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Relationships Between Dress and Gender Identity: LGBTQIA+

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1   **Relationships Between Dress and Gender Identity: LGBTQIA+**

2   As societies evolve so do ideas about the individuals that comprise those societies. One

3   concept undergoing change is that of gender identity. The American Psychological Association

4   (APA) defined gender identity as "A person's deeply-felt, inherent sense of being a boy, a man, or

5   a male; a girl, a woman, or a female; or an alternative gender (e.g., gender nonconforming, gender

6   neutral) that may or may not correspond to a person's sex assigned at birth" (APA, 2015, p. 834).

7   According to Polderman et al. (2018), gender identity can be divided into two broad

8   classifications: cisgender and transgender. The term cisgender applies to individuals who identify

9   with a gender that matches their biological sex at birth (Smith, 2018). The term transgender

10   applies to individuals who identify with a gender that is different from their biological sex at

11   birth. Gender identity is further delineated by the roles assumed and acted upon based on socially

12   accepted environmental factors (APA, 2015).

13   Gender identity is distinct from gender expression. The expression of gender varies based

14   on the cultural and political context within which it is established and maintained (Butler, 1999).

15   Thus, gender can be expressed in a variety of ways including dress[1], voice, and mannerisms

16   (Koene, 2017). For example, an individual might identify as a transgender person but the dress,

17   appearance, name, and mannerisms of this individual within a specific context may be interpreted

18   by others as indicating a cisgender woman (Lowry et al., 2018).

19   In traditional western cultures, gender expression was traditionally tied to the binary

20   concepts of masculinity and femininity, each of which was closely linked to cisgender identities

21   (man, woman) and associated with archetypal dress that included specific colors, styles, and

22   features (Workman & Johnson, 1993). Thus, dress was one means by which individuals

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[1] Dress consists of body modifications (e.g., tattoos, piercings) and supplements (e.g., accessories, clothing) added to the body (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992).

23 communicated gender identity (Barnes & Eicher, 1993; Tortora & Marcketti, 2015). In contrast to

24 a simple gender dichotomy, androgyny has been used to designate gender expressions that are

25 neither or both feminine and masculine and suggests the possibility of more than two genders.

26 Indeed, some researchers have recommended that gender be viewed as on a spectrum (e.g.,

27 Iantaffi, 2015; Monro, 2005). Evidence for societies that recognize more than two genders comes

28 from non-western cultures (e.g., Asian, Polynesian, Native American). For example, some

29 Polynesian cultures have a third gender referred to as Fa'afafine or children identified at birth as

30 male but raised female (Bartlett & Vasey, 2006). Some Native Americans tribes also recognize a

31 gender wherein individuals are referred to as "two spirited" (Paige, 2016).

32   As indicated by the New York City (NYC) Commission on Human Rights' (2018) formal

33 recognition of the existence of 31 different gender identities (Fruehan, 2016), gender identity is a

34 complex and fluid concept. Different genders can identify in many ways. Queer and transgender

35 theorists have argued that gender is on a continuum and that gender identities are also impacted

36 by other identities including class, race, ethnicity, religion, occupation, age, subculture, and

37 personality (Halberstam, 1998). As dress and appearance have traditionally been important cues

38 to communicate gender identity and as Michelman and Kaiser observed "viewing gender as a

39 fluid concept allows scholars studying dress and appearance to understand gender relations as

40 more than men and women 'dressing their parts'" (cited in "Gender, Dress and Fashion," 2021,

41 para 2), it is important to understand dress and other appearance-based cues as deliberate symbols

42 to announce a plurality of gender identities.

43   The formal recognition of gender identities by the NYC Commission on Human Rights

44 was the impetus behind our research as it identified 31 different gender identities; our purpose

45 was to investigate how dress and other appearance cues are used to establish, maintain, and

46   communicate gender identities among individuals identifying as other than cisgender. Specific

47   research questions addressed were as follows: (1) what types of dress are used to express their

48   gender identity, (2) what are individuals' experiences with using dress as an expression of their

49   gender, and (3) what barriers have been encountered when expressing their applied gender using

50   dress?

51

52   **Theoretical Framework**

53   The framework for this research utilized self-verification theory. Self-verification theory is

54   based in symbolic interaction which posits that humans relate to objects based on the meanings

55   attached to those objects and that the meanings of objects are determined through interaction with

56   others (Blumer, 1969). Thus, key to symbolic interactionism is the concept of meaning. Along

57   with meaning, the self is a basic concept within symbolic interactionism. Beliefs about the self

58   (i.e., one's self-concept, self-knowledge, self-view) are developed over time and, like meaning,

59   established through interaction with others. The self is a dynamic and complex construct that

60   consists of thoughts, intentions, and feelings that describe individuals. The self is the answer to

61   the question "who am I?" Thus, the self is comprised of numerous identities (e.g., gender,

62   professional, familial).

