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I Am What I Wear:
The Use of Dress in Constructing and Evaluating Sexual Identity

Candidate for B.S. Degree
In Women's Studies, Political Science and Magazine Journalism with Honors
May 2006

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Abstract

This thesis explores different disciplinary studies and discussions of dress, and more specifically, the use of dress in constructing a gendered identity and sexual identity. To conduct this research, I performed a literature review and referenced various social psychological, sociological, and/or feminist theoretical frameworks. I argue that dress cannot serve as any sort of innate or accurate indicator of sexual identity; rather, the meanings associated with dress are socially produced and vary across time and place. Evidence for this argument emerges only after a literature review, as one can recognize a common theme linking the literature, or perhaps a commonly overlooked theme in some works of the literature review. In arguing this, I hope to better peoples' understanding of how dress is feminized, the role of identity in the production of dress, how it works to reinforce and/or resist gender (in relation to race, class, and sexuality) binaries, divisions, categories and inequality. I also hope to address how people use dress as a form of social resistance and as a means to form community.

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Preface

Before pursuing any sort of feminist research, one must examine his or her social location within various racial, class, gender, and sexual contexts. One must consider her social status, within her socially constructed world, and question her own motivations, perspectives, and conclusions. In performing these tasks, she is able to locate herself and her perspective in a field of knowledge production. Since no research can be completely objective, locating the “knower” is a strategy designed to reveal the partiality of knowledge claims. Knowledge made from somewhere also serves to open to new questions of inquiry, allowing readers to see what has been included and also what else needs to be investigated. Readers become an active participant in the knowledge, evaluating, questioning, and interacting with the researcher. This is an extremely feminist method and perspective. The more diverse the knowledge and the “knowers,” the closer to truth knowledge can become.

In my research of how dress is used to shape a sexual identity, or rather, how dress is used as a marker of sexual identity, I first must analyze my own life, to position myself within certain social histories and contexts. Like many children, I didn't realize growing up that my life was much different from anyone else's. But if I did take time to reflect, I thought along the lines of Goldilocks – it was just right. My room, with powder blue walls, a tea set, little wooden chairs, pink-comforter-ed twin bed, and star stickers on the ceiling, was comfortable. My Dad, a goofy doctor, always enlisted me to help him build shelves or paint the barn. My Mom, an English teacher, took me grocery shopping with her, a task we

both dreaded but provided some entertainment. My brother, always a bit of a loner, stole my stuffed animals and yelled at me but never hit me, like some of my friends' brothers. I had cats. Stuffed animals. Life was good.

I had a sense of where I lived at an age when most kids, I think, start to figure out that a world exists beyond the bounds of their house. I lived near the Common – the grassy, town-square, geographical center – of Grafton, MA, an old, working and middle class farming town. Most people moved into our town and never moved out. I went to a Protestant church near the Common sporadically, hating it because I had to sit still and wear tights that itched.

Oktoberfest, Strawberry Festivals, Memorial Day parades were held or passed by there, all traditional, American events that dot my childhood. Life was good.

I read – and read and read. The old cliché rang true for me. Books sent me to other worlds. Fairy tales, the Berenstain Bears, Little House on the Prairie, the Boxcar Children, anything Mercer Meyer and Chris Van Allsburg. All of this reinforced to me that life was good. As I plowed through elementary school, facing my own “adversity” for being so small for my age, I watched TV with my brother whenever I could, after school, during dinner, and later, with a bowl of ice-cream. Sadly enough, TV exposed me to “other” people, “other” lives within very strict, socially constructed and stereotyped messages. In many of these, life was not so good. I watched “Punky Brewster” and learned about foster kids. I watched “Fresh Prince of Bel-Air” and saw a Black family for the first time (I never watched “Cosby”). But everyone I knew in real life– except for one girl in 3rd grade – looked like me: white.

I took many vacations with my family. We traveled on a couple cruises, a huge deal for my parents. The cruises were interesting in that I saw many people of color, more than I usually did at home. I viewed the staff of those ships (who were mostly Black) as defined by their work as waiters, servers, room cleaners. I knew they were Black, but I am not sure if I associated their type of work as Black work. Did I view them with superiority? If I did, was it because of their race or their work? I also had seen plenty of white servers and room cleaners by that age. I knew I was not Black, but I don't remember learning any blatant racist ideas from my family or community. What I learned came from my place in the system, socialized into me, and because I benefited from it, I became an active participant in it. Since I certainly had no consciousness of this system, or of the hegemonic forces maintaining the racial hierarchy, I am sure I had absorbed the general racism of most white people in America in that time and place.

While life didn't always remain good for me – I had my ups and downs – I eventually became conscious of others, others being those more or less privileged than I or simply those who lived very differently than my family did. Most of my privilege (or lack of) that I understood related to my social standing and my gender. I had little concept of white privilege and systematic structures of power.

I feel as though I've always understood money, namely, everyone wants it, you can only have so much, and money equals having things, whether it's food, a new My Little Pony, or a baby-sitter. Dad always talked about money with me, how I couldn't have anything I wanted, we needed to save money. Dad is thrifty. He grew up very poor in Maine and worked hard in school to become a doctor.

But his “working” class values stuck with him. Still, we were comfortable. I never wanted too much. We didn’t have “rich” people in my town, so I never knew fancy jewelry, expensive cars, designer clothing, as something real people had. It only existed on TV and only when I had the sense to recognize it. I developed a definite sense of rich and poor; again, from realizing as I grew older that my family had much more money than many of my friends. While I waitressed at a retirement community and worked as a camp counselor, I knew my parents wouldn’t be too upset if I didn’t work. But for my friends – working wasn’t a choice.

By the time I began attending my predominately white, private, expensive, Northeastern college, my feminist spirit had been awoken. I began as a girl who was furious with the unfair, short end of the stick women seemed to receive in this life. That was enough to encourage me to gobble anything I could from women’s studies classes, taking it all in. But I quickly realized women weren’t the only people who dealt with systematic adversity. Thus, my attention has been somewhat split, and I feel like someone walking through a mine field, so many pauses and careful considerations to make, every angle to examine, before continuing on, making sure I’m not forgetting anything (or any ism). I became even more understanding in the past couple years. I’ve always been attracted to men, but for about eight months, I found myself involved with another woman, a situation that completely shocked and rocked me. Today I am not sure of how to define my sexuality so I choose not to define it. But I have begun to understand the implications of heteronormativity and homophobia, more than I could have

imagined before that relationship. How out to be? Who to tell? Will people be able to just look at me and know, wow, you have a girlfriend? Is there a stamp on my forehead? Will people treat me differently than any (straight) person?

The idea that I may even be able to consider a sexual identity other than heterosexual, along with my being white, of the upper middle class, and well-educated, is no coincidence. My family grew from white, European ancestry; my people were able to journey to and settle in North America, destroying the home of those people who lived there before. The “new world,” which was not new at all except to the foreign invaders, gave these foreign invaders the opportunity to build extreme wealth, to create a brand new form of government, through the ravaging of resources and exploitation of others, largely people of color. The slave trade, and extensive use of slave labor, ripped Africans from their homelands and cultures and forced them into a hugely disadvantaged state (within the United States). Most were denied any sort of extensive education or the ability to pursue the same sort of life as their white owners. The subordinate treatment of Black people in the years that followed the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment greatly advantaged the white majority: it allowed this majority to retain power and exploit the labor of others. Poor, white immigrants to America also became subordinated to the white, European upper class who settled here. Without their work for this country, as is the situation for poor Americans today, much of the country’s technological, political, and industrial advancements could not have occurred. This country was built on the backs of the poor and the people of color.

Although neither of my parents came from particularly wealthy families – in fact, both their families were of the lower-income class – they were white (and thus were viewed as full citizens) and lived within the Northeast, with access to industry, resources, and higher education. They had a great opportunity to lead a comfortable life, based on the socially produced circumstances. After traveling from Europe, where living circumstances seemed (to them) to be problematic, they acclimated quickly to American life, and were embraced as Americans within a short time. Their immigration however illustrates a desire that many throughout the world seem to possess: to settle in America, and pursue an American dream. The American dream however is not clear and is often just that: a dream. Not all citizens are created equally, given people's varied and unequal historic, as previously discussed.

