



Queer Youth in Halifax, Canada: Exploring the Connections Between Dress, Agency and
Self-perception.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Literature Review	5
Research aims and objectives	13
Theoretical Framework	14
Research Methodology	16
Findings	25
Discussion	48
Conclusions and Recommendations	52
References	54
Appendices	65

Chapter 1: Introduction

Dress has long served as a visual representation of an individual's identity (Davis, 1992). Dress is defined as the supplements and modifications that are added to the body (Roach-Higgins and Eicher, 1992) and can be distinguished from clothing as it embraces a much wider range of items, including cosmetic use, perfume use, tattoos and body paint (Eicher & Evenson, 2015). Dress is a tool that is used for more than a utilitarian purpose, it is a visual language which conveys areas of an individual's identity, resistance and belonging (Roach-Higgins and Eicher, 1985). How a person dresses conveys their cultural background, values and socio-economic class which in turn affects our self-perception and social dynamics (Kwon, 1994). Dress is also a form of art, mostly visual art, although it is not exclusive to it. A founding figure in fashion theory, Roland Barthes (1977) argues that dress is "in the fullest sense, a 'social model', a more or less standardized picture of expected collective behaviour; and it is essentially at this level that it has meaning" (pg 13). Additionally, Barthes (1990) expressed in his work that clothing must be considered "above all, as an object of *appearance*" and emphasizes that dress is fundamentally a social phenomenon (Barthes 1990 p. 245, emphasis original in 1967).

Dress serves as a means of self-expression and enables us to convey our individuality and identity (Eicher & Sumberg, 1995). An individual's choice of dress can reflect an individual's creativity and confidence (Davis, 1992), cultural or gender/sexual identity (Hansen, 2004; Halberstam, 2005), and a position on social matters, such as sustainability or social justice (Fletcher & Grose, 2012). Dress is a particularly important tool that facilitates self-exploration in youth as it allows them to experiment with their personal and collective identities (Bain & Nash, 2018). Since youth are in a transitional period between childhood and adulthood, they tend to have heightened self-awareness and are more vulnerable to social norms; this is what leads to dress becoming a space that represents both expression and regulation (Sweet, 2017).

There is an added significance for queer youth regarding dress as it is a channel to navigate heteronormative spaces and manage their visibility, safety and sense of belonging. Research studies reflect how queer youth use dress to challenge binary norms by wearing pride symbols and mixing gendered clothes (Cole, 2010), to alleviate gender dysphoria by choosing to wear affirming attire or by binding/tucking (Windsor, 2019), and to signal to others in the queer community such as through punk sub-culture or drag (McCann, 2022). For the purposes of this research, queer youth is used as an umbrella term of young adults who identify with non-heteronormative sexual orientations and gender identities (Hilton & Siegel-Stechler, 2024; GLSEN, 2022). The term "queer" encompasses a broader spectrum of identities than LGBT+

as it includes other marginalized identities such as asexual, pansexual and non-binary individuals and it rejects gender/sexuality binaries (Hammack et al, 2023). While the word “queer” was once a slur, it has been reclaimed by activist groups like Queer Nation and seminal scholars like Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who expressed that the word “queer” is an umbrella term that unites marginalized sexual and gender identities. (Willett, 2023; Perlman, 2019).

Dress is interlinked with gender and sexuality, and its expression depends on the different cultural and political contexts that shaped it (Butler, 1993). Fashion theorists have expressed how clothing plays a vital role in expressing identity as well as sexuality, especially for individuals who are sexual minorities as they could possibly be invisible in mainstream society and hence producing sexuality is more important to this community (Entwistle, 2000; Wilson, 2003). Thus, this research aims to explore the relationship between dress, agency and self-perception with queer youth. While there have been studies in the past that have looked at the significance of dress among women (e.g. Woodward, 2007) and youth (Ellington and Leslie, 2008; Pomerantz, 2008; Willett, 2008; Love, 2017; Reddy-Best & Pedersen, 2015), there is a research gap exploring the experiences and perspectives of queer youth in Canada in relation to dress. This research seeks to gather experiences of queer youth in Halifax to better understand the connections between agency, self-perception and dress through a critical lens using the framework of critical feminist theory.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

According to Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development, during adolescence the individual's primary objective is to navigate identity formation; failure to do so may lead to role confusion. Hence, identity development is one of the most major developmental tasks during adolescence (Morrow, 2004). Identity formation, across diverse cultural contexts, is impacted by intersecting socio-cultural factors (Hatano, Sugimura & Klimstra, 2017; Dwyer, 2000). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) youth have additional developmental influences as they are more likely to experience harassment and discrimination from their peers and adults, which can affect their overall development (Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine [SAHM], 2013). Furthermore, LGBTQ+ youth also often undertake the task of coming out or the disclosure of their sexual orientation during adolescence and this increases their anxiety (Cox, Dewaele, van Houtte, & Vincke, 2011). One significant way that young people negotiate these identities is by experimenting with their dress, style and appearance (Kaiser, 1990), and this is particularly true for queer youth (Geczy & Karaminas, 2013; Reddy-Best & Jones, 2020; Clarke & Spence, 2013)). Throughout this paper, the term queer youth will be used to represent all LGBTQ youth. The following sections discuss how dress is affected by various socio-cultural factors as well as the implications that dress has on youth's identity and sense of self.

Dress and Identity

According to Entwistle (2000), dress is a "situated bodily practice and forms part of the micro-social order of most social spaces and when we dress, we have to orientate ourselves to the implicit norms of these spaces" (pg. 52). Due to this existing micro-social order, dress is intricately connected with the different identities that individuals are expected to play each day (Tsaousi & Brewis, 2013; Tsaousi, 2016). There have been many studies that show the impact of dress on an individual's identity and their sense of self (Hass & Luteck, 2019; Tsaousi, 2013; Tsaousi, 2020) and they discuss the role that dress plays in different social spheres such as professional and personal. Dress forms a link between a person's body and identity as it provides a space for creating and performing identities (Entwistle 2000).

Dress and fashion can facilitate the negotiation between an individual's social and personal identities (Nwigne, 2019; Barry, 2019; Mackinney-Valentin; 2017, Jones & Lim; 2022). The way we dress can significantly influence our psychological state, affecting both self-perception and confidence. Dress also depicts an individual's personality and can influence an individual's feeling of self-worth. For individuals with high self-esteem, clothing might be

used as a visual demonstration of a positive self-concept (Creekmore, 1974; Joung & Miller, 2006). Research shows that dress can enhance self-esteem by donning garments that make us feel positive (Kwon, 1994). Furthermore, studies reflect that dress can affect our mood and behavior (Hogg & Abrams, 2001; Nevitia & Monika, 2023; Hilton & Stechler, 2024). Previous research depicts the effects of affirming dress and its correlation to improved mental health and self-esteem (Basiliere, 2021) while restrictive dress code policies increase the risk of depression, self-harm and anxiety (Sumerau, 2018).

As youth start to slowly transition from childhood to adulthood, they use dress to assert their autonomy, signal group belonging to find community and experiment with the way they present themselves (Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). Hass & Luteck (2019) illustrate this in their research which explores the connection between dress and identity among Dutch Muslim women. This research found that agency and identity are the most important findings when it comes to dress as the women felt empowered and viewed themselves in a positive manner when they choose what to wear and it helped them feel closer to their cultural identity (ibid). McCann (2022) also found that wearing the dress that aligns with the identity that the individual holds for themselves improves their confidence while not being able to dress in alignment with their identity causes distress. These findings have been consistently found over decades, for example, Erikson (1968) found that adolescence represents a vital period for identity experimentation, with clothing acting as a low-risk avenue for adopting various personas. This research study aims to explore how queer youth in Halifax dress and how their agency (or lack thereof) with choosing what to wear affects their self-perception.

Dress and Agency in Youth

Agency can be defined as an individual's ability to make autonomous decisions over their life circumstances in an intentional manner directed by their personal values (Bandura, 2001). Giddens explains that "agency implies the power to originate action for a purpose, grounded in consciousness of one's aims" (1984, p. 9). Multiple studies have explored how dress is connected to agency in youths' lives (Ellington and Leslie, 2008; Pomerantz, 2007, 2008; Willett, 2008). Dress and clothing are integral aspects of identity formation, especially for youth as their ability to exercise their agency and choose what to wear significantly improves their confidence and mental-wellbeing (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1995). Dress affects the way that youth perceive themselves and how dress can improve youth's self-esteem (Ellington and Leslie, 2008; Pomerantz, 2007, 2008; Willett, 2008).

Willett (2008) explores the relationship that young girls have with fashion and how they interact with it by exercising their agency and producing their own images online. This

study recognizes the discourses of autonomy and individualism and how girls make conscious decisions about what to wear due to the factor of parenting as well (ibid). Furthermore, Willett (2008) also argues that when studying the concept of dress, researchers must consider the importance of self-reflection when it comes to youth. This is because the study shows that the girls were able to self-reflect and understand how media's portrayal of women affects their sense of self (ibid). Another study by Pomerantz (2008) argues how young women use dress as a tool to alter the way they are perceived by others. The author mentions how dress codes tend to be gendered and define what is considered culturally and socially acceptable (ibid 2008). Ellington and Leslie (2008) explore the significance of dress (including clothing accessories, and other body adornments) and how it affected African American adolescent girls. The research showed that the girls who had agency to choose the dress that they wanted to wear had a higher level of self-efficacy and self-esteem (ibid). Self-efficacy was coined by Bandura as being a strong predictor of agency and it was defined as a person's belief in their own ability to effect change (Bandura, 1989).

There are psychological benefits to being able to exercise youths' agency with dress as it leads to overall lesser levels of self-reported anxiety and depression (Bain & Nash, 2018) and improved body image specifically for overweight and disabled queer youth (Windsor, 2019). A 2021 survey collected data from 500 self-identifying queer youth and observed that those with full control over their dress reported a 30% higher level of life satisfaction (The Trevor Project, 2021). Another research study conducted in 2018 surveyed 1200 adolescents and found that those with complete agency over their wardrobe scored 23% higher on their self-reported measures of self-assurance than peers with restricted choices (Hancock et al., 2018). Studies have also shown that teenagers who develop unique styles (such as punk, skater, preppy) demonstrate greater self-concept clarity (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014).

Dress and agency among youth are influenced by many social factors. For example, queer youth tend to face both structural and social restrictions as schools use uniforms that enforce the gender binary (GLSEN, 2022). Dress codes that are often implemented by educational institutions implement binary dress codes that marginalize queer and trans youth (McCann, 2022) and non-binary youth face erasure when schools refuse them gender neutral options (Windsor, 2019). Studies (Fileborn & Hardley, 2024; McQuillan, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2017) indicate that transgender students face disproportionate disciplinary actions for breaching gender-specific uniform regulations (for instance, trans girls being compelled to wear pants). Additionally, queer youth report experiencing pressures from their family who expect them to conform to heteronormative roles (Panfil & Miller, 2020). On the other hand, for those who exist outside the gender binary, dress can serve as a tool to manage their identity

and for them to present themselves externally in a manner that aligns with their internal gender identity. Transmasculine youth use binders or oversized clothing to feel more comfortable in their body especially if they are unable to access healthcare services to manage their gender dysphoria (Windsor, 2019).

Gender, Gender Expression & Dress

The American Psychological Association (APA) define gender identity as “a person’s deeply-felt, inherent sense of being a boy, a man, or a male; a girl, a woman, or a female; or an alternative gender (e.g., gender nonconforming, gender neutral) that may or may not correspond to a person’s sex assigned at birth” (APA, 2015, p. 834). According to Butler (1990), gender is not biologically determined nor is it an inherent identity; it is reinforced by societal norms and due to societal expectations, it gets repeatedly performed. Through these acts of repetition, gender becomes a practice, the effects of which make it appear natural. Butler (1993) expresses that “this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject” (p. 95). Hence, gender is performative, “precisely because it initiates the individual into the subjected status of the subject” (Butler, 1993, p. 121). Therefore, gendered identities only exist through repetitive performance and driven by regulating practices (Butler, 2000).

Based on Butler’s work, we can understand how gender and performativity are interlinked and how it can affect how individuals perceive themselves. Butler (1993) stated that the presentations which are non-normative, are also associated to sex-gender relationship with homosexuality, thus contributing to the heterosexual matrix. This shows how gender presentation is linked to sexuality as well. Regarding dress and fashion, Kollnitz and Pecorari (2022) in their book *Fashion, Performance & Performativity*, define performativity as “a concept used to address the effects of shaping the real” where performance is seen “as operating in the realm of fiction” (pg. 4). Kollnitz and Pecorari (2022), along with many authors in their edited volume, explain that performativity has effects on the ways of communication people have in their daily lives. These ways of communication can be expressed through dress.

