

# “An Extra Set of Bits for Your Fantasy”: A Qualitative Exploration of Bi + Women’s Fetishization Experiences

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## ABSTRACT


Bi + Australians experience disproportionate rates of poor mental health compared to both heterosexual and lesbian and gay people. In the case of bi + women, negative psychological outcomes may arise from the eroticization of their sexual identities. There is a scarcity of literature examining this phenomenon. The current study aimed to address this gap by qualitatively exploring bi + women’s experiences of fetishization. Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants aged 19 to 51 years ( $M=30.3$  years,  $SD=9.3$ ). Data was analyzed with inductive thematic analysis, and eight themes were developed: (1) Bi + sexuality is desirable to heterosexual men; (2) fetishization differentiates bi + sexuality from monosexual same-sex attraction; (3) bi + sexuality creates exceptions to monogamy; (4) fetishization manifests as dehumanization and hypersexualisation; (5) experiencing internalized fetishization, (6) emotional impact of fetishization; (7) cognizance of fetishization leads to alertness and vigilance, and; (8) navigating intersecting identities. Future directions concern the need for generation of theory around fetishization processes.

## KEYWORDS

Bisexuality; plurisexual; fetish; fetishization

Bi + is an umbrella term that refers to people who experience romantic, emotional, or sexual attraction to more than one gender (Cavarra et al., 2023), and includes a range of plurisexual identities including bisexual, pansexual, and other labels that indicate multi-gender attraction (Galupo, 2018). In Australia, where this study was conducted, bi + people experience disproportionate rates of poor psychological wellbeing, general health, and sexual violence compared to heterosexual people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020–2022, 2021–22; Perales, 2019), but also compared to their monosexual counterparts (i.e., lesbian/gay individuals; Hill et al., 2020). For example, ~49.9% of bi + Australians report diagnosis or treatment for depression in the past 12 months, compared to 39.4% and 26.7% of lesbian and gay individuals, respectively (Hill et al., 2020). Bi + individuals also

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report higher rates of lifetime experience of homelessness, low-income, social exclusion, and intimate partner violence than lesbian and gay people (Amos et al., 2023; Hill et al., 2020). It is important to highlight that these disparities are not innate to bi+sexuality, but rather, a product of the experience of unique marginalization, discrimination, and stigma faced by bi+ individuals. There has been growing academic interest in the experiences of bi+ individuals, and a range of theoretical and empirical accounts now contribute to understandings of these health and psychosocial disparities. This paper adds to this literature by exploring bi+ women's lived experiences of fetishization (i.e., the eroticization of bi+ women's selves and sexualities; Thai et al., 2024).

### ***Theoretical accounts for the negative experiences of bi+ people***

The well-established health and wellbeing disparities experienced by bi+ people are most commonly understood within the *sexual minority stress* framework (Brooks, 1981; Meyer, 1995; Meyer, 2003), which posits that marginalized sexual identities are exposed to excessive and chronic stressors, resulting in a range of negative health outcomes. These stressors can be categorized as distal (e.g., biphobia, violence) or proximal (e.g., internalized biphobia, identity concealment). Accordingly, minority stress is predictive of physical and mental health problems—such as cancer and hypertension, depressive and PTSD symptoms, suicidality, and substance misuse (Frost et al., 2015; Fulginiti et al., 2021; Weeks et al., 2023). Research in this space frequently treats bi+ people as part of the broader, superordinate LGBTQ+ category, which has some utility (e.g., increased sample sizes, shared advocacy goals), yet is problematic as it assumes heterogeneity in the experiences of all sexual minority people, thus erasing the unique experiences of multi-gender attracted individuals (Hässler et al., 2024). Indeed, the evidence suggests that bi+ individuals experience minority stress at heightened rates to their monosexual counterparts (Katz-Wise et al., 2017, for meta-analytic evidence, see Anderson & Maugeri, 2024), likely due to their exposure to additional and unique stressors to those experienced by lesbian and gay individuals.

Other theoretical accounts focus on the differences in experiences between bi+ people and those with other sexual minority identities. For instance, bi+ people experience sexual prejudice from heterosexuals (i.e., negative attitudes toward their non-heterosexuality), but also plurisexual prejudice from lesbian women and gay men (for an account of this “double-edged sword” of prejudice, see Anderson & Maugeri, 2024). More specifically, bi+ prejudice is exacerbated by the intersection of *heterosexism* (i.e., prejudice stemming from a moral superiority of heterosexuality), directed towards all LGBTQ subgroups, and *monosexism* (i.e., prejudice

driven by a moral superiority of monosexual identities) which is unique to bi+ individuals. The combination of this intersection can result in *bi-erasure* (i.e., the denial and delegitimization of bi+ sexualities). A recent systematic literature review on bi+ people's experiences of bi-erasure (McCole & Anderson, 2025) revealed nine common themes of erasure (across 100 studies,  $n=7,191$ ). These included the policing of bi+ identities through "sexual resume" requests, myths that bi+ sexualities are a phase, and negative stereotypes such as bi+ people are greedy and insatiable. These findings highlight the various manifestations of prejudice unique to bi+ sexualities.

