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Fashion and gender: How clothing choices challenge or reinforce traditional gender roles

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Abstract

This study delves into the intricate relationship between fashion and gender, scrutinizing how clothing choices serve as a powerful medium for both challenging and reinforcing traditional gender roles. The study investigates the multifaceted ways in which individuals, through their sartorial expressions, engage with and contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding gender identity and societal expectations. It shows the importance of recognizing the agency that individuals possess in using fashion as a tool for self-expression and societal critique. It calls for a nuanced understanding of the interplay between clothing choices and gender roles, urging a more inclusive and diverse approach to fashion that embraces the spectrum of gender identities and challenges entrenched norms. Ultimately, the study contributes to a broader conversation on the transformative potential of fashion in shaping and reshaping societal perceptions of gender.

Keywords: Fashion, gender roles, societal expectations, self-expression, societal perceptions

Introduction

Fashion plays a pervasive role in our lives, influencing the decisions we make each day, often without us realizing it. When we wake up and choose our attire, we are, in essence, crafting a statement about how we wish to be perceived by the world. This decision-making process is intricately woven into a tapestry of external factors such as prevailing fashion trends, our daily activities, weather conditions, emotions, and the images we encounter in the media. Fashion, far from being merely a matter of clothing, serves as a vehicle for identity and self-expression, helping us find our place within the broader tapestry of society.

However, within this intricate interplay, fashion is not neutral - it is entwined with social constructs, particularly the concept of gender. Gender, defined as the social arrangements around normative sex categories like male and female, is deeply ingrained in societal expectations. Each gender is burdened with a set of dress codes, enforced by cultural and societal norms. Clothing, as a form of nonverbal communication, signals our gender identity—whether we identify as male or female (Lauer, J. C., & Lauer, R. H., 1981) ^[7]. In many cases, individuals conform to these gender norms, using clothing as a means to fit into their prescribed gender category.

From the moment a child is born, they are assigned the status of boy or girl, and from there, societal assumptions and actions shape their experiences. Boys are adorned in blue, associated with traits like "big" and "strong," while girls are draped in pink, linked to attributes such as "pretty" and "sweet" (Altman, M. 2020, Conley, D., 2011) ^[2]. These early associations give rise to distinct expectations of behaviour, dictated and enforced by various social groups. The repercussions for deviating from these expectations can be significant, with social stigma and judgment acting as powerful deterrents.

In essence, fashion becomes a potent tool in the arsenal of socialization - a mechanism through which individuals either secure acceptance in society or find themselves on the fringes, challenging established norms and expectations. As we navigate the complex web of societal expectations, fashion emerges not only as a personal choice but as a dynamic force shaping our understanding of gender and influencing our place in the social fabric.

Following are some features associated with fashion and gender norms.

1. Colour and Design: Traditional gender norms often associate certain colours with masculinity (e.g., blue) and femininity (e.g., pink). Challenging these norms may

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involve individuals wearing non-traditional colours for their gender. Design elements such as floral patterns for women and geometric patterns for men have been conventional, but breaking away from these norms can challenge gender stereotypes.

3. **Cross-dressing:** Cross-dressing involves wearing clothing typically associated with the opposite gender. This can be a form of personal expression, a way to challenge societal expectations, or a means of exploring gender identity.
4. **Androgynous Fashion:** Androgynous fashion blurs the lines between traditional male and female clothing, aiming for a more gender-neutral or non-binary appearance. This challenges the binary nature of traditional gender roles.
5. **Unisex Clothing:** The rise of unisex or gender-neutral clothing challenges the notion that certain styles are exclusively for men or women. Brands embracing inclusivity in their designs contribute to breaking down gender stereotypes.
6. **Empowerment through Clothing:** Some individuals use clothing choices to reclaim power and challenge traditional gender roles. This may involve women wearing traditionally masculine clothing as a symbol of empowerment and equality.
7. **Cultural and Historical Influences:** Traditional clothing from different cultures can enforce specific gender norms. Challenging these norms may involve adopting clothing elements from other cultures or reinterpreting traditional garments in a way that defies gender expectations.
8. **Gender Identity and Expression:** Transgender and non-binary individuals often use clothing to express their gender identity. For some, wearing clothing that aligns with their gender identity is a form of self-affirmation and visibility.
9. **Media and Fashion Industry Influence:** Fashion designers, influencers, and celebrities can impact societal perceptions of gender through their choices. Inclusive fashion campaigns and runway shows that feature diverse models challenge traditional norms and promote a more expansive understanding of gender expression.

