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Gender Patterns in Dress and Outward Appearance: An Individual Choice or Fulfillment of Cultural Expectations?

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Abstract

This study examines the extent to which males and females conform to gender schemas regarding outward appearance and clothing styles. Participants were observed from a distance in various natural settings and were coded based on estimated age, hair length, certain clothing choices, and certain jewelry and accessory choices. We found statistically significant gender differences (with $p < .0001$) for all characteristics, with the codes for hair length, earrings, and dresses showing the strongest discrepancies. These data showed a pattern of males being more confined to strict gender displays than were females, which can be seen particularly clearly in the wearing of earrings and dresses, as males rarely deviated from the socially acceptable gender signals. These findings imply that the feminist movement loosened feminine standards for dress and appearance; lacking a similar social movement, men remain more strictly confined to traditional displays of gender.

The Gender Code: An Individual Choice or Fulfillment of Cultural Expectations?

Just a few decades ago, men and women were encouraged by society to dress a very specific way. Women (especially younger women) were expected to have long hair, wear make-up, and wear skirts and dresses. Some schools and workplaces prohibited women from wearing shorts or pants. Men, on the other hand, were expected to keep their hair cut relatively short and to wear shorts or pants. As U.S. society becomes more egalitarian, however, the differences in male and female presentation are becoming less extreme and more gray areas are appearing. It is generally

accepted that these standards have relaxed significantly, especially for women, as wearing pants and short hair have become commonplace. Androgynous presentations (Bem, 1974) are also becoming increasingly common. These changes in dress have occurred concurrently with a number of other significant social changes, as women have also participated in higher education and in the workforce in much greater numbers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). It is perhaps not surprising that, as women have engaged in activities traditionally dominated by men, that they would also dress more like men.

On the other hand, there were no external forces telling men that it would be beneficial to begin styling themselves in a more feminine way; therefore their clothing styles have remained relatively static. Although both men and women sport hairstyles of various lengths, standards for what men are supposed to wear do not seem to have changed as much. This relative rigidity in standards for men have been noted in a number of domains by many scholars of male cultural stereotypes (Kindlon & Thompson, 1999; Pollack, 2006). Although these psychologists have tended to focus on cultural imperatives for men to restrict their emotional presentation and activity preferences, these strict gender schemas may extend to appearance as well.

Little data exists as to how rigidly either gender conforms to gendered expectations of dress and outward appearance. The purpose of this project is to examine how much conformity currently exists in males' and females' adherence to gender schemas for dress. We hypothesized that hair length, earrings,

bracelets, dresses and skirts, pants and shorts, purses, and makeup would be gendered characteristics of appearance. We also hypothesized that males would conform to gender stereotypes more rigidly than females, as there has not yet been a male equivalent to the feminist movement, which freed women from many feminine expectations, particularly those concerning appearance.

Method

Participants & Procedure

A total of 440 participants were observed, 46% of whom were males and 54% of whom were females. We estimated that 32% of participants appeared to be over the age of twenty-five, and 68% appeared to be under the age of twenty-five. Participants were observed at four locations on The University of the South's campus, including near the entrance to the University library, in front of the university bookstore, in the dining hall, and in the entrance area to an academic building. Participants were also observed at a local McDonalds and fuel station, located on a highway exit in Tennessee.

Due to the fact that we were observing participants over eighteen years of age in areas where there is no expectation of privacy, and that we were not directly interacting with these individuals, this study was certified as exempt from ethical review from the University of the South's Institutional Review Board. We coded the first 40 adults we saw at each location. When data were collected in groups, the researchers within each group compared the data collected for each participant and reached a consensus rating. If no consensus could be reached, data for that participant was discarded. The data were compiled in a Microsoft Excel document and then imported into the PASW statistical program for analysis.