63   Stone (1962) argued that symbolic interaction suffered from a discursive bias and posited

64   that appearance, including dress, was at least as important as verbal communication in the

65   establishment and maintenance of the self. He subsequently outlined a process whereby

66   individuals used dress to state their identities to others. Stone noted an individual is recognized as

67   having an identity when the identity is claimed by the individual using dress and when others

68   attributed the identity to the individual. Although the association of an item of dress with any one

69   gender versus another is dynamic and changes over time (Tortora & Marcketti, 2015),

70   customarily there have been specific dress items and practices (e.g., wearing neckties, shaving

71   legs) that have been adopted almost exclusively by either males or females (Tortora & Marcketti).

72   Thus, individuals could easily use dress to announce an identity for themselves or to infer a

73   corresponding gender identity about others. During the 2010s, the idea that additional genders

74   might also be symbolized in appearance emerged with the promotion of non-binary[2] dress

75   (Mackinney-Valentine, 2017). Non-binary dress refers to dress that can be worn by anyone at any

76   time (e.g., t-shirts, jeans) and are designed to avoid creating a distinction between masculine and

77   feminine.

78   Correspondingly, as individuals use dress to visibly express their gender, self-verification

79   theory states that they will actively seek confirmation of their views (Swann, 2012). The theory

80   posits that individuals prefer to be perceived by others as they see themselves. Thus, when

81   individuals identify with a gender, it is important that others also attribute that gender to them.

82   According to Swann, when seeking self-verification, individuals may employ several strategies

83   including the display of identity cues (i.e., visible symbols of who they are) such as clothing.

84   Validation of self-views including one's personal and social identities is important because it

85   gives people a sense of unity (Swann) as well as enhances self-perceived legitimacy and self-

86   worth (Carter & Marony, 2018). Thus, we posited that members of the LBGTQIA+ community

87   may use specific dress to signal their gender identity to others and seek verification of that gender

88   identity from these others and that this process may be successful when the meaning of the dress

89   is shared between individuals.

90   **Related Literature**

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[2] Other terms have been used to describe this category of dress including androgynous, gender neutral, non-gendered, and gender inclusive among others.

91 **Dress and LBGTQIA+[3] Identities**

92   Previous research on identity and dress with members of the LBGTQIA+ community is

93   limited and has frequently focused on sexual identity. In research with participants who self-

94   identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, Clarke and Turner (2007) reported that appearance norms

95   signaling sexual identity were rather rigid and "policed" using both verbal and nonverbal means.

96   Although there existed variation, appearance norms for lesbian women consisted of a masculine

97   appearance, that is, individuals "wore men's clothes, (baggy) trousers, and had short, spiky hair"

98   (p. 269). Appearance norms for gay men included "having (bleached) blond or highlighted hair,

99   wearing tighter t-shirts, lower trousers, and generally more feminine styles and colors, more

100 jewelry and more revealing clothes than the average heterosexual man" (p. 270). However, no

101 appearance norms emerged for bisexual men or women. Subsequently, Huxley et al. (2014)

102 studied lesbian and bi-sexual women residing in Great Britain and found that participants did use

103 appearance and dress to communicate their sexual identity. Clarke and Smith (2015) studied a

104 sample of self-identified gay or bi-sexual men recruited in the United Kingdom. Similar to Clark

105 and Turner (2007), they reported there were two common images of gay men and that appearance

106 norms existed for gay men. One image, labeled camp, indicated gay men wore tightly fitted

107 clothing and bright colors. The other image, labeled trendy, indicated gay men were fashionable,

108 well-groomed, and invested in their appearance. Some participants felt pressure to conform to

109 these images.

110   Similar results were reported by Reddy-Best and Pedersen (2015a, b) in their studies of queer

111 women living in the United States. Even though signifiers of sexual identity were fluid,

112 participants in this research frequently adopted masculine signifiers. These researchers (2015a)

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[3] LBGTQIA+ is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or questioning), intersex, asexual (or allies) and other non-heterosexual people.

113   reported that locating clothing that fit was an issue for queer women (i.e., gay, lesbian, bisexual,

114   or transgender and non-binary persons) and that shopping for clothing in general was a source of

115   distress.

116   Interested in how members of LGBTQIA+ community negotiated their gender identities,

117   Levitt et al. (2003) interviewed self-identified femmes living in Florida in the United States.

118   Participants characterized femmes as identifying with a feminine aesthetic, "often associated with

119   makeup, feminine clothing, and dressing provocatively" (p. 105).

