

‘Boys just want to have fun’:
The Subversive Potential of
Playfully Performing Hybrid
Masculinity Through Dress

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This research addresses the subversive potential of men dressing in once marginalised aesthetics (i.e. skirts and nail polish) in playful fashions. Scholarship argues playfulness is the act of making virtually any environment more stimulating, enjoyable and entertaining. This research connects wider playfulness-based scholarship to the field of dressed hybrid masculinity, creating the novel perspective of playfully dressed hybrid masculinity. Hybrid masculinity is categorised as the assimilation of once marginalised aesthetics (lifted from gay or feminine identities) into a masculine gender identity project. A playfully dressed hybrid masculinity is a performance of maleness that toys with feminised or gay modes of dress with a distinct lack of intention, for the purposes of looking and feeling good. Instances of ultimately problematic playfully dressed hybrid masculinities are identified in popular culture via the realm of male music performers, supplemented with how playfully dressed hybrid masculinity in everyday, pedestrian spheres may more authentically occur. For men to play with their dress in ways once reserved for women and children, achieving unique personal expression without masculinist ulterior motifs, could represent a seismic shift in hybrid masculinity and men’s dress scholarship. Hybridly masculine men who play with their dressed identity may provide instances in which the well documented pattern of hybrid masculinity being a (re)articulation of the style rather than substance of masculine norms is disrupted.

Keywords: hybrid masculinity, men’s clothing, playful masculinity, androgyny, gay masculinity.

Introduction

Playfulness and masculinity has received little scholarly attention, limited to accounts addressing the visibility of white masculinity in adventure-based cinema (Frohlick 2005) and young, middle-class white men's (re)deployment of street culture (Hellman and Odenbring 2020). Whilst scholarship has addressed playing with seemingly disparate gendered signifiers amongst Eastern men in everyday spaces (Slade 2020), accounts located in Western culture are lacking. This paper harnesses the ephemeral, joyful connotations of playfulness and applies it to hybrid fashioning of the male body in a way which is yet to garner academic scrutiny. By citing examples of playfulness from outside the masculinities scholarly canon, with a particular focus on Barnett's (2006; 2011) research, this paper aims to present the novel proposition of playfully dressed hybrid masculinity. It is the hope that the categorisation of playfully dressed hybrid masculine bodies will provide instances in which the substance of male appearance norms are profoundly interrogated. Contrasting previous accounts of dressed hybrid masculinity, which record the novel (re)articulation of masculine norms via feminised appropriations (Barry 2015; Barry 2018).

Hybrid masculinity can be categorised by the incorporation of once 'othered' (i.e. gay or feminised) aesthetics into a masculine gender identity project (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). The article begins with an overview of hybrid masculinity and men's dress. The rigidity that continues to control dressed transgression upon the male body with a particular focus upon men in popular culture is discussed. The section concludes with a definition of the novel perspective of playfully dressed hybrid masculinity the paper proposes. An overview of playfulness in and outside of the masculinities scholarly canon is then provided, informed by Barnett's work concerning playfulness as a personality trait among young adults (Barnett, 2006; 2011). The research extends Barnett's claims that playfulness is categorised similarly by

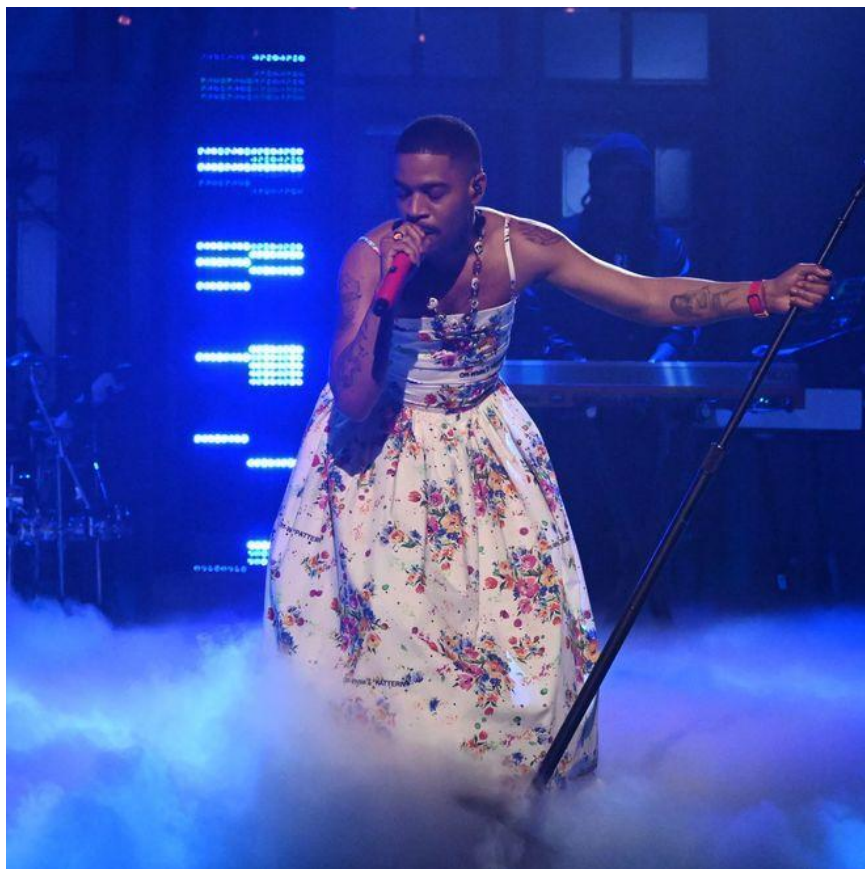
both men and women (Barnett 2011). However, whilst the ways in which playfulness is conceptualised across genders might not differ, how it is enacted, particularly in the realm of dressed gender identity, remains divided. Clothing departments catering for women are often larger and house greater variance, whilst their male equivalent remain (albeit the site of increasing diversity (Barry and Martin 2015)) surprisingly rigid and void of the same plethora of apparel.

