

Using ‘dress appearance [...] to define who I am to others’: Everyday fashion and subjectivity amongst white lesbians in Brighton 2005-2015

Dr. Jane Hattrick, University of Brighton

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Abstract

This article introduces a longitudinal study of the changing role of dressing and fashionability in the lives of ‘ordinary’ lesbians in Brighton, England, over a decade. The everyday dress practices of lesbians in midlife, are explored through first hand responses to two directives on lesbian dress and identity in 2005 and 2015 by a small cohort of participants. The responses to a set of openended questions posed by the author provide a window onto the ways in which gender and sexual subjectivity is negotiated through the wearing of specific items of dress and fashion brands on an everyday basis. A key finding in 2015 has been that these women’s attitudes towards self-fashioning have changed over time according to changes in personal circumstances and psychological development in midlife, within the context of wider social and political change.

Introduction

A decade ago in 2005 I explored the everyday dress practices of a group of white, self-identified lesbians in Brighton, England, through qualitative, participatory research. I revisited this research in 2015 in order to explore how these women’s attitudes towards self-fashioning might have shifted, and how they represent themselves differently through dress, within the context of personal and socio-political change across the intervening decade. I wanted to explore how lesbians negotiated their identity, of which their sexual subjectivity is a key part, on an

everyday basis through their clothing choices. I also wanted to investigate the extent to which a particular 'lesbian look' or stereotype was taken up or rejected by these women over time, and whether this was context specific. I was interested in which brands they preferred and the extent to which the consumption of particular brands signifies affiliation to lesbian subculture.

In accordance with theories of ordinary lesbian lives (Brown and Bakshi 2013) and everyday fashion (Buckley and Clark 2012), this article is not about subcultural styles more closely associated with youth culture. It explores how a group of midlife lesbians assemble a wardrobe of clothes from which to construct their 'look' through what one respondent referred to as 'cross shopping' (Schutt, 2015), purchasing garments from various clothing brands for their fit and style, and examines the role that dressing plays in their everyday lives. The select focus group that took part in this study is made up of women that identify as white British (that is, falling within the hegemonically white Northern European racial majority'). As none of the women in this small cohort of respondents are women of colour, this research does not tackle issues of dress related to minority racial and ethnic subject positions, as they intersect with sexual identity at this time.

The main issue under scrutiny here is the construction and negotiation of lesbian subjectivity or identity through dress. As respondent Tracey G. stated in 2005: 'Dress [and] appearance has always been very important to me and I have used it since an early age to define who I am to others' (Tracy G. 2005). Sociologist Steph Lawler argues that individual actions and responses can be understood as 'part of a wider social order that permits some actions and disallows others' (Lawler 2008: 104). Thus identity is about who it is possible for us to be in the context in which we construct our identities, for example the period in time and geographical location in which we live out our lives, and the constraints this puts upon us. Despite Brighton's reputation as 'the gay capital city', situated in Southern England, and wider socio-political changes that have taken place, discussed here, these women experience concerns around their appearance and negotiate their dress practices accordingly.

Recurrent themes emerged, these include issues of androgyny and gender ambiguity, lesbian stereotypes versus multiple lesbian styles, 'the politics of comfort' (Holliday,

2001), and the ways in which some lesbians create a look, cherry-picking particular labels and garments to create a specific lesbian fashion.

The ‘ordinary’ lesbian in the ‘gay capital’ city

Brighton is seen as an extraordinary place in terms of the numbers of LGBT people that live there and is known as the UK’s ‘gay capital’ city. The city’s official tourist guide ‘Visit Brighton’, has a page dedicated to ‘Gay Brighton’ which lists the attractions of this ‘cheeky, free thinking, bohemian atmosphere’, the ‘Gay Quarter’ of Kemp Town and celebrates the UK’s largest gay pride festival, now celebrating its 25th year (Visit Brighton 2015). In *Ordinary in Brighton* (2013), Kath Browne and Leela Bakshi argue that the post-industrial, consuming city today is marketed in terms of its cultural quarters, associated closely with its gay areas (2013: 10). They also identify the ‘ordinariness’ of Brighton, which is understood as privileged in terms of gender and sexual freedoms, but acknowledge that this acceptance and assimilation only applies to certain LGBT individuals that demand normative equal rights, such as gay marriage. Identified as homonormative, the white, educated urban gay individuals associated with ‘creative classes’, are no longer seen as deviant but ‘normal’, as they bring economic benefits and social prestige to the city (Browne and Bakshi, 2015: 8-11). The white, professional lesbians working in the creative arts, social care and education in this study fit this trope of homonormativity, making their lives, according to Browne and Bakshi’s theories, appear ‘ordinary’ rather than transgressive (2015: 11). Respondent Tracey G. noted in 2005 that ‘Cities which have a large gay scene (Manchester/London/Brighton) tend to display a definite lesbian look on the scene...ultra trendy with designer clothes’ (Tracey G. 2005). The women in this study, however, appear to eschew ‘ultra trendy designer labels’, preferring ordinary, high street fashion brands that sell androgynous styles such as surf and skate brands, widely accepted as everyday clothing.