### ***Gendered differences in bi+ experiences***

One of the key findings to emerge from the systematic literature review is that the experiences of bi+ individuals are gendered. The findings highlighted that within a paradox of marginalization and desire, bi+ women are frequently eroticised, objectified, and hypersexualised, based on their sexual identities, and in a way that bi+ men are not (McCole & Anderson, 2025). For instance, while bi+ men are perceived as being actually gay, bi+ women are perceived as being actually heterosexual and that their bi+ identities are attention seeking and performative, existing only to fulfill heterosexual men's sexual fantasies (McCole & Anderson, 2025; Yost & Thomas, 2012). The reduction of women's selves to their physical characteristics and their body's sexual functioning, for the consumption of men, is captured in *sexual objectification theory* (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This phenomenon is pervasive among women (Anderson et al., 2018; Holland et al., 2017) and damaging to those who experience it (Koval et al., 2019; Szymanski et al., 2011). Evidence suggests bi+ women are particularly vulnerable to sexual objectification, due to its intersection with anti-bisexual discrimination, resulting in the internalization of heteronormative beauty standards (Brewster et al., 2014). Accordingly, bi+ women are more susceptible to self-sexualisation (i.e., intentionally presenting oneself as sexually appealing; Hall et al., 2012) and self-objectification (i.e., adopting an observers perspective of one's physical self; Kahalon et al., 2024), compared to heterosexual and lesbian women. Where bi+ women experience sexual objectification in this traditional sense (i.e., reduced to an object of desire on the basis of physical characteristics and sexual functioning), they also experience objectification as the *fetishization* of their sexual identities (i.e., reduced to an object of desire on the basis of sexual identity; McCole & Anderson, 2025).

A critical limitation of much of the existing literature on bi+ women's experiences is its focus on cisgender individuals, often without acknowledging the gender diversity within bi+ communities. The studies cited in

the systematic review largely presume a cisnormative framework, in which bi+ women are conceptualized as cisgender by default, without consideration of how fetishization and sexual objectification may operate differently for trans and nonbinary bi+ individuals. In this paper, we invited participants who self-identified as women, and in a bid to be inclusive we opted not to ask about their gender identities. However, in doing so we inadvertently removed our ability to conduct any analyses exploring for differences in experiences between cisgender bi+ women and bi+ women with other gender identities. This omission is particularly important for us to acknowledge given the substantial overlap between samples of bi+ people and samples that have diverse gender identities. In addition, there is an emerging body of evidence suggesting that trans people experience fetishization in substantially different ways (Anzani et al., 2021; 2024; Hawkey et al., 2021).

### **The fetishization of bi+ women**

Fetishization refers to the hyper-fixation and reduction of bi+ women's selves and sexualities to a set of eroticized stereotypes held by the fetishizer (Thai et al., 2024). Through a framework of intersecting discrimination and sexual objectification, fetishism likely reflects a process described by Moradi's (2013) *pantheoretical model of dehumanization* - an extension of Haslam's (2006) model of dehumanization. This model emphasizes the intersection of minority stress and sexual objectification theories, and suggests that dehumanization operates along two mutually inclusive dimensions in which targets are denied human *uniqueness* (i.e., resulting in discrimination) and *nature* (i.e., resulting in objectification). Human uniqueness characteristics refer to attributes distinguishing humans from other animal species, such as civility and morality. The denial of these characteristics results in a form of dehumanization in which bi+ women are perceived as possessing characteristics akin to those of animal species—as uncivilized, sexually indiscriminate, and insatiable (i.e., animalistic dehumanization). Alternatively, human nature characteristics refer to attributes distinguishing humans from objects, such as agency and individuality. The denial of these characteristics results in a form of dehumanization in which bi+ women are perceived as possessing machine-like characteristics - fungibility, lack of agency, and as an interchangeable object in another's fantasy (i.e., mechanistic dehumanization). As these dimensions fall on separate continuums, experiences of fetishization frequently reflect denial of both humanness characteristics.

An element common to the dehumanization, minority stress, and sexual objectification frameworks is the processes of *internalization*. This is the integration of discrimination, stigma or objectification into one's own self-concept, arising from exposure to these external events. Accordingly, the literature documents self-directed bi-stigma (McInnis et al., 2022), internalized erasure

(McCole & Anderson, 2025) and self-objectification (Calogero et al., 2005). Also reflected in the literature is *cognizance*, referring to awareness and expectations of experiencing stigma and discrimination (Williams et al., 2017), or being on “higher alert” to objectification (Serpe et al., 2020, p. 471). If fetishization operated accordingly to these theories, it could be expected that a process of internalized fetishization would occur.

Despite a growing interest in the experiences of bi+ individuals, the phenomenon of fetishization has largely been overlooked. Although limited, contributions qualitatively exploring bi+ women’s experiences of bi-negativity, body image, and sexual assault, have emphasized the prevalent and harmful nature of fetishization (Chmielewski & Yost, 2013; DeCapua, 2017; Watson et al., 2021). For instance, in an exploration of bi+ women’s experiences of psychosocial influences on their body-image, Chmielewski & Yost (2013) reported that when bi+ women experienced others assuming they were promiscuous or sexually adventurous, it was damaging to their romantic relationships and contributed to issues with their body image. Reiterating this hypersexualisation, Decapua (2017) explored bi+ women’s experiences of bi-negativity in romantic relationships, and described their subjection to sexual history inquisition and experiences of encouragement to engage sexually with other women and in threesomes. Such findings indicate a need for research to directly explore this phenomenon.