Fashion in Historical Context Nineteenth century application

In the 19th century, clothing became intricately entwined with political movements, notably evident in the Women's Suffrage movement of the 1850s. During this period, women advocated for the right to vote and, in doing so, confronted the restrictive and hazardous clothing norms that symbolized their societal oppression.

The Burden of Conventional Attire

The attire of the time, characterized by whalebone corsets and multi-layered dresses, was not merely a matter of style but a physical manifestation of the societal constraints imposed on women. These garments, though fashionable, inflicted physical harm on women, causing stress on organs, respiratory problems, and even restricting day-to-day activities. The weight of the dresses, often exceeding fifteen pounds, raised legitimate health concerns.

The Emergence of Reform

Amidst these challenges, pioneers like Amelia Bloomer and her contemporaries took a bold step by introducing

"Bloomers." This marked the inception of the Victorian dress reform movement, aiming to liberate women from the oppressive fashion standards. Bloomers, essentially a dress worn over loose-fitting pants, offered a comfortable alternative, eliminating the need for the cumbersome layers that impeded women's mobility.

Symbolism of Liberation

The reformers believed that women's clothing had become a symbol of broader societal and cultural oppression, reflecting domestic confinement, economic dependence, and intellectual decay. The shift in dress was not just about fashion but a rebellion against a system that perpetuated planned obsolescence, upheld aristocratic origins, and exploited underpaid, overworked women in the fashion industry.

Challenging the Fashion System

The Victorian dress reform movement sought to redefine how women perceived and engaged with the fashion system. Reformers identified the flaws within the system, including its economic burdens, cultural valuation of women's physical capital, and the exploitation of female labour. They argued that fashion, instead of liberating women, was being employed to confine them further.

Twentieth Century Application

Hawes, a trailblazing fashion designer and feminist activist of the early-to-mid 20th century, left an indelible mark by challenging the status quo and advocating for gender representation in the fashion industry. On April 5, 1967, the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) showcased Hawes' latest fashion line, notably featuring an innovative concept—male skirts. This exhibition marked a watershed moment in the ongoing battle for gender expression through fashion. Hawes, believed that both men and women were shackled by the constraints of gender stereotypes in clothing. Her vision sought to transcend these limitations, advocating for a "unisex aesthetic" that would grant everyone the freedom to express themselves and move away from the rigidity of traditional masculinity and femininity (Woodard, J., 2017) ^[13].

In his insightful exploration of individuality, Georg Simmel delves into the intricate interplay of dualities within each human being, contending that the fusion of masculine and feminine principles forms the very essence of our individuality. Simmel's assertion, articulated in his work, emphasizes the inherent tension within individuals, asserting that no societal institution, legal framework, or chosen way of life can fully satisfy the conflicting demands of these two opposing principles (Simmel, G., 1957) ^[10].

The crux of Simmel's argument lies in the notion that femininity and masculinity, being inherently incompatible, cannot be simultaneously satiated within an individual. This inherent tension, he argues, propels the universal yearning for uniformity, a quest for a harmonious balance that is forever elusive (Simmel, G., 1957) ^[10]. The perpetual struggle to reconcile these dual principles is at the heart of what defines and shapes individuality.

Hillman's (2013) ^[4] exploration of the concept of "gender presentation" sheds light on the profound role clothing, physical appearance, and self-fashioning play in expressing one's gender identity to the world. In her analysis, Hillman emphasizes the pivotal role of the feminist movement in the

1960s in reshaping societal expectations surrounding female attire.

During this transformative period, women utilized their fashion choices not only as a form of personal expression but also as a powerful tool for breaking free from the constraints imposed by male-dominated norms. The feminist movement encouraged women to critically examine the reasons behind their clothing choices, sparking a larger conversation about societal expectations and gender roles.

One of the key objectives of this movement was to empower women to question and challenge the norms that dictated their wardrobes. It provided them with the agency to assert their right to dress in a manner that reflected their personal preferences rather than conforming to traditional expectations. This empowerment extended beyond the realm of fashion, becoming a political statement against the broader limitations placed on women.

