

Bisexuality's appeal is freedom of choice

By Suzanne Curley
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Move over, Madonna. These days you're not the only one exploring alternatives to the girl-meets-boy scenarios. More and more young women, it seems, are experimenting with different ways of defining their sexuality. Refusing to accept such labels as "straight" or "gay," they are happier with the term "bisexual." The popular media is reflecting this trend: the cover story this summer in Newsweek proclaimed that bisexuality was "coming out into the open – in pop culture, in cyberspace and on campus." Recent celebrity biographies have dwelled on the eclectic sexual leanings of public figures ranging from Marlene Dietrich to Eleanor Roosevelt to Janis Joplin. In advertising, androgyny has become a popular selling tool for products designed for the younger set, such as Calvin Klein's CKOne unisex perfume. This year's movies with distinctly non-heterosexual leads include "Boys on the Side" and "The Incredible True Story of Two Girls in Love." Young people, says Marjorie Garber, author of *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (Simon & Schuster, 1995), "want to leave themselves undefined. They choose the term bisexual to define themselves because it leaves their options open. They don't really know what's going to happen, and for some the alternative categories don't fit, so they choose "bisexuality" as the most accurate term."

Kelly Dean, 23, a Long Island, N.Y., sculptor working on her master's degree says, "Yes, I do call myself bisexual. But I have a problem even with that label – I like to say that I'm sexual." Dean says she has had relationships both with men and women; she's been involved with a woman for the past year. "It's not about gender; it's about what's in a person's head and what's in their heart," says Dean. "I've always had wonderful experiences with men. And yet I'm very happy where I'm at."

"Many of my friends are bisexual – they don't really talk about it, but they don't lie about it either. I don't know what I consider myself; I don't really like labels," says a 22-year-old New York City woman who graduated from college in June and asked not to be named. Though she sleeps only with women, she does occasionally find herself attracted to men and doesn't rule out the possibility of having a sexual relationship with one. "I'd like to leave it that people are just attracted to people as people. You can't label desire and put it into a box," she says.

"One reason why we are seeing more young people calling themselves bisexual is that there's been progress in the visibility of gays and lesbians," says Garber, a professor of English who directs the Center for Literature and Cultural Studies at Harvard. "Nowadays people see that they have a choice, that there are options, and that feelings that they may have had (of attraction for people of both sexes) are real feelings."

"'Just a phase' – it's what many parents say and hope when their children tell them they're gay, lesbian or bisexual," writes Garber. "But bisexuals are also accused of going through a 'phase' by many gays and lesbians, who consider that there are really only two poles, straight and gay."

There are many who believe – as does Garber – that bisexuality is actually normal rather than a deviation from standard behavior. "I'm not saying that everyone is bisexual," says Garber. "But that people who have strong erotic attractions to both men and women have historically always been present. We really should see bisexuality as the ground from which all human sexuality springs."