The sincerity of the avant-garde which often accompanies femininely dressed men in popular culture (for example, the high art aesthetic of the fashion show or photoshoot) often facilitates and provides an incubated context for masculine celebrities to experiment with their dressed gender identity. However, when compared to the playful, daring few who dress their bodies in ways often reserved for the catwalk, in more everyday spaces (i.e. the supermarket) the positive momentum which often surrounds the skirted male pop star / fashion model is critiqued. 21st century music performers like Harry Styles and Matty Healy play with their dressed masculinity in ways which openly challenge male appearance norms. However, the highly curated, orchestrated way in which their ultimately privileged dressed bodies often appear in the sheltered context of photo shoots arguably helps cement, rather than deconstruct, the boundaries that prevent men from exploring feminised dress such as skirts and pretty blouses in more pedestrian contexts.

Androgyny and men's dress follows, how it can be problematic to label performances of dressed masculinity as androgynous after even the slightest degree of dalliance into once feminised aesthetics. Superficially, labelling certain 'gender blurring' dress habits on the male body as androgynous appears progressive, encapsulating the egalitarian model of non-gender restricted dress the field arguably strives to one day identify. However, in the current male / female divide of clothing via department, playfully dressed hybrid masculinity might serve as a subversive middle ground, allowing men to retain their masculinity when experimenting with

non-normative dress. However, unlike previous accounts of dressed hybridity, playful hybrid masculinity explores the boundaries of acceptable men's dress in ways which do not problematically bolster male norms via a (re)articulation of marginalised aesthetics as acceptably masculine.

The research concludes by reflecting on where playfully dressed hybrid masculinities sit within the current scholarly canon. Bridges and Pascoe (2014) claim that hybrid masculinities continually offer stylistic variance to masculine norms, problematically leaving the substance of masculine identity unchanged (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). I postulate that the identification of playfully dressed hybrid masculinities might provide instances in which toying with dressed norms acts as the primary means of modulating not only the visual style but ever rigid substance of masculine appearance norms.



*Figure 1. NBCU Photobank, colour photograph,
Courtesy: Gettyimages*

Hybrid masculinity

Hybrid masculinity is used to categorise configurations of male gender identities which assimilate “bits and pieces” (Demetriou 2001) of marginalised identity fragments into their performance. For example, dressing one’s masculinity with a pink t-shirt, scholarship defines dressing as “the activity of clothing the body” (Barry 2018: 639). Wearing pink can be interpreted as a hybrid act of maleness in Western culture as magenta is traditionally used as a shade to signpost femininity (Entwisle 2015). Superficially, an assimilation of feminised / gay aesthetics into a masculinity appears progressive, the divide between what constitutes manly and unmanly behaviour is dissolved by a hybrid assimilation of the two. However, masculine appropriations of once marginalised identity are often problematic and done so at the expense of those whose identity is being borrowed from. For example, Bridges (2013) investigates how groups of majoritively straight, white and ultimately privileged men appropriate gay sexual aesthetics: “cultural and stylistic distinctions used to delineate boundaries between gay and straight cultures and individuals” (Bridges 2013: 59). The methods by which the men include once marginalised identity traits into their formation of gender identity serve to fortify, rather than erode the boundaries and the resulting inequalities that continue to exist between traditionally gay and straight modes of behaviour (Bridges, 2013).