To our knowledge, only one contribution has explicitly explored bi+ women’s sexual objectification experiences (in an American sample of women; Serpe et al., 2020). Findings from their qualitative study detailed sexual objectification embedded within identity fetishization, erasure and discrimination, and highlighted bi+ women’s experiences of invasive questioning, invalidation of their sexualities, exploitation of their sexual identities for other’s fantasies of threesomes or voyeurism, and assumptions of hypersexuality and sexual irresponsibility. Participants also described the subsequent hypervigilance, distress, bi-erasure internalization, and alienation from queer communities that they experienced. This limited collection of literature highlights that bi+ women are sexualized and eroticised on the basis of their sexual identities.

Building on these findings, an exploration with a specific focus on the phenomenon of fetishization is needed. Where sexual objectification is the concept of being reduced to an eroticised object of sexual desire, exploring the experience of being reduced to an object of sexual desire on the basis of sexual identity (i.e., fetishization) will allow for a more in depth and nuanced understanding of the experiences and interpretations bi+ women give to their fetishization. It will also allow for the identification of novel themes that may be elicited when bi+ women are asked specifically about their experiences of fetishization. Given the heightened risk bi+ women face for a range of health and psychosocial challenges, understanding their

experiences are of utmost importance. The present study will explore these experiences in a bottom-up fashion, centering the voices of bi+ women, and their lived experiences of fetishization. As such, the current study constitutes a qualitative exploration of how Australian bi+ women experience and understand their sexual identity fetishization.

## Method

### *Philosophical perspectives*

This study was grounded in interpretive phenomenology, centering the lived experiences and voices of bi+ women, to understand the phenomenon of fetishization. Through this approach, we were able to acknowledge and honor the subjectivity and nuances in bi+ women's perceptions and understandings of their fetishization experiences. Ontologically, we hold a social constructivist stance that emphasizes the broader social context in which participants experiences are situated. Specifically, our approach understands the phenomenon of fetishization as it is constructed through sociocultural discourse (i.e., heteronormative and patriarchal ideologies) and maintained through constant social interactions. By grounding this study in both interpretivism and constructionism, we seek to understand fetishization through both bi+ women's realities, and through our interpretations of these realities as situated within broader social contexts.

### *Participants and recruitment*

Ethical approval was obtained from the Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee (2024-3623). The inclusion criteria for this study required participants to be individuals who identified as bi+ women, were Australian residents or citizens, and were over the age of 18 years. There were no exclusion criteria regarding relationship status. Eligible individuals expressed their interest by responding to advertisements for a study about experiences of fetishization for having a bi+ identity, which was shared through online avenues, personal and professional networks, and through the use of snowball sampling techniques.

Participants were 12 bi+ women aged between 19 and 51 years ( $M=30.3$  years,  $SD=9.3$  years, see [Table 1](#) for demographic details) who were recruited in July and August of 2024. We used purposeful sampling, a process of identifying information rich cases to comprise the sample (Patton, 2014). The final sample size was guided by time and budget constraints, as well as notions of *information power*. This posits that sample size is dependent upon the relevance and adequacy of the information held by the sample, to the study, on the premise that new insights will continue to be drawn provided that new data is collected and analyzed (Braun & Clarke,

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of sample.

| Participant ID | Age | Ethnicity                  | Pronouns     | Orientation         | Relationship Status                                | Location  |
|----------------|-----|----------------------------|--------------|---------------------|--|-----------|
| P1             | 22  | Asian                      | She/Her/They | Bisexual/Fluid      | Single   | Melbourne |
| P2             | 25  | First Nations              | She/they     | Bisexual            | Partnered (man)                                    | Melbourne |
| P3             | 29  | Anglo/Caucasian            | She/Her      | Bisexual/Queer      | Polyamorous, two primary partners, casual partners | Melbourne |
| P4             | 28  | Anglo/Caucasian            | She/Her      | Bisexual            | Single   | Melbourne |
| P5             | 22  | Anglo/Caucasian            | She/Her      | Bisexual/Pansexual  | Single   | Melbourne |
| P6             | 19  | Anglo/Caucasian            | She/Her      | Bisexual            | Single   | Melbourne |
| P7             | 51  | Anglo/Caucasian            | She/Her      | Bisexual/Pansexual  | Single   | Melbourne |
| P8             | 32  | Chinese/Filipino/Malaysian | She/Her      | Bisexual            | Partnered (man)                                    | Melbourne |
| P9             | 35  | Fijian-Indian-Australian   | She/Her      | Bisexual/Queer      | Partnered (woman)                                  | Melbourne |
| P10            | 28  | Australian-Russian         | She/Her      | Bisexual            | Married (man), non-monogamous                      | Melbourne |
| P11            | 44  | Anglo/Caucasian            | She/Her/They | Bisexual/Omnisexual | Partnered (woman)                                  | Clunes    |
| P12            | 28  | Anglo/Caucasian            | She/Her/They | Pansexual           | Partnered (man)                                    | Melbourne |

2021; Malterud et al., 2016). Information power offers an alternative to the traditionally endorsed *data saturation*, or the point at which no new themes “emerge” from data (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 201).

### **Interview details**

The semi-structured interview schedule developed for this study (available at <https://osf.io/zngrf/>) was comprised of four sections. The first section was used to collect demographic information about the characteristics of the sample, including their age, location, ethnicity, pronouns, and specific sexual identity. The second section involved checking the participants’ conceptual understanding of fetishization to ensure mutual understanding of the concepts being discussed. The third section comprised an open-ended question regarding participant’s journey and experiences as a bi+ woman, as an opportunity to build rapport, increase comfort, and provide context for the participants’ fetishization experiences. The final section comprised of four open-ended questions regarding participants’ experience/s of fetishization and its impacts. The questions in this section were developed based on the available literature, and the researchers’ expertise and lived experience. The interview schedule was used flexibly, as a guide to allow for the content to be participant directed, and for spontaneous follow-up questions.

