



“I Kicked Those Babies Off and Put the Typical Lesbian Birkenstocks on:” Authentic Style-Fashion-Dress Negotiations of Lesbian Married Couples on Their Wedding Day

Kelly L. Reddy-Best, Iowa State University; Jennifer Paff Ogle, Courtney Morgan, and Karen Hyllegard, Colorado State University

Massachusetts was the first state to legalize same-sex marriage in 2004. Then, in June 2015 the U.S. Supreme Court ruling (*Obergefell V. Hodges*) allowed same-sex marriage in all 50 states (Pew Research Center, 2015). A 2017 report revealed that there were almost 1.1 million married people in the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and/or queer (LGBTQ+) community (Romero, 2017) and that the number of same-sex marriages had increased every year since the *Obergefell V. Hodges* ruling (Jones, 2017). The ruling also prompted the development of several queer-focused fashion brands (e.g., Saint Harridan, Tomboy Tailors) catering to participants in LGBTQ+ weddings (Reddy-Best, in press), as many women in the LGBTQ+ community push gender boundaries in their appearances (Geczy & Karaminas, 2013; Reddy-Best & Pedersen, 2015). With this work, we conducted an in-depth, exploratory study on how lesbian married couples in the US negotiated their style-fashion-dress (Tulloch, 2015) on their wedding day. Understanding how these married couples negotiate their style-fashion-dress could illuminate the changing cultural contexts of what being a bride means in the US post *Obergefell V. Hodges* and can provide insight to designers and retailers looking to design and market to this community. The work was guided by theory exploring gender negotiation and authenticity as related to self-expression through appearance (Erickson, 1995; Hutson, 2010).

We conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 10 married couples whose ages ranged from 27 to 66 (mean age = 37). Each couple shared wedding photographs, which were referenced during the interview. We asked questions about all aspects of participants' wedding day style-fashion-dress, including how they assembled their wedding style-fashion-dress; what they were trying to achieve through these appearances; their beauty rituals; perceived cultural pressures; compromises; conceptualizations of the self; expressions of self/identity; concerns for authenticity; and adhering to or breaking conventions. The participants all were assigned female at birth, yet used a variety of gender identities such as woman or genderqueer. Although all participants responded to the recruitment call for “lesbian married couples,” they conceptualized their sexual identity in varied ways, including lesbian; lesbian/gay/ queer; lesbian/gay; bisexual, but responds to lesbian; gay; queer; queer, non-heterosexual, sexually attracted to both males (30%) and females (70%); lesbian or queer; bi/pan; pansexual with same-sex tendencies; and lesbian or lez-be-honest. The participants identified their race as white/Caucasian (n = 15), mixed race (n = 1), Latina/x (n = 2), Hispanic (1), and no response (n = 1).

Each interview was transcribed verbatim. We analyzed the transcripts along with the wedding photographs that the couples provided using the constant comparison process. Checking intercoder reliability resulted in 87% agreement; disagreements were negotiated between the coders. The researchers also continually engaged in bracketing and debriefing throughout the data collection and analysis processes. Our analyses resulted in four themes that interconnected with the overarching concept of *authenticity*. As these participants navigated a newly available identity for the LGBTQ+ community, they negotiated and re-negotiated these experiences against a long-standing heteronormative hierarchy for married couples while aiming to maintain and perpetuate an authentic identity through their style-fashion-dress.

Traditionally, within married couples, there is a bride and a groom; yet, for these married couples, there was *ambivalence, re-negotiations, and labor surrounding the identity or concept of bride or what it means to be a bride*. Some of the participants embraced the term bride, yet they did not always fit into the traditional ideas of how a bride appears or acts. Some of the participants felt ambivalent about using the term bride in that it fit their identity in some ways, such as them wearing a wedding dress, but not in others, such as the desire to maintain equality in their relationship with their partner. Other participants actively avoided the term, because it did not make sense for them. Still others did not contemplate the concept of bride. Even though some of the participants did not actively identify as a bride, family members or friends sometimes referred to them as brides, especially if the person getting married fit traditional ideas of what a bride looks like, such as wearing a white wedding dress or appearing in a feminine-leaning aesthetic.