Everyday fashion and the ordinary, midlife lesbian

In their research that investigates ‘fashion as an aspect of everyday life’, Cheryl Buckley and Hazel Clark note that ‘within fashion’s discourses, the truly “ordinary” remains elusive’ (Buckley and Clark, 2012: 18). Aspects of fashionable dressing that sit outside the scope of studies which examine novelty, youth styles and modernity as their context, are overlooked. Modes of self-fashioning that ‘comprise the ordinary

and mundane practices of wearing, where items are drawn from the personal wardrobe in a routine manner' are not examined by the academy (2012: 18). Accorded with Buckley and Clark's theories, this research into the ordinary, everyday dress of middle-aged lesbians investigates the 'routine' and the 'mundane' rather than special event dressing such as weddings or club wear. Recent published research into lesbian's self-fashioning by Caroline Huxley, Victoria Clarke and Emma Halliwell (2013) involved participatory research with 'largely a privileged group of young, white and middle-class lesbian and bisexual women'. The majority of their participants were aged between 18 – 30, just touching the border of debates concerning lesbians in midlife addressed here (Huxley, Clarke and Halliwell, 2013: 217).

Susan Kaiser's theories on the role of dressing in the subject formation process, of 'being and becoming', offer up a way of framing my respondents' articulations (Kaiser, 2012). Kaiser explains that individuals '...style themselves in ways that articulate their most recent thoughts about who they are (becoming)' (Kaiser, 2012: 193) within a particular geographical location and moment in time. Drawing on Carol Tulloch (2010), Kaiser also suggests that the system of 'style-fashion-dress offers a way to bridge across subject positions, manage power relations and sort through visual and material cultures to see what just might be the best possible articulation of self at the moment' (Kaiser, 2012: 193). The women's experiences discussed here reflect these ideas of 'becoming' and articulation of the self through fashion over time. And although this process applies to all women, the negotiation and self-representation that takes place in lesbian lives is unique in terms of 'coming out' as gay, and fitting in, either passing as straight or visibly representing oneself as lesbian to various degrees, according to the ever shifting contexts of everyday life, issues of homophobia and safety. As Reina Lewis explains: '...clothes have an importance in the lives of lesbians and gays – whether or not they consider themselves fashionable – that is rarely experienced by heterosexuals, however much they may affiliate to alternative networks of style...' (Lewis, 1997: 94).

Kaiser posits 'the knot of sex, gender and sexuality' through style, suggesting that when the human imagination comes into play the boundaries between sexuality and gender become 'blurry' and ambiguous; '...Clothes, like bodies or appearance styles

in general, can be turned into symbols that are desired or fetishized' (Kaiser, 2012: 149). Kaiser unpacks this 'knot' through her example of the wearing of garments styled as masculine by women whose sex may be female whilst their gender identity can be described as butch or 'masculine-of-center' and their sexuality is lesbian (Kaiser, 2012: 150). As an example of Kaiser's 'knot', my respondent Tracey G. commented that she 'usually wears men's clothes' and '...may be more prone to accessorise with a hat or tie if I am going out somewhere "special"' (Tracey G. 2015). Kaiser's 'knot' can be theorised further through Judith Butler's 'crisis' of gender, represented in many of my respondent's accounts. Butler explains that her first 'formulation of "gender trouble" (1990) addresses the fear of 'loosing one's place in gender', and that non-normative sexual practices destabilize gender categories. Being a women is framed within dominant heterosexuality, and as Butler asks, 'if gender is understood as consolidated through normative sexuality, then is there a crisis of gender that is specific to queer contexts?' (Butler 1999: xi).

In 'Fashioning the Queer Self' (2001) Ruth Holliday's participatory research explored everyday dress-practices of people who identified as queer, including lesbian subjects with a focus on what she defines as 'the politics of comfort'. Interested in the ways that identities are performed in relation to clothing and fashion, she asked participants to make video diaries of themselves in various social situations wearing the clothes they would wear in those situations and noticed that throughout the diarist's accounts, the term 'comfort' was used to justify 'a number of identity positions and personal stylizations' (Holliday 2001: 215). She noted that certain labels could be read as a marker of performance of gay identity in specific contexts. Contrary to the assumption that queer consumers spend a lot of time considering what clothes to buy in order to construct their personal visible identity as gay or lesbian, many of Holliday's respondents admitted that they chose clothes on the basis of 'comfort'. She noted of her interviewees that '...there was some attempt to pass over the question of 'labels' of clothing, which clearly have social meanings in specific contexts at the time of writing' (Holliday, 2001: 219). Holliday concluded that the word comfort stood in for authenticity, and that labels such as Adidas, considered fashionable by lesbians on the scene were essential to fitting in and becoming visibly lesbian, reflecting the 'authentic, natural self' or subjectivity and 'the rejection of (unnatural)

femininity' (Holliday, 2001: 221). Thus clothes were chosen to assemble a visibly lesbian look.