Gender can be expressed in a variety of ways including dress, voice, and mannerisms (Koene, 2017). Freitas, Kaiser, Hammond (1996), state that style is extremely significant for members of the queer community to feel visible and separate themselves from the others while maintaining an identity within a smaller community. Reddy-Best & Pedersen (2015) investigated how queer women express their gender through clothing and its relation to distress. The results reflected that the women who identified as queer were influenced by their sexual identity regarding how they chose to style themselves (ibid). Furthermore, it also states that

“performing queerness” causes distress for women in both straight and queer spaces. In straight spaces they were fearful of discrimination and harassment while in queer spaces they felt the pressure to validate their queer identity through conforming to subcultural norms (ibid). Queer youth also identify with various subcultures which influence their dress and identity. When identifying with alternative sub-cultures, queer youth often use alternative dress (or alt fashion) to find community of other queers with similar interests and identities. For example, they tend to seek spaces where they can express their alternative fashion such as goth or punk nights (Halberstam, 2005).

Dress and Empowering Intersectional Identity

Culture and race play a strong role when it comes to dress and identity. For example, Krmptich and Peers (2013) reported that Indigenous youth in Canada have higher self-esteem when they wear their cultural clothing such as ribbon skirts, regalia or beaded jewelry. Additionally, this study shows that when schools prohibited wearing cultural dress it led to cultural erasure (ibid). Their work makes it clear that Indigenous youth having access to their traditional clothing symbolizes collective identity (ibid). Wearing cultural attire can assist with cultural recovery as well as strengthening resilience (ibid). Similarly, Love (2019) notes that young Black girls embrace using durags, hoop earrings and Afrocentric styles to resist Eurocentric beauty standards, and when schools ban these items, it reinforces racial stereotypes and prejudice towards the Black community and reduces Black youth’s ability to exercise their agency and embrace their identity through dress. Additionally, Love (2017) considers the role of community in facilitating identity construction and agency for Black queer youth, particularly in the space of hip-hop. The study analyzed the intersections of Black and queer identity and expressed the importance of understanding Black queer youths’ lives from a humanistic lens (ibid). This research demonstrated how Black queer youth find their agency with dress in different spaces (such as hip-hop) in community along with other Black people (ibid).

Dwyer (2000) explored how young British South Asian Muslim girls use dress to negotiate their identity. It was observed that schools acted as a space of control and regulated dress that signified cultural and religious differences. Due to the diaspora, they use ethnic dress to express their dual identities by putting together western and south Asian elements (by wearing hijabs with sneakers) (ibid). Their dress is a space where there is a mix of both their own style and their cultural attire (used due to cultural expectations), and this creates both internal and external resistance and incongruence. This incongruence in turn affects their identity and their sense of self negatively as their dress is a battleground where they fight for

autonomy from their community's expectations. This study and those mentioned previously, show how community is an essential factor, particularly for Queer youth of color who come from communal cultures that influences their self-perception and dress. These studies demonstrate how dress can also play a significant role in cultural reclamation.

Furthermore, clothing is also used as a tool to display people's socio-economic status and the roles they play (Anyakoha & Eluwa, 2008). It has been recorded that low-income queer individuals struggle with accessing gender affirming clothing such as binders or suits (Windsor, 2019). Additionally, queer youth living in rural areas have limited access to queer fashion and it was also noted that 1 out of 3 trans youth could not afford affirming clothing (Halberstam, 2005). And importantly, research demonstrates that in addition to barriers facing queer youth across socio-economic and cultural contexts, queer youth face heightened restrictions related to dress. McCann (2022) noted that 58% of LGBTQ+ students have reported being dress-coded in comparison to 32% of cisgender peers, with Black queer youth facing the highest penalties. Thus, it is necessary to explore queer youth's experiences through an intersectional lens, as dress is a tool that serves more purposes than creative and individual identity expression.

Dress, Signaling & Constraints

An individual's dressing pattern is a type of "sign language" and it gives a comprehensive amount of information through which immediate impressions get formed (Kiran, 2002). Queer individuals often use dress as a tool to subtly signify queer code to members of the queer community in a safe space (Bain & Nash, 2018). Dress that can be added and then later removed to avoid potential unwanted attention in unsafe spaces are typically preferred (ibid). For example, queer individuals may wear rainbow accessories as discreet signals to other LGBTQ+ individuals (ibid). Further, when gay men and lesbian women were surveyed in a study by Carroll & Gillroy (2002), they were able to identify members of the queer community because of their ability to use the cues of jewelry, clothing fit and clothing style to increase the accuracy of their categorization.

While dress and signaling may be common within queer communities, a study by Clarke & Spence (2013), demonstrated how a majority of gay men and lesbian women reported feeling some sense of pressure to wear dress that is associated to their sexuality, and this creates tension with their "subcultural authenticity" (refers to dressing in a way that is perceived as non-heterosexual) and their "individual authenticity" (refers to dressing according to personal preference). This has led to creating a "coercive element" (Clarke, 2013, p. 3) regarding dress and sexual identity. Recent research shows that the coercive element is weaker in the younger

generations (Wilkinson, 2015). This could lead to a steady decrease in the ability to predict or identify cues. Heterosexual youth also had some knowledge of those cues but referred to them as stereotypes and did not consider them as meaningful signals (Hayfield, 2013).

In the book *Body Acts Queer*, Maja Gunn (2015) expresses how clothing poses a performative challenge to heteronormativity. She expresses that clothing has a strong influence on power, sexuality and gender as she draws from Butler's work and expresses that gender norms are reinforced and challenged through clothing. Gunn (2015) states that clothing can be a way to perform and conform to cultural expectations but experimenting with fashion is necessary and it would allow for a deeper understanding of existing heteronormative roles and challenge gender norms. Throughout the research, Gunn uses several different artistic projects and uses queer theory to explore how clothing can impact and influence gender performance and heteronormativity. For example, school spaces tend to privilege heteronormativity and has a structure which is designed in a way that excludes queer youth (Keenan, 2017). There is some progress regarding change in policy to reflect gender and sexual diversity and address these systemic exclusions (EECD, 2020) but even so, 2SLGBTQI+ inclusive spaces are still questioned in school spaces due to the continuation of gendered spaces and erasing queer representation in learning materials (Burkholder et al., 2021). School spaces have many unwritten dress codes that are shaped by a cis-heteronormative viewpoint, and this compels students to express their identity in a manner that is aligned with gendered narratives (Keenan & L.M. Hot Mess, 2020).

Queer youth have also reported altering their dress for safety reasons and wear clothes that allow them to "pass" as being heterosexual or cisgender in certain heteronormative spaces (Ahmed, 2017). Research by Clarke and Turner (2007), conducted with participants who identified as LGBT, reported that factors that affected appearance and which signaled sexual identity were "policed" using verbal and nonverbal means. This literature provides a deeper contextualized understanding into how queer individuals are controlled by heteronormative expectations in society.

Overall, the literature review shows the effects of dress on different people from various socio-cultural settings. These studies demonstrate how dress is a key factor in how queer communities present themselves in a social setting and how this presentation affects the way that they are perceived and judged by others, which in turn affects their self-perception. It is important to recognize that queer youth represent hugely diverse people, experiences, and communities, a reality that this research will endeavor to further explore in relation to dress, agency and identity development. This paper aims to provide further data to the existing

literature by exploring how queer youth in Halifax view dress and the impacts that it has on their self-perception.

Chapter 3: Research Aims and Objectives

The rationale for conducting this research is to explore the relationship between dress, agency and self-perception with queer youth. While there have been studies in the past that have looked at the significance of dress among women (e.g. Tseelon, 1995; Woodward, 2007) and youth (Ellington and Leslie, 2008; Pomerantz, 2008; Willett, 2008; Love, 2017; Reddy-Best & Pedersen, 2015), there is a research gap exploring the experiences and perspectives of queer youth in Canada in relation to dress. This research aims to gather the experiences of queer youth in Halifax, Canada to set up a platform where they will be able to voice their views and discuss their unique experiences. This study explores the connections between agency, self-perception and dress among queer youth by using the framework of critical feminist theory and by using photo-voice methods. It seeks to understand how dress affects youth's self-perception and identity. The purpose of this study is to analyze how agency regarding dress among queer youth facilitates identity growth and self-perception. The research objectives for this study are to: 1) investigate how queer youth express their identities through dress; 2) examine the role of agency in these expressions; and 3) explore the lived experiences and voices of queer youth through the photovoice method. This study aimed to contribute to the existing literature in the field. Furthermore, it aimed to challenge heteronormative views as it centers marginalized voices through participatory methods and uses a theoretical framework that prioritizes resistance. Additionally, the study seeks to provide a better understanding of the challenges and environmental factors that affect queer youth regarding their dress and how that could impact the way they view themselves.

Chapter 4: Theoretical Framework

This study uses a critical feminist theoretical framework to explore the connections between dress, agency and self-perception among queer youth in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Critical feminist theory critiques systems of power, such as heteronormativity and patriarchy, that regulate bodies and identities. (Collins, 2000). Heteronormativity refers to the socio-political system that marginalizes non-heterosexual identities and reinforces institutional power structures that pathologize queer existence (Ferrari, 2021). Whereas patriarchy has been defined as a

hierarchical system organized around the social, religious, and political rule of older men... the understanding of the term has expanded to include the organization of most current cultural systems, in which the macrocosm of the political sphere, with a king or president, is expected to parallel the microcosm of the family, in which the grandfather or father exercises dominance (Hibbs, 2014).

Understanding these systems will allow for a more in-depth application of the critical feminist theory.

One of the principles of critical feminist theory is that no person is better equipped to understand the issues of a particular group, than the people who belong to that group (Keller & Longino, 1996). While this theory was developed to refer to women, it can also be applied to other marginalized groups of people (Wang & Burris, 1997). bell hooks (1984) states that feminist theory must be revamped to include more than just the plight of privileged women. Marginalized women, or women of other races or classes should make use of their “special vantage points” and look at “the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony” (pg. 15). This framework supports deconstructing gendered dress norms as critical feminist theory rejects the notion that clothing can be “neutral” and shows that dress codes constantly enforce and reinforce heteronormativity and cisnormativity (Butler, 1990). Critical theory also exposes additional inequities relating to socio-economic status, for example barriers for low-income queer youth to access affirming clothing (Windsor, 2019).

Critical theory can help to highlight resistance as queer youth use dress as a tool to resist erasure by wearing pride flags or DIY fashion (Halberstam, 2005), recognizing important political challenges to oppression (Ahmed, 2017) and an overt rejection of fast-fashion which perpetuates heteronormative standards of beauty as well as the gender binary (Hethorn & Kaiser, 1999). Queer youth tend to use clothing as a means of expressing their gender and sexual identity which in itself is an act of rebellion in heteronormative society and critical feminist theory recognizes it as such. An example of using clothing as a form of resistance is

drag. One of the seminal theorists, Butler (1990) argues that drag exposes how gender is performative and not inherent. Drag is a practice that is performative in nature, where individuals who partake in it deliberately use exaggerated gender expressions and it is only a temporary embodied persona while their everyday gender identity is maintained (Moncrieff & Lienard, 2017). Drag is also identified as a collective resistance to oppressive norms (Bailey, 2013), for example, the study discusses how Black and Latinx drag queens/kings use drag as a method of criticizing the gender construct and its rigid binary. Resistance as a community is also aligned with the critical feminist theory as it seeks to advocate for more resources to be provided to marginalized communities (hooks, 2000; Fraser, 2013). One way for resistance to take place is by those from marginalized communities sharing their resources with each other such as queer thrift stores and clothing swaps which foster community relationships and resists consumerism (hooks, 2000).

This study addresses two major principles of the feminist framework, which are valuing youth experiences and development of critical consciousness (Weiler, 1991). Critical consciousness with regard to feminist theory is the process of identifying and understanding the power structures that perpetuate oppression such as capitalism, racism and patriarchy (Freire, 1970). The feminist pedagogy aims to empower youth to view themselves as a valuable source of information (Sinacore & Boatwright, 2005). Feminist theory puts forward the notion that youth must first view their personal experiences as valuable, to connect the personal and political (Fuehrer, 2011). The result of critical feminist theory is that it aims to critique and change discrimination, especially those based on sex and gender (Wood, 1995). Author bell hooks (2000) expresses how dress is a tool that can be used to critique the socio-political environment, stating: "Fashion is a form of speech that can either reinforce the status quo or challenge it. For marginalized groups, clothing becomes a language of resistance—a way to assert presence in a world that seeks to erase them" (pg 145).

Critical feminist theory is both apt and effective for this study as it can help to expose systemic oppression with relation to dress code policies, provide space to amplify queer youth's lived experience and celebrates dress as a tool for resistance. Critical feminist theory also recognizes marginalized communities and seeks to improve their representation by supporting their voices and experiences. The framework acknowledges the power imbalance, and this research study aims to provide a space to queer youth where they can express their opinions with creativity through drawings and photography.

