
Affecting Agency Through Restrictive Dress Codes

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Contextual Review and Concept Statement

The human body has been the milieu of innumerable expressions of power dynamics ranging from neutral to radical. Dress is inextricably linked to gender roles and largely associated with symbolism used to communicate identity (Milan & Wright, 2018; Kaiser, Nagasawa, & Hutton, 1991; Goffman, 1975). Foucault has been criticized by feminist's scholars for his neutral approach suggesting the male and female bodies affect similar or equal experiences in society (Bartky, 1988). Furthermore, feminist theory highlights the physical experience of women and the way they "have been subjugated primarily through their bodies..." (King, 2004, p. 31). Many of these restrictions appeared historically as dress items, such as "tightly-laced corsets...and long trains" (Crane, 1999), which not only limited physical agency, but also posed significant health hazards (Cunningham, 2013). Groups like the suffragettes questioned dress that impeded physical movement and endangered health (Negrin, 1999); they equally used symbolism in dress to advance female agency (XXXX). In contrast, men's clothing, with limited exceptions, have promoted physical agency, functionality, and movement (Tanberg, 1985). Women throughout history donned men's garments when activity required more functionality, less restriction, and more physical movement (Ogg & Green, 2020; Fisher, 2001; Reigal, 1963).

The concept for this design originates from an investigation of feminine dress that has historically limited bodily movement while superimposing those limitations on a masculine body with relatively limited experience with dress codes that restrict physical agency. The purpose of this garment is to express how women have been physically restricted by dress through the lens of menswear. The design specifically restricts head and neck movement, arm movement, the waist, and leg movement.

Aesthetic properties and visual impact:

Traditionally, the vocabulary of menswear aesthetics to communicate a masculine identity can generally be described as being narrower compared to their womenswear aesthetics. Although in contemporary fashion there are many examples of color and pattern in men's dress, this design deliberately emphasizes the historically traditional fabrics and monochromatism representative of a majority of menswear. This aesthetic choice also aided in keeping the design in the realm of menswear as opposed to the sphere of camp or drag. The use of a single fabric, green wool houndstooth check reflects the formal aesthetic quality of line and constitutes the greatest portion of visual impact of a contiguous line that continues from the collar to the train of the design. A secondary visual impact is created with leather bands which emphasizes the selected female-

derived restricted dress elements. Other elements are a high collar, a lengthened shoulder yoke to restrict arm movement, a waist compression feature, a leg hobble, and a long train. Emphasis of the design lines is accomplished with the use of “shadow structuring” (DeLong, 1987) to define the interior design shapes on the single patterned fabric.

Process, technique, and execution

The design process progressed from the conceptual ideation phase to researching the various restrictive elements found in historic female dress and deciding on the man’s jumpsuit as a base to collect the restrictive components. After choosing the collar, restrictive shoulder yoke, waist cincher, hobble, and train, a sketch was produced, an all-natural wool houndstooth check fabric was selected along with natural leather for functioning straps. A muslin pattern was developed by draping on a men’s dress form with legs. The collar and hobble have straps that pass from front to back. The waist cincher crosses in the front and requires an opening through which the left band passes through the right band. These strap closure features provides an opportunity to add more masculine decoration such as welted openings, self-fabric tabs and brass buckles. The most interesting challenge was transforming the flared hem pantlegs into the trained back and was accomplished by draping the inside back leg pant hem to the full length of the train and matching it to the side seam of the front pantleg at the hem.

Cohesion

This design is cohesive with the concept of superimposing elements of restrictive dress on to a masculine aesthetic with historic female aesthetic components that limited physical agency. The concept cohesion is further reinforced by modest embellishments. Male dress adornments are traditionally limited and restricted to the neck (such as a necktie), or the wrist and hands (e.g. A watch or metal ring). A single brass metal non-functionary adornment was chosen at the neck and coordinates the functioning brass buckles.

Significance, rationale, and contribution

The significance of this design hearkens to current and important themes of equality and awareness of other perspectives including gender and identity. By viewing the male body through the lens of women’s dress and lack of agency, this design continues conversations on dress rules, restrictive dress codes and dress’ ability to define the landscape of human agency.

Originality and innovation

This garment introduces restrictive dress elements not normally experienced by the male body. The design adapts a standard men’s jumpsuit to evoke conversations on equality, gender, and agency. Unique features include, a front crossing waist suppression element, belted high collar, a belted hobbling device to restrict leg movement, flared pant hems that unite into a train, and subtle masculine details such as welted openings, self-fabric tabs, straps, and buckles to balance the male and female aspects of this design.



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