Emerging debates from hybrid masculinity scholarship are divided over whether or not these softer performances of masculinity disband or sustain hegemonic masculine norms (For accounts which surmise such arguments see Bridges and Pascoe, 2014; Bridges, 2014). Hegemonic masculinity being the currently exalted configuration of idealised masculinity ensuring the perpetuation of patriarchy, via the domination and subordination of women and other lesser masculinities (for example, gay or black masculinity) (Connell 2005). The academic canon may disagree as to whether hybrid masculinity represents little more than local subcultural variation (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), or that hybrid masculinities are

endemic of the future disbanding of once regressive “orthodox” (thought of most productively as hegemonic masculinity) masculinities (Anderson, 2009). What remains pivotal to all sides of the argument is a masculine performance of gender identity which hybridly assimilates identity fragments it once ran in opposition with is visible in 21st century culture.

The surprising rigidity of dressed performances of hybrid masculinity

Clothing grants our current gender order the ability to almost instantly assess the acceptability of a given performance of gender identity based on what garments are worn on what bodies. Given certain items of clothing's power to affirm or disrupt gendered norms when worn on the male body (i.e. skirts and nail polish), it seems inevitable masculinity and its performance through clothing remains an ever-burgeoning field of research. An interest in fashion and clothing traditionally opposes acceptable performances of masculine gender identity (Barry 2018; Rinaldo 2007). Such girlish echoing have meant its assimilation into contemporary expressions of heterosexual masculinity have been tentative, remaining governed by context (Barry 2015; Barry and Martin 2015; Rinaldo 2007). Certain ‘safe spaces’, such as popular music performance (Morgan 2020) or alternative club scenes (Moore 2018) incubate and encourage the transgression of appearance norms attached to one’s assumed gendered identity. Whereas ‘danger zones’, take for instance a rural village, or a male dominated business meeting (Barry 2018) continue to tightly regulate how a given masculinity is adorned. For instance, the suit and tie continues to set the standard of idealised dressed masculinity across a multitude of formal events (Barry and Weiner 2019; Morgan 2018).

Barry and Martin (2015) in their study of young men’s expressions of masculinity via dress claim: “While contemporary menswear includes a growing selection of bright and bold styles (Davies 2008), young men are often still fearful of being thought of as ‘too feminine’ in

relation to fashion” (Barry and Martin 2015: 7). Within popular culture, the masculine body is argued to be dressed with increasing inclusivity, defying the once rigid norms surrounding male appearance (Morgan 2020; McCauley Bowstead 2018). However, this paper argues men’s hybridised adoption of transgressive dress remains contained to cyclic moments of static transgressions. Mini-skirts have been advertised to and worn by the daring few men for decades (Georgina 2002; See Figure 2). Skirts continue to remain the epitome of dressed transgression for the subversively dressed celebrity in the sheltered context of superstardom (Carreno, 2014; Morgan 2020). However, such garments remain inaccessible to the majority of men outside of the few aforementioned safe spaces. The historic recurrence of the similar degrees of feminised aesthetics upon different but ultimately privileged male bodies allows these seemingly radical transgressions to appear arguably mundane. The repeated instances in which only the daring few have toed the line of acceptable men’s dress in certain safe contexts justifies why after decades of assimilation into the popular culture canon, menswear remains dominated by a surprising rigidity.



*Figure 2, Unknown Author, Dorcus Menswear's He-Skirt, Black and White Photograph
Courtesy: Vintage Everyday*

Scholarship has also tackled men's dressed performance of maleness and hybrid masculinity specifically. Barry (2018) investigates the ways in which a sample of Canadian men across different social identities embraced or disavowed feminine aesthetics in their performances of dressed maleness. Barry claims: "the extent to which they deviated from masculine dress depended on their social locations and social contexts" (Barry 2018: 658). Crucially to this research, Barry also theorises the ways in which men strategically (re)mark or (re)articulate dressed appropriations which may be considered effeminate in concert with more acceptable performances of idealised maleness (Barry 2018). For example, to pair delicate jewellery with sportswear (re)marks the feminine signifiers inscribed into dainty jewellery with the more traditionally masculine connotations of sports and a powerful masculine body in

motion. Thus, despite the hybrid appearance of women's jewellery on the male body, any transgressive potential of this feminine appropriation is nullified via the strategic (re)deployment of overtly masculine aesthetics.

