Fashioning the self: heterosexuality and the social psychological constraints of the wardrobe.

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Establishing a social psychological account of queer theory and its understanding of subject formation, this paper seeks to understand the relationship between the continuously emerging self and the dressed body by taking its departure in the concept of transvestism. In this context, questions are asked concerning the heterosexual matrix, cultural intelligibility and the importance of the dressed body in the materialization of a gendered self. This approach involves a critical examination of the ideas of discursively regulated processes of subject formation as presented in the theories of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault while relating to a theoretical framework mainly inspired by George Herbert Mead, Erving Goffman and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Focusing the social psychology of the dressed body from a viewpoint of queer theory, questions are asked about in what ways does dress mediate gender and thus facilitate the performance of certain gendered behavioural patterns and in what ways are these processes constrained by the heterosexual matrix making certain bodily configurations appear as intelligible and others not? To put it simply; how does the culturally intelligible wardrobe constrain the constantly changing self in accordance to the heterosexual (in its wider metaphorical sense) imperative of western culture and how is one to understand the bodily surfaces when the concept of dress is inserted as a crucial factor?

Empirically, this paper is grounded in an analysis of a large number of digital self-presentations and diaries authored by self-identified male to female transvestites between the ages of 15 and 69 in which notions of self, body, gender and sexuality have been focused. In addition, a number of qualitative un-focused interviews expands the empirical repertoire. The research is performed within a theoretical framework of queer theory and thus elucidating the presence of the heterosexual matrix in everyday life bodily practice, that is within different modes of understanding and relating to one’s own (dressed) body. The digital portrayals analyzed are understood as integrative parts of the observed authors lives and the ‘real’ world they live in and, as such, regarded as significant pieces of everyday life.

Keywords: queer theory, social psychology, Judith Butler, identity construction, George Herbert Mead, symbolic interactionism, transvestism, body, Michel Foucault, fashion, dress, gender, sexuality.