My cohort's experiences are also considered in accordance with Lynn Calhoun Howell and Amy Beth's model describing lesbians' midlife development (2001). In Howell's model midlife begins between the ages of 40 and 50 with women in different and overlapping stages of adjustment to various life-changes (catalysts) (Howell and Beth, 2004: 134). For the purposes of this research, midlife is identified as between 30 and 54 years old. The lesbians discussed here adjust their wardrobes and their sense of style across the changes experienced throughout midlife. Howell and Beth explain the developmental process and trajectory of midlife as 'external awareness, internal awareness, and, ultimately, congruence' (Howell and Beth, 2004: 134), noting that:

Over time, as they adjusted to many changes in their lives and clarified their values about many issues, women became adept at making necessary adjustments in their circumstances, attitudes, and behaviours and experienced increasing levels of life-satisfaction (Howell and Beth, 2004: 135).

They argue that the various stages of change and growth in midlife are experienced differently by lesbians to heterosexual women. Lesbians may not have arrived at midlife through the sequence of life events such as heterosexual marriage, children and subsequently experience different family and work roles to heterosexual women. They may also have experienced homophobia and rejection by family and the psychological impact of coming out. These issues are reflected in my respondents' constant negotiation of self through fashion, in the nuanced ways they soften or feminize their look for straight family events or work related situations. The responses unpacked here reflect upon the role that fashion and style played in the individual's burgeoning sexuality and coming out, and the ways in which approaches to self-fashioning might have relaxed in terms of visibility and gender representations as the subject ages, accommodating their aging female bodies in their wardrobe decisions.

Research methods: the National Lesbian & Gay Survey

In 2005 I looked for a suitable method for gathering primary material (before the advent of social media), and my research began in the National Lesbian and Gay Survey, part of the Mass-Observation Archive in Special Collections at the University of Sussex. Mass-Observation was founded in 1937 with the aim of recording the everyday life of ordinary people in Britain. In 1986, Mass-Observation respondent Kenneth Barrow set up the National Lesbian and Gay Survey to collect 'autobiographical reports from gay men and women'. As Neil Parkinson notes: 'The survey's aim was archival: to gather material which would enable researchers of the future to understand what it meant to live as a homosexual in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries' (2002: 70). There is, however, no directive relating specifically to dress and identity in the Survey, although occasional references to style occur across a variety of directives and this prompted me to write my own, asking lesbians questions about their clothing choices as these related to their gender and sexual subjectivity and everyday lives, over a period of four months in 2005.

Following on from the original Survey's directive format, all respondents were asked questions that positioned them in terms of national identity, family background and place of birth, education and current occupation and relationship status. The thirteen women that took part in my original research all lived in Brighton (and continue to do so) and were aged between 30 and 46 years old in 2005. They were and remain personal friends. Half were educated to postgraduate level and their occupations included jobs in social work, secondary and higher education, project managing, and creative practices such as photography, stonemasonry and couture fashion.

Respondents were initially asked:

Do you think there is currently such a thing as a 'lesbian look' or lesbian style? How important is fashion/dress/your appearance/style to you? Do you feel it is part of your identity as lesbian? Do you present 'clues' as to your sexuality through the way you dress? Do you dress differently in different social situations, for example at work, for a family event, or when you are out 'on the scene' or at a queer space? Are you interested in mainstream current fashionable styles for women? Where do you get your influences/ideas for the clothes you

wear? Where do you shop for your clothes? Are you interested in labels, if so which ones? (Hatrick, Questionnaire and Directive 2005).

This 2005 directive was resent to the same respondents a decade later and included extra questions about the wearing of tailored menswear and whether individual clothing styles had changed since 2005, asking ‘Has your style changed in the last ten years and if so why do you think this has happened?’ (Hatrick, Questionnaire and Directive, 2015). Of the original fifteen respondents in 2005 thirteen responded to the 2015 directive. In 2015 I had lost two respondents through relationship break up and out of three of my original couples only one woman from each couple decided to take part. Thus, there were some small shifts in this core group of respondents, now aged between 40 and 56 in 2015.