Each couple *negotiated their style-fashion-dress in a unique way; however, gender expressions and considerations were central to couples' discussions and experiences*. In some instances, the couples reflected the long-standing stereotypes in lesbian-women's culture, or the butch-femme dichotomy, where there was one more feminine-leaning person and one more masculine-leaning person. In other cases, both partners appeared more feminine-leaning or masculine-leaning. Across their narratives, participants discussed pushing gender boundaries either in their hairstyles, clothing, shoes, or accessories, or adhering to gender norms, which made their sexual identities largely invisible through their appearances (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Nine of the couples pictured on their wedding days in their style-fashion-dress.

Whether participants adhered to gender norms or embraced lesbian women's appearance stereotypes, all of the couples related that they felt they *represented their authentic selves in their style-fashion-dress* on their wedding day. They all explained that reflecting their authentic selves in their appearances was of high significance and felt that their styles represented who they were on an everyday basis, but in a heightened aesthetic. This sometimes meant that they rejected lesbian women appearance stereotypes, such as appearing unfashionable or wearing Birkenstocks. On the other hand, they sometimes embraced the stereotypes such as wearing Doc Martin shoes, North Face fleeces, or short "lesbian hair." This authenticity was sometimes represented through symbols of resilience such as succulents in their flowers. A few couples incorporated overt LGBTQ+ symbols such as rainbows. The couples also acknowledged that maintaining authenticity in their style-fashion-dress meant re-writing traditions such as both people wearing engagement rings or not wearing a gown while still identifying as a bride.

Although each couple aimed for authenticity in their style-fashion-dress, this sometimes resulted in *heteronormative experiences*. For example, other people assumed that the guests would be most interested in the feminine-leaning person's style-fashion-dress. Or couples sometimes experienced tension surrounding their joint look where masculine-leaning persons felt unsure about how they should appear or what norms they should conform to or reject.

Our results suggest that lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, pansexual, and/or queer women brides in the US have a variety of ways they negotiate their fashion-style-dress on their wedding day. These negotiations reflect the long-standing theme that women in the LGBTQ+ community negotiate gender and gender expression as a sign of their sexuality in their dress (Geczy & Karaminas, 2013; Reddy-Best & Pedersen, 2015). These gender negotiations led to an authentic expression of self for these couples on their wedding day. Queer and non-queer focused wedding retailers can consider these findings in order to provide an affirming experience for the significantly increasing number of LGBTQ+ brides (Jones, 2017).

### References

- Erickson, R. J. (1995). The importance of authenticity for self and society. *Symbolic Interaction*, 18(2), 121-144.
- Geczy, G., & Karaminas, V. (2013). *Queer style*. London, UK: Bloomsbury.
- Hutson, D.J. (2010). Standing OUT/Fitting IN: Identity, Appearance, and Authenticity in Gay and Lesbian Communities. *Symbolic Interaction*, 33(2), 213-233.
- Jones, J. M. (2017). In U.S., 10.2% of LGBT adults now married to a same-sex spouse. Gallup. Retrieved from [https://news.gallup.com/poll/212702/lgbt-adults-married-sex-spouse.aspx?g\\_source=Social+Issues&g\\_medium=newsf](https://news.gallup.com/poll/212702/lgbt-adults-married-sex-spouse.aspx?g_source=Social+Issues&g_medium=newsf)
- Pew Research Center (2015). Same-sex marriage, state by state. <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/06/26/same-sex-marriage-state-by-state/>
- Reddy-Best, K. L. (In press). The politicization of fashion in virtual queer spaces: A case study of Saint Harridan one of the pioneering queer fashion brands in the twenty-first century. In Andy Reilly & Ben Barry (Eds.), *Crossing Boundaries: Fashion to Deconstruct and Reimagine Gender*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Reddy-Best, K. L., & Pedersen, E. L. (2015). The relationship of gender expression, sexual identity, distress, appearance, and clothing choices for queer women. *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology, and Education*, 8(1), 54-65.
- Romero, A. P. (2017). 1.1 million LGBT adults are married to someone of the same sex at the two-year anniversary of *Obergefell v. Hodges*. The Williams Institute UCLA School of Law. Retrieved from <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Obergefell-2-Year-Marriages.pdf>
- Tulloch, C. (2015). Style-fashion-dress: From Black to post-Black. *Fashion Theory*, 14(3), 273-303.
- Wilson, E. (2013). What does a lesbian look like? In V. Steele (Ed.), *A queer history of fashion: From the closet to the catwalk* (pp. 166-191). New Have, CT: Yale University Press.