Chapter 5: Research Methodology

Qualitative research serves as a valuable approach for obtaining insights from participants regarding a topic that is not fully explored or understood (Kim et al., 2017). Qualitative methodologies offer an account of a situation using everyday language and are valuable research approaches (Sandelowski, 2000). While using inductive approaches, the participant's input is crucial as qualitative description provides deeper understanding when there is little information about a subject as (Sandelowski, 2000; Kim et al., 2017). Qualitative research provides an important framework for this research as it can help to obtain an in-depth awareness of queer youth and their experiences. Furthermore, it allows for deeper insight with the participants as they introspect their own experiences (Sutton and Austin, 2015). Qualitative methodology also “provides an in-depth, intricate and entailed understanding of meanings, actions, non-observable as well as observable phenomena, attitudes, intentions and behaviors... it gives voices to participants and probes issues that are beneath the surface” (Cohen et al., 2011 p. 219).

Qualitative research recognizes the social reality faced by the participant and how that is developed constantly by the individual (Bryman, 2012). Additionally, it also aligns with critical feminist theory as it emphasizes and amplifies the voices of marginalized queer youth and provides them with a space where they can critique the dominant power structures and unpack its impact with other members of the marginalized community who share similar experiences. Therefore, it is the appropriate research methodology for this study because it aims to investigate the in-depth lived experiences of queer youth and provide them with the platform and knowledge to voice their opinions using a participatory method called photovoice.

Research Method

The qualitative data for this research study was collected using participatory photography methods and focus groups. The study employed an image-based method of photovoice to collect data and provided the youth with a space where they participated and used their voice to illuminate connections between dress, agency and identity. The photovoice method is a qualitative method which places importance on individual voice and its potential to facilitate social change (Wang, 1994). The key aspects of photovoice are: 1) allowing people to record what is relevant to them and in their community 2) using photos to increase awareness about issues through discussions and 3) using the acquired information to reach the public and policymakers (Wang, 1997). Furthermore, studies have recognized that taking photographs of daily life helps participants to create a distance from their everyday life and this leads to

prompting reflection and critical thinking about the same, and when this is brought back to the group, new insight and critical consciousness can be formed (Rose, 2016). The goal of this method is to get an extensive understanding of the dynamic human experience through analyzing texts and images (McLeod, 2010).

Voice is seen as the way to express resistance to the dominant narrative and showing the accurate contextual risks. While “Voice” in photovoice is not a given, the possibility of it is significant and it requires researchers to approach it with care (Liebenberg, 2009). The rationale for using the photovoice method for this study is because the aim of this study is to have youth exercise their agency and view themselves as an agent of change by providing their photos of what they deem is important. Furthermore, photovoice is used to have youth express their views and feelings in a creative manner where they can exercise their agency.

Wang and Burris (1994) mention how “policy is the articulation of voice through the concrete distribution of resources...Whose voices participate in the policy dialogue determines which actions are chosen” (p.192). Qualitative studies focus on giving importance to the in-depth lived experiences of youth rather than generalizing it to the majority. The photovoice method seeks to have those with little power in society showcase their photos and then lead to promoting change in the community through informing those with power in the community (Wang & Burris, 1994). In reflecting on their research with adolescents and a community needs assessment, Strack et al., (2004) found that most youth in their research spoke “about the insight they gained by taking pictures of the positive and negative things in their community...that being in photovoice has caused them to think about their community for the first time” (pg. 54).

Photovoice within a focus group context was selected as group work can create “opportunities in which participants can inspire each other to take better, more informative pictures; develop a collective voice; and *mobilise for unified action*” (Strack et al, 2004, pg. 52) while such mobilization is not necessarily the intent of qualitative research. Focus groups are a qualitative method and a process where a group of individuals are researching together (Bryman, 2012). Focus groups can create be an effective method when working with queer youth as it aids with expanding the relevant themes of identity formation, marginalization and social dynamics (Krueger and Casey, 2015). Queer youth can find this method to be empowering as they might feel isolated when participating in individual interviews (Flicker et al., 2014) and focus groups creates solidarity through the process of shared storytelling (Bain & Nash, 2018).

Sampling and Participant Selection

For this study, the aim was to recruit six youth between the ages of 19 to 24 to participate. Six participants for focus groups would ensure that it is a manageable group size where all members can contribute, thus leading to more depth in conversations and richer qualitative data (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The inclusion criteria included: 1) Youth within the age group of 19–24 years; 2) Youth residing in Halifax, Canada; 3) Youth who have the ability to communicate in English; 4) Youth who have access to a phone to capture photographs; and 5) Youth who self-identify as being part of queer community.

A poster was put up at the Pride Center at Mount Saint Vincent University to recruit participants for the study (see Appendix C). Additionally, posters were sent to non-profit organizations in Halifax asking if they could post the recruitment poster. This allowed for more diversity within the group of participants. As the intention of the study was to understand queer youth's experiences, criterion sampling was employed. Criterion sampling refers to selecting participants who meet a specific set of criteria that has been set by the researcher for the research study (Patton, 2002). It is quintessential to select criteria that would be relevant for the study, and which would aid to provide rich data based on the research aim (Patton, 2002). Another reason for employing this type of sampling is because this allows for participants with relevant experiences to self-identify for the study.

Participant Demographic

For this research study, there were a total of eight participants. Six participants took part in each focus group. Two of the participants had to withdraw from the study after the first focus group due to personal health issues and two additional participants joined for the second and third focus groups. All the participants identified as queer individuals. There were a total of six Canadian participants and two international students.

Research Site Selection

Mount Saint Vincent University was chosen for this study, which is located in the heart of a multi-ethnic community in Halifax. The research was conducted in a study room at MSVU during the Winter 2025 term. The participants who were recruited for this study were contacted and asked what times and days that they would be available, which helped to decide the days on which the focus groups were conducted. All three focus groups were conducted for about an hour and thirty minutes each.

Procedure

The following section details the research processes followed in the study.

Data Collection Process

The researcher met with the participants three times to collect the adequate data required for this study. The rationale for the same is because the first session focused on the aims of the research study, what dress means and what photovoice is. The initial focus group was for one hour and thirty minutes, and the two follow-up focus groups were for 1 hour and fifteen minutes each. The focus group agendas will be described in the following section. Additionally, the participants were also shown techniques on how to capture photographs. Subsequently, they participated in two focus groups where they shared their photographs and analyzed them together. Having the participants meet three times allowed them to better orient themselves with each other, which improved the overall group's analysis of the photographs.

First session- focus group.

The first session with the participants helped them understand what the photovoice method is, the themes that they would be exploring as well as how to capture photographs that would highlight their views on this topic (see Appendix G). Firstly, there was an introductory activity where I, as the facilitator, introduced myself to the participants and had them introduce themselves to the group. They were asked to say their names, pronouns, where they are from and why they chose to participate in this study. Subsequently, the facilitator supported the establishment of common ground rules and safe practices that we followed during the data collection. Some of the ground rules established were respecting each other and maintaining confidentiality of the other participants as well as treating the information that they share during the data collection process as confidential. Exercising active listening skills and giving everyone space to participate are some other important ground rules. Then, the facilitator asked the participants what they think other ground rules should be and wrote it all down on a flip chart that everyone in the group can see and this chart was always on display for the group so that they could refer to it at whatever point of time during the data collection process. Following this, the aims and objectives of photovoice were described. Additionally, the facilitator explained that photovoice is “a method of reflection and reporting that gets messages across by using photographs” (Rutgers International, 2016, pg 33). Participants were then asked to participate in an arts-based activity and to draw or write on the topic “what does dress mean to you?” and to share their drawing/writing with the group. After this, the facilitator taught them how to link images to find a common theme or story between them and used the presentation aid given by Rutgers International Photovoice Facilitators Guide (Presentation 3) for the same. The participants were asked what they thought of the photos and this activity allowed them to

understand how to capture the photographs using symbolism and be able to arrange a scene and tell a story with it.

Second session - focus group.

The second focus group was conducted two weeks after the first. During this period the youth were asked to capture 10-20 photographs each based on what they learned in the focus group and their own views of the research topic – the connections between dress, agency and identity. The specific task was to take photos of their clothes as well as photos of the type of outfits they would like to wear but feel they are unable to do so due to socio-cultural factors. Using these visual representations that incorporate photography provides an opportunity to produce new and unique knowledge and such methods have been widely used by ethnographers and sociologists, dating back to the early 1920s (Shrum & Duque, 2008). The objective of this focus group was to see the photos that the participants have taken, understand why they chose to photograph the images they did, and to share their experiences and views with each other. The participants were encouraged to select three to five photographs that they felt fit the study the most and email it to my MSVU email the day before the focus group so I could or put them on a presentation for the whole group to see. The participants were invited to look at each other's pictures and then paired up to describe their photographs with each other. Subsequently they were asked to discuss in the group what they learned from their partner and about their own photos. When they discussed their own photos, they were asked the following questions:

1. Why did you decide to take this picture? What does it represent?
2. Did you arrange it in a particular manner? If so, then why?
3. Why is this dress significant to you? How does wearing it make you feel?
4. Do you have any restrictions placed on your dress by factors such as family or educational institutions? If so, how does that affect you?
5. Does this dress reflect your gender and/ or sexual identity? If so, how?

After the participants answered these questions, I asked them to self-reflect about their feelings after hearing the other participants answers and to discuss if there are any common themes that emerge and note those down.

Third session – focus group.

The third focus group was conducted two weeks after the second one. The objective of this focus group was for the participants to come up with captions for the photographs that have been taken by the participants as well as to analyze themes. Using visual data such as photographs can uncover novel and complex insights since it would observe the subtle interactions that occur in different settings (Barone & Eisner, 2011), and it is able to capture the attention of the viewer and increases their empathy and social awareness (Leavy, 2017).

This focus group aimed to have the participants identify the subtle cues and themes that exist in their photographs and to improve their overall awareness of the social situation. During this focus group, as their facilitator I asked them these following questions:

How can we caption these photos?

What are common themes that you feel exist between these photographs?

What do you hope this research teaches others about dress, agency and identity among queer youth in Halifax?

After these questions were discussed and the participants felt satisfied with the themes that they put forward, I ended the focus group by thanking the youth for participating in the study and tell them that they would be informed after the data is analyzed and the paper is complete.

Method of Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted by using input from the participants during the third focus group where they captioned the photos and discussed the themes that were common amongst all of their photographs during the group discussion. Additionally, data analysis was also conducted separately by the researcher to highlight significant themes that arose from the transcripts and visual data. This second part of data analysis was done by the researcher as certain themes were not common amongst all the participants and hence not discussed by them in the focus group but were still significant to be discussed in the study. This part of the data analysis was done while adhering to the steps outlined by Creswell (2009) on how to analyze qualitative data. The first step was to organize and prepare data for analysis. This involved structuring the information obtained from the transcripts of the focus groups. Second, the data was reviewed to gain an understanding of the material and assess its overall importance. Thirdly, a detailed analysis was completed through a coding process. Coding entails segmenting the content into smaller textual parts or segments before contextualizing all the transcripts and pictures. After this, the generated code was used to create an overall description of the situation as well as categories or themes for analysis. A description provides a comprehensive portrayal of details regarding individuals, locations, or activities within a scene. Subsequently, for a research study, utilize the coding to generate a limited number of topics or categories— for this study there were four themes. The fifth step was to develop how the description and themes will be articulated in the qualitative narrative. Finally, the last step of data analysis consisted of interpreting meaning from the data.

Reflexivity and Research Trustworthiness

The reason I chose to study the relationship that youth have with their dress is due to my own personal experience. When I was younger, I was unable to wear the clothes that I identified with due to many restrictions that existed in my environment. Some of these restrictions were due to extended family's disapproval of my choice of clothing and dress codes at the educational institutions I was enrolled in. These factors severely affected the way that I perceived myself. I felt unable to express myself creatively and felt like I had no control which in turn reduced my confidence. When attending university and living on my own I got the opportunity to dress however I liked. This experience was liberating and made me feel connected to my culture as well as allowed me to experiment with various styles that would fit my identity. This improved the way I viewed myself over time and I feel much more confident and capable now as I can present myself in an authentic manner.

Since I have a high level of emotional investment in the topic, I made sure to have my questions audited by the research committee and framed in a neutral manner. Before the data collection process, I was diligent and questioned my own biases through the process of introspective journaling as well as self-reflection. According to Willig (2008) it is necessary that the researcher acknowledges their bias and reflect on how their personal reactions could affect the research process. To engage in reflexivity, I journaled my experience throughout the process of conducting this research to detect my own biases and to try to mitigate my perception or experiences getting projected onto the participants. Furthermore, since the participants described their photos in a group, they identified the common themes that existed amongst the group members' individual experiences, and this allowed them to exercise their agency with this study. Finally, I have framed open-ended questions for the focus group that are direct and not misleading to minimize any personal bias from affecting the research.

