Standing OUT/Fitting IN: Identity, Appearance, and Authenticity in Gay and Lesbian Communities

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Sexuality scholars have noted the historical connection between appearance and gay or lesbian identity. However, as the social landscape for lesbian women and gay men has shifted over the past forty years, little research has documented how such changes influence gay and lesbian individuals' appearance choices as they form, manage, and maintain their identities. To explore the impact of this "post-closet" (Seidman 2002) era on the identities and appearances of lesbians and gays, in-depth interviews were conducted with twenty individuals, aged eighteen to thirty. Findings suggest that while most people use appearance to attain a sense of authenticity after "coming out," achieving a feeling of authenticity in gay and lesbian spaces presents unique challenges as individuals come under scrutiny by the community.
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It was not long ago that gay and lesbian individuals were arrested simply for being in a known gay establishment (Chauncey 1995; D'Emilio and Freedman 1997). However, not all gay people were targeted equally. Drag queens, butch lesbians, and "fairies" all faced extreme police harassment and public persecution for disorderly conduct (Chauncey 1995; Faderman 1991). In other words, being "gay" meant being visible or standing out, typically through appearances that broke gender conventions. Lesbians and gays who could "fit in" often escaped in the confusion of arrests, blending in with the crowds and calmly walking away. Because of this increased harassment from the 1950s to the 1980s, during "the era of the closet" (Seidman 2002), the connection between appearance and identity became salient for an individual's life and safety.

Over the past forty years, life has changed considerably for gays and lesbians. As both public opinions (Loftus 2001) and political agendas (Adam 1995; Chauncey

2004) have progressed, many people now choose to live their lives openly *as* gay or lesbian. Additionally, gays and lesbians are demanding inclusion and recognition in many institutions, such as marriage (Mello 2004; Rothblum, Balsam, and Solomon 2008), the military (Belkin and Bateman 2003), religious communities (Glaser 1996), and the family (Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen 1999). Broadly conceptualizing these social changes, Seidman (2002) terms this historical moment the "post-closet" era, explaining that many individuals no longer feel the need to hide their homosexuality. However, one understudied aspect of this postcloset era remains the connections between gay or lesbian identity and appearance, specifically how gays and lesbians use appearances to construct identities they experience as authentic.

Appearance allows for the "identifications of one another" (Stone 1970:397) and is an integral aspect of social transactions; the element of prediscursive and nonverbal interaction through which people determine the identities of others before any words are spoken (Stone 1970). As individuals form gay and lesbian identities, they often do so through appearance choices that announce those identities. Particularly during the era of the closet, these announcements could carry severe social sanctions, such as overt harassment, verbal abuse, and even physical violence (Chauncey 1995; Faderman 1991). However, if indeed the social landscape has changed for gays and lesbians, and if they are choosing to live more openly with their sexual identities, then how are various social interactions now mediated by appearance? While some research has touched on identity and appearance in lesbian culture (Hammidi and Kaiser 1999; Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1995; Krakauer and Rose 2002), or bodily dissatisfaction among gays and lesbians (Brown 1987; Duggan and McCreary 2004; Reilly and Rudd 2007; Siever 1994), there remains a "paucity of research" in this area (Rothblum 1994:96).

To address this gap, the current study asks: how do gays and lesbians use appearance to form, manage, and maintain identities in a postcloset era? How does their appearance change after coming out, and how do they use appearance to navigate social interactions to experience a sense of authenticity? Through in-depth interviews with twenty gays and lesbians, this study finds that while most people feel confident about their identity and appearance after coming out, achieving a sense of authenticity in gay and lesbian spaces presents some unique challenges, as individuals come under scrutiny by lesbian and gay communities. In other words, it is not "standing out" that is a problem; rather, it is a question of fitting in.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM, APPEARANCE, AND IDENTITY

Symbolic interactionists have studied the importance of appearance and identity for some time. Building on classic interactionists such as Mead (1934), Cooley ([1902] 1983), Blumer ([1969] 1986), and Goffman (1967b), Stone (1970:397), in his essay "Appearance and the Self," finds that appearance constitutes an element of the social transaction as important as discourse, or the text of conversations: "Above all, identifications of one another are ordinarily facilitated by appearance and are often accomplished silently or non-verbally. . . . *Appearance*, then, is that phase of the social

transaction which establishes identifications of the participants." Thus appearance acts as a prediscursive form of interaction, one that allows interactants to ascertain the identities of participants, the relative social values attached to their positions, their moods, and their attitudes or possible courses of action (Stone 1970). Similar to other contemporary scholars (Weigert and Gecas 2003), Stone (1970:399) differentiates *identity* from the *self*, explaining that identity indicates a placement within a set of social-structural relations, often taking the form of role identities, status identities, or relational identities that play out through social interactions.

More recent scholarship has also engaged the topic of appearance and identity. Glassner's (1989:183) "Fitness and the Postmodern Self" uses a Meadian analysis to suggest that the "fit" body "holds a signal position in contemporary American culture . . . a focus of interaction and hence a key constituent of the 'me,'" while Edgley (2006) discusses the narrative construction of fit and healthy bodies. Vannini and McCright (2004) explore the social semiotics of the tanned body and argue that a dominant "seduction frame" aligns an individual's tanned appearance with notions of health, fitness, and beauty. Millard's (2009) study of Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign reveals that social interactions, performances, and self-presentations construct beauty on a personal and social level. Even interactions occurring in cyberspace have been explored, specifically Waskul's (2002) study of how individuals create meaning by managing their visual appearances online. Further, Schrock and Boyd (2006) suggest that transsexuals undergoing gender-transition surgery must "come out" visually, announcing their desired gender through appearance. As evidenced here, interactionists routinely discuss the connections between appearance and identity. However, the ways that gays and lesbians use appearance to announce and to establish subcultural identities remain underinvestigated.

