



Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Individuals and the Negotiation of Identity Development Through Embodied Practices While Traveling: Panopticism and Gendered Surveillance

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Travel refers to the movement of bodies from one space to another. In these movements geographically, the identities and appearance-related practices shift, change, and engage in malleability as they interface with new individuals, cultures, communities, in both expected and unexpected spaces (Goffman, 1969; Kaiser, 2012; Kaiser & McCullough, 2010). For transgender and gender non-conforming individuals (TGNC), these experiences may be even more complex (Bockting, Benner, & Coleman, 2009; Factor & Rothblum, 2008; Pollock & Eyre, 2012). TGNC is an umbrella term for a community of people whose gender expression does not align with the cultural expectations of their assigned sex at birth (Center for LGBTQIA+ Student Success, 2019). There are numerous ways people in the TGNC community experience and navigate their gender, gender expression, and gender roles. Some individuals have a desire and interest in transitioning and “passing” as another gender, while other individuals may feel a rejection to the binary-gender system. Overall, there are numerous identities that fall under the TGNC umbrella that people identify within (Tate, Ledbetter, & Youssef, 2013).

In this study, we examine TGNC individual’s experiences with the negotiation of identity through different embodied practices while traveling to different geographic locations. There has been significant literature in tourism on the experiences of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or queer people, (i.e., Therkelsen et al., 2013; Vorobjovas-Pinta & Robards, 2017) in addition to more recent work on traveling experiences of TGNC individuals (Olson & Reddy-Best, 2019). Yet, there is a lack of research examining the intersections of travel, appearance, and the body for TGNC individuals. Using Foucault’s (1977) concept of panopticism, we explore the relationships between power, the perceived viewer, and TGNC bodies and bodily practices. How are bodies monitored and how does this impact negotiations of identity through dress when moving into familiar or unfamiliar spaces?

Foucault (1975) offers the concept of panopticism by arguing that the shape of the early 18th century prism system in which the central panoptic-shaped tower and the surrounding circular cells with prison mates serves as a metaphor for controlled power and surveillance. In this sense, the prisoners are constantly unaware of their surveillance status and thus regulating their own behavior due to the outside system. We use a Foucauldian discourse analysis focusing on power relationships between TGNC individuals, their embodied practices, and society.

Due to the limited research on TGNC individual’s experiences with appearance negotiation, we used a qualitative approach where we conducted 14 in-depth interviews after approval from the Institutional Review Board. This study is part of a larger study where we were examining TGNC individual’s experiences with traveling and appearance-related practices. We invited participants who were 18 years or older, identified in the TGNC community, and had traveled over 100 miles at least once in the last year for work or leisure. Participants were recruited via flyers on social media where we shared in our own personal networks and asked TGNC-focused social media groups to also share the call. All of the interviews took place between 2017 and 2018 in person, on the phone, or via video chat. The interview schedule contained 39 questions which started with demographic questions. Then we asked questions related to their gender identity and general appearance-related practices, followed by tourism-related questions pertaining to pre-travel, during travel, and post travel. All of the questions were open-ended. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and re-listened to by each author to ensure accuracy. We

followed a grounded theory approach and used open, axial, and selective coding in the qualitative-software NVIVO (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Intercoder reliability resulted in 96% agreement, which is considered acceptable (Neuman, 2011). Participants ranged in age from 21 to 60 (average 34). Eight of the participants were assigned female at birth while the remaining were assigned male at birth. Participants were mostly white (n = 10), followed by black/African American (n = 2), multi-ethnic (n = 1), and racially ambiguous (n = 1). Lastly, participants had a variety of different gender identities, and we found there were too many nuanced differences to describe here in this abstract in an accurate way.

Across the interviews, four larger themes emerged with several subthemes: *emotional labor and dress; travel as a vehicle for identity negotiation; fear of the unknown; and no change in dress while traveling.*

While all of the participants mentioned a significant effort went into thinking about and negotiating their dressed body and appearance practices during their everyday experiences, there was also a theme of *emotional labor and dress* while traveling into different geographic regions. In some instances, participants related constantly thinking about their appearance while traveling. For example, participant 3 traveled for work and transitioned their appearance to a more feminine appearance while going out at night. In the morning, participant 3 had to be on guard with a “cover story” in case there was still evidence from the night before such as “leftover mascara.” Some of the participants explained that most of these thought processes of added emotional labor occurred when they traveled before having their medical transition surgeries. There was also added appearance planning where some participants would pack two suitcases in case they wanted to try out a new aesthetic in the “opposite gender” while traveling in a space they felt might be safe to do so. Lastly, the participants expressed that sometimes they had to consider some of their bodily changes and what they might wear in new spaces, because for example their “penis might swell.”

Traveling was also used as a *vehicle for identity negotiation*. Therefore, when some participants moved into these new spaces they would sometimes utilize the opportunity to try out new aesthetics. While these new spaces were utilized for the possibility of new negotiations of identity, there was also a *fear of the unknown*. Participants related that they actively tried to pass or appear in the gender binary while traveling. Sometimes this meant dressing or appearing in their assigned gender at birth, which would cause anxiety or stress as they did not feel like their authentic self. These fears also led some participants to drastically change their appearance from one gender binary to another. There was also a fear of hidden TGNC appearance cues becoming known. For example, participant 12 mentioned that they were afraid their top-surgery scars would signal their trans identity to others if they were to appear topless such as in a locker room or while swimming in a new place. A few participants related that they had *no change in their dress while traveling.*

When examining these TGNC individuals’ experiences from a Foucauldian perspective, the act of traveling and the power of the current cultural discourse on accepted-gender presentations influenced many of them to enact in self-surveillance of their gendered appearances. In some instances, it was a near constant thought process and resulted in changing behaviors and appearances. It led to great fear, fear of violence, threats, or even death. While many of the participants expressed they would feel great freedom and a positive sense of self in a gendered expressed that was different than the one that was expected of their sex assigned at birth, some of these participants experiences reflect the self-monitoring of those in a panoptic prison cell in the 18th century as theorized by Foucault (1977).

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