Regardless, United States citizens have extreme privilege compared to many people living in other areas of the world, as problematic as that statement is. Of course, who has citizenship in this country has been determined by a process of racialized and gendered sorting, determined by the needs of the capitalist system created by the white, male forces. The United States is the world's most wealthy country, with a seemingly endless supply of resources, a fairly uncorrupt and efficient government, and much opportunity. Much of its superiority however stems from the exploitation of other parts of the world, largely, most parts of the world excluding Western Europe. Hence, as a white, upper-middle class American citizen, I not only have benefited from the socially produced hierarchy of racial and class communities, but also from simply being a recognized and

accepted part of the “greatest country in the world.” I was able to have those dozens of books to read. I attended great schools. I always had access to food, clean water, a warm home. I could watch television and play with toys. I was able to take cruises to explore “the other.”

I also had a far more than necessary amount of clothing, stemming from my love for fashion and style, which led to the germ of an idea that grew into this thesis project. My mother enjoyed dressing me in all different outfits, and as I grew up, I became very intrigued with the art of putting different pieces together, expressing certain messages and creating various images of myself, through my clothing. I never enjoyed purchasing certain designer brands or being particularly trendy; I never had much money to spend, anyway, even though I know my mother purchased more clothing for me than probably many other parents.

I was always extremely conscious however of what constituted men’s and women’s clothing. I wanted to dress in a way that was attractive, and by attractive, I mean in a way that was defined by the historical, marketed and socially produced boxes of “women’s” clothing. I enjoyed dressing in a constructed “feminine” way, largely because I enjoyed feeling stylish or ahead of the fashion, and fashion and stylish – for women – is equated with femininity. I also had less incentive and need to purchase “men’s” clothing: I was and still am very small in stature; they never fit!

In my research however, I attempted to abandon my own personal ideas of style and fashion and truly examine how gender – or more accurately, sexual identity – is produced through clothing. It seems to be an extremely pertinent

topic to analyze, because, if societal concepts of gender were to be abolished, then dress, in some way, must be stripped of its gendered and sexualized meanings (as well as racial and classist meanings) to contribute to the success of that abolishment. When I, or anyone, thinks of men's and women's clothing, who are we thinking of? Straight women? White women? Poor women? This is what I hope to examine in my work. How people use clothing to assigned a sexual identity (or how people sexualize clothing) on themselves and others. Clothing and fashion do not exist in a vacuum. Like me, they are shaped by raced, classed and gendered hands, through various histories and communities. Clothing is produced, by certain communities and in certain ways, and clothing is consumed, differently by certain communities and in certain ways. Because of my social location, as a feminist scholar, the product of a white, upper-class, Northeast community, I have a unique perspective on this subject.

My research should serve a purpose in the realms of the discussion relating to gender, identity, sexualities, and dress. First, the motivations for this research – in addition my own personal interest – are such that most people are interested in clothing. Every person, in some way, adorns her body. Clothing has been an economic, social, political, religious, anthropological, and cultural concern for centuries. It conveys meaning through symbolic systems. However, only recently has attention been given to the implications of clothing, in relation to gender. This is important to consider how relations of gender, as well as class, race, sexuality, and ability have been used to convey meaning in particular cultural contexts throughout time as part of the political economy. My work,

targeted at an undergraduate, academic audience, will attempt to link the discussions of dress and gender from within several fields, linking debates and theory, in order to argue that dress cannot be innately or accurately used to express a sexual identity, because dress has been assigned certain social meanings within different contexts and has come to express different social cues of sexual identity; sexual identity and gender are also both socially constructed within a heteronormative, white, male system, dominated by capitalist forces, and therefore cannot be expressed by any certain dress, without this social construction.

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“The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman’s garment; for all that do so are abomination unto the lord thy God” (Deuteronomy 22:5)

Body

Methodology

For this thesis, I conducted a literature review as my primary method of inquiry for this project. To perform this literature review, I began by reading several general sources relating to dress and identity, within society and culture, which provided me with some basic historical information of the modern relationship of dress to class, social position, and gender. An analysis of many fields quickly became apparent to me as a necessity to fully understand some major concepts and themes relating to dress and gender and the use of dress in expressing of a sexual identity. These fields include social psychology, psychology, textiles and design, cultural study and queer study fields.

As will be discussed in the literature review, this material did not relate to any area of the world except that of Western Europe and the United States. The material that did relate to those areas besides Europe and the United States largely framed people of those areas as disadvantaged, exploited and without agency.

Through my research, I learned several of the basic theories of why humans dress as well as the often entangled associations of gender and sexuality within clothing, often both assumed to be dichotomous: male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, one versus another.

I then began to examine several sources which more narrowly discuss dress in relation to gender, which were surprisingly numerous. Most of these sources were limited in that they focused analysis only on the middle to upper class, and completely ignored people of color, unless in reference to their being workers. They also assumed heterosexuality when discussing the interaction among genders.

To learn more regarding the use of dress to construct a sexual identity, I found some literature within the realm of queer studies. This field, an interdisciplinary field of many social sciences, provided me with information regarding the use of dress and appearance cues in the act of “passing,” staying in the closet, to attract mates, become part of an identifiable community, or reject societal gender and sexual norms.

I analyzed a variety of sources within several fields, though mostly within the fields of social psychology and sociology, and categorized the information into three major components: historical explanations of the implications and evolution of fashion and dress; the relationship of consumption and production (including the forces of marketing, the media, retail, etc in the capitalistic United States economy); and dress and appearance management within the LGB community, particularly in reference to the “closet,” personal expression, political agency, etc.

Literature review

The literature I have investigated and analyzed helps me to perform several objectives in writing my thesis. It establishes a theoretical framework, predominately the social-symbolic, social-interactionist framework. It also provides an overview of how the topic of the use of dress to construct gender and sexual identity appears within various fields of research, illustrating that a full, exhaustive examination of this topic must be interdisciplinary. One must examine work performed in the field of anthropology, psychology, sociology and feminist studies to fully understand what theories have been produced and the greater contexts of dress (its uses and effects), rather than just definitions of dress or “fashion.” In doing this, I can make the central claim that dress itself, the physical products that people drape on their bodies, cannot serve as an innate or accurate indication of sexual identity; only the culturally defined symbolism and cues, assigned to certain modes, colors, styles of dress can serve to distinguish and regulate a sort of sexualized identity.

Through my literature review, I have also developed three major areas of study from the literature to illustrate the contexts in which (types of) dress is arbitrarily assigned within a rigid gender binary. The first area of the literature provides a historical account of the evolution of dress, as well some historical theories of why humans dress. The context of these works however remains within only Western Europe and America. This limit reflects the ethnocentrism of academic scholarship in the United States; research is assumed to begin and end within the Western world, and any information regarding “the rest” is constructed

and treated as “the other.” Thus my research has this inherent limit, as claims and conclusions should assumedly apply only to the West.

The second area of study in the literature pertains to the marketing and industry of dress, how it evolved into the capitalist machine of today and how the larger forces (laborers, manufacturers, retailers, the media, and the consumer) interact. Clothing has become commodified, made, advertised and sold to specific audiences, including a so-called gay and lesbian “market” and “subculture.” Much of this research comes from historical accounts as well as today’s marketing reports and related sociological studies.

The third major area of study within the literature pertains to the use of dress in constructing a lesbian identity within the frameworks of larger society and the LB community. The majority of this scholarship is qualitative; however, some research performed within psychology is quantitative. It describes how some gay and lesbians practice very strict appearance management either to construct a closet or to resist social norms. This appearance management also serves another purpose, for some: it gives some members of the lesbian, gay and queer communities agency to resist heteronormative, mainstream society, by proclaiming a common identity and forming an identifiable community, and outwardly expressing a resistance. To further illustrate the utilization of dress as a means to express agency, I draw in some research of the straight-edge movement within the punk movement of the late 1970s.

