`Hot Lesbians': Young People's Talk About Representations of Lesbianism

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Abstract  Media representation of heterosexual alternatives is particularly salient for young people negotiating sexuality, more so for those with limited access to other cultural resources to inform their homosexual understandings. With the centrality of media as resource in mind, we present in this article findings from our focus group research with 25 high school students aged 16–18 in which we invited them to discuss representations of homosexuality in the media. Our analyses, which focus here on lesbian sexuality, used a thematic discursive approach. We found constructions of lesbianism as ‘heteroflexible’, ‘hot’ and experimental to be common patterns in participants’ talk, whereas notions of lesbian desire were largely silenced. While most of the talk drew on heteronormativity, we found small pockets of its deconstruction in mobilization of alternative discourses and rejection of sexual categories.

Keywords  discourse, lesbian, media, sexualities, youth

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‘Hot Lesbians’: Young People’s Talk About Representations of Lesbianism

‘Hot lesbians’: Young people’s accounts of on- and off-screen ‘lesbianism’

Over the last decade, lesbian visibility in the media has mushroomed. Like her heterosexual sister, the media lesbian is frequently defined by her embodied sexuality and constituted as a sexually desiring and desirable subject. Attractive and sexy within heterosexual norms (slim, pretty, curvaceous), she is ‘hot’. But is the emergence of ‘new’ lesbian woman from the media closet cause for celebration? Potentially, she may counter heteronormativity and diversify representations of femininity, but feminist
critiques of her meanings underscore her problematic constitution within heterosexuality. Although such critiques are important, investigating her possible meanings from the perspective of those who ‘consume’ her is crucial to questions of what potential, if any, she offers. Young people’s perspectives of the contemporary media lesbian are particularly important both because they are at a critical point in negotiating their sexuality and because they are ardent users of media. Media, then, functions as a significant resource for young people about possibilities for sexual subjectivity.

In this article we examine how young people in New Zealand make sense of contemporary portrayals of lesbians in the media and how these relate to understandings of lesbian sexualities in their lived worlds. We are particularly interested in identifying those discourses mobilized by young people that may open up spaces for negotiation of sexuality outside of heteronormativity. In bringing together accounts about lesbian sexuality represented in media and experienced in lived worlds, we hope to contribute to understandings about the relationship between the two. We begin, however, with a brief overview of ways the lesbian figure has come to be represented in the media.

The media lesbian

Versions of the media lesbian that preceded her contemporary incarnation as ‘hot’ typically cast her in stereotypical and undesirable ways, for example as masculine and unattractive (Ciasullo, 2001; Wilton, 1995). Dow (2001) notes how the lesbian on television historically occupied a fleeting space as an object of humour or as a villain. In her contemporary guise, the media lesbian can most often be seen as constituted within post-feminist discourses that produce women as sexually desiring, sexually plural, and self-pleasing (McRobbie, 1996, 2004). The ‘new’ post-feminist woman is free-choosing and autonomous but her empowerment is largely embodied in her sexuality. Traditional femininity endures but is reformulated as something postfeminist woman ‘chooses’ to perform in a spirit of playfulness (Gill, 2007).

Samantha in Sex and the City typifies the ‘new’ sexually adventurous, self-pleasing, (hetero)sexually attractive postfeminist woman. Her temporary foray into a lesbian relationship resembles ‘tri-sexuality’ in the contemporary spirit of ‘sexual diversity’, and resonates with ‘doing whatever turns you on simply because you like it’ (Wilkinson, 1996: 294). Her experimentation though does not threaten her ‘real’, ‘straight’ heterosexuality, but rather denotes ‘heteroflexibility’ (Diamond, 2005) and accords with fashionable, ‘chic’ lesbianism (Jackson and Scott, 2004). The ‘trendiness’ of (s)experimentation is boosted by inducements in various popular magazines that ‘sell’ woman–woman sex as ‘exciting’, ‘safe’, ‘fun’
and, importantly, completely unthreatening to being heterosexual (Wilkinson, 1996). Wilkinson uses the term ‘bisexuality a la mode’ to capture notions of a trendy, ultra-flexible lesbian sexuality where lesbian women indulge in sex with straight women and also with men just for ‘fun’, to be ‘bad’, or simply for ‘hot sex’. Here, the construction of the contemporary lesbian within postfeminist discourse is realized within the rhetoric of doing ‘what you want’ and ‘having fun’ (Griffin, 2004). Not all representations of the lesbian woman in the media treat her sexuality as so transient. While The L Word resonates with postfeminist discourse in many ways, relationship issues run through its storylines. A clearer counter example can be found in Bad Girls, where the show carefully avoids depicting Helen’s evolving lesbian desire as a ‘fad’ (Herman, 2005).

Where the contemporary media lesbian is constructed within a postfeminist discourse of sexual desire, she is simultaneously produced as a commodity, an object of desire. As Thynne (2000) observes, she is sexually packaged to ‘advertise goods from Kronenbourg beer to Peugeot cars and sunglasses’ (2000: 202). As commodity, she mirrors her heterosexual sister, designed within cultural norms of feminine attractiveness and stamped with sex appeal, commonly referred to as the ‘luscious’, ‘hot’ or ‘lipstick’ lesbian (Ciasullo, 2001). Wilkinson (1996) cites a capture on commodity marketing by Briscoe in Elle magazine in 1994: ‘How do you sell a lesbian? Easy. Slap some lipstick on the controversy, hit the mainstream and watch the ratings rise’. Ciasullo (2001) and others (e.g. Garrity, 2001; Jenkins, 2005) argue that representing lesbian women within heterosexual attractiveness norms constructs them for consumption by the male gaze, in much the same way that heterosexual women may be cast as ‘eye-candy’ for a male audience. Drawing on the television examples of the ‘thin perfectly coiffed’ bridesmaids in the Friends lesbian wedding and the lesbian couple on Mad about you, Ciasullo (2001) suggests that heterosexualization of lesbians reifies the ‘femme’ and obliterates the political, feminist ‘butch’. From another perspective, Torres (1993) observes that representing lesbian women solely within heterosexual norms may serve a ‘universalizing’ function that glosses or erases lesbianism both as an identity and as desire for another woman. Yet it could also be argued that the media representation of a ‘femme’ lesbian brings overdue recognition to ‘femme’ lesbians on the other side of the screen for whom visibility may only be achieved through a ‘butch’ partner (Eves, 2004).