120   Focusing on transgender and nonbinary persons within the United States, Pollock and Eyre

121   (2012) investigated young persons to further understand their gender identity. Participants

122   revealed that gender identity was a "vague feeling" (p. 211) and that they adopted "masculine"

123   clothing and behaviors. Subsequently, McGuire et al. (2016) investigated young transgender and

124   nonbinary persons from the United States, Canada, and Ireland to understand body satisfaction/

125   dissatisfaction and how it related to gender and body size. Participants noted initial body

126   dissatisfaction occurred during puberty when "mature body characteristics" (p. 97) began to

127   appear. Transgender and nonbinary persons, who wanted to achieve a desired body image, would

128   exercise intensely and not practice specific body modifications (i.e., shaving legs or armpits,

129   plucking eyebrows). Some participants shared their dress was a way to alter their appearance and

130   "disguise their bodies" (p. 105).

131   Finding clothing that enables expression of gender is a challenge for transgender individuals.

132   Reilly et al. (2019) in their research with transgender individuals from Ireland, Canada, and the

133   United States found that participants used clothing to express their gender. Similar to Reddy-Best

134   and Pedersen (2015a), these researchers also identified clothing fit as an issue as fit was key to

135   revealing or concealing body parts that were consistent or inconsistent with their gender. In

136 analogous research with transgender persons and gay men in India, Chauhan et al. (2019) echoed

137 the importance of clothing fit as participants tried to "fit their assigned-male-at-birth bodies

138 within garments that were designed for an assigned-female-at-birth body" (p. 21). However, these

139 participants indicated communicating one's gender identity was not central to their decision-

140 making concerning their appearance. Moving forward, they were, however, interested in utilizing

141 gender-neutral garments to express their selves.

142 **Summary**

143   Symbolic interactionism (Stone, 1962) and self-verification theory (Swann, 2012) suggest that

144 dress is useful in establishing and maintaining gender identities. The extant research with

145 members of the LGBTQIA+ community suggests there are appearance norms (Levitt et al. 2003)

146 as well as expectations concerning body modifications (McGuire et al. 2016) that are tied to

147 gender expression and that one clothing attribute important to the successful use of clothing to

148 express gender is fit (e.g., Chauhan et al. 2019; Reilly et al.2019).

149   **Method**

150   The research questions addressed with individuals identifying as other than cisgender were (1)

151 what types of dress are used to express gender identity, (2) what are their experiences with using

152 dress as an expression of their gender, and (3) what barriers were encountered to expressing

153 gender using dress? To address these research questions, we utilized a phenomenological

154 approach to data analysis (Creswell et al. 2007). Utilizing this approach, researchers are able to

155 identify and describe what participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon, in this

156 instance, the use of dress in negotiating and communicating gender identity.

157 **Data Collection**

158   After receiving IRB approval for research with human subjects, a convenience sample was

159   recruited to understand participants' perceptions of gender representations. Participants were

160   recruited by contacting LGBTQIA+ community organizations located in an urban Northeastern

161   region of the United States and from organizations located in a rural Midwestern region.

162   Recruiting from a rural location was included as Hulko and Hovanes (2018) called for research on

163   identity development with members of the LGBTQIA+ community residing in rural areas, whose

164   experiences and resources (e.g., stores, support services) may be markedly different from

165   individuals residing in urban areas.

166   Representatives of the LGBTQIA+ community organizations sent an email to members

167   inviting them to participate in a one-on-one interview comprised of open-ended questions. Seven

168   individuals agreed to be interviewed. Interviews took place in a location where it was safe,

169   convenient, and provided sufficient privacy for responses to be candid (e.g., libraries, coffee

170   shops). Interviews ranged in length from 30 minutes to two hours. The interviews were recorded,

171   transcribed verbatim, and analyzed by the primary researchers. Field notes were also written

172   immediately after each interview noting, among other things, participants' nonverbal expressions

173   (e.g., body language, tone of voice) (Groenwald, 2004). Finally, member checking wherein

174   participants were provided the opportunity to review the transcribed interviews and to make any

175   corrections and additions to the content was completed. In doing this, participants' validated the

176   accuracy of their respective transcribed interviews adding validity to the data statements.

177   **Data Analyses**

178   Each transcribed interview was assigned a letter and a number. The letter represented the

179   region and numbers were randomized to maintain anonymity. Each interview response was read

180   several times to ensure in-depth understanding of the participants' responses. Data were then

181   initially analyzed using processes outlined by Creswell (2015) and van Manen (1990). As

182   interview questions stemmed from each of the three research questions, participants' responses

183   (text) were initially grouped together by interview question so that all responses to the same

184   question could be reviewed. Every statement was given equal value. After reading responses to

185   each question, data analyses began by identifying major concepts (i.e., information segments) by

186   highlighting responses in detail. Van Manen (1990) refers to this as the line-by-line approach.

