



Millennial Transpersons' Gender-conforming and Non-binary Appearance Modes

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In her reflections on documenting transpersons' self-image, Allen (2010) noted there were two distinct aesthetic camps. "The conventional conviction [in 1980] was that before revealing one's body to anyone, it had to look 'perfectly' male, or 'perfectly' female. Anything ambivalent, or 'incomplete,' was unattractive" (p. 267). The notion of looking 'perfectly male' or 'perfectly female' was interpreted as cisgender. Cisgender individuals are people whose sex-assigned-at-birth aligns with their gender identity (e.g., designated as a female on birth records and identifies as girl/woman in life). The desire to appear as cisgender reinforces binary gender categories and is colloquially known as "passing." For some, appearances that fall outside of the binary could call attention to one's status as trans, result in a failure to pass, and potentially result in uncomfortable situations, discrimination, harassment, or even violence and harm (Garfinkel, 1967; Namaste, 2000; Schrock et al., 2009; Snorton, 2009). The other aesthetic camp, Allen (2010) noted, embraced gender non-conformity and "usually did not care about 'passing.'" (p. 271), or even actively challenged the notion.

However, since Allen's 1980s research, expression of a broader range of gender identities has become more widely accepted. Today, people may identify their gender as male, female, third gender, genderqueer, gender fluid, agender, nonbinary, or a variety of other multi-dimensional and non-static ways. Contemporary research does reveal that while some individuals may dress to uphold contemporary gender norms, many continue to use dress to affirm, maintain, and communicate gender identities by using clothes to shape the body to conform to gendered expectations: "Transpersons use and mimic the tools and symbols of dress to ensure they are read and affirmed as a certain gender. Transpersons' individual agency is also limited by the social forces of hetero and cisnormativity, which delegitimize transbodies and queer genders." (Catalpa & McGuire, in press, n.p.).

In this presentation we examine contemporary attitudes towards gender conforming and non-conforming appearance modes. The trans community in the United States is estimated to be between 1.4 and 9.1 million people (Doan, 2016; Flores, Herman, Gates, & Brown, 2016). This sizeable portion of the population warrants understanding clothing needs and how identity is presented to others. Research on gender expression of transgender people has focused mostly on gender identity as a component of broader identity development (e.g., Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Factor & Rothblum, 2008; Gagné, Tweeksbury, & McGaughey, 1997; Morgan & Stevens, 2009) or on body image (e.g., McGuire et al., 2016). Of particular note, Rubin (2003) and Ross (2014) explored how transgender individuals may at times exaggerate their gender performance.

Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is an effective technique to use when the purpose of the research is to gather information about a topic that has been little studied before. A technique of Grounded Theory is to use interviews with opened ended questions. Data for this presentation was pulled from a larger study on transgender body image and identity, which used interviews. One question about clothing was imbedded among questions relating to body image and identity and resulted in an abundance of responses. Responses were analyzed using open coding techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Ninety people from North America and Europe participated in the larger study and consented to interviews. Participants came from metropolitan areas in North America and Ireland (Atlanta, Dublin, Minneapolis, Olympia, Portland, Pullman, Seattle, Salt Lake City, Toronto, and Tucson) and represented multiple ethnicities: 48% US Caucasian, 15% Latin/Hispanic, 12% African American, 11% Irish, 8% American Indian, 5% Asian, 4.5% Canadian, and 4% other. The participants also represented multiple gender identities: 31% female-to-male, 37% male-to-female, and 32% third gender or genderqueer. Age, which ranged 15-30 years, is representative of the Millennial Generation.

Three themes related to passing and safety were identified during the analysis portion of this research. Theme 1, which we called Philosophy of Clothing, included comments relating to the purpose of clothing. Participants discussed how dress is used as a form of control and used the word “costume” frequently. Participants elaborated how clothing can be used to create gender identities and assist with social interaction. Theme 2, “Cis-gender Appearances”, highlighted the importance of dress for passing. Passing is the ability to be effectively read as one’s gender identity and typically refers to appearing cis-gender (or the identity of a person whose gender matches their sex-assigned-at-birth). In order to pass participants selected clothes that conformed to gender stereotypes (e.g., colors, silhouettes). One participant discussed frustration at not passing, while two discussed how passing is important to safety. Theme 3, “Non-binary Appearance”, however, related to creating ambiguous appearances and noted how looking androgynous helps one pass.

Whereas appearing cisgender is still common, the Millennial Generation has a different concept of non-binary appearances. As Allen (2010) noted, in the 1980s, Androgyny—the combination of both masculine and feminine characteristics--was in opposition to looking “perfectly” male or female and disrupted one’s ability to pass. However, today, androgyny is seen as an effective method, for some, to pass. The reason may lie in the nature of ambiguous appearances which allow the reader to draw one’s own conclusions about gender.

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