Reading media lesbian

Media lesbian’s appeal to the male gaze extends beyond her heterosexual packaging. The heterosexual audience is generally aware that displays of
‘lesbian’ sex are acts of performance, that the actors portraying them are (often) ‘really’ heterosexuals. One of the ways that the notion of ‘display’ or ‘performance’ may function is to produce lesbian acts as ‘titillation’ for male heterosexual viewers. Diamond (2005), for example, reads the Ally McBeal lesbian kisses as staged to ‘trick’ the male onlookers, in a remarkably similar scene to Amber and Danielle’s lesbian performance for the males in American Pie 2 (Jenkins, 2005). In both cases, the heterosexual identities of the women characters are never in doubt, allowing the acts to be read as ‘performance’ rather than identity. The Madonna/Britney Spears and Madonna/Christina Aguilera kisses at the 2003 MTV music awards are perhaps the most controversial instance of staged ‘performance’, leading to widespread speculation over the possible meanings of the kisses. Spears, who at the time had a husband and a baby, stated that she enjoyed the kiss, although she later stressed the specificity of her enjoyment to Madonna, stating, ‘I mean come on . . . If you can kiss any girl in the world, that has to be her’ (cited in Diamond, 2005: 107). A sceptical audience attributed Britney’s kiss and subsequent comments as a media ploy to attract a male audience, precluding a subversive reading of the kisses as a challenge to the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy (Diamond, 2005).

Framed as staged performance, these ‘lesbian’ acts lend themselves to being read by a male audience in ways that resonate with the pornographic male fantasy of observing women having sex with women (Jenefsy and Miller, 1998). Indeed, girl–girl sex has a lengthy history as a source of titillation for heterosexual men. While feminist theorists have explored meanings of viewing girl–girl sex for men, much less attention has been given to the ways in which women and lesbian audiences may read woman–woman sexual performance on television or elsewhere. Whether it is understood as ‘lesbian’ is, as Wilton points out, ‘a contested process determined as much by lesbian/non-lesbian reading as by lesbian/non-lesbian text’ (1995: 5). Similarly, Moritz (1994) observes that the complexity of television texts leaves them particularly open to a variety of often-contradictory readings. Lesbian viewers may variously enjoy, subvert, resist or appropriate mainstream representation of ‘lesbians’ (Clark, 1993; Simms, 2002). Anderson-Minshall, for example, writes of lesbian ‘jubilation’ about The L Word, a show made by, for and about queer women, marking it as a ‘a show to call our own’ (2006: 12).

The audience of interest in this article is young people. We ask how young people ‘read’ contemporary representations of media lesbian and to what extent such representations inflect their own constructions of lesbian sexualities. We regard media representations of lesbian and gay sexuality as important and significant in young people’s negotiation of sexuality and see its possibilities for making the invisible visible and the
silenced spoken. At the same time we recognize the possibilities in media for harnessing and reproducing damaging and limiting stereotypes and for creating new ‘impossibilities’. Gross (2001), for example, notes that if young people consume only heterosexual versions of sexuality and have no access to alternative sources of information (e.g. in their social environment) they may ‘have little choice but to accept the media stereotypes they imagine must be typical of all lesbians and gay men’ (Gross, 2001: 16). Cover (2000) similarly argues that a relatively inexperienced young audience is more likely to naively accept heteronormative representations if they are not provided with alternatives to stereotypical information. However both of these authors’ viewpoints appear to position youth as an uncritical audience that simply absorbs everything that is watched, read and listened to. Conversely, a growing body of research illustrates that young people are critical consumers, as in Buckingham and Bragg’s (2004) investigation of young people’s responses to sexuality content in the television programmes they watch. While distinctions between notions of audiences as passive and active are not as clear cut as they may seem (Blackman, 2004), in this article we view young people as actively making sense of the lesbian representations they encounter in the media.

A perspective of young people as sense-makers reflects the post-structuralist, discursive theoretical framework we adopt (see Parker, 1992), which has implications for how we treat sexuality, and ‘lesbianism’ in particular. We consider sexual identities to be socially constructed, pieced together through a process of making sense of socially available meanings derived from media, experiences, social interactions and so on. As such, we do not treat sexual identities as inherent or ‘fixed’ but as ‘in process’, forged at the intersection of the social and cultural. Transitions from heterosexuality to same-sex sexuality, for example, are readily understood within poststructuralist notions of identity. We are cognisant of, and engage with, debates around Queer Theory (see Walters, 2005) but do not contextualize our work in this way; we choose instead to deploy the category ‘lesbian’ as a sexual and political identity. However we do not assume that depictions of girl–girl sex are necessarily ‘lesbian’. Rather we are interested in the kinds of meanings young people make of ‘girl–girl’ sexual representations and practices they have access to in their daily lives. Throughout the article we accordingly use single quotation marks to denote plural meanings and understandings of the term ‘lesbian’.

Elaborating our theoretical position more specifically around our research material, we treat media as one of the social institutions in which discourses of sexuality, and the subjectivities constituted within them, are re/produced. Thus, the discourses and subjectivities media make available are seen to provide a resource that young people may draw on in their understandings of mainstream and marginalized sexualities as well as the
negotiation of their own sexual identities. We are interested in the discursive resources (discourses) circulating in participants’ social worlds and taken up (or not) in their talk because the motivation for our work is political. By this we mean that we want our work to inform debates about whether the increased visibility of ‘lesbians’ in popular culture may help or hinder young women’s negotiation of sexuality. For the young heterosexual audience more generally, we are interested in how representations may influence understandings of and practices toward ‘lesbians’. While it could be argued that the kind of poststructural approach we take does not allow us to make such connections between talk and the ‘real’ world, we align ourselves with the work of those poststructuralist researchers who remind us that discourses have material effects and are as much about practices as they are about meanings constructed in talk (e.g. Gavey, 2006; Parker, 1992). Thus, we focus in this article both on how ‘lesbians’ are constructed in participants’ talk and what the implications of these are for practices such as taking up a ‘lesbian’ identity, interacting with others who self define as ‘lesbian’, and openness to same-sex relationships.

