Clothes as window to the soul: How clothing influences the relationship between individuals' identity and the external world

by Lola Oberhagemann

Individuals' interaction with the external world is almost always influenced by their clothing, whether through personal choice, their "habitus", dress codes, etc., through shaping how other view/interact with them, influencing their understanding of their identity, and conversely of influencing how others view them though how they dress. As a result of this, different clothing styles can evoke different connotations based on the viewers assumption of the ideals of the groups or contexts that the wearer's clothing connects them to, such as formal office dress and LGBTQ+ fashions, whether by choice or by pressure. Also, through dress individuals can internalize these ideals of the group, to influence their view of themselves, and in turn how they interact with the outside world. Furthermore, clothing can also highlight a person's individuality through failure to conform, evoking a different individual-world interaction. Regardless, an individual's desire to express themselves and externalize the internal can lead to clothing construction or altering to better represent themselves, and/or their relationship to a group.

Introduction

What is the first thing you notice about someone- their face, posture, voice? For me, it's their clothes. How much time was put into styling it, does it signal a connection to a community, does it follow a dress code? I categorize people's clothing and accessories and, with a passing glance, form an opinion of their wearer, and likewise, others may form an opinion of me through mine. Clothing becomes the person's cover, so to say, to signal their identity, therefore when people are dressing, they must balance that tension between dressing to promote their identity as part of a group-whether assigned, through social position, or chosen, through their occupation or personal style- and their holistic individuality. In this essay, I will argue that clothing materializes the tension within individuals of understanding themselves, based on their association with a group or as an individual, to frame their relationship with the external world.

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How Clothing Creates the Self

Clothing is the medium in which people interact with the world and therefore can be viewed as an extension of themselves. Clothing can have a very literal impact on the wearer in terms of restrictions- think skinny jeans, or the "restricted gait of a pencil-skirt"- or evoking a sensory experience, whether pleasant or not- the "pinch of raw denim jeans when sitting down", "reassuring tap of boots on pavement"- that can influence the wearers choice in dress, along with personal preference or dressing expectations (Hesselbein 2021: 368). The many factors that inform the individual's clothing decision reflects the personalization of dress, and how close the relationship is between individuals and their clothing; a relationship Lambros Malafouris illustrates in his "Blind Man's Stick Hypothesis" (Malafouris 2008: 403). Malafouris' "Blind Man's Stick Hypothesis" details the "intersection between cognition and material culture" by debating where "the blind man's self [ends] and the rest of the world [begins]" (Malafouris 2008: 403-404). It is through the stick that the man interacts with the world thus influencing his perception of himself and his body (Malafouris 2008: 404). This hypothetical of where the body

ends can be expanded to include clothing to demonstrate how a different medium causes a different interaction. Human bodies influence how humans "come to see and be seen in the world", and as most interactions occur with clothed bodies the clothing becomes "an extension of the body that is like a second skin" (Entwistle 2000: 334). Clothing becomes the "Blind Man's Stick" with more societal clothing restrictions, through dress codes and gendered clothing, that further shapes that self-world interaction (Malafouris 2008: 403). Clothing is how people come to see and be seen in the world.

As clothing provides the framework for self-world interactions, clothing conventions and dress codes influence how individuals dress, and thus, how others perceive them. Societal expectations of dress combine with an individual's "habitus" to inscribe areas and interactions with dress codes, and their subsequent behaviors (Bourdieu 1990: 53). Pierre Bourdieu defines his concept of "habitus", as "a particular class of conditions of existence", like social positions of gender, class, and race, that "produces individual and collective practices…generated by history" that are "inscribed in bodies" (Bourdieu 1990: 53-54). As "habitus" are "internalized structures" they reproduce power-dynamics based on social position, through different social groups' "conditions of existence" causing different "views" and actions towards themselves and others (Bourdieu 1990: 53-60). For example, men viewing themselves as more 'powerful' or 'capable' than women, can influence their language towards women, such as through catcalling. Furthermore, how social positions intersect with one another can formulate different power-dynamics, such as black women experiencing "misogynoir", and "being treated in a uniquely terrible way because of how societal ideas about race and gender intersect" (Bailey and Trudy 2018: 763). People's "habitus'" influence how they view the world and themselves within it, and "predisposes [them] to particular ways of dressing", which is further limited by their association with other groups

