Gender rebels: Inside the wardrobes of young gay men with subversive style

ABSTRACT
A constant theme in the history of gay men’s dress has been the hyperbolic performance and radical confusion of masculine and feminine gender codes. This research seeks to understand how gender conventions influence the stylistic motivations and dress practices of contemporary gay men. Guided by the theory of gender performativity, this article presents the sartorial biographies of three urban-residing young gay men in Toronto, Canada, who each come from different ethnic backgrounds. Eschewing gender binaries, these men combine unique variations of conventionally masculine and feminine clothing to formulate distinctive looks. Influenced by their sexuality and intersectional identities, these men blend gendered dress codes to express their individuality as well as stimulate meaningful dialogue about gender. The experiences of the men in this study can be seen as representing the influence of neoliberal political ideology and the current post-postmodern cultural climate.

In his seminal monograph Don We Now Our Gay Apparel on gay men’s dress in Britain and the US in the twentieth century, Shaun Cole asserts that ‘the history of gay men’s dress has been marked by a vacillation between masculine

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and feminine’ (2000: 183). These dress practices served a variety of purposes: they enabled gay men to create a sense of group identity, locate each other for sexual encounters, resist homophobia by passing in heterosexual society and advocate for gay rights and pride (Cole 2000; Reilly and Saethre 2014). Life for gay men in many western spaces dramatically changed at the end of the twentieth century, following years of gay liberation that encouraged public visibility and tolerance. When deciding what to wear, they experimented with a greater breadth of clothing styles to convey a fashionable image rather than explicitly define their sexual identity (Cole 2000). Gay men in the early twenty-first century are still targets of violence based on sexuality, but political and social acceptance of homosexuality has increased; same-sex marriage is now legal in twenty countries (Freedom to Marry 2015) and tolerance of gays and lesbians is widespread in North America and Europe (Pew Research Centre 2013). Given these cultural changes, it is important to question contemporary gay men’s relationship with dress and, in particular, their long-standing uses of clothes and physical presentation to play with gender signifiers.

This article explores the role of gender subversion in young gay men’s dress decisions by asking: How do young gay men blend gender codes through clothing and what motivates their choices? To answer this question, we use a sartorial biography methodology to explore the intimate everyday dress routines of three urban-residing gay men from different ethnicities who each distinctively disrupt gender norms through dress (Woodward 2007). By uncovering the stylistic motivations and dress practices of these men, this article adds to emerging research that suggests that some contemporary gay men destabilize gender binaries through their clothing choices (Barry and Martin 2015; Cole 2013). We also enrich understandings about how queer dress practices are transforming society’s perceptions of gender in the post-postmodern climate (Morgado 2014). Gay men’s experiences, sartorial selections and even desires to engage with fashion have always been and will continue to be diverse (Cole 2000, 2013).

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The data for this article was collected as part of a larger project on men’s fashion consumption in which men of diverse ages, ethnicities and sexual orientations who live in Toronto, Canada, were recruited through a snowball sample. This larger project explored how men use fashion to construct and reimagine their gendered identities through a sartorial biography methodology (Woodward 2007). Thirty-five men were interviewed in their homes with the contents of their wardrobes used to prompt discussions. Picking out particular garments, the men explained the personal meanings and histories that they attached to their clothing. This method provided unique insights into how men think about gender when they make clothing choices. Moreover, the researchers photographed the men’s wardrobes in order to provide rich material examples of how perceptions of gender are enacted through dress. To protect the anonymity of participants, names were changed for publications and none of the participants were photographed in their outfits.

For this article, we selected three particular young gay men from the larger sample to analyse because each of them had distinctive stylistic practices that blurred gender codes. Additionally, each of the men represented different social positions (i.e. ethnicity, class and body type), enabling us to investigate the ways in which diverse identity categories impact young gay
men’s gender-blending approaches to dress. This article is therefore positioned not only to uncover how young gay men dismantle and re-imagine the gender binary through clothing but also how their different social positions influence their subversive sartorial practices. Our focus on three participants follows Downing Peters’ (2014) use of this same number for her study on plus-size women’s fashion identities using sartorial biographies. The small sample enables researchers to deeply engage with each participant’s clothing histories, dress decisions and wardrobes. Accordingly, the men whose stories are shared in this article illuminate the experiences of some, but certainly not all, gay men in the early twenty-first century.