Ethical Considerations

Before beginning the data collection process, the consent of the participants was taken. There were three types of consent that was taken from the participant for this type of study. The first consent form sought the participants consent to engage in the research (see Appendix D). The consent form was reviewed with the participants individually, including a review of the purpose of the study, the objective of the study, and the time commitment that was required from the participants. The consent form also provided essential information about how their confidentiality would be protected in this study by using code names. Additionally, the photo voice method was described, and they were given a brief verbal overview of the process of data collection by the researcher. When they agreed to participate after reading the consent form, they were asked to sign the form to confirm their willingness to participate. The second consent

form asked the participant to give permission to use the photos that they take for publication or display and was collected at the beginning of the first focus group (see Appendix E). Finally, the third consent form was used if the participant chose to photograph someone who is not a participant as a subject of their photos, they must have the subject sign a consent form that they consent to the participant photographing them and for its display or publication (see Appendix F). The participants were given the third consent form to take home and sign it or get it signed before the second focus group which was conducted one week after the first.

This research study received ethics clearance by the University Research Ethics Board of Mount Saint Vincent University (REB #2024-206) and the participants were treated ethically according to TriCouncil ethical guidelines. As researchers, it is our primary responsibility to protect the participants. The research topic touches on a subject that could be somewhat difficult for the youth based on their own personal experiences and elicit uncomfortable emotions for them. Asking youth to self-disclose their sexuality and their struggles with their gender and sexual identity with relation to dress can be sensitive. Therefore, I discussed with them before beginning the focus groups that if this occurs, they have the information in the consent form that would give them access to professional support (see Appendix D). The participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time if they felt uncomfortable. Additionally, since the participants are youth of ages 19-24, it was necessary to keep in mind that they might have to consider authoritarian factors such as parental and religious institutions when wearing their dress which and they might not be able to exercise their agency to wear the dress that they would potentially like to wear without risks. These complexities were identified in the consent form and discussed during each focus group. Finally, since queer youth are an equity-seeking group it is of utmost importance for researchers to provide them with a platform where their individual experience is recorded with care and without bias and use their voices to create change at a social level.

Researchers are also responsible for ensuring participant anonymity. Since some of the participants for this study were recruited through the university's Pride Centre, they were informed that they could be sharing their views with the other queer youth from the Pride Centre in a group setting during data collection. Community standards were created during the first focus group to discuss respect for each other during and following the research process. Further, while anonymity is not possible among the participants in this study given the group nature of the methods, code names and refraining from using identifying personal detail were employed in this thesis to enhance protection for the participants. The participants were informed that their names would not be revealed, and a pseudonym would be given to them

when their words were discussed in the paper. The visual photographs and audio recordings of the data are only saved on MSVU's One Drive where the data is encrypted and secure. The photographs that are stored will only be the blurred versions to protect the participant's identity and maintain confidentiality. The data retention for this research study is for one year after use or unless specified otherwise by my thesis supervisor or committee member.

Chapter 6: Findings

This study used a qualitative approach to understand the connections between dress, agency and self-perception. The youth who participated in this study did not directly benefit from participating but were interested in contributing to a study that increased the literature about queer youth and dress. The participants also learned about themselves and how some aspects of their experience are a collective experience, shared with other queer youth as well. This allowed the participants to express feeling safe to share and create a non-judgmental space where they found community with the other participants. Using a critical feminist theoretical framework to challenge heteronormative standards, four major themes emerged:

1. Dress and socio-cultural identity
2. Dress as a personalized emotional and social experience
3. Queer signaling and building queer community
4. Barriers to dress

These themes will be discussed in-depth in the following sections.

Theme 1: Dress and socio-cultural identity

Based on the data, it was clear that queer youth's dress was influenced by their socio-cultural identity. The participants used dress as an aid or tool which made them feel more aligned to their self-perceived identity. There are many aspects to their socio-cultural identity and aligning with it using dress helped them feel more connected to others and reduced feelings of isolation.

Dress and cultural identity

The queer youth who participated in this study came from various cultural backgrounds and saw their cultural identity playing a significant role in their choice of dress. One participant, AA, talked about how Indigenous youth who are outside the gender binary have started to alter traditional clothing to feel more gender neutral, stating: "We're like, people who are gender non-conforming and wanting to make like vests or ribbon pants, which is not common as you're stepping away from the traditional norms." Additionally, AA stated: "I make beaded earrings like my ancestors, but for Two-Spirit powwows now" and this shows how youth exercise agency through dress by making and wearing custom pieces that tie them to their cultural identity. Similarly, BB, mentioned "I wear a lot of beaded earrings since embracing my Indigeneity. A lot of times I have my medicine pouch or my moccasins. I have my dancer boots on right now that are all like leather, like hide and fringe, and it makes me feel good, and connected to my culture."



Image 1. This photo showcases one of the participants beaded earring collection which they described as a representation of how dress links them to their culture.

Another participant, FF, mentioned “that regardless of what I’m wearing, I deliberately have like an element of [South Asian] culture brought into whatever I’m wearing because it's a method of connectivity for like you know, feeling connected to my roots". These statements show how wearing cultural/ethnic dress and attire can make an individual feel more positive emotions and more connected to their identity.

Dress, intergenerational ties and family dynamics

Through the focus groups, it was noted that the participants enjoyed using and repurposing their family members' dress pieces to fit their personal style in various ways. The youth felt as though they were carrying a piece of their ancestors or family with them, and they reported experiencing feelings of comfort and nostalgia when wearing these pieces. BB mentioned “I have a lot of hand me downs. Most of my favorite jewelry pieces are things that my mom and my grandmother used to wear. I had a lot of clothing pieces that were like my grandmother's, and I just, I love hand me downs cause they're so special.” This is further attested by CC, who stated “I just want to say that half of my wardrobe is my mum's.”



Image 2: This photo showcases one of the participants wearing their mother's sweater which they described as feeling a sense of comfort in this dress due to its familiarity and this shows the unique characteristic of dress passed down from one generation to the next.

This type of intergenerational connection regarding dress establishes an added layer to the way that the youth present themselves and how they feel about themselves. The youth feel more connected to their family and not as different due to these dress choices. It was also mentioned by a youth BB that borrowing pieces from family “has a similar kind of vibe to thrifting but more personal.” These statements show their interest in wearing clothing that tells a story about themselves.

Some youth pointed out how they liked to alter the dress that they received from their family members to fit their own personal style and gender identity. AA mentioned how: “I have my grandfather's leather jacket and just knowing that he feels that girls shouldn't wear men's clothes and he hates that I wear his jacket makes me feel happier to wear it.” This shows how youth in this study have intergenerational ties with their dress, but this is also a mode of rebellion and resistance against familial expectations. One youth who is an immigrant from South Asia mentioned how wearing ethnic attire made her feel closer to home even when she was physically very far from it.



Image 3: This photo showcases one of the participants wearing traditional clothing and highlights the importance that dress holds for someone who is an immigrant and wants to stay connected to their roots.

The queer youth in this study described using aspects of their own self-presentation to connect with their parent(s) and influence family dynamics. GG mentioned “I don't think I had natural colors in my hair since I was 10 but now my mom is with me. She came out as queer, way too late. Now we have matching hair.” It shows the comfort that this youth feels with their mother and how sharing the same hair helps facilitate closeness and connection. This statement also shows how dress can be used as a tool to strengthen relationships. However, there is also the other side where family dynamics have affected youth’s agency from being able to present how they would like to. AA expressed:

My mum never let me do anything with my hair until I was, like, out of high school or in high school and my mom was like, open minded too, but she would not let me do an undercut or anything like fun. But now here we are with blue hair, and I feel more comfortable with myself than before.

This statement shows how parental control can influence dress when youth are younger adolescents but when they are older, they are more likely to exert their agency. This further demonstrates how when youth start to break out of the mold shaped by the expectations of family and exercise their agency, they start to feel more comfortable and secure in their bodies and identity.

Dress and subcultural identity

Another significant sub-theme that was identified when conducting the data analysis was how dress is influenced by subculture, which the youth in this study defined as a group of people that have interests, values and style that is different from the normative or “normy” dominant culture. Youth use these spaces for creative self-expression as well as to flexibly experiment with their own gender and sexual identity in a fluid manner. Both dress as well as the different sub-cultures it offers help BB feel inspired, she states:

Dress makes me feel inspired. Then I also get inspired by things to create outfits. Like, I even add nature cause I don't know, sometimes I feel like I just want to look like a little like fairy in the woods, you know, like, that's just kind of the vibe. I also wrote like subcultures as well. Like, I go to a lot of like, goth, emo or drag nights, and I like to, you know, I don't have like, a specific style I stick to all the time. Like, it depends on my mood sometimes the season.

AA also adds on to this and describes what dress means to them, they state:

I put in funky eye makeup and themes. it could be like, I don't know. It could be anything, like stars, or it could be like pirates. goth, I don't know it's just like anything with like, kind of like a vibe or a theme. I was like, piercings. And then I also put like hairstyle and like sub things, like blue hair, or anything that you kind of do to your hair... you can kind of like, do it in a theme, or kind of like your color, like, I guess another part of like themes was, like, if you wanted to do a color of the day or something, and kind of like, correlate your whole outfit on that.

These statements show how dress can have different meanings to each individual and queer youth state that sub-cultures influence a large portion of their dress as it inspires them and allows for their creativity to flourish as they enjoy the feeling when they can dress based on any theme they pick. GG also talked about their experience with enjoying experimenting with different styles and subcultures on different days based on how they feel, they say:

(my dress) it's not really consistent with any one thing there are times where I'm dressed like super punk and like don't talk to me get away from me do not look at me. Do not

perceive me, I'm not here. Then there are times where it's like I am super like preppy chic because I don't want to stand out.

This statement by GG shows how dress is used by individuals in this study as a flexible tool to experiment with their subcultural identity in addition to their gender identity.



Image 4: This photograph was submitted in response to how the participant was feeling about their gender and their interest in participating in goth nights. This particular dress in the photograph was described as punk and edgy by the rest of the group.

For DD, being in the “alt or queer community” feels safe. They shared:

I taught my little sisters like 10 years younger than me if you need help somewhere and you can't find somebody in a store uniform go find the most Goth motherfucker you can encounter and they will help you. Or find someone with a ton of pins they will help you cause, I find the community to be very in touch with their values and I love that so much.

This statement by DD shows the safety they feel in approaching people who are flagging as being a part of a subcultural identity. This is because DD feels that those people portraying

their subcultural identity are authentic and true to their values, which improves their perception and increases overall trust.

In conclusion, this theme shows us how the participants of this study feel like their dress acts as a connecting thread to their culture, ancestry and subcultural interests. Participants mentioned their personal choice of dress is influenced by their family as well as their culture but that this was a conscious decision to carry forward their heritage as it gives them positive feelings of comfort and happiness. How dress influences the participant's emotions and relationships will be further discussed in the next theme.

Theme 2: Dress as an emotional and social experience

Another theme that stood out from the data was how the dress youth wore influenced their mood. The participants expressed that they experienced more positive emotions overall when they could wear the dress that they felt comfortable in. They also reported how dress is a social experience for them as it tends to be an activity that bonds them with other people and fosters social connection. This theme reveals that each person's experience with dress is highly personalized.

Dress as a personal emotional experience

During the first focus group, the youth did an activity where they were asked to share what dress means to them, and BB mentioned:

I have a quote written saying "Look good feel good" and maybe its superficial but honestly sometimes life is so hard and it's nice to get up in the morning and like do my makeup and wear a cute outfit and even if my day is kind of bad, I still look nice so I feel better than what I would have otherwise.

This statement shows that the youth savors the experience of dressing up and expresses how it makes her feel better regardless of the other events that happen in her day and this show the importance of considering the act of dressing up as an act of self-care and dress as a tool to improve short-term mood. Additionally, BB spoke about how the process of choosing what to wear each day by exercising her agency and dressing up in a creative manner increased her confidence.

GG conveyed how they feel about their gender identity is not static and the dress that they choose to wear changes based on the way they feel about their gender on that day and if they feel the need to present themselves in a certain way based on the space that they are in both physically and emotionally. GG stated:

There are times where I am 100% dressed super, super femme, and I have, you know, the whole nine yards full shebang. And there are times where I'm showing up in my

boxers on my lazy day, like not even bothering and trying, but I'm feeling good because I don't feel the need to present myself. I tried to hit my gender [that I am feeling on that day] and I hit it, easy peasy.

This comment shows how queer youth in this study do not want to feel pressured to look or present in a certain way all the time and like to have the flexibility of being able to stand out or fly under the radar when they would like to. This also shows how when participants have days that they don't feel like they need to "present" in a certain way, this can lead to positive feelings of increased self-assuredness in their gender identity, and this leads to an improved sense of self-perception.



Image 5: This image was submitted by the participant to express how wearing cozy and comfortable sweaters is a staple dress of choice.

