

Consumer Products Positioned as Vehicles for Queer and Trans Sensibilities

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Products are the tangible embodiment of a brand, the concrete manifestations that entrepreneurs create, market, and ultimately sell. Yet, within the realm of queer and trans fashion, these products serve as more than just commodities (e.g., Geczy & Karaminas, 2013; Reddy-Best et al., 2023). They become vessels that intricately convey and embody the multifaceted tensions, ambiguities, and ambivalences surrounding queer and trans identities (Kaiser et al., 1995). Thus, the profound question arises: What qualities within these brands' products allow them to actively resist, subvert, and simultaneously uphold traditional notions of gender and sexuality? How did these entrepreneurs think through these tensions, create the products, and then communicate that to their consumers? In navigating the complex landscape of the 21st century, queer and trans fashion brands strategically position their soft and hard assemblages, not merely as clothing, accessory, or shoe items, but as intentional tools to challenge and support prevailing fashion norms (Reddy-Best et al., 2023; Reddy-Best, 2017, 2020). In this research, I explore the nuances of how this strategic positioning unravels the layers that define these products as powerful conveyors of queer and trans sensibilities, shedding light on how the brands navigate and contribute to the ongoing evolution of the societal and personal perceptions and expectations.

To complete the research, I drew upon the historic research method and utilized a critical cultural analysis. Specifically, I completed oral histories with 24 queer and trans focused fashion brands (e.g., All is Fair in Love and Wear; Audio Helkuik; Beefcake Swimwear; Bluestocking Boutique; Dapper Boi; FLAVNT Streetwear; FtM Essentials; gc2b; Greyscale Goods; Kipper Clothiers; Kirrin Finch; Let's Be Brief; NiK Kacy Footwear; Outplay Swimwear; Play Out Apparel; Queer Supply; Rebirth Garments; Show and Tell Concept Shop; Strapping Sacramento; Stuzo; THÚY Custom Clothier; TomboyX; TransGuy Supply; and WE ARE MORTALS). The oral history method is a research approach that involves gathering and preserving historical information through recorded interviews with individuals who have personal knowledge or experience of a particular time period, event, or cultural context (Ritchie, 2003). I focused on capturing memories, perspectives, and lived experiences to document and understand the fashion brands and media from their unique viewpoints in the context of the early 21st century.

I completed the oral histories in a semi-structured interview style and aimed to elicit detailed accounts and narratives about specific topics, such as significant historical events, personal experiences, and cultural practices related to the development of these fashion brands. Specifically, I asked about their personal background, clothing experiences, start of their company, inspiration and design process, challenges and successes, consumer feedback, advertising and public imagery, funding, sustainability, consumers, trends, and final thoughts. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and about 3 hours. To analyze the data, I employed a combination of open, axial, and selective coding techniques (Creswell, 2014). These coding methods allowed me to identify patterns, establish relationships, and develop a comprehensive understanding of the underlying themes present within the data.

Through their products, these fashion brands engage in a nuanced and intentional exploration of queer and trans meaning, deftly balancing multiple intersections throughout the

entire lifecycle of their creations. These brands produce commodities and interweave layers of queerness and transness into different aspects of product development, distribution, and consumption, of course not all at once. That is, the narratives of these brands embody a sensitivity towards queer and trans identities, manifesting through a diverse array of approaches and possibilities: consumption, making, options, messaging, makers, and educational hubs. Each brand adopted different approaches at different times for different reasons while drawing on their strengths and acknowledging their limitations. These queer and trans fashion products intentionally navigate the realms of ambivalence and ambiguity. They disrupt conventional categories, deliberately blurring lines to foster a space where ambiguity is accepted and celebrated. This intentional ambiguity challenges normative expectations, encouraging a more expansive understanding of fashion—with the coexistence of multiplicity and complexity.

In the realm of consumption, these brands *revolutionize shopping experiences* by adopting gender-equal practices, transcending traditional labels to focus on diverse styles that resonate across the spectrum of identities. Furthermore, they redefine the very essence of products by *queering the accompanying copy*, transforming it into a medium for expressing the richness of queer and trans experiences. When it comes to the making of their products, these brands pay meticulous attention to construction details. They *mix and match heteronormative elements of garments*, challenging preconceived notions and embracing a spectrum of possibilities. The very shape of the body becomes a canvas for expression, with options ranging from compression to additions, allowing individuals to assert, explore, and embrace their identities through clothing. In terms of options, these brands go beyond conventional sizing systems that root back to the early 20th century, *embracing an expanded sizing approach* that accommodates the diverse bodies and identities within the queer and trans communities.

Messaging becomes a powerful tool in the hands of these fashion brands. They *overtly express pride*, celebrating queer and trans identities with bold statements that resonate with authenticity. Simultaneously, they *weave subtle pride into their communication*, creating a sense of belonging and recognition for those in the know, which has a long history in the LGBTQ+ communities such as gay men's use of bandannas to communicate with other gay men – sometimes called flagging (e.g., see Reilly and Saethre, 2014). Behind the scenes, the maker plays a crucial role. These fashion brands *actively seek out queer makers and designers*, ensuring that the creative process itself is deeply rooted in the lived experiences of the community.

It is crucial to recognize that their participation in capitalism does not negate the positive impact they may have on the industry. They might challenge conventional standards; however, the fundamental structure within which they operate often demands adherence to market principles, shareholder value, and competitive strategies, aligning them with the broader capitalist ethos. In this complex dance between disruption and conformity, these enterprises become both agents of change and products of the system they seek to transform. As they push boundaries and redefine the fashion landscape, they simultaneously underscore the resilience and adaptability of capitalism, absorbing and co-opting even its most radical challengers. This paradoxical relationship highlights the intricate interplay between innovation and the persistent economic structures that shape the fashion industry and society at large.

Arguably, these brands are creating opportunities for queer and trans moments to exist in unspecific ways. Kaiser and McCullough's (2010) knot metaphor is a useful tool to contemplate how truths about queer and trans products can be temporarily obscured by the very limitations

the fashion brands are navigating, only to be unveiled as the knot is loosened and is perhaps retied when leaning on their self-defined successful business practices centering queer and trans identities. In essence, this dynamic interplay between societal perceptions and the evolving strategies of these brands underscores the knotty entanglements of queer and trans identities in the realm of fashion. This research has practical implications for current and future fashion entrepreneurs looking to center justice-related philosophies and the ways they produce and distribute products.

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