The geographic location of Toronto and time period of 2015 provide the research setting for this study. In this context, gay men have greater ability to play with gender because they are legally protected and have diverse social spaces. The travel guide Lonely Planet (2014) ranked Toronto as the third ‘most gay-friendly place on the planet’. While the city’s historic gay neighbourhood, Church and Wellesley Village, has become a major entertainment district, LGBT people have established dynamic social and nightlife scenes beyond its boundaries. Both the east and west ends of the city have venues that target a diversity of gay lifestyles (Toronto Life 2009). Nationally, Canada is a leader in equality for gay men, allowing them more freedom to express themselves. The Constitution of Canada protects people against discrimination based on sexual orientation (Hurley 2005), and Canada was the third country worldwide to legalize same-sex marriage (The Guardian 2005).

**RESEARCH CONTEXT**

*Conceptualizing gay men*

In this article, we take a social constructionist approach to understanding gay men: we see sexuality as socially and historically situated (Weeks 2000). Our research focuses on a present-day western model of gay men in which they balance freedom to construct their sexual identities with social constraints (Cooper 2013). The development of queer theory in the 1990s suggested that a range of expressions of sexuality are available to people, enabling them flexibility in establishing sexual identities. Despite the plethora of sexual identity options for gay men to choose, their ability to express sexual identities remains limited because they face homophobia and the ‘heterosexual assumption’. The heterosexual assumption is ‘the all-persuasive background noise which always privileges and shores up the heterosexual model as the norm’, thereby enforcing a straight way of being as the standard (Weeks et al. 2001: 41). Gay men’s identity construction is further restricted by how their other social positions, such as class and ethnicity, interact with their sexuality (Cooper 2013).

We also conceptualize being gay as a cultural practice with socially approved codes that influence the development of gay men’s identity. In his book *How to Be Gay*, David Halperin notes, ‘Gay refers not just to something you are, but also something you do’ (2012: 13). Specific popular cultural forms – such as Broadway musicals and female celebrity icons – are seen to influence how individuals learn to perform their gayness (Halperin 2012). Gay men are subsequently evaluated on whether they follow or challenge dominant gay codes. Media targeted to gay men further confines the construction of gay male identity by promoting an idealized image of gay men. In her analysis of American gay magazine *Advocate*, Katherine Sender (2001) found that the publication
constructed a singular image of the gay male consumer: affluent, white and gender-conforming. Such positioning of gay men erases the diversity of queer lives from public consciousness. Accordingly, our analysis of gay men recognizes the role of structural constraints in shaping gay male identity, but we also assert that gay male identity is discursively and performatively constructed; individuals have the potential to innovatively and creatively disrupt, construct and transgress hegemonic norms.

**Gender as performance**

Judith Butler (1990) explains that gay identity as well as gender can be regarded as performed within social constraints. In her theory of gender performativity, Butler asserts there are no fixed connections between biological sex and gender identities but rather culturally constructed and socially enforced linkages. Masculinity does not belong to men, and femininity does not belong to women; instead, masculinity and femininity are unstable categories that become culturally entrenched and naturalized through repeated performances. Clothing is one way that gender is performed and through repetition appears naturalized: certain types of styles, colours and fabrics have been culturally and historically demarcated for men versus women and, respectively, deemed masculine or feminine (Entwistle 2000). In this way, gender is based on the performance of repeated acts rather than a natural essence: ‘Gender reality is performative […] it is real only to the extent that it is performed’ (Butler 1988: 527). Understanding gender as performed suggests that clothing can be used to regulate gender norms but also to creatively challenge them. By using clothing to create alternative performative acts that dismantle the link between sex and gender, gay men can use their appearances to question gendered dress codes and re-imagine gendered identities.

Many gay men have intentionally played with gender throughout the twentieth century. Inspired by the masculine cowboy and biker archetypes, the predominantly white gay men who were part of the ‘clone’ subculture of the 1970s wore denim, plaid shirts and bomber jackets. Since heterosexual society promoted the stereotype that gay men were feminine, ‘clones’ wanted to disrupt the separation of masculinity from homosexuality and redefine the gay male image. In contrast, many gay men embraced an effeminate aesthetic from the late nineteenth century. Feminine dress provided young gay men with a means of becoming part of a recognizable group when they first entered the gay community because it was the most common manifestation of homosexuality (Cole 2000). In addition to magnifying masculine or feminine dress codes, gay men blended them. Some radical gay men who were part of the Gay Liberation Front of the 1970s embraced a style known as ‘gender fuck’. These men combined extreme masculine and feminine appearance signifiers in a single outfit to expose fixed notions of sex and gender as artificial. They often wore heavy make-up and donned sequined dresses while also revealing their genital bulges and keeping their facial hair (Cole 2013).