187   Authors continually debriefed throughout this process and consistently checked agreements.

188   Once major concepts were identified from the participants' responses, responses were grouped

189   into categories using axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Coding continued until each

190   information segment could be placed into a category. During this part of analyses, coding,

191   noteworthy statements were highlighted and sentences or quotes were identified. As participants

192   were able to make any response to any of the questions, content that did not appear to be relevant

193   to one interview question but relevant to another was moved to the appropriate question.

194   Statements that were irrelevant to the topic were removed. Next, similar categories were grouped

195   together and each group of responses were analyzed to determine underlying themes. Authors

196   analyzed all the data to extract all possible themes. The process was repeated to achieve saturation

197   which was determined as "no additional data being found whereby" the researcher "can develop

198   properties of the category. As he [sic] sees similar instances over and over again, the researcher

199   becomes empirically confident that the category is saturated" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 61).

200   After data analysis, it was apparent that additional data collection was not needed. Finally,

201   researchers created an interpretative description of each theme.

202   For reliability purposes, two coders read and coded the same interviews to check for

203   consistency within the coding responses and for similar interpretation of the data. Inter-rater

204   reliability was calculated by dividing the total themes in agreement by the total themes (Marques

205   & McCall, 2005). Any disagreements were discussed and negotiated by authors until agreement

206   was reached. The inter-rater reliability was .92.

207   **Findings**

208   **Participant Characteristics**

209   The sample (*n* = 3) from the Midwest were all White. Most participants identified as

210   middle class. The first rural participant from the rural Midwest identified as female, middle class,

211   White was 24 years old, did not indicate annual earnings, and held a retail sales position. She

212   came to the interview wearing a black and white dress, and heels. She wore make-up, had arm

213   tattoos, and long black hair. The second participant identified as non-transfer or non-transgender

214   binary, was from the rural Midwest, was 49 years old, White, had an annual earnings of $40,000,

215   and held a librarian position. They came to the interview wearing jeans, a t-shirt, and tennis shoes.

216   She had visible arm tattoos and short brown hair. The third participant identified as non-transfer

217   binary, was from the rural Midwest, was 32 years old, White, had annual earnings of $10,000, and

218   was a student. She came to the interview wearing a dress and low heeled shoes. She wore make-

219   up and had shoulder-length, brown hair.

220   The sample (*n* = 4) from the urban Northeast included two African Americans, one

221   Hispanic, and one White. The first urban participant identified as male, was 27 years old, African

222   American, had annual earnings of $50,000, and worked as a Fashion Publicist and Adjunct

223   Professor. He wore black sweater and slacks to the interview and shared that his black loafers

224   were Gucci brand. He had short hair.   The second participant identified as female, was 24 years

225   old, of Hispanic descent, and indicated annual earnings of $26,000 working as a restaurant server.

226   She wore blue jeans and a white T-shirt with sneakers to the interview. No make-up was visible

227   or detected. The third participant identified as male, was 31 years old, White, and indicated

228   earnings of $110,000 as a Style Advisor at Saks Fifth Avenue. He had short hair and wore a

229   black T-shirt, blazer, and slackers with black Ferragamo oxfords. The last participant, identified

230   as male, was 29 years old, African-American, and indicated annual earnings of $36,000 as a

231   Program Director. He wore jeans and a black sweater to the interview. Table 1 summarizes

232   participants' demographics.

233   _____
234
235   Insert Table 1 Here
236   _____
237

238   **Types of Dress Used to Express Gender**

239   Our research was designed to address the following questions with members of the non-

240   binary gender community: (1) what types of dress are used to express gender identity (2) what are

241   their experiences with using dress as an expression of their gender, and (3) what barriers exist to

242   expressing gender identified using dress? The findings are organized by each of these three

243   research questions and the themes identified. Exemplary quotes illustrate our findings.

244   **Body supplements used to express gender identity.** Body supplements used to announce

245   gender included clothing, specifically dresses, and shoes. The wearing of a dress was noted as

246   particularly successful to announce a female gender because inferences by others were accurate.

