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The effect of androgynous clothing on male expressions of masculine gender

Cassie F. Walsh, Anthropology Student

Introduction
Our clothing choices communicate a lot about who we are, including what we think about ourselves and the world, and how men and women belong to, to our interests and aspirations.

Clothing selection and personal style also play an important role in gender expression, a fluid combination of verbal and non-verbal communication. Over time, androgyny, or the mixing of masculine and feminine characteristics, has become a cultural symbol of equality and masculinity. My research investigates attitudes held by masculine men concerning androgynous clothing items and any changes in male expressions of masculine gender that result from these attitudes.

Methods
I conducted my qualitative research over a three-week period of time using a variety of interviewing methods, including face-to-face interviews, group interviews, and phone interviews. I interviewed a total of six individuals between the ages of 8 and 64 years, each of whom self-identified as male and expressed to me a conscious desire to communicate a masculine gender identity through their selection of clothing. I asked each individual a predetermined set of questions, covering at least these questions during the interview, but often expanding on each in order to facilitate organic conversation.

The results of my research would have been stronger if I had a greater number of participants across a broader spectrum of age, race, ethnicity and culture groups.

When conducting qualitative research in the future, I would allow myself more time for the interviewing, coding, and data analysis process. I would also include other methods of data collection such as surveys.

Results
When it comes to expressions of a masculine identity, the participants agree that to be masculine is to be "pretty much the opposite of feminine". They describe three specific sets of criteria that could be used to determine the gender association of clothing.

1. Shape: items such as skinny jeans and blazers are associated with femininity when they accentuate the shape of the body. These items make men look more shapely as well and are therefore no longer masculine. Differences in body shape establish the basis for differences in clothing gender association.

"With women, everything is small. They have smaller necks, shoulders, and it is a woman's genetics that keep her from fitting into men's clothing." - K.D.

2. Style: Gender associations do not depend so much on which particular clothing item is being worn, but how it is being worn.

Feminine - incorrect - decorative - messy - casual
Masculine - correct - functional - clean - serious

"Ties are traditionally masculine, but a woman can wear a tie in a very loose knot, with the tail hanging longer than the main piece, and suddenly the tie is ridiculous and has become an accessory, no longer functioning as a tie." - M.L.

3. Details: The gender association of an item is based on the relationship between form and function. An object that is highly functional without any unnecessary features is considered more masculine than something that gets the job done and looks good.

Discussion
My research focuses on two questions. The first is "are male expressions of masculine gender affected by the use of traditionally masculine clothing items for female expressions of gender?" For most of the males interviewed, women's adoption of traditionally masculine items has had a bleed-back effect. Non-essential elements, body conscious tailoring, and inappropriate styling of certain clothing items are evidence of this effect.

My second question is "are there changes in male expressions of masculine gender as a result? Most of the subtle variations in male clothing due to feminine influences are gradually absorbed without any changes. However, males who want to be very intentional about their gender expressions feel the need to be more selective when making choices about what to wear.

All of the individuals I interviewed mention that other elements of their personality and lifestyle choices are important for reinforcing their masculine gender identity. Characteristics such as assertiveness, dominance and confidence are identified as primarily masculine personality traits. Physical features such as having a deep voice, being tall or physically fit also hold masculine associations. Finally, certain activities such as shaving, participating in sports, volunteer activities, and specialized skills are important supplements for the expression of masculine gender.

Conclusion
I conclude that individual selection of clothing items for the purpose of gender expression is heavily influenced by societal expectations of gender.

These gender norms dictate our interpretation of gender associations and form predictable patterns of thought and behavior that are often mistaken as personal preference.

Literature Cited

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Credits
Figure 1 & Figure 2: improuncedmetrosexual.com
Figure 3: FashionHD pics.com
Figure 5: qianlong.com
Figure 6: weallswe.com