Gay men’s decisions to play with gender through dress has also been complicated by the intersection of their other identities, such as ethnicity. Gay African-American (Conerly 2000) and Asian-American men (Leong 1996) often struggle to reconcile their ethnic and sexual identities. For example, African-American culture is traditionally masculine oriented, and gay men are often perceived as jeopardizing their masculinity (Cole 2008). African-American gay men therefore negotiate an ethnicity and sexuality that are
often ‘at odds with each other’ (Conerly 2000: 7). Even with increasing gay rights, many African-American gay men ‘feel forced to choose whether they are black first or queer first; some even opt to be only one or the other’ (Kenan 1999: 9). In addition to balancing their ethnic and sexual ‘worlds’, these men also have to navigate living in white heterosexual society. Like other gay men in minority ethnic contexts, they spend considerable energy balancing the completing tensions between their different worlds (Phellas 2002).

**Gay dress today**

Although gay subcultures continue to evolve into the twenty-first century (Cole 2008), style tropes have a diminished influence on young gay men’s dress practices. In their interviews with gay men, Cole (2013) and Barry and Martin (2015) uncovered that participants perceived contemporary gay aesthetics to be less unified than in the past and often did not subscribe to traditional gay style tropes. Steven M. Kates (2002) found that gay men seek to distinguish themselves from heterosexual men through their clothes but that they do not conform to demarcated subcultures. Instead, contemporary gay men become ‘bricoleur(s), improvising and refashioning identity and subculture out of the fragments on the menu of consumer culture’ (Kates 2002: 396). Kate Schofield and Ruth Schmidt (2005) elaborate on the factors that gay men consider when they make dress decisions. These scholars found that gay men use clothing to convey their gay identity, subcultural gay identity and their situational identity. Similarly, Victoria Clarke and Kevin Turner (2007) observed that while young gay men used clothing to construct their gay identity, they also desired to use clothing to express idiosyncrasy. These studies suggest the ‘muscular clone’ and ‘flamboyant queen’ polarities typically associated with gay men of older generations have become outdated. Contemporary gay men negotiate multiple identity categories, social contexts and personal interests when selecting clothes.

Despite these various influences on gay men’s dress decisions, their sartorial choices are embedded in cultural discourses that are historical and have preceded individual experience (Kaiser 2012). Over the past 30 years, Nikolas Rose (1989) argues, the resurgence of neoliberal discourse in western politics has required people to understand themselves as choosing subjects. The citizen is a consumer and their role is to activate the rights of a consumer in their lives ‘in furtherance of a biographical project of self-realization’ (Rose 1989: ix). In this context, people become ‘entrepreneurs of themselves’ as they choose from ‘a variety of market options that extends from products to social goods to political affiliations’ (Rose 1989: 230). The growth of neoliberal governmental ideology in the 1970s and 1980s has been coupled with the rise of media and consumer culture. While there is scholarly contention about whether this period should be characterized as one of postmodernity (Featherstone 1991) or reflexive modernity (Giddens 1991), based on the degree of societal constraints that exist, there is agreement that individuals are aware of their ability to construct personal identities and use the resources of consumer culture to do so. In this neoliberal and postmodern society, fashion – as a resource of consumer culture – is used to modify or highlight aspects of one’s appearance in order to construct a sense of self (Bennett 2005).

Some scholars assert that global crises and disruptions have shifted the postmodern or reflexive modern period to one described as post-postmodern (e.g. Morgado 2014). In her analysis of how the post-postmodern period
influences fashion, Marcia A. Morgado (2014) explores five theoretical features that define this new era: altermoderism, hypermodernity, performatism, automodernity and digimodernism. The feature of ‘performatism’ is relevant to the gender-blurring aesthetic that we explore in this study. According to Morgado, the post-postmodernism is defined by performative aesthetics in which common cultural categories are eradicated and transcended in ways that differ from the previous era. In fashion, garments and images promote new transgendered appearances: ‘These dramatic looks are not the androgynous blending of categories identified with postmodernism; rather, the new looks combine masculine visual markers such as facial hair with very feminine appearance signs such as make-up, skirts and heels’ (Morgado 2014: 324). By fostering transgendered appearances that make gendered codes obvious rather than ambiguous, the post-postmodern era enables people to craft new notions of gender. The focus on ‘dramatic’ transgendered appearances not only suggests that destabilizing gender categories are part of the current cultural aesthetic but also indicates that gay men are likely to wear styles that feature distinct masculine and feminine elements in order to disrupt gender codes.