A significant aspect of this liberation was the push for the right to wear pants in professional settings, a departure from the conventional long skirts that had been the norm. This shift symbolized a tangible break from traditional gender norms and represented a broader demand for equality and autonomy.

However, Hillman highlights the resistance and fear that accompanied this movement. Some individuals interpreted the push for gender-neutral clothing as an attempt to eradicate the distinctions between men and women entirely. This misconception generated apprehension and scepticism about the feminist agenda.

In reality, the feminist movement sought to grant women the freedom to choose how they presented themselves to the world. It aimed at dismantling restrictive norms rather than erasing the inherent differences between genders. The ultimate goal was to create a society where individuals, regardless of their gender, had the autonomy to express themselves authentically through their clothing and appearance.

In essence, Hillman's exploration of "gender presentation" within the context of the feminist movement underscores the transformative power of fashion as a tool for social and political change. The movement not only revolutionized women's relationship with clothing but also contributed to a broader societal shift towards recognizing and respecting diverse expressions of gender identity.

Contemporary Understanding of Fashion Shifts in Gender Identity Display

The quest for fashion equality has become an integral part of contemporary discourse, as evidenced by Levi's exploration of the evolving dynamics of dress requirements in professional settings for both men and women. In this context, Levi sheds light on the presence of "sexually exploitive dress requirements" within various institutions, from educational environments to workplaces, prompting a critical examination of these norms (Levi, J.L., 2006) ^[8]. Notably, the conversation extends beyond the binary framework of traditional gender norms, with many transgender individuals spearheading efforts to challenge sex discrimination through dress. This movement serves as a catalyst for reevaluating societal perceptions and fostering a deeper understanding of fluid gender identities.

The emergence of the fight against sex discrimination in dress extends beyond merely challenging societal norms. It becomes a pivotal avenue for individuals to express and

affirm their gender identity, particularly those who identify as transgender. By doing so, they confront and challenge the conventional understanding of gender as a binary construct based solely on one's assigned sex at birth.

Hyper-Masculinity and Symbolic Interactionism

In contemporary society, men grapple with a formidable societal pressure that demands adherence to a prescribed standard of masculinity for acceptance. This pressure, as noted by Vokey *et al.* (2013) ^[12], suggests that men must conform to specific ideals to be perceived as manly, creating a restrictive environment that stifles individual expression and authenticity.

The Burden of Conforming to Masculinity Ideals:

The prevailing societal narrative dictates that men must adhere to a set of predetermined masculinity ideals to secure acceptance. The fear of being perceived as less manly or facing social exclusion looms large, compelling men to conform to a narrow and often toxic version of masculinity. This conformity extends beyond behaviour to encompass even the choice of clothing, with men feeling compelled to avoid items associated with femininity to align with societal expectations.

Advertisements as Agents of Socialization:

Advertisements play a pivotal role as socializing agents, significantly influencing the development and perpetuation of masculine ideals and norms. Vokey *et al.*, 2013 ^[12], argue that these influential messages further engrain the prescribed standard of masculinity, creating a rigid framework that restricts men from embracing a broader spectrum of self-expression. The portrayal of hyper-masculine stereotypes in media contributes to the cultivation of toxic masculinity, limiting men's freedom to dress and act authentically.

The Stranglehold of Toxic Masculinity

Toxic masculinity emerges as a consequence of societal expectations that dictate rigid norms and discourage deviation from the established standard. This toxicity denies men the freedom to express themselves genuinely, reinforcing harmful stereotypes that constrain their emotional and behavioural authenticity. The stigma associated with deviating from masculine norms perpetuates a culture where men may feel compelled to mask their true selves to fit an unrealistic mold.

The Struggle for Authenticity

The pressure to conform to societal standards of masculinity poses a significant barrier to men embracing their authentic selves. This struggle not only impacts personal expression but also hampers emotional well-being as men navigate the tension between societal expectations and their genuine identities. It becomes imperative to challenge and redefine these narrow standards, fostering an environment where men feel empowered to dress and act according to their true selves without fear of judgment.