Susan Keiser, (1997), lays down groundwork for analysis in terms of thinking about the use of dress in society, through a social-psychological lens. She

explains three major frameworks of analyzing dress: cognitive, symbolic-interactionist, and cultural studies (35, 42; 1997). From these frameworks, I utilize a symbolic-interactionist frame in this work largely because I identify with this approach most through my own feminist, sociological background. This approach has three major components: the actions of the consumer, who “actively and selectively use what is available to them to shape their own realities, to express themselves visually, and to join their actions with those of others in everyday life” and “combine clothing, modify the way they are worn, or wear them in new contexts, in ways that may be different from what manufacturers could have ever visualized” (42); people’s means to “indicate messages through symbols, clothing and appearance in symbols evoke certain responses, initiate behavior, organize actions”; and finally, others’ ability to act “toward other people, in part, on the basis of the meanings their appearances hold for us” (43). Kaiser very briefly discusses the use of dress by members of a gay and lesbian community. She argues that some lesbians have rejected norms of femininity by maintaining certain appearances, and certain visual codes (572). Her discussion is extremely generalized, however, and refers specifically to a more affluent, white gay and lesbian community. Overall however Kaiser provides much evidence and theoretical basis for my ultimate claim that dress cannot be used as an innate or accurate indicator of a sexual identity.

Joanne Entwistle (2000) provides a history of western dress in terms of gender (although this account does not examine the space between or question the male and female binary system). Despite some major limitations, it has some

feminist conclusions. Until the 18th century, most Western people wore similar clothing, regardless of gender, although class based and feudal differences were marked in clothing. By the Victorian era, certain clothing was created for men and women, with women's clothing far more revealing of the breasts, restrictive at the waist (to emphasize the hips and buttocks). Relations of class and race, however, imparted some women's abilities to achieve this style, and Entwistle does not specifically address these gray areas. The 20th century saw the birth of the fashion designer. Soon, handfuls of people decided the trends for the rest, assigning gendered meanings to different items of clothing arbitrarily (170-171).

Entwistle also provides a cognitive theory of dress, examining how clothing has become one of the key indicators of gender identity, cross-culturally. "Clothing draws attention to the sex of the wearer so that one can tell, usually at first glance, whether they are a man or a woman... [and that] clothing, as an aspect of culture, is a crucial feature in the production of masculinity and femininity: it turns nature into culture, layering cultural meanings on the body" (140-143). She states that all gender distinctions in dress are arbitrary, and the distinctions are rigidly maintained through childhood into adulthood (141). Entwistle also draws a connection between the norm of heterosexuality in dress, implicit in the gender constructions. As dress reinforces dichotomous ideas of male and female, it also reinforces heterosexual roles, sexualities and behaviors. "Given that our ideas about masculine and feminine are tied not just to sex difference but to sexuality, there is a close relationship between the gendered codes of dress and ideas about sexuality" (142).

Much of Entwistle's text describes how women have come to be associated more closely with dress and fashion, even though all people wear clothing. Through various historical moments, including the close role women have had with the production of clothing, dress became a woman's occupation and was assigned a frivolous quality, ephemeral and not worthy of the cerebral male's attention. Women, of course, did exercise agency through the control of dress. Clothing became a sort of property (147). Much of the social control however came from some women over other women, establishing social hierarchies, by setting trends, creating and wearing certain clothing, establishing hierarchies of race and class among women, allowing men to maintain ultimate social control. Through various social forces, such as the media, the body becomes commodified and sexualized. "In other words, the fashion obsession with the sexuality of the body is articulated through particular commodities which are constructed as sexual (187).

Sarah Gordon (2004) provides a discussion of sewing that examines the practice as both gendered labor as well as a skill and an art. She gives much agency to women of the household who sewed all the household clothing, especially when mass-produced clothing became available at stores, albeit at relatively high prices. She acknowledges that dress "was vital to presenting an image of upward mobility or of preserving class status," thus sewing became a necessary skill within a class-based, hierarchical society, but also explains that sewing made women a major economic force, to save money or even to earn money themselves (69). It also became an art, a creative outlet. But although

sewing and the realm of dress provided much agency for women, it was also subjugated as “women’s work” and thus was labeled as weak, inferior and not worthy of male attention. A man often decided whether a woman would sew or not, even if the family’s economic status was such that a woman could purchase clothing. Quoting a United States Department of Agriculture survey: “As long as the woman at home has no direct source of income and her chief duty is in caring for the home and its occupants, she will, no doubt, consider that making at least a part of the clothing for the family is a wise way of stretching the family’s income” (71).

Entwistle also points out that “fashion imagery in magazines and in print advertisements play at the boundaries of contemporary mainstream ideas about sexuality” (187). Indeed, men’s and women’s magazines have historically promoted ideas of how exactly men and women should dress, right down to the last earring, cuff, jacket and dress. Editors, advertisers, manufacturers and writers work together to maintain a “style” within a magazine and promote it to the reader, establishing gender, racial and class standards. David Granger, the editor in chief of Esquire magazine, wrote in his editor’s letter in the March 2006 issue that “Esquire has been studying style and offering advice for as long as the magazine has been in existence. There is, of course, no one way for a man to dress. We try to make that clear, even as we make suggestions and offer recommendations.” There may be no one way for a man to dress, but men at least dress in some way, and this way is very much different from how one of another gender would dress. He goes on to describe fashion icons of the past, including

Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly. *Esquire*, it seems, emulates white, wealthy celebrity men, and thus, so should the reader. While sexual identity is not stated, a certain gender identity is very much assumed. “But for as long as American men have been considering the way they want to present themselves to the world, the trend has been clear: American men want to be comfortable, and they want their look to reflect whatever their particular level of ambition is.” (Granger, 2006) This statement not only assumes that women do not dress in these ways to achieve these goals but also reaffirms social constructed norms of what it is to be a man, and sends this message to all of his male (and female) readers.

Within certain social environments, such as a sorority, women develop a strict conceptualization of how to be “feminine” through their grooming and dress, according to Linda Arthur (1997). Her work reflects a symbolic-interactionist approach, in that certain symbols assign meaning within certain contexts and people respond in certain ways to them. Arthur set out to analyze the environment of the sorority on the psyche of the sorority sister, although her study is relatively limited as she analyzes only two sororities. It becomes problematic because it fails to question or dismantle societal assumptions and constructions of gender, race and class, as well as sexual identity. Her research illustrates how in the sorority, much of this “femininity” comes from belonging to the white upper class, which makes some sense as they attend a predominately white university. It alludes that “proper” femininity may vary within various social classes, and certain standards apply. They have the means to purchase expensive clothing and treatments “necessary” to perform certain appearance management (tanning, hair

dyeing, etc). Indeed, the sorority in which the sisters do not come from as wealthy families are not considered as beautiful or successful as the other.

Arthur does not attempt to relate any of this to the larger context of the sorority: it forms within expensive colleges (thus, most members come from the privileged middle and upper class), it formed in the 19th century as a “dating” and “marriage” medium for the “proper” upper class, and it predominately consists of white women. Arthur’s research, while analyzing the construction of a “feminine” female identity, maintains heteronormativity by ignoring any sort of sexuality alternative to heterosexuality within the sorority and the construction of the female. In her analysis, Arthur also does not question the production end of the equation; in other words, she does not examine how relations among women contribute to this particular enactment of femininity. For example, she does not explain how these women regard the production of clothing even though they may act as ultimate consumers. She does not address who produces the clothing – and runs the nail salons, the tanning beds, etc – that is so necessary for these women to maintain their rigid, policed appearances.

Sarah Miraglia, however, argues in her unpublished essay that the relationship between production and consumption works by feeding upon and fueling the other. Her research, mostly a literature review, is inclusive and does not “other,” although for the sake of length, she makes some valid generalizations. While gender or sexual identity is not a major factor in her research thus far, she does describe that women (more than men) have been targeted and created as the ultimate consumers. Marketing and other social forces,

including the media, work to constantly change the fashion trends so the consumer feels the need to constantly buy, meanwhile, laborers must work harder and more rapidly to produce and constantly refresh the new fashionable goods. The gendering of fashion seems to have a major profit-making motive: if people must wear certain items to create very rigid identities, more clothing will be purchased. The demand for cheaper costs and more product will result in a push for cheaper labor, thus, exploitation of women workers' labor in non-Western parts of the world will continue.