Meanwhile, CC mentioned how they like prints or elements of their dress that look "silly" but are "comfy" at the same time make them feel safe emotionally. They shared: "I have so few words (about dress) but a lot of what I was thinking of is just because you're talking about, like, safety and comfort. I'm like, Yeah, I wrote down comfort cause I want to look like a silly little old man. You know, frog and toad and a silly little guy." They also went on to mention how they don't feel the need to wear clothing of a specific gender and feel comfortable wearing clothing that is marketed for men and women and mixing both of those elements in

their outfits. They mention that their style has “no gender, just vibes”. This statement is a strong one that shows how queer youth who are participants in this study have subverted the gendered expectations in society when choosing what to wear. They prioritize how they feel in their dress and the comfort it makes them feel in their body and this is an act of rebellion as it challenges an existing power structure of heteronormativity.

When the session progressed, EE reflected on their experience with dress and how they use it to feel more present in their body and to be able to “peacock” or show off their body as they did not feel comfortable in their body previously to do that. They shared:

I put down peacocking. Don't ask me what I mean by that. I do think that means that sometimes I want to be the hottest bitch at the bar. So sometimes I dress to be the hottest bitch at the bar. Enjoyment of physicality and presence in body as like a trans person, it's been a long time to find an enjoyment of being present in my body, and I find being able to dress how I want is just like a really good way to find joy, where I haven't been able to find joy for a while and backing off of that I have.”

This shows how dress can be empowering and how it provides some queer youth with the opportunity to take up space and be fully present. This statement also shows how this participant used their dress as a mediating tool to feel more connected to their physical body, especially when they have felt like it was uncomfortable to them previously. Individuals can use dress internally to feel more connected to the physical body as well used externally to interact with the environment around them. DD expressed how being able to dress how they like makes them feel more positive about life. They shared: “All of my dress all the time forever is significant to me, cause it makes me feel a lot more confident. I find that my default state nowadays is extremely confident, and I love that so much and saying that makes me realize like wait a minute this is the life I'm living right now actually, this is great.”



Image 6: This photograph was submitted as a demonstration of expressing agency with dress as historically the participant felt pressured to dress in a gendered way.

Comfort is a recurring factor when it comes to dress with queer youth in this study. In the second focus group, the youth were paired up and asked to talk to each other about their photographs and what the dress in those photographs signify. FF, explained what she discussed with her pair:

I think a lot of what you said had a lot to do with how you just want to like how you said like find peace and like and comfort in your own clothing and so you don't really care what like you're supposed to just look like what a queer person is supposed to be dressing like you'll just like you know do what makes you comfortable and what you feel the most true authentic self in and it to me does look like you explore a lot with your accessories and your clothes.

This statement reflects how queer youth are personalizing dress to suit their needs and increase their overall comfortability as well as not conforming to the pressure of needing to look a certain way to identify as queer.



Image 7: This photograph was submitted in relation to dress in the workplace and how dress can represent gender identity and personal style while being functional.

Dress as a social experience

The conversation among the youth revealed that they tend to experience dress along with their social relationships. Participants discussed how they enjoy shopping together with their friends for clothes as well as thrifting together to find unique pieces for each other. The youth also mentioned how the process of dressing up together with friends before an event strengthens their social bonds as well as leads to an improvement in their mood. In this regard, EE shared: “I also feel like dress to me, is a collective experience. I frequently go out with friends, and that's when we dress up, or I go thrifting with my friends. Like it is very much, we go somewhere, we decide we're going to dress up, we dress up together.” This statement shows how queer youth appreciate the experience of dress and the act of doing it together with their friends to increase the overall sense of community. EE further mentions how they feel very

validated when their friends approve of their outfit and enjoy the process of teaching each other how to do their makeup and doing it for each other. This shows that they also value the process of giving feedback to each other and feel safe to experiment with their dress in an accepting space amongst friends.

CC spoke about how they usually own dress/items that have been given to them or that they have thrifted as this makes them feel more connected to their community.

All of these are either thrifted or they've been gifted to me so I'm like which is why I like wearing them so like I just I want cool things that other people gave me because that makes them cooler and me cool by extension. DD and I went to that thrift store, and I feel like everyone should know that I'm also wearing these.

This statement also shows how the youth like to both shop at the thrift store with their friends and then talk about the pieces/dress that they found with their friends. It also shows that when they wear dress that is gifted or thrifted, they feel more positive emotions as well.

Overall, the data reflects how dress can act as an aid for queer youth to increase their feelings of comfort and confidence with their body and environment. They use dress to feel more seen as well as more secure in their identity, and this increases the overall positive feelings they experience. Additionally, they also experience positive emotions from dressing up as a collective as it becomes a social experience that aids with community building as well, which is linked to the next theme of this study.

Theme 3: Queer signaling and building queer community

Aside from the social experience that queer youth showed having with relation to dress, it was also observed through the data that participants participated in queer signaling and using those cues through dress to build new social connections.

Queer signaling

Dress was described as a tool to “signal” queer identity to other queer individuals and to expand their community. GG mentioned how they code or “clock” others based on their dress: “One of the first things I look for on a person. What cool things are they wearing? What cool pins they have on? I will clock you based on your pride pins before I clock you on, like, what color your eyes are, what color your hair is.” A few participants mentioned using accessories to covertly communicate their identity without words and this could also easily be removed if necessary. Both BB and GG spoke about the significance of pins and how using them made them feel like they had a personalized accessory that represented their identity and could modify it at any point. BB stated that: “I have like a denim purse, and, like, that's where, like, all of my pins go. So, it's just, like, completely, like, covered and, yeah, yeah, I'm still

adding more.” To which GG responded with: “I have a pin purse with an actual open slot for it, for the display.” This way the participants found commonalities with each other, and this helped them to develop a social connection.



Image 8: This photograph focuses on personalized pins that the participant keeps adding and how this accessory becomes an integral part of her dress as it showcases her identity.

Several of the participants described pins as an accessory which they used to demonstrate their identity. During the second focus group, DD explained how their dress and presentation signaled their gender and sexuality. They stated:

I don't really feel like pins are a very important part of my gender editing, but sexuality wise, kind of yeah because sometimes I will wear like lesbian pins or like I've like disability pride in there I have transit in there. Yeah, mostly my accessories like or specifically my pins are just flagging and I'm also carabiner coding. I should've mentioned that that's what that's me doing showing my sexual identity. This is like, a lesbian dog whistle like a better word if you see somebody with a carabiner on their

like front loop of their belt and they look like quasi feminine. They're probably carabiner coding.

With this statement, we can observe a phenomenon within the queer community known as “carabiner code” which is an accessory used to signal sexual orientation and is used by a participant to send non-verbal signals.



Image 9: This photograph showcases the participant’s carabiner that is hooked onto their belt loop. It is used to hold their keys but also as an accessory to subtly queer code to other lesbians in the community.

It is also necessary to note that some queer youth do not feel like their dress or style signals their sexual identity. The participants indicated that when they were not being able to “signal” using dress cues, this caused feelings of anxiety. HH, shared:

I don't have any dress that really reflects my gender or my sexual identity. I think it's pretty clear that I'm a very feminine person when I like dress, I do like wearing yellow pants suits and stuff but they're always in bright fun colors cause you know what I enjoy and I like rainbow colors, but I don't know if it necessarily makes me look queer. I feel

like I'm very straight presenting...I'm like proud to be a part of the LGBTQ community even if my look in the LGBTQ community looks different cause I feel like in the last like six months I finally have found comfortability, and being able to say you know I'm queer because when you are this woman who is straight passing you get a lot of bilerasure and that comes from the queer community as well. I felt like I didn't belong but now I've started to feel comfortable in these spaces.

Having this experience shared in the study adds a layer of understanding of queer youth who have felt like they did not “belong” or fit in with the rest of the queer community due to their dress and self-presentation. Thus, this shows the possible negative effect of using dress to solidify queer identity.

Dress and Queer Community Building

Participants mention how they have used dress to identify other queer people and they feel more comfortable starting conversations based on their common interests. GG described an experience where they become friendly with someone they just met based on their dress: “I had someone in my store yesterday, and they were wearing punk patch jacket and it was like, you and me? We're friends.” These statements show how the participants also use dress as a non-verbal code to make an immediate first impression on other people. Small accessories can be a code that is implicit amongst the queer community based on the youth’s input and they feel that it mostly goes unnoticed by the general population. This allows queer youth to be able to find each other and building a safe and queer community together. Moreover, GG also mentioned how they are identified by others who are part of the queer community and approached by them:

I feel like people just kinda flock to me. I'm very easily clocked by others as like I know you. Something is happening out there I don't know if it's gay... I would make a lot of the friends that I've had for years and years that's how I met them. They kinda went like hey buddy, is that an adventure time backpack? and I'm like yeah it is...and so far no one has really reacted in a bad way in my 23 years of life like that in terms of like actual friendship seeking or positive kind of interaction seeking people.

This statement is very powerful because it speaks to the importance of dress for the queer community in terms of finding others with similar identities and thus creating an overall safe space with them as well.

Participants also mentioned how dress influences perception. They feel that dress helps them learn about someone’s interests. Through sharing common interests, they are more likely to establish social interaction and connection. EE shared:

Perception as well is a big part of dress how I am perceived. How do I want to be perceived? And how do I perceive others? I tie that into subculture, because, like other people have mentioned, I go to a lot of like emo events or goth events, and I'm probably more likely to talk to someone if I clock them as having similar subcultural interests as me.

Alternate subcultures can be another shared or common interest that creates community as there are designated spaces for the same. BB spoke about these spaces: "The experiences of like going to different like goth nights or emo nights is great. It's something that makes you think, it's dress, but it's also subculture, and you connect with other people." While GG shared "I also end up going to, like emo night, seeing Gothic things. And there, I feel really safe. The alt community will always make people feel safe, I find." These experiences demonstrate the positive effect of using dress as a means of creating safe spaces for queer youth to express their identity freely. Additionally, GG also goes on to mention the importance of drag and how it shaped their experience as a queer person who enjoys both attending drag shows as well as performing. GG mentions that drag allows for an opportunity to "try on another gender identity" and draws parallels with cosplay in the same way. They stated how both cosplayers and drag performers create a space where queer people can make connections and revisit when they would like, and it functions as a "third-space for queer youth". Third space is defined as an accessible social environment that is distinct from home which is the first space and work which is seen as the second space (Littman, 2021). GG also expresses how cosplay allows for experimentation and safety. They state:

I got to the (comic) con in my costume and it's such a safe space when you go to one of those events where you know that no one's gonna judge you, you know that you could show up as a kids cartoon character or you could show up as like a total like slutty kind of character that everyone's like oh yeah, like she's literally wearing just a bikini. You could be anything in anyone you want and if someone judges you in those faces honestly they're the ones getting bitched out they are not gonna be the ones walking away feeling safe you are and that's a really, really big part of the cosplay community.

This statement clearly shows the importance of a third space and feeling safe and accepted by others in the community as it provided GG with the opportunity to experiment and to be creative with how they wanted to present themselves and they mentioned that cosplay increased their positive emotions. They also felt more capable and like they had agency when they made decisions to choosing and putting together dress for the cosplaying each character.



Image 10: This photograph showcases cosplay of Wendy from Gravity Falls, a character that is well-loved by the participant and the fandom community at Halifax comic con.

Participants of this study reported that they were glad to have taken part in the study as it allowed them to form new connections with people who have had similar experiences. They expressed that they would also be open to participate in other studies like this to foster new relationships and that they did not have many options like this to meet others of similar backgrounds other than at the university's pride centre. These inputs show how the queer youth in this study have limited options to meet new people from the queer community and that they are also open to making new connections but do not have access to platforms that could help them with it.

In conclusion, this theme expresses the importance of community building for the participants of this study and how they subtly signal to others in the community. The youth in this study have found a way to identify other queer youth and this allows them to make new social connections.

Theme 4: Barriers to Dress

When conducting these focus groups, the youth also revealed the various barriers that hinder them from dressing the way that they would like and how they would find ways to manage this. These barriers are harder for queer youth to cope with as lack of access to dress could mean that they do not feel aligned with their gender and sexual identity, and this could cause gender dysphoria.

Disabilities and Dress

One of the barriers to dress, related to queer youth, was focused on disability. HH, for example, shared her professional experience where she noticed how those with disabilities did not have much access to different types of dress. She stated: “because I do a lot of volunteering with a lot of youth with physical disabilities, and a lot of the adaptive clothing is, like, hospitably and ugly, and there's not a lot of, like, teenage, fun adaptive clothes. There's, like, nothing in terms of adult adaptive clothes, nothing fun/weird vibes.” The youth described how many youth with disabilities do not have access to a variety of dress because there are no options available when it comes to adaptive clothing. This point was then further expanded by BB in relation to mental illness as. She mentions:

I thought it was important that you mentioned, like, health and socioeconomic status and also people like, you know, with, like, mental illness and stuff. It's like, can be hard to, like, you know, get up and, like, go, like, dress yourself the way you want, a certain way, but it just takes so much like, energy to do that.

