



## Relationships Between Dress and Gender in a Context of Cultural Change

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*Introduction.* As societies evolve policies are developed to recognize and formalize these changes. One current context for change is New York City and the concept that has undergone significant change is gender. Many individuals no longer identify with the traditional binary distinction of male or female. Subsequently, new gender categories have emerged (e.g., bi-gender, pan gender, androgynous). Indeed, 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. NYC businesses that do not accommodate individuals identifying with any of these gender identities can face a fine of up to \$250,000<sup>1</sup> in an anti-discrimination lawsuit.

*Research purpose.* With a goal of equitable and appropriate treatment of all individuals, the question remains how will these different genders be recognizable by others? When gender was a simple binary distinction, one means by which one individual's gender was signaled to others was using dress and appearance cues (Barnes & Eicher, 1997). Dress consists of body modifications (e.g., tattoos, piercings) and supplements (e.g., hats, scarves, clothing) added to the body (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992). 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 included (1) to what extent is dress useful for communicating one's gender identity, (2) how is dress used, and (3) what barriers exist to effective use of dress to express one's gender?

*Theoretical frameworks.* 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. Thus, identities are negotiated through interaction with others. Thus, an individual could use dress to claim a gender identity, another person could either confirm or disconfirm that identity through reactions

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/cchr/law/legal-guidances-gender-identity-expression.page>, section IV, retrieved 2018-11-26

and responses to that individual. Researchers have documented that dress has been used to negotiate identities (Berger & Heath, 2007; Freitas, Kaiser, Hall, Kim & Hammidi, 1997).

Self-verification is the process of trying to confirm one's own view of oneself (Swann, 1912). According to self-verification theory, people prefer that others view them as they view themselves. People seek self-verification because self-verifying interactions simplify social exchanges by letting people know what to expect from others. Thus, dress could be used to announce and verify a claimed gender identity.

*Method.* To address our research purpose, we utilized a phenomenological approach. Utilizing this approach researchers are able to identify and describe what participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (Creswell, et al, 2007). In this instance the use of dress in negotiating and communicating gender identity. 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 be interviewed. Interviews were taped and transcribed. To analyze the data, van Manen's (1990) line-by-line method was used. Two researchers analyzed and coded participants responses. 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.

*Participant characteristics.* All participants self-identified as being part of the LGBTQ community. Three participants lived 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." With the exception of 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.

*Results.* In response to the first research question, participants noted both body modifications and supplements. 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.

In discussions focusing on the second research question, 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. Participants 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.

Focusing on the third research question, 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.

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. Future research includes continued investigation of the use of dress as an expression of gender with all of the 31 genders identified as well as issues surrounding dress and gender in the workplace.

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