Much research has been performed regarding the marketing of clothing and other goods to the gay and lesbian population. In one sociological study, Freitas, Kaiser, Hammond (1996), the authors argue that style has become an important means for members of the lesbian and gay community to express agency and visibility, separate themselves from the greater society and identity within a smaller community, and resist the greater processes of capital. Unfortunately, the marketers of the world have classified the gay and lesbian community as a market, and a very affluent one at that. According to marketing research, the average gay household makes \$55,430 and the market has a trillion dollars to spend (89). So, although "...access to markets and consumer goods begins to mean not only visibility, but also political and economic clout," the authors argue, "How has the struggle for equal access to law come to mean equal access to consumer goods and services?" (89) Within recent years, marketers, designers and retailers have begun to target a "new" lesbian, one who is young, more interested in maintaining some femininity, and most likely a member of the

middle and upper class, unlike the lesbians of the past who marketers believed to be unknowing and uncaring about fashion (90). Most of the people they interviewed seemed to be distressed that they were viewed as a market and commodified, and some worked to reject these ideas by participating in the dressed world in all sorts of ways, purchasing clothing at a range of prices and within a range of styles. In this way, they express agency. However, identity is a major factor, and dress becomes an important way of expressing a certain identity, through socially assigned meanings in various dress (94).

Darrell Irwin (1999) briefly explores this notion of agency in decisions of dress and appearance management in his research of the members of the straight-edge subculture. “These youths challenge the drug use and irresponsible sexuality of their generation by establishing a cultural identity for themselves through ‘hardcore’ or high energy, punk music” (365). This cultural identity included appearance cues such as “baggy clothes” and tattoos, both elements of their parent punk, skinhead and skateboarder subcultures. They – Irwin fails to note that he refers only to the men of the movement, as he leaves out the specific appearances of women and people of color within the movement – wore leather jackets, black stovepipe-legged pants, and torn t-shirts like punks of the time, they then began wearing oversized sweatshirts and jeans, like skateboarders (369). However these cues were altered to create a separate, easily recognizable and resistant straight-edge subculture. Every aspect of their appearance had symbolic meaning. To prove that they had no intention of drinking alcohol, straight-edge youths “X-ed up” their hands, by drawing large Xs with black marker on their hands, to imitate

the Xs that bouncers of bars drew on hands of the underage, prohibiting them from drinking (269). They also drew Xs on sneakers, fliers and jackets, making X a symbol for the subculture. Appearance maintenance, through dress and other cues, became very important as it allowed members of the straight edge movement to exercise some of their own power in a society where everything else seemed controlled (375). Irwin does not recognize however that in maintaining their bodies with these very specific cues, these members of the straight edge subculture create a very specific category, a social control, creating an identity but also leaving out those people who do not fit into this identity, specifically those who are female or of color, or even of a different economic status. He does not explore the hypocritical irony that the straight edge culture acts to resist mainstream norms, and uses dress as a certain agency to do so, however it completely buys into the mainstream norms of heterosexuality, the male and female dichotomy and white privilege.

Some gay and lesbian people are more able to recognize other gays and lesbians much more quickly and with more accuracy than their heterosexual counterparts because of these assigned meanings, some researchers have claimed. However, this overarching theory might be dangerous. Lynne Carrol (2002) points out that gays and lesbians could have socially assigned certain meanings to various items and types of dress, many of which may have evolved into constantly reaffirming and self-replicating stereotypes. So, although gays and lesbians may have some social cues within their appearance management, they are actually acting on certain socially assigned meanings. Not all gays and lesbians, of course,

claim this ability or maintain specific appearance management. Both of these statements illustrate how certain social cues do not inherently represent a gay or lesbian identity but instead challenge gender norms.

Steve Seidman (2004) provides a fairly in-depth analysis of many interviewees (although the racial and class breakdown of these interviewees is problematic, as most of the respondents are white and of the university community) to illustrate the very conscious gender process of which some gay, lesbian, bi and queer-identified people participate, through maintaining a very specific, rigid appearance. They do this to either maintain a “closet,” or a socially constructed realm that “hides” their sexual identity by pretending or letting others assume they are heterosexual, or bust the closet wide-open. They are extremely concerned with dressing more “feminine” or “masculine.” Says one interviewee, Renee, “(my) masculine way of dress and look that this signals to people that I am a lesbian...the way I walk, dress wear my hair...I look like a dyke” (53) Seidman argues that the expression of gender norms through dress has long acted as the most accurate indicator of sexual identity. But because wearing certain dress is so arbitrary, and the gender assigned to certain types and styles of dress changes so frequently, this “indicator” of sexuality cannot always be accurate; simply, members of the gay and lesbian community assign meaning to various appearances, as previously discussed. “Gender nonconformity is...the most telling sign of a gay identity,” Seidman writes (34). But in “nonconforming” on the basis of a gay identity, are gender norms or sexual norms being bent? Seidman does not discuss transgender people and their experiences in dressing to express their

perceived gender and/or their own innate gender. They may be assumed to identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual, depending on what gender cues they utilize in their dress decisions. His lack of this discussion is a major flaw in his work, and its inclusion would strengthen his argument greatly.

Fred Davis, in his book Fashion, Culture and Identity (1992), discusses how “cross-dressing” is a means of challenging the gender binary within fashion. The book overall, however, does not focus solely on the construction of gender through clothing, he places his brief discussion within the context of constructing other types of identity (racial, class, religious, etc). His use of cross-dressing is a bit problematic, as it implies only two genders to cross and does not necessarily imply a sexual identity, just a switch in gender-representation. He does however coin the term “anti-fashion” and writes that members of the queer community, like members of other cultural and racial minorities or socially oppressed groups, use dress to challenge mainstream social norms. Members of the queer community challenge the gender binary through clothing to help form a distinctive community. It also becomes a source of pride (181). Davis’ major gap in his findings lies in his avoidance of analyzing sexual identity, separate from gender identity; instead, he lumps them together. He also engages in “othering,” overlooking that greater society has formed certain values and hierarchies to the benefit of some, and implies that these minorities or subcultural groups are different, or other, even though they have been socially constructed to be so within various racial, gendered, and class contexts.

But gender-bending within clothing has been more acceptable within the dominant, elite class at some points in history. Marjorie Garber, in her book Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety, provides some history of the evolution of dress as a means of expressing nationality, race, and dress, in England. She describes the sumptuary laws of the medieval and early modern England, laws that regulated who wore what, on what occasion (21). Within these laws, gender regulation was not a priority: class and rank distinctions came first, largely because of the restrictions of how much of certain items and materials to purchase (26). Thus, these laws had great economic incentive, rather than social structure: they helped regulate the consumption of certain products and prevented people from a sort of conspicuous consumption. “What is offensive, then, about excess of apparel for either gender is that it has a deleterious effect upon patriotic pride and upon both the national and domestic economy” (28). These laws also prevented national embarrassment. Queen Elizabeth herself warned her English subjects against dressing too frivolously and elaborately, or risk making a mockery of their country to others. Clothing, which often has a reputation for being a frivolous concern, in this case was a matter of national identity. “Was ‘self-fashioning’— the forming of a self” – that achievement so consistently claimed as one of the chief distinguishing features of the Renaissance, in fact at the mercy of fashion? Of clothing?” (32)

Diana Crane (1999), in her analysis of women’s interpretations of images in fashion photographs in magazines, illustrates that women may not consciously interpret images of gendered dress as being indicators of specific sexual identities.

Her qualitative study, both feminist and sociological, seems fairly convincing. Her objective was to determine how women responded to images; however, she did not create a skewed pool of subjects and assumptions before conducting her research. She conducted several focus groups (which she then analyzed in terms of race, class and age) and asked many questions that seemed fairly open-ended, such as how they felt about the representations about female sexuality. Most of the respondents expressed that they did not feel hugely upset by the images or feel as though they were highly objectified. Most interesting of Crane's work is her interpretation of the subject's need to be "in fashion." She explains that fashionable clothing reflects societal debates and confusions, such as "youth versus age, masculinity versus femininity, androgyny versus singularity, work versus play, and conformity versus rebellion..." by allowing the expression of different and intersecting identities "that reflect the complexities of defining identities and nonidentities in contemporary culture" (Crane 543-544) Indeed, by participating (or not) in what is marketed as fashionable clothing allows one to participate in creating a sort of self-identity.

One woman, in a narrative published in Looking Queer: Body Image and Identity in Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay and Transgender Communities (1998), provides a highly qualitative look at why she makes the very specific decisions to dress a certain way. She attempts to meet certain standards of being "female" and "feminine," linking the two together, and arrives at the conclusion that dressing in a way that meets certain sexualized conceptions of the female "liberates" her from feeling weak, submissive and shy, by making her aware of her body and its

(sexual) power. Thus, as a female, one must be characterized by her sexuality and sexual expression and express it through her dress, she seems to argue. She draws a large link to her specific appearance and her sexual identity, however, most of her discussion lies within the context of what meanings and codes have been socially assigned to certain elements of dress. In the context of my research, her narrative indicates that dress cannot accurately indicate sexual identity; people rely on their internalized notions of gender and sexuality through clothing cues to assign or create a sexual identity.