Details of the study

The material presented in this article is drawn from a broader project on representations of both gay and lesbian sexualities on television drama. Within this broader study, we conducted focus group interviews with 25 predominately Pakeha\(^2\) (Non-Maori New Zealanders) 16–18 year old high school students (12 boys and 13 girls). These students attended an inner city high school serving a broad ethnic and socio-economic population. We did not actively recruit lesbian/gay/bisexual students for several reasons. First, using these identity categories may have deterred students who engaged in same-sex relationships but did not use a sexual identity label, or those who were unsure about their sexuality. Second, despite the school being openly and actively supportive of Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual (LBG) students, heteronormative pressures are powerful with potentially adverse reactions to participation. By way of ensuring the safety of the participants, the project was undertaken in close consultation with one of the school guidance counsellors who facilitated the school’s gay support group. Thirdly, we considered it important to include hetero-sexual perspectives since representations may be a primary source of their information about LBG relationships. Having made these decisions, students were recruited through information sessions at senior high school assembly. Those students who signed up for the study took part in single-sex focus groups with six to seven members. Selecting the television representations of gay and lesbian sexuality presented us with a challenge. Ideally, we wanted to select current or
recent programmes popular with teenagers. We also wanted to use clips that would provide fertile ground for discussion. Pragmatically, our selection needed to be from programmes designated as suitable for teenage viewing within broadcasting guidelines. Our search revealed, with the exception of the locally produced soap drama Shortland Street that all current or recent programmes with gay or lesbian representation originated either in the USA (e.g. The Simpsons, Six Feet Under, Will and Grace, Queer Eye for the Straight Guy) or the UK (e.g. Bad Girls). As might be apparent from the programmes listed, New Zealand teens are mostly offered Anglo-American representations, more ‘gay’ characters than ‘lesbian’ ones, and adult rather than teenage representations. Finding a local or Australian ‘teenage’ show with lesbian or gay characters proved to be impossible and we used clips from Will and Grace and Six Feet Under for representations of gay sexuality. We were slightly more fortunate with finding lesbian representation since the local soap drama Shortland Street has two long-standing lesbian characters. Screening in prime-time, the show enjoys popularity with a teen audience and features teenage storylines and characters (although not teen lesbians).

Set in a metropolitan hospital, Shortland Street, as is typical of the soap genre, focuses on the complex romances of its predominantly heterosexual characters who work or are connected with those who work at the hospital. However, the show also has a reputation for developing storylines around topical issues such as suicide, statutory rape, teen pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, alcohol abuse and, in a more recent example, same-sex marriage. The show’s willingness to engage with socially contentious issues is consistent with its screening on Channel Two, the government network’s second channel that is directed to a younger adult demographic and provides more ‘liberal’ offerings than its more conventional ‘sister’ on Channel One.

The scene selected for presentation in focus groups featured two lesbian characters, Jay Copeland and Maia Jeffries who have been a part of the show since 2004. While not the first lesbian characters to be featured on Shortland Street, Jay and Maia engage in the first ongoing homosexual romance explored in the show. The scene selected occurred during a separation between the two characters. Jay had recently returned to New Zealand after living in Australia for a short time. Maia was living with another woman. The scene shown to participants began with Jay and Maia getting into bed together, ostensibly to ‘talk all night’ as recently reunited friends. However, it soon became apparent that Maia had something else in mind and, after initial reluctance on the part of Jay, the two women kiss passionately. The scene ends with this kiss. After being shown the scene, participants were asked to discuss the clip.

The interviewer’s role in the discussions was facilitative and questions were kept to a minimum, allowing participants to develop discussion...
amongst themselves. Achievement of this goal became evident in trans-
scription of the material where the interviewer’s contribution was notably
small. Discussions were audiorecorded and transcribed. Our analyses of
transcribed material were informed by poststructuralist approaches to
discourse analysis (Gavey, 2006; Parker, 1992; Willig, 2001) around ‘talk’
as both productive of and produced by the cultural fabric of people’s
everyday lives. Thus in the context of our study we understand young
people’s talk to be illustrative of the myriad discourses in circulation about
lesbian, gay and bi sexualities as well as a site for rupture to those
discourses. At the same time, we do not hold young people’s accounts to
be the way they ‘really’ perceive lesbian sexuality but as a particularized
story produced within a discussion with other students and an interviewer,
some two to four years older than them.

Our approach to the analysis of the transcript data bears some similarity
to what has been termed ‘thematic discourse analysis’ or ‘thematic de-
composition’ (Stenner, 1993; Ussher and Mooney-Somers, 2000;
Woollett et al., 1998). Analysis began with repeated reading of the tran-
scripts to familiarize ourselves with the complete data set. For the purposes
of this article, we extracted all data that made any reference to girl–girl
sex, ‘lesbian’ or ‘bi’ and subjected this material to more detailed reading
to identify patterns and meanings in the data. Although this dataset was
comparatively small, our selection was driven by our strong interest in the
work of feminist scholars on the ‘heterosexualization’ of ‘lesbian’ sexual-
ity, particularly in the media (e.g. Ciasullo, 2001; Diamond, 2005;
Wilkinson, 1996; Wilton, 1995). We wished to explore whether and how
these ideas may be re/produced in participants’ talk while at the same
time remaining open to other constructions in the data. In the next stage
of the analytical process, the recurrent patterns and meanings in the
dataset were coded using transcript notes and highlighter pens and these
codes formed the basis for organizing the data into broader themes
relevant to our interest. The data within these themes were then subjected
to more detailed analysis around both the meanings being produced in
the text and the discourses theorized as informing those meanings.
Presentation of our analyses here follows the dynamics of the discussions
where initially talk focused on representations of ‘lesbians’ in the media
after viewing the videoclip, then broadened out to talk about lesbian
sexuality in participants’ everyday lives, the ‘other side’ of the screen.

Reading on-screen ‘lesbian’ representations
In our readings of participants’ talk related to the Shortland Street video-
iclip, we were particularly struck by the thread of ‘heteroflexibility’
(Diamond, 2005) that wove through and across the group discussions.
We did not find this to be the case in any discussions related to gay sexuality suggesting heteroflexibility to be a distinctly gendered phenomenon, at least amongst our participants. Foremost in discussions that related to heteroflexibility was the notion of representing lesbianism or ‘girl–girl sex’ as a way of attracting and ‘titillating’ a male audience. Such talk commonly invoked the metaphor of ‘hot lesbians’, with its attendant plural meanings of ‘sexy’, ‘attractive’ and ‘now’.

A description of Jay and Maia, the lesbian couple depicted in the Shortland Street clip, is an important context for the construction of participants’ ‘hot lesbian’ sexuality. Both women may be described as conforming to conventional understandings of (heterosexually) attractive females: Jay is a pretty, petite, Maori woman with long curly black hair and Maia is a tall, slender and attractive Pakeha woman, with long brown hair. Postings on the show’s fan site are unanimous in applauding the sex appeal of them both, especially Jay. In every way, Jay and Maia may be seen as ‘luscious, lipstick lesbians’, typical of the rising tide of mainstream ‘lesbian’ media representations that deploy heterosexual attractiveness norms (Ciasullo, 2001; Jenkins, 2005). Maia’s conformity with femininity norms, or a ‘femme’ lesbian identity is heightened by a young male doctor’s romantic and sexual interest in her.

