

School Dress Codes: The Socialization of Gender Inequality

Claire Feasby

Introduction

The representation of the body is a visual language that is used as a means for communication. While this communication may be silent, it is one of the loudest voices an individual can possess in any society and certainly provokes societal reaction. Body representation is a reflection of diverse cultures and experiences that speaks to someone's individuality without even having to actually *say* anything. This ability to speak visually and communicate through our bodies comes from the values placed on different types of bodies and the way this visual expression is interpreted. Gender as a social construct divides bodies, simultaneously intersecting with other forms of oppression and inequality. Every person is born into a body that already has predetermined inequalities applied to it, and these are deeply rooted and perpetuated through the socialization that reinforces and reproduces these meanings. There is a complexity in the contradictions girls and women face – such as being hypersexualized yet “slut shamed” – and dress codes in schools exemplify how these contradictions complicate the relationship between identity and expression. Dress codes are constructed by fear and seek to limit discomfort by neutralizing students' identities. Rebecca Raby sees dress codes as the force that produces docile citizens, attempting to limit the motivations of students to challenge authority and pursue individuality (“Polite” 79). The human body is the most utilised tool in the expression of gender through being a site of resistance, identity, and agency, and these aspects operate collectively to create notions of individuality. In adolescence, the ability to exercise

agency when it comes to dress is powerful when shaping gender identity. We use our bodies as a canvas by choosing what to wear, which facilitates a sense of individuality, pride, and expression. The use of the body as a tool for expression of gender is problematized by dress codes in schools and the socialization of inequality.

Identity Regulation

At their core, dress codes in educational settings are aimed at regulating and surveilling students' bodies and dress choices. Typically, if a student is 'dress coded' they are given the option of changing or calling home to get different clothing; in some cases, they are suspended. Although dress codes consist of written rules, these rules are typically vague and their application is subjective, ultimately being strongly influenced by the enforcer's biases. Some common dress code regulations are: clothing is expected to fit properly; unnatural hair color and piercings are strongly discouraged or not allowed; "common sense" and "good judgement" is to prevail at all times; students must not reveal midriffs or any part of undergarments; and shorts, skirts, and dresses will need to pass the "shorts-length spot check" (Student Dress Code 325; Harbach 1039). With regulations implementing phrases such as "good judgement", "common sense", and "fit properly", the ruling of dress codes ultimately relies heavily on the school's faculty to subjectively and arbitrarily decide if their pupils are abiding by the dress code. This undoubtedly allows for biases to shape dress code regulations, thereby being strongly influenced by the genders and sexual orientations of those who make-up the school faculty. These two factors influence whether a staff member claims discomfort, attraction, or distraction based on what students wear. Moreover, requiring girls' skirts, shorts, or dresses to be longer than their fingertips when their arms are at

their sides (commonly known as ‘spot checks’) relies on an arbitrary marker of suitability that does not consider varying arm lengths. Cleavage is an example of the objectification of certain bodies over others – girls with larger breasts will be ‘dress coded’ and sexualized more than girls with smaller breasts. ‘Spot checks’ and stigmatized rules about cleavage illustrate how one student could get away with wearing something while meeting the dress code standards whereas a student with a different body, wearing the same article of clothing, would be ‘dress coded.’

The application of dress codes has been steadily increasing, showing the impact of social fears associated with certain bodies. In 1999, 47.4% of American schools enforced a strict dress code and in 2013, 58.5% of schools enforced a strict dress code (United States. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics). The significant increase in dress codes demonstrates the determination to regulate bodies, especially those of adolescents who are hypersexualized on social media, the news, and various artistic platforms. The title of the study released by the US Department of Education: “Percentage of public schools with various safety and security measures”, aligns the regulation of students’ dress with locker checks, the use of metal detectors, police dog sniffs, drug testing, and security cameras. Equating dress codes with school security measures explains the rise in strict dress codes and demonstrates the hypersexualization of girls as well as fear of female agency.

The socialization of inequality is reinforced through dress codes by controlling the expression of identity, by blaming girls for distracting boys and male teachers, and by exploiting students who are particularly malleable to authoritative influence. There is an emphasis placed on adolescents to respect authority and to not question the “rights” of authority (“Polite” 78). This exemplifies the power given to school staff

through the application of dress codes, consequently socializing inequality under the aegis of the education system. Blaming girls for the distraction of boys and male teachers prioritizes the education and comfort of boys and men by exerting control over girls and women and what they do with their bodies. This reflects how school dress codes reinforce the perception that “‘woman’ [is] associated with the body while ‘man’ is linked with the mind” (Mascia-Lees 210). Girls’ and women’s bodies are targeted, controlled, and blamed in order to ‘protect’ male staff and students. Not only is this practice sexist, but it exemplifies heteronormative standards by assuming that all men and boys are attracted to and distracted by the opposite sex, therefore perpetuating inequality and the gender binary in numerous ways. Rebecca Raby notes that “dress codes participate in a broader, ongoing cultural concern with forms of female dress (and sexuality), defining what is acceptable. They consequently normalize certain forms of girlhood, problematize others, and suggest girls’ responsibility for the school’s moral climate” (Raby, “Girls’ Engagements” 334). Raby’s statement critiques the nature of dress codes for the blame and responsibility that is placed onto girls. Additionally, the association of girls’ and women’s natural bodies with these negative perceptions creates stigmas about certain parts of the body and attire worn. This shuns girls’ and women’s bodies rather than seeing sexualization as a cultural phenomenon (Harbach 1058). The ideas presented by Raby and Meredith Harbach show how these perceptions are linked to the rise in victim blaming and “slut shaming,” which demonstrate the internalization of these values – such as those of dress codes – that dictate that girls and women who show more skin or wear certain clothing are sexually available, deviant, or troubled. These negative associations frame dressing in certain ways as a maladaptive coping mechanism, further ‘othering’ girls and women, as well as anyone who disobeys

dress codes or rejects gender norms (for example, if someone were to dress in a way that contradicts the gender they were assigned at birth - or that to which the faculty resigns them).