Theoretical Framework

Susan Kaiser presents two major sociological approaches that have been historically utilized to analyze the relationship of dress and gender. The first, the symbolic interactionist, emerged in the 1930s with work performed by George Hebert Mead, a social psychologist at the University of Chicago. The main thrust of this approach is that all social processes relate to how meanings are constructed in daily life, and how these constructions are recreated. Personal appearances are assigned meaning, and people also give them meaning. The second approach, the cognitive perspective, analyzes how people simplify their perceptions and develop judgments about people on the basis of certain cues (24). This approach does not analyze the context of how or why these cues develop, or why people simplify their perceptions; it instead just works to see that they do, and which cues spark these actions.

In my research, I gravitated toward sources which took a more symbolic-interactionist approach, largely because I believe a more feminist mode of study requires one to understand context: the context of what causes one to dress a certain way, who is able to dress a certain way, how one learns how to dress a certain way. Thus, most of my analyzed sources consist of qualitative data, rather than quantitative.

Kaiser also explains the three major influences of clothing: how we shape and represent our identities as we manage our appearances, how we interact with other people in groups or communities, and how we are influenced by, and contribute to, the cultures and times in which we live (vii). It is exactly these

three influences that I attempt to analyze in my research here, largely how dress is and can be used to shape and represent a sexual identity, how we use this to interact with others, and how dress contributes to social ideas of sexuality and identity.

Findings and Analysis

Through my research, I have found that the entire discussion relating to clothing has been feminized. The realm of dress has been linked with women since the 17th century – in terms of its production, its consumption, and its meaning, and also with sexuality, which is typically associated with women. Dress has also been assigned socially prescribed feminine traits: shallow, vain, fleeting, impractical, fanciful, excessive, beautiful, etc. Entwistle explains that this feminization has skewed all research regarding dress, leaving it in the realm of the non-academic, the lay(wo)man. “For centuries woman has been associated ‘fickle’ fashion, vain display and indulgent narcissism,” Entwistle writes. “Indeed, this association may explain in part the marginalization of fashion within social theory, why it has been seen as ‘frivolous,’ ephemeral nonsense, unworthy of serious academic attention. Typically, as feminists have pointed out, the things associated with women tend to have lower social status than the things associated with men and women’s pastimes and preoccupations have been trivialized and mocked....Therefore, when considering fashion, gender and fashion, it is worth asking the question: why are women associated with fashion more than men are?” (145-146). John Brewer, a history professor at the University of California Los Angeles wrote that “to dress fashionably is to be labeled frivolous, to seem to care about the body and, therefore, by implication to downplay the life of the mind,” and this is how he judges others, especially women (Steele, 1991)

Several researchers, including Entwistle, Keiser, and Davis, describe the role of women, within the family structure, as creators of clothing. Clothing

became associated with the home, mothering and wifery. Today, when many women purchase clothing, they purchase clothes still created largely by other women. The consumers often forget the producers, although both the consumer and producer are feminized: the producer paid low salaries for long hours, the consumer caught up in a so-called trivial pursuit. But as producers of clothing, women do have some agency of their lives, providing their own income and controlling some aspect of their own household (Entwistle 147).

Dress in isolation is not feminized. Instead, because women are sexualized, their clothing is thus sexualized and women are critiqued for the expression of sexuality in their dress. Entwistle, using Teelson's argument, explains that if women are more closely associated than men with the body, sexuality, sin and clothing, then it is understandable that they are more likely to be condemned for their dress on the grounds that it is immodest or sexually alluring" (149).

Entwistle also describes how women in the American workforce often face difficulties in their dress, as they try to portray a "professional," and therefore, non-feminine presence, but their dress constantly acts to present some sort of sexuality as their dominant identity. "When it comes to clothing, these connections between woman, the body and sexuality remain strong so that even in the professional workplace they are often seen in those terms" (145).

To not have an interest in fashion often means that one is less of a woman, although what definition of woman or the idea that there is a definition is problematic. One California professor writes that women with "asexual clothing

and handbags [that] are satchels," with "no makeup and no jewelry," send the "subconscious message" of her "If I could, I'd be male" (Steele). But if a woman is too "feminine," she is penalized for her sexuality, or more accurately, her perceived sexuality, the sexuality applied to her by others. Another professor, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, explained, "I don't lecture to students wearing a codpiece." One a woman wore a short skirt, he continued. "The students kept staring at her legs; it was very unprofessional. Women should dress to be one of the boys" (Steele).

To research dress and its connection to gender and sexual identity, one must absolutely attempt to remove it from a sphere of disdain, frivolity and unintelligence. But dress remains one of the most pervasive means of expression social symbols and cues and therefore cannot be trivialized.

Because dress and appearance management are socially constructed and assigned and reaffirmed meanings, dress and appearance are not innate or accurate indicators of sexual identity. While much literature offers many theories as to how dress works to construct a gendered identity, by maintaining the gender binary, reinforcing social norms of male and female genders, and reinforces heterosexuality, little of the literature makes the direct connection of how dress – in terms of, the act of selecting, purchasing, and wearing as well as the act of reading another person's dress – does not accurately indicate how one describes his or her sexual identity.

Three major areas of research regarding gender and dress all provide evidence that the meanings in dress are socially constructed and are shaped by

larger organizations of gender, race and class, including the assumption of heterosexuality. The first area of research to do this is that regarding the cross-cultural modes of dress and the changing history of dress in the Western world, particularly how its production and utilization is gendered. “Clothing, as an aspect of culture, is a crucial feature in the production of masculinity and femininity: it turns nature into culture, layering cultural meanings on the body. There is no natural link between an item of clothing and ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’; instead, there is an arbitrary set of associations which are culturally specific” (Entwistle 143). Within this set of associations lies heterosexuality. As Judith Butler explains, heteropatriarchy is the dominant framework, and the gendered body has meaning through “gender performances culturally structured through heterosexual ideology” (Kaiser 178)

In laying out the three major theories of why humans wear clothing at all, Kaiser indicates how these theories are based in sexism and patriarchal control of female sexuality, racism and ideas of Western superiority. These theories garnered much popularity at the turn of the 20th century, corresponding to the rise in social-science analysis of “other” cultures, or those not of Europe and America. Members of the white, upper-class engaged in such science and thus their work reflects their own personal views of “other.” The modesty theory, which states people wear clothing to conceal the genitals and other intimate parts of the body to hide their instinctive shame, is based in Judeo-Christian ideas of guilt and sexual disgrace (14). But this theory becomes highly problematic when one considers how the definition of “private” comes about. What is private? Certain

parts of the body have become problematic, largely because they have socialized to be sexual, and anything sexual – within Judeo-Christian beliefs – is dangerous and belonging to a problematic lifestyle, not fit for anything pure or spiritual. The modesty theory also, in times of its popularity, was applied more often to women, exacerbating the idea that female sexuality is dangerous and must be concealed, hidden and forgotten: for women's own sake and for the men around them, who could not “control” themselves if certain parts of the female body were not concealed.

The adornment theory, or that people wear clothing and other forms of modifications for display or to attract others, typically involves Western researchers analyzing the “natives” or “tribes” (16). Thus, it is highly problematic in that it considers Western dress the norm, the standard, also assuming that Western dress is consistent and similar for every person in the West. In this theory, all people who maintain their appearance in ways which do not require full dress are the “other,” and implicitly considered backward, or bizarre, and simplistic (illustrated by the reasoning offered for why people might ornament their bodies in certain ways).

Finally, the protection theory states that clothing protects humans from elements, animals, or supernatural forces. It also implies a sort of cultural Darwinism, with white Westerns the most “advanced” with their clothing styles (17). In other words, the theory holds, Westerners have evolved to understand that to protect themselves from the weather and other natural dangers, clothing is very valuable. White cultures have advanced, while “others” are primitive. This theory,

and the others, illustrates the earliest forms of analysis of fashion within a social-science lens, and it indicates the grounding of such research through an implicitly hierarchical Western, white, heteropatriarchal lens.