This is surprising given that gay and lesbian identities operate on many levels of meaning, as appearance allows multiple types of identities to be established. One may construct and announce a *social identity* that is tied to positions in social-structural relations, or a *situational identity* that is more temporary and tied to social roles, such as that of "customer" or "attendant" (Stone 1970; Vryan, Adler, and Adler 2003). One may also announce a *personal identity*, including individual aspects of self that are unique (Vryan et al. 2003). Gay and lesbian identities act simultaneously as personal, social, *and* situational identities: they are aspects of one's biography that may be enacted (or suppressed) in specific circumstances, yet they also announce a placement within a set of social relations (i.e., heterosexual marriage). Therefore identification as gay or lesbian carries both risks and rewards even in a postcloset historical moment (Seidman 2002).

GAY AND LESBIAN APPEARANCE

Although diverse and spread among many disciplines, the literature discussing appearance and lesbian or gay identity remains sparse, either skewed toward lesbians or concerned with gay men and disordered eating. In 1999 the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* devoted an entire issue to lesbian beauty, illuminating how lesbian women

navigate dominant appearance norms while constructing the meaning of "lesbian beauty" (Hammidi and Kaiser 1999). Rothblum, Myers, Taub, and Morris (1999) question whether lesbian and bisexual women are as concerned with beauty mandates as their heterosexual counterparts. They find that appearance norms in lesbian communities still exist, although often different from heteronormative culture. Cogan (1999) asks whether the "thinness expectation" persists for lesbians and concludes that while many are concerned with body size, lesbians also create new standards of beauty for themselves (87). Other research has suggested that lesbian appearance norms perform a variety of functions, such as signaling group membership or displaying readable cues for other lesbians (Cogan 2001; Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1995; Krakauer and Rose 2002; Rothblum 1994). This literature explains how lesbian women interact with dominant cultural messages about beauty and how they use appearance to construct lesbian identities. However, it often portrays appearance as changing at one point in time (coming out), instead of understanding appearance as a *process*, influenced and mediated by social interaction (Stone 1970).

Appearance and gay or lesbian identity is also mediated through master statuses, such as race, gender, and class. The ways that white gay men appear may be different from the appearance choices made by black gay men, and the socioeconomic framework of class further influences these choices. For example, Han (2009) found that gay Asian men's presentation was mediated by both race and gender, operating around poles of hypermasculinity and effeminacy while managing the stigma of being Asian within white gay communities. Newton (1995) found that class acted as a mediating variable in lesbian interactions at Cherry Grove, and Kennedy and Davis (1993) have suggested that butch/femme identification constitutes a primarily working-class phenomenon. The experiences of black lesbians have also been explored. Moore (2006) finds that many black lesbians often pair in feminine–less feminine couplings, as black lesbian feminists did not move away from gendered presentations in the 1970s. Similarly, Lyle, Jones, and Drakes (1999:52) locate "black lesbian beauty" at the intersection of beauty as a woman, beauty as a lesbian, and beauty as a black woman. In all of these examples, it is clear that gay or lesbian identity is influenced by the intersections of race, class, and gender.

Additional literature on gay men and appearance routinely links body image with eating disorders (Brown 1987; Duggan and McCreary 2004; Reilly and Rudd 2007; Rothblum, Brand, and Solomon 1992; Siever 1994), constructing a gay man's concern with appearance as pathological. For example, Duggan and McCreary (2004) show that gay men maintain a higher concern over body shape and size than heterosexual men, which is hypothesized to be the result of watching more pornography and media that emphasize the male body. Reilly and Rudd (2007) suggest that although there are no significant differences in the body mass indexes of straight versus gay men, that gay men *may* indulge in "risky" behaviors simply because of the added stress of being visibly gay. In contrast to the overly pathologizing literature on gay men and appearance, some scholars discuss specific subpopulations of the gay community, such as "bears"—gay men who celebrate large (either muscular or fat)

men with body hair (Hennen 2005; Monaghan 2005). These studies underscore the active meaning making that gay men do as they navigate social worlds filled with appearance norms. These studies also rescue the research on gay men's bodies from eating disorders and pathology. Yet much work remains to be done. The present study contributes to literature on gay and lesbian identity and appearance through an interactionist lens, understanding appearance as a process of identification that depends on the social and historical context, as well as an individual's experience of authenticity.