The group agreed and expressed how queer youth need more mental health supports and how they know queer youth who were unable to access mental health resources due to systemic barriers where they do not get appointments for mental health support.

GG shared their own experience with disability and the difficulties they have with dress and being able to wear what they like, by stating:

I am someone who has multiple physical disabilities. And there are times where I get to wake up, put on my cute dress and do my cute makeup. And then there are times that I have to account for my [medical devices] I have to account for if I'm going to need further walking supports that day, for anything like that. At work, I go up and down

ladders every five minutes, so I have to account for those things with my dress. And that can be really draining and really, really exhausting.”

DD also shared their experience with having disabilities when talking about their photographs stating: “This is gonna be part of my fashion actually because why not half of these showcase my headphones, which are a sensory aid. I'm autistic so those are my noise canceling headphones.” They further elaborated stating:

A lot of my accessories are also a big part of disability for me like noise canceling headphones. I got a mask on there. But yeah a lot of it has to be functional. I have really bad sensory issues and I will not be able to function if I'm wearing something that is remotely bad sensory so all of these are sensory friendly so to speak.”

All of these statements attest to the aspect of disability being a barrier when it comes to dress as most adaptive clothing only considers function and not self-expression or identity. This creates more difficulties for queer youth who could possibly depend on external aids like dress to affirm their gender identity.



Image 11: This photograph showcases a participant with their sensory-aid headphones as well as their mask in hand which shows how these aids become a part of their dress.

Dress-codes and dress

The participants of this study mentioned how they faced systemic barriers at work regarding their dress. DD expressed how the dress-codes were enforced differently at work for people of color and queer people, stating: “My West Asian auntie gave [me] a handmade skirt from a local store in her neighborhood, and it got me dress-coded at work... and I could not complete my shift that day and was sent home because it had patchwork and looked ethnic.” Dress-coded is a term that refers to the enforcement of school dress codes that disproportionately disciplines Black, female and gender non-conforming people (Schwartz, 2023). This shows how dress codes at work are still not inclusive with cultural or ethnic

clothing, thus further oppressing the marginalized class. DD also mentions being harassed when they were growing up in school by their peers for not fitting the expected mold of “whiteness” in terms of their clothing. They expressed:

it's something that's the cookie cutter like this is what you're supposed to wear generic stuff like to conform to the expectations you know? They say that you are supposed to look like this. There is also so much whiteness and like I guess privilege in being able to guess fit in that mold and have it look like it's supposed to if that makes sense and I have a distinct memory in middle school of people would get on me because I wasn't wearing what everyone else was wearing.

Furthermore, FF mentions how her South Asian identity makes it harder to wear whatever she would like because she feels the pressure to conform. She states:

I think I'm still conscious when I step into any space that is predominantly white because I'm someone of color ...I do get a little conscious of like what I'm wearing because I think people when they see your skin colors it's enough for them to like be horrible so I am afraid of receiving any hate towards me so I'm conforming a lot of ways just because I'm like I don't want to be seen as different cause I don't want to receive that sort of like a negative response from people, but I think me wearing like my little Indian earrings are like this little bag is just a little bit non-conforming. I feel like that's one less thing that I need to like (worry about) people being homophobic.

These statements reflect how participants who are queer youth of color face further difficulty due to the intersectionality that exists in their identity. These participants have hence experienced a state of hyper-vigilance and stress in their daily life and due to which feel like they need to avoid looking overtly queer as they are already being flagged for their race.

The participants also shared how dress codes, focused on hair colour, also affected them. GG recounted their experience of being dress-coded at work for their hair color: “they said that if I wanted to be on my first shift and it was only because it was a day shift, but I would need to go back to blonde or brown or black hair and I was like if you're paying for it then absolutely because this is \$400 worth of my time and my effort”. This statement shows how queer youth in this study have faced discrimination from their workplaces and needed to change their dress to keep their job and this stifles their self-expression and agency. Additionally, discriminatory dress-code practices made these youth feel unsafe in their work environment.

Socio-economic Barriers

The participants discussed how socio-economic factors such as household income, living in an urban area and weather conditions all affect dress and how queer youth are able to access dress. HH expressed her view of growing up in a rural area:

I grew up in [X]. So that's kind of like 40 ... or 30 minutes from here. So that's where I grew up. And it's like in the city, but it's a little more rural. So, growing up there is very common to, you know, where, you know, go to Frenchies and go thrift shopping, and that's kind of what everyone in our community did. But then, kind of, when I got older and started to, like, get to know people that lived in the city, I learned that wasn't really something that they do because they live, you know, closer to the mall or had access to other things.

HH's observation helps contextualize how accessibility could change the way that youth are able to present themselves and manage their self-image. This could cause queer youth to feel like they don't have access to resources that would allow them to experiment and understand their identity. HH expanded on this point by stating:

But I don't necessarily think is a good or a bad thing, because I think I'm grateful. I got a big appreciation for, you know, sustainability and saving money. When I was a kid, we didn't even need to save money. But I just like being frugal now, because I was raised to be frugal, what I also think dresses a lot to do with, you know, also some like, things that I was thinking of was, like the weather and your health and things like that. Because, like, I feel like, if you live in, like [South Asia], where it's warm all the time, you're not gonna wear the same clothes as people here. And it's that's just because of the weather. But also it comes down to a lot too, with money.

Being unable to buy the popular branded clothes that were trending has also had a negative impact on the youth as they felt that they were unable to fit in or belong with the others. For example, DD mentioned:

All the girls would come to school wearing like Lululemon leggings... I had silly pants like pattern pants I would wear and hoodies and stuff. I wanted to be comfortable with people and to get along with me, so I caved I went to Lululemon or something. No, I went to Joe fresh because I couldn't afford Lululemon and got leggings there.

When youth recount experiences from years ago in this manner, it shows the impact that it has had on them during their developmental years to not be able to wear what they wanted to due to social pressures and economic barriers and how it negatively impacted their sense of self when they felt like they did not have the option to choose or exert their agency.

Now, the queer youth in this study have resisted the societal expectation to purchase expensive brands and have expressed that they generally thrift for their clothes. This form of resistance against the norm strengthens the agency of marginalized communities as youth will still be able to choose clothes that they enjoy wearing from a thrift store as they will have access to many options for a more affordable price.

Conclusion of Data

In conclusion, the major findings show that queer youth are affected by dress in many ways and these nuances are important to document and study. The data displays the importance of experimentation and agency for queer youth with dress as well as what the potential barriers are. Additionally, the youth identified the role of subcultures and how it increases feelings of belonging among the youth as well as how queer youth can build safe spaces and queer relationships through signaling.

Chapter 7: Discussion

This research aimed to look at the connections that exist between agency, dress and self-perception in queer youth. The three main objectives of this study were to investigate how queer youth express their identities through dress, to examine the role of agency in these expressions, and to explore the lived experiences and voices of queer youth using art and photographs. From the data collection, some other related and relevant themes also emerged. It is important for this study to highlight these findings due to the theoretical framework that is used. The critical feminist theory requires the centering of the lived experiences of marginalized communities such as queer youth (Butler, 1990) and the participants highlighted having agency over their dress and body made them feel more confident and view themselves in a positive manner. Based on the critical theory, it was necessary to provide a platform for queer youth to express their opinion freely without imposing a heteronormative expectation on them.

The first theme expresses how queer youth repurpose clothing from family or thrift stores and this modification of dress assists with affirming their identity. It is seen that identity thrives in hybrid dress that has mixed elements and repurposing cultural dress disrupts colonial gender norms (Anzaldúa, 1987). Cultural reclamation is a form of resistance and the way that participants of this study have observed this is by embracing hybridity and breaking the colonial binary (eg: traditional/modern or European/Indigenous) by mixing elements from both (ibid). The participants expressed that altering and wearing their cultural clothing allowed them to feel more comfortable with their hybrid identity regarding gender and culture. Additionally, it also aids with reclaiming culture, intergenerational ties and increasing cultural resilience (TallBear, 2018). For example, this was observed through BB's statement when she mentioned that wearing cultural clothing like beaded earrings, moccasins, dancer boots and her medicine pouch made her feel more connected to her culture. Youth having the opportunity to exercise their agency and wear their cultural clothing regularly is important.

Youth are influenced by their cultural identity when selecting their dress, but the concept of hybridity has been underexplored when it comes to queer youth. The concept of hybridity when it comes to dress is crucial to observe as queer youth with different cultural identities tend to blend their cultural attire with their personal or queer-coded styles to cement their dual identities. An example of this is participant FF's expression of wanting to wear "something (South Asian)" each day in terms of jhumkas, bangles, a bindi or a kurta. Additionally, it was also observed how those from a marginalized race have a different experience with dress through FF's statements that she is constantly aware of her racial identity and notices if there are people of color whenever she walks into a room or if it predominantly

white (even if they are queer) as that makes her feel self-conscious and “different”. This can be related to Crenshaw’s (1989) views on intersectionality where it is mentioned how any marginalized group may have additional aspects of their identity that creates further barriers or challenges such as race or disability and not only gender or sexuality that could affect their experiences. This concept is known as intersectionality, and it underscores the need to understand each aspect of youths’ identity that influences and changes the experiences that they face as a member of a marginalized community. Recognizing the importance of intersectionality within marginalized communities is especially important for future academic research (hooks, 2000).

The participants of this study explained how they chose their dress to communicate their multiple identities and that they also identify others who share those identities through dress. Participant DD and HH, for example, both expressed how they were limited by their socio-economic background when choosing what to wear as they were in high school but are more comfortable to express their unique identity through thrifting and wearing cultural clothing that is unique to them. Based on the participants' experiences of what they shared during the focus groups as well as through their photographs, intersections of the identity influence the way that they chose to dress. The youth recognized how dress is a tool to express their cultural, gender, and sexual identity and how each aspect of their identity influences their dress in a different manner. These overlapping identities created a sense of fear in the participants as they felt like they would be implicitly or explicitly judged for wearing cultural clothing as it marks them as being from another group different from the majority. This is why Crenshaw expressed how there is a need for educational institutions to alter dress codes to accommodate queer and racialized youth and disrupt colonial and patriarchal norms. Youth from different cultural backgrounds also mentioned the pressure that they initially felt to conform and to look like they were queer when first coming out as they did not understand how their intersectional identity could look like in a Western space and then realized how they did not need to conform or assimilate. South Asian participant FF explained:

I think this is a conversation that I have with a lot of my friends is that when I first got to Canada was around the time that I was coming out and I felt like there was a need that I had to dress a certain way to be perceived as a gay person and I never knew what exactly that was like. How can I change my appearance to make it look like I was and then it took almost like a year or two and then I realize that I just don't have to do any of that.

From this statement we can understand how those with intersectional identities have a different experience of coming out and navigating their identities through the dress they choose to wear in a different country.

Dress enables queer and trans youth to materialize their otherwise oppressed identities through subcultures such as punk, goth or even drag. Youth mentioned how participating in these subcultures gave them an opportunity to meet like-minded queer youth with similar interests and how these spaces are sites to facilitate community growth and acceptance. Disidentification theory explains how marginalized communities modify dominant cultural forms (Muñoz, 1999) and queer nightlife shows what a future without compulsory heteronormativity could look like (2009). This theory highlights findings from the literature which explains how critical feminist theory rejects the idea that dress can be “neutral” as dress constantly reinforces and enforces heteronormativity and cisnormativity (Butler, 1990). Participants expressed how wearing gender neutral dress was an act of resistance and they felt more connected to their identity when they dressed in a “non-normative” manner and opposed cisnormative expectations. Additionally, these alternate spaces are created as a physical counter space to the normative space that creates a form of community, which acts as another form of resistance (hooks,1990). The literature explains how queer individuals use dress as a method to signal to other queer people and the results of the study further expand on this and indicate that queer youth use dress to signal their identity to other queer youth and then use this as an entry point to initiate conversation and establish queer community. Based on this factor of using dress to establish queer community, it can be observed through the lens of the critical feminist theory the importance of using dress for marginalized communities as a means of fostering community to establish safe spaces that would resist the heteronormative structure.

The participants also mentioned how they felt joy when they wore the dress that they liked as they felt more comfortable in their body as well and this is a source of erotic power and communal joy, since for trans communities, wearing affirming clothing is an act of reclaiming bodily autonomy (Lorde, 1978). Two participants BB and EE shared that they felt safe to dress the way they wanted to in third spaces where others dressed in an alternative manner or “alt way” such as during goth, drag or emo nights. Hence, we can see that creating safe third spaces matter for the youth because they need to see glimpses of a world where they will not be judged for their existence and that they would in fact be celebrated for their differences. Third spaces are distinct and a separate space from one’s work which is considered as the first space and work is the second (Littman, 2021). Third spaces need to be public spaces that can be accessed by youth and the socialization from it can support marginalized communities (ibid). Some of the most important resources that are shared in these spaces are

social capital and a sense of community. Butler's theory (1990) used drag as an example to explain how gender is performative and this concept is liberating for queer youth as it allows them to experiment and be flexible with their gender identity and accept the fluidity of their identity. Drag kings and queens use drag to critique the heteronormative gender binary (Bailey, 2013) and this is why the participants mentioned enjoying both performing and attending drag shows. Moreover, queer youth would have opportunities to engage with older queer adults who have engaged in participating in different sub-cultures and they could establish an intergenerational relationship with them (of having a drag mom or dad) who would teach them about these spaces. The youth revealed feeling comfortable to experiment with their gender identity when participating in drag or being around those spaces as they could be flexible and experiment with their gender and sexual identity. This would be because drag shows expose how gender is performed and that is a social construct (Butler, 1990) which lead to the youth challenging these constructed identities as well.

