

Everyday performance: sameness and difference

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Abstract

Sub-cultural groups are defined by their shared dress code, which indicate an individual's sameness to their group, and difference from the mainstream. This paper looks at how individuals adapt to their social groups through the clothing they wear, and how these embodied identities are constructed through performative displays. A particular emphasis falls upon the margins of the body, and the ways in which the boundary between the 'body' and 'non-body' can be manipulated, as a means for individuals to both mark their shared style and also their individuality. This paper is based upon images and interviews collected as part of a mass observation into everyday fashion. Contrasting examples will be considered which range from 'wagabees' through to the nu rave scene, to consider the relationship between the items of clothing, accessories and the body. The relationship between non-body and body will be highlighted through looking at the agency of items of clothing, and the styling of hair, as one of the most ambiguous markers between the body and clothing. The examples are brought together to consider the everyday performance of identity through fashion, which is always a gendered performance of the body. On occasion this is explicit, for example in the ways in which many people that were photographed, often deliberately 'pose' and 'strut' for the camera. This performance is also implicit, being part of how people stand, walk and wear their clothing as part of the everyday performance of identity.

Introduction

In the wake of Judith Butler's seminal accounts (1990 1993), the notion of gender as an everyday performance, which occurs in relationship to social norms, has been extended to discuss how even embodied identities are not simply 'natural', but are socially constructed and enacted through everyday practices. As each individual is socialised into gender norms and reiterates these through practice, these acts of repetition serve to naturalise gender difference. In Butler's account, this implicit, seemingly natural performance is also on occasion made explicit, for instance in the case of transvestism, where the everyday gender practices are parodied. A key part of how both the everyday and the transgressive are performed is through the clothing worn, which are in turn embodied practices, such as stance, and deportment. The focus of this paper is the role that clothing plays in the

performance of embodied identities, considering both the naturalised and everyday, and also the explicit and deliberate. The examples considered are various style groupings, ranging from 'Wagabees', the Nu rave Scene and men wearing tracksuits, as this paper seeks to problematise the boundary between the body and the non body.

The material the paper is based upon is a Mass Fashion Observation in Nottingham, as part of a research project, which has been ongoing since 2001, and aims to document the everyday assemblages of clothing in Nottingham. It aims to highlight both the mainstream styles that are being worn, and how these cohere together into shared style groupings. In this article, three such style groupings will be looked at, in order to see how individuals use clothing to enact their identity as it is shared by the particular sub-cultural grouping. Taking the contrasting examples of the everyday wearing of sportswear, 'wagabees' through to the nu rave scene, the emphasis will be upon how the shared identities are performed through clothing and accessories. The paper aims to interrogate the relationship between the items of clothing and the body, to discuss the relative agency that objects such as a handbag, or a tracksuit, have in creating or enabling particular embodied identities.

Wearing tracksuits: just 'natural' masculinity?

This article is based upon a Mass Fashion Observation that has been ongoing since 2004; the aim of the research is to understand fashion as it is assembled by ordinary people on an everyday basis. It aims to offer an ongoing documentation of the trends that are worn by the majority of people in Nottingham, and the styles that depart from this, as potential domains for future innovation. The majority of people photographed, as a result of this aim are those within the age bracket 18 – 25. The other major aim of the research project is pedagogic, as the observation is carried out by trained student researchers. This both allows students to develop their research capacities, yet also draws upon the insider knowledges of the students, as the students are situated in many of the style groupings that they are documenting. The first observations carried out as a pilot, were followed by a symposium which discussed the possibilities of the mass observation method, and also the limitations. One of the core issues discussed was that of representativeness; when all of the images taken were collected together, it soon became apparent that the student body, when instructed to document the quirky, unusual or fashionable (as this was the aim of the first observation), they ended up photographing people who looked very like themselves, or an aspired to version of the person they wish they could be. Rather than seeing this as a limitation to the research of as a 'bias' that needed eliminating, instead it becomes a means through which the cultural situatedness of the researchers was such that it allowed a documentation of particular style groupings from the 'inside-out'. The position of the student

researcher was also one that often elicited particular confidences or allowed the relaxation of the person being photographed. Simultaneously, however, this meant that the styles documented are not representative of all of the style groupings within Nottingham at any one moment.