AUTHENTICITY, EMBODIMENT, AND APPEARANCE

The concept of authenticity, although variously employed across the social sciences (Vannini and Franzese 2008), sheds much light on the contemporary dynamics of identity formation and management. Vannini and Franzese's (2008:1621) extensive review situates authenticity as a complex concept that refers to such things as "sincerity, truthfulness, originality, and the feeling and practice of being true to oneself." Grounded in Goffman's (1967a) theory of "face work," researchers understand authenticity as reflexive and emotional: "Such an approach addresses both the individual's subjective sense of what the true self is, as well as the individual's subjective emotional experience of being true or untrue to that self" (Vannini and Franzese 2008:1623). Erickson (1995) conceptualizes authenticity as a commitment to self-values, which operate like a core around which ideals may shift because of the social situation (i.e., a commitment to "hard work" is prominent at work). However, the central value system stays intact or is at least durable enough to persist beyond the interactional moment. Erickson writes: "While the concept of authenticity does assume the existence of a transituational and somewhat stable aspect of self, it is not reducible to it" (122). However, individuals may have many core values to which they feel committed, and different social situations may arise where one self-value takes precedent over another. Indeed, people often strategize their experiences of authenticity, negotiating their self-values as their social situation changes, such as with career developments (Vannini 2006). This focus on relatively stable self-values that may emerge differently in varying circumstances allows theorists to think about both the internal *and* interactional aspects of identity.

Following Erickson's (1995) understanding of authenticity as commitments to self-values, and Vannini and Franzese's (2008:1625) clear articulation of authenticity as possessing both "self and other-referential dimensions," this study explores authenticity as a motivation for altering one's appearance when "coming out" as gay or lesbian, and also within gay and lesbian spaces as a response to changing definitions of authentic (and inauthentic) experience. Authenticity as a motivational force has been investigated by scholars in the past (Gecas 1991; Turner 1976) and in more contemporary ways (Vannini and Burgess 2009; Weigert 2009). As people construct gay and lesbian identities, they often use clothing and appearance to announce those identities. Such decisions around appearance can be seen as maintaining commitments

to self-values (i.e., being "out" or being proud). As a commitment to a gay or lesbian identity becomes part of one's core value system (Erickson 1995), individuals experience authenticity when they feel that their announced and responded-to identities have been successfully established (Stone 1970).

Appearance, however, is not synonymous with embodiment. Broadly understood as the way one's body is adorned, appearance encompasses how individuals announce desired identities (Stone 1970) or manage stigmatized ones (Goffman 1963). These identities are then responded to and established, or responded to and renegotiated through social interaction (Goffman 1967a). They do not necessarily reveal an individual's experience of embodiment. The body is infused with symbolic meaning and understood as a "*social* object" (Waskul and Vannini 2006:3). As Waskul and Vannini explain: "From this perspective, the term 'embodiment' refers quite precisely to the process by which the object-body is actively experienced, produced, sustained, and/or transformed as a subject-body" (p. 3). This "reflexive embodiment" (Crossley 2006:21) is the precondition for appearance and identity, as individuals must simultaneously reflect on their body-as-subject and body-as-object before announcing an identity through appearance.

Indeed, experiences of embodiment may be quite different from the identities individuals attempt to establish in social interactions. For example, transgendered individuals may experience their bodies as "female" or "male," especially before surgical or hormonal procedures begin, but still attempt to *appear* as men or women (Rubin 2003; Schrock and Boyd 2006). Gay men and lesbian women possess a sense of their embodied selves, even as they use appearance to form, manage, and maintain gay or lesbian identities. Indeed, many scholars explore the dynamics of "body work" that individuals undertake, altering their identities by altering their bodies (Gimlin 2002). Therefore appearance and embodiment are indeed interrelated. This study expands on the current research that explores embodiment and appearance, particularly as it relates to experiences of authenticity that play out in gay and lesbian lives.

METHOD AND PARTICIPANTS

Data for this study were gathered from one- to two-hour in-depth interviews with eleven lesbian women and nine gay men aged eighteen to thirty. Interviewing younger gays and lesbians allowed for investigation of how the postcloset moment might influence interviewees' experiences of appearance and authenticity, as these individuals have arguably grown up in a world that is largely "beyond the closet" (Seidman 2002). Recruitment took place near a large public university in the Midwest and in the surrounding towns. Participants became aware of the study through e-mail recruitment, strategically placed flyers (bookstores, bars, coffee houses), and word-of-mouth (snowball sampling). The data for this exploratory study were gathered in the spring and summer of 2005, and most interviewees were recruited either through e-mail solicitation or through snowball sampling.

While most interviewees were not originally from the area, all but one resided around the university or in the surrounding towns. The majority of participants were current students (twelve out of twenty), although some of the nonstudents had either recently graduated or were not currently enrolled (i.e., taking the semester off). Although recruitment did not specifically target college students, it is not surprising that most respondents were in college or connected to one, given that the area supports three large universities. When asked the question "What is your sexual orientation, if any?" all of the participants described themselves as either "gay" or "lesbian," although two women mentioned identifying as "queer femme" and "gay." As per IRB confidentiality guidelines to protect individuals' identities, all interviewees were assigned pseudonyms in this study. The racial and ethnic composition of the sample consisted of fifteen individuals who identified as white/Caucasian, one female who identified as white/Jewish, one male who identified as Latino, one female who identified as black, one female who identified as Mexican/black, and one male who identified as Asian Pacific-Islander.

Data analysis occurred through a series of steps that blended both inductive and deductive methods (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). First, the data from transcribed interviews were analyzed using a qualitative coding software program, and a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Glaser 1967) was applied, allowing significant themes to emerge from the data itself. After establishing prominent themes, initial codes were derived from commonly used phrases (i.e., "butchy, but not butch") or common meanings (i.e., "wearing tight-fitting clothing"), and further refined through thematic memos. Next, the codes were applied to the data deductively, and the data were organized through these codes for additional analysis. Finally, a second round of memo writing integrated data and codes more concisely, producing what Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995:162) term "integrative memos." Memo writing during coding is a useful strategy for bridging the analysis-to-writing stage of research, and parts of these more reflective "integrative memos" typically become prominent parts of a completed manuscript (Emerson et al. 1995). This process allows researchers to see patterns that emerge from the data inductively while still applying a deductive lens once coding categories are identified.

