

Looking the Part: How Clothing Influences Perceptions of Gender

Anonymous

Keuka College

COM-122: Communication and our World(s)

Dr. Barile

21 April 2022

Looking the Part: How Clothing Influences Perceptions of Gender

According to the theory of performativity, one's identity is determined by the conscious and subconscious choices they make to accurately "perform" their gender (Fasset et. al. 2018). For example, the decisions that one makes regarding their clothing can affect how they feel about themselves and how they are perceived by others. While clothing is an excellent way for people to nonverbally communicate their personalities and aesthetic interests, the way that clothing is viewed, in regards to gender, can be problematic. Specifically, the culture around clothing helps reinforce gender roles in society by encouraging people to embrace stereotypes while also creating and maintaining systems that disallow gender expression.

From children playing with each other to consuming media such as video games or movies, popular culture helps construct and maintain binary, gender stereotypes by teaching them to children. For example, in 2002, Beasley and Collins analyzed the bodily proportions and clothing of characters in video games circa 2000. Beasley and Collins (2002) found that, among the hundreds of characters in the Nintendo 64 and Sony Playstation games they examined, only a small portion were women. Of which, most of these female-presenting characters were overly sexualized through means such as dressing them in clothing that exposes most of their skin, showing moderate cleavage, and giving characters large, unrealistic breast sizes (Beasley & Collins 2002). On the other hand, male characters, which made up the majority, were rarely sexualized at all. These characters would often be dressed in conservative clothing which did not appear to focus on sex appeal (Beasley & Collins 2002). These aspects of character design appeared in games of all ratings, including games that are rated "E for Everyone" by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (Beasley & Collins 2002). Since, according to Beasley and Collins (2002), the majority of the gaming audience at this time were men, over-sexualization in

CLOTHING AND THE GENDER BINARY³

gaming could teach them how they should view themselves and women, based on how they view clothing and bodies. As Fasset et. al. (2018) claim, culture has the power to communicate ideas that can form or maintain oppressive structures. As a part of popular culture, video games have the power to influence how people perceive gender, based on bodily appearance and clothing.

As video games communicate gender towards their highly male-centric market, media aimed towards girls does so as well. For example, in a survey of preschool girls about pretending to be princesses, which is a popular playtime activity for young girls, Golden and Jacoby (2018) found that Disney princess media was extremely popular among young girls, which may affect how they view themselves and boys. For example, when “playing princess,” the girls’ perception of what a princess is focused on achieving beauty through clothing choice, which constitutes a stereotypically feminine approach to their play (Golden & Jacoby 2018). Furthermore, the all-female cast of Disney princesses also instills a notion among girls that princess play is only for women, with the girls mocking boys who try to play with them (Golden & Jacoby 2018).

Since boys are generally not allowed to participate in activities that are geared towards girls, such as princess play, and girls are both misrepresented and underrepresented in media such as video games, it is likely that this separation can shoehorn young boys and girls towards highly-gendered play and media consumption, maintaining the gender binary. Through clothing stereotypes, such as men needing to be conservatively dressed and women either being “elegant” or oversexualized based on the type of media consumed, people learn how they are “supposed” to act within a gendered culture, which can instill beliefs that persist throughout people’s lives.

As people grow into adulthood, the strict gendering of media and clothing can continue to affect how they present themselves. For example, this can be seen by examining the results of a study conducted by Kuper et. al. (2018), which examined the development of gender identities

CLOTHING AND THE GENDER BINARY⁴

among transgender individuals. Many participants of the survey who identified as transgender desired to fully adhere to the gender roles and expectations of their identity (Kuper et. al. 2018). For example, some trans men surveyed wanted to be muscular with facial hair, while one trans woman surveyed got numerous implants to make her body look more feminine (Kuper et. al. 2018). According to the theory of performativity, the actions that people take to “perform” their identities, including gender, are based on both macro and micro factors, including the contexts in which people hail from (Fassett et. al. 2018). As such, it is possible that the people surveyed wished to abide by gender expectations in order to fit within the systems they grew up in. Additionally, while some participants did not like binary gender roles, they admitted that it is hard to describe their gender without falling back on stereotypes as a reference point (Kuper et. al. 2018). This relates to the idea of positionality, which states that one’s knowledge and perception of the world is entirely dependent on the contexts in which one hails from (Fasset et. al. 2018). In other words, it is difficult for people to describe themselves in a less-rigid manner if they grew up in a rigid, binary society.

While many nonverbal, artifact-dependent ways of communicating one’s gender are passively given meaning through media, such as princess media showing that elegant dresses are “only” for women, the binary structure of western culture is also enforced and learned through other means. For example, as early as infancy, gender roles are forced upon people through clothing. According to Weinberg and Weinberg (1980), clothing that is worn by infants can affect how their gender is perceived by adults that interact with them. Since one’s infancy is a period of mass learning and cognitive development, the way that a baby is treated can also affect how they will act as they grow into their early childhood, acting as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Weinberg & Weinberg 1980). However, since infants are generally unable to make choices

CLOTHING AND THE GENDER BINARY5

regarding their clothing, this is an example of culture being maintained through hegemony, as adults have full control over the wardrobe of their child. While memories from infancy may not last as people age, how they are forced to express themselves from the beginning of life can affect how people are viewed for their entire lives.