As time passes, the standards of what clothing and details of appearance change, and much literature illustrates that. However, although “the forms (fabrics, colors, shapes in clothing) of this symbolic separation have varied with time, but the idea of gender difference has endured” (Kaiser 68). Until the 18th century, differences in dress according to gender were not drastic. Clothing was similarly draped and cut for men and women. The greater distinctions in clothing were that of wealth, based on the price of the fabric and other adornments. But after this time, clothing became more and more gendered in shape, color and texture, some say. Others argue that clothing never became that much different and men’s and women’s clothing evolved at the same rate, although clothing became part of the women’s realm, and became viewed as narcissistic, shallow and trivial, like women (Entwistle 160). Women became the dominant producers of clothing, linking the idea of dress to women through not only consumption but production. By the Victorian era in Europe and North America, white women of the upper-class wore corsets and cleavage-revealing dresses, all meant to indicate the ideal woman (and physically force her into a subservient role) to catch a husband (162). This husband, ideally, would possess much wealth, ensuring wealth for the woman’s family. Thus, looking desirable became a tool for one man (typically, a woman’s father) to gain more wealth, by having her appearance attract a wealthier man whose wealth would then be linked to him through his

daughter. Entwistle does not analyze in depth the gendered dress of women in the lower classes, nor does she analyze the clothing of women of color. In doing so, she illustrates that perhaps creating gender identification through dress was much more important to the white upper class, who work to maintain their wealth and remain part of the upper class. Or she could simply be acting in the spirit of most researchers, analyzing the dominant groups and ignoring others, without intention.

Meanwhile, white women – largely of the white, middle class – began to ditch their bulky skirts and don pants in the mid-1800s, corresponding to the first wave of the women’s rights movement. Although considered suitable for working-class women, who need mobility and were not viewed as particularly “feminine,” pants drew attention to legs, a taboo at this time, and were considered “indecent” and “seen as a challenge to natural and God-given distinction between the genders which deemed that men should wear the trousers” (Entwistle 165). Pants have become acceptable for women. But the rapidly changing meanings and norms of pants again prove how arbitrary certain types of dress are assigned meanings as male and female, and these meanings are steeped in heteronormativity.

Another major area of the literature regarding the history of dress examines how clothing became mass-marketed. With the industrial revolution, fabric became available to far more people and thus became more affordable to members of the working and middle classes. Members of the upper classes then distinguished themselves with clothing made of materials like leather and silk. Stores began selling fabrics and patterns, and newspapers and magazines of the

era began including advertisements for their wares. Soon, clothing became mass-produced; more specifically, people no longer made their own clothes to wear, although immigrant women and women of the lower class mass-produced clothing in factories for mass-consumption, and the same gendered dress was available for most people, some more inexpensive than others.

The literature regarding the gendered history of clothing, and its gendered production and consumption, changes whenever it addresses any eras following the 1920s, beyond the “mass-marketing” of dress in Europe and the United States. The discussion regarding the production of dress by American or European women completely ends and refocuses on their consumption: who wears what, how marketing operates, who profits, the media’s influence, etc. The discussion relating to production from this point continues only in relation to women of the South, also known as the “third world.” The literature tends to strip the agency from women of the South. No one seems to care how they dress, how they are gendered or sexualized through their dress, or if they express agency in their appearance management. Instead, the literature in the realm of sociology, cultural studies and even feminist studies analyzes their economic status and role as breadwinner in the family, the debilitating effects of globalization upon them, and their struggle to produce an extraordinary amount of product for low wages for a far away audience to consume. While it is important to understand and recognize the relationship of production and consumption, and understand that most consumers of the North have no idea where or who produced their dress, one must

be careful not to strip agency from these producers and view them as solely as such. They cannot be victimized or undermined.

The marketing machine of the North undermines producers of the South in another way, by assuming they can shoulder the burden of production that is necessary for the consumption they so aggressively promote. By the 1980s, the marketing machine began to dig into consumers' minds to figure out how to make more of a profit, to determine how they communicate about their culture through clothing and then determine how clothing could be advertised so as to convey socially desirable meanings (Kaiser 25). But what socially desirable meanings? In this way, the social symbolism within clothing became reproduced. By analyzing how consumers already assigned meaning to certain cues in appearance, marketers could in fact re-promote those same cues, hoping that people would recognize them and purchase the clothing. The social constructions were reconstructed, once again, benefiting the larger capitalist forces.

The era of the fashion designer, beginning with Coco Chanel in the early 1900s, indicates how rapidly socially assigned meanings of feminine, masculine, male and female change and that these meanings are mass marketed. In other words, major definitions of masculine, feminine, male and female changed through the designs of a handful of extremely influential designers, backed by an entire fashion industry consisting of manufacturers, retailers, media sources, and style mavens. The only constant was that these differences were always gendered; there was always a male and female, a masculine and feminine, although some designs toyed with these concepts. They were also heteronormative, as well as

white and upper-class based. Following Chanel came Jean Paul Gautier, who failed in his attempt to make skirts the fashion for men. By the 1920s and 30s, the androgynous look reigned for women (although this look was distinctly male, as female curves were meant to be hidden and hair was cut short). Dior reinstated the Victorian, hyper-femininity following World War II, with other designers following. Chanel: sweaters, simple dresses, suits, totally revolutionized fashion. In the late 1980s, Calvin Klein produced the unisex look. Within 70 years, ideas of how to express gender in dress changed completely arbitrarily. The motivations for profit remained as well, as the designs would not be created unless designers thought they would sell, and they would remain in business.

Today, designers and retailers set new fashions nearly every week, and the marketing machine constantly works through the media and other outlets to pressure the consumer to buy, driving a constant need for production (Miraglia 1). Their drive lies in the need to make maximum profit. “While it is claimed that the increase in fashion seasons is a direct benefit to consumers, the real benefit goes to retailers to profits soar when (mostly) women consume new fashionable goods every few weeks” (13) Consumers often do not make the connection of who produces the clothing they purchase. In the drive for profit, manufacturers seek the cheapest labor available, typically women in industrializing countries, who are not paid much and work long hours, to meet the demand of retailers (13). As discussed earlier in this thesis, the producers within the relationship of production and consumption of dress are not considered as consumers; their role is strictly

limited and only acknowledged as parts of the production machine, for Northern consumption.

Whether people actually choose to purchase and wear such clothing depends on numerous factors, economic, political and social. As Crane explained in her work, one can participate in following a “fashion,” or not, and therefore makes decisions of how to express an identity, based within gendered, raced, sexualized, and classed contexts. In constructing this self-identity, one must have an idea of what constitutes of gender, race, sexuality and class in terms of being “in fashion,” largely because people have assigned social meanings to “fashionable” dress, as previous research has illustrated and has been explained here. Some agency is available, as people have some amount of “choice” of what to purchase, what to wear, and can change their perceptions of others regardless of their dress. But despite efforts to create (or deny) identity, others will assign meaning that may be contrary. If gender is assumed through clothing, then sexuality is typically assumed (to be heterosexual, unless the person dresses using social cues that express otherwise). But clothing can never be a guaranteed method of understanding one’s sexual identity, even within the context of being “in fashion.”

The arbiters and promoters of fashion, marketing executives, have realized the potential profit goldmine in the lesbian, gay and bisexual community. As previously mentioned, researchers estimate that the average gay household the average gay household makes \$55,430 and the market has trillion dollars to spend (Freitas 89). Within the past 20 years, researchers have analyzed the shopping

habits and modes of dress within a wealthy, largely white LGB community to determine exactly how to produce clothing and market this clothing to it. Two outcomes could arise from this. The first outcome begins with the premise that, historically, some members of the LGBT community have been able to use dress to subvert gender norms (disturbing the socially constructed ideas of gender and heteronormativity). Other subcultural communities have challenged mainstream norms in clothing as well, argues Davis, in what he calls “anti-fashion.” “...The quest for distinctive collective identities, be they of a racial, ethnic, occupational, or socially deviant variety, acts as a major cultural launching pad for antifashions” (166) The straight-edge movement borrowed from the punk, then skateboarder cultures, anti-fashions. Members wore similar clothing to these anti-fashions that were in direct opposition to the fashion of the mainstream. Certain elements of their appearances however, assigned social meanings which were reinforced through messages in music, small social networks and radical literature, became identifiers of being “straight-edge.” Thus, straight-edge people specifically maintained their appearance, expressing agency to resist mainstream norms and created their own social norms.