STANDING OUT/FITTING IN: DILEMMAS OF DRESS AMONG GAYS AND LESBIANS

Hairstyle. Ear piercings. Tight clothing. Men's boots. All of these represent signs employed by gays and lesbians as they "came out" and established subcultural identities through appearance. However, appearance was also modified when entering gay and lesbian spaces, and often changed as individuals experienced authenticity through interactions with others. Therefore authenticity may be understood as a motivating factor when individuals reflect on their appearance and align it with self-values (Gecas 1991; Vannini and Burgess 2009; Weigert 2009). While identity and authenticity are negotiated differently when coming out and when entering gay and lesbian spaces, there

are similarities between lesbian women and gay men on issues of freedom, gender, appearance mandates, and cultural norms that are elaborated in the following sections.

Coming Out and Appearance:
Feeling "Free" and the Salience of Gender

Some of the first things participants discussed were their feelings associated with coming out and altering their appearance. In fact, almost every interviewee mentioned feeling "free" to change the way they looked, at least in some way, after coming out. This "freedom" was often understood as the ability to appear in ways that they thought of themselves internally. In other words, they were able to appear gay or lesbian and feel authentic in their performances as they aligned their inner self-values with external appearance. Therefore "coming out" may be considered a "turning point" (Strauss 1959:93, 100) in identity, a "change in your relations with others" that signals a "status passage" into a new social group or social structure. Appearance facilitates this transition and allows for individuals to experience a sense of authenticity. For example, Daniel (Latino, twenty-two) said:

> I think once I was comfortable with who I was, I was comfortable wearing anything, like I was more in tune with what I liked. . . . But yeah, I think after that, me coming out, I think I could be myself completely and it definitely affected the way I dressed, because now I could be more expressive in what I wore.

Daniel mentions the ability to be more "expressive" and how it allowed him to "be [himself] completely," illustrating that clothing represents one way that individuals form and announce both personal and public identities. In subsequent interviews, participants were asked if they experienced a feeling of freedom after coming out, and similar answers arose:

> I will agree with that. Yes, I will agree with that. I would say that since I've come out, I have felt more free to experiment with dress and stuff like that. (Adam, Caucasian, nineteen)

> Oh yeah. I would agree. Yeah, I would agree. Especially . . . even the past year, I've felt more comfortable with experimenting with different styles. (Gavin, Asian Pacific-Islander, twenty-two)

Jenny (Caucasian, twenty-three) expressed a similar sentiment about how her appearance style changed after coming out:

> I don't think I felt a freedom to "experiment," but I think *I felt just a freedom to be myself,* like I think it was probably the most liberating thing in my life, coming out. Because I finally felt comfortable in the community I was in . . . I finally felt like there were people who could relate to me and *I just felt like I could be myself.* If that means buying men's clothes, then great. (emphasis added)

For these individuals, coming out was a turning point in identity that was marked by a conscious change in appearance. As their identities formed, they found that more appearance styles had become available to them, beyond what they envisioned

for themselves previously. In many cases, these new styles involved changing gender presentations, and individuals struggled to overcome long-standing stigma against looking gay or lesbian.

Indeed, interviewees' narratives included both direct and indirect references to gender presentation and identity, suggesting that gender as a master status influences sexual identity formation. The continuing salience of gender in relation to sexual identity has been noted by scholars (Butler 1990; Kessler and McKenna 1978), even as researchers separate the two concepts for analytic reasons. However, in reality, gender and sexuality are intertwined. This research suggests that an intersectional (Crenshaw 1991) approach is extremely useful when studying appearance and sexual identity, as often gay or lesbian (and even heterosexual) identity is read through appearances that are gendered (Han 2009; Kessler and McKenna 1978). Men's association with gender and sexual identity led them to explore clothing that might mark them as visibly gay—either effeminate or nonheterosexually masculine (Ingraham 1994), while women found that more masculine styles were available to them. For example, Kevin (Caucasian, twenty) recounts this story about buying his first pink shirt:

> And then, after I came out, I actually went to the mall and I didn't buy one pink shirt, I bought two! And I was like, "This is a momentous occasion, because I am buying *two* pink shirts." And so I bought these two pink shirts and I started wearing tighter pants. . . . I figured that I'm gay now . . . I get to get away with anything because I'm gay. So, I think my wardrobe is getting more "out there" and I just buy all these weird things I wouldn't normally have bought because I was afraid that everyone would be like, "Dude, you look like a fag in that shirt." And now I'm like, "Yeah, that's the point!"

Clearly, Kevin was excited to align his outer appearance with his self-values, regardless of whether or not people might identify him as gay. For Kevin, identification *as* gay was the goal and highlights how he used appearance to achieve a sense of authenticity even when faced with the possibility of verbal harassment as a "fag." This supports Stone's (1970) contention that appearance is integral to establishing social identities, as Kevin used appearance so that others could locate him within a system of social relationships, as a gay man. Another interviewee, Eddie (Caucasian, twenty-two), also mentions how his style incorporated more tighter-fitting clothes as he ventured into gay culture:

> The biggest change I noticed . . . was just in being more comfortable wearing tighter stuff to the gay bars. And part of it was me wanting to wear it, and part of it may have been that it's how gay culture is.