The observations consist of both the photographing of individuals, and also of the carrying out of brief interviews with participants. The interviews consisted of questions about the individuals appearance (open-ended questions such as: tell me about your outfit), and questions which aimed to understand how this related to the rest of the person's clothing (is this typical of what you wear? Describe an outfit you would usually wear to...), and in their social lives more widely (such as where do you go out? Do your friends dress like you?). The questions were not predetermined, but rather, in the tradition of semi-structured interviewing, the students were encouraged to follow questions on from what the interviewee themselves states. In some research projects the questions were more specific to the research project, such as Murphy (2006). This project started off with the primary interest being about social class, and as such the initial stages involved questions that centred upon this; however the project developed in different directions as the interviewee responded to participants (this example is discussed later).

In total over 700 individuals have participated in the observation; as such, a wide range of data has been accrued since 2004, and this data has started to throw light on the mass observation's initial aims to chart how people assemble their outfits in order to accurately understand what fashion is from the perspective of the everyday, rather than as it is represented in fashion magazines, and through designer's collections. 'Street style' is a phrase in common parlance, and one that has acquired a prominence in the popular imagination through an exhibition at the V and A museum (see Polhemus, 1994), and the sections in weekly magazines where 'ordinary' people are picked off the street and photographed for their, usually quirky, take on fashion. Therefore, in the case of our investigation, 'street style' is not reduced to the sections in magazines, but instead involves a systematic interrogation of what people are wearing, as this occurs in dialogue with magazines, and popular cultural icons. As these observations are carried out every year, then it is possible to see how these styles change over time. Within the overall research project, various smaller projects are taking place (3 of which are selected in this article), which aim to interrogate specific style groupings, or fashions. As such, the data accrued includes both the mainstream fashions, and also what would be defined as sub-cultural style (Muggleton, 2000), or 'taste constellations' (Crewe and Beaverstock, 1998). Within the mainstream styles, various sub-categories emerged, which later developed into specific

research projects. One such trend was the wearing of sportswear by young men, later investigated by Murphy (2006), and Woodward, (2008). This forms the first example to be considered here; as an example, it offers an interesting insight into the relationship between the wearing of everyday items of clothing that are part of the mainstream, and as these become differentiated into often subtly defined style groupings. It can be considered part of the ordinary and everyday given how many people photographed were wearing some item of sportswear. The ensuing discussion is based upon my own interpretation and analysis of the images in order to understand how their appearance is perceived; it is also in turn informed by the interviews with participants.

As the majority of people that were photographed in sportswear were men, this reinforces the implicit masculinity of sportswear, as “male sports clothing is normative of modern masculinity” (Craik, 2005: 144). The wearing of sportswear is therefore part of the everyday performance of one form of normative masculinity. An overview of the images collected of sportswear, shows a sameness in the stance of those who were photographed, as they stood with their hands in their pockets, the whole body loosened in a relaxed pose.



Figure 1. Young man in tracksuit, image taken by Claire Murphy, 2006, Nottingham Trent University.

This stance is one which is both created by the informality and lack of structure of the sportswear clothing (mostly baggy and loose), yet also as it is the culturally expected stance (Entwistle, 2000), the men wearing the clothing demonstrate their basic competences in wearing the clothing. The softness of the clothing, the baggy trousers, with low slung

pockets, and the (often undone) trainers is mirrored in the softening of the body posture beneath, as the shoulders relax through the lack of any structure in the tops. The clothing therefore has agency in helping to constitute the bodily posture beneath it. As a result, what is apparent from these images is that the stance is one that looks 'natural', this very naturalness is both socially (through cultural expectations) and materially (through the styles, and fabrics of the clothing) constructed. Indeed, in any shared social identity, the wearing of clothing in a manner that makes you look as if you belong is vital for acceptance. Conforming to the social codes of any style grouping involves looking as 'natural' as possible.