Thus, if some members of the LGB community have historically used clothing as a means of resisting social norms of gender, or have given meaning to certain appearance cues to signify a certain identity, then a mass-produced, heavily-marketed drive to dress the LGB community seems destined for failure because the LGB community may reject it. Or, if the LGB community becomes more accepted or chooses to assimilate into the mainstream heterosexual

community, then perhaps some members may feel less inclined to distinguish themselves through dress and create various symbols. However, if this complete acclimation and acceptance by the mainstream occurs, marketers to the GLB community could also fail, as the LGB community would purchase the same clothing styles as their straight counterparts. This entire discussion is highly problematic in that it completely overlooks that marketers have defined a dichotomous sexual identity, gay versus straight, and assumes that both can and should be marketed to differently. It targets a blanket LGB community, assuming all identified queer, lesbian, bisexual are the same, using them to make a huge profit. It also identifies closeted people as “potential,” as well as problematic (Bowes 235). “But do the closeted or fearful respond favorably? And what of a possible backlash by an offended heterosexual community?” (239). Indeed, marketers and others benefiting from the capitalist forces in fashion have a great interest in maintaining a gender dichotomy, to make more profit, and to maintain distinct heterosexual and LGB communities (who have money to spend).

Kaiser explains that some members of the lesbian community have used dress to subvert gender norms regarding “woman” and the “feminine,” norms that seem to be hyper-heterosexual as well. “...Processes of style in the lesbian community have often revolved around a theme of resistance to traditional femininity and its obligatory interest in or obsession with clothing, fashion and issues of beauty” (572). But as the lesbian-identified woman in Looking Queer would claim, lesbian women can dress “femme” and retain their lesbian identity, as she does. Perhaps this woman is one who has been nabbed by marketers and

the gendered modes of dress, and has developed a sort of “lesbian chic.” Or perhaps she simply prefers “femme” clothing. The overall issue here is not whether a lesbian woman dresses femme, or not, or if dressing a certain way subverts norms of a heterosexual identity or even a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity. The issue is that dress alone, the actual products of clothing, is a personal choice limited by one’s economic capabilities and limitations as well as one’s ideas of what messages he or she wishes or is forced to convey, and cannot accurately indicate any sort of sexual identity. Only certain social symbols and cues, assigned to dress, provides individuals with ideas of how to express their own sexual identity (tied up intimately in gender, class and race identity) and how to read other’s identities, through their dress.

Some research suggests that gay men and lesbians are more adept at reading others’ appearances to identify other gay and lesbians. Psychologist Lynne Carrol, in her report, “Role of appearance and nonverbal behavior in the perception of sexual orientation among lesbians and gay men,” wrote that her work “showed that gay men and lesbians were more proficient than heterosexuals in recognizing other homosexuals on the basis of brief exposure to non-verbal behaviors” (115, 2002). This research seems problematic in that Carrol does not examine some of the context behind her conclusions. Some gay and lesbian people may be more adept at this proficient “recognition” because they know what subtle dress and appearance cues have been assigned the meaning of a gay and lesbian identity, and they wear them also to express this identity. Kaiser explains that people can develop skills to interpret images differently to recognize

the deeper ideological messages, such as recognize the perpetuation of thinking about gender (52-53). They become active viewers. However, a gay or lesbian person does not always wear or engage in these cues; she could dress and act “straight,” proving that dress and appearance does not always indicate sexual identity. She could choose to appear “straight” as a conscious choice, expressing her individual agency, to resist categorization, instant labeling (as Carrol discusses in her study), and to challenge the colonizing desire of both the mainstream, heterosexual community and some lesbian and gay communities, to define what it is to “look” gay or lesbian. No item of clothing is gay or straight, it has simply been assigned to be and has become a symbol. In their “skill” of identification, gay men and lesbian women may simply be relying on stereotypes of the appearances of gay men and lesbian women (Carrol 120).

If certain ways of dressing and appearance maintenance have been socially assigned meanings of gay and lesbian, then for those people living in “the closet,” or a state of hiding their sexual identity, decisions of how to dress and maintain their appearance could be of the utmost importance. In describing the socially constructed “closet,” which Seidman calls a “state of oppression,” Seidman explains how some members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and transgender community must live all, part, or certain aspects of their lives hiding their sexuality from others. In doing this, they modify their behavior, speech, dress, and any other socially interactive aspect of themselves. They constantly police their own gender, perhaps more consciously than heterosexual people, and thus police

their sexuality. Again, this sort of policing indicates that clothing cannot be an accurate indicator of sexual identity.

Conclusion

Nearly every person in the world wears clothing every day. Dress is an extremely crucial and pervasive form of self-expression, perception, and identity. More specifically, dress has systematically become a marker for sexual identity. Social cues have been assigned in dress and other aspects of appearance management that create messages of gender, race, class and, within the heteropatriarchy, sexual identity. The histories of production and consumption in the Western world, modern marketing and drive for profit, as well as the use of dress within the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities to create an identifiable community and also to rebel against certain gender and sexual norms, illustrate that dress is socially constructed and its meanings reaffirmed, over and over again.

The literature regarding dress does not address the direct link between the use of dress in constructing a sexual identity as commonly as it discusses gender, class and race based identity construction. In addition, all of these identities greatly intersect and most often these intersections are not analyzed, particularly in certain fields of study. Feminist scholars must address these intersections and truly question conceptions and research regarding dress, especially conceptions which generalize how dress is masculinized or feminized, what defines dress, who are the consumers and who are the producers, and what greater processes shape the symbolic assignment in clothing. If heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy are to be abolished, as I and many others believe they must be, then these assumptions and productions in dress must be critiqued and abolished as well.

Works Cited

Anwah, Fauzia Erfan. "The rise of the Bangladesh garment industry: globalization, women workers, and voice." *National Women Studies Association Journal*. Vol. 16. p. 34 2004.

Abstract: Anwah provides an analysis of women workers of the Bangladeshi garment industry. She examines their economic status within the family, within economic, political and social contexts, based on interviews with workers. She also examines the gender roles and gender practices within the family. This work is useful to my research in that it helps to illuminate the agency of the producer of clothing, purchased by people of the North. It is also useful because it illustrates how producers, often women of the South, are represented in the literature of the production of dress as people without agency to dress, to express their gender and sexuality. They are undermined. Their use of dress, as a personal expression, is not addressed.

Arthur, Linda B. "Dress and the Social Construction of Gender in Two Sororities." *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*. Vol. 17. P.84. 1997.

Abstract: This study, while completely assuming heterosexuality, illustrates how some women (and all women should, according to societal norms) become "feminine" depending on what's expected and taught from those around them. This study also illustrates how gender construction and conditioning is largely based in class structure, as women in sororities must have the financial capability to purchase the dress and appearance management (tanning, hair dying, etc). Consumption is a major theme with little regard to the producers of fashion. For my research, this essay reinforces all of those major themes as well as supports the symbolic-interactionist framework that people interpret symbols and it is a two way process of receiver and sender.

Bowes, John. "Out of the Closet and into the Marketplace: Meeting Basic Needs in the Gay Community." *Gays, Lesbians, and Consumer Behavior: Theory, Practice, and Research Issues in Marketing. Journal of Homosexuality*. Vol. 31. p. 219.

Abstract: Bowes argues that the marketing toward the gay community creates a sense of political validation for the community. He argues that marketing toward the "gay community" is aided by an understanding of "psychosocial characteristics in addition to traditional demographic indicators" (220). To be successful, it must "respect its differences" and provide an "affirmation of its claims to rights in society" (221). This research seems highly problematic, from a feminist perspective, in that Bowes gathered his evidence from surveys of people who attended concerts sponsored by the organized gay and lesbian communities of Seattle, and also distributed it through various organizations in Seattle as well. He accounted for "minority" status in his work however he did not account for class difference. He also reached only those who participated in these concerts or organizations, who may be more willing to be targeted by a mainstream

marketing machine. This research is valuable to my work however because it provides a glimpse into the mindset of the capitalist based, profit driven, marketing machine.

Carrol, Lynne. "Role of appearance and nonverbal behavior in the perception of sexual orientation among lesbians and gay men." *Psychological Reports*. Vol. 91. p. 115-122. 2002.