The theme of wearing tighter clothes came up repeatedly in the interviews with gay men and was often contrasted to the "baggy" style worn by heterosexual men. For example, Will (Caucasian, twenty-five) says that, when going out, he prefers to dress more "flashy":

> Very tight shirts, and you know, pants that really accentuate my ass. . . . I would say that clothes for going out are clothes that are more modern, more hip, something that makes one look youthful. You don't want to look frumpy or out of style.

While wearing tighter clothing was the norm in clubs and bars, gay men associated such tighter-fitting clothing with a distinct gay style, even if more and more heterosexual men were also adopting this style (Barber 2008). Thus, for the gay men in this study, altering their appearance after coming out allowed them to wear colors and styles that might mark them as visibly gay.

Lesbian women also understood some clothing to be gendered feminine (tighter pants and shorts) and found themselves moving away from such styles as they formed lesbian identities. Marianne (Caucasian, twenty-two) identifies clothing she perceives as feminine and explains: "I wouldn't say anything I wear is really girly, because it's not very tight-fitting." Lesbian women also discussed how their freedom to experiment with appearance led them to more intentionally masculine or "boyish" styles of dress. For example, Jenny describes how she incorporated nonfeminine clothing after coming out:

> I mean, I have both women's and men's jeans. But right after I came out . . . I went on this spree of buying men's clothes. But my women's pants are not the stretchy tight jeans, I don't like tight pants or shorts for that matter. I wear men's shorts, I always wear men's shorts.

Here, Jenny recognizes clothing coded as feminine—"tight pants or shorts"—and she develops an appearance style that fits her personal and public identity as a lesbian. This sentiment goes hand in hand with Jenny's previous quote on how dressing in a more masculine style allowed her to simply "be herself," illustrating how this self-value influences appearance. Other women in the study conveyed similar experiences. For example, Tamara (Caucasian, nineteen) explains how her already nonfeminine appearance took on new meaning after coming out: "I feel like my appearance hasn't changed drastically, but I think if anything, it's become a little bit more masculine. I feel more comfortable, I feel like I have more room to just be myself." Again, the notion of appearance changing to allow individuals to "be themselves" says much about the connection between appearance as an interactional process and authenticity.

Of course, not all appearance changes after coming out as lesbian involved adopting a more masculine style. A few women discussed simply dressing less feminine, as opposed to appearing more "boyish." This shift away from feminine styles signaled both an opportunity to express oneself, as well as an opportunity to be free of traditional feminine mandates. Nadine (white/Jewish, twenty-two) explains:

> I think that I've rejected a lot of what I hear coming from dominant culture, to be thin, to have, you know, like a hard, pinched, little body and that that is what is attractive, and that you have to wear make-up and do your hair and have no hair anywhere that you shouldn't have hair.

For Nadine, rejecting dominant discourses of heterosexual feminine beauty allowed her to develop a style of her own, supporting what other scholars have found

among lesbian women (Cogan 2001; Hammidi and Kaiser 1999; Rothblum, Myers, Taub, and Morris 1999). Amy (Caucasian, twenty-one) also explains how lesbian identification resulted in less pressure to be thin:

> I guess I felt liberated from a lot of those issues, and because of this particular need to be sporty, I felt a lot more comfortable being at a healthy weight . . . instead of thin . . . I guess knowing that everyone expected me to change somehow, allowed me to change, like I could wear things that were comfortable and . . . it was okay if I wasn't 102 pounds, I could just be healthy.

For Amy, knowing that people expected her to change actually allowed her to change, suggesting that the development of personal and public identities is not only facilitated by appearance changes but mediated by both dominant and subcultural norms. In general, while many women discussed appearance, identity, and partners using gendered terms (i.e., boyish, girly), they rarely described themselves as either butch or femme, two traditional, if now somewhat dated, lesbian archetypes. A nuanced metalanguage developed, however, allowing them to talk about masculine versus feminine appearances without committing to rigid categories. Consider how Amy explains what *butch* and *femme* mean to her:

> To be honest, I don't know a lot of women my age who identify as femme, but I know women who are more feminine, but they don't necessarily identify as femme; and similarly women who are more butch, but who don't necessarily identify as butch women. . . . some women do choose, very consciously, to describe themselves as butch, but I feel like "butchy" is generally used as an adjective, as more of an appearance descriptor than as an identity.

Although Amy discusses individuals' identifications *with* butch and femme roles, the process of identity also involves identifications *of* participants (Stone 1970). In other words, participants in interactions might impute a butch or femme identity to individuals, even if they do not necessarily identify with those roles themselves. This distinction between identifications *with* and identifications *of* is important for considerations of authenticity in lesbian spaces and is further discussed in the following section.

For both lesbian women and gay men, appearance played an important role in "coming out," helping individuals establish identities they experienced as authentic. Significantly, all of the interviewees said that they felt comfortable appearing as readably gay or lesbian—or simply not caring what others thought of their appearance. Whether they were men wearing brightly colored shirts and tight pants, or women appearing "butchy," these gay and lesbian individuals understood that they might stand out through their appearance, but did not express concern about being recognized. In contrast, many said that dressing in these ways actually made them feel "like themselves," allowing individuals to align outer appearances with self-values. These same appearances came under scrutiny, however, when people discussed their experiences in gay and lesbian spaces, places where the question of fitting in is directly related to appearance.