Interviews ranged from 26 to 75 minutes ( $M = 46.5$ ,  $SD = 14.3$ ), of which 10 were conducted over the video conferencing platform Microsoft Teams, and two were conducted in-person on the ACU campus.

### **Data quality**

Ensuring trustworthiness of research is essential to establish qualitative rigor, and was achieved through the adherence to several criteria:



credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Credibility concerns the degree to which the findings accurately represent participants' experiences of fetishization. This was accomplished through prolonged engagement such as building rapport, follow-up questions, encouraging participants to elaborate or share examples, and by giving participants the opportunity to review their transcripts. Transferability is the degree to which findings can be applied to alternative contexts by other researchers. This was achieved through in-depth descriptions of the study's sample and procedures, and by providing comprehensive explanations to situate the data within context. Dependability pertains to the study's detail and transparency, and its interpretations grounded in data. This was facilitated through rigorous documentation of the study's purpose and methods, and through multiple revisions of raw data, codes, themes and interpretations. Confirmability regards the impartiality and neutrality of the findings. This was ensured through the validation of interpretations by other queer researchers, including those with research expertise in fetishization processes and effects. Finally, reflexivity is the process of acknowledging and minimizing personal biases and preconceptions. This was practiced through reflexive journaling and bracketing (i.e., identifying and 'shelving' personal experience and assumptions; Fischer, 2009) to allow for critical self-reflection.

### **Data analysis**

We used Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and interpret common patterns or 'themes' within the data. Specifically, we analyzed the interview transcripts using inductive thematic analysis (i.e., bottom-up approach), which involved coding data without fitting it into preconceptions and preexisting hypotheses. Thus, findings were developed through centering the experiences of significance to participants.

Thematic analysis involves 6 phases. Phase 1 is *data familiarization*, which involves transcribing recorded interviews, removing filler words (e.g., 'um'), and conducting multiple transcript readings. Phase 2 involves the *generating of codes*, in which the data's interesting features are systematically coded into meaningful groups using the qualitative analysis software NVivo14. Phase 3 is *generating themes*, involving clustering codes into potential themes. Phase 4 concerns *reviewing and refining the themes*, to ensure accurate representation of data and relevance to the study's research question. Phase 5 involves *defining and naming themes* to capture their essence. Finally, Phase 6 is *writing the report* through the integration of themes with data extracts to produce an analytical narrative.



## Procedure

Respondents were provided with the participant information letter *via* email, outlining the details of the study and confidentiality protocols. To participate, they were first screened by the researcher *via* email to ensure eligibility and comfortability discussing topics relating to their sexual identity and experiences of fetishization. Following this, a mutually agreeable time and location was determined. Prior to commencing the interview, respondents provided informed consent. Interviews were recorded for transcription purposes. Following the interview, participants were debriefed, thanked for their time, and provided with a list of support services. They were remunerated with a \$25 gift voucher, and provided with their password-protected transcript *via* email to make any amendments within a seven-day window, prior to the de-identification of their data.

## Researcher positionality

The research team hold a range of sexual and gender identities, which include some bi+ identities. All researchers are advocates and allies of bi+ issues, bi+ people, and bi+ communities. We acknowledge that our experiences and expertise cannot understand the experiences of all bi+ women, and we remained cognizant of this during data collection and analysis. To mitigate any personal bias and remain objective throughout this study, we adhered to qualitative research techniques such as reflexivity and bracketing.

## Results

A total of eight themes were developed. Five themes explored how fetishization was experienced: *Bi+sexuality is desirable to heterosexual men*, *fetishization differentiates bi+sexuality from monosexual same-sex attraction*, *bi+sexuality creates exceptions to monogamy*, *fetishization manifests as dehumanization and hypersexualisation* and *experiencing internalized fetishization*. Three themes explored fetishization implications: *Emotional impact of fetishization*, *cognizance of fetishization leads to alertness and vigilance*, and *navigating intersecting identities*. Fetishization was instigated almost exclusively by men (friends, partners, and strangers), and occurred in a variety of settings (house parties, clubs, bars, pubs, online dating, and social media).

## Experiences of fetishization

### Theme 1: *Bi+sexuality is desirable to heterosexual men*

This theme describes a broad societal rhetoric discussed by all interviewees of bi+ sexuality as desirable to heterosexual men. Several participants first experienced this in their teenage years, through peer discourse, “*I probably*

started hearing this kind of stuff from guy friends or guys making jokes about it” (P6) and popular culture, “media when we were growing up ... men freaking out about lesbians ... that being the horniest thing ... so probably really early something clicking of like, oh, that’s what men find really attractive ... and will lose their minds over two women being together” (P12). Other participants experienced this sexual appeal through commentary when disclosing or discussing bi+sexuality, “I would tell guys that I would like sleep with ... that I was queer and you’d get a like ‘ooooh ... that’s hot’” (P2), or during sexual encounters with women in public spaces “at parties where I’d hook up with women ... the guys around me were like, ‘oh, that’s so hot’” (P3).