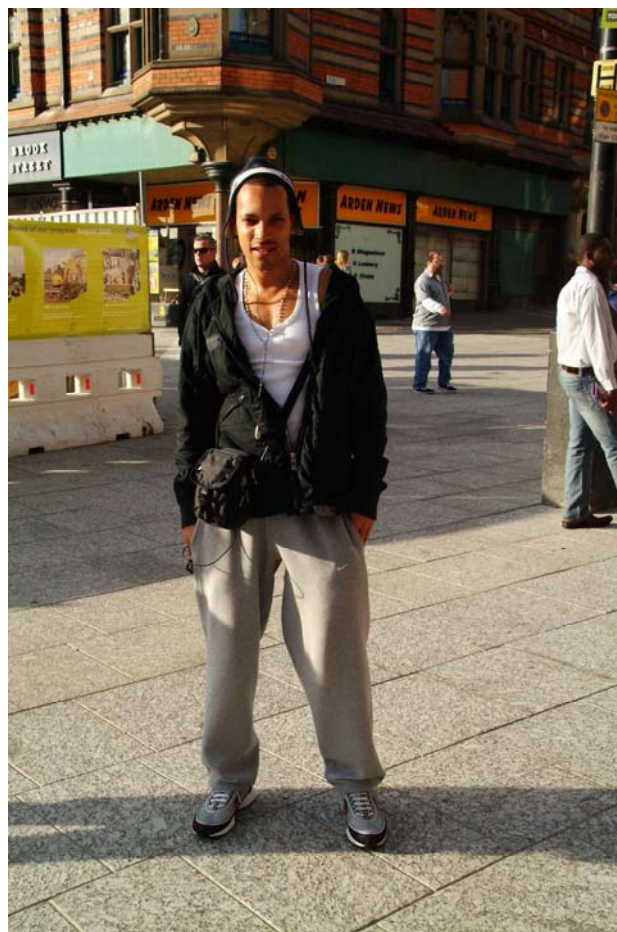


Figure 2. Young man in Nottingham, striking a pose. Image taken by Claire Murphy, 2006, Nottingham Trent University.

As the young man in figure 2 shows, these same young men on other instances can be seen to perform their masculinity in a more explicit way, in the way that they pose for the camera, as all of the men photographed stood with their hands in their pockets, and legs slightly apart, with a softening of the knee. In front of the camera this becomes more exaggerated, as often the interviewees slouched even more, and dropped their shoulders in an exaggerated fashion, as if to make instantly apparent that they were able to adopt the

appropriate posture. The exaggeration of the natural is most emphatically noted in the tendency to wear jeans, or trousers so baggy that they will not stay up without the young man holding them up with his hands in his pockets. Here the 'natural' becomes so exaggerated, that it becomes awkward. The act of walking, and keeping the trousers from falling to the floor (yet just low enough to reveal underwear) is a challenge that indicates the young man's adequacy as a male.

This performance is seen in both the static stance before the cameras, and also in the ways in which the young men moved their bodies. There was one occasion when one group of young people were interviewed consisting of both boys and girls. Prior to taking the photograph, one of the young men strutted around the female photographer, treating her with suspicion, as he asserted his presence. When she interviewed the others in the group he did not get involved, yet, when the camera came out, the young man rejoined the group, and in total 5 photos were taken, as a variety of poses were struck. In this example, and in many others, the interviewees clearly participated in the research on their own terms. The young man asserted his physical presence by walking around the young woman photographer in an exaggerated strut as his bodily movements assert a territorialized masculine space (such a relationship has also been identified by Keith (1995) in terms of how young men walk down the street).