they become a part of, like jobs, dress 'aesthetics", etc. (Bourdieu 1990: 60; Entwistle 2000: 340). It is important to note that "people do not always don articles of clothing for the express purpose of conveying a pre-determined message", and factors like convenience, location, and store supply, all influence people's dress (Owyoung 2009: 195). The lack of in-depth clothing choice may result in people's clothing communicating meanings that the wearer may not wish to convey, or "is even consciously aware of" (Owyoung 2009: 195). Regardless, the clothing and accessories do convey some meaning about the individual, whether correct or not, that others read and respond to, thus shaping their interaction with others, to shape how they view themselves (Owyoung 2009: 195). Furthermore, dress influences individuals to "particular forms of discipline of [their] body", such as body positioning, and speech, that further mediates their relationship with the external world, whether that be literal restrictions like sitting with a skirt on, or through embodying what the clothing represents like standing taller in a suit (Hesselbein 2021: 373). People's dress and its connotations become the framework for their interactions with the world and the understanding of themselves, through external reactions that the wearer internalizes (Owyoung 2009: 195). Clothing and all its subsequent ideals and group associations encase the body inhabiting it, mediating the individual's relationship with the external world, to influence their internal view of themselves.

The importance of dress in understanding oneself and their place within a group is why many people struggle with finding their 'style' as they attempt to externalize their desired view of themselves. As "conventions of dress not only dictate which garments to wear and how, and ways of seeing and evaluating (dressed) bodies", they put pressure on individuals to dress a certain way to be viewed by themselves and others how they wish, as individuals or as part of a group (Hesselbein 2019: 368). Thus, clothing conventions encourage individuals to "conform to prevalent social norms of identity" to become

easily identifiable as part of a group and that group's associated values and expectations (Hesselbein 2019: 368). The pressure for group dress occurs in offices through overt 'business casual' dress codes, to show "religious or ideological beliefs", and through street styles or "style tribes", and as "like-looking is like-thinking", adhering to a clothing convention signals an individual's beliefs and values as aligned with the group their clothing signals (Tortora and Marcketti 2021: 427). These "style tribes" signal a different influence of clothing on the self from environmental and situational dress codes, such as 'business casual', to a more personal, community-based influence, that the wearer may internalize on a deeper level (Tortora and Marcketti 2021: 427). Therefore, outside reactions to this more personal clothing can have a greater influence on the wearer's view of themself, than the more occupational clothing conventions that may feel more akin to a uniform than an expression of self (Owyoung 2008: 204). However, adherence to group clothing conventions can cause tension between the wearer's desire to express themselves as individuals and not adhere entirely to the group, potentially sacrificing that acceptance by the community in the pursuit of personal self-expression, as the LGBTQIA+ fashion example explains below (Clarke and Smith 2015: 17). Another tension that can arise, is people desiring to conform to the group but having the inability to do so, based on their "habitus" and the groups clothing historic precedent, as the 'business casual' example below discusses (Bourdieu 1990: 60, Marcketti and Farrell-Beck 2008: 57). This tension between group conformity and expressing holistic individuality through dress, forces individuals to confront this tension to define for themselves who they are.

