"My Interview Dilemma": Expression and Suppression of Butch Gender Identity

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This paper examines ways in which Butch lesbians manage and negotiate their identity within the context of a work interview situation in a world where the cultural gender belief system makes assumptions about masculinity and femininity and attitudes towards appropriate roles for the sexes (Deaux and Kite, 1987, in Whitley, 2001). Reviews of the literature on consumption and self, queer/Butch identity and sexual identity in the workplace are presented, together with a detailed methodological discussion of online enquiry and the role of the ‘embedded’ researcher underpinning our exploration of lesbians’ experiences of performing their Butch identity through symbolic consumption.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Issues surrounding gender, marketing and consumption have received increasing attention from the marketing academy over recent years (e.g. Hirschman, 1987, Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988, Costa, 2000). However, as Crocco et al (2006) note, there is scant interest within marketing and consumer research in studies focusing on the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual) segment generally and Rosenbaum (2005) comments that the literature concerning homosexual marketplace discrimination is sparse. Additionally, it is our observation that while there is some growth in the body of literature documenting research on gay men (e.g. Kates, 1998, 2000, Crocco et al., 2006) and on inclusive work which focuses on gay men and lesbians (e.g. Penaloza, 1996, Walters and Moore, 2002, Rosenbaum, 2005), our experience in developing this paper showed that there is a dearth of literature within marketing or consumer research focusing more specifically on lesbians (e.g. Oakenfull and Greenlee, 2004).

Our aim is to widen the debate into gender, marketing and consumption by exploring issues surrounding the construction (or ‘performativity’) of expressions of Butch lesbian identity through consumption and the careful management—and even suppression—of that identity in specific contexts and audiences (job interviews), particularly in relation to the politics of gender and sexuality in the workplace. We examine ways in which Butch lesbians manage and negotiate their identity in a world where the cultural gender belief system makes assumptions about masculinity and femininity and attitudes towards appropriate roles for the sexes (Deaux and Kite, 1987, in Whitley, 2001).

This paper explores the way in which Butch lesbians use clothing to shape self and create identity in line with “the meanings that serve to define (consumers’) current sense of self-identity and the type of envisioned identities that they seek to realise through consumption activities” (Thompson, 1997, p.447) and the “deep meanings” of consumption (Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf, 1988); the consumer’s ability “to build a DIY self through consumption” (Elliott, 1997). Using personal accounts, message board responses and interactions, we explore the conflict between the desire to remain true to an authentic expression of self and the underlying fear that true self representation will invite rejection or discrimination.

Our attention was first drawn towards studying Butch identity in relation to the workplace environment by discussion threads arising from time to time within online lesbian community message boards (which both authors are members of) on the topic of what to wear for interviews and whether there is too much risk associated with being openly Butch in that particular context. It was one of these threads-entitled “My Interview Dilemma”-which provided us with the motivation and inspiration to conduct this research and examine some of the underlying issues in depth and the kind of reactions respondents received or have experienced. This gave rise to two main issues of importance in the development of this paper, namely the idea for the topic under consideration and also an in-depth, reflexive examination of the nature of online inquiry (cyber ethnography or online ethnography). We have dealt with these two areas by presenting a review of the literature on consumption and self, queer identity, Butch identity and sexual identity in the workplace together with a detailed methodological discussion of online enquiry and the role of the ‘embedded’ researcher underpinning our exploration of lesbians’ experiences of performing their Butch identity through symbolic consumption. We contend that this paper offers dual contributions to knowledge in terms of both increased understanding of (Butch) identity and the construction and negotiation of self through symbolic consumption and the discourse surrounding methodology and reflexivity in the context of emergent online community scenes of inquiry.

The research presented in this paper shows that the notion of Butch identity has both psychological roots and is performed as a situated social practice but while it may be seen as social competence within a particular community of practice—the lesbian community—its management and enactment outside that community can present challenges and risks for the individual. Identity is thus not an object “but a constant being” and one which can be tempered and negotiated as Butch lesbians move between a variety of social communities with multi-membership across family, work and culture. The analysis presented in this paper has highlighted various aspects of Butch identity and sexual politics which clearly merit further cross-disciplinary investigation.

References