Barry and Weiner (2019) also explore hybrid masculinity and men's dress via marginalised men's appropriations of hegemonic norms. Contrasting more typical accounts of hybrid masculinity, where ultimately privileged, more hegemonically aligned male bodies (i.e. white, athletic) assimilate once marginalised aesthetics into their performance of hybrid maleness (Demetriou 2001). Marginalised men of varying subject position (i.e. fat, gay or non-normatively bodied) use the hegemonically male symbol of the suit and tie to accrue masculine status in professional contexts traditionally limited to them, given the socially prescribed oppression inscribed onto their culturally othered bodies within systems of patriarchal dominance (Barry and Weiner 2019; Connell 2005). Barry and Weiner's (2019) research traces a novel instance of hybrid masculinity in which marginalised men appropriate masculine aesthetics which represent a more traditional performance of masculinity. Such appropriations allow once socially subjugated men a means of harnessing a more dominant hegemonically aligned performance of dressed maleness. Unlike the more typical process of hybridly masculine appropriation set out by Bridges and Pascoe (2014), where hegemonically aligned men (white, normatively bodied, economically mobile) hybridly fuse the marginalised (typically feminine aesthetics) into their performance of maleness as a means of creating discursive distance between themselves and problematic associations to more hegemonic modes of masculinity (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Whilst the methods and individuals involved in both accounts of hybridity differ, the resulting perpetuation of normatively masculine modes of behaviour ensues.

The following research presents the novel perspective of playfully dressed hybrid masculinity. To playfully dress a hybrid masculinity is to mesh the feminine and masculine

without recourse or masculinist ulterior motifs, allowing a uniquely disruptive hybrid appearance of male gender identity which facilitates looking and feeling good, rather than strategically (re)articulating the boundaries of more normative masculinity. When seemingly disparate masculine and feminine aesthetics exist in equilibrium on the dressed masculine body without recourse, the gendered moorings of both sets of aesthetics are arguably thrown into question. The playfully dressed hybridly masculine body remains a hybrid, its masculinity intact. Instead, it is the clothing and the resulting cultural meanings attached to them that take on new disruptive meaning when they are toyed with for the joy of the wearer. Such ephemeral processes of sartorial disruption contrast previous accounts of dressed hybrid masculinity, where although superficially boundaries are interrogated, (re)articulation performed by hybrid wearers often problematically leave masculinist boundaries intact.

When discussing sartorial disruption via deviantly dressed gender projects, Moore's (2018) Fabulous theory should be acknowledged. Moore (2018) documents fabulous gender identity as being embodied by marginalised gender nonconforming bodies using dress as a means of resisting social norms that continue to relegate them to the fringes of our current patriarchal gender order. The extent to which the fabulously dressed transgress the gendered binary of appearance allows them to appear "beyond the expanse of the believable and what the mind has been prepared to process (Moore 2018: 23). Barry (2019) has also explored fabulous masculinities in light of Moore's fabulousness theory, applying the same resistance of dominant gendered schema via dress as enacted by gender nonconforming men more specifically (i.e. fat, gay, trans or disabled men).

The perspective of playfully dressed hybrid masculinity shares similarities with fabulousness as a mode of transgression adopted by individuals in everyday realms of life, outside of sheltered contexts like celebrity stardom (Moore 2018). However, it is the intention of this research to separate playfully dressed hybrid men from fabulousness theory. Unlike

fabulousness, playfully dressed hybrid masculinity remains uniquely hybrid but distinctly masculine. Although wearers may push male norms, they remain within realms of gendered belief as Moore might describe it, and recognisably men. Furthermore, a presumed heterosexuality remains pivotal to playful performances of dress, as to be openly gay and deviantly dressed takes on a whole new gamut of social meanings. Playfully dressed hybrid men garner subversion via their presumed heterosexuality as such constellations of gendered identity typically facilitate conformist performances of masculine dress. Dressing with feminine aesthetics traditionally reserved for gay masculinity as a heterosexual male without masculine recourse could prove liberating in deconstructing cultural boundaries between gay and straight masculinity.

Playful masculinities, past instances, and application to hybrid masculinity

Outside of the masculinities scholarly canon, the act of playing with / in one's environment remains a burgeoning field of study. For instance, Broadhead and Burt (2012) studied a group of three to five year old boys and girls, investigating the way in which the children played and play's role in identity formation and social interaction (Broadhead and Burt, 2012). More specifically pertaining to gender identity formation, Lynch (2015) investigates the perpetuation of gender stereotypes that can be supported by teachers who project gendered ideas about play onto children of varying subject positions (Lynch 2015).

A child's keen ability to play is inevitable, the same curious, joyful display of interaction is a less common practice amongst adults. Langan and Smart (2018) discuss the importance of adults (re)connecting with playfulness as a means of stimulating adult learning processes (Langan and Smart 2018). Outside of education, Barrett (2006; 2011) looks how playfulness manifests in the personality traits of young adults. Barrett defines the playful

individual as being able “to transform virtually any environment to make it (more) enjoyable and entertaining” (Barrett 2006: 949). In relation to gender / racial identity, Barrett identifies a “relative consistency across men and women, and Black and White students, in what playfulness is and how it can be seen in leisure” (Barrett 2011: 397).