To contextualize the responses to my directive, the fashion pages in issues of the lesbian lifestyle magazine *Diva*, published monthly since 1994, were considered in terms of how lesbian style is represented and promoted. Reina Lewis noted in 1997 that the magazine did originally feature a regular fashion spread, but at the time her article in *Feminist Review* was published, these had been dropped from the magazine’s contents (Lewis, 1997: 96). In 2005 the fashion pages had been reinstated in *Diva*, although these were not a regular feature of the magazine. In an email to the author, deputy editor of *Diva*, Louise Carolin explained the enormous expense of including fashion content in the magazine, necessitating the use of young, inexperienced models, willing to work for free, indicating perhaps why the readership felt that the models used were/are unrepresentative and the reasons why fashion spreads in *Diva* are not a regular feature. Carolin explained that the fashion industry is not interested in this small circulation magazine that caters to a niche readership and *Diva* are ‘back of the line when it comes to getting clothes for shoots. High street labels and menswear brands are pretty much inaccessible to us...’ (Carolin, 2015: email to author, 23 February 2015). The clothing brands favoured by my respondents seem not to be represented in *Diva*’s fashion shoots, another possible reason for reader’s dissatisfaction.

An exploration of lesbian dress practices in 2005

In 2005 my respondents were asked to comment on whether there was currently such a thing as a lesbian look. In accordance with recent published research (Huxley, Clarke and Halliwell, 2013, Karaminas and Geczy, 2013), most believed that there were many styles of dress worn by women who identify as lesbian and noted the more relaxed attitude to dress amongst lesbians in general. As art teacher Julia notes, ‘there appear to be several looks, but all generally recognizable to another lesbian. Each look says something about the woman, where she goes out etc. (Julia, 2005). Clare wrote that: ‘I think there are now loads of stereotypical lesbian looks which, although true for some, are generally bollocks when it comes to real life. Current street-dyke and lesbian media stereotype is a kind of 90s gay man, Lara Croft hybrid-androgynous with a girlie twist, very clean, styled and “trendy”’ (Clare 2005). This softer, androgynous look is represented in the styling of 21 year-old singer Alex Parks, who featured inside and on the cover of *Diva* in October 2005. Parks’ short, slightly asymmetrical and spiky hairstyle is softened by her subtly made up face, and her look is described by the journalist interviewing her as: ‘box-fresh jeans, grey sleeveless sweater, white T-shirt underneath...the trademark spiky hair is sleeker...she’s very pretty close up and has the kind of porcelain skin and ski-slope cheekbones most girls would die for’ (Sarah-Jane, 2005: 38). Park’s 2005 look also reflects Huxley, Clarke and Halliwell’s 2013 findings on lesbian appearance norms, and what they describe as the prevailing, softer ‘boyish’ look (Huxley, Clarke and Halliwell, 2013: 207).

Issues of gender, dress and lesbian identity

Evidence from both the NL&G Survey and my original 2005 directive would suggest it is the relationship between assumed gender (as it is aligned with sex according to societal norms) and gender identity made visible on the body that is complex. The ways in which lesbians dress in styles and garments associated with boys or men disrupts gender binaries, producing a ‘deviant’, androgynous body. As Elizabeth Wilson has stated: ‘...how can the lesbian or gay male gender be naturalized when it is a challenge to the very notion of a ‘natural’ sexuality neatly matched to biological sex?’ (Wilson 1991: 57).

As already suggested here, Judith Butler's 'crisis of gender...specific to queer contexts' is relevant to many of my respondents' experiences, and is manifested through dress (Butler 1999: xi). As fine artist Tracey G. stated in 2005:

Although I didn't knowingly dress 'like a lesbian' I have always had a boyish dress style and ever since I was able to choose my own clothes I have never bought feminine clothes (dresses, skirts etc.). However I have worn make-up everyday since I was 13 years old and only stopped in recent years (Tracey G. 2005).

For Tracey G. it was the coming to terms with her sexuality as a young lesbian that gave her difficulties with her self-image and what she describes as 'the pressure around me to conform to the feminine ideal. This came to the forefront when I was suspended from school at the age of 14 for refusing to wear a skirt' (Tracey G. July 2005). In her 2005 photograph Tracey wears black jeans, a black bomber jacket and white trainers. She sports a short fashionable 'shark fin' hair cut and wears a heavy silver chain around her neck. Her look is more closely associated with lesbian youth subcultural styles than that of the other respondents. (Figure 2: Tracey G. 2005).



Figure 2: Respondent Tracey G. July 2005. [photograph] (author's personal collection).

Stonemason Tracy S. wrote that her appearance didn't change when she came out, stating that: 'I'd always worn 'boys' clothes unless I was forced into a frock. Having two brothers' "pass me downs" and preferring these clothes to sister's "pass me downs" I was already looking like a lesbian when I became aware of my sexuality' (Tracy S. 2005). Tracy was photographed wearing dark t-shirts and blue jeans in both 2005 and 2015. Emily explained that her parents did not 'push gender roles on me or my brother...the way I dress is more to do with being a tomboy' (Emily 2005). In 2005, social worker Andy appeared to be comfortable with her appropriation of gendered clothing associated with male gender norms. She admitted to preferring 'traditionally male clothing' and 'feels very uncomfortable in skirts/dresses' and always has done. She continued: 'My clothing is a strong part of my identity, initially as a "tomboy" and then as a lesbian' (Andy 2005).