The Influence of Assigned Groups on Identity Creation

Some clothing conventions are followed from birth based on assigned social position to shape people's identity, that can conflict with later group association. The influence of clothing on the self begins at a very early age, shaping children's preferences for clothing alongside their identity formation (Lennon et al. 2017:13). Children are taught the basics of gender through clothing, among other things- pink and brighter colour for girls with complex surface embellishments of ruffles and glitter, and blue and darker colours for boys with only simple designs of stripes- establishing what clothing they, due to their gender, are expected to dress in throughout their lives (Lennon et al. 2017:13). As people grow, their gender physically divides them from the other, with separate 'men' and 'women' clothing section online and in-store, to buy the more 'mature' styles they have grown into that continues many gendered elements from childhood- the mature deeper V-necks, combined with childhood brighter colours for women, and darker and looser fitting T-shirts for men (Luna and Barros 2019: 284). Furthermore, children internalize status distinction alongside gender, as higher costing shirts are "less likely…to use gendered themes" signaling the historical precedent of higher-class individuals wearing "less audacious" clothing (Lapierre, Ashtaputre, and Aubrey 2022: 13). These looser gendered clothing conventions allows higher status children to dress with less strictly enforced gendered roles, perhaps influencing a less gendered-focus view of themselves, and a favouring of simpler designs (Lapierre, Ashtaputre, and Aubrey 2022: 13). Status distinctions also influence bodily experience through dress with expensive brands, like Lacoste, causing the wearer to receive better treatment, and embodying the up-right and 'proud' posture assumed of the higher class (Gurung et al. 2019: 329). Race is another assigned social group that influences people's "practices and views" towards themselves and others, causing a different reaction and inhabiting of one's clothes (Bourdieu 1990: 53; Gurung et al. 2021: 119). For example, Black men wearing sports T-shirts are viewed as less competent as white men wearing them, due to their different social positions influencing observer expectations (Gurung et al. 2021: 124). These clothing conventions based on one's birth "habitus"

influence an individual's clothing preference-implicitly through forming clothing taste, and explicitly through barriers like cost and location-to shape their identity, and how they interact with the world, and so influencing how others interact with them (Bourdieu 1990: 60). Their individuality stems from their birth "habitus", thus when individuals become part of a new group, aspects of their "habitus" and "schemes of perception" can change, but as their view of the world and themselves is still "dominated by earlier experiences" it can cause tension of how individuals view of themselves (Bourdieu 1990: 60). People's individuality is heavily shaped by assigned group clothing conventions, to influence how they navigate self-world interactions.

The Influence of Chosen Groups on Identity Formation

'Business Casual'

Overt dress codes create narratives about group ideologies that relies on historic precedent, drawing attention to individuals not strictly conforming. Dress codes help groups and their associated ideals become easily identifiable, like scrubs and a stethoscope that evokes a healthcare worker, a yellow hard hat and an orange vest implying a construction worker, or a button-down and tie signifying a politician or businessperson (Owyoung 2009: 194). Business attire gained prominence from nineteenth-century English businessmen, resulting in a historical basis for white male business dress- think suits, button-downs, slacks- and encoded white masculinity in the corporate and business world (Owyoung 2008: 204). As white men established the 'business causal' precedent it is them that are the ideal, causing all non-white men and women to be unable to entirely conform to the standard and being viewed as 'corporate outsiders' (Sharron and Clayton 1990: 144). However, for this essay, I will focus on women as outside the 'business casual' ideal. When white women began entering the workforce in North America, during the World Wars but more securely in the 1970's, the tension regarding women engaging in

work beyond their gender's expectation was materialized in their work attire (Marcketti and Farrell-Beck 2008: 51). Women's clothing was expected to highlight their womanhood through the "staple tailored wool skirt and...shirtwaist blouse", "at a level appropriate with her 'station'", the low position for performing an 'unnatural' role (Marcketti and Farrell-Beck 2008: 51). As women gained more jobs and higher-status jobs in the 1970's, they struggled with dressing 'appropriately' as "there was no dress protocol for women...as there was for men", resulting in competing views on what businesswomen should wear, based on conformity to either the male model of business through the "tailored business look", or complete rejection of masculinity with wrap dresses and patterns (Marcketti and Farrell-Beck 2008: 57). This tension for businesswomen between dressing masculine and feminine remains today, with the adoption of the pants and the suit in the 1970/80's showing a continuation of male traditions, and pencil-skirts and heels showing a preservation of feminine styles (Owyoung 2008: 206). As masculinity is embodied in the 'business casual' dress code, the pants and button-downs are associated with the power and professionalism white men's "habitus" grants them, thus for women to become accepted into the business world, there is a strong pressure to conform to men's fashion to gain that white male power and respect (Sharron and Clayton 1990: 144). However, women are still expected to retain some femininity, through heels and makeup, to highlight their distinct womanhood, and 'business casual' clothing for women itself is fundamentally different from men (Owyoung 2008: 204). The pressure to retain femininity in the office comes from desiring to continue the legacy started from women's first entry into the workforce, of women dressing differently to draw attention to their 'otherness' and "safeguard 'natural' gender relations" (Owyoung 2008: 204). The buttons on a shirt for men and women are on different sides for no practical reason but to differentiate gender, with women facing issues of sexualization and perceived powerlessness based

