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Redefining Gender & Gender Expression through Self-Perceptions & Self-Reflections

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Honors Scholars Program Spring 2020

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Introduction

As societies evolve policies are developed to recognize and formalize these changes. One current context for change is New York City and the concept that has undergone significant change is gender. Many individuals no longer identify with the traditional binary distinction of male or female. Subsequently, new gender categories have emerged (e.g., bi-gender, pan gender, androgynous). Indeed, a total of 31 gender categories have been recognized by the NYC Commission of Human Rights. The goal behind this acknowledgement is to encourage equitable treatment and respect of all individuals within the workplace. NYC businesses that do not accommodate individuals identifying with any of these gender identities can face a fine of up to \$250,000 in an anti-discrimination law suit on the basis of gender identity and gender expression.

Research Purpose

With a goal of equitable and appropriate treatment of all individuals, the question remains how will these different genders be recognizable by others? When gender was a simple binary distinction, one means by which one individual's gender was signaled to others was using dress and appearance cues (Barnes & Eicher, 1997). Dress consists of body modifications (e.g., tattoos, piercings) and supplements (e.g., hats, scarves, clothing) added to the body (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992). The purpose of this research was to investigate the use of dress and other appearance cues to communicate gender with individuals representing a range of genders. Specific research questions included (1) to what extent is dress useful for communicating one's gender identity, (2) how is dress used, and (3) what barriers exist to effective use of dress to express one's gender?

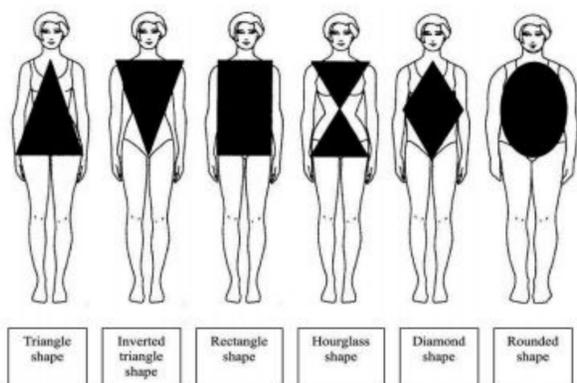


Figure 1. Different Body Shapes. Adapted from a study on 'The shape and size for designing the unisex clothing,' by Vasani, Pujar, & Gopalakrishnan, 2019, Trans Steller, 9, p. 126. Copyright 2019 by Trans Steller

Theoretical Frameworks

Stone (1955) argued that identities are developed and maintained through social interaction with others. An individual is recognized as having an identity when that identity is claimed and when others also attribute that identity to that individual. Thus, identities are negotiated through interaction with others. Thus, an individual could use dress to claim a gender identity, another person could either confirm or disconfirm that identity through reactions and responses to that individual. Researchers have documented that dress has been used to negotiate identities (Berger & Heath, 2007; Freitas, Kaiser, Hall, Kim & Hammidi, 1997).

Self-verification is the process of trying to confirm one's own view of oneself (Swann, 1912). According to self-verification theory, people prefer that others view them as they view themselves. People seek self-verification because self-verifying interactions simplify social exchanges by letting people know what to expect from others. Thus, dress could be used to announce and verify a claimed gender identity.