The soap’s representation of Jay and Maia as ‘lipstick lesbians’ generated much discussion amongst our participants. While they made brief mention of the butch/femme lesbian stereotype in focus groups, discussion centred on the attraction of female–female sexual encounters for a male audience. The girls’ talk in the following extract articulates the construction of lesbian sexualities for the titillation of ‘guys’ in general and ‘guys’ they know as friends.

Extract 1

Rachel: I mean with what Sophie said, and it just seems to be – to appeal to guys, those two.

Beth: It is, it’s like . . .

Rachel: And they seem to only, I don’t know, for Shortland Street like all my guy friends who’d watch it, which is like two . . .

Beth: [Laughs] =³

Rachel: = but that was like ‘Oh my gosh, yeah, I’ve got to watch Shortland Street for the hot lesbians and The OC’. Like no one, like they don’t watch The OC but they watch it for that episode

Beth: just for that =

Rachel: = because the ads like would [brief interruption] the ads kinda like drew them in because it would hint at the . . .
Our participants as a whole generally adopted a critical stance to the representation of ‘lesbians’ within conventional feminine attractiveness norms. Amongst girls in particular, erasure of the ‘butch lesbian’ did not escape notice. Rachel’s opening comment refers to Sophie’s point made earlier in the discussion that ‘it’s not like the stereotypical like butch lesbian couple on TV. It’s always young, pretty’. Here, being young and pretty is contrasted with being butch, reflecting hegemonic discourses of masculinity and femininity in which masculine women are positioned as unattractive. Ciasullo (2001) identified the butch woman as the cultural signifier of lesbianism, and argues that feminized representations of lesbianism reflect an attempt to ‘de-lesbianize’ lesbians, packaging them in such a way as to be unthreatening to a heterosexual audience. In accord with this argument, participants questioned the ‘true’ homosexual status of the Shortland Street characters and suggested that the use of attractive lesbians was a means, as Beth put it later in the discussion, of ‘softening it’. More critically, Zara, in a different group, stated, ‘they look like street girls pretending to be gay’ while Jo, in this group, suggested that the next, more controversial step in lesbian representation would be to ‘bring in an ugly girl who’s a lesbian’. We suggest that each representation may be read as both ‘good’ and ‘bad’. A so-called ‘ugly’ lesbian counters invisibility produced by a ‘femme’ lesbian identity and makes a political statement against attractiveness norms but she may also function to repel girl viewers and hinder identification as lesbian. Conversely a ‘feminine’ lesbian may counter the image of lesbians as masculine and unattractive lending appeal to being lesbian but politically undermine lesbian visibility and identity.

In Extract 1, the use of attractive ‘girls’ is criticized as appealing only to heterosexual males and the construction of the emphatically ‘hot’ ‘lesbian’ is specific to the male gaze (‘it just seems to be – to appeal to guys’). Rachel’s criticism agrees with academic analyses of modern representations of female–female sexuality in mainstream media (Ciasullo,
Ciasullo acknowledges that feminized portrayals of lesbians challenge the ‘relatively rigid image of the lesbian that has dominated for decades . . . the angry, militant, lesbian feminist, the butch, the woman who deep down wants to be a man and thus eschews all accoutrements of femininity’ (Ciasullo, 2001: 585). Yet, as Jenkins (2005) argues, it (re)constructs lesbian sexuality within a heterosexual framework through presenting female–female sexual encounters as (merely) a source of titillation for heterosexual male audiences. Thus, such encounters reinforce rather than challenge discourses of hegemonic masculinity, which maintain masculine traits as desirable only in males and position women as passive objects of male desire (Ciasullo, 2001; Jenkins, 2005).

Consistent with the undermining of lesbian identity in mainstream media through ‘heterosexualization’ of lesbian characters (Jenkins, 2005), the notion of a sexually desiring lesbian audience was notably absent in discussion groups. In Extract 1, the possibility that a sexual encounter between two conventionally attractive women might appeal to a lesbian audience is not mentioned, further reinforcing the heteronormativity of female–female sex as represented on television. Provided the notion of desire is obscured, ‘lesbianism’ can be explained away as, for example, ‘not really lesbians’ or as a temporary lapse from heterosexuality. Participants in Ussher and Mooney ‘Somers’ (2000) study commonly expressed the idea that desire for another woman defines being lesbian. Similar filtering through a heterosexual lens is found in the description of gay representation as appealing to women rather than gay men (‘is it true with like quite a lot of gay men, like Will and Grace, mostly women watch it though?’), underlining the ‘male gaze’ as exclusively heterosexual (Mulvey, 1975).

Rachel describes heterosexual males as preoccupied with sex in that they watch Shortland Street and The OC for the sole purpose of viewing ‘hot lesbians’. The OC is a teen drama that, at the time of the discussion groups, featured a liaison between a previously heterosexual female main character and a conventionally attractive female bisexual. The main character subsequently returned to heterosexuality and the bisexual character left the programme. In characterizing males as viewing these programmes solely for their sexual content, Rachel draws on discourses of masculinity in which ‘real men’ are interested in sport and sex rather than soap drama (Cameron, 1997; Connell, 2000). Jock Phillips’ (1996) work on New Zealand constructions of masculinity suggests that for Rachel, and other young New Zealanders, a macho ‘real man’ discourse is readily available. As outlined earlier, heterosexual males are positioned as actively desiring subjects, although susceptible to media manipulation in that they get drawn by advertising into watching programmes that otherwise would not
interest them. In contrast, Jo indicates that women do not watch programmes depicting gay males ‘for the same reasons’ as males. Her construction of female viewers maps on to dominant discourses of heterosexuality which deny women an active sexually desiring subjectivity (Jackson and Cram, 2003). However, it also functions to avoid the implication that women, like men, are duped into watching programmes purely for their sexual content, positioning women as more media savvy than their male counterparts.

The greater audience appeal of lesbian over gay representation also peppered the talk of male participants. In the following extract, the young men use a femininity discourse to construct and account for different heterosexual male and female viewings of homosexual men and women on television.

Extract 2

Tamsyn: So going back to – You said that you don’t really s – people wouldn’t watch it if it was two guys hooking up?

Sam: Well they’d probably watch it but it wouldn’t really draw any new audience members in or boost the ratings of a subpart show but . . .