The performance of masculinity is also defined through opposition, as this is seen in the contrasts and harmony between the men and women photographed. A clear trend, within the images collected, was that few women wore top to toe tracksuits (other than those of school age), unlike the myriad men who did. When women did wear tracksuits, there was a tendency to exaggerate their femininity through accessories, such as large hoop earrings, or lots of eye make-up, as the implicit masculinity of sportswear is challenged by the exaggerated, almost parodic, performance of femininity. Women tended to wear trainers, and perhaps a hoody, yet often with fitted jeans, which are often low slung to display their flesh. When a man wearing the characteristic top to toe baggy tracksuit, stands next to a woman, the respective femininity and masculinity are emphasized. This is often seen in the stance of the men and women, as the men rest their arms over the girl's shoulders. Even when the individual young men attempt to create a more personalised outfit, they do so through the subtle details, for example through the way they wear their hats. As such, very rarely are these men explicitly questioning the implicit masculinity or the norms of sportswear, but instead find small spaces for individual manoeuvre within this.

Does the bag make the WAG? The agency of clothing



Figure 3. A young woman dressed in typical wagabee styles, image taken in 2007 by Hannah McGee, Nottingham Trent University.

What the example of men in tracksuits highlights is that the performance of gendered identities is in part formed through the contrast between masculinity and femininity. One clear example of this is the 'wagabees', a phrase that signifies women who aspire to being a 'WAG' (a wife or girlfriend of a famous footballer). This aspiration is manifest in the examples included in this research project, of young women who wore the typical styles of the 'wags', cited one as their icon, and their ideal date as a Premiership footballer (see figure 3). The 'wagabees' form an example of a link between the everyday identity that is embodied through the clothing worn, the styling of hair, and the aspirational, as these young women connect their own style with that presented in a variety of fashion magazines. The collection of images within Fashionmap that can be grouped as Wagabees all demonstrate particular key items of clothing that can be seen on the images of fashion WAG's in magazines (often a high street copy of the style). These women all tend to go to similar bars, such as 'Skin', which is notorious as being a hang-out for the footballers in Nottingham. Some women photographed there can even be seen almost directly replicating the posture of perhaps the most famous WAG, Victoria Beckham, as they attempt to connect their own everyday embodied identities with those seen in magazines (see Figure 4). Through wearing the

clothing, adopting the poses on an everyday basis, and when they go out, they are therefore in Butler's terms (1990) reiterating the norms of femininity that are encapsulated in images of WAGs in the weekly celebrity magazines (such as Closer or Heat). The carefully copied pose is one that they attempt to make look effortless.



Figure 4. Two young women in a bar, adopting the wagabee pose, image taken by Hannah McGhee, 2007, Nottingham Trent University.

Particular items of clothing are used in order to enact this particular aspired to identity. For instance the possession of an oversized handbag, rectangular shaped, with two small handles, and a metallic clasp. The possession and carrying of the bag is a medium through which these women are attempting to transform themselves into their aspired to identity of a WAG. Of the women photographed carrying the bag, as it is so oversized, and the handle is not large enough to be positioned over the shoulder, the women have to perch the bag on their forearm (see figure 3). However, as a result of its size, their arm cannot rest on their body, but must protrude at an awkward right angle to the body. The bag is therefore the means by which these women attempt to create a particular identity through clothing, yet the bag itself clearly has agency. The materiality of the bag, its size and shape, means that the woman's arm has to be positioned in a certain way, lending an awkwardness to the pose.

The size of the handbag is characteristic of many of the items that characterise the WAG style; others include oversized sunglasses. The super-sizing of accessories has the effect of emphasising the smallness of the body. Indeed the awkwardness of carrying the bag makes

the act of carrying a handbag come to appear a strenuous activity for these women. There is a clear analogy between this style, and the relationship it has to masculinity, and Veblen's discussion of the leisure class in the late 19th century (Veblen, 1899). Veblen notes that the dress of women is one which is meant to display the status of their husband's, in his example instance, the evening gowns, and lavish clothing of women, in contrast to the more staid clothing of men, is one wherein the women act as an accessory to the men. In the case of the WAGs, the emphasis upon oversized accessories, the false nails and hair extensions means that these women make themselves look like they do not need to (and indeed are unable to) work. The emphasis is not upon physical mobility, but their inability to function. The false nails and hairs are, as in the instances of transvestism, an exaggeration of femininity, as the 'artifice' of femininity is reiterated. The links between femininity and masquerade have been widely discussed, such as in Tseelon (1995). However, what the data here highlights is that this masquerade can also be extended to how masculinity is performed. In a similar way to the young men who have trousers so baggy they are held up by hands in pockets, the wagabees are not only citing the norms of gender, in Butler's sense, but are exaggerating them to the point of parody, in order to emphasise their own normative gendered identity.