While the focus on radically combining gender appearance markers is similar to ‘genderfuck’ of the 1970s, we suggest that this subcultural aesthetic was prefiguring a style that has become more common in the new millennium. Two recent studies provide empirical evidence that ‘performatism’ has become a frequent characteristic of gay men’s dress. In his research on how contemporary gay men negotiated their clothed appearance and gay identities, Cole (2013) concluded that many gay men have pushed gender boundaries by mixing feminine and masculine signifiers. Similarly, in our previous study on men’s fashion consumption, we found that young gay men used fashion to explicitly blur gender categories (Barry and Martin 2015). While these studies identify a relationship between conflating gender signifiers and gay men’s dress in the early twenty-first century, they do not explain gay men’s motivations for playing with gender or detail the specific stylistic practices that they enact to do so. The following sartorial biographies uncover the stylistic motivations and dress practices of young gay men who blur gendered dress.

**SARTORIAL BIOGRAPHIES**

**Andre: The ‘gender-more’ school teacher**

Andre has always had a penchant for atypical clothes that confront gendered dress conventions. Having felt a desire to differentiate himself stylistically from a young age, the 6-foot-5-inch tall, lean and toned sartorialist would shop at secondhand stores as an accessible means of experimenting with dress. As a high school student who was expected to don a uniform consisting of a sports jacket and tie, Andre would scour thrift stores for unconventional blazers and accessories that would set him apart from others and challenge the school’s uniform. As he explains, ‘There was this very strict uniform that impeded my budding sense of fashion but I did not let that stop me. I had a lot of plastic beads and wore interesting jewelry [over my school ensemble] which was sort of cool.’ To subtly attest the rules, he also would wear ‘the tightest business casual pants possible’. Andre’s idiosyncratic approach to fashion has carried on through his adulthood. Now 30 years old, the African-Canadian sixth-grade school teacher – who is first-generation Canadian – continues to wear outfits intended to spark conversation.
Believing that fashion ‘forces encounters in a different way than a piece of art in a gallery’, Andre uses dress as an outlet to explore gender. As a gay man working in public education, he believes it is important to highlight his eccentric dress habits to encourage school students to accept gender diversity. Much like how he had tested the boundaries of dress norms as a young student, Andre continues to push the style envelop as an educator. As he elaborates, ‘my outfits aren’t only a form of self-discovery, but they give the kids a space to explore their identity and their gender as well’. Andre feels it is his responsibility to use his style as a starting point for talking about gender and sexuality with students by actively questioning preconceived identity assumptions.

While he was always interested in rejecting binary gender divisions, Andre’s style first consisted of clothes that stripped away masculine and feminine signifiers but he later developed an approach to fashion that magnified these gendered dress codes:

When I started thinking up the gender-less wardrobe, it felt very stripped down, very bleak […] gender-less means you’re stripping something away. But really if you’re empowered enough to take on both sets of codes then you have more, and so the idea of the gender-more was something that I was really excited about taking on.

Andre’s ‘gender-more’ approach to dressing encourages him to wear bold gender signifiers. He likes ironic takes on classic designs, such as the Jeremy Scott sequined teddy bear basketball-inspired sneakers (Figure 1), which he often sports at school. He also likes layering a women’s sequined top (Figure 2) under a men’s blazer at work or a leather jacket (Figure 3) on the weekend because ‘it feels like you’re ready to party, it feels really celebratory’.

Figure 1: Jeremy Scott Teddy bear sneakers.
Andre is cognizant of how his various identity categories influence his personal style and ‘gender-more’ dress philosophy. For Andre, dress is an important vehicle of self-expression and means to challenge societal norms because marginalized black (Miller 2009) and gay communities (Cole 2000) – both of which he is a part – have long turned to dress for these purposes.
Citing his black heritage as an important source of inspiration, Andre appropriates contemporary black styles and makes them his own: ‘I get inspired by oversized hip-hop t-shirts and really wide jeans. I warp them and reinterpret them and that’s how an outfit can sort of take shape.’ Combining different elements of himself into a look, Andre often fuses athletic streetwear designs that he associates with male black culture alongside unexpected glitzy garments that he feels are representative of his queerness. For example, he pairs a Harlem Globetrotters basketball jersey (Figure 4) with his maroon faux-fur and mesh pants (Figures 5a and 5b). He takes pleasure in wearing these feminine bottoms because ‘they’re kind of glam and life would be a lot more fun if it was glam all the time’.

Beyond his racial background and sexual orientation, Andre explains that his restricted income influenced his clothing choices:

I think blackness and queerness are huge elements but I think socio-economic status and class is a huge part of it too so the three of them collectively and collaboratively influence my choices. When I was younger the only way I could interact with fashion was through other people’s old cast-offs and vintage pieces. I would re-purpose the clothes […] Because second hand is often ill fitting, I got to wear tight things and play with feminine styles.

