



“Male hair cannot extend below plane of the shoulder” and “no cross dressing:” Critical queer analysis of high school dress codes in the United States

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Identity development for LGBTQ+ youth is often complex and challenging as compared to heterosexual youth (Eliason, 1996). Adolescents regardless of sexual identity, use a variety of tools to explore their numerous identities such as friendships, sexual experiences, and clothing (Arnett, 2007). One unique way some LGBTQ+ youth explore their sexual identity is by the adoption of “gender non-conforming clothes or hairstyles;” these appearance expressions that violate perceived cultural norms may be related to significantly higher rates of harassment as compared to harassment experienced by heterosexual youth (Bucchianeri, Gower, McMorris, & Eisenberg, 2016, p. 72). School is the place where adolescents spend a significant amount of time; therefore, it is a space that has an immense impact on their life and either helps development of sexual identity by providing a supportive space or creates isolation and perpetuates discrimination (Bedard & Marks, 2010). Since dress is such an important component to identity development and exploration, we question how or if the dress codes in the school handbooks provide supportive guidelines for how LGBTQ+ youth may want to fashion their bodies. Many studies have analyzed high school dress codes in handbooks asking questions about their rationale or the sanctions for violating the guidelines, yet there is a lack of research in this area in regards to inclusion, gender, and sexuality. Therefore, in this study we questioned how high school dress codes outlined in official handbooks were written or presented in regards to the gender binary “either/or” perspective. We critically analyzed how or if they allowed for flexibility in expression of gender and sexual identity and if they support, encourage, or affirm a variety of expressions through text and/or image.

We used the content analysis method to answer the research question and analyzed public high school handbooks from the 2016-2017 school year that contained dress code guidelines. In this exploratory study, we were interested in analyzing for emergent themes across a variety of geographic locations; therefore, handbooks were sought from five rural (less than 2500 people), five urban cluster (between 2500 and 50,000 people), and five urbanized (over 50,000 people) areas in each state (excluding Hawaii) in the United States resulting in analysis of 735 handbooks. We searched for handbooks by first locating the list of population breakdown for each state, and then searched for schools with online handbooks that were within each population criteria. Each handbook was coded as a single unit, and two coders engaged in coding the data using Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software. The intercoder reliability check resulted in 99% agreement, which according to Neuendorf (2002) is an acceptable rate of agreement.

Utilizing a queer theory lens, we critically analyzed the discourse and imagery surrounding gender and hence sexuality in each handbook (Jagose, 1996). We used open, axial, and selective coding in order to look for emergent themes in the data while also paying close attention to silenced or marginalized perspectives or ideas. A codebook with code definitions was created and continually refined throughout the coding process.

In many handbooks (n = 615) the dress codes were not separated by gender; the guidelines were simply outlined in a list or paragraph format. Yet, analysis of the remaining dress codes revealed the theme that there was *marginalization of gender non-conforming or transgender identities or expressions*. This was evident in that the dress codes were sometimes (n = 120) separated by gender with gender or sex specific terms such as “female,” “male,” “ladies,” or “guys.” These dress codes were spread across 35 states and the three population categories. None of the handbooks used gender-neutral terms such as they, their, hir, zir, ze, xe, or other similar pronouns that have been recently adopted to be more inclusive of transgender, genderqueer, or gender non-conforming individuals. Transgender, trans\*, or transsexual identities or expressions were also not mentioned, and schools never stated that they supported, affirmed, or encouraged the preferred gender expression of each adolescent.

Garment silhouette, jewelry, facial hair, head hair, make-up, and nail polish were the categories that schools made stereotypical gender-specific statements about. For example, one handbook in rural Tennessee stated, “Male students are not allowed to wear makeup, eye shadow, or fingernail polish.” In a New Jersey school, they indicated that “unacceptable dress” for males include “any style tank top” while females are allowed to wear tank tops, but non with “straps less than 2 inches in width.” A school in Utah required boys to wear “button-up shirts, slacks, tuxedos, ties, [or] bowties” to dances. In some instances, the schools prohibited “cross-dressing” and required “appropriate” or “acceptable” presentations or garments for each gender. One examples is from a school in Louisiana whose handbook stated, “girls must wear their hair in a standard, acceptable style.” All imagery in the handbooks also promoted stereotypical-gendered aesthetics, yet schools did not label the images with a gender or sex. For example, there were not any male-bodied individuals wearing non-bifurcated garments.

In sum, when critically analyzing high school dress codes from a queer theory lens, it is clear that there is room for improvement in how some schools present the language and imagery for appearance guidelines in relation to allowing multiple and mixed gendered expressions. Future studies can further analyze each state and use the results to make suggestions to school boards or the educational policy makers in regards to pronoun, language, and image usage in handbooks in order to promote diversity and inclusion.

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