Past infancy, binary gender roles are often maintained and enforced by the school system. For example, Reddy-Best and Choi (2020) studied the dress codes of numerous schools across the United States and found that many of them restrict people who are assigned male or female at birth very differently. For example, male students in many districts were strictly prohibited from expressing femininity through physical appearances, such as banning them from having long hair, wearing makeup, or wearing accessories such as earrings (Reddy-Best & Choi 2020). This reflects the gender roles mentioned in Beasley and Collins' (2002) study of video games, where most male characters dressed conservatively. In many districts, while male students were not allowed to present in a feminine manner, they were also forced to wear traditionally male clothes that cover up a significant portion of the body, such as slacks or suits (Reddy-Best & Choi 2020). On the other side of the gender spectrum, women in many schools had strict rules they had to follow regarding how much skin they were allowed to show, such as being prohibited from wearing crop tops or miniskirts (Reddy-Best & Choi 2020). This also reflects Beasley and Collins' (2002) study, where women had their bodies oversexualized and mostly wore minimal clothing. Schools seemed to sexualize the female body as well since the purpose of many of these rules banning skin exposure were stated to be to prevent "distractions" (Reddy-Best & Choi 2020). Both the media that people consume and the rules they are forced to follow from infancy to late adolescence reflect each other, and demonstrate a culture where

CLOTHING AND THE GENDER BINARY⁶

men are expected to be “strong” and “content” (Weinberg & Weinberg 1980, p. 112) and women are expected to be elegant and a sex object at the same time.

While people who abide by binary gender structures feel oppression within current social structures, how are nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people treated within this strict system? According to Kuper et. al. (2018), many transgender people seek to “pass” as their gender by performing gender in a very binary way, such as wearing extremely gendered clothing or acting in a stereotypical manner. This is likely so that members of the majority group, cisgender individuals, will view them as the gender they identify. Since the western perception of gender is largely based on artifacts and other visual elements of gender, whether or not trans people “pass” can affect how they are viewed during first impressions. Although visually performing gender is how people are expected to express who they are, many of the people Kuper et. al. (2018) surveyed, both transgender and cisgender participants, did not wish to adhere to binary systems and were more comfortable with expressing a mix of masculine and feminine traits (Kuper et. al. 2018). Although anecdotal evidence does not show how an entire group of people acts or feels, as gender categories are not monoliths, my experiences can highlight how gendered systems are difficult to exist in as a gender non-conforming person.

Although I identify as a transgender woman, meaning that I identify with a binary gender, my gender performance and presentation is generally nonconforming to either masculinity nor femininity. However, similar to the trans people surveyed by Kuper et. al. (2018), I often engage in feminine acts that I may not fully enjoy in an attempt to fit within the binary and experience gender validation. For example, while I enjoy wearing women’s clothing and keeping my nails long, I am not a fan of makeup. I tend to touch my face and bite at my nails often, making cosmetics a chore to work with. As such, since I experience a dislike for the beauty aspects of

CLOTHING AND THE GENDER BINARY⁷

femininity, I sometimes wonder if I am performing womanhood correctly. While I am able to reflexively look at how I learned what “womanhood” is by examining the systems I grew up in, this line of self-questioning shows how binary systems can make people who do not fully conform to masculinity or femininity feel out of place.

While growing up, I often felt out of place in terms of gender, even when I identified as a male before I discovered my gender identity at the age of seventeen. For example, I did not often identify with the typical male characters that are seen in children's media, meaning that I was unable to make many “heroes” growing up. Furthermore, in terms of clothing and body presentation, my parents often berated me for wanting to have more feminine features, such as keeping my nails long or growing my hair out. As such, I felt out of place in both body and identity for a long time, since I did not fit into either system that I learned in similar ways to the children mentioned throughout this essay. Paradoxically, although categorization is meant to help people understand themselves and the world, it only makes myself and other gender-nonconforming people feel lost.

Clothing and bodily presentation are strong, nonverbal ways of communicating one's gender to others. However, since people are raised in contexts where gender is communicated to them in binary and seemingly “objective” ways, it is difficult for many to express themselves, as they would have to break free from the paradigm that they have experienced since birth. As such, in order to communicate gender to people in ways that are inclusive and allow for true self-exploration, what “gender” means to people must change from the bottom up to reflect a vast spectrum of identities, rather than viewing gender as a set of parallel tracks that shall never converge.

CLOTHING AND THE GENDER BINARY8

References

Beasley, B., & Collins Standley, T. (2002). Shirts vs. skins: Clothing as an indicator of gender role stereotyping in video games. *Mass Communication & Society*, 5(3), 279–293.

https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327825MCS0503_3

Fassett, D., et. al. (2018). *Communication: A critical/cultural introduction* (3rd edition). Cognella Academic Publishing.

Golden, J. C., & Jacoby, J. W. (2018). Playing princess: Preschool girls' interpretations of gender stereotypes in Disney princess media. *Sex Roles*, 79(5–6), 299–313.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0773-8>

Kuper, L. E., Wright, L., & Mustanski, B. (2018). Gender identity development among transgender and gender nonconforming emerging adults: An intersectional approach. *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 19(4), 436–455.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2018.1443869>

Reddy-Best, K. L., & Choi, E. (2020). “Male hair cannot extend below plane of the shoulder” and “no cross dressing”: Critical queer analysis of high school dress codes in the United States. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 67(9), 1290–1340.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2019.1585730>

Weinberg, J. S., & Weinberg, S. B. (1980). The influence of clothing on perceptions of infant sex roles. *Journal of Applied Communications Research*, 8(2), 111.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00909888009360276>