In 2005 most of my respondents had explained that they did not dress particularly differently for work or leisure. For occupations such as art teacher, stonemason and garden designer, they were able to wear less formal clothing in the workplace. Respondents described navigating contexts in which being 'out' might not have been acceptable through the deliberate adoption of elements of normative feminine dress. Debt Advisor Emily had explained that she might dress up for special occasions such as a wedding 'then I might really push the boat out and wear something girly – I have four skirts and one dress' (Emily 2005). Art teacher Julia admitted in 2005 that she 'toned down' her look slightly and for family events she tried to "feminize" more, make up etc., jewelry, less clumpy shoes' (Julia 2005). Before her change in career, Lil '...never did come out in the middle class, white suburbia corporate blue chip world I used to work in. In that world I had to be "suited and booted" in trouser suits and flat (comfy) shoes were my norm. Would sometimes wear jewelry, make-up, scarves etc. to feminize/normalize my look. Family and friends have always known me in jeans and jumpers' (Lil 2005). These examples suggest that lesbians feel pressured to adapt their look to avoid discrimination in specific contexts. My respondent's comments correspond with Huxley's research that explores how lesbians are aware of the negative stereotypes associated with the lesbian look such as unattractiveness and even ugliness associated with lack of normative femininity in dress. Huxley concludes: 'Thus evidence to date suggests that while appearance is

central to sexual identity it is also potentially problematic within wider (heterosexist) society' (2013: 8).

The politics of comfort versus labels and fashionability

Respondent Lil cited comfort as a priority when dressing, admitting that she 'never cared too much about style or fashion - comfort over style for me' (Lil 2005). The photograph taken of garden designer Lil in 2005 shows her wearing jeans, trainers, a white GAP t-shirt and a grey, zip-up hooded jumper. This outfit supports her statement, which suggests she only chooses garments in terms of how comfortable they are to wear rather than how they look, but nevertheless identifies her with a certain fashion brand (Figure 1: Lil, 2005).



Figure 1: Respondent Lil wearing 'comfortable' GAP, jeans and trainers, September 2005. [photograph] (author's personal collection).

Despite stating that she prefers 'comfort over style', Lil has adopted a specific style of dressing outside of mainstream fashion, which clearly rejects what Holliday has described as 'unnatural femininity' in favour of the 'authentic' lesbian look (Holliday, 2001: 221). This natural look has its roots in androgynous feminist dressing, whilst endorsing a capitalist, global brand. Several of my respondents in

2005 denied being interested in labels, however some of these who expressed this went on to cite the high street brand GAP as somewhere they shop. All understood which brands and labels were associated with lesbian style. Eight of my 2005 respondents admitted to shopping in GAP and Emily bought 'Fat Face, Just Add Water, Benetton, Badger and GAP' (Emily 2005). Rachel had explained that she was not really interested in labels but will shop 'in the GAP, and buys Diesel and Levis' (Rachel 2005). These brands can be seen as gender neutral in terms of casual, sports wear and particular types of fabric such as jersey and denim, more closely associated with masculine styles and what Kaiser has described as the 'clone look' worn by lesbians in the 1980s (Kaiser 2012: 160). Librarian Rachel admitted in 2005 that mainstream women's fashions 'pass her by' mainly because, she explained, 'they tend to be quite feminine recently – kind of gypsy skirts etc. which look quite nice but I would not wear...I tend to stick to things that retain their fashion value, like simple classic trousers/shirts/jeans...' (Rachel 2005). Again, this reference to 'fashion value' and classic styles could also be contextualized in terms of Holliday's 'politics of comfort'.

On the basis of many of the responses to my directive in 2005, GAP clothes also appeal to these women's liking for, in the words of university administrator Rebecca, 'generic or classic looks, such as polos, corduroys, sports casuals' (Rebecca 2005), and Rachel's 'classic trousers/shirts/jeans' (Rachel 2005). As Lil explained in her response to the 'lesbian look' question, 'among the majority I guess there's a lot of jeans, t-shirts, jumpers and fleeces and not forgetting comfortable shoes' (Lil 2005). When asked whether there was a 'lesbian look', Tracy S. wrote: 'Generally yes, though not exclusive to just lesbians. If you dressed a lesbian in the 'uniform' then you'd unmistakably see a lesbian but if you dressed a straight woman in the 'uniform' you'd see a woman in jeans and a t-shirt' (Tracy S. 2005), indicating that despite the diffusion of lesbian style into the mainstream since the 1970s, lesbians maintain the ability to read appearance codes. Several respondents delighted in their labels; 'expensive ones preferably', for Julia (Julia 2005) and support worker Clare explained that she was interested in 'fabric quality and cut which does make me interested in labels by default' citing Diesel and Jaeger among the brands that she chose (Clare 2005). Photographed in 2005, support worker Clare wears a plain pale blue T-shirt,

blue knitted, hooded zip-up jumper and kaki cargo-pants, not immediately associated with either of these fashion brands.