Troy: Yeah.

Matt: Unless they’re very very lonely old desperate women.

Sam: Mmm

Matt: you know.

Sam: But when two girls kiss it makes them more feminine and when two guys kiss it does the same thing so yeah.

Tamsyn: It makes – It makes =

Sam: = Them more feminine [laughter] which probably isn’t attractive to girls.

Troy: Kissing’s for girls.

Sam: Yeah man.

Troy: Yeah.

Here the sexual double standard is clear – only ‘very very lonely old desperate women’ might watch gay males on television as a source of sexual pleasure, while male viewing of lesbians for the same purpose is identified as common earlier in the discussion (e.g. Sam admits earlier that this is the only reason he watches The OC). As in the girls’ talk in Extract 1, female–female kissing is identified as attracting a wider audience, while male–male kissing would merely be tolerated by an existing audience.
(‘they’d probably watch it but it wouldn’t really draw any new audience members’). Yet rather than attributing this pattern to a lack of female sexual agency, Sam indicates that gay kissing is simply unattractive to females. In so doing he positions himself as knowing about, and so able to speak for, what girls find attractive, although we suggest that girls themselves may disagree with this and other assumptions the boys make about them. Sam also suggests that kissing between two girls and between two guys ‘makes them more feminine’. Feminization of gay kissing resonates with the feminization of gay sexuality more broadly as a means of affirming hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2000; Kimmel, 1997). Indeed, insults pertaining to feminine characteristics, such as ‘poofier’, are harnessed as tools of homophobia. Sam’s use of a feminization argument here positions gay men as sexually unattractive to heterosexual women and so works to affirm discourses of heterosexuality, in which males are attracted to femininity and females are attracted to masculinity (Hollway, 1984). His argument maintains heterosexual (masculine) males as the exclusive target of heterosexual female desire and constructs male viewing of female–female sexual encounters as a desire for the feminine rather than for the ‘lesbian’.

The construction of female–female kissing in Extract 2 also functions to undermine the potential for an actively desiring ‘lesbian’ subject in representations of female–female encounters. Additionally, the boys’ talk is doing some gender work around sexual behaviours. The term ‘hooking up’ is commonly deployed in teen vocabulary to denote a sexual liaison or ‘one night stand’. When the talk was about ‘guys’ earlier in the discussion, the term ‘hooking up’ was used but here where the talk moves to girls, ‘hooking up’ is reformulated as ‘kissing’ and ‘kissing’ is categorized as ‘for girls’. This reformulation of ‘hooking up’ as ‘kissing’ allows it to be read not as something sexual but, as in Matt’s words later in the discussion, ‘a thing of affection’, associated with the traditionally feminine quality of nurturance. Matt’s construction leaves open the meaning of heterosexual kissing for males – does it reinforce or undermine their masculinity? More relevant to the current study, it constructs lesbian kissing as a relatively asexual activity for the two women involved (but not for the male spectators). In doing so, possibilities of being bisexual or lesbian are erased and heterosexuality is preserved.

Representing lesbianism off-screen

Talk about on-screen representations merged seamlessly into accounts of everyday experience. The discussion of Jay and Maia’s kissing scene, for example, led into discussions of girls’ kissing in participants’ lived worlds. Participants described same-sex sexual ‘experimentation’ among female
adolescents as a relatively common and accepted occurrence. While such experimentation is by no means a new phenomenon (Lamb, 2001), participants’ reporting of a high prevalence of female–female kissing among students mirrors the recent proliferation of such ‘experimentation’ in the media (e.g. television programmes such as *Ally McBeal, Friends, Will and Grace, Sex and the City*, and *The OC*). So what kinds of meaning did our participants make of girl–girl displays of kissing in the ‘real’ world? In the following extract, male participants speculate over the possible meanings of same-sex kissing for the girls involved.

**Extract 3**

Tamsyn: You said earlier that guys often encourage girls to like get it on and stuff.

Steve: Yeah.

Tamsyn: So is it quite hot to be a lesbian?

Steve: I think a lot of guys have different views on that, (you know).

Tamsyn: Mmm.

Steve: I – It really irritates me ‘cos yeah my girlfriend’s done a l – used to just go to parties and end up hooking up with girls and she’s just just always denied like [laughs] being gay but I still reckon – oh, well, not gay but like you know, bi. And I still reckon she fully is you know and it’s just, that pisses me off =

Jake: = I think – I think a party though is kind of completely out of context ‘cos there’s so many other factors. I mean, you know, the – the – as you were saying before there’s pressure that – I mean they might – I mean I haven’t experienced it before but you can just see that – I don’t think it’s not a good a good angle to look at it from like chicks hooking up with other chicks at parties, it’s I think the attention thing or – and the peer pressure is probably the the biggest factor um rather than the sexuality.

Steve: I think they enjoy it though and

Jake: They they probably do but um

Steve: and I think sometimes like it is not a sexual thing maybe but like they just like girls better than guys and

Ted: Well I mean half the time

Steve: ah sometimes they’ll do it to piss off guys maybe, you know like, just be like ‘I don’t like you I like her. Screw you.’

Ted: Right. Right.

Steve: Something like that.
The initial questions in the foregoing extract orient to earlier comments that lesbians are more accepted in society than gay men and that some boys pressurize girls to ‘hook up’ at parties. Tamsyn interprets these comments as meaning it is ‘hot to be a lesbian’. Yet this interpretation, both that lesbianism is ‘hot’ and that female ‘hooking up’ indicates a lesbian identity, is quickly revealed as problematic in the ensuing discussion. Steve does not directly refute that lesbians are ‘hot’ (for ‘guys’). Instead he indicates that the male attraction to lesbian women is not universal, and appears to suggest that he himself does not find lesbian women ‘hot’ through expressing anger at his girlfriend’s same-sex encounters. Yet Steve identifies his girlfriend’s sexual identity as bisexual rather than her sexual behaviour as the principle source of annoyance (‘I still reckon she fully is [bisexual] you know and it’s just, that pisses me off’), possibly suggesting that female–female ‘hooking-up’ is acceptable (though perhaps not desirable) in a girlfriend so long as there is no sexual desire behind it, or possibly so long as it is a one-off act rather than a permanent sexual identity or same-sex relationship.