Lynch (2015) espouses a culturally perpetuated disparity that exists between the ways in which our current gendered order encourages young boys and girls to play (Lynch 2015). Conversely, Barrett identifies the lack of distinction between the ways in which young adults, regardless of gender identity, identify playful traits in others and themselves (Barrett, 2011). Barrett’s research instead identifies the personality traits which young men and women both consider to be playful, rather than how playfulness might manifest in gendered activities more specifically. However, to view playfulness as a fixed list of character traits, rather than how these traits might inform the ways in which masculine and feminine identities play within traditionally gendered activities, arguably leaves an incomplete cross-gendered view of playfulness as a whole. For instance, the women’s department in clothing retail is, often, far larger and more varied than its menswear counterpart. So, whilst playful men and women might both be identifiable as zany dressed, the way in which men and women play with their clothing will inevitably differ. One might argue women have the opportunity to be more playful with their dress as they are, as aforementioned, provided with a greater depth of choice and are less chastised for a foray into the men’s section (i.e. the rise in popularity of items such as boyfriend jeans). As opposed to men, who’s clothing departments are typically smaller and deviances into feminised dress are usually more culturally chastised overall.

Scholarship addressing playful masculinities specifically remains a niche area of masculinity-based research. For example, Hellman and Odenbring’s (2020) study of young white men and their playful use of urban spaces in the creation of a skateboarding video and Frohlick’s (2005) investigation regarding women’s responses to the playful white masculine

bodies that are solely represented in films at a mountain film festival. Both studies document the ways in which playful masculinities can serve to bolster patriarchal dominance and hegemonic male norms. To Frohlick, male dominance was perpetuated via the high inclusion of white male bodies in adventurer films and the lack thereof of feminine or other marginalised masculine bodies as anything but spectator roles (Frohlick, 2005). In Hellman and Odenbring's (2020) account, the young white men via their play in urban spaces crafted a space in which they could express performances of masculinity which defied associations to their middle class, white subjectivities. However, their appropriations of hip-hop culture were self-serving and fortified rather than eroded boundaries between superordinate and subordinate/marginalised masculinities.

Whilst not referencing playfulness specifically, Slade (2020) documents the cute nature with which young Japanese men dress their masculinity. This cute aesthetic is defined as *Kawaii* (translating from Japanese to cute) and male participants who play with such innocent signifiers within this visual subculture disrupt "masculinity's claimed social position as the gender that is mature, serious and exclusively useful" (Slade, 2020: 79). Seemingly, the *Kawaii* aesthetic Slade proposes runs in concert with the playfully hybrid masculinities espoused by this paper: "in its embrace of the non-serious and the childish it actively disrupts gendered clothing norms. In doing so it often assumes an ironic attitude showing how any norm is socially constructed anyway" (Slade 2020: 79).

Both Slade (2020) and the present research document the subversive power harnessed by men dressing in traditionally feminised ways which defy norms and espouse their perfunctory, social construction. However, to define these cute Japanese men as in concert with the playfully hybrid masculinities proposed by this paper would ignore the large cultural rifts that exist in definitions of manhood between the East and West. As Slade discerns, what it

means to look acceptably masculine in Japan differs from the Western World (Slade 2020). Accepting Japanese men as bastions of playfully dressed hybrid masculinity would do disservice to the research and popular media aforementioned, which bases its findings amongst Western masculinities and culture. Studies of hybrid masculinity in Asian culture remain limited and accounts tend to focus on hybridly masculine music performers (McLeod 2013; Younghee Son and Velding 2020), rather than more everyday performances of subversive masculinity. Although further research investigating the implications of everyday, playful transgressions in Eastern Men's wardrobes would make for a novel investigation, such questions are not intended to be broached by this research.

It is the intention of this paper to imbue hybridly dressed masculinities with the joyful ephemeral connotations of playfulness. The novel perspective of playfully dressed hybrid men disrupts the norm bolstering representations of playful masculinity highlighted in previous accounts (Frohlick 2005; Hellman and Odenbring 2020). It also challenges the current stasis dominating hybrid masculinity scholarship, which frequently traces the (re)articulation of feminised aesthetics as acceptably masculine (Barry 2018; Bridges 2014) or limits zany dressed ensembles to sheltered contexts which celebrate rather than condemn feminised aesthetics worn upon the male body (Barry and Reilly 2020). Via a (re)articulation of a seemingly disparate, hybrid meshing of feminine and masculine gendered signifiers, lacking in claims of androgyny, and inhabiting pedestrianised contexts where gender play isn't always necessarily supported, playfully dressed hybrid men embody a 21st Century iteration of dressed hybridity that interrogates the substance as well as style of surprisingly rigid male dress norms (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Unknown Author, Michael Spookshow is just like any other normal married guy except in what he chooses to wear.