When asked about how she felt about mainstream fashion in 2005, Julia responded that women's fashions don't always suit the 'lesbian look' and that she prefers to buy men's fashion, in particular skateboard fashion and surfer wear 'even (underlined) the women's brands – baby blues/pinks/girly colours are allowed in these looks'. She looked to friends for ideas and also 'some of the London trendier lesbian clubs' (Julia 2005). Julia's outfit worn at the time of her 2005 photograph comprised jeans, t-shirt and denim jacket, short spiky hair and a messenger bag with the strap worn across her body diagonally – a common accessory for several of the women photographed for this study. Variations on the 'Pixie cut' and 'shark fin' were the hairstyles of choice for my respondents, reflecting the young musician's hair style on the pages of *Diva* in October 2005.

Several other women stated in 2005 that they bought surf & skateboard-wear. Production co-ordinator for the couturier Giles, Kate explained in 2005 that 'I think this is because I like the 'culture' that comes with these clothes...fun...outdoors...exciting...young'. She preferred to shop at 'small independent surf/ski stores ...Legends, Quicksilver, Zunamee, Just Add Water...I love surf/ski labels...love, love, love...' (Kate 2005). In her photograph taken in 2005 Kate wears a plain black long-sleeved jumper and jeans – her long hair is tied back in a pony-tail. The June 2005 edition of *Diva* included a fashion spread featuring Surf-wear entitled 'Board Meetings'. Images of young women with short, spiky hair, pose with surfboards, demonstrating the relevance of this style to wider lesbian fashion culture at the time, reflecting and responding to the tastes stated by my respondents, although the brands identified are not represented in the shoot, possibly because these brands were hesitant to supply *Diva* with their clothing for photoshoots, according to Carolin's comments (Carolin, 2015: email to author, 23 February 2015).

The 'lesbian look' in 2005 for these women constituted a combination of androgynous, anti-mainstream fashion and a tendency to choose menswear over women's. Sportswear brands such as GAP and Levis, and labels associated with surf and skiwear, were popular. In most cases, this style of self-presentation developed out

of dressing like a ‘tomboy’ in childhood and feelings of discomfort when having to adhere to normative gender codes. Hair was worn short. The term ‘comfort’ was used throughout my respondents articulations of style, indicating a choice to dress comfortably (for ease of movement, physical comfort) and to dress in order to feel ‘comfortable’ in terms of gender identity, but also, according to Holliday’s analysis of the term, to assemble a look that represents our natural self as lesbian, rejecting an unnatural feminine style (Holliday, 2001: 221).

Dressing, gender and lesbian subjectivity 2015

Returning to this research after a decade I was interested to see whether these women’s approaches to dressing had changed over time. In terms of whether there is a ‘lesbian look’ in 2015, the responses seemed remarkably similar, with perhaps even more references to multiple looks, or as Emily explained, ‘super diversity’ in terms of ‘otherness’, although the androgynous (short hair, boyish clothes) look still holds fast (Emily 2015). In 2015 Andy wrote ‘I think there is a look which is quite ‘boyish’ smart and on-trend but there is also an acceptance that lesbians can look like anyone and there isn’t a big pressure to conform to a look in order to be recognized or accepted’ (Andy 2015). Certain brands are still popular including surf brands, and also Fat Face, Superdry, GAP and Levi’s, however to wear brands typically associated with lesbian style seems less important than in 2015. As Kate explained, she was now ‘not interested in fashion or labels. When I was younger I bought into all the surf labels, hoping to buy into a “lifestyle” but I think I’ve grown out of that somewhat now’ (Kate 2015).

There have been wider changes in lesbian style or ‘the lesbian look’ more generally, however, as Julia notes: ‘I think it just has changed since I was on the scene, younger lesbians often have their own look, longer hair with perhaps “jogged around a track look” with large jewelry. Older lesbians around me appear to be femming up more’ (Julia 2015). Julia refers here to the ‘drop crotch’ jogging pants and t-shirt look favoured by younger lesbians in Brighton in 2015. As subcultural styles for younger lesbians have evolved to include more feminine elements of style such as long hair and jewelry, my respondents appear to be adopting less androgynous styles of dress, whilst choosing the cut and fit of clothes to accommodate the ageing female body. Shopping for these more feminine clothes to accommodate a changing shape seems

problematic, however, as Rebecca states: ‘I still feel that some women’s clothes are too girly for me to feel comfortable wearing them. At the same time I like women’s clothes/clothes for socializing and work’. She notes that like many of her friends she finds it hard to find shirts she likes: ‘...men’s shirts are too big/boxy and women’s shirts too tight/girly’ (Rebecca 2015).

