wardrobe. I have manners—you can take me anywhere. I make a good trophy. But that's not really what they want. What do women want? If I knew that, I wouldn't be single!

It's scary . . . to be a femme walking down the street and getting all this energy and attention I don't want from people I don't want.

These statements suggest that there is no single conclusion we can draw about appearance norms in lesbian communities. Lesbian appearance norms are clearly different from heterosexual ones; however, the beauty mandate of the dominant culture has apparently been reproduced to some extent within lesbian communities. The heterosexual beauty mandate continues to affect lesbians to the extent that they still worry about weight and other factors that make up the dominant culture's ideal. In addition, lesbians create norms within their own communities, which to some may feel just as restrictive as heterosexual norms. The degree to which women feel pressured to conform to such norms may be a factor of age and the number of years of being “out,” just as the degree to which heterosexual women conform to the dominant culture's norms changes over time. Other factors influencing the pressure to conform—or not—may be membership in a lesbian subculture, such as the butch/femme subculture. Lesbians in such groups may experience less acceptance by the larger lesbian community, and they might create different standards of appearance within their own groups.

Thus, while for many women coming out represents freedom from the dominant culture's ideal of beauty, mere coming out does not solve the problem. Although, in theory, lesbian communities afford women the opportunity to define themselves and to find the appearance they find most pleasing to themselves, our research suggests that appearance norms continue to exist among lesbians. Some lesbians experience these norms as being just as restrictive as those of the dominant culture. As one lesbian interviewed noted, it is ironic that a group which has so emphasized eschewing the heterosexual beauty aesthetic should create beauty standards of its own. Said she, “On a personal level, I find it all pretty tiresome.” Thus, it seems that for lesbians, as for heterosexuals, the onus is on each individual to find her own ways of breaking free of the appearance obsession.

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