Coding

Information collected on each anonymous participant included biological sex, approximate age, hair length, presence of

earrings, presence of bracelet, wearing a dress/skirt, wearing pants, carrying a purse, and wearing makeup. Biological sex was coded as either male, female, or unknown. Age was coded as either old (appears to be older than twenty-five) or young (appears to be younger than twenty-five). Hair length was coded as either short (above earlobes) or long (below earlobes). Earrings were coded as either 'yes' (wearing more than two) or 'no' (wearing less than two). Bracelets were coded as either 'yes' (wearing a bracelet other than a watch or plastic band) or 'no' (wearing either nothing, a watch, or plastic bands). Dress/skirt was coded as either 'yes' (wearing a dress or skirt) or 'no' (wearing something other than a dress or skirt); pants were coded as either wearing pants, capris, long shorts (at or below mid-thigh), or short shorts (above mid-thigh). Purses were coded as either 'yes' (carrying a purse) or 'no' (either not carrying a purse, or carrying a book bag or other type of satchel). Originally a code was also included for wearing makeup, this code was eventually discarded, as it was deemed too difficult to correctly identify whether or not a participant was wearing any makeup. The time of day was also noted (morning, lunch, afternoon, or dinner), as was location (campus or town). The most common time period for observations was afternoon (45.5%).

Results

Chi-square tests were used to examine gender differences. A significant gender difference occurred for hair length, $\chi^2(1) = 307.48, p < .0001$. As expected, the majority of females had long hair (94.9%), with only a few seen with short hair. Men's hair was short the majority of the time (88.2%), however there was a slightly larger number who kept their hair at a length that is counter to gender expectation when compared to females. Earrings were a second gender signal that had a significant difference, $\chi^2(1) = 211.00, p < .0001$. A majority of women wore two or more earrings

(67.5%), however there was more variability among females for this characteristic than with other gender signals. Males were extremely consistent for this characteristic, with only one male seen wearing two or more earrings (0.5%). Bracelets were also found to have a significant gender difference, although this difference was relatively small when compared to that for hair length and earrings, $\chi^2(1) = 58.65, p < .0001$. As expected, only a small number of males wore bracelets (8.9%). However, the number of females wearing bracelets (41.1%) was less than the number of females not wearing bracelets, which results in the lower chi-square. See Table 1.

A significant gender difference was also observed for dresses and skirts, $\chi^2(1) = 117.81, p < .0001$. Less than half of the women were wearing a dress or a skirt (44.3%), however this was still highly significant since no men were wearing a dress or skirt (0%). The number of women wearing clothing other than a dress or skirt resulted in the lower chi-square than other gender signals. Pants displayed a significant gender difference, $\chi^2(4) = 233.43, p < .0001$. Males were most commonly observed wearing pants (57.1%) or long shorts (39.9%), with no males observed in a dress, skirt or capris. Females were observed wearing a wider range of bottoms. The most common choices for females were a dress or skirt (44.3%), long pants (24.3%) and short shorts (21.7%). A significant gender difference was observed with purses, $\chi^2(1) = 40.82, p < .0001$. Only a small percentage of women carried purses (18.1%), probably reflecting the campus location of many observations, however no men (0%) were observed carrying purses.

Location did interact with some variables. When comparing gender patterns at town versus campus locations, the differences were significant, $\chi^2(4) = 54.17, p < .0001$. On campus, females were more likely to be coded wearing dresses or skirts (51.3%) with the second most common choice being pants (18.5%). In town, females were most likely to

be coded wearing pants (52.5%) or capris (17.5%). For the males, there was less of a difference with males in town being slightly more likely to wear pants (82.5%) than males on campus (50.9%).

Discussion

This study utilized naturalistic observation to assess the presence and strength of conformity to gender stereotypes in various components of clothing and dress. Results confirmed that all the factors we examined, including clothing, accessories, and hair length, were indeed very gendered. Both males and females appear to be limited in choice of hair length, as most males have short hair and most females have long hair. Similarly, because only 0.5% of the males wore earrings, while 67.5% of females did, it is reasonable to conclude that women's social acceptance does not necessitate wearing earrings; conversely, the tiny minority of men who chose to wear earrings challenge the norm and defy the image of masculinity. Females have the option of wearing or not wearing earrings and still are considered feminine. Females often wear jewelry such as earrings to appear more attractive to other females socially or to males romantically. Males typically do not use accessories to attract companions socially or romantically. Wearing earrings can also establish a social class based on the quality of the jewelry and create social hierarchies within communities. Since two thirds of the females were wearing earrings suggests that the action is a choice, not an obligation, and adds to a woman's femininity but does not detract if earrings are not present.