To cultivate his eccentric style on his budget, Andre buys clothes at thrift stores and during end-of-season sales as well as participates in clothing swaps.

Andre has received both positive and negative feedback for wearing gender-blending outfits. Some of his students questioned his aesthetic choices, as Andre describes how ‘kids would be like, why are you wearing blue lipstick?’ when he wore cosmetics. Andre uses these experiences as educational opportunities to discuss the limitations of gender norms with his

Figure 4: Harlem Globetrotters jersey.
Figure 5a: Faux Fur and mesh panel pants.

Figure 5b: Faux Fur and mesh panel pants.
colleagues and students. When some boys in his class experimented with nail polish, which is a part of Andre’s signature look, he took it to suggest that his approach to style was an effective method to encourage the celebration of gender diversity in the classroom. As Andre explains, ‘At this point in their life, they’re building identity and the process of constructing an identity is figuring out what works for you and what doesn’t work for you. Allowing my unique style to be a part of the class conversation is important.’ Andre believes that playing with gender has enabled him to teach important lessons about difference and acceptance.

**Felix: The distinctive design student**

Felix is a 25-year-old retail sales associate and fashion design student. From an early age, the first-generation Canadian defied his traditional Filipino-Canadian family’s conventional ideas about what a male should look and act like. The self-professed ‘fashion fiend’ recalls the first time he disrupted conventional dress codes, ‘I bought these ugly cowboy boots that I wore everywhere. That’s when I started to deviate from what most guys my age wore.’ Excited by his newfound ability to establish a unique identity through clothes, Felix became increasingly adventurous with his sartorial selections during high school. He started to wear skinny jeans that were purchased from women’s clothing stores because the ultra-slim pant style was not common in men’s collections at the time. While Felix eventually saw more men start to buy women’s denim, he believes that he was ahead of this curve in Toronto. This experience instilled in him the belief that ‘I don’t have to really do what all the other guys are doing, I just want to do what I want to do’.

Felix takes ownership of his unique approach to clothes and feels as though the appropriation of women’s styles came naturally to him. The pinnacle of his fashion exploration came when he began to wear high heels as a young teenager: ‘Leaving the house in heels and my parents being like “oh my god, you’re wearing heels”, I’m like “yes, I’m wearing heels” […] the physical feeling of being on heels is excruciating and liberating at the same time.’ While Felix initially enjoyed the rebelliousness of sporting stilettos, he explains he has since become ‘desensitized’ to wearing them; now they feel ‘second nature’ and he wears a range of heeled shoes daily, such as his favourite pair of strappy leather platform sandals (Figure 6). The discomfort he first felt when shopping in women’s sections has also subsided, and he has become more confident in his choices, noting ‘my wardrobe is now almost exclusively women’s wear’. In selecting women’s clothing, Felix is not cross-dressing or trying to pass as a woman but instead using clothing designed for women in his own wardrobe. While he does not intentionally wish to challenge gender ideals, Felix makes untraditional choices in an effort to stay true to himself: ‘I’ve always felt very strongly that if I live my life the way I want to, that’s a political statement in itself. Because the choices I make, regardless of how other people view them […] they’re going to deviate from the traditional.’

Felix explains that his body shape – which he says is ‘too big for most off-the-rack clothes’ – has an impact on his fashion choices, demonstrating how the intersections of sexuality and body size influence personal style. While Felix prides himself on having what he describes as a ‘refined’ wardrobe in a mostly monochromatic black palette (Figure 7), many of the individual pieces are cut in draped women’s styles to accommodate and flatter his body. Accepting his queerness and plus size body, he notes, ‘women’s clothes just look more
natural on me. If I were trying on a men’s shirt, it would just look boring and wouldn’t fit right. Whereas if I wore a women’s oversized tunic, it’d just fits me’. He perceives tights layered under women’s shirts and dresses as an ideal marriage of style and practicality for his body shape. For an element of sparkle, Felix loves wearing lustrous metallic jackets (Figure 8) and pairing them with his drop-crotch pants (Figure 9), which he perceives to complement his body. Since his clothes typically combine subdued colours with shiny details – such as his favourite charcoal sweatshirt dress with metallic accents (Figure 10) – Felix feels his style is not totally masculine or feminine: ‘My clothing will always have an element of gender fluidity, like me.’ Receiving financial support from his family while he is attending university, Felix’s privileged class position allows him to wear ‘elevated labels’ such as Comme Des Garçons and Issey Miyake, brands that he thinks reflect his personal aesthetic. Moreover, he believes that these high-end women’s designer clothes complement his larger body because the garments are cut in billowy silhouettes.
Figure 7: Wardrobe in a restrained colour palette.