For several, fetishization was experienced as men’s voyeurism of women’s same-sex sexual interactions: “boys would come around and watch and they’d film ... It just became a spectacle” (P1) and “parties and stuff in high school, guys would want to see girls kiss” (P6). One participant described a woman she was dating engage in performative behavior to satisfy men’s voyeuristic desires: “kissing them ‘cause you want to kiss them versus ... kissing someone and you know other people are watching and you’re like, ‘I gotta make this look pretty’ ... I definitely noticed that [the latter] in public spaces” (P5). These experiences illustrate the assumption that participants’ bi+sexuality was assumed as being performative for the male gaze rather than a legitimate expression of their sexuality.

### **Theme 2: Fetishization differentiates bi+sexuality from monosexual same-sex attraction**

While much of the discourse around the appeal of same-sex sexuality was indiscriminate to bi+ and lesbian women, the heightened desirability of bi+sexuality (relative to lesbianism), became evident through heterosexual men’s opportunistic involvement in bi+ women’s same-sex sexual experiences. Primarily this was through requests for threesomes, discussed by eight of the 12 participants, “as soon as they’ve found out [bisexuality] ... they’ll be like, ‘do you want to sleep with me and my partner’” (P9). Another participant described suggestions to watch pornography together: “I would wanna watch that [lesbian/threesome porn] with you” (P3). The nature of these propositions—specifically, that they were requests for dynamics involving two women - reiterates men’s desire of bi+sexuality on the basis of its beneficiality to them and their fantasies.

Sexual prejudice also worked to position bi+sexualities as hierarchically favorable to lesbianism. For instance, one participant shared being told, “two women hooking up are hot but lesbians are gross” (P3), and another described hearing someone say “they only voted yes [same-sex marriage plebiscite] because they thought it was really hot to see two girls making

out” (P8). Another participant explained how public displays of her bisexuality was key in the acceptance of her same-sex sexual interactions: *“I again [sic] kissed women throughout in usually a public setting ... like spin the bottle or like ... performative ... Or at least it was justified in a public setting as not gay”* (P10). The acceptance of same-sex sexualities conditional to men deriving pleasure from them was further exemplified by one participant: *“in a unicorn<sup>1</sup> situation, it’s got to be sufficiently performative for the male person who’s involved, but not so much that he feels like he’s not centred”* (P7). All of these instances highlight an erasure of bi+sexuality, in which its legitimacy is denied through its positioning as performative for men.

The protection that bi+sexuality offered participants from stigma and discrimination was experienced ambivalently: *“we had a few people in our year level who were openly lesbian, and even the treatment that they received was different ... so I was just like ... as long as that’s not the reaction that I’m having, I’m happy ... then coming out of high school, I realized ... oh, that’s actually weird”* (P1) and *“I suppose at the time it didn’t phase me because I was getting what I wanted ... to kiss a girl ... without people judging me”* (P6). In one way, avoiding stigma and discrimination was seen as positive, however upon reflection, participants understood it as driven by the fetishization and invalidation of their sexuality.

### **Theme 3: Bi+sexuality creates exceptions to monogamy**

A third of participants discussed experiencing encouragement or permission of same-sex sexual activity from their male partners while in monogamous relationships: *“he [ex] continuously would tell me that it was fine if I wanted to go and sleep with other women”* (P2) and *“he never thought it was cheating when I kissed girls”* (P5). Participants experienced this as shaped by both a denial of their queerness or queer relationships as valid, and from a fetishized interest in watching them with other women: *“he just didn’t think I was queer, and that if he did think I was queer ... the entertainment factor was enough where he didn’t care”* (P5) and *“[men] think that it’s hot and don’t feel threatened by it”* (P3). This was experienced as invalidating of participants’ sexuality: *“that really devalues these relationships that I’m having with women and non-binary folk”* (P3) and *“the fact that he was like, ‘... do whatever you want with girls’ ... that really wasn’t taking it seriously”* (P2).

Participants also emphasized how these sentiments manifested as double standards in their relationships, *“when I go with a man to those spaces [sex on premise events] often there’s this thing of, ‘oh, I felt a bit uncomfortable seeing you hookup with a guy, but if it’s a woman I’m really into that”* (P3) and *“we got into such a huge argument about whether I was*

*flirting with him for him to get the idea of that [threesome] ... I was like, you had no problems the other day when it was a pretty girl” (P5). For one participant this contradictory attitude was to the extreme of her partner’s controlling behavior, “I couldn’t have a conversation with a man that he didn’t know ... if someone in a bar came up to me ... he [ex] was terrifying” (P2).*

#### **Theme 4: Fetishization manifests as dehumanization and hypersexualisation**

Nine of the twelve participants described feeling like they were treated as objects, denied their individuality and experienced excessive sexual focus attributed to their sexuality. This was expressed by participants as not being “*fully seen or understood*” (P3), or human, “*I’m not a person to you*” (P7). Oftentimes participants felt reduced to physical and sexual attributes, “*we’re so much more than just our physicality and sex life*” (P9), or sex--objects for other’s pleasure, “*they’re viewing you as a sex-object or an object of their fantasies ... They don’t actually consider you to be deserving of the same respect as everyone else*” (P11).

Participants also described fetishization in the form of hypersexualisation. For one participant, the mere disclosure of her bisexuality was perceived as flirtatious: “*as soon as you say that [bisexuality] as a woman to a cis-het man they’re like, ‘oh, now we’re flirting’*” (P3). Hypersexualisation was also experienced as microaggressions: “*you have no morals ... you’ll do anything*”, “*bisexuals will fuck anything*” (P11), “*you haven’t had the right dick*” (P9), and as intrusive questioning: “*I’ve had a few [sexual identity disclosures] where it has been ... ‘oh, have you had sex with women?’*” (P12).