Courtesy: Fishki

Incubated dressed subversion and the disruptive capabilities of everyday transgressions

As aforementioned, the most privileged members of a given gender order are bestowed with the greatest freedom from social marginalisation when incorporating once marginalised identity fragments (i.e. feminised signifiers like skirts and nail polish) into their performance of dressed masculinity. In the West, white, heterosexual, normatively bodied men occupy this prestige (Barry 2018). This research argues heterosexual men within and outside of this social

category who toy with their dress provide a novel instance in which dress norms can be profoundly interrogated, rather than simply (re)articulated in novel fashions. To dress the masculine body in ways once deemed effeminate without masculinist recourse provides a more fluid / subversive performance of dressed hybridity. Men who play with once marginalised modes of dressing, unlike hybrid men of previous accounts, are unrestricted by the degree to which their zany dress can be (re)aligned with traditional notions of masculinity (i.e. the innate heterosexuality often claimed to bolster certain “feminine” colours on the male body: *only real men wear pink*). Instead, they are only limited by their own enjoyment and expression of once taboo configurations of adornment.

To playfully dress a hybrid masculinity is to interrogate the boundaries of normative masculinity regardless of social consequence, be that verbal and physical assault (Barry 2019) or even loss of professional opportunity (Barry 2018). This research contends that truly playful performances of dressed hybrid masculinity are usurped by a certain sincere facade, particularly in the realm of popular culture. For example, the highly cultivated, orchestrated and ultimately serious dressed ensembles of feminised aesthetics on the masculine body harnessed by Matty Healy. Such performances contrast the joyful, ephemeral nature of the act of playfulness this research describes when categorising truly playfully dressed performances of hybrid masculinity.

This article recognises that the hybridised meshing of masculine and feminine aesthetics worn by stars like Matty Healy or Harry Styles in photoshoots or across social media serves as important milestones in the continued promotion and visibility of non-normative performances of dressed masculinity. Circulating images depicting their zany dress may serve to inspire gender deviance in and outside of the context of celebrity stardom, as well as continuing to shed light on the perpetual rigidity of men’s clothing more specifically. However, the majority of instances in which Healy or Styles dress their masculine bodies in hybridised

attire captures a sincerity of expression which remains more at home on the catwalk than the high street. Their highly curated dressed bodies seem to bolster the boundaries of art and life rather than dissolve them. The resulting avant-garde connotations attached to hybridised dressing arguably make those who are inspired to dress more like these subversive young men less likely to do so, as the contexts male rock stars dress their masculinities in are far “safer” than the majority of spaces men inhabit in more every day, pedestrian scenarios.

This is not to say hybridly dressed male rock stars cannot be defined as playfully dressing their hybridity exclusively. For instance, Styles once accessorised a television appearance with a Gucci handbag (Suzannah, 2021; See Figure 3). Conversely to past iterations of acceptable hybridised masculinity, he provided no masculinised (re)alignment to censor his nonconformist act of dressed identity, nor did he channel the stern, momentum shifting facade of high art. Style’s cheesy grin and casual adoption of the feminised accessory allowed him (albeit temporarily) to harness what we might consider a playfully dressed hybrid masculinity.



*Figure 3, Harry Styles and his Gucci Handbag, appearing on The Late Late Show, Colour Photograph.
Courtesy: GQ*

Unlike the male rock star, who at times will profoundly play with male dress norms in a hybrid way, and despite the safety net provided by their privilege position, it can be argued that truly playful performances of dressed hybrid masculinity are those which occur in more everyday scenarios. Playing with what might be considered avant-garde fashion (men in overtly women's wear remains more at home on the catwalk than the high-street (Carreno 2014)) in everyday, pedestrianised spaces, produces a dressed performance of dislocation and subversion. The boundaries of acceptable men's dress are profoundly interrogated rather than (re)deployed in once marginalised, thinly veiled guises. Furthermore, the everyday performance of playful hybridised dress produces a style embedded in reality; one which may be emulated by other masculinities. As opposed to being admired as just another unattainable dressed masterpiece restricted to male pop stars, who's large cultural influence and often heterosexual virility justifies such dressed transgression.