The data showing that no males wore dresses or skirts or carried a purse also suggest that men are more limited than women regarding some clothing and accessory options. Likewise, very few males wore bracelets as opposed to nearly half of the women, indicating that what is simply a fashion choice for women may be a much more noticeable statement for men. Although almost all men limited

themselves to either pants or long shorts; women displayed much more freedom in choice of bottoms, as they were more evenly distributed among pants, dresses/skirts, and short shorts. Men do not have the option of wearing a dress or skirt without denying their prescribed masculinity or losing any androcentric social power. Wearing a dress is much more dangerous socially for males than wearing an alternative to a dress or skirt is for females. A man risks being labeled as homosexual which is stereotypically a very negative label for males, especially those in middle and high school (Kindlon, & Thompson 1999). The "power of homophobia" causes men to strictly adhere to masculine ideals and narrow the possibility that a male would wear a skirt or dress because it is highly feminized (Kindlon, & Thompson 1999). Males in dresses or skirts are often associated with drag queens or those of a deviant sexuality to that of the norm. Women have the option of wearing pants without losing their femininity.

In the feminist movement of America's recent past, women struggled to gain the same political and social equalities as men. For women, adopting traditional male traits aided their cause and furthered their quest for equality in the public eye. However, at the same time, many men struggled to maintain social dominance, and adopting traditionally female appearance traits would have conflicted with their efforts to maintain many male privileges. It is not unreasonable to speculate that modern gender traits of presentation and appearance may still reflect the feminist struggle. As women began to value and seek a balance between their traditional female roles and their desire for male privileges, their clothing choices reflected the integration of both identities; likewise, the male struggle to maintain their social roles in an era of rapid political and social change manifested itself in a strict adherence to traditionally male clothing choices to preserve a united and unwavering front in the public eye.

Our findings of significant gender differences on several aspects of appearance challenge the notion of freedom of choice within our culture. Because it is unlikely that the differences we found were the result of random chance, it is very difficult to ignore the voice society has in choices as personal as what haircut to get or what clothes and jewelry to put on each morning. Males and females alike conformed most strongly to gender expectations for hair length and the wearing of earrings. Nearly 95% of females who were coded had hair longer than their ears, equating long hair with femininity. Feminine long hair may be explained by a biological and evolutionary theory of female fertility and youth. Women with long healthy hair may signal their youth and increased fertility to males (Vandermassen, 2005). Our sample set observation was taken on a college campus with a high percentage of people under the age of 25, possibly explaining the higher percentage of females with long hair (if young females are trying to signal their availability and desirability as a potential partner to a male). Women in the sample set older than 25 may still attempt to signal their availability as a romantic partner by wearing their hair at a longer length.

In general, men's acceptable clothing and accessory choices were much more limited than those allowed for women, implying that males are much more confined to gender signaling stereotypes than are women. In modern America, any deviance from the public norm is likely to be interpreted as a statement of defiance or manifestation of an intangible, psychological rebellion against popular masculinity. In many ways it is a vicious cycle, as men who do not view themselves as stereotypically masculine go against norms of appearance to distance themselves from the male norm; subsequently, after recognizing the counterculture message underlying the defiance of norms, men who relate with the male stereotype fear that any deviation from the cultural standard will call their masculinity into

question. The social comparison theory supports this idea, as men look to other men to glean what constitutes masculine behavior (Morrison et al., 2003). Military soldiers have short hair for uniform and practical purposes and are often seen as very masculine. Many males look to role models such as those provided by the military to form part of their own ideal of masculinity, and therefore may cut their hair shorter than their ears.