Requests for threesomes were described by participants as hypersexualised assumptions, “*a lot of couples ... will approach and then just kind of assume that wanting to be a third ... is just something that comes with bisexuality*” (P1), occurring in absence of expressed interest: “*why are you making assumptions about me ... I’ve never said it [interest] anywhere*” (P9). Many participants spoke of how they were left feeling dehumanized and objectified, as “*an extra set of bits*” (P7) for a fantasy, where instigators were “*doing this to get your [their] rocks off and as an experience for you [them]*” (P9).

Navigating the duality of fetishization feeling positive and validating, yet also dehumanizing was a challenge some participants articulated: “*when you’re getting that validation from a man ... and they’re validating a part of my identity, like if I’m saying that I’m bisexual or having a threesome ... That feels positive. But then there’s this added layer of you don’t really see me, or ... understand me, and that can be quite painful*” (P3). This was emphasized by sexuality being key to this participant’s identity: “*it’s difficult because I am a sexual person, so I do want to sexualize parts of*

*my identity and parts of my experiences ... it's a fine line"* (P3). Another participant commented that threesomes weren't problematic in themselves, *"being a unicorn was something that I've explored and it's been quite fun"* (P7), but rather the issue was in the assumption that just because someone is bi+ that they will be interested in them: *"I'm looking for someone to engage with me as me, and while I'm not opposed to that sort of thing [threesomes], I am not looking to be fetishized out of the gate"* (P7).

In some cases, fetishization manifested in non-consensual and coercive sexual encounters. One participant described receiving unsolicited nude photographs, *"This man matched with me and then ... just assumed because I've got bisexual in my bio ... that I would be into a specific type of kink and ... started sending all of these intense nude images"* (P1). Another shared experiencing coercion from an ex-partner, *"my sexuality was kind of used against me to sort of manipulate me into [sexual] situations that I didn't want to really be in"* (P11) and feeling like *"a target"* for non-consensual sexual advances, *"I've had married men at house parties, and they would come across me in the bathroom and they would just, you know, grab you [me] and kiss you [me]"* (P11). Following this, she experienced subsequent victim blaming in which her identity was hypersexualised and framed as motive for non-consensual advances: *"our society is very good at victim blaming ... me talking about the fact that I'm bisexual ... that I have been with women ... led him on"* (P11).

### **Theme 5: Experiencing internalized fetishization**

Eight of the 12 participants described fetishized representations and experiences becoming entangled in their understanding and perceptions of themselves or their sexuality. For one participant, this manifested in a struggle to understand her identity independently from sexualized projections: *"I feel like from the very moments [sic] that I started to say that I was bisexual, that was sexualized ... so that's really become a core part of the way that I see myself now and it's hard to disentangle that and to look at, is that part of who I am or how I have been conditioned to be?"* (P3). Several participants experienced doubt regarding the legitimacy of their sexual identity, *"am I doing it 'cause I want validation from men? Or... because I actually like women"* (P5) and *"you're kinda being watched like this for other people and not entirely for you, and therefore maybe that's not driven by you and so maybe then that's not real attraction"* (P10). This doubt and questioning caused identity turmoil for participants: *"sometimes it makes me feel like I'm not actually bisexual, which is confusing because I know damn well that I am"* (P4), *"it gave me imposter syndrome ... looking inside myself being like, am I faking this?"* (P6).

Internalizing a male gaze of bi+ sexuality led to challenges in viewing same-sex relationships beyond a sexual lens: *"it didn't help me imagine*

*having emotional or romantic connections with women. It made me really only see it in a sexual way”, and affected queer dating experiences, “which then made it really hard with dating [women] afterwards, because I’d come with this, probably very male gaze/angle of like what it would be like” (P2). Another participant reiterated this struggle: “I find it really hard to have actual queer relationships because I have a really blurred line of what I’m doing for others and what I’m doing for myself” (P5).*

## **Implications of fetishization**

### **Theme 6: Emotional impact of fetishization**

**Subtheme 6.1: Negative emotional impacts.** The first subtheme echoed findings in the literature of the negative emotional tolls of experiencing fetishization. All participants described fetishization eliciting distress related emotions such as anger, hurt, invalidation, disgust, and frustration. One participant described fetishization as disempowering, *“wanting to do this because it’s fun for me or because I’m enjoying this ... whatever explanation I give to myself for wanting to kiss a girl in a public setting ... that feels powerful to me because I made that choice ... But when another person, a man, takes that power away by being like, ‘... I’m now enjoying this and I want to see this’, I hate that ... this is not fun for me anymore” (P10). Another participant shared feeling shame, guilt, and self-blame after non-consensual experiences, “I felt so much shame afterwards ... beating yourself up ... why didn’t I have better boundaries? Why didn’t I say no?” (P11).*

**Subtheme 6.2: Validation and affirmation.** The second subtheme nuances the first, with several participants describing that their unwanted experiences of fetishization elicited feelings of validation, approval and affirmation, *“[bisexuality] was something that they found really attractive and hot and cool ... so that was like celebrated almost in a way, like it was kind of quite affirming” (P3), “I felt like I wanted any guy to say ‘oh, that’s hot or you’re pretty” (P5), and acted as a source of self-esteem: “I had a lot of body image issues ... feeling pretty and validated by men ... it was really important to me” (P5). Another participant described experiencing her bisexuality as a form of status: “it was a positive quality ... being seen as sexual, it was equals to cool [sic]” (P10). These positive appraisals were almost exclusively described in the past tense, referencing early stages of participant’s lives (i.e., “at the time”), or reflected upon as harmful experiences: “it wasn’t until later on that I looked back on those experiences and realised how a lot of that was quite damaging” (P3).*

*“Playing into” (P3) fetishization was described by two participants to attain the validation they experienced from it: “I felt like it was definitely something I could use to my advantage” (P5) and “hyper-sexualizing myself*



*in those environments as a way to get men's attention and ... validation"* (P3). Self-fetishizing in this way was accompanied by shame and guilt, and was associated with periods of poor mental health and less accepting friends. One participant reflected that after a shift in these areas: *"I just felt so myself ... I didn't feel as much of a need for validation in that sense"* (P5).