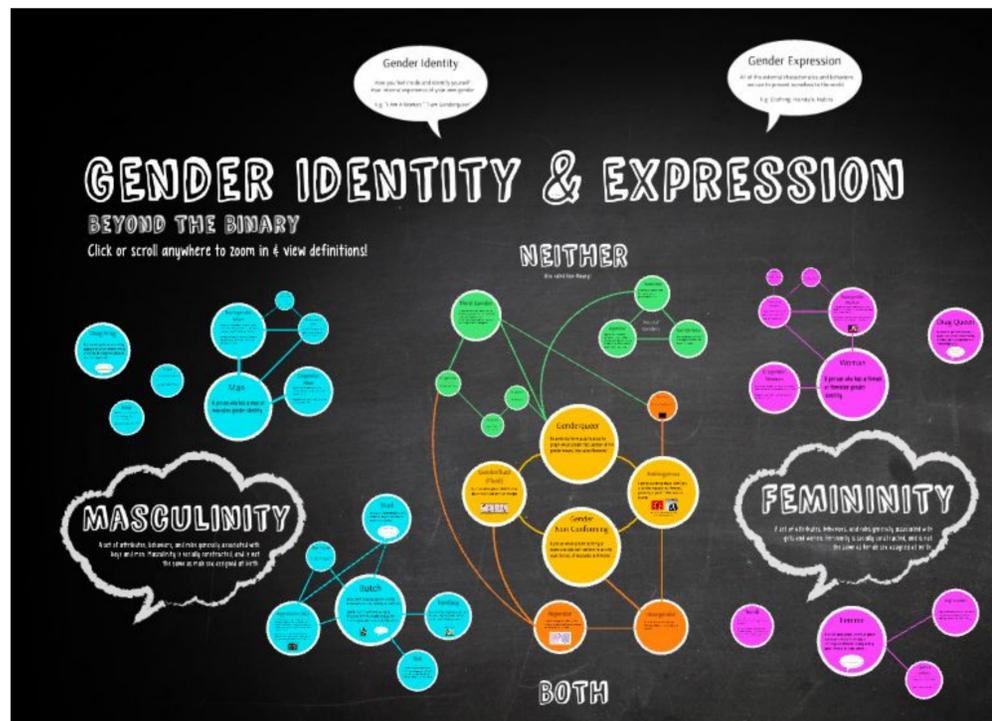


Figure 2. Difference between gender identity & gender expression. Adapted from a 'Gender Identity and Expression,' by Yes Magazine, 2020, landing page. Copyright 2020 by Yes Magazine.

Literature Review

Identity interprets human behavior, it is known that identity is not just identifying as male or female any longer, according to (Werner, 2019), there are about 64 terms that describe gender identity and expression, these terms may be confusing because they change over time, words like androgyne, cisgender, demigender, femme, neutrois, novigender, transsexual, e.t.c. one cannot assume gender based on appearance only. In a study Kott (2014) did, a majority of millennials surveyed argued that gender shouldn't define us the way it has historically, and individuals shouldn't feel pressure to conform to traditional gender roles or behaviors (Weingarten, 2015). More than two-thirds of people ages 14 to 34 agree that gender does not have to define a person in the way that it used to, according to a 2013 study conducted by the Intelligence Group, a consumer insights company. And 6 in 10 say that men and women do not need to conform to traditional gender roles or behaviors anymore.

Gender identity and gender expression, in essence, are very different from each other. Gender identity is a concept designated by one's self as male or female. The concept is defined by the role s/he assumes and acts upon based on the socially accepted environmental factors (American Psychological Association, 2016); whereas, gender expression is manifested through dressing, appearance, and mannerism, which may or may not observe a socially established norm (Koene, J. M., 2017). According to The Biological Contributions to Gender Identity and Gender Diversity: Bringing Data to the Table (2018), gender identity can be divided into two different classifications of "cisgender" (a person's sex assigned at birth determined by the presence of genitalia) and "transgender" (a person's assumed sex is different from the one assigned at birth). However, it is crucial to note that even though it might be related, gender identity is very different from gender expression because, for example, a female might identify as transgender but portray usual female gender roles per societal expectations (Lowry, R., Johns, M. M., Gordon, A. R., Austin, S. B., Robin, L. E., & Kann, L. K., 2018).

Expectations, however, cannot be applied to perceptions and reflections. The discrepancies within someone's perception of self and importance can be explained as missing self-awareness (Kristin L. Cullen, William A. Gentry, Francis J. Yammarino, 2014). For self-awareness to fully exist and influence our perception and self-esteem, a reflection of self and of surrounding must be evaluated. A study conducted by American Journal of Orthodontics on 248 schoolchildren aged 12 years, importance of self-perception and self-esteem were directly related to the perceived need rather than an influence of sex or on quality of life (Patricia R.dos Santosa, Marcelo de C.Meneghim, Glaucia M.B.Ambrosanob, Mario Vedovello, Filho Silvia A.S.Vedovello, 2017). This need is always gained through emotional stimulus via self-reflection (Agneta H. Fischer, Mariska E. Kret, Joost Broekens, 2018).

Method

To address our research purpose, we utilized a phenomenological approach. Utilizing this approach researchers are able to identify and describe what participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (Creswell, et al, 2007). In this instance the use of dress in negotiating and communicating gender identity. After receiving IRB approval for research with human subjects, individuals were recruited by contacting LGBTQ community organizations in a rural Midwestern and urban Northeastern region of the United States. Seven individuals agreed to be interviewed. Interviews were taped and transcribed. To analyze the data, van Manen's (1990) line-by-line method was used. Two researchers analyzed and coded participants responses. After identification of individual responses, similar responses were grouped together and each category of responses were analyzed to determine underlying theme(s). Inter-coder reliability was .92.

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