



“It started off as Hot Topic, and that was like the gateway store”:

Narratives of Dress and the LGBTQ+ Coming Out Process

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Introduction

One’s identity is expressed through one’s dress. Among gay men, dress is used to communicate one’s gay identity but questions of surrounding the development of a gay identity vis-à-vis dress that communicates it remains unanswered. This research builds on a prior study that theoretically linked the Public, Private, and Secret Self Model with coming out models (Reilly & Miller, 2016) by providing qualitative evidence to support their suppositions.

Literature Review

Dress, or the totality of appearance modifications and attachments/supplements to the body (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992) have long been used as a means to communicate gay identity. Coded symbols, like a green carnation during the Edwardian period in England, the inverted pink triangle post World War II, or the rainbow flag have been used on clothing and bodies (Reilly & Seathre, 2013). Specific gay subcultures have styles such as the clone (blue collar aesthetic), muscle boy (muscular bodies in form-fitting clothing), bear (blue collar clothes with overweight, hirsute bodies), scally (British working-class aesthetic), and homothug (African-American hip-hop aesthetic) are just some of the styles that gay men use to proclaim and reinforce their identity (Cole, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

The Public, Private, Secret Self Model (PPSS; Eicher & Miller, 1994) categorizes dress into nine sectors depending on purpose of the dress (reality, fun/leisure, fantasy/play) crossed with the situation when the dress is worn (in the public, in the private, in secret). The taxonomy has been used in research on historic re-enactors (e.g. Miller-Spillman & Lee 2014), Sino-Japanese dress (Kim & DeLong, 1992) and, tattoo location (Luzier, 1998).

Coming out models offer a framework for understanding how LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and others) individuals incorporate a LGBTQ+ identity into their total sense of self. Although there are different iterations of coming out models, they all propose a succession of stages beginning with a person thinking they may be LGBTQ+, telling people close to them they may be or are LGBTQ+, telling other people they are LGBTQ+, and integrating it with their total identity (e.g., Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1988).

Reilly and Miller (2016) combined these frameworks and suggested that as gay men develop a sense of self as gay, their dress changes to correspond to where they are in the stages of coming out. However, this research was completely theoretical and they called for subsequent research on the topic to test their claims.

Method

The researchers used a hermeneutical phenomenological approach to gather interviews (Heidegger, 1996). Participants were recruited via flyers, social media, and word-of-mouth. Interviews were conducted in person or via Zoom and included questions related to dress and coming out. All participants gave written or oral consent. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, except for three cases where the recording device did not work; in these cases, the interviewer relied on notes taken during the interview, wrote a summary, and asked the participant to review it for accuracy. Interviews were 15-31 minutes. Transcripts and summaries were analyzed line-by-line by both participants and coded separately. Discrepancies were discussed and recoded based on consensus. This method was approved by the researchers' Internal Review Board.

Results

Nine gay cisgender men and one bisexual transman participated. Six were White, two were Asian, and two were mixed race. The mean age was 31. Four themes emerged from the data: dress before coming out, dress right after coming out, dress a period of time after coming out, and situational dress. In the first theme, participants noted their dress was baggy, masculine, and conservative, or "straight." In the second theme, participants noted dress changed to be more fitted, expressive, fashionable, and stylish, or "obviously gay." In the third theme participants noted how their dress is a combination of styles, masculine and feminine, and less obviously "gay." In the fourth theme, dress was dependent on the situation—work or home, or if they were with gay people or people who knew they were gay.

Discussion

Participants used clothing as a means to communicate identity in various stages. How participants viewed dress—as "straight" or "gay"—changed with the stages of coming out, with the most "gay" clothing worn during the period directly after coming out to others. Coming out models propose that after a period of being "out of the closet" LGBTQ+ individuals will incorporate their sexual orientation into their overall identity (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1988). This research somewhat supports Reilly and Miller-Spillman's (2016) proposition. While reality and fun/leisure dress did change with the stages of coming, it was not necessarily aligned with the secret, private, or public selves. Rather dress was more dependent on the situation and if it they would incur repercussions for being out.

Conclusion

This research used a qualitative approach and had 10 men participate, so it does not reflect the variety and diversity of the entire LGBTQ+ community. However, it does support coming out theories and advances the literature by noting the relationship between coming out and dress. More research on other communities within the LGBTQ+ spectrum is necessary to explore themes surrounding situational dress.

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