Abstract: In this report, Carrol explains her research within the zero-acquaintance paradigm, a psychological theory developed in 1966, that holds that people can assess others and make judgments about them based on very brief interactions (in different dimensions). She states that other research has indicated that gay men and lesbians are more proficient than heterosexuals at recognizing other gay and lesbian people. This research often concludes that subtle aspects of appearance, including dress and body modification such as makeup, short hair, lack of jewelry, etc, allow this phenomenon to occur. In her own work here, she concludes that much of these aspects (for recognition) may be based in gay/lesbian stereotypes or that this ability has developed especially within gay and lesbian communities for protection and attraction. For my research, this work is useful because it indicates the idea that gay and lesbian people can quickly identify each other based on cues in dress and appearance; however, most of these cues have been socially constructed and given meaning (social-symbolic perspective) and may have turned into stereotypes, and these cues do not necessarily represent queer identity but are primarily a challenge to gender norms.

Crane, Diana. "Gender and Hegemony in Fashion Magazines: Women's Interpretations of Fashion Photographs." University of Pennsylvania. The Sociological Quarterly. Vol. 40. Nr. 4. p 541-563. The Midwest Sociological Society: 1999.

Abstract: Analysis of the ways in which women perceive images in women's fashion magazines. Crane conducted focus groups in which she asked participants how they interpreted images, specifically, in terms of their representation of women's sexuality, their unrealistic or realistic messages, their targeted audience, and how they felt they were spoken to or ignored through these messages. She also briefly analyzes the targeted (or not) audiences of these images, and distinguishes this analysis into racial, class and age categories, i.e. younger women of color, older white women. Crane found that women were not necessarily upset or felt confined by these images into stereotypical conceptualizations of female behavior and value, such as being sexual objects or viewed by masculine standards in a hegemonic culture. This source is valuable to my work because it provides an analysis of women's (certain women, identified) analysis of images of clothing on women in fashion magazines, a hyper sexualized and exaggerated idea of womanhood, allowing for clear cut opinions of gender and how it is represented by clothing (as well as stance, gaze, etc).

Davis, Fred. Fashion, Culture and Identity. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1992.

Abstract: Davis argues that the gendering of dress reinforces social norms of gender, including male dominance, female labor, the female as frivolous, and assumed heterosexuality. He also discusses cross-dressing and its threat to the gender binary. He also introduces the idea of anti-fashion, or a sort of organizational stance against mainstream fashion usually developed within minority classes or segments of society. He mentions the idea that members of the queer community have frequently dressed in a manner which challenged the mainstream gendered dress codes of male and female. Because heterosexuality is assumed with these codes, they also challenge notions of sexual identity.

Entwistle, Joanne. The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress, and Modern Social Theory. Boston: Blackwell Publishers. 2000.

Abstract: Entwistle provides a largely historical analysis of dress and its distinction as male and female, masculine and feminine. She links the role of dress in expressing sexuality as well. She also explains in great detail why and how dress has become associated as a “feminine” pastime, and therefore not worthy of male attention, even though plenty of evidence proves that men have been equally if not more so conscious and careful of their dress. This book has been very valuable for my research as it clearly laid out much of the theoretical basis of the construction of gender through dress. It does not address much about sexuality or the transgression of the gender binary.

Garber, Marjorie. Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety. New York: Routledge. 1992.

Abstract: Garber explores the psychology, cultural representation and creation of the transvestite, particularly the fascination (of the transvestite and observers of him). She analyzes several aspects of popular culture. Garber’s analysis however of the connection of dress to sexual identity is most pertinent to my work. She also describes certain socially assigned and reaffirmed cues in clothing, particularly to indicate a certain gender or sexual identity. The source is rooted in Western culture, which Garber admits. She does question the gender binary but (perhaps unavoidably) roots her discussion within this binary and does not necessarily challenge the notion that clothes must indicate sexuality.

Irwin, Darrell. “The Straight Edge Subculture: Examining the Youths’ Drug-Free Way.” *Journal of Drug-Free Issues*. Vol. 29. p. 365-380. 1999.

Abstract: Irwin provides an ethnographic analysis of the youth straight edge subculture in Long Island, New York focusing largely on its rejection of drugs, alcohol and casual sex, while continuing to participate in the larger punk scene. He also describes the importance of certain appearance cues for this subculture, as a means for members to express agency and identify themselves as separate from other subcultures. His work is limited however in that it fails to analyze the

position of women and people of color in this subculture and he does not explain how they may be marginalized and/or oppressed in this largely white, male community. He does not explore the hypocritical irony that the straight edge culture acts to resist mainstream norms however it completely buys into the mainstream norms of heterosexuality, the male and female dichotomy and white privilege.

Kaiser, Susan. The Social Psychology of Clothing. 2nd ed. New York: Fairchild Publications. 1997.

Abstract: Kaiser creates a textbook of the role of clothing in society, through a broad contextual analysis, through sociological and psychological lenses. She discusses clothing by explaining that the study of it is interdisciplinary; it cannot just be analyzed through an economic, psychological, feminist, etc view. It gives some background to several theories of why humans wear clothing, and then she provides evidence to support and refute these theories. This book is crucial for my work because it gives me context in which to place my findings and research. It provides some theories of analysis and definitions of dress, clothing, appearance, and appearance management which I did not formerly know but now I will use to strengthen my thesis. Unlike other sources I have examined, this book seems written with the intent on teaching its reader the basics, very much like a textbook. The author, a textiles professor, is also a women's studies professor and it seems appropriate she would write this book through this lens.

Miraglia, Sarah. Syracuse University. 2006.

Abstract: Miraglia's essay focuses on the relationship between production and consumption of dress, arguing that they feed upon and drive each other. Marketing and individual preference drive constant demand for new clothes, thus consumers purchase more, and producers of fashion (typically, women working in low-wage, long-hours and often unsafe labor conditions). The incentive for retailers for constantly producing "new" fashion is often spurred by the quest for profits. For my research, Miraglia provides evidence that marketing and the forces of consumption (the media, etc) create an environment of constant consumption, for men and women, for profit, while the producers are often overlooked. Much of this marketing and consumption (and production) are highly gendered, to maximize profit.

Seidman, Steve. Beyond the Closet: The Transformation of Gay and Lesbian Life. New York: Routledge. 2004.

Abstract: In describing the socially constructed "closet," which author Steve Seidman calls a "state of oppression," Seidman explains how some members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and transgender community must live all, part, or certain aspects of their lives hiding their sexuality from others. In doing this, they modify their behavior, speech, dress, and any other socially interactive aspect of themselves. They constantly police their own gender, and thus sexuality. Some people have radically different experiences within the closet, some completely immersed in it and others abandoned it, and still others in between. This work is

particularly pertinent to my research as it provides evidence to the very conscious, or subconscious, gender and sexuality policing of dress and appearance that some people experience. Seidman explains that decisions of dress and appearance are carefully calculated to fit into what society has deemed “masculine” and “feminine,” gay and straight, thus supporting my thesis that dress is not an innate or accurate indicator of sexual identity.

Steele, Valerie. “The F-Word.” 2005.

Abstract: Steele’s analysis of the dressing patterns and opinions regarding them, in academia, highlights two major themes: the association of fashion with frivolity, shallowness, “of the body” and therefore not intellectual (might be because the academy is male dominated, thus, fashion which is associated with women, is not valid) and that professional women tiptoe on the boundary of being “professional,” and therefore, not provocative in their dress however they are still expected to look “nice” and “sexual.” For my work, Steele’s interviewees provide further evidence of some arguments and further illustrate the social importance of using dress to establish gender, femininity and masculinity, professionalism or non-professionalism, sexuality or asexuality.

“The Beauty Norm: A Femme Strikes Back.” Looking Queer: Body Image and Identity in Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay and Transgender. Dawn Atkins, ed. New York: Harrington Park Press. 1998.

Abstract: This essay provides a qualitative example of the struggle one undertakes in choosing her dress, from the simplest action of waking up and pulling something on (her own decision) to how she must deal with family and surrounding people in their evaluation of her dress. It gives clear insight to her thoughts, motivations and perspective of her daily struggle and conscious decision to change her appearance to fit some standard, or ignore it, and then her explanation of how it felt to again dress femme and discover and, in her words, celebrate her body. For my work, it serves as a forum for questioning her emotional and cognitive connection. She may feel as though she discovered her body once she realized she could treat herself as a sexual being by wearing very specific clothing...why only that clothing? It may be because only that clothing (in western society) promotes a very strong, and very exclusively female, sexuality.