Figure 8: Comme des Garçons jacket with cropped sleeves.
Figure 9: Drop crotch harem pants.

Figure 10: Sweatshirt dress with metallic shoulder accents.
Due to his body shape, queerness and unconventional approach to gender, Felix disregards hegemonic beauty and dress ideals. As he explains, ‘I’ve always felt immune to appearance norms because I never fit in to begin with.’ Not subscribing to either a thin or muscular body ideal, the accompanying dress ideals also feel irrelevant to him. While his ‘gender fluid’ mode of dress feels more ‘natural and authentic’, it also causes frustrations when engaging in broader gay culture. He gave the example of dating apps and explains, ‘There’s no way to navigate apps like Grindr if you don’t belong to the norm […] You have to appear and dress cisgendered to be successful.’ As a gay male who enjoys wearing feminine accessories such as handbags (Figure 11), Felix feels that his disruption of masculine gender ideals disassociates him from straight societal norms as well as from the gay community because both value men with masculine appearances. He also believes that failing to confirm to one of ‘the two Grindr ideals […] skinny or strong’ destabilizes traditional male

Figure 11: Strappy black handbag.
sex traits, further making him feel different from straight society and the gay community because he does not possess a standardized male body.

Despite challenges romantically connecting with other men in a largely ‘masculine obsessed gay scene’, Felix acknowledges that he was fortunate to live in a progressive urban space where he feels safe to express his queerness and don alternative apparel. He juxtaposes his urban experience with the infrequent times that he has to ‘dress down’ when visiting his family outside of the city. Felix notes, ‘If I’m going to visit my uncle in the suburbs […] I’m not going to go in full regalia. I’m going to dress down but I’ll wear one unique piece of clothing, it’s enough to sustain me.’

**Tom: The irreverent artist**

Tom embodies androgyny both in his physical appearance and in the way he dresses. This 25-year-old Caucasian man – whose family has lived in Canada for multiple generations – has long, dark hair and a tall, lean physique that he dons with sheer fabrics, crop tops, skirts and dresses alongside chunky sweaters and heavy work boots (Figures 12 and 13). As a visual artist, Tom views
clothing as a means of further exploring his creative inclinations and rebelling against normative gender conventions. As he states, ‘I completely believe in gender fluidity and a spectrum of genders, instead of just men and women. I think my clothing should represent that, which is why I’m into the androgynous thing. My style is in-between, both, and neither genders’. Tom balances freelance commercial photography jobs with personal creative projects while maintaining a consistent style: his look is primarily black and features reinterpreted glam rock musical styles. Reveling in fashion’s ability to provoke, he subverts classically masculine pieces, feminizing them with accessories such as his favourite pony hair necklace, designed by Maison Martin Margiela (Figure 14). Using clothes to make a statement, he says, ‘If the stuff I’m wearing is creating some sort of conversation, then that’s when fashion becomes really enjoyable for me.’ Through the clothes he wears, Tom seeks to embody and advance his progressive gender ideals.

In retaliation to the cultural norms that have made him feel excluded, Tom deliberately aims to challenge dress conventions. As he explains, ‘I just try and have conversations with people, like why do you think I should or should not wear that certain item? Or why is it bad for a guy to wear a skirt?’ Defying tradition, Tom melds edgy subcultural aesthetics with feminine dress styles. For instance, he enjoys wearing a structured masculine sport jacket with a feminine slinky silk dress (Figure 15). Playing with gender codes, he
‘butches-up’ a dress with military coats and other stereotypically masculine pieces. As he suggests:

If you’re pairing things that are contrasting, there’s always going to be kind of a conversation that comes out of that [...] If I’m wearing a really traditional men’s leather jacket, and then I’m wearing a skin tight, mesh dress underneath, that’s saying something different [...] I think contrasts are important because they help push boundaries and create new spaces for fashion and for expression.

Unapologetic in his clothing choices, he hates ‘the rules of fashion’ which he feels prevent people from creating new looks.

Integrated into his city’s alternative queer scene, Tom enjoys attending a string of bars, clubs and dancehalls where mixed crowds of queer-positive young people congregate and individualistic fashion flourishes. Inspired by his peers in this community, Tom assembles his clothes to challenge society’s gender distinctions:

I’m not a traditional drag queen because I don’t dress up as a woman, but I’ll wear elements of women’s clothes [...] But I don’t necessarily think it’s the women’s clothes that make me feminine and the men’s
clothes that make me masculine. I think I can wear women’s clothes in a masculine way and men’s clothes in a feminine way.

