



13th Annual City Tech
Poster Session

Relationships Between Dress and Gender in a Context of Cultural Change

Alyssa Adomaitis, Ph.D., Diana Saiki, Ph.D.
Rafi Sahanoor, Emerging Scholar

New York City College of Technology Department of Business

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

- Many individuals no longer identify with the traditional binary distinction of male or female as many new gender categories have emerged (e.g., bi-gender, pan gender, androgynous).
- A total of 31 gender categories have been recognized by the NYC Commission of Human Rights.
- The goal behind the commission's recognition is to encourage equitable treatment and respect of all individuals within the workplace with NYC businesses that do not accommodate individuals identifying with any of these gender identities can face a fine of up to \$250,000 in an anti-discrimination lawsuit.
- Stone (1962) argued that identities are developed and maintained through social interaction with others.
- An individual is recognized as having an identity when that identity is claimed and when others also attribute that identity to that individual.
- Self-verification is the process of trying to confirm one's own view of oneself (Swann, 1912).
- People seek self-verification because self-verifying interactions simplify social exchanges by letting people know what to expect from others.

Purpose

- The purpose of this research was to investigate the use of dress and other appearance cues to communicate gender with individuals representing a range of genders.

Specific research questions were:

1. What types of dress are used for communicating one's gender identity?
2. How is dress used for communicating gender identity?
3. What barriers exist to effective use of dress to express one's gender?

Method

- To address our research purpose, we utilized a phenomenological approach. Utilizing this approach researchers can identify and describe what participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (Creswell, et al, 2007).
- After receiving IRB approval for research with human subjects, individuals were recruited by contacting LGBTQ community organizations in a rural Midwestern and urban Northeastern region of the United States.
- Seven individuals agreed to participate, allowing their interviews to be taped and transcribed.
- To analyze the data, van Manen's (1990) line-by-line method was used.
- After identification of individual responses, similar responses were grouped together, and each category of responses were analyzed to determine underlying theme(s).
- Inter-coder reliability was .92

Results Q1

- Participants noted both body modifications and supplements are used for communicating one's gender identity.
- Body modifications included tattoos, hair styles, and makeup use
- Body supplements mentioned were jewelry/piercings and dresses/pants.
- Participants shared body modifications were very important in identifying gender, because clothing can be confusing (e.g. skirt on a transgender man).
- Communication cues beyond dress were also used to signify gender such as mannerisms and pronouns.

Results Q2

- Social norms or "rules" were discussed such as short hair, t-shirts, and pants being linked with men and long hair, make-up, and skirts/dresses linked to women.
- Participants discussed changes to dress upon transitioning to a non-binary or different gender and noted traditional male-female dress features were only one of many means to express identity.
- They noted there are layers to people beyond the first impression or "most people are like onions."
- They also emphasized one should be careful not to stereotype based on dress.

Results Q3

- Barriers to express gender included physical limitations such as height, voice, and gait.
- Another barrier identified was ignorance.
- Others do not understand gender making both unintentional and intentional mistakes in identifying it.
- Participants also noted pressure from within and outside the LGBTQ community to meet gender dress norms was a barrier.

References

- Barnes, R. & Eicher, J. B. (1997). *Dress and gender: Making and meaning in cultural contexts*. Providence, RI: Berg.
- Berger, J. & Heath, C. (2007). Where consumers diverge from others: Identity signaling and product domains. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 34(2), 121-134.
- Creswell, J. W., Hanson, W. E., Clark Plano, V. L., & Morales, A. (2007). Qualitative research designs: Selection and implementation. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 35(2), 236-264. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000006287390>
- Freitas, A., Kaiser, S., Chandler, J. D., Hall, C. D., Kim, J. W., & Hammidi, T. (1997). Appearance management as border construction: Least favorite clothing, group distancing, and identity not! *Sociological Inquiry*, 67, 323-335. doi:10.1111/j.1475-682X.1997.tb01099.x
- NYC Commission on Human Rights. (2018). Gender Identity/Gender Expression: Legal Enforcement Guidance. <http://www1.nyc.gov/site/cchr/law/legal-guidances-gender-identity-expression.page>.
- Roach-Higgins, M. E., & Eicher, J. B. (1992). Dress and identity. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 10(4), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0887392X9201000401>
- Stone, G. P. (1962). Appearance and the self. In A. M. Rose, (Ed.), *Human behavior and social processes: An interactionist approach*. (pp. 86-118). New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.
- Swann, W. B. (2012). Self-verification theory. In Van Lang, P., Kruglanski, A., & Higgins, T. (Eds). *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology, Vol. 2* (pp. 23-42). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Participant Characteristics

- All participants self-identified as being part of the LGBTQ community, where three participants lived in rural locations and four resided in urban areas
- Two interviewees identified as "female," one said "woman," three identified as "male," and one "transfer non-binary."
- Except for one participant (49 years), all were younger than 32 years and all were pursuing or had earned a university degree.
- Four participants identified as Caucasian, two as African Americans, and one as Hispanic.
- Participants were middle (n=5) or low (n=2) income with annual earnings ranging from \$10,000-\$110,000. One participant was an unemployed student, three worked in service positions, and three held academic related positions.



Figure 1. Transgender
Lesbian Symbol, Participant
B14

Conclusion

- Our results support the idea that dress is useful in transitioning into new gender identities and that participants sought self-verification of their gender identities using dress.
- Participants shared that upon their recognition they did not identify as either male or female, they appeared in a manner that fit stereotypes of either sex (i.e., hyper masculine or hyper femme).
- Participants often utilized multiple gendered appearance cues or behaviors (e.g. masculine walk/ wore a dress; tall stature/ heavy make-up) to suggest their non-binary gender identities.
- As gender identities continue to evolve, dress items and practices that clearly signal male or female are likely to dissolve along with the effectiveness of dress as a signifier of another's gender.