### **Theme 7: Cognizance of fetishization leads to alertness and vigilance**

Two thirds of the participants described a vigilance in response to experiencing fetishization, feeling *"guarded"* (P8), *"nervous"* (P2), and constantly cognizant of the possibility of fetishization: *"it would be nice if I could have comfortably just danced on the dance floor with men and women, whoever, and it not be seen necessarily as a sexual thing"* (P11) Some participants also described fear around social perceptions, *"people are going to assume that it's for attention or ... because I want to be seen in a certain way ... I want to make myself more attractive to men"* (P12).

Several participants experienced vigilance around disclosure, *"I tried to avoid putting it [bisexuality] on any dating apps ... every time that I did mention it, it was ... 'what about you and my friend?'"* (P4) and *"it makes you ... wary to be out to certain people"* (P8). After non-consensual sexual advances, one participant shared that she *"stopped talking about being bisexual around men 'cause it was safer"* (P11). Participants also described vigilance around when and what labels they used to describe their sexuality, *"when I say that I'm queer, it tends to not come with that kind of sexualized connotation ... so I use that when I don't want to be sexualized"* (P3) and *"when I'm talking to a guy that I don't wanna be talking to ... I'd say queer because they get more confused ... they're like, 'gay?'"* (P5).

Other manifestations of vigilance were behavioral, *"I didn't feel like I could be platonically intimate, there's always that question ... she's attracted to all of us, so maybe she's [attracted to us]"* (P11) and *"when I'm deciding whether or not to be affectionate ... or intimate with a woman in public, it's a choice about being willing to be fetishized ... or I'm holding myself back because I don't feel comfortable in the moment to do that"* (P3). Vigilance also effected participants' self-presentation: *"I used to cover myself up because I didn't want to be viewed. Especially if I was around people that knew that I was bisexual"* (P4) and *"for a really long time it affected the way that I chose to present myself"* (P1).

### **Theme 8: Navigating intersecting identities**

Participants with intersecting marginalized identities discussed being fetishized for both their sexuality and their race: *"I get it from a couple of different angles - from the bisexuality, but also from being Asian"* (P1) and *"I noticed more men definitely making it easier for me to pinpoint that this was about me being Asian, but also definitely [about being] bi"* (P8).



Some participants described the challenge of not being able to separate which aspect of their identity was being fetishized, “*You can’t really tease apart your sexuality and your ethnic identity ... that makes it extra complicated*” (P8). Another participant reiterated this sentiment, “*I think it is always kind of the combination of the two*”, however also noted that for her, racial fetishization preceded sexual identity fetishization: “*you look at me and you know [race] ... So that’s where it starts ... then this element of my bisexuality being introduced to that is almost like this ... super exciting thing for the person ... then less and less they’re interested and like actually me*” (P1). This distinction was echoed by another participant: “*I experience them in a way that feels separate to me because people can obviously see I’m a person of color long before they know I’m queer*” (P9).

Dual fetishization resulted in feeling dehumanized and additional vigilance: “*when something like that keeps happening over and over again for either your race or your sexuality, it makes you feel not considered as a whole human*” (P8) and “*I have to be twice as guarded because I never know whether people are going to fetishize me for my sexuality, and or my race, which is not something I can hide*” (P8).

## Discussion

This qualitative study sought to further explore bi+women’s experiences of fetishization. The eight themes developed explored how fetishization was experienced and its subsequent implications. Themes around experiences of fetishization were: *Bi+sexuality is desirable to heterosexual men, fetishization differentiates bi+sexuality from monosexual same-sex attraction, bi+sexuality creates exceptions to monogamy, fetishization manifests as dehumanization and hypersexualization, and experiencing internalized fetishization*. Themes around fetishization implications were: *Emotional impact of fetishization, cognizance of fetishization leads to alertness and vigilance, and navigating intersecting identities*. The findings extend the existing literature by highlighting the complexities within experiences of fetishization, and indicating a process of internalization.

## Visiting the major findings

Consistent with previous literature, fetishization was experienced both interpersonally and as part of a broader social discourse. The establishment of bi+sexuality as the acceptable form of same-sex sexuality, and as appealing to heterosexual men, occurred through popular culture representations and commentary around bi+sexualities as “hot”. Aligning with previous literature, findings emphasized bi+women’s hypersexualisation, reiterating experiences of unsolicited invasive sexual questioning and stereotypes of

promiscuity and insatiability (Chmielewski & Yost, 2013; Serpe et al., 2020). Additionally, fetishization was experienced through heterosexual men's encouragement of their partners to sexually engage with other women (but not men), their requests to participate in these interactions, and their voyeurism of women's same-sex sexual interactions. Consistent with findings of Watson et al.'s (2021) study exploring bi+ women's sexual assault experiences, participants drew links between their non-consensual and coercive sexual experiences with their fetishization. Bi+ women are at a heightened risk of sexual victimization (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021–22; Hill et al., 2020), thus this potential contributory role of fetishization warrants further exploration.