Tom relishes getting dressed-up and attending events with like-minded ‘queer kids, drag queens, trans people’ who were transgressive and indefinable. He appreciates that unusual forms of dress and gender display are deemed admirable and aspirational within these progressive and diverse spaces in contrast to Toronto’s mainstream gay neighbourhood; ‘when you go to a Church Street bar, you are seeing a really limited kind of fashion […] People are all wearing mall clothes.’ Tom feels the masculine dress code and muscular gay ideal are a limiting part of broader gay nightlife.

Tom takes pleasure incorporating feminine clothing and make-up into his look for several reasons. He appreciates the feels of fabrics and fit of silhouettes typically reserved for women’s wear. Intrigued by tight-fitting garments that define his physique, he notes:

I like a tight fit, it’s very sensual, kind of like sexual, in the way that it hugs your body and also shows off your body […] it’s intimate and appealing to me […] Being raised very normatively, wearing a more feminine fit as a man is very novel, new and interesting just because it is so different.

He points to a metallic bustier top (Figure 16) and a sheer black full-length dress (Figure 17) that clung to his body closely for a sleek look that he likes
wearing to queer events. Alongside his skin-revealing outfits, Tom often wears cosmetics:

I wasn’t taught how to use makeup as like a little girl because I wasn’t a little girl […] I kind of just learned through experimenting and just trying things out. Because I haven’t really been shown those rules, I kind of just am more playful with it. I usually wear lipstick for eye shadow because I liked how it’s glossy.

Rather than appropriating feminine clothes and cosmetics in a conventional way, Tom applies his curiosity and creativity to craft something subversive.

Acknowledging the significance of style in the lives of LGBT people, he notes, ‘I think it’s easier for queer people to express themselves through fashion because they have slipped through the cracks of normativity […] People are wearing weird and wacky things because they can and because they don’t
necessarily feel like they have to fit in.’ He sees women’s dress as one means of intentionally diverting from conventionality and takes pride in breaking gender boundaries and perceptions:

I was wearing makeup and had an androgynous outfit on. There was a group of young hockey players hanging out on the sidewalk [...] I was walking by and their coach was like, ‘make way for the nice lady’ and you could just see all their faces. They were all really confused that the coach had said that and they were trying to gender me [...] They were very curious and talking with each other about it. I enjoyed that. It wasn’t like I felt insecure. I thought it was good to get young kids aware that they don’t have to fit into such a narrow slot when it comes to gender and style.

Much like he uses his art practice to inspire discussion around contentious subjects, Tom uses his dress to incite meaningful dialogue about gender performance.

**DISCUSSION**

Extending the findings of Cole (2013) and Barry and Martin (2015), the preceding sartorial biographies illuminate the motivations and stylistic practices of three young gay men who take a subversive approach to gendered dressing. Each of them confuses naturalized linkages between sex and gender by re-appropriating unique variations of conventionally masculine and feminine clothing. Although these men define their aesthetic through a range of terms such as ‘androgynous’ and ‘gender-more’, they all adopt a style that approaches gender as fluid. Their use of fashion to destabilize the link between sex and gender underscores Bancroft’s (2013) assertion that fashion ‘doesn’t just break down socially and culturally determined ideas about sex and gender – it provides ample evidence that those ideas were a fiction to start with’. While gay men’s dress history has long played with gendered dress codes and illustrated gender performativity, our sartorial biographies suggest that young gay men have a different set of intentions and stylistic interpretations when blurring gender through clothing than in previous eras.

When making dress decisions, gay men from past generations were often motivated by the desire to be identified by other gay men because the lack of legal protections and prevalent homophobia forced them to be more publicly discreet (Cole 2000). In contrast, our participants wish to express their individuality through idiosyncratic style. The different sartorial motivations between this generation of gay men and their older counterparts are manifested through distinctive stylistic practices. Previous generations of gay men had more unified subcultural dress aesthetics (Reilly and Saethre 2014), whereas the gay men in this study – although they loosely share a common gender-blurring style – follow a more sartorially diverse and nuanced approach. Shifts in the broader cultural context can explain the differences between younger gay men’s dress practices and their older counterparts. While western gay men still face homophobia and the heterosexual assumption, they live in a society where many of the political and societal barriers of exclusion that were experienced in the 1970s are being overcome. Despite documenting moments of prejudice, the men in our study recognize that they are fortunate to live in a time and place where they had freedom and social acceptance. Additionally,
none of the participants have occupations that strongly prohibited or regulated their chosen mode of dress, such as law enforcement or finance. By working in progressive occupations – education, fashion and arts – they have the support and freedom to play with gendered dress in everyday life.