on the top button being done/undone that men in similar situations do not (Gurung et al. 2018: 253). These gendered clothing differences cause businesswomen to have their femininity highlighted in 'business casual' dress, influencing others to notice their gender in a way businessmen's masculinity is not, to highlight women as "corporate outsiders" and not fully accepted into the 'business' group, even if working in an accepting environment, due to the lack of a long-established historical precedent of businesswomen (Sharron and Clayton 1990: 144). Even when businesswomen embrace their femininity through dress, to subvert the gendered expectations of 'business casual' clothing and validate themselves as powerful women, it is never by being closer to the group, but by highlighting their differences (Gurung et al. 2018: 253). There is a tension between wanting to be accepted into the group but never being fully able to for women in 'business casual' clothing, forcing businesswomen to navigate their identity as women and businesspeople (Gurung et al. 2018: 253). A gendered tension businessmen do not face. The 'business casual' dress code shows the negative impact of clothing precedent on individuals unable to conform to the standardized model.

LGBTQIA+ Fashion

As covert dress codes or street styles, like LGBTQIA+ fashion, are followed for personal fulfillment and expression, the tension between highlighting identity-based group association or individuality can have a profound effect on people. LGBTQIA+ clothing conventions signal an externalization of the queer identity to validate and externalize people's internal view of themselves. As LGBTQIA+ individuals have often been on the outskirts of society, especially if their queer identities intersect with other marginalized ones, creating community and friendships was and is an important way to feel validated and safe in their identity (Barry and Drak 2019: 692). Clothing became a way to signal to others their queerness and share, if only for one look, a sense of community; with more

general clothing and accessories that can signal queerness, like tattoos or piercings, and more specific clothing conventions to signal a specific queer identity, like gay men "wearing bright colours and 'tighter, fitted clothes'" (Clarke and Smith 2015:17). The creation of and adherence to this queer "habitus" of fashion causes individuals to use their queerness to influence themselves and the world around them, allowing others to validate them through external means reaffirming their identity and increasing their confidence, causing a continuous adoption of queer styles to further boost confidence, and on and on; of course, the inverse invalidation and subsequent less adoption occurring as well (Bourdieu 1990:60; Clarke and Smith 2015:13). However, there is a tension between "being recognizable as an authentic [queer person] and an authentic individual" that conformity to queer clothing conventions can cause, that every LGBTQIA+ person must navigate through their dress to feel at ease with themselves, and the amount their recognizable queerness is influencing their self-world interactions (Clarke and Spence 2013: 29; Entwistle 2000: 399). Queer fashion demonstrates the tension between expressing identity as part of a group, or as an individual.

Within queer fashion, two streams of thought influence how individuals validate their identities within established clothing conventions. The first stream is dressing to embody queerness by breaking gendered clothing conventions. There are many examples of queer sub-"habitus'" that break gendered clothing conventions to signal identity, some include women dressing in masculine, 'butch' styles- think short hair, leather jackets, and button-downs- to signal their lesbian identity as they are "much easier to read as lesbian", and bisexual and gay men wearing feminine "bright colours" and skirts (Bourdieu 1990: 60; Clarke and Spence 2013: 27; Clarke and Smith 2015: 17). Even masculine presenting people wearing jewelry can be a kind of breaking of conventions and signal queerness within certain contexts. Conformation to a subtype reaffirms one's unique queer identity by breaking clothing gender conventions in a standardized way, creating a historic precedent like 'business

casual', to allow for select outside identification to reinforce identity (Barry and Drak 2019: 690). Yet it can come at the cost of personal expression, like lesbian women feeling pressured to be 'butch' to be identifiable, showcasing how the desire to be viewed as part of the group can encourage restriction of individuality, to promote an individual's connection to a group (Clarke and Spence 2013: 27). People choosing to express their holistic identity can cause their queer identity to go unnoticed, resulting in a validation of their complete self at the cost of invalidating a key aspect of themselves. To express their queerness, individuals may break gendered clothing conventions to adhere to standardized conventions, at the cost of personal expression.

