



LGBTQ Women, Workplace Dress Codes, and Appearance Negotiations

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Over time, there has been a myriad of ways LGBTQ women express their sexual identity through appearance and clothing. Some women in the LGBTQ community push gender boundaries by adopting masculine garments in order to express their sexual identity (Reddy-Best and Pedersen, 2015). Skidmore (1999) found gender-boundary pushing appearances within some workspaces were not considered appropriate by analyzing several English and German court decisions that rejected cases allowing lesbian and gay individuals to push gender boundaries. Many companies have employee handbooks that outline regulations such as dress code; however, companies often also have unwritten rules, which impact the cultural environment and productivity (Duncan, 2014). There is significant research on the impact of dress code regulations on employee performance and psychological health for heterosexual individuals. Studies that examine workplace dress code for the LGBTQ community are limited to findings based on court cases that are 16 years old. It is important to understand the current climate at work for LGBTQ women since workplace regulations may impact performance and psychological well-being. Due to the dearth of studies on the topic, this exploratory study asks: Do unwritten or written workplace dress codes impact LGBTQ women's experiences at work?

To answer the research question, the researcher conducted 20 semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. Participants in the study also completed a follow-up interview that lasted between 10 and 30 minutes. All of the interviews were completed individually with each participant. In the initial interview, the researcher asked questions about where they work, what they are required to wear, if there are written or unwritten dress code regulations, and whether or not they feel they can fully express their sexual and/or gender identity in a way that made them feel comfortable within the written or unwritten dress codes. An interview guide with 45 questions was followed. During the follow-up interview, the researcher checked the respondent's answers from the initial interview to ensure they had interpreted the answers correctly and to see if anything was missing or overstated.

Each interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. After transcription, the researcher used open coding. During the first round of coding, a codebook was developed with code definitions. Throughout the entire process, the researcher redefined the codes and continually revisited the data to link ideas and themes. An additional coder was employed until an intercoder reliability of 80% was reached. Twenty codes or subthemes were developed initially, and the researcher continued analysis until three larger themes were defined.

Participants included 20 self-identified women in the LGBTQ community (15 Black or African American and 5 Asian; ages 23-50). Participants lived in California, Washington, and Oregon. All of the participants worked in professional settings where professional attire was expected. To recruit the participants, the researcher posted flyers on social media websites.

The first theme that emerged was that there were *no explicit rules prohibiting pushing traditional gender boundaries*. This was evident in a 30-year old Black participant's statement, "They explained the rules to me in the beginning. They didn't say I couldn't wear pants or anything. Thinking about it now they did describe the skirt lengths for women so maybe that's a thing." Many research participants explained that they experienced *struggles with sexual identity invisibility in the workplace*. For example, a 25-year old African American participant said, "I feel like as a femme or femme-identified person, I would say that femme invisibility is a thing I struggle with. I know that it's okay to look gay at work within the dress codes and all, but sometimes I know I need to hide my gayness even if it is just subtle hints or whatever. I sometimes think I'm not looking gay enough and being true to myself and my community." Another theme was the *pressure to present as heterosexual and to confine ethnic or racial identity expressions during important events*. While many participants explained that they were conscious of how much they were expressing their sexual identity in their appearance in workspaces, many had to think through another layer of ambivalence related to their racial or ethnic identity as they were "minding appearances" (Kaiser, 2001, p. 79). These experiences of negotiating the expression of their ethnic or racial identity were often more salient than negotiating expression of sexual identity. For example, a 40-year old Black participant said, "if you want to be welcomed or engaged with high level executives especially in our goals meetings, you kind of have to play the part. Dressing like a white, heterosexual female has a big part to do with that." Several other participants described similar pressures. One woman said, "I can't wear my natural hair," and another explained, "I have to think about how gay and Black I'm looking." The number of participants who experienced all themes and initial subthemes will be reported.

Findings from the research suggest that the work environment is a space where LGBTQ women must work through and negotiate multiple layers of ambivalence (Kaiser, 2001) and subtle acts of resistance placed on them from the dominant society. The results from this study do not support that written dress codes create a blatant oppressive environment as found by Skidmore (1999), but that these women have a heightened attention to their appearance in relation to their sexual and ethnic identities when entering into spaces with importance such as meetings or interactions with bosses. Future studies should look at other ethnicities or races. Implications for employers will be addressed.

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