247   "…most people gender me correctly when they gender me, they'll gender me female. I pretty

248   much exclusively wear dresses at this point." [B26]

249   Participants also described specific body supplements that contained their specific

250   meanings. For example, a participant discussed a necklace that she wanted to purchase prior to

251   transitioning. Later she bought the necklace and always wears it as it is an essential part of her

252   gender identity. She, an individual in the middle of her physical transition, shared the following

253   about this necklace "I pretty much always wear a necklace. It's such a part of me that I sometimes

254   forget I'm actually wearing it" [B12].

255   **Body modifications used to express gender identity.** Although both body supplements

256   (e.g., dresses, shoes) and modifications were used to express gender identities, body modifications

257   appeared to be more important to participants than supplements. Participants shared specific body

258   modifications (e.g., tattoos, piercings, hair length, fragrance, cosmetics) were central to

259   announcing gender because men and women wear similar styles of clothing.

260   We are seeing men who identify as male wear skirts, many women are preferring comfort

261   therefore the silhouettes of their clothing can be misleading. However, grooming of the

262   hair, nails, fragrance worn, may be more accurate to ones display of their gender. [C1]

263   **Dress in the context of an entire appearance**. Some participants suggested that it was

264   not a single item of dress that announced one's gender identity but rather multiple items taken

265   together and that one had to consider an entire presentation (i.e., individuals' attitude,

266   mannerisms, physical attributes, dress) for accurate inferences of gender identity. One participant

267   commented about presenting gender identity as a whole appearance.

268   it's [gender expression] just kind of everything. For the most part, it's just people, it's

269   pretty accurate. But, I mean, it's just kind of an instant judgement people do just based

270   on...everything, hair, clothes, face shape, voice, mannerism. [B26]

271   Another participant shared "I think my clothing is slim fitting and usually very

272   professional and on trend. I am usually very clean and put together (my hair is done)" [C32].

273   _____

274

275   Insert Figure 1 Here

276   _____

277

278   In addition, pronouns were discussed as the most accurate signifier of gender identity,

279   which could only be discovered upon interacting with an individual.

280   Asking people for pronouns when you meet them …introducing yourself with your

281   pronouns, 'Hi. I'm…. they've and they're' and that will give them the cue that I

282   should have introduce myself with my pronouns and it just makes it a lot easier for

283   people to just put that right up there and right up front. [B14]

How Dress Was Used to Express Gender

285   Knowledge of social norms concerning dress in combination with how dress can be used

286   to reveal and conceal body parts was important to participants' use of dress to express their

287   gender identity. Some participants also noted that their use of dress was dynamic and that gender

288   was not the only information that they intended to convey using their dress and appearance.

289   **Align with gender norms for dress.** Some participants noted making use of traditional

290   norms tied to clothing or "rules" for appearance linked to men or women when trying to express

291   their gender. Participants noted, though variation occurs, that specific items of dress (e.g., short

292   hair, t-shirts, pants) were linked to men/masculinity while others (e.g., long hair, removal of body

293   hair on legs, dresses, cosmetics) were linked to women/femininity. Due to these associations,

294   participants could choose to wear these items to announce their gender identity to others. A

295   participant discussed presenting a masculine appearance as a means to signify his gender. **"**My

296   beard, my haircut, my work attire (e.g., blazer), that is very masculine. Most of the choices I make

297   fashion wise positively work towards identifying myself as male…" [C32].

298   **Disguise body parts**. Participants also discussed the use of dress to conceal specific body

299   parts that were inconsistent with their gender identity as well as not adopting certain items of

300   dress that could send a conflicting message. For example, one participant noted wearing unfitted

301 clothing (i.e., loose) to conceal a tapering V body shape: "…baggy t-shirts or wearing sports bra

302 or something to hide the breasts. This makes it easy to say that either this is a queer individual or

303 a trans person…." [B14] A transwoman noted not wearing high heels. She shared that while

304 heels were considered feminine, they emphasized height and being a tall individual was

305 associated with being a man.

306 **Use of dress was dynamic.** Participants shared that their use of dress to express their

307 gender identity varied based on their level of comfort with their gender. Level of comfort was

308 particularly important during the time they were transitioning to another gender. Participants

309 described themselves and others as wearing dress consistent with traditional norms in

310 circumstances when they or others were less comfortable with their gender.

311 I think I am pretty successful. When I first started transitioning, especially socially

312 transitioning versus medical transition, I really laid along the markers, the dress, earrings,

313 rings and necklaces….I just started transitioning and they didn't really recognize it.

314 [B14].

315 Another participant shared

316 I have gotten more and more comfortable with my body and how I choose to express

317 myself and learned what works with my body as a whole, and that just because I'm a

318 female does not mean I am forced to wear things that the social construct says I

319 should at all times or in general. [C214]

320 **Dress conveys an array of information.** Participants also noted that gender was not the

321 only information inferred on the basis of one's dress. Dress conveyed information about

322 economic class, sexual orientation, work identity, and regional identity. Additional information

323   inferred by participants about others and tied to dress included age, interests (e.g., interest in

324   fashion), and personality.