The second stream is dressing to embody queerness by conforming to gendered clothing conventions but subverting bodily expectations. As established, clothing is made for specific situations for specific bodies that carry certain connotations, especially gendered ones, such as the 'business casual' signaling a white, male body or the word 'dress' evoking the body of a woman without further prompting (Marcketti and Farrel-Beck 2008: 5). In the first stream, LGBTQIA+ people used this assumption to turn clothing conventions on its head and reaffirm their identity, with 'butch' lesbians never wearing dresses and men/nonbinary people wearing them (Clarke and Spence 2013: 27). For transgender people desiring to "pass" or be perceived as cisgender for the gender they identify with and not the gender their body signals, using clothing's assigned gender prescriptions allows them to embody that gender (Lunceford 2010: 64). Clothing becomes a "way of being and doing gender" through "visual conformity" to the gendered societal expectations of dress to reaffirm their gender identity and allow it to mediate the relationship between themselves and the world (Jones and Lim 2021: 13). Trans people desiring to "pass" are an example of utilizing clothing to have complete conformity to a group, to align oneself entirely with its expectation and values, and even to separate oneself from their assigned identity to formulate a new "habitus"

(Bourdieu 1990: 60). Their identity is internally reaffirmed through choosing their gendered dress, and externally reinforced through others seeing them wearing that clothing, like a transwoman wearing a skirt (Jones and Lim 2021: 13). Furthermore, by dressing as they wish, trans people break clothing conventions of what body should inhabit those clothes, and "gender stereotypes" of dress (Lunceford 2010: 64). That woman in the dress imagined earlier was likely a biological female and not a transwoman. Trans people wearing gendered clothing to 'pass' reinforces their gender identity and queer identity by reaffirming themselves and their body as that gender.

However, for others desiring to represent their gender, namely those who do not identify entirely with 'woman' or 'man', this gendered connotation of clothing can limit their ability to express themselves and interact with the world as their gender. While not all clothing is as overtly gendered as others- a white T-shirt or blue jeans versus a dress or skirt for instance- the cut, colour, and fit, almost always differentiates clothing for men and women, and together with the "body and their adornment", clothing provides "'texts" for reading a person's gender" as man or woman (Lucal 1999: 784). While 'gender-neutral' or 'genderless' fashion is emerging, it relies on a "mixture of stereotype elements of gender" to create the "so-called androgynous look", that defines the dressed body based on binary understandings of women as dressing feminine, men as dressing masculine, and therefore "other" genders as need to dress as neither (Luna and Barros 2019: 283). Therefore, non-binary and genderqueer people are faced with the impossible task of attempting not to reinforce gendered clothing conventions through gendered clothing, resulting in an "incongruity" between "[their] gender self-identity and the gender that others perceive" (Lucal 1999: 787). Their identity is not widely externally validated but rather denied, causing no internal reinforcement of their gender identity, meaning they must rely entirely on themselves and those that are aware of their gender and validate it to

have any external validation at all (Lucal 1999: 795). Furthermore, as the non-binary or genderqueer identity, understood through the white, hetero-patriarchal framework, is a fairly new concept, there lacks a historical precedent of how to dress and its associated values (Owyoung 2008: 204). More established clothing conventions, like 'business casual' have that historical precedent of prescribed clothes that conveys a clear meaning (Marcketti and Farrell-Beck 2008: 57). Instead, the gendered clothing causes tension in non-binary and genderqueer people by being unable to express their gender identity and posing the terrifying and overwhelming challenge of attempting to overhaul years of socialization every day in the attempt to do so (Lucal 1999: 795). The gendered dress codes limit non-binary and genderqueer people's ability to interact with and be interacted with through their gender.