The results of this study show how youth engage in dressing in different ways according to the environment and space they are in due to dress codes by institutions which enforce a colonial and heteronormative standard. This creates barriers for queer youth in the workplace and they feel dejected by it but this standard that is created is built by the class that is in power to benefit them (hooks, 1992). Existing in a white supremacist patriarchy is distressing for marginalized communities especially when intersectionality is involved, and this is why it is necessary to abolish racialized dress codes to work towards reparations for marginalized groups (hooks,1992). These theories lay the foundation for the recommendations for future studies that need to be investigated in this area of study as well as what aspects need to be incorporated for policy and societal change.

The findings also show that a participatory method like photovoice empowers marginalized communities to express their personal struggles and use this platform to exercise their agency and inform future equitable policies (Adan, 2024).

Chapter 8: Conclusions and Recommendations

When considering critical feminist frameworks, it is necessary to critique the current heteronormative societal structure which enforces gender norms on queer individuals. Heteronormative structures require marginalized youth to stifle their self-expression and conform to the gender binary; this process of conforming has shown to cause negative emotion for youth, and this is why there needs to be steps taken to dismantle these structures. Based on the findings from this study that explore the connections between dress, agency and self-perception among queer youth, four recommendations emerged. Firstly, the participants from the study expressed how third spaces helped them to comfortably express their gender and sexual identity and establish social relationships within a safe and relatable community. Hence, queer youth need additional safe third spaces to feel connected to their gender, sexual, social and cultural identity. The reason for this is due to the heteronormative power structure that exists in society and hence they need spaces that do not expect them to conform to and this is where they can experiment and develop their sense of self. The concept of third spaces – social environments that are outside the home and work, are necessary for queer communities to foster a sense of belonging and safety. An example of establishing queer-friendly third spaces is by using public infrastructure such as libraries or parks to set up queer book clubs to amplify marginalized voices (Borowski & Stathopoulos, 2023). Furthermore, queer youth require representation and safe spaces in their educational institutions such as a university pride centre that could help them to access social support as well as informational resources which is how our participants reported mainly socializing with other queer youth on campus. This recommendation is also in line with the critical feminist theory as it provides a space for critical consciousness of marginalized communities to develop as well as to foster community which acts as a mode of resistance.

The second recommendation is to support queer youth in expressing themselves and valuing their true self. The participants expressed how when one has poor mental health, they will not be able to do things for themselves like dress up or “look good, feel good”. Additionally, they may also struggle to reach out to social support and take part in activities that could improve their mood like thrift shopping with their friends or attending subcultural nights with them. Research has shown that queer youth who have more barriers to accessing mental health services tend to experience higher rates of suicidality and depression (McDermott et al., 2017). This is why the participants of this study mention needing mental health supports as dress is a tool that an individual can use if they already have good mental health and pre-existing social support. This also means it must be an option where they can

receive mental health support in a timely manner rather than needing to wait for longer periods of time such as 12-24 months in Canada (Bhatla et al, 2023).

The third recommendation would be for future studies to delve deeper into exploring how disabilities impact youth's agency over the dress they can choose to wear and its potential negative effects their mental health and self-perception. Due to the gap that exists in the current literature, as well as how the participants of this study with disabilities expressed that having limited clothing options that accommodates their aids disheartens them when they seek to dress up and feel better, future research is important to understand these connections and tensions.

The final recommendation would be to develop inclusive dress-codes at both the workplace and educational institutions for queer youth where they can flexibly experiment with their style and express their gender, sexual and cultural identity in a way that they see fit. This is an important step forward based on the input from the participants of the study, who mentioned that it improved their overall positive emotions as well as their self-confidence when they had autonomy over their dress. Policy makers at professional organizations and educational institutions must consider these positive effects and seek to alter policies that discriminate against marginalized communities. These intersectional considerations, and studying how disability, culture, gender, and dress intersect is necessary to support more queer youth whose voices are not heard. Furthermore, additional research is needed on how other intersections of queer youth affects the way that they dress and socialize with their community.

The findings of this research demonstrate the cardinal role that experimentation and agency with dress serves for queer youth. The participants of this study expressed how they felt more confident in their gender identity and overall experienced more positive emotions when wearing their preferred dress. Additionally, participants also mentioned how choosing the dress they liked led them to pursue new interests as well and find community of other like-minded individuals. Moreover, the participants reported how their cultural identity is strengthened when wearing cultural dress but are worried about wearing it in predominantly white spaces due to fear of judgement and social ostracization.

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Appendix A: CORE Tutorial Certificate



Appendix B: Signed thesis proposal presentation report



Office of Graduate Studies
Thesis Proposal Presentation Report
 (see Policy on reverse)

Student Name: Bharghavi Gopakumar Student ID: 0761980

Degree Program: MA Child and Youth Study

Thesis Title: Queer Youth in Halifax, Canada: Exploring the connections between dress, agency and self-perception

Date of Presentation: December 9, 2024

Outcome of Presentation:

- Proposal approved subject to minor revisions. [If the thesis is approved subject to minor revisions, the thesis supervisor will sign and forward the report once the revisions are completed.]
- Proposal approved subject to revisions. [If the thesis is approved subject to revisions, the thesis supervisor and committee members will sign and forward the report once the revisions are completed.]
- Proposal approved
- Proposal not approved. Student required to resubmit the proposal for presentation. [Supervisor to submit report of reasons for decision and changes required attached to this form.]
- Proposal resubmission not approved – grade of “F” to be assigned and copied to the Registrar.

Ethics Clearance Required.

- Yes [The proposed research may not start until the student receives the Certificate of Ethics Clearance from the University Research Ethics Board. The Certificate will be required to be attached to the thesis defence notification form submitted to the Dean of Graduate Studies.]
- No

Signatures:

<p>Thesis Supervisor: <u>Catherine Baillie Abidi</u> Name</p>	<p><small>Catherine Baillie Abidi Digitally signed by Catherine Baillie Abidi Date: 2024.12.09 11:49:28 -0500</small></p> <p>Signature</p>	<p><u>December 9, 2024</u> Date</p>
<p>Thesis Committee Members: <u>Phillip Joy</u> Name</p>	<p><small>Phillip Joy Digitally signed by Phillip Joy Date: 2024.12.09 11:49:28 -0500</small></p> <p>Signature</p>	<p><u>December 9, 2024</u> Date</p>
<p>Student: <u>Bharghavi Gopakumar</u> Name</p>	<p><small>Bharghavi Gopakumar Digitally signed by Bharghavi Gopakumar Date: 2024.12.09 11:49:28 -0500</small></p> <p>Signature</p>	<p><u>December 9, 2024</u> Date</p>

The completed form will be copied by the Thesis Supervisor to:
 Dean of Graduate Studies - Student – Graduate Program Coordinator (to be placed in the student’s file)
 Grades of “F” will be copied to the Registrar.

Use this form effective 1 September 2018

Appendix C: Recruitment poster

RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS

BHARGHAVI GOPAKUMAR, A GRADUATE STUDENT FROM THE CHILD AND YOUTH STUDY DEPARTMENT AT MSVU IS CONDUCTING A STUDY ABOUT DRESS WITH RELATION TO QUEER YOUTH.

YOU MAY PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY, IF YOU ARE:

- 1) AGED 19– 24 YEARS
- 2) RESIDING IN HALIFAX
- 3) HAVE ACCESS TO A PHONE TO CAPTURE PHOTOGRAPHS
- 4) SELF-IDENTIFY AS BEING PART OF QUEER COMMUNITY.

WHAT WILL WE BE DOING?

THE AIM OF THE STUDY IS TO REFLECT ON THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN DRESS, IDENTITY AND SELF-PERCEPTION. PARTICIPANTS WILL BE ASKED TO ATTEND THREE FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS AT MOUNT SAINT VINCENT UNIVERSITY. THEY WILL REFLECT ON THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH A GROUP OF OTHER QUEER YOUTH AS WELL AS CAPTURE PHOTOGRAPHS RELATING TO DRESS AND AGENCY

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING OR WOULD LIKE MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE EMAIL BHARGHAVI.GOPAKUMAR@MSVU.CA

THESIS SUPERVISOR EMAIL:
CATHERINE.BAILLIEABIDI@MSVU.CA

THE SECURITY OF INFORMATION SENT OVER EMAIL CANNOT BE GUARANTEED. PLEASE DO NOT COMMUNICATE SENSITIVE INFORMATION OVER EMAIL.

REB #



Appendix D: Information letter/first consent form

Title of study

Queer Youth in Halifax, Canada: Exploring the connections between dress, agency and self-perception.

Principal investigator

Bharghavi Gopakumar

Child and Youth Study Graduate student, Mount Saint Vincent University

bharghavi.gopakumar@msvu.ca

Thesis supervisor

Dr. Catherine Baillie Abidi

Associate professor. Child and Youth Study, Mount Saint Vincent University

catherine.baillieabidi@msvu.ca

Invitation to participate in the study

You are being invited to participate in a research study conducted by Bharghavi Gopakumar, a graduate student at Mount Saint Vincent University for her thesis work. Choosing whether or not to participate is entirely your choice. Choosing not to participate in the study will not cause any negative impact on your relationship between yourself and the principal investigator. The information provided in this letter will outline the details of the research, how you can contribute to the study and what are the potential risks and benefits. Please read all the information carefully, take the time you need and feel free to ask questions or clarifications. You should not take part in the study unless you are sure that you have understood all the details in this form.

Purpose of the research study

This study seeks to explore the relationship between dress, agency and self-perception with queer youth. This research aims to gather the experiences of queer youth in Halifax, Canada to

set up a platform where they will be able to voice their views and discuss their unique experiences. The purpose of this study is to understand the connections between agency, self-perception and dress among Queer youth by using the focus groups and image-based data to supplement the findings.

These focus group sessions will be audio-recorded using an MP3 recorder, and transcripts will be created from the audio-recordings. During the first focus group, you will be shown techniques on how to capture relevant photographs for the study. In the second focus group session, you will be discussing the photos that you captured and asked why you chose to capture those objects. Finally, in the third focus group session, you will be asked to analyze the photos and generate themes with other participants.

Who can take part in the research study

To take part in this study, you must be:

1) Within the age group of 19– 24 years; 2) Residing in Halifax, Canada 3) Ability to communicate in English 4) Access to a phone to capture photographs and 5) Self-identify as being part of the queer community.

What you will be asked to do

You will be asked to attend three focus group sessions at Mount Saint Vincent University with each session lasting around 75-90 minutes. You will answer questions alongside other queer youth in these focus groups and you will learn how to capture photographs that are relevant to the research question. Then, you will bring these photographs to the group to discuss them collectively and collaboratively come up with captions for the same.

Possible risks and benefits

Risks: While there are no physical risks from this study, there are psychological and social risks that are associated with this research. This is due to the focus groups method that will invite you to introspect on your personal experience and identity. The introspection could elicit strong emotions during and after the discussion. If at any point you feel severe anxiety or discomfort and feel that you are incapable of continuing the study, you can inform the primary researcher as well as use the helplines provided in this consent form for professional help. Additionally, since the method of data collection is focus group, confidentiality cannot be fully guaranteed. However, it is discussed within the group that the information that is shared by

other participants will not be revealed to non-participants when developing community standards for the focus group.

Benefits: There is no guarantee that you will directly benefit from participating in this research, but your involvement will help to build an understanding on how dress can affect youth's sense of self. Additionally, you will be able to make new connections about how your dress and dressing pattern affects the manner you perceive yourself. It will also provide an opportunity for you to collectively reflect on the socio-cultural factors that affect youth's agency with regard to their dress. As this area has not been researched extensively, your contribution will also add value to the topic.

How your information will be protected

All information provided to the principal investigator will be kept confidential. To protect your confidentiality, you will be asked to choose a pseudonym that will be used when quoting your contributions from the focus groups. Your personal information will be digitally stored separately from the audio-recordings, transcripts and photographs that you have produced. The photographs that you have produced will be scanned, digitally saved and immediately shredded or returned to the participant.

The principal investigator will ensure confidentiality by restricting access to your personal information, signed informed consent and produced data during the focus group sessions. These will only be made available to the thesis supervisor if and when needed. All electronic data will be saved securely at Mount Saint Vincent University's encrypted OneDrive folder. None of your information that discloses your identity will be publicly released or published, unless you wish to have your contributions attributed to your name.