325   I think my clothing is slim fitting and usually very professional and on trend. I am

326   usually very clean and put together (like my hair and nails are done). I don't have any

327   super visible tattoos or piercings…I appear to have money and take care of myself.

328   [C32]

329   Another participant who appeared for the interview dressed in black, with dark eye

330   make-up, jet black hair, and tattoos noted that her self-presentation was interpreted

331   inaccurately by others as "harsh" and that her appearance was an expression of her

332   hobbies.

333   …I'm a vaguely alternative girl with bangs, and a septum ring. Because I am into

334   things like astrology, and my interests pretty much lined up with my physical

335   appearance…are like 'oh, she seems kinda scary.' Like no, no… Truly I am as gentle

336   as a lamb. [B12]

337   **Barriers Encountered to Expressing Gender Using Dress**

338   Participants noted several barriers to the effective use of dress when expressing their

339   gender. These barriers included stereotypes tied to dress that prevent people from accurately

340   inferring others' gender or presentations that did not fit within traditional norms for men's and

341   women's appearance, limitations concerning what dress could and could not do, contextual

342   concerns, and negative past experiences.

343   **Stereotypes**. The existence of stereotypes that link genders to specific forms of dress is

344   both a blessing and a curse. As noted previously, the association of dress items to a gender

345   assisted individuals in making claims to a gender identity (e.g., I identify as a woman,

346   traditionally women wear dresses, I adopt a dress to announce my gender identity). When

347   attempting to infer the gender identity of others, a participant reasoned that individuals make

348   comparisons. The explained that people are comparing what they see to what they already know

349   and understand. So if they encounter an appearance that falls outside of their experience, they do

350   not know what gender to infer. "I don't think people are making accurate perceptions about

351   others' gender identity. I believe it's a comparison of how different that person looks from the

352   typical man and woman and the way they carry themselves." [C42] Using this process becomes a

353   barrier as individuals cannot seem to get beyond categorizing others as either a cisgender man or

354   cisgender woman. Similarly, another participant noted an issue with using stereotypes to

355   accurately infer gender.

356   Whatever it be about me or about someone else, I do not believe these impressions

357   are accurate at all. Simply because most of these impressions are influenced by

358   stereotypes that were made in a bias[ed] manner and typically generalization of a

359   group of people with similar characteristics. [C214]

360   Another participant commented that a significant barrier to announcing gender

361   identity was fear and a lack of knowledge.

362   I think the only barrier there is for this is lack of knowledge and the fear of 'other'

363   and change. I find unless people are educated on the topic there won't be any growth

364   of understanding because some people might believe their normality is being tested

365   [C214]

366   A participant also noted that stereotypes concerning gender enabled individuals to

367   make inaccurate extended inferences. "They assume that I am into guys, because there's a

368   stereotype that a lot of transwomen are actually just gay men and it is not true. There are a

369   lot of different types of transwomen" [B14].

370   **Limitations tied to dress.** Participants noted that some forms of dress are not tied to

371   gender at all. "The barriers are that the garments that we wear are not enough to identity any

372   gender" [C42]. Additionally, one had to consider mannerisms, voice, gait, and height in addition

373   to dress as these aspects of gender were difficult to realign. A participant discussed being

374   misidentified as male as a result of walking style, which was perceived as "aggressive."

375   Now as I have gotten older I have molded and gotten comfortable with myself a lot

376   more and while I still do identify as a female woman I am aware that I have

377   masculine body language at times and can come off as 'aggressive' which also has

378   helped me become more aware of the space I can take when communicating or even

379   walking. [C214]

380   **Contextual concerns.** Participants identified environments that were unsafe for them.

381   Therefore, rather than announce their gender identity, they used dress to conceal it.

382   I could pass as a straight person if I need to or if I do not feel safe. Usually at work

383   I wear a short-sleeved shirt so it's (gendered tattoos) pretty visible so people can

384   see them. But, like my family get-togethers, depending on which side of the

385   family, I wear longer sleeves… [B12]

386   **Past experience.** Participants noted that a very real limitation on using dress to express

387   their gender identities was their past experiences. When their appearance was clearly not either

388   masculine or feminine viewers became confused. Viewers' confusion resulted in rude behavior.

389   Experiences of rude behavior was particularly true for participants living in rural locations. A

390   participant shared that others gawked.