Negative Portrayals of Women

According to Strassel, Annemarie (2013) ^[11], women's clothed bodies became emblematic of other kinds of social and cultural oppression such as domestic confinement, economic dependence, and intellectual decay (Strassel, Annemarie, 2013) ^[11]. The objectification of women has given rise to a pervasive societal pressure for women to conform to an idealized appearance crafted by men. This

pressure is exemplified by the staggering statistics surrounding cosmetic procedures. In 2010, a staggering 91% of cosmetic procedures were performed on women, marking a significant trend in the pursuit of an externally defined beauty (Jhally, S., & Kilbourne, J. (Eds.), 2010) ^[5].

- 1 **Rising Trend in Cosmetic Procedures:** From 1997 to 2007, the prevalence of surgical cosmetic procedures experienced a staggering 457% increase, while nonsurgical procedures, such as Botox and lasers, saw a remarkable surge of 754% (Jhally, S., & Kilbourne, J. (Eds.), 2010) ^[5]. These statistics underscore the growing societal emphasis on women altering their physical appearance to align with prescribed standards of beauty. The numbers reveal a deep-seated desire among women to meet an external standard, driven by societal expectations.
- 2 **Social Approval and Conformity:** The pressure for women to modify their appearance stems from a societal demand for adherence to an idealized image. This perpetuates the notion that women will be judged primarily based on their physical attributes, fostering a culture where altering oneself becomes a prerequisite for acceptance. Young girls, exposed to these norms, internalize the message that conforming to a specific appearance is essential for societal approval, laying the foundation for lifelong insecurities.
- 3 **Fear of Aging and Pursuit of Eternal Youth:** The conflation of beauty with youth has instilled a deep-seated fear of aging in women. Society has programmed women to equate beauty with youthfulness, creating an environment where the natural aging process is feared rather than embraced. This fear further perpetuates the idea that women must go to great lengths to maintain a youthful appearance, reinforcing harmful beauty standards.
- 4 **Unrealistic Beauty Standards and Size Zero Culture:** Advertising often perpetuates unrealistic standards by portraying adult women with the physique of teenage girls. The promotion of a size zero as an aspirational goal not only sets an unattainable standard but also sends a disconcerting message, suggesting that aspiring to be nothing in terms of physical size is the societal ideal. This idealization contributes to a culture where women are pressured to conform to an unrealistic and unhealthy body image.
- 5 **Vulnerability and Passive Body Language:** Women in media are frequently portrayed as vulnerable, with passive body language. This representation reinforces submissive stereotypes and further objectifies women. The continuous exposure to such depictions reinforces harmful gender norms, influencing societal perceptions of women and contributing to the objectification they experience.

Hidden Rules of Masculinity and the "Tough Guise"

In the realm of masculinity, a persistent tension exists between the expectations imposed by societal norms and the innate human need for emotional expression. Michael Kaufman's (1987) ^[6] assertion, as highlighted in 1987, that masculinity demands the suppression of various human needs, aims, feelings, and forms of expression, sheds light on the complex interplay between maleness and the societal construct of masculinity. This tension is particularly evident in the arena of fashion, where the assumed behaviours of a

male are prescribed, compelling individuals to conform to a set of norms in order to be perceived as genuinely masculine.

The Suppression of Emotion

As humans, experiencing and expressing emotions are fundamental aspects of our existence. However, the traditional expectations associated with masculinity dictate a suppression of these emotions. The societal narrative suggests that a masculine man should embody stoicism, strength, and emotional restraint. This creates a paradox wherein individuals grapple with their innate emotional responses while conforming to the predetermined mold of masculinity.

Fashion as a Form of Expression

Fashion, as a powerful mode of self-expression, becomes a battleground for the conflict between authentic identity and societal expectations. The garments we choose are, in Erving Goffman's (1959) ^[3] words, our "costumes" that signal our role and place in society. For men, this means adhering to a specific dress code associated with masculinity, reinforcing the notion that deviation from these norms implies a failure to fulfil one's masculine role.

The Dilemma of Conformity

The pressure to conform to established masculine fashion norms results in a stifling of individuality and personal expression. Men are expected to adopt a specific wardrobe that aligns with the perceived ideals of masculinity, limiting the diversity of self-presentation. This conformity extends beyond clothing choices to encompass body image, further reinforcing the narrow parameters within which masculinity is deemed acceptable.

Breaking the Mold

Challenging these established norms requires a re-evaluation of societal expectations surrounding masculinity. Embracing authentic expression, whether through fashion or emotional openness, becomes an act of resistance against the limitations imposed by traditional gender roles. By dismantling the notion that certain clothing or behaviours define one's masculinity, individuals can redefine their relationship with their own identity, allowing for a more inclusive and authentic expression of self.