An additional area that deserves recognition is the carrying of a purse. The purse is a very feminine accessory. Traditionally they carry important items necessary for beauty touch ups, make up, items associated with menstruation, and money. The data regarding purses was very likely affected by the location. On campus, many students carry either traditional backpacks or large satchels that serve as both a book bag and as a purse, thus it is somewhat uncommon to see students carrying only a purse. In fact, many of the female participants who were coded as carrying a purse were observed at the local McDonalds. If data were collected from other locations, our data regarding purses would likely reflect a much stronger gender typing. This explanation might explain why we saw very few purses.

Another limitation of the study is that some of the codings were difficult to determine from a distance. Researchers tried to correct for this by collecting data in pairs and comparing records, though there were inevitably instances in which researchers did not agree. For example, when a participant wore long hair below the ears, it could be difficult to see earrings, especially if they were small studded earrings. The same could be true of bracelets, particularly if the participant was wearing long sleeves. The discrepancies regarding makeup were so common that it was eventually decided to discard that rating, as it proved to be quite difficult to determine (especially from a distance) whether or not a participant was wearing makeup. Despite these minor discrepancies, it is unlikely that they had a large

effect on the results as a whole.

Further limitations of this study include the environment. Considering Sewanee is a unique school without much diversity, our sample might not have been very representative of the general population. It should be noted that The University of the South places significant value in upholding certain traditions, among which is one referred to as 'class dress.' The University's website clarifies this further, stating, "Class dress varies with the seasons, but typically men can be seen wearing khakis, a collared shirt, or coat and tie; female students typically wear slacks or a skirt and a nice top or a dress" ("Sewanee Traditions"). Therefore, one might be able to infer that young men and women on this campus might dress slightly more gendered than other undergraduates. The weather might also have been a minor limitation. Observation took place in early and mid September, when the weather was mild. This might account for the abundance of shorts and dresses/skirts. If this study were done in a colder season, we most likely would have seen more women wearing pants.

Furthermore, the time of day might have had a slight affect on our results. In the beginning we conducted our research around four o'clock in the afternoon which might have accounted for more casual attire, attire that might stray from what we consider gender suggestive. However, we did try to counteract this by recording findings during breakfast and lunch times. The majority of the University's classes are typically held in the mornings and early afternoons, and after class it is common for students to change out of their more formal attire and into more casual clothing. Thus, later in the day, it becomes more common to see students in casual attire. By observing students at breakfast (typically before classes) and lunch (typically between classes or immediately following morning classes), we hoped to see formal attire, which is generally more suggestive of gender.

It is our interpretation that it is more socially acceptable for women to cross the masculine "line" than it is for males to cross the feminine "line." From our data, there are far more women wearing pants than men wearing skirts or dresses. It also seems acceptable for women to have short hair, whereas few males had long hair. In analyzing the implications of the earrings and bracelet, we believe that these two characteristics do not do an efficient job of labeling an individual as masculine or feminine. For future studies, it would be of interest to create a different set of codings, and see if the data reflect the same gender differences. Likewise, it would be interesting to see if different cultures yielded the same results,

either with the existing set of codings or with a set of codings tailored to the culture being studied. If similar studies were carried out in either different locations (for example, in certain workplaces, in certain regions, or even in certain socioeconomic classes), or perhaps over different generations, it may be prove valuable to compare the results to the existing results. A comparison of results across cultures, places, and generations may allow us to shed more light on the subject of gender inequality, and may allow us to more effectively work to reduce both inequality and prejudices against those who do not conform to conventional gender standards.

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Table 1
Clothing, Accessories & Hair Length by Gender

Item	Participant	
	Male	Female
Earrings (% wearing)	0.5%	67.5%****
Bracelets (% wearing)	8.9%	41.1%****
Purses (% carrying)	0%	18.1%****
Hair		
Short	88.2%	5.1%****
Long	11.8%	94.4%
Bottoms		
Dresses/Skirts	0%	44.3%****
Pants	57.1%	24.3%
Long Shorts	39.9%	3.4%
Short Shorts	3.0%	21.7%
Capris	6.4%	0%

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; **** $p < .0001$. $n = 440$. See text for more specifics on codes.