The principal investigator will comply with relevant ethics guidelines that protect your confidentiality and will not be shared with anyone unless required by law. Confidentiality and respect for other participants is important during the focus group. However, due to the nature of focus groups, the principal investigator cannot fully guarantee confidentiality. Please bear this in mind when deciding what information that you feel comfortable in sharing with the group.

If you decided to stop participating

It is your right as a participant to refuse to participate, answer any questions or withdraw at any point from the study by informing the principal investigator without giving a reason. There will

be no penalties or repercussions if you decide to withdraw. However, if you choose to withdraw from the study midway, then the data that was collected in collaborative focus group discussions would still be anonymized and used in the study and the rationale for the same is due to the fact that not all data can be individually attributed or deciphered, for example: collaboratively developed captions.

How to obtain results

Once the final written thesis report is available, a secure link where you can access it will be sent to you. The final report will also be deposited at Mount Saint Vincent University's E-commons, the university's repository where the thesis will be assigned a trustworthy and permanent link. The research will also be discoverable and accessed by a wider community through Google Scholar once it is deposited in the E-commons. The principal investigator will only use your contribution for the sole purpose of this research.

Conclusion

Please sign this agreement form if you agree to take part in the study. Thank you in advance for considering taking part in this research work. The principal investigator is more than happy to answer any questions regarding the research.

Questions

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact the principal investigator, Bharghavi Gopakumar (email: bharghavi.gopakumar@msvu.ca) or the research supervisor Dr. Catherine Baillie Abidi (email: catherine.baillieabidi@msvu.ca)

If you have any ethical concerns or questions regarding your participation, you may also contact Mount Saint Vincent University's Research and Ethics Board at ethics@msvu.ca or 1-902-457-6350.

Contact details for support or information of related professional services:

To speak to a mental health professional in Nova Scotia:

211: A confidential helpline that is available for 24 hours and 7 days a week where you can speak with someone who can help in referring proper services offered in Nova Scotia.

Call toll free: 211

Appendix E: Second Consent Form (Given to participant for their photographs)

Nature of the Study

The data for this study will be collected by using participatory photography methods. This research employs image-based method of photovoice to collect data and to provide participants with a space where they can participate, and they can use their voice to inform change. The participants will take photographs that are related to the research topic and bring it to the focus group to discuss. This consent form is for the photographs that participants will be capturing, and it will be given to the principal investigator to allow the photos to be used for academic purposes and publication.

Questions

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact the principal investigator, Bharghavi Gopakumar (email: bharghavi.gopakumar@msvu.ca) or the research supervisor Dr. Catherine Baillie Abidi (email: catherine.baillieabidi@msvu.ca)

If you have any ethical concerns or questions regarding your participation, you may also contact Mount Saint Vincent University's Research and Ethics Board at ethics@msvu.ca or 1-902-457-6350.

Signature

By signing this form, I have read and understood the method of data collection of this study. I have been given the opportunity to ask and discuss questions and they have been answered satisfactorily by the principal investigator. I understand that by participating in this study, I will be contributing by taking photographs using my phone camera and that these photographs will be used for academic purposes such as publication and possibly for exhibitions in the future. The focus groups will also be audio recorded and transcribed using my chosen pseudonym. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

I have been given a copy of this form to keep Yes No

Participants name: _____

(Please print)

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix F: Third Consent Form (Given to subject/person that the participant photographs)

Title of study

Queer Youth in Halifax, Canada: Exploring the connections between dress, agency and self-perception.

Nature of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the connections between agency, self-perception and dress among queer youth by using the framework of critical feminist theory and to analyze it through a critical lens by using photo-voice methods.

Principal investigator

Bharghavi Gopakumar

Child and Youth Study Graduate student, Mount Saint Vincent University

bharghavi.gopakumar@msvu.ca

Thesis supervisor

Dr. Catherine Baillie Abidi

Associate professor. Child and Youth Study, Mount Saint Vincent University

catherine.baillieabidi@msvu.ca

How your information will be protected

Identifiable features such as your face would be blurred out and not be revealed publicly.

Appendix G: Structure of First focus group session

The first focus group would help participants understand what the photovoice method is. It would be conducted during the Winter term at a study room at MSVU. It would last for the duration of 75-90 minutes. These are the activities that would be conducted:

- Introductory icebreaker activity (15 minutes)
- Establishing ground rules and safe practices that would be maintained throughout the data collection process (15 minutes)
- Aims and objectives of photovoice will be discussed (15 minutes)
- Participants are shown the research question and asked what kind of photos they would take. (10 minutes)
- Basic photography themes and techniques will be explained (25 minutes)
To explain the photography themes and techniques for the research study I will be using the presentation aid (Presentation 2) given by Rutgers International Photovoice Facilitators Guide (2016, pg 119) and ask the participants what they think of the photos. This would allow them to understand how to capture the photographs using symbolism and be able to arrange a scene and tell a story with it as well as how to link the different photos to tell a story.

Appendix H: Structure of Second focus group session

Participants must email the photographs they take to my MSVU email a day before so that I will print physical copies of the photographs for the second focus group.

Welcoming participants and Objectives (25 minutes)

- Review of community standards which based on respect and confidentiality between participants during focus group sessions.
- Review of the information letter/consent forms
- Sharing a short summary of the first focus group
- Sharing the objectives of the second session.

Focus group discussion (~50 minutes)

The participants will be invited to look at each other's pictures and then to describe their own photographs. Following that they would be asked the following questions:

1. Why did you decide to take this picture? What does it represent?
2. Did you arrange it in a particular manner? If so, then why?
3. Why is this dress significant to you? How does wearing it make you feel?
4. Do you have any restrictions placed on your dress by factors such as family or educational institutions? If so, how does that affect you?
5. Does this dress reflect your gender and/ or sexual identity? If so, how?

Ending the focus group (15 minutes)

- Ask participants to self-reflect and journal about their feelings after hearing the other participants answers and to discuss if there are any common themes that emerge
- Summarize the participants' responses by referring to the mind map and notes
- Ask if there is anything that was missed or needs to be clarified.

Appendix I: Structure of Third focus group session

Introduction and Objectives (15 minutes)

- Review of community standards which based on respect and confidentiality between participants during focus group sessions.
- Review of the information letter/consent forms
- Sharing a short summary of the second focus group

Focus group discussion (~40 minutes)

This focus group will aim to have the participants identify the subtle cues and themes that exist in their photographs and to improve their overall awareness of the social situation.

During this focus group, participants will be asked the following questions:

- How can we caption these photos?
- What are common themes that you feel exist between these photographs?
- What do you hope this research teaches others about dress, agency and identity among queer youth in Halifax?

Ending the focus group (20 minutes)

- Summarize the participants' responses by referring to the photographs.

Appendix J: Email that will be sent to those who express interest to participate in the activity but do not meet the inclusion criteria

Respected _____,

Thank you very much for your interest in our research study! Unfortunately, this email is sent to you to inform you that you do not meet the criteria for this study and hence we would be unable to recruit you. We appreciate the time you took out to express your interest and hope to collaborate with you on a future project.

Sincerely,

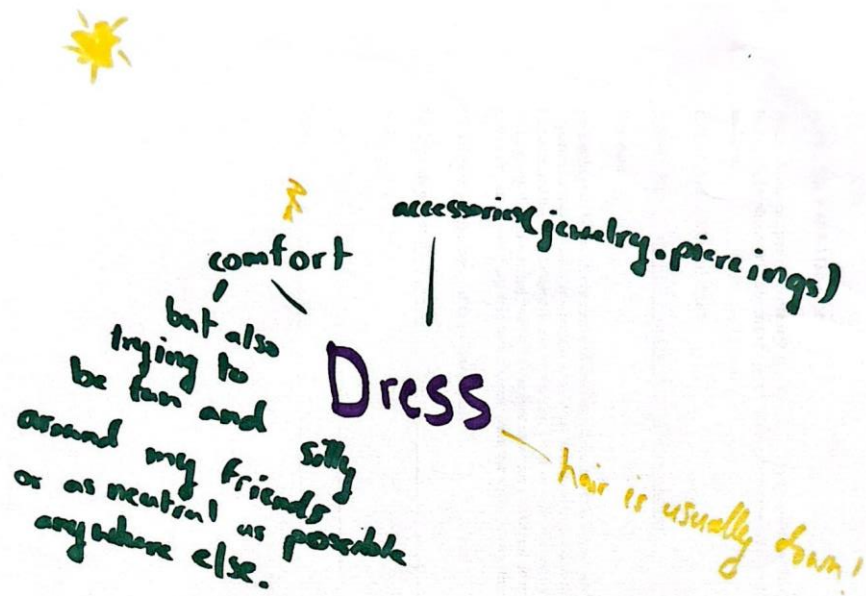
Bharghavi Gopakumar

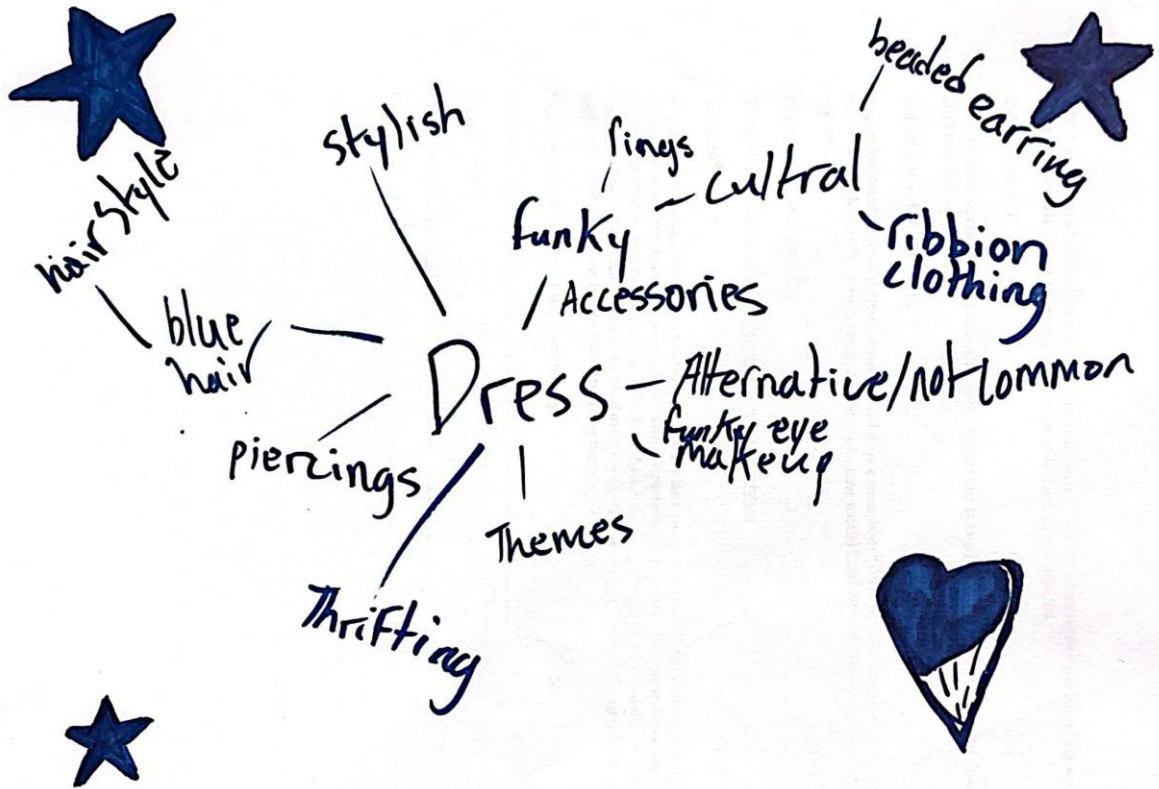
Graduate Student - Masters of Child and Youth Study

Appendix K: Drawings from the "What does dress mean to you?" Activity









- What does dress mean to me?
- Expression of interests
 - Peacocking
 - Enjoyment of physicality, presence in body
 - What brings me joy?
 - Collective experience (dressing up with friends, going to thrifting w/ friends)
 - Perception (how am I perceived, how do I want to be perceived, how do I perceive others?), a subculture
 - ~~Being present in my body~~
 - A project (patches, DIY, crochet/knitting). An active part of my life, NON-Static
 - ~~Love~~
 - An excuse to go to Value Village



- SAFETY • FRIENDSHIP • STYLE •
- IDENTITY • JEWELLERY • UNCOMFORTABLE •
- CUTE • FEMME • DRAINING • BRACES • COMFORT • CULTURE •
- HORROR ART • SHOES N STOMPERS

- PIERCINGS •
- JUDGEMENT
- HAIR DYE •
- COSPLAYS
- MASCULINE
- VIBES • DRAG
- NAILS •