Apparel Consumption and Experiences of Gay Men and Transgender Women in India

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Keywords: Apparel, Consumption, India, LGBT

LGBT (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and/or transgender) individuals fashion their bodies in unique ways as compared to heterosexual individuals, which has resulted in styles that push gender boundaries (Cole, 2005; Geczy & Karaminas, 2013). Research examining transgender bodies and their experiences with clothing is largely absent in the literature, except the most recent study by Reilly, Catalpa, and McGuire (2017), where they found that the ready-to-wear industry largely does not meet the functional and aesthetic needs of transgender individuals. In this study, we sought to ask questions related to LGBT individual's experiences with the consumption of fashion and clothing specifically in India, a country where identifying in the LGBT community was illegal up until 2017 (Kentish, 2017). In this study, we asked (1) What are LGBT individual's experiences with fashioning their body in India? (2) What are LGBT individual's impressions of and experiences with the current offerings in the fashion system in India? Entwistle's (2000) notion of the "situated bodily practice," which considers both the dressed body and the context from which the body is within and acted upon by outsiders, informs our study (p. 325).

Because there is scarce literature on this topic, a qualitative approach was used to answer the research questions. Creswell (2007) illustrates the potentiality of phenomenology as a research lens in qualitative research design. Phenomenology involves the process of studying the lived experience of a phenomenon shared by a group of individuals with a focus on their perception of these experiences. In this sense, the phenomena under study was the consumption of fashion and clothing for LGBT individuals in India, as clothing and appearance-related behaviors are a significant part in the process of identity negotiation (Kaiser, 2012). The interview was guided by a few key open-ended questions and then the interview dialogue emerged as the experiences were described by the participants (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). The two key questions important to ask in a phenomenological approach include "What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon?" and "What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?" (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). Creswell (2007) continued that other open-ended questions can be added to the interview schedule, but these two questions lead to the textual and structural description of the common experiences, which leads analysis to the "overall essence of the experience" (p. 60). An interview schedule was used on topics including: experiences related to their appearance; what they wear; how they feel about what they wear; which fashion brands they prefer; and availability of different fashions and styles from different brands. To be eligible for the study, participants had to meet three criteria: 1) 18+ years old, 2) live in India, and 3) Identify as LGBT. Creswell

(2007) recommends between five and 25 participants for this approach who have all experienced the same phenomena under study.

The transcription and notes from each interview were analyzed using the phenomenological data analysis techniques described by Creswell (2007) in addition to using open, axial, and selective coding. The qualitative data analysis program NVIVO was used during the analysis process. A codebook was developed and utilized and an intercoder reliability check resulted in an acceptable agreement.

Participants included 3 gay men and 7 transgender women who ranged in age from 26-50. All participants were assigned male at birth and of Indian descent with those identifying as gay using the pronouns he, while the transgender women used the pronouns she. All but one participant lived in an urban area.

Participants described their experiences with fashioning their body with much *ambivalence*. They expressed that they wore a variety of styles that were often androgynous in nature and mixed both feminine and masculine aesthetics. *Affordability* of garments was salient for participants as they often expressed the inability to purchase garments they felt most represented their LGBT identity due to cost. In the next theme, *desire for gender fluidity*, participants had a significant interest in clothing that pushed gender boundaries and was less rigid than the current offerings centered around the gender binary. For example, one participant (transgender, 30) stated they preferred if fashion brands were more LGBT friendly or that "keep the brand as genderfluid." Participants identified numerous brands both national (such as Zara) and local to India that offered more gender fluid or androgynous styles, yet they indicated a desire for more of these options. The context of being in India where these options are largely not available resulted in some ambivalence in regards to the desire for more gender fluidity. Finally, *clothing fit* was a recurring issue for participants as they often desired to wear garments made for individuals who were assigned female at birth, which did not fit on their bodies that were assigned male at birth due to differences in the shapes of their bodies. The numerous subthemes for each major theme will be discussed further in the paper.

Consistent with previous findings LGBT individuals in India both have the desire to push gender boundaries and expressed issues with embodied experiences of clothing fit (Cole, 2005; Geczy & Karaminas, 2013; Reilly, Catalpa, & McGuire, 2017). The paper offers insights into the bodily practices and experiences for LGBT individuals in India, a community that historically has not been explored in regards to these topics. Through an understanding of their bodies and bodily experiences (Entwistle, 2000), we disentangle how the shape and sizes related to biological characteristics create ambivalence about what is offered in the fashion system and how these availabilities create desires for fluidity to resolve clothing fit needs. The LGBT individuals desired more agency in these embodied experiences. Based on this research, fashion industry professionals can consider the design needs and aesthetics for this community in India.

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