Negotiating Authenticity: Exploring Design Decisions of Reenactors' Regency Gowns

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There are currently about 4,500 members of the Jane Austen Society of North America within the United States and Canada. Members of Jane Austen groups frequently meet together for events such as balls and teas. During these events members are encouraged to wear "Regency" period dress (which roughly covers 1795-1820). Dress plays a major role in the activities of these groups and there is a desire among members to dress authentically.

Wearers of historic styles of costume often value and strive to achieve authenticity in dress (Strauss, 2001). According to Strauss (2001), in order to be authentic, costume must exhibit historically accurate construction methods and materials. However, many historic materials are no longer available today due to differences between historical and modern methods of creating materials.

The drive for authenticity has influenced a number of reenactors to create blogs/internet-based instructions on methods for properly creating and dressing in Regency attire. While scholarship exists regarding the authenticity, materials, and construction of extant garments from these time periods, there are few studies focusing on Regency costume as it is worn today. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to examine the "quest for authenticity" (Handler and Saxton 1988, p. 242) and subsequent design decisions of reenactors creating Regency gowns.

Methods and Procedures

To explore participants' design decisions and modern interpretations of Regency gowns, blog and website entries pertaining to the making of this costume style were examined using digital ethnography or netnography. Kozinets (2002) defined this research method as "ethnography on the Internet" that "adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications" (p. 62).

The resultant sample included 13 blog or website entries. The blog/website authors were designers and wearers of Regency gowns and were all female. Constant comparison method was used to analyze the text and data collection continued until theoretical saturation was met.

Results and Discussion

Four major categories emerged from the data: authenticity, personal needs, limitations, and negotiations. An over-arching desire for *authenticity* was evident throughout the sample. Designers looked to primary sources of inspiration, which included fashion plates and extant garments that would guide them in creating an authentic-looking gown.

Personal needs of the designer were frequent design considerations. These included expressive needs or notions of what the designer wanted their gown to express or communicate. Personal needs also included functional needs related to mobility, fit, as well as versatility of style. For instance to achieve mobility, one designer reported removing the train to make the gown more suitable for dancing. Aesthetic needs were those pertaining to the general line, shape, fullness, and/or size of the entire gown or design details.

The designers of Regency gowns encounter a number of *limitations* that impacted their final designs. For example, designers often faced economic limitations, which led them to choose cheaper materials for their garments. Also, the lack of skill/knowledge limited what types of Regency styles could feasibly be assembled by the designer.

There was a desire among the designers to create authentic Regency gowns. However, designers frequently *negotiated* authenticity with their personal needs and limitations. For instance in the selection of materials, while designers drew from authentic sources of inspiration that provided them with ideas for materials and colors, materials were often selected in relation to factors of economy and function. For most of the designers, considerations of their financial constraints and ability to work with the materials (limitations in skill) influenced their selection of materials.

Personal needs were similarly negotiated with the desire for authenticity when selecting a pattern. Even when "striving for accuracy" the gowns were made to be worn by women with contemporary figures. Designers also modified existing patterns to suit their aesthetic needs, such as personal preference relating to the overall look of the final garment.

Authentic designs were less feasible when the designer lacked the knowledge and skill necessary to pattern and construct a gown. Strauss (2001) found that "method of construction" contributed to authenticity (p. 154) for instance, hardcore reenactors viewed hand-sewn garments as more authentic over machine-sewn garments. Likewise, designers of Regency gowns viewed hand-sewing as more authentic and contended that machine sewing reduced its level of authenticity. These limitations worked as opposing forces in designers' quests for authenticity and mirror the "barriers to authenticity" described by Strauss (2001, p. 151).

Designers in this sample felt that even if some aspects of their costume, such as fabrics, were not historically accurate, they could still achieve a fairly authentic result through the use of an authentic pattern or construction technique. This feeling is in opposition to past research on the concept of authenticity among renenactors (Strauss, 2001).

Examination of the data from this research led to the development of the *Designers of Regency Gowns Needs Model*. This model graphically displays the balance between personal needs and limitations all while operating under the umbrella of authenticity.

Conclusions

The designers in this sample had to balance many aspects while creating Regency gowns. Personal needs relating to function, aesthetics, and feasibility and limitations in finances, time, and skill influenced decisions in patterning and construction of the gowns and acted as barriers to authenticity. Future research should examine how members of this community interact with each other to examine how this interaction may impact their designs and their "quest for authenticity."

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