391   Working on a college campus, …where a lot of people are rural, I am the first trans

392   person they have ever seen. So I have seen parents just stopping and stare, having the

393   'I'm not sure what to do' look on their face and even lot of students... [B14]

394   Two rural participants shared they experienced sarcasm. One participant [B26] shared another

395   individual addressed her using male pronouns despite the fact she was wearing a dress. She said

396   the individual was doing it to be "mean." Thus, a barrier to using dress to express gender identity

397   is previous experiences with others' responses to their dress and a desire not to repeat these

398   experiences.

399   **Effective Expression of Gender: Verification or not?**

400   While participants did not specifically note that they consciously sought verification of

401   their gender identities, they provided evidence that their presentations of their gender identity

402   were interpreted correctly by others and therefore, verified. For example, a participant identified

403   a tattoo located on an arm (see Figure 1). "My tattoo is a transgender lesbian symbol, so I put it

404   on my arm so when someone sees [it] they know..." [B14]. Another participant noted that she

405   wore dresses almost exclusively so that others are correct in inferring her gender. Additional

406   participants commented about the successful use of dress in specific contexts to announce their

407   gender. "I cannot control which conclusions others draw but my presentation is clear and

408   authentic. In dating, conclusions were made that I was a gay man based on my appearance. That

409   was accurate." [C00] "I have to wear blazers and general "menswear" in my day to day work life

410   which I think communicates clearly to people my gender identity." [C32]

411   Some participants shared that they were not always successful in their attempts to convey

412   their gender identities using dress. They noted confusion when others attempted to infer their

413   gender or that of others because the dress worn was inconsistent or did not fit binary norms.

414   I kind of assume things based on height, so obviously there's …crossovers are

415   inaccurate. If you're taller, you're probably a guy. If you're shorter, you're probably a

416   girl. Dress, haircut…I mean, especially if you're androgynous, it can be hard to figure

417   out which way to go to [infer] gender …I know a lot of trans guys who still like to

418   wear femme stuff on occasion, and I know transwomen who, at most, tend to dress

419   very from the butch side of femme. [B26]

420   **Discussion and Conclusions**

421   Consistent with previous researchers (e.g. Levitt et al., 2003; McGuire et al., 2016; Reilly

422 et al., 2019), participants used dress to signal their gender identities. As supported by previous

423 research on members of the LBTQIA+ community (e.g. Clarke & Smith, 2015), wearing dress

424 traditionally tied to women or men assisted some participants in conveying desired gender

425 identities to others. That these gendered dress items existed was especially important and useful

426 during periods of gender transitioning as wearing gendered items of dress facilitated identification

427 of impending genders. However, some participants presented a post-postmodern appearance

428 (Morgado, 2014) consisting of changing and ambiguous gender signals as well as androgynous

429 appearance traits that were a juxtaposition of masculine and feminine aesthetics. Participants

430 noted that in these instances it is difficult for viewers to make accurate inferences of gender

431 identities.

432   Participants noted the importance of one's entire presentation (e.g., gait, mannerisms) in

433 conveying gender identity. Participants were aware that dress was not the sole cue to others'

434 inferences of their gender identity. At times, individuals are objectified into parts– viewers focus

435 on what is most prominent or conflicting (e.g., an individual wearing a dress who has an Adams

436 apple) about another's presentation and use those cues to infer gender. Gender is a multifaceted

437   and evolving category of identity and we should anticipate that new symbols of gender identity

438   will and are emerging along with new gender designations. Dress is only one of many cues that

439   could be used as the basis for inferences of gender, enabling appropriate and respectful interaction

440   with others.

441   Barriers exist to effectively using dress to express gender. As reported by previous researchers

442   (Chauhan et al., 2019; Reilly et al., 2019), our participants shared that some items of dress do not

443   easily accommodate the variety of body forms in existence. Opportunities exist for fashion brands

444   to broaden their offerings to include non-gendered dress as well as for retailers to offer clothing

445   and accessories in non-gendered spaces to alleviate problems associated with easily accessing

446   diverse items of dress.

447   Barriers to using dress to signal gender also included lack of knowledge. Individuals may

448   not recognize or correctly interpret dress intended to signal gender information. Participants

449   residing in rural areas specifically noted others' resistance to moving beyond traditional male or

450   female appearances, people being confused by appearances that fell outside of traditional male or

451   female, and not even wanting to try to communicate their gender because they wanted to avoid

452   evoking rude behavior on the part of others. These results support previous scholars' research

453   indicating where one lived can impact gender expression (Hulko & Hovanes, 2018; Walls, 2019).