Furthermore, in smaller, less known groups, like non-binary and genderqueer communities, there is an added pressure to conform to increase the chance of correct identification and establish a clothing precedent. For non-binary and genderqueer people attempting to communicate something many people are not aware of, there is a tension between expressing their gender in an individual way, and in adopting a standardized model to establish a precedent and gain recognition (Lennon et al. 2017: 13). Speaking from personal experience, the desire to be viewed as non-binary can cause strict adherence to 'androgynous' fashion, in the hope this would allow one's (and my) gender to be recognized and externally validated (Luna and Barros 2019: 283). This 'androgynous' sub-"habitus", for me, entails no skirts or dresses, sports bras and baggy clothes so the body can also embody 'gender-neutrality', and a pressure to have short hair and less jewelry, to name a few (Bourdieu 1990: 60). This 'androgynous' look has become somewhat of an expectation in non-binary fashion, like 'butch' for lesbians, and like 'butch' for lesbians it increases the chances that other queer people will recognize some level of their queer identity (Clarke and Spence 2013: 27; Luna and Barros 2019: 283). While this allows for more external gender

validation, to some (like me) it sacrifices one's ability to define and express their gender for themselves through their dress in favour of promoting a parallel, but less established gender convention, within a gendered system that non-binary and genderqueer people are, ironically, attempting to dismantle (Lucal 1999: 795). Unfortunately, our socialization and acculturalization have limited our ability to change how we engender clothing, causing 'androgynous' fashion as the non-binary stereotype to emerge as the 'other' to masculine and feminine styles, and non-binary people dressing for themselves to be gendered as 'man' or 'woman', and their gender being invalidated (Lucal 1999: 784; Luna and Barros 2019: 283). The non-binary sub-"habitus" demonstrates the tension between desiring to be recognized for one's gender by creating and conforming to a clothing precedent and externalizing one's holistic identity through dress (Bourdieu 1990: 60). Ultimately, it is up to every person, regardless of gender, to navigate the gendered lens of clothing to feel comfortable in their portrayal of themselves.

The Crafting of Clothing as the Crafting of Self

So, an obvious next step, if given the means, is to create or alter clothing to better express oneself and to embody their understanding of themselves. Through creating garments non-binary and trans people can form a better understanding of their identity, and frame how they are perceived even if not as the gender they inhabit, then at least as the individual they are, thereby decreasing the tension between their view of themselves and how other view them, to build that framework for self-world interaction (Lucal 1999: 787). These same principles can be applied to broader LGBTQIA+ fashion, 'business casual', or gendered clothing conventions, to represent people's "authenticity and personal style" that emphasizes their individuality even amongst a group (Hall and Jayne 2016: 226). In the inverse, the creation of garments can solidify to an individual their status amongst a group and signal

a belonging that shapes their values and beliefs, to frame their self-world relationship (Hall and Jayne 2016: 226). Even the act of altering pre-existing clothing can help shape and solidify an individual's identity (Barry and Drak 2019: 692). Regardless, this altering of clothing leads to greater self-confidence and "pride in their accomplishments" based on physically embodying their internal understanding of themselves, to frame how they materialize their unique identity (Martindale and McKinney 2020: 42). In a metaphorical sense, the creation or even alteration of one's clothing is the creation of one's identity. It is forming and refining personality, association with a group, interests, etc., to influence how one interacts with the world and vice versa, by stitching that interaction together themselves. Clothing alteration and creation loosens the tension in portraying the self.

Conclusion

In conclusion, clothing materializes the tension of expressing the many facets that make up an individual, based on their social position, past and present, chosen groups, and individuality, to allow themselves to be seen and interacted with how they wish. Thus, clothing creation or alteration can help alleviate that tension by allowing their complete identity to be externalized. Clothing becomes an extension of the body and the person within it to signal their identity, values, associations, and many more components of the self. Gives a whole new meaning to "you are what you wear" huh?

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