Rachel explains that ‘my style has got more feminine as I’ve got older and perhaps more coordinated – I less and less want to look boyish as I might have done or ‘dykey’ these days and as my income has increased then I’ve gone for clothes which may last longer so are more expensive than I used to. So it’s not so much about my sexuality but about my income and age’ (Rachel, February 2015). In a photograph taken at work at the Jubilee Library in Brighton in 2015, Rachel is pictured wearing blue jeans, a navy blue sports shirt, dark grey Fair Isle cardigan and black biker boots. (Figure 3: Rachel, 2015). Despite her comments, this assemblage remains androgynous in parts, for example her jeans and biker boots. Perhaps, however, her more conservative short hair cut and looser, button-through soft jersey shirt (womenswear), teamed with the traditional Fair Isle knit represent what she considers more feminine attire? Rachel references her age in terms of clothing choices and increased income, however, these clothes fit her softer, less toned midlife body and increased responsibility at work.



Figure 3: Respondent Rachel at work in the Jubilee Library, Brighton, February 2015.

[photograph] (Rachel's own private collection).

Charting her psychological development through shifting clothing choices, Andy, stated in 2005 that she felt uncomfortable in women's styles, writes in 2015 that:

I've become more comfortable in 'female' clothing. I used to wear more baggy clothes and more items of menswear. I now have many more shirts and trousers tailored for women, women's jumpers and cardigans and bras. I don't think that I was comfortable with the available identities for women when I was growing up other than 'tomboy'. I also didn't want to signal availability or interest to men. It now feels much more comfortable to play around with gender and sexual identity, and to express them in a variety of ways (Andy 2015).

Andy's more relaxed attitude to dressing in terms of gender norms appears to have developed over the decade, fitting within Howell and Beth's trajectory towards congruence in midlife (Howell and Beth, 2004: 134).

This experimentation and ease with more feminine looks mirrors respondents similar experiences of ‘becoming’ and congruence. Rachel explains that the length of her hair dictates how she feels in terms of her appearance. ‘I can still look ‘dykey’ but I can also fit in with the crowd I think’ (Rachel 2015). She expands: ‘[...] for me too how I dress sometimes depends on the length of my hair, if I grow my hair I feel more feminine so tend to wear dresses and more ‘girly’ clothes/shoes, when my hair’s short I really enjoy being androgynous’ (Rachel 2015). Julia now deliberately plays with gender through dress, stating that: ‘I enjoy looking at both (men’s and women’s fashion) and trying to put them together in some way, if my hair is shorter then I will look at female fashions more and the opposite applies with longer hair’ (Julia 2015). Complex negotiations in terms of self-fashioning still take place. According to different contexts, however, Julia still adopts what she describes as ‘Somewhat, subtle differences (in dress), perhaps softer clothes in family gatherings or straight gatherings for example the addition of a soft scarf or a little more makeup’ (Julia 2015). An article offering up style advice for the middle aged lesbian, for women with a ‘softer frame’ demanding ‘a more linear, less slovenly silhouette’ suggests ‘grown up tailoring’ (*Diva*, December 2013: 64-67). As Julia notes, she has adopted ‘a more grown up style’ and admits to ‘spending a bit more to get a better cut of cloth to hide the aging flaws I feel I have now well into my 50s. I like to feel smarter now’ (Julia 2015).

Rebecca explained that: ‘[...] butch, boyish identity was how I saw myself in my mid-20s to mid-30s. More recently, I enjoy being more playful, wearing a skirt of dress, experimenting with my femininity’ (Rebecca 2015). She continued:

I’m more comfortable with wearing more feminine clothes, and am more conscious about the clothing choices I make. I think this has to do with my inner journey over the last ten years, which has been about getting in touch with myself and facing up to who I am (Or at least, trying to!) I think it also has to do with observing changes in lesbian culture around me (Rebecca 2015).

Rebecca equates her wearing of more feminine clothes in 2015 with ‘her inner journey over the last ten years’ (Rebecca 2015). These comments represent how Howell and Beth’s psychological development towards congruence can be reflected

in the self-fashioning of midlife lesbians (Howell and Beth, 2001: 134). They also fit Kaiser's theory that fashion and dress enables individuals 'to see what just might be the best possible articulation of self at the moment' (Kaiser, 2012: 193). The women's experiences discussed here reflect these ideas of 'becoming' and negotiation through fashion in midlife. Returning to Howell and Beth's statement, 'over time, as they adjusted to many changes in their lives and clarified their values about many issues, women became adept at making necessary adjustments in their circumstances, attitudes, and behaviours and experienced increasing levels of life-satisfaction' (Howell and Beth, 2004: 135). Butler's 'crisis of gender' appears to be less acute in midlife (Butler, 1999: xi).