Sexual desire is taken up by Jake as the key issue in determining the implications of same-sex encounters for the sexual identities of those involved. In line with other reports of same-sex sexual activities which are not taken as indicative of a homosexual or bisexual identity (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1995; Lamb, 2001; Ussher and Mooney-Somers, 2000), it is the meaning of the act rather than the act itself that is taken as central in determining identity. Sexual encounters between ‘chicks’ are located in a particular context – parties. The social context, rather than same-sex desire, is identified as the cause of such encounters. Jake refers to a previous comment made by Steve that ‘if girls even show the slightest hint of you know, being about to hook up you know it’s got – some guys will just go crazy and start putting lots of pressure on them to do it’. Rather than freely kissing another female, girls are ‘pressured’ into hooking up by ‘some guys’. Jake’s statement ‘it’s I think the attention thing’ suggests that girls engage in same-sex activity to attract a presumably (in the light of prior talk) male audience, positioning these girls as (heterosexual) objects of male desire. Thus, like media representations of female–female sexual encounters, same-sex sexual activity among adolescent girls is heterosexualized through its role as a source of titillation for a male audience (Diamond, 2005; Jenkins, 2005).

Although Jake argues that girls’ same-sex encounters can be attributed primarily to external forces, he concedes to Steve’s comment that ‘they enjoy it’. His small acknowledgement of girls’ sexual pleasure stands in contrast to the silencing of such pleasure in dominant discourses of heterosexuality (Tolman, 1994), according some sexual agency to female adolescents independent of a male target. However, Steve states that ‘it is
not a sexual thing maybe’ but is rather an asexual preference for girls over boys, perhaps as friends (‘they just like girls better than guys’). Like Jake, Steve relates female–female sexual encounters to a male audience. Steve’s comment ‘they’ll do it to piss off guys maybe’ can be seen to construct female–female sexual encounters as a means of manipulating males. Such a reading positions these encounters as part of a heterosexual dynamic, exploited by girls to avoid, punish or secure potential male partners.

An alternative reading of Steve’s comment constructs female–female sexual encounters as a means of defiance against males rather than a ploy to influence them. Girls remain objects of male desire but do not seek such desire, displacing males as essential to female sexuality. They are positioned as free agents, deliberately selecting female over male partners based on choice or preference (‘I don’t like you I like her’). For girls to be so positioned potentially allows them some flexibility in their sexual behaviour and constructs sexual identity as a fluid, possibly unnecessary, category. Young people have a range of discursive resources to use for constructing a more flexible sexuality for girls. Postfeminist discourses permeate contemporary media of all kinds, teenage magazines being a particularly relevant example for girls (e.g. Jackson, 2005; McRobbie, 1996). Even traditional femininity discourses, however, can contribute meanings that facilitate crossing sexual boundaries: emotional and physical intimacy between women is normative (Diamond, 2003; Johnson, 2004).

Elsewhere in group discussions, the notion of fluid non-heteronormative sexuality linked more closely with constructions of adolescence within developmental psychology than any postfeminist sexual ‘freedom’ or normative traditional femininity. Beth, for example, mobilized an adolescent discourse in her musings about bisexuality.

**Extract 4**

Beth:  Well, what I think, what I . . . I haven’t really . . . I don’t know any bisexual adult people. Like I know they exist.

Rachel: *Adult people* [Laughter].

Beth:  I know they exist but I just don’t think it’s as common. I think that it’s more of an adolescent thing where, ‘cos you just don’t know.

Jo:  In high school you just don’t know.

Beth:  Yeah, you’re confused. And yeah, just need to try everything and see. Find out what you are really.

Jo:  I mean some people know they’re straight. They just, they just know. The same with people just knowing they’re gay.

Sophie:  Yeah, exactly. It just depends on the person.
Tamsyn: So you reckon once you’ve figured it out you are generally one or the other?

Beth: Probably. Yes.

Jo: It might take a while but you’ll get there in the end.

Emma: Even if you don’t you’ll generally decide. Either you’ll find a woman or a man so that will decide for you. Someone you love.

In this extract it is possible to tease out a number of ideas found in conventional (i.e. not critical) developmental psychology texts. Developmental discourse constructs young people as ‘adolescents’, poised at a ‘stage’ characterized by, amongst other aspects, an ‘identity crisis’ that they must resolve in order to progress satisfactorily to young adulthood. Triggered by the crisis, typified by a sense of confusion (‘who am I?’), they may experiment with different behaviours, one of which may be sexual experimentation. Beth, in particular, positions young people within this developmental discourse, as sexually unsure, not knowing, confused, experimental (‘just need to try everything and see’) and on a journey to a stable, authentic sexual identity (‘find out what you are really’). Tamsyn’s comment, as interviewer, may be read as ‘reflecting’ back the main ideas of the talk to that point but it may also be read as complicit in the ‘adolescent’ construction by affirming the process as a decision-making one (‘figuring out’) and dichotomizing the choices as ‘one or the other’. Although using a developmental discourse may be read as constraining (e.g. connoting immaturity, lack and deficiency) it may also be read as potentially liberating through its curiosity and experimental elements that position girls as agentic and able to explore their sexuality (see also Leahy, 1994; Jackson and Cram, 2003). On the other hand, a developmental discourse risks erasing lesbian identities through designating same-sex desire as a ‘passing phase’ that girls grow out of or dismissing it as experimentation in practice for heterosex (Griffin, 2000; Ussher, 2005). These ideas have currency in Lamb’s recent book The Secret Lives of Girls (2001).

In contradiction to the adolescent discourse used by some of the girls in the extract, other participants suggest that people ‘just know’ whether or not they are ‘gay’, mobilizing an essentialist discourse in the sense that ‘just knowing’ has an innate quality that requires no ‘figuring out’. A sense of ‘just knowing’ in essentialist terms is also found in romantic discourse where love ‘casts a spell’ on its subjects who inexplicably ‘just know’ they have found the person they want to ‘live happily ever after’ with. In this extract, Emma’s comment draws on romantic discourse in accounting for how people work out their sexual preferences. Typically, romance is a heterosexual story, one that has been critiqued by feminist scholars for its...
constructions of passive femininity and sexuality. Resistant feminist readings have been much less argued, although Radway (1987) conceptualized romance reading as subversive and Wetherell’s (1995) analysis of romantic discourse incorporated notions of power, as in women ‘hooking’, ‘reeling in’ and ‘playing’ the man who desires them. Emma too offers a subversive reading through her non-heteronormative use of romantic discourse where love is as likely to ‘find’ a same sex as an opposite sex partner. Emma’s formulation of romance resonates with Diamond’s theorized ‘biobehavioural model’ where ‘individuals can fall in love with partners of either gender, regardless of sexual orientation’ (2003: 173). Emma’s use of romance, however, goes beyond sexual orientation, functioning to unchain gay and lesbian sexuality from its position ‘outside’ of heterosexuality (Johnson, 2004): ultimately sexuality is a matter of who you love rather than an identity.