Authenticity in Gay and Lesbian Spaces:
Appearance Mandates and the Butch-Femme Divide

Although stigma attached to being publicly gay or lesbian may have decreased (Loftus 2001; Seidman 2002), and interviewees related few to no issues with being identified in public spaces, being identified in gay and lesbian spaces may have become more problematic. Interviews with gay men revealed difficulty navigating appearance norms around clothing that displayed body size and shape. Women, on the other hand, discussed gender presentation in lesbian spaces through clothing and hairstyle. These differences and similarities between gay men and lesbian women comprise two important aspects of identity and appearance: appearance mandates and the butch-femme divide.

Many gay male interviewees expressed concern over fitting in when wearing clothing that revealed their bodies or clothing that stepped outside the dominant fashion. This concern is unsurprising given that recent studies have shown gay men to be more susceptible to bodily dissatisfaction than heterosexual men (Dillon, Copeland, and Peters 1999; Drummond 2005). A more sociological interpretation, however, suggests that gender as a master status influences gay male appearance. As Han (2009:109) explains, "The hypermasculinization of gay male desire can be traced to the 1970s and 1980s when the 'gay clones' and their hypermasculine sexual codes came to dominate the gay community." This hypermasculinization leads many to hyper-*muscularization* and materializes through an expectation of gym going and muscle tone: "The physical appearance of the clone was the first signal of a new type of gay masculinity. Clones used such stereotypical macho sign-vehicles as musculature, facial hair, short haircuts, and rugged, functional clothing to express butchness" (Levine 1998:59). For example, Chad (Caucasian, twenty-six) explains the connection between gay men and fitness:

> There's a great line from a Seinfeld episode, where one of the straight characters says, "I could never be gay, there's no way I could stay in that kind of shape." And I think that's really it. I noticed that when I was bartending, people would ask, "Where do you work out," the same way that other people talk about sports or the weather. It's small talk. And it's just sort of assumed that you do.

At the same time, a concern with clothing that reveals (or hides) body shape and size constitutes traditionally feminine concerns (Bordo 1993; Wolf 1991), underscoring the complexity of gender, sexual identity, and appearance. These expectations around gay male appearance became amplified when men went to gay bars or clubs.

Gay male spaces act as meeting spots and centers of social life for many men in the gay community, and gay bars historically have filled a variety of functions (Chauncey 1995). The bar, a semipublic subcultural space, becomes one site where gay identity is enacted. Often, simply being inside a gay bar or club is enough for one to be read as gay, especially true during the era of the closet (Seidman 2002). When the idea of going out to the bars enters the dialogue around gay identity and appearance, however, it is understood that going out means looking good and, to a degree, looking the part of a gay man. One recurring idea that emerged from the data

involved what might be called the "gay uniform," exemplified by Levine's (1998) work on gay clones. This term is a bit misleading as, of course, not all gay men wear the same type of clothing or sport the same fashion style. Within the dominant gay bar scene, however, a distinct hegemony of appearance reigns: tight shirts, tight pants, and a well-groomed presentation.

Regardless of whether interviewees actually participated in this style of dress, most acknowledged the "club look" as the dominant fashion. For example, Daniel (Latino, twenty-two) says: "Most of [the men at clubs] just look like they all shop at the same store, they all wear tight pants, and they all wear the same tight shirt." Marc (Caucasian, twenty-two) relates a similar idea when he describes his favorite club clothes: "I have this one pair of jeans I like to wear when I go out. . . . they are these expensive jeans I bought last summer . . . so I'd wear those, they are tighter, a more fashionable fit." Taken together, these conversational snapshots provide a picture of a dominant subcultural look, one that focuses on clothing that reveals one's body to other gay men. Marc explains why people might wear tighter clothes in gay bars:

> Showing more of your body has always been more attractive. . . . it's better to show off more of your body, and if you're not going to actually show bare skin, then tighter jeans shows your form and your figure and at least leads people to think about what you look like naked.

Here, showing more of the body is considered "good," beneficial for the person showing and for others who may be looking. Wood (2004) cites this "gay male gaze," developed historically and stemming from gendered power relations, as influencing the bodily dissatisfaction among gay men. But this same gaze in gay male spaces creates an *identity* dissatisfaction, based on the inability to establish a gay identity experienced as authentic. Individuals who choose not to wear clothing that reveals one's body may experience inauthenticity, and interviewees recognized which bodies were held in high regard or disregard in gay culture (see also Han 2009).

Bodies that did not fit the gay ideal, specifically around body weight and body fat, often were a way to discuss undesirable bodies. Researchers have studied how gay male subculture exerts pressure on its members to be physically attractive (Siever 1994), youthful (Giles 1997), and "devoid of fat" (Drummond 2005:272). Indeed, male bodies in general are often idealized as being "at once firm, fit, flexible, and fat-free" (Atkinson 2006:258). Especially interesting were the types of bodies that gay men described as attractive or desirable. When asked what they looked for in a potential partner's appearance, most men responded by discussing body types they would or would not find attractive. For example, Daniel (Latino, twenty-two) mentions how much one's physical body factors into considerations of dating:

> I mean, when you see an overweight person, you don't immediately say, "Wow, you're so beautiful." But, I have had overweight friends. I've never dated anyone overweight. . . . I wouldn't personally date someone who was overweight.