Reflecting the sentiment in Serpe's (2020) findings, many individuals described the experience of fetishization and its implications as overwhelmingly negative, emphasizing distress, dehumanization, and invalidation. Extending these findings, those of the present study suggest that experiences of fetishization are nuanced and cannot be adequately covered by theories of sexual objectification. Several participants described duality within fetishization, experiencing a sense of validation and approval, and affirmation of their bi+ sexuality. The occasional positive appraisals, or leveraging of fetishization, was accompanied with negative emotions (e.g., shame, reduced sense of self) separate to those arising from the fetishization itself. Further understanding the potential processes and implications of these nuanced positive appraisals of fetishization, and self-fetishization is required.

The findings also highlighted the construction of a heightened desirability of bi+ sexuality compared to lesbianism through its beneficiality to men and through discourse interweaving homophobia with fetishization. In this way, fetishization was experienced ambivalently by participants as a protection from stigma and discrimination (a concession not granted to lesbian women).

Building on processes of internalization outlined in sexual objectification and minority stress frameworks, evidence that fetishization is internalized constitutes a novel finding. This literature documents the internalization of proximal constructs of stigma, and its implications in bi+ individuals' mental health (Feinstein et al., 2022), sense of belonging (McInnis et al., 2022), and sexual victimization (Salim et al., 2020). Current findings suggest internalized fetishization manifests as a struggle for participants to separate fetishized ideas from their self-concept, doubt regarding the legitimacy of their sexuality, and difficulty viewing queer relationships beyond a sexual lens.

### ***Future directions and implications***

These findings reflect the broad and complex experience that fetishization encompasses, impacting bi+ women's emotions, relationships, self-perceptions, and behavior. Presenting a preliminary account of such

processes, cognizance, and internalization of fetishization shed light on potential intermediary factors between fetishization and impacts on behavior, emotions, and relationships. Relevant next steps include the generation of theory around these processes, the development of validated measures assessing these factors, and quantitative analyses examining their contribution to psychosocial and physical health disparities.

Another preliminary extension to theory is the construction of a hierarchy of desire for various same-sex sexual identities. Bi+sexuality is positioned as favorable to lesbianism through mechanisms of homophobia and heterosexual men's opportunistic participation and benefit from it. However, there were also elements of fetishization that applied indiscriminately to lesbian and bi+ women. Exploring fetishization experiences of lesbian women would allow further understanding of the unique impacts of same-sex fetishization for different sexualities. How individuals navigate the fetishization of multiple marginalized identities also requires further research. For example, evidence that non-binary and transgender individuals also experience fetishization (Anzani et al., 2021; Perez & Pepping, 2024), and that fetishization of race and sexual identity intersect, suggests a need to explore intersecting experiences of the fetishization of sexuality, gender and ethnicity.

Finally, pertaining to social implications, is the need for comprehensive resources and sex-education around bi+ fetishization. Several participants emphasized lacking language and knowledge to understand and articulate their earlier experiences of fetishization. Thus, bi+ inclusivity within educational resources would act as a source of support for bi+ women and facilitate articulation and understanding of their experiences. Additionally, it would provide an important intervention to cultivate bi+ sexual respect literacy.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations pertain to the current study. While the sample is representative of ages 19 to 51, the majority of participants were aged between 22 and 35. As such, experiences may be different for adolescents and older adults. Similarly, limitation pertains to the insufficient information power to explore differences driven by specific sexual identity labels or partner gender. Over half of the participants were White Australians, and there was heterogeneity in those with other cultural backgrounds, thus insufficient information power also pertains to the role of culture in the diversity of fetishization experiences.

In addition, while we know that all participants were self-identified women, we did not ask about their gender identity and thus we do not know if any were also trans or non-binary. We recognize both that there is substantial overlap between having a bi+ identity and being gender diverse, and also that the experiences of being fetishized are likely different for cisgender bi+ women

and women with other gender identities (Anzani et al., 2021). Specifically, trans and nonbinary bi+ individuals may experience fetishization in ways that intersect with transmisogyny, transphobia, and nonbinary erasure, compounding their marginalization. For example, trans bi+ women may experience a heightened form of hypersexualization shaped by both cissexist and biphobic stereotypes, while nonbinary bi+ individuals may be fetishized through androcentric or gender-exoticizing lenses. While our data cannot speak to this, we encourage future research to fully capture the diverse ways in which gender identity and bi+ identity intersect in shaping experiences of fetishization.

## Conclusions

This study aimed to explore Australian bi+ women's experiences of fetishization, and contribute to a limited body of existing literature. Eight themes were developed, five of which explored how fetishization was experienced and three of which explored fetishization implications. These themes shed light on the diverse and various ways bi+ women experience and make sense of their fetishization. Particularly, they demonstrate that bi+ women experience their fetishization as largely negative, unwanted, and invalidating to their sexuality. However, there were some nuances to these experiences that are discussed. Together, the findings suggest that there is an ongoing need to better understand fetishization, including the need for a better understanding of the construct, the generation of associated theory, and the development of an evidence base around risk factors and associated impacts.

## Note

1. Unicorn refers to being the third person (typically female) in a threesome with a man and a woman.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

Joel Anderson was funded by a grant from the Australian Research Council [DE230101636].

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