Body and non-body: extending the boundaries

These first two examples highlight that the performance of gendered identity is enacted through the interrelationship between the body and the items of clothing and accessories. The items of clothing engender particular body stances, expand the awareness of the boundaries of the body or ways of moving, and as such they become inseparable from the embodiment of masculinity or femininity. The boundaries between the body and non-body become unclear, as the slouching standing position of the young men in tracksuits is one which is permitted by the tracksuit bottoms. The permeable boundary between body and non-body is also evidenced in cases where certain practices or treatments mean that the body itself is extended. In the case of the 'wagabees', this is seen in the practices of integrating bought hair extensions (usually 'real' hair) into their own in the form of extensions, or the addition of acrylic nails. Here the various body parts associated with femininity are extended and expanded (seen in the more extreme instances of plastic surgery) as the women enact the parody of normative femininity. The extension of hair and nails forms part of the overall aesthetic that is necessary for the WAG (-abee).

So too in the case of numerous sub-cultural style groupings, the manipulation of hair and the skin (through body ornamentation such as tattoo-ing) is part of constructing a particular aesthetic. For example, in the case of the nu rave scene, of which there were numerous

images collected through the Fashionmap database, the styling and colouring of the hair acquires particular significance. There were many photographs of individuals with pink or bright red dyed hair; in many instances this is in keeping with the clothing worn, as the items of clothing are in fluorescent colourings (including t-shirts, leggings, and accessories, such as face scarves and bangles). The hair styles (which in some cases are spiked high) serve to extend and emphasise the clothing styles, as hair occupies the ambivalent position of being the body non-body, with more permanence than clothing, yet more changeable than other body parts. On other occasions the hair styles can be seen as occupying a more contradictory relationship to the clothing; as Evans (1997) notes of an earlier form of this subculture in the late 1990s it is one of the few style groupings that has not been commodified by the mainstream (and therefore loses its subversive edge). She argues in part this is because the scene was so underground, and the clothing was not radically subversive, but more in the style of baggy t-shirts, with smiley faces on them. Evans' argument for this group in the late 1990s still has purchase today, as even though the 'nu rave' scene has acquired cultural visibility, what the Fashionmap data shows it that they are tied to specific underground clubs. The visibility, and almost confrontational nature of the hair colouring and styles, is one that is almost in contradiction to the understated clothing styles.

Conclusions

The three case studies introduced in this paper are all at first glance extremely different; what this paper has attempted to do is highlight potential points of connectivity through an analysis of the body position, stance, and how this is impacted upon by accessories chosen, and clothing worn. Each example reinforces the arguments of writers such as Wilson... of the need to understand the relationship between items of clothing and accessories and the body in terms of seeing how gendered identities are performed. These examples have made clear both the implicit performance of embodied identities through clothing, and also the explicit attempt to adopt an identity. Rather than seeing these as two separate performances, the paper has considered instances where the young people photographed attempted to make these 'naturalised' identities explicit, seen, for example in the ways in which young men exaggerated their relaxed posture. The ways in which the everyday performance of identity is made explicit and parodied is usually discussed in terms of transvestism. However, what this paper has suggested is that the actions of both the boys in tracksuits and wagabees with false nails, involves a similar process of exaggeration and making explicit gender norms. In the case of drag, the performance involves adopting the gender norms of the opposite gender, in a deliberate process of mimicry. In the examples I have discussed the young men and young women are not only 'citing' the norms of their own gender, as Butler suggests, but they are also exaggerating them. In this act of exaggeration,

as these young people make explicit, and in turn leads to a gradual evolution in clothing styles, bodily stance and gender norms, the performance of these gendered identity is self-parodic.

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