In the 80s and 90s, men like Dennis Rodman and Sylvester Stallone appropriated feminised aesthetics in ways which bolstered their public image as inclusive, modern men (Dunbar 1999; Demetriou 2001). Such dressed appropriations offered great personal freedom of expression to the individuals in question. However, these liberties were restricted to masculinities located inside such positions of gendered privilege. They supplied no trickle-down effect, particularly towards marginalised, black bodies that remained policed by outdated, hyper-sexualised male norms (hooks 2003). Arguably, such lack of dressed emancipation remains equally as exclusive in the 21st Century. Harry Styles and Matty Healy are empowered to dress how they wish in the breadth of sheltered spaces their non-normatively dressed bodies will almost always inhabit. However, such sartorial freedom remains elusive for men whose bodies either differ in appearance to Healy or Styles (are not white / normatively proportioned) or exist in more socially restrictive spaces (for instance, rural rather than urban contexts).

The presence of alternatively dressed male bodies in mainstream media remains crucial in the journey towards the abandonment of surprisingly rigid male dress norms. However, so long as alternatively dressed men remain figments of popular culture and (majoritively) absent in more everyday spaces (i.e. the supermarket or school yard), menswear will continue in shocking us with its lack of freedom of expression, and continue to be absent from those who wish to perform outside of normative modes of masculine appearance. What is needed is not another journalist or celebrity, from the safety net of alternative media, to urge onward men's adoption of once forbidden aesthetics. Instead, this research argues an adoption of playfully dressed masculinity in everyday contexts (outside the aforementioned "safe zones") is crucial in combating the ever static, banal norms which continue to dominate the dressed male body.

Androgyny and interrogating boundaries of acceptable men's dress

Traditionally, androgyny can be defined as an equal meshing of both feminine and masculine aesthetics, resulting in an unidentifiable gender project existing between masculine / feminine categories (Morgado, 2014). However, the post-postmodernist perspective of "gender more" presented by Barry and Reilly (2020: 133) allows us to better understand the nuance that often surrounds performances of gender identity where the masculine and feminine are simultaneously deployed: "rather than attempting to visually communicate the equality of genders, this new form of androgyny is intended to highlight the complexity of gender identity and the diversity of masculine and feminine facets". Barry and Reilly also discuss the aesthetic of *Genderfuck* practiced by gay men in the 1970s, such fashioned ensembles being defined as a meshing of "hyper-masculine and hyper-feminine appearance signifiers to expose fixed notions of sex and gender as artificial" (Barry and Reilly 2020: 124).

Barry and Reilly's (2020) participants vary in their alignment to normative performances of their assumed gender identity (i.e. their weights and racial identities differ).

Coupling this with their performance of “gender more” dress in more everyday spaces (i.e. the workplace) leads to atypical performances of dressed gender identity which have garnered verbal and physical abuse (Barry and Reilly 2020). When separating playfully dressed hybrid masculinity from Barry and Reilly’s *Gender More* performances gender identity, it is reiterated that the interventions made towards masculine and feminine visual signifiers by a masculine toying with hybrid forms of dress always remain inherently masculine. The subversive presence of playfully dressed hybrid masculinity garners its disruptive force from existing within the static dress norms that continue to govern men’s performance of dressed masculinity outside of select safe zones. As opposed to *Gender More* performances of dressed gender identity espoused by Barry and Reilly (2020), where a distinct masculinity remains less crucial to its disruption.

This research does not intend to underestimate or feign ignorance to the daily social marginalisation experienced by subversively dressed others who dress and express themselves outside of their assumed configuration of gendered identity. However, zany feminised dress is seemingly more culturally acceptable upon the gay male body given gay identity’s long-established connection to feminised identity established by hegemonic models of masculinity and resulting gendered policing. Put simply, in our current patriarchal gender order, to be gay is to be everything that is not masculine (i.e. feminine) (Kimmell 1994). Whilst playfully toying with gendered aesthetics running in opposition to one’s assumed masculine category should not be considered exclusive to heterosexual performances masculinity, one should not underestimate the discursive force harnessed by outwardly heterosexual men who adopt feminised aesthetics once reserved, often reductively, to exclusively gay performances of masculine gender identity.

The cultural association of feminised aesthetics upon the assumed male body as androgynous or gay alienates the majority of men from practicing a non-normative dressed

performance of masculinity, given the strict social policing (verbal and / or physical) that answers those who dare toe the line of acceptable men's dress (Barry 2019). By definition, labelling the skirt on the assumed masculine body androgynous seems appropriate. However, by culturally defining the muscular, hairy leg veiled by the skirt or soft fabrics as an androgynous performance of dressed gender identity, arguably its inaccessibility is only reified for the majority of men, given the humiliating homosocial policing typically threatened who even marginally stray outside of strict masculine appearance norms. Seemingly then, the solution would be to make once feminised aesthetics such skirts an acceptable expression of masculine gender identity. However, as the hybrid masculinity scholarly canon has already espoused, to do so would only (re)articulate the visual style of normative masculinity, rather than (re)form its often problematic, inherently homophobic, anti-feminine substance (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). So then, what is needed is a playful middle ground in which all men can toy with once feminised aesthetics without masculine recourse, a sartorial space and time where once feminised aesthetics are toyed with not to exist outside of gendered categories but to disrupt them from the inside out.