The desire of participants to create looks that reflect their individuality – rather than identify with a particular subculture – also highlights their interpolation in the pervasive neoliberal political ideology. By selecting a diverse range of gender-blurring styles to express uniqueness, participants view themselves as freely choosing subjects who construct their identities through the cultural resource of fashion. We therefore argue that traditional gay-style tropes are less important to contemporary gay men’s conceptualizations and expressions of sexual identity because of the extension of neoliberal political discourse to consumer culture (Rose 1989). Our research provides additional analysis to previous findings that contemporary gay men have a less cohesive subcultural aesthetic (Barry and Martin 2013; Cole 2013) by revealing the role of cultural context – specifically the influence of neoliberalism – in shaping gay men’s dress decisions. Just as older generations of gay men followed subcultural aesthetics as a result of legal discrimination and social exclusion, contemporary gay men’s individual dress practices are similarly influenced by the broader culture in which they live.

While neoliberal consumer culture encourages all people to express their individuality through fashion shopping (Woodward 2007), the experiences of participants suggest that younger gay men provide a unique perspective on this phenomenon. Many consumers’ sense of self is apolitical but, for our participants, their sense of self is political. By simply expressing their individuality through dress, the young gay men in this study inherently defy societal gender norms. Each of the participants knowingly uses their dressed bodies as a vehicle to challenge the gender binary and hegemonic masculinity as well as incites new discussions about gender and sexuality. Although the extent to which these men aim to instigate social change differs, their motivations suggest that politics influences gay men’s fashion choices. In our interviews, all three participants explained that feeling different – as a result of being gay – inspired them to question conventional identity categories and use dress to pursue a progressive political agenda. Since gay men of past eras also aimed to create social change through their self-presentation (Cole 2000), politically charged dressing connects younger gay men to their counterparts from previous generations.

Although subcultures are less relevant to gay men’s conceptualizations of sexual identity, their sexuality continues to shape their dress decisions. The unique ways their social contexts and intersectional identity categories are entangled with sexuality enabled our participants to craft novel identities (Kate 2002; Schofield and Schmidt 2005). When selecting outfits, for instance, Andre referenced his African heritage while Mickelli purchased women’s designer clothing because he perceived the styles to complement his larger body. Additionally, clothing made participants feel included in or excluded from gay communities. Sam and Mickelli felt marginalized from a mainstream gay culture that valorized a traditional masculine aesthetic; however, Sam found alternative queer spaces where he could freely express his gender-blending style and Mickelli chose to reject gay appearance norms and don his own aesthetic. By challenging the gay habitus, young, urban and western gay men expand the practice of dominant gay performance (Halperin 2012) and make a spectrum of gay lives publicly visible (Sender 2001). Our study
therefore concludes that gay men negotiate a variety of factors when making dress decisions but their sexual identity still plays an important role in their personal style.

**CONCLUSION**

Since the 1920s Jazz movement, a diverse number of gay and straight men who were part of rebellious subcultures – such as glam rock, punk and grunge – have displayed feminine and masculine dress codes congruently (Bolton 2003). What is new about contemporary men’s gender blurring fashion, however, is that it is becoming increasingly commonplace. Young, western and urban gay as well as straight men abide by less gendered rules and combine gender signifiers when making dress decisions (Barry and Martin 2015). In March 2015, London luxury fashion retailer Selfridges launched a shopping environment that was not demarcated by gender. Explaining the motivation behind their ‘agender’ project, the Creative Director noted, ‘It is not about harnessing a trend, but rather tapping into a mind-set and acknowledging and responding to a cultural shift that is happening now’ (Gonsalves 2015). In her analysis of the Spring 2016 men’s fashion collection, Washington Post fashion journalist Robin Givhan (2015) reported that menswear designers are on ‘mission’ to ‘eradicate’ the gender binary in a new way:

> The current tide is full of nuance and energy, unlike the stoic detachment that typically deifies androgyny [...] Designers aren’t putting one or two skirts on the runway in a sedate shade of navy or in the familiar shape of a sarong. They are dedicating entire collections – entire businesses – to genderless dressing.

Our research therefore does not only illuminate the experiences of some gay men but points to a cultural shift in gender that represents the current post-postmodern climate (Morgado 2014). As Cole (2000: 2) argues that ‘gay men were ahead of fashion and influenced changes in men’s fashion through their challenge to the hegemony of men’s dress codes’ during the twentieth century, we assert that gay men are pioneering fashion’s gender revolution in the early twenty-first century.

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