The possibility that remains unexplored in the girls’ talk is that of ‘bisexuality’. Although Beth refers to ‘trying everything’ it seems to be constructed in the talk that follows as more dichotomous – finding out whether you’re ‘straight’ or ‘the other’. Given the tendency toward alienation of ‘bisexuality’ by both homosexuals and heterosexuals alike, the erasure of bisexuality does not surprise us. We did, however, find some ‘voice’ for sexuality that comfortably avoided polarized categorization and we take up this talk in the next section.

Re-representing ‘lesbian’ sexuality

Thus far we have seen how participants’ talk has challenged constructions of postfeminist lesbian, perceiving her to be constructed for the male gaze, provocative and temporary. Sprinkled throughout discussions more broadly, participants frequently questioned the ‘true’ sexuality of those engaging in ‘lesbian’ practices, more often than not concluding that those involved did not qualify as ‘genuine’ lesbians. Participants also highlighted the fluidity of sexual identity, pointing to the commonality of changes in sexual identity over the lifespan. One reading of such comments accords with notions of ‘heteroflexibility’ and postfeminist constructions of sexuality. In the main, however, these readings maintained a hetero/homo binary. In this final section of the article, we consider moments in girls’ talk where the notion of sexual identity itself is destabilized. We examine two accounts of sexual fluidity and sexual identity, exploring the implications of these accounts for countering heteronormative sexualities. In the first of these accounts, notions of both heteroflexibility and destabilization of categories merge in an extract from a discussion around the authenticity of bisexuality and an innate sexuality.
Extract 5

Emma: But I don’t think – I don’t think you should have to *class* yourself.

Beth: Mmm.

Emma: See me I’m just, I’m just what I feel like. You know, people are like, ‘Uh, I’m a lesbian, I’m a lesbian’ but then (you know) they’ll get a boyfriend.

Sophie: Mmhm.

Emma: and it’s like can’t you just be what you feel like being at the time.

Beth: Mmm.

Emma: I don’t see the point in classing myself as bi, I’m just what I feel like being.

Here Emma directly challenges the very concept of sexual identity (‘I don’t think you should have to *class* yourself’). She describes her own sexuality as fluid and highlights the inconsistencies of those individuals who clearly identify with a particular sexual category. Even bisexuality, a sexual identity that allows for the sexual fluidity that Emma describes, is identified as pointless (‘I don’t see the point in classing myself as bi’), perhaps according with the stigmatization of ‘bisexuality’ noted earlier. Emma is one of the few participants to refer to her own sexuality and sexual practices. She positions herself within a postfeminist discourse of choice and personal freedom as a ‘free’ sexual agent whose sexuality is located outside of normative heterosexuality. Emma argues for a sexual utopia in which individuals may freely select partners regardless of their sex. Her statement ‘I’m just what I feel like’ indicates that the sole determinant of her sexual object choice is her personal preference at a particular moment. Emma’s use of a postfeminist personal fulfilment discourse provides space for an actively desiring female subject who selects either a male or a female partner depending on her inclination at any given moment. We may read this in a politically positive way from the perspective that it works to erode heteronormativity and construct sexuality outside of heterosexual imperatives that ‘other’ lesbian and gay sexualities. On the other hand, some would argue, as Diamond (2005) does, that a ‘choice’ discourse gives little recognition to the pervasive socio-political structures that influence and constrain all sexual ‘choices’. In the talk here, however, Emma does not state that you *can* be ‘what you feel like being at the time’. Rather, she questions why everyone is not free to select the sexual object of their choice. Her questioning gives recognition to restrictions on freedom of choice, although it is the constraints of categorization, not the power of heteronormativity, which Emma highlights.
The theme of sexual (de)categorization is elaborated by Sophie further along in the same discussion.

**Extract 6**

Sophie: I dunno maybe it’s not just down to the types of people it’s just sort of on levels of preference. Like some people really – obviously what people expect are gay on one end of the spectrum and then there are really really straight people. I dunno, like if like instead of just putting two categories there you could have a whole scale of what – what would you rather. I dunno, I mean it could just come down to the situation. Like if you’ve had straight relationships all your life and then you – and then you meet someone of the same gender that you like and

Emma: Yeah, it’s just who you meet.

Sophie suggests that ‘some people’ (distancing herself from the position) adopt polarized categories (‘gay’ and ‘really really straight’) whereas her own position concurs more with a fluid continuum that is contingent on preference and situation. Like Emma’s position in the previous extract, Sophie’s ‘situation’ continuum destabilizes the hetero/homo dichotomy and the destabilization process is continued by her proposal that sexual identity may be determined by the personal attraction of the who you meet, rather than their sex (‘Like if you’ve had straight relationships all your life and then you – and then you meet someone of the same gender that you like’). Emma endorses this suggestion, reiterating ‘it’s just who you meet’. The girls’ talk positions individuals in same-sex relationships as ‘the same as’ those in heterosexual relationships, negating the importance of sexual identity and equalizing apparently heterosexual and homosexual individuals. Emma and Sophie’s talk may be read as a (political) rewritings of the romantic discourse, in that it constructs a ‘new’ version of romance (i.e. meeting someone you like and having a relationship) that questions the ‘natural’ links between sex, gender and sexuality while undermining compulsory heterosexuality.

**Conclusion**

Our aim in this article was to examine participants’ sense-making around media representations of ‘lesbian’ sexuality and ‘lesbian’ or girl–girl sexual practices in everyday life. We were particularly interested in the discursive resources our participants used to challenge or support the kinds of ‘lesbian’ identities made available to them on television and encountered in their everyday interactions. In this section we draw together the constructions of lesbian identities in participants’ accounts and identify
the discursive resources we understand them to be using. We also explore possible implications of these discursively produced identities for practices related to sexual identity work.