It is important to note that all minorities and oppressed groups are more at risk of being 'dress coded' and scrutinized based on what they wear. Additionally, the intersectionality of gender with identifiable characteristics such as race, sexuality, and body shape, greatly increases the likelihood of body regulation whether it be in schools or in the public realm. These characteristics are often discriminated against in society, 'othering' individuals based on the intersection of gender and other visual inequalities. For example, a girl who is Black is more likely to be 'dress coded' than her White female peers because she is a hypervisible figure due to the intersection that she embodies of girlhood and race (Raby, "Polite" 72). Individuals who have intersecting marginalized characteristics are subject to even more identity regulation and body politics.

Gender Roles, Binary Thinking, and Gender Bending

Body politics is the feminist anthropological concept that refers to the regulation of bodies through structural power, usually targeting minorities. The body politics surrounding dress codes disempowers minorities by not allowing the expression and experimentation with identity. Dress codes target visible bodies revealing biases based on physical appearances and social positioning. Typically, the visible body is used in contrast with the invisible body, which describes marginalized bodies as invisible and privileged bodies as visible. However, in this case, visible bodies are those who stand out as Other and who are subject to being scrutinized based on their difference(s) from a

prescribed norm. This is including, but not limited to, individuals who are women/girls, LGBTQIA+, disabled, or a racial or ethnic minority.

The dress code debate becomes paradoxical because of all the ways in which adolescent girls are hypersexualized in society, while they are simultaneously told to ‘cover up’ and dress and act ‘decently.’ Moreover, dress codes attempt to create an asexual space with an emphasis on respect, however in doing so, they have sexualized girls’ bodies and disrespected identity and agency (Raby, “Polite” 79). In the Western world, girls and women are being sold a certain idealized image where clothing is “both an artifact of the sexualization of girls in our culture and also part of the larger process of identity formation over which girls exercise some control” (Harbach 1042). Through schools enforcing regulations that strengthen the gender binary, they act as one of the main sources of the socialization of gender roles, thus producing citizens who blindly manifest inequality.

Gender bending is one of the ways in which people reject these binary norms. It is the conscious act of transcending gender through things like dress, relationships, actions, and discourse. Gender bending is anything that disrupts gender roles. Historically, it has been coined as the term to describe boys or men who are transgender or noticeably effeminate however, anyone who rejects gender roles and norms – even in subtle and potentially unnoticeable ways – is actively gender bending. What an individual chooses to wear is a mindful decision that expresses identity to the people around them. Sometimes this is an effort to purposefully prompt discomfort in others. Discomfort is one of the most constructive feelings because, in the social sphere, everything is uncomfortable until it becomes normalized through widespread acceptance. This has been seen in the human rights movements, the legalization of gay

marriage, and women's liberation (although the groups involved in these movements are still largely oppressed). Challenging binaries and gender roles, and actively gender bending are some of the ways in which an individual or community can affect social change.

It is as children that we are socialized and taught gender-appropriate behavior and we internalize norms (Connell and Pearse 97). This is understood that “the socialization model pictures the learner as passive, [and] the agencies of socialization as active” (Connell and Pearse 97). That being said, Connell and Pearse note that younger children are constantly gender bending and act as agentic bodies through their socialization. It is in the teenage years, following puberty, when notions of hegemonic masculinities and femininities become adopted. These claims are shown through the different dress codes applied to elementary schools versus junior high/high schools. For example, the “Current Elementary Student Handbook Dress Code Language” states that “the goal is to maintain the best learning situation possible and the rights of the students to dress and groom themselves as they please will be recognized, as long as doing so does not interfere in maintaining such a learning situation” (Student Dress Code 325). This can be contrasted with the strict, harsh, and objectifying language of dress codes in upper year grades that aim to restrict identity expression and create an asexual environment (these have been discussed earlier in this paper). The dress codes of junior highs and high schools teach gender-appropriate behavior that molds malleable citizens. Furthermore, students can internalize values and reproduce them in ways such as victim blaming, objectification, and sexual harassment. Dress codes play a major role in the socialization and justification of such actions, behaviors, and words.

Conclusion

The body is a notebook where cultural meanings of character and value are inscribed, allowing the world to read bodies based on preconceived biases. However, individuals exercise agency through how they choose to dress within a system that attempts to neutralize expression and place bodies within a social hierarchy. Throughout history, the body has been the most utilised tool for resistance, identity, and agency. School dress codes are one of the oppressive body regulations, driven by the gender binary and sexism, that hinder the formation, experimentation, and expression of gender identity and identity as a whole. The enforcement of dress codes is a discriminatory practice because it is implemented by authority's subjective biases, becoming an issue of "frequency, inconsistency, and inequality" (Raby, "Girls' Engagement" 340). The meanings associated with dress and appearance stem from education and enculturation. To feel as though there is some control and agency in terms of expression of identity instills happiness and confidence in people, especially youth. It is an exhausting and never-ending task to protect and maintain identity while being discriminated against. By eliminating dress code policies in schools, we would be abolishing one of the most overt ways girls' bodies are policed at a young age, and adolescents would not be socialized through the education system to objectify and discriminate against girls and women based on what they wear. Certainly, a more widespread effort and engagement is needed to promote equality and freedom of expression, and abolishing dress codes would be a consequential breakthrough.

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