Even gay men who feel that they do not personally fit the body ideal make reference to it when discussing potential partners. Gavin, who describes himself as a "person of size," comments:

> I wouldn't want people to judge me based on my appearance, so I try not to do that. And, you know . . . I mean, would I rather have someone who is physically fit than someone like me who is bigger? Yeah. But I would rather be physically fit.

Clearly, the idealized gay body is present in these statements, or rather the nonidealized gay body, as interviewees discussed what they found attractive and what they found unattractive.

Again, embodiment is not synonymous with appearance, as individuals may present an identity that is at odds with how they experience their own bodies. Strategic clothing choices that either hide or reveal one's body factored prominently in gay men's decisions about what to wear. One explanation for this suggests that gay male identity relies heavily on experiences of embodiment and that appearance choices facilitate identification through the body. This pragmatist approach, often associated with work on embodiment, casts individuals as "active and creative agents" who construct meaning through experience (Waskul and Vannini 2006:3). At the same time, there is some overlap between experiences of embodiment and how one uses the body as part of appearance. Seen especially in strategic displays of the body while dancing, either by taking off one's shirt or by keeping it on— behaviors that signal membership in a group of gay men who can "flaunt it if they got it." In this context, the body becomes a component of a gay man's appearance, the *body-as-appearance*, and often the revealed body itself is adorned with piercings or tattoos. Indeed, gay male subculture has a history of using body modification as appearance (Pitts 2003). However, while the gay label is available to many people, being an "attractive gay male" is only available to individuals who dress appropriately or reveal bodies that fit the thin and toned ideal. Gay men who do not conform to the gay uniform must take other actions to experience authenticity and be read as gay in gay spaces.

Identification as a lesbian in lesbian spaces also presents a set of problems. Similar to gay men, interviewees found that it had become easier to be lesbian in public. Citing prominent examples of lesbian representation on television, specifically *The L Word* and Ellen DeGeneres, lesbian women felt positive about changing perceptions in the United States. But, like gay men, many women experienced difficulty about what it meant to be lesbian within lesbian spaces. Successful identification in lesbian spaces often relied on the self-presentation of gender, understood as the problem of "not being butch enough" or "being too butch."

Throughout the interviewees, women often associated butchness with lesbianism. Three women who placed themselves at the more feminine end of the gender spectrum each struggled with issues of identification and recognition when in lesbian spaces. The issue of equating "real" lesbians with those who look "butchy" came up repeatedly in interviews, echoing Levitt and Hiestand's (2004) suggestion that butch women are unable to hide their lesbian identities. The opposite problem exists for other women, like Nadine, who see themselves as more feminine: "I think there are times, especially when I'm in the gay community that I want to be identifiable. I don't want people to think that I'm the straight ally." Later Nadine elaborates on how

she manages her identity in these spaces, making changes that help her announce a lesbian identity to others: "When I find out that I'm going to the bar . . . where I feel like there's a lot of lesbians, I do feel like I dress differently, I try to dress more. . . . I wouldn't say masculine . . . just less feminine." Being identified as lesbian in lesbian spaces remains important even for women who may unintentionally "pass" as straight in everyday contexts. However, this identification is difficult and is typically accomplished through changing appearance or by being in a visible lesbian relationship. Rose (Caucasian, twenty-six) explains how she consciously changes her appearance: "For me sometimes, it's more about how do I change my look . . . and add to it pieces or ways that I think present as more lesbian." Sandra (Mexican/black, twenty) also felt the pressure to be butch in lesbian spaces:

> It's very difficult, because being identifiable, you know, sometimes people run away from it, but I kind of wish I was more. . . . Because it is your identity, you want to be identifiable. So, the long hair throws people off sometimes.

These comments speak to how appearance allows both identification *with* lesbianism and identification *of* these women as lesbians. Appearance, even when altered to be identifiable, facilitates an experience of authenticity in lesbian spaces. While managing appearances is impression management, usually considered the antithesis of authenticity (Vannini and Franzese 2008), it is also a fulfilling of commitments to self-values (Erickson 1995).

In comparison with situations where women felt they were not butch enough, some women discussed what happens when the lesbian community perceives them as being too butch. Kristin (Caucasian, thirty) explains this well:

> To be perfectly honest . . . I have a really poor reaction to people saying to me, "Oh, I would've thought you gone trans by now." Because . . . I am not trans. I don't want to be trans, I don't want that identification. Not that there's anything wrong with it, I just don't want it, it's just really not me.

Being too butch in lesbian spaces is read as a step toward transgendered identification or a possible cue to an underlying transgendered identity. Such associations are not unfounded, as Levitt and Hiestand's (2004) study of butch authenticity found that some respondents did consider themselves transgendered. However, some interviewees who identified on the butch end of the spectrum did express moments of inauthenticity as lesbian women. Alicia (Caucasian, twenty) discusses how the lesbian community views butch women, especially drag kings:

> I still feel that in the gay community, there's this transphobia, and to an extent people are starting to be like, "Are you trans? What's going on?" Ummm . . . my friend, who does drag, I feel like she's definitely been asked that. And I don't give a shit, but she made a point to say, "I'm not trans, I'm just gender queer."