454   Our findings also support tenets of self-verification theory (Swann, 2012) and Stone's

455   (1962) ideas about claiming an identity. Some participants used dress to announce their gender

456   identities to others. Some of the time, their attempts were successful, feedback from viewers was

457   positive, and therefore they experienced verification of their gender identities. Other times,

458   attempts to use dress to convey gender were unsuccessful. These ineffective experiences were

459   linked to instances wherein the dress cues presented varied from traditional western binary norms.

460   Presenting mixed gender cues via dress challenges expectations and may certainly contribute to

461   inaccurate inferences concerning others' gender identity. Inaccurate inferences of gender identity

462   tied to dress could also be as a result of several meanings of dress including that it is fluid, tied to

463   context, and that the items of dress utilized might be an individual marker of gender rather than a

464   shared societal indicator (Carter & Marony, 2018). Another consideration is that in some cases

465   clearly displayed gender messages were present but viewers were refusing to accept the stated

466   gender identity perhaps because they held to traditional norms for sex, gender, and appearance.

467   Finally, our findings revealed some information about the importance of dress during

468   periods of transition. Participants who were early in their transition to another gender relied on

469   traditional gender markers (e.g., skirt = female) to convey their new gender identities. Overtime,

470   as they became comfortable with their identified gender, they wore gendered dress less often and

471   in a less obvious manner. This finding is consistent with Arthur (1989) in her work on individuals

472   transitioning into new social identities (i.e., sororities). She noted that, as women adopted their

473   new identity, they adopted the dress and appearance of an ideal sorority member. Over time,

474   however, as they became secure in that identity, they began to present an individualized

475   appearance and wearing the clear symbols of that social identity was less important to them.

476   **Implications for Teaching and Research**

477   There are several implications for teaching and future research. When discussing dress and

478   gender in the classroom, body supplements and body modifications could be presented in a non-

479   gendered manner. However, as participants recognized that many items of dress continue to be

480   linked with males or females, instructors can discuss what it is about forms of dress that cause

481   them to be linked to one gender or another. Among many strategies to enhance student learning

482   about gender, instructors could also discuss how dress is designed along gender lines and to what

483   extent that practice reinforces gender stereotypes concerning dress. The strategy might assist

484   students in recognizing their own biases about gender.

485   In addition, while acknowledging the existence of emerging genders, course policies could

486   reflect properly used pronouns. Our participants indicated appropriate pronouns were important

487   and gender inclusive language in course syllabi, assignments, and examinations would model

488   acceptance of diverse genders. Informal and formal dress codes could also be reviewed for their

489   inclusive nature.

490   Our findings raise awareness of the struggle that individuals that do not identify as one of

491   two cisgender identities have in communicating their gender identities to others. The findings also

492   suggest that the communication of a non-cisgender identity might be even more difficult when

493   residing in a rural versus an urban area within the United States. Therefore, additional work could

494   be done in the clothing and textile classroom on educating students on the existence of individuals

495   that do not identify as cisgender. Our study can be a jumping off point to classroom discussion on

496   use of dress to convey gender identities, the possibilities and realities of designing and

497   merchandising dress beyond traditional western binary norms, the development of inclusive dress

498   codes within schools and within the workplace, and the general (or lack of) acceptance of creative

499   gender expression using dress.

500   As gender identities continue to evolve, dress items and practices that clearly signal male

501   or female are likely to dissipate because dress may be designed more on the basis of body type,

502   weight, and height than on the basis of gender. Future research could include measurements of

503   individuals representing the plurality of genders in existence to enhance design of non-binary

504   clothing. Future investigations could further explore the use of dress as an expression of gender

505   with additional members of the LGBTQIA+ community representing a broader array of gender

506   identities. Individuals who agreed to participate were not representative of all of the 31 different

507   genders identified at the time of data collection. Additional research can identify the difficulties

508   LGBTQIA+ individuals encounter tied to dress in the workplace, in schools that require uniforms,

509   or in gendered public forums (e.g., swimming facilities). Further research is needed on the use of

510   dress during transitioning from one gender to another. For example, researchers could conduct

511   longitudinal studies to reveal use of dress prior to, during, and after transitioning. Finally, our

512   approach to examining the usefulness of self-verification theory (Swann, 2012) in gender

513   expression using dress was indirect in that we did not question participants on the importance of

514   having others verify their gender identities. Rather, our approach was to allow participants to

515   share their experiences as they desired. Thus, future researchers could address tis knowledge gap.

516   Researchers could explore members of the LBGBTQIA+ community responses to others'

517   unsuccessful identification of their gender identities. If attempts to express their gender identity is

518   unsuccessful, do people change their dress? Do they switch to utilizing other identifiers (e.g.,

519   voice, mannerisms)? To what extent does verification by others vary based on who is doing the

520   verifying?

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