Kaiser writes that '...fashioning the body is a fundamental part of subject formation (shaping, sustaining, and shifting): an ongoing sense of self and identity in a changing world' (Kaiser, 2012: 30). In terms of Rebecca's comments on changes in lesbian culture, the wider socio-cultural shifts in the 'changing world' of British society must be appreciated as context for the changes in these Brighton based women's self-fashioning and self-perception. LGBTQ spectrum people have become more visible within popular culture, represented in film and on television and very occasionally in advertising, although lesbians are still left to 'superimpose themselves into mainstream imagery' (Walters and Moore 2010). 2004 saw the Civil Partnership Act and every Council in England and Wales having to comply by law, and the Gender Recognition Act, allowing transgender people to legally change their gender. The Marriage Act (same sex couples) of 2013 legalized same-sex marriage from March 2014 in England and Wales, and 2014 saw the Marriage and Civil Partnership Act (Scotland). The referendum on gay marriage in Ireland has just had an overwhelming 'yes' majority vote, demonstrating that British (and Irish) society has become a more tolerant and aware place to be LGBTQ. Perhaps within this increased atmosphere of tolerance and the adjustments made to these changes in their lifetime, midlife lesbians feel more at ease with their sexuality. As their female bodies change with age and they 'experience increase levels of life-satisfaction' (Howell and Beth, 2001: 135) they feel less of a need to identify with the 'deviant dress' (Wilson, 1990), more political styles of their past.

Some of the women in my study have become much more fashion savvy, getting ideas from a broad spectrum of fashion press and social media such as Instagram and *Vogue*, to create their own specific, perhaps more youthful looks, through a mix of womenswear and menswear, vintage and designer labels. Julia's fashion ideas come from 'Vogue type magazines, sometimes I spot a pop star sporting something I like' (Julia 2015). Nancy writes: 'I think I collect looks that I like from many different places, high end fashion magazines particularly androgynous looks, the mix of bling and casual (hip hop), people on the street, from skate boarders to older women in expensive clothes'. Along with brands such as Superdry, her designer labels of choice include Vivian Westwood (Nancy 2015).

Katrina Rolley's 1991 work on dress and the historic lesbian couple, likened the wearing of similarly, identifiable lesbian styles to 'uniform' that, 'serve both to distinguish the wearers from the rest of society and to bind them together into a unified body. Thus the lesbian couple who dressed alike emphasized both their special closeness and their difference from the rest of society' (Rolley 1991: 33). Julia and Nancy fit this trope of dressing alike. Photographs of the couple in 2005 show them in corresponding, bright green tops and beige chinos. In 2015, the pair shares a taste for what Julia describes as 'bling' and Nancy identifies as 'hip hop', with chunky neck chains, combining a mix of classic men's tailoring and brightly coloured sportswear. Now needing spectacles, their stylish frames complete their specifically lesbian, fashionable look. (Figures 4 and 5: Julia and Nancy, 2005 and 2015).



Figure 4: Respondents Julia and Nancy, July 2005. [photograph] (author's personal collection).



Figure 5: Respondents Julia and Nancy, February 2015. [photograph] (Julia and Nancy's own private collection). Here Julia, my oldest respondent in 2015, satirizes the generic selfie pout associated with the younger, social media generation.

Conclusion

In line with theories of ordinary lesbian lives (Brown and Bakshi 2013) this article examines the role that clothes play in the negotiation of sexual subjectivity on an everyday level. Most of my respondents in 2005 expressed the view that there were many styles of dress worn by women who identify as lesbian, and that these shift and change overtime according to wider lesbian culture and changing attitudes to gender and sexuality within wider society. Nevertheless, the ‘boyish’ androgynous lesbian look prevails into 2015. According with Kaiser’s theories on fashioning the body as a ‘fundamental part of subject formation’ in constant flux’ (2012: 30), lesbians appear to be in constant dialogue with their clothes according to their age and the context in which they find themselves. To ‘fit in’ with the crowd at a straight wedding or at a gay event, to feel ‘comfortable’ at work or to identify with a same sex partner, or to adopt labels that signify lesbianism, dressing is key to lesbian subjectivity formation. In 2015, my respondents seemed more comfortable with their identities to be able to experiment with feminine clothing in terms of cut and fit and to construct fashionable looks outside of the mainstream.

This study examines the self-fashioning of a group of ‘ordinary’ lesbians in Brighton between 2005-2015. And as Rebecca explained, ‘anyone can be a lesbian now’ (Rebecca 2015), indicating that perhaps lesbians are not so easily identifiable today, but also suggesting that in today’s more tolerant society provides a more ‘comfortable’ environment in which to be ordinary and gay. Nevertheless, these women can never be anything other than transgressive in terms of the ways in which women that love other women continuously challenge gender ideals through self-fashioning, and go against the grain in terms of normative sexuality, perhaps making their lives and style anything but ‘ordinary’.

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