Alicia makes the point to mention how an overly "butchy" appearance can induce apprehension and instability within lesbian spaces. Even stepping outside "butchness" for women in this category can bring punishment from inside the lesbian community, as Kristin (Caucasian, thirty) explains:

> I actually feel more comfortable when I am heading to a fairly straight world wearing a skirt than in the gay community, just because I am pretty identifiably butch and a lot of dyke lesbians like to put butches in a gender box saying, "You're gonna wear pants, you're gonna wear a tie, you're gonna look a particular way." And I hate that. I don't like being put in a box.

Here, looking "identifiably butch" means never stepping outside that identity, at least within lesbian spaces. As Levitt and Hiestand (2004) find, butch stereotypes can often be rigid and difficult to navigate. A "butchy" self-presentation through clothing and hairstyle is usually thought to *establish* a lesbian identity more easily in lesbian environments. However, a lesbian identity is not necessarily imputed simply because of a more "butch" appearance.

Taken together, these findings show that announcing and establishing a lesbian identity, one that aligns outer appearance with inner self-values, involves a careful construction that is best described as being butch enough without being too butch. Again the question of embodiment and appearance comes to the forefront of this discussion, as women's identification seems more tied to clothing and gender presentation than the body. However, other studies have shown that lesbians do experience their identities through "butch" or "femme" embodiment (Kennedy and Davis 1993), through comportment (Halberstam 1998) and the notion of bodily strength (Levitt and Hiestand 2004). Indeed, some overlap may be seen in these women's narratives, especially regarding hair, as it is part of one's physical body yet remains "one of the most powerful symbols of individual and group identity" (Synnott 1993:103). Similarly to the gay men who made clothing choices to display their bodies, the distinctions between experiences of embodiment and how the body is adorned are not always so clear.

CONCLUSIONS

Identity is an interactional and ongoing endeavor. Even in situations that seem cut-and-dry, for example, discovering one's sexual orientation, identity remains a complex process. Without a doubt, the climate for gays and lesbians has changed in U.S. culture. A simple survey of television programming and movie releases reveals how lesbian women and gay men have gained recognition as both individuals and consumers (Seidman 2002). The General Social Survey shows improvements in attitudes toward gays and lesbians every year it has been conducted (Loftus 2001). For many people, being gay or lesbian is filled with less difficulty, less trepidation, and less intolerance than in the past. Especially important to this conversation remains how looking identifiably gay or lesbian in public presents fewer problems as well, at least in many larger towns and cities. However, as this research suggests, identifying as lesbian or gay in subcultural spaces may provide new challenges.

For gay men, both dominant fashions and revealing clothing registered as significant in the interviews. Particularly prominent was the notion of the hegemonic gay "look," an idealized image of thinness, muscle tone, and style typically devoid of

fat that one could show off through clothing in gay spaces. Men within these spaces often judged and were judged by such standards, equating achieving this ideal with performing a gay identity they experienced as authentic. Lesbian women experienced a similar phenomenon in lesbian spaces, specifically through the need to present as "butch" in order to be identified as a lesbian. Adopting a more masculine style did not exempt women from scrutiny, however, as they regularly needed to combat notions of an underlying transgender identity and reassert their femaleness as central to their self-conception.

The implications of this study for symbolic interactionists are significant, as it clearly shows that appearance—as a process of interaction—is integral to establishing gay and lesbian identities. Identification as a process, though, implies both identifications *with* a gay or lesbian identity, as well as identifications *of* individuals as gay or lesbian. That the historical moment of this postcloset era (Seidman 2002) shapes understandings of meaningful symbols in everyday lives, such as those that allow people to appear visibly gay or lesbian, also says much about the importance of appearance in social interactions. Yet for individuals to feel that their performances of gay and lesbian identities are authentic, they must align their outer appearances with their own self-values as they negotiate appearance norms in both dominant culture and gay and lesbian spaces.

This study faces some limitations regarding identity and appearance, given that it was conducted with a specific age-range in mind. This was done purposefully to capture what the postcloset moment might mean for gays and lesbians who came out under conditions where the closet was beginning to recede (Seidman 2002). However, the connection between identity and appearance obviously plays out in other gay-specific spaces, such as male-oriented leather bars that cater to an older clientele, as well as lesbian-specific spaces with a diverse range of ages. Also, this study remains skewed toward white, middle-class experiences of identity and appearance, and future studies might concentrate on how nonwhite and non-middle-class individuals make appearance choices in gay and lesbian spaces. Of course, these gay and lesbian bar spaces have traditionally served a wide variety of clientele and have allowed for class and race mixing (Garber 1989; Newton 1995), so that studying such locations might facilitate an exploration of race and class. Future iterations of this study might also recruit participants more broadly, using the now popular social networking technologies like Facebook, MySpace, and Craigslist.

Although this study only touched on the experiences of individuals who were "out of the closet," additional research might investigate appearance and identity for individuals still in the closet or who participate in gay sub-subcultures, for example, the bear and leather communities. Also important might be an investigation into the contemporary experiences of identity for butch versus femme lesbian women, and how people make sense of those terms today. For the present moment, though, this research has highlighted important trends among both gay men and lesbian women in U.S. culture. Discussing how appearance relates to identity upon coming out and later in gay and lesbian spaces reveals a rich and myriad world of meanings and

symbolism, contributing to the interactionist research on gay and lesbian identity and appearance in social transactions.

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