In common with feminist academic readings, our participants identified a consumer-designed ‘hot lesbian’ produced to titillate and lure male viewers into watching a television programme. Some of our male participants distanced themselves from being such viewers but agreed with the girls that ‘hot lesbians’ were designed for the male gaze and desire. Thus participants constructed the ‘hot lesbian’ within discourses of hegemonic heterosexuality, in particular the male sex-drive discourse (Hollway, 1984) that produces women as the objects of men’s sexual gaze: the dominant meaning of attractiveness within the male sex-drive discourse is sexual. Participants’ critiques also constructed the ‘hot lesbian’ as ‘unreal’ and as ‘performance’ rather than as identity. We read their critique as both positive and unsettling. Positively, her construction as ‘performance’ recognizes the function of her heterosexualization as commodity or ‘audience bait’. Yet dismissing the ‘hot lesbian’ as unreal may also function to erase ‘femme’ lesbian identity and position ‘butch’ as the ‘genuine’ version of being lesbian. Of course the ‘hot lesbian’ herself is an exclusionary figure, erasing not only ‘butch’ identity but also speaking to white, pretty, slim, middle-class girls. Accordingly, if the ‘hot lesbian’ is the dominant portrayal of lesbian identity, and if young women do not have other resources of lesbian sexual identities to call upon, then being ‘lesbian’ may present more as impossibility than possibility for their own negotiation of sexuality.

Even if ‘hot’, the media lesbian described in young people’s talk did not suggest her as sexually desiring nor as sexually desired by women viewers. Together with a reading of her as ‘performance’, such absences solidify her positioning within heteronormativity. The invisibility of lesbian desire was further evident in the way in which boys’ talk diminished and trivialized representations of ‘lesbian’ practices through categorizing them as ‘feminine’ and positioning ‘lesbian’ kissing as asexual. We would suggest that the erasure of desire through trivialization and ‘girlie’ behaviour functions to make ‘lesbianism’ less threatening to heteronormativity. In sum, the media ‘hot lesbian’ presents something of a dilemma from the perspective of young people’s sexual identity work. In one reading of her, she erases ‘lesbian’ identity, since she is not about sexual desire for another woman (see Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1995). Moreover, she makes available a particularized, exclusionary version of ‘lesbian’. Nonetheless, she at least renders ‘lesbian’ visible, exposing young women to the possibility of being ‘lesbian as they negotiate their own sexual feelings.

Our participants responded not only to representations of ‘lesbians’ on television but also drew on their experiences and observations in their
social world. In boys’ talk, erasure of on-screen ‘lesbian’ desire mirrored such erasure in their constructions of everyday practices. Observations of girls kissing other girls were variously constructed as asexual and as party behaviour designed for the male gaze or to annoy or punish a boyfriend; constructions firmly rooted in heterosexual discourse that function to heterosexualize girl–girl sexual practices. Reading such practices as ‘performance’ rather than identity preserves the notion of the girls as ‘really’ heterosexual and accords with Diamond’s (2005) use of the term ‘heteroflexibility’. The experimentation that denotes heteroflexibility has resonance with adolescent discourse, in which experimenting or ‘trying things out’ sexually until ultimately adopting an identity (typically heterosexual) is normalized.

Adolescent discourse clearly provided a resource in some participants’ accounts, harnessed to explain away bisexual identity and to explain shifts between same-sex and heterosexual relationships. Young people’s use of adolescent discourse as a discursive resource is open to both facilitative and constraining readings. As a constraining discourse it limits sexual flexibility to an experimental age-based ‘stage’, permitting readings of ‘lesbianism’ as a passing phase in adolescence en route to a stable (hetero)sexual identity (Griffin, 2000). However, for adolescent girls, positioning themselves within the discourse may provide a tool that constructs their stepping outside of heterosexuality an expected and ‘normal’ part of their development. In practice, despite liberalization around diverse sexuality in New Zealand (Brickell, 2001), young people who ‘come out’ are likely to encounter derogation from peers (Quinlivan, 1999): heterosexual discourses exert greater regulatory power than can perhaps be countered through adolescent discourses.

Although location in an adolescent discourse may offer some potential for countering heteronormativity, greater potential may arguably come from romantic discourse. As used in girls’ accounts, love guided the choice of sexual partner, its arrows as likely to point to a same-sex as other-sex partner. Use of romantic discourse circumvents notions of sexuality as essentialist in the sense of being ‘born’ lesbian or gay, since love and not biology determine attraction. It also derails the notion of a freely chosen sexual identity in that love, spontaneous and uncontrollable, decides the matter. Thus, rescripting romance as a ‘lesbian-hetero-bi’ tale can be read as potentially subversive, opening up spaces for girls to negotiate sexuality outside of heteronormativity. Although limited, girls do have discursive resources that construct lesbian relationships within a discourse of love. Love drives the storylines of the Shortland Street lesbian characters for example and ‘civil unions’ (legalized in 2004 in New Zealand) engage with notions of making a public commitment of mutual love. While we acknowledge counter arguments about romantic discourse heterosexualizing
lesbianism through norms of coupledom, monogamy and so on (Jackson and Scott, 2004; Kitzinger and Wilkinson’s, 1995), we would not want to see its potential to be enabling of sexual diversity ignored.

Like romantic discourse, participants’ use of a postfeminist discourse provided a means to unchain sexuality from its dominant heterosexual meanings. Again confined to girls’ talk, postfeminist constructions could be seen in the notion of sexual preferences as momentary and transitional and doing ‘whatever you feel’. Location in a postfeminist discourse allows girls’ agency and provides possibilities for an active desiring sexuality. Indeed, as used by our participants, desire and feelings guide the sexual partner independently of gender thereby deconstructing sexual categorization and sexual identities. A less favourable reading would understand such fluidity as conforming to the ‘fad’ of sexual diversity, the ‘trendiness’ of being ‘lesbian’ today, ‘bi’ tomorrow and ‘hetero’ yesterday. Whatever way it is read, a postfeminist preference discourse as used by the girls unshackles sexuality from heteronormativity and also challenges the notion of a fixed sexual identity.

As we reflect on our participants’ material, we are heartened by the level of critical awareness evident in their talk. Constructing the heterosexualization of ‘lesbians’ in the media as a ploy to attract male audiences resists heteronormativity and allows spaces for other versions of lesbian sexuality to be included; the invisibility of the non-femininized lesbian is perhaps ironically made visible by her absence. Although adolescent and romantic discourses have their limitations, in using them young people are able to explore possibilities, at least discursively, outside of a heterosexual imperative. So too does thinking outside the sexual identity box allow for poststructural versions of sexuality to be brought into language and, potentially, practice. Despite the power of heteronormativity then, pockets of challenge, as small and localized as they may be here, can and do exist.

Notes
1. The research material in this article comes from a project conducted by Tamsyn Gilbertson while she was still a student at the Victoria University of Wellington.
2. Maori are the indigenous people of New Zealand. Pakeha is the Maori term for non-indigenous New Zealanders.
3. Transcription notation simplified version of Jefferson (see Wetherell, 1998).

References


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