

Intersections of Queerness and Mormonism Student Activism: Brigham Young University, The Fashioned Body, Space, and Place

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Brigham Young University (BYU) is a private research university located in Provo, Utah, United States. Founded in 1875 by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church), BYU has grown to become one of the largest religious universities in the United States. BYU is known for its strong emphasis on academic excellence coupled with a commitment to the values and teachings of the LDS Church. (Brigham Young University, 2024a). However, one notable aspect of BYU's policies is its stance on LGBTQ+ individuals. The university's Honor Code, which students are required to abide by, includes provisions that prohibit "same-sex romantic behavior" amongst its students (BYU, 2024c, para. 2). This policy has been the subject of controversy and criticism, particularly in recent years as attitudes towards LGBTQ+ rights and inclusion have evolved. Critics argue that BYU's policies create an unwelcoming and discriminatory environment for LGBTQ+ individuals, contributing to feelings of alienation and marginalization within the student body. This stance has led to protests, advocacy efforts, and calls for change both within and outside the university community (e.g., Porter, 2023). In recent years, there have been some developments indicating a potential shift in attitudes and policies at BYU regarding LGBTQ+ issues, including statements from university leaders expressing a desire to create a more supportive and inclusive environment. However, significant changes have yet to materialize, and the debate continues within and around the university (Bennett, 2023).

In this work, we explore the context of queerness and Mormonism at BYU through fashioning the body, as fashioning the body is one important way queer and trans folks feel affirmed in their identities (e.g., Reddy-Best et al., 2022; Reddy-Best, et al., 2023; Streck & Reddy-Best, 2023). According to the BYU Honor Code, which students sign and agree to upon acceptance, they must, "Live a chaste and virtuous life, including abstaining from sexual relations outside marriage between a man and a woman. Living a chaste and virtuous life also includes abstaining from same-sex romantic behavior" (BYU, 2024c, para. 2). Additionally, the Honor Code specifies appearances for men and women including: "modesty," prohibiting "extreme clothing," requiring that clothing "be clean, neat, modest, and avoid extremes in styles and colors," and for men specifically, their hair "should be neatly trimmed," they "should be clean shaven," and "if worn, mustaches should be neatly trimmed" (BYU, 2024b, para. 4).

To achieve our purpose, we conducted oral histories with current BYU students involved in the various queer centered resources near campus. BYU students utilize these resources, yet BYU does not recognize or associate with them. The oral history methodology constitutes a research technique centered on collecting and safeguarding historical insights via recorded conversations with individuals possessing firsthand knowledge or direct experience of a specific era, occurrence, or cultural milieu (Ritchie, 2003). We focused on capturing memories, perspectives, and lived experiences to document the BYU students' viewpoints in the 21st century as related to LGBTQ+ identities, BYU as a place/space, and fashioning the body.

In the non-BYU sanctioned LGBTQ+ group spaces, BYU students engage in exploring the intersections of queerness and Mormonism via fashioning the body in numerous ways. After

analyzing the interviews using a constant comparative approach (Creswell, 2014), we identified that much of the self-fashioning involved incorporation of overt queer signifiers.

In these overt queer signifiers via embodied fashions, much of the fashion centered on creating space for these prohibited expressions to manifest and be celebrated. For instance, drag emerged as a prominent form of activism in the surrounding community, serving as a bridge between queerness and Mormonism for BYU students. A notable figure in this movement, Hannah Bryan (in drag, known as Charity Heels), has crafted drag outfits that incorporate BYU and queer symbols. Examples include an avant-garde denim ensemble featuring a BYU t-shirt, and a homemade corset that showcases the trans flag colors. Hannah's drag performance music often carries overtly religious or activist themes in the lyrics, further emphasizing community building and bridging divides. Other student drag performers push boundaries in less overt ways by crafting outfits that would be considered "extreme" or "absurd" in their cultural setting.

Students also participated in events such as *Color the Campus*, where queer students gathered and moved about in large numbers on campus to create queer visibility while donning rainbow-themed clothing of varying assortments. Unofficial BYU student groups like the Rainbow Collective advocated for both Mormon and queer identities by promoting, wearing, and distributing symbol-laden t-shirts. At queer student BYU (unofficial) organization events, like the back-to-school pride celebration, where anti-queer protestors may be present, some attendees defiantly wore DIY angel-themed outfits with large wings to protect, by physically blocking, those participating in the pride celebration from anti-queer protestors. Activists have utilized the practice of angel wings in protest disruption throughout much of queer and trans history (Kennedy, 2016). Another intentional space students created includes, *The Cougar Pride Center*, which plays a crucial role in providing gender-affirming clothing through its "open closet" program, allowing students to apparel-related items for free. This resource has been instrumental for individuals crafting drag outfits or seeking gender and/or sexual identity affirming attire. Certain campus spaces, like the Theatre and Art department building on the West campus, are considered safer havens for queer students, providing an environment where drag performers can comfortably prepare and present themselves in full drag. Similarly, the Global Women's Studies Office, particularly the "Conference Womb" room, offers a welcoming atmosphere with rainbow decor and imagery of local drag queens, further fostering a sense of belonging and connectedness for LGBTQ+ individuals on campus.

In addition to creating new spaces to enact intersections between queerness and Mormonism, students also fashioned their bodies in unique ways in the formal exhibiting spaces supported and maintained by BYU. That is, queer students have found ways to infuse activism and religion into their graduation attire, a space where students formally celebrate their achievements. For example, one student had a rainbow flag sewn to the inside of her graduation robe, which she flashed to the audience while on stage.

Our exploration of the complex intersection of queerness and Mormonism at BYU sheds light on the creative and resilient ways in which LGBTQ+ students navigate and assert their identities within a context marked by homophobic and transphobic institutional policies and cultural norms. Despite the restrictive provisions of the BYU Honor Code and the university's official stance on same-sex romantic behavior, queer students at BYU actively engage in fashioning their bodies as a form of self-expression, resistance, and community-building, confirming past literature on the importance of using fashion to affirm and celebrate queer and

trans identities (e.g., Reddy-Best et al., 2022; Reddy-Best, et al., 2023; Streck & Reddy-Best, 2023). Through drag performances, symbolic clothing, and the creation of supportive spaces both on and off-campus, these students challenge existing norms and strive to carve out spaces where their identities can be celebrated and affirmed, in part, through fashion. As the conversation around LGBTQ+ rights continue to evolve, it is imperative for institutions like BYU to critically examine their policies and practices if they aim to support all LDS Church members.

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