Conclusion

It has been the intention of this exploratory piece to propose the sartorial power of subversion that can be garnered by men who playfully interrogate the often rigid boundaries of male appearance norms. Academics and journalists alike have argued the 21rst century has provided a time and space in which Western men can openly subvert once stringent sartorial norms (McCauley Bowstead 2018; Elan 2020). However, this research reiterates the mundanity that continues to plague dressed transgression of male appearance norms, outside of a few select safe spaces (Morgan 2020). Despite the (re)occurrence and seeming mundanity of men

wearing skirts in pop culture, feminised garb remains equally excluded from men's everyday wardrobes as it was 40 years ago.

The research further cements claims made by Barry (2018) and Morgan (2020) that gendered privilege granted to certain configurations of masculine identity in a given space / time often grants such masculinities with a safety net in which to hybridly transgress male norms. This article cites examples like the celebrity photoshoot as an incubated context in which normatively proportioned, white and ultimately privileged male bodies are majoritively seen and provided with a space to safely subvert male appearance norms. Alongside their gendered privilege, this article claims the often avant-garde dressed aesthetics which are worn on the famous male body bestow dressed transgressions with a sincerity that ultimately legitimates their dressed performance as an acceptable dalliance of male gender norms. When compared to the joyful toying with male appearance norms harnessed by playfully dressed hybrid masculinities in more pedestrianised spaces (i.e. a bar or the high-street), the comparative subversive potential of playing within a dressed hybrid masculinity is clear. Performances of playfully dressed hybrid masculinity are proposed to exist in everyday reality; a space where other masculinities might dare to emulate such joyful toying with ever rigid dressed norms. As opposed to the often unattainable, ultimately incubated context of avant-garde, feminised dress on the male body in celebrity superstardom.

A cautionary glance at our current use of androgyny as a descriptor of dressed gendered deviance has also been provided. The research speculates that in the current split of gendered dress by department, labelling certain feminised fashions upon the male body as gender blurring might provide us with justification as to why the majority of men feel dubious towards hybridly implementing feminised garb alongside their presumed masculinity. If dressing in ways once deemed effeminate was normalised and uprooted from its traditional position as gender obscuring, this might act as an appropriate middle ground in encouraging the majority

of men to step outside rigid masculine dress norms. Which may ultimately expose their perfunctory social construction and lead to unmooring them entirely from fashion's strongly established X/Y delimitations.

Playfully dressed hybrid masculinity has been proposed as a novel iteration of subversively dressed maleness. To playfully dress masculinity is to toy with dressed norms outside of safe contexts and use once considered “gender blurring” dressed tactics with a presumed masculinity. One which doesn't (re)articulate the worn feminised aesthetics as acceptably manly but instead questions the very meaning of appearing as such. This proposed playfulness may provide a determinable model of dressed maleness that encapsulates instances of the change desperately needed to eschew the rigidity that continually defines how men choose to dress their bodies. In their seminal work on hybrid masculinities, Bridges and Pascoe conclude: “The question that remains concerns how we can recognize meaningful change in systems of gender inequality when we see it. Questions about how and when real – not just stylistic – change happens in the gender order remains to be answered by gender scholarship” (Bridges and Pascoe 2014: 256). To this research, the exposition of playfully dressed hybrid masculinity might serve as a fragment in answering these questions. To play with one's dressed masculinity without masculine recourse, or (re)articulation of the once marginalised as appropriately manly, poses a novel instance in which the substance of male dress norms and resulting hegemonic definitions of masculinity might be (re)defined.

Further research opportunities might wish to empirically gather data from participants who could be considered an embodiment of playfully dressed hybrid masculinity. Such studies might wish to compare and contrast playfully dressed hybridly masculinities of varying identity constellation (gay, heterosexual, white, black, Asian) against claims made towards how playfully dressed hybridly masculinity is manifested throughout this paper. An evaluation could then be produced, thus deciphering the subversive potential espoused by participants.

Claims from the resulting research could provide a study where 21st century, subversively dressed masculinities are evaluated in terms of how the style and more crucially substance of contemporary hybrid masculinities might be affected.

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