Conclusion

Culture Jamming the Media

In the intricate tapestry of modern society, the intricate interplay between culture, gender, and sexuality is prominently shaped by pervasive forces such as fashion, clothing, and the media. Cultural norms often serve as both a mirror and a mold, reflecting and shaping the beliefs of a given group. However, these norms are not static, and various groups and organizations endeavour to challenge and reshape societal perceptions, particularly those surrounding gender and sexuality. This is where the concept of "Culture Jamming" emerges as a powerful tool to subvert and redefine the prevailing narrative, allowing for a more inclusive and diverse expression of identity.

Defining Culture Jamming

Culture Jamming, as defined by sociologist Conley (2011) ^[2] is the act of turning media against itself. It is a deliberate

and often subversive strategy employed by individuals or groups to challenge, critique, and alter the dominant cultural narratives propagated by mainstream media. This concept provides a means of disrupting the status quo and reevaluating societal norms that may otherwise restrict individual self-expression, particularly in the realms of gender and sexuality.

Shifting the Narrative

In the context of contemporary society, traditional gender roles and stereotypes are perpetuated and reinforced through various channels, including advertising, fashion trends, and media representations. Culture Jamming becomes a potent mechanism for dismantling these limiting narratives. By subverting mainstream messages, culture jammers aim to create alternative discourses that challenge preconceived notions about what is deemed acceptable or 'normal.'

Rewriting Societal Stereotypes

One of the primary objectives of Culture Jamming is to rewrite societal stereotypes that act as constraints on individuals' self-expression. Through creative interventions in media and cultural spaces, activists seek to expose the artificiality of these stereotypes, demonstrating that they are constructed and perpetuated rather than inherent truths. This process allows for the empowerment of marginalized voices and the celebration of diverse identities, disrupting the hegemonic norms that often marginalize certain gender expressions and sexual orientations.

Following the Dress Code

Paoletti, J. B. (2015) ^[9] insightful book, "Sex and Unisex: Fashion, Feminism, and the Sexual Revolution," delves into the intricate relationship between gender and clothing, unravelling the complexities that have shaped contemporary fashion norms. Paoletti's exploration focuses on the dynamics of unisex or androgynous clothing, shedding light on the challenges and societal perceptions surrounding its evolution.

One of Paoletti's key arguments centres around the idea that unisex fashion often involves making women's clothing more masculine, rather than attempting to feminize men's attire. She posits that this asymmetry arises from deep-seated societal stigmas attached to men adopting traditionally feminine qualities. The resistance to embracing femininity in men's clothing reflects a broader cultural reluctance to challenge established gender norms.

Paoletti's narrative underscores the historical context of these gendered fashion norms. She contends that, during the 1960s, there was a notable shift towards accepting unisex fashion for both sexes. This transformative period was marked by the influences of the Civil Rights Movement and the Sexual Revolution, which collectively fostered an atmosphere of liberation and acceptance. Clothing became a canvas for self-expression, reflecting the changing socio-political landscape.

The Civil Rights Movement advocated for equality, challenging racial and gender biases. Simultaneously, the Sexual Revolution sought to dismantle restrictive attitudes towards sexuality and gender roles. These progressive movements inspired a collective sense of freedom, prompting a re-evaluation of traditional gendered norms, including those within the realm of fashion.

During this era, the notion of unisex clothing gained traction as a symbol of equality and liberation. Styles became more fluid, with individuals experimenting with fashion that transcended traditional gender boundaries. However, Paoletti suggests that despite this promising trajectory towards degendering clothing, society ultimately reverted to ingrained gender norms.

Despite the strides made in the 1960s, society retreated from the path of unisex fashion. She implies that deeply ingrained prejudices and societal expectations played a role in stifling the progress toward a more inclusive and fluid approach to clothing. The enduring stigma around men embracing feminine qualities may have contributed to the reversion to more rigid gendered fashion norms.

In summary, clothing choices have the power to both challenge and reinforce traditional gender roles. As societal attitudes toward gender continue to evolve, fashion serves as a dynamic and influential medium through which individuals express their identity and contribute to broader discussions on gender norms and expectations.

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