



“She was buried in her purple dress and her red hat and all of our members wore full ‘Red Hat Regalia’ to celebrate her life”: Dress, embodiment and older women's leisure: Reconfiguring the ageing process

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ABSTRACT

There is a significant literature on women's dress and clothing, women's dress and identity, and women's dress and body image. However, the way that dress shapes the self, gives public meaning to the body, and situates it within culture—its embodiment—is understudied. Older women's voices on how dress-up in leisure contexts is linked to embodiment are absent. Using data from an online survey of the Red Hat Society®, a leisure-based social group with over 1 million members, we examined the relationship between older women's dress and embodiment. Data analysis revealed three themes: 1) Dress and embodiment, doing “dress-up”; 2) Dress and embodied subjectivity, linking the personal with the social; and, 3) Dress and perceptions of ageing, fashioning to freedom. We extend the embodiment and leisure literatures by: (a) including older women's viewpoints on dress; (b) understanding linkages between embodiment and older women's leisure; and, (c) illustrating how public displays of dress contribute to older women's development.

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Introduction

Think about this. After menopause, which occurs anywhere from age 45 to 55, women's bodies sag, skin folds, wrinkles appear, and weight gain is the norm (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001). And, if western society defines women of value, “beautiful” women “suited” to public appearance, as youthful [and thin] (Ferraro et al., 2008), does this mean that older women are worthless, ugly, and relegated to the home (Hurd, 2000)? What if some women in later life dispute that the agenda of ageing is decline, deterioration, and social isolation. And what if dress—often shortsightedly viewed by academics as “trivial” (Twig, 2007, p. 287)—is the mechanism for contributing to that re-evaluation?

Although the literature on women's dress and clothing and on women's dress and body image is significant, the way that dress shapes the self, gives public meaning to the body, and situates it within culture—its embodiment—is understudied (Entwistle & Wilson, 2001), particularly in relation to older women (Twig, 2007). With kind assistance from the Red Hat Society®, a social leisure group of over 1 million that encourages its female membership to “dress-up” in red and purple for public activities and events, the purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between older women's dress and embodiment. In this study, the term ‘older women’ refers to women in mid to late life.

Literature review

Women's dress and embodiment

Turner (1985), in *The Sociology of the Body* remarked that “there is an obvious fact about human beings, they have

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bodies and they are bodies” (p. 1). Entwistle and Wilson (2001), however, noted that while Turner's groundbreaking work highlighted the social forces that shape the body and bodily experiences, it failed to address one important issue: “...human bodies are *dressed* bodies. Dress is a basic fact of social life...all cultures dress the body in some way be it through clothing, tattooing, cosmetics or other forms of body painting” (p. 33).

While a substantial literature exists on the history of women's dress and women's clothing (e.g., de la Haye, 1997; Steele, 2001; Taylor, 2002), women's dress and identity (e.g., Crane, 2000; Fussell, 2002; McRobbie, 1989), and women's dress and body image (e.g., Bordo, 1993; Cooke, 1996; Warwick & Cavallaro, 1998), Entwistle and Wilson (2001) remarked that we know little about the embodiment of women's dress. “Dress does not simply serve to protect our modesty and does not simply reflect a natural body, or for that matter a given identity; it embellishes the body, the materials commonly used add a whole array of meaning that would otherwise not be there” (p. 33).

In trying to understand relationships between dress and embodiment, it is important to consider the following tenets. First, Eco (1986) argued that dressed “comfortably” in ways that enhance the body (e.g., wearing high heels or a wide brimmed hat) that modify, hide or display the body (e.g., tight belts, loose tops, and short skirts), and that are “appropriate” to cultural context (e.g., wearing black at a funeral or white at a wedding), we pay little attention to dress; it embodies a “second skin” (p. 192). In contrast, dressed “uncomfortably”, for example, in jeans that are too tight, a shirt that restricts movement, or in sweat pants when the cultural context calls for a tuxedo, we develop an “epidemic of self-awareness” (p. 193). In an extension of this idea, Andrews (2005) argued that the embodiment of dress is linked to physical changes in the body. Using the example of putting on a top hat, which prompts the wearer to hold him or herself upright to carry the hat suitably, Andrews (2005) contended that the physical attitudes prompted by particular garments are accompanied by “mental shifts in attitude and in the way the wearer looks at the world” (p. 33). In essence, dress works at the edges and boundaries of the body; it shapes the self, embodying personal tension between *having* a docile body and *being* an active body (Douglas, 1973; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Turner, 1985).

Second, several authors (e.g., Domash & Seager, 2001; Fussell, 2002) have drawn attention to how dress embodies discipline and control, particularly in public settings. Entwistle and Wilson (2001), for example, found that “the spaces of the night-club and the dark street impose their own [different] structures onto the individual and her sense of the body and she may in turn employ strategies of dress aimed at managing her body in these spaces” (p. 50). Women used dress as an expression of freedom and sexuality in the nightclub, but on dark streets bodies were managed through “cover-up” (p. 50). In contrast, others (e.g., Butler, 1993; Craik, 2005; Harrison, 1997) have noted the potential of dress to “re-appropriate and subvert the meanings imbued in clothes” (Guy, Green, & Banim, 2001, p. 7). Acknowledging that the fashion system, including dress, is suppressive and conformist at the social level, Guy et al. argued that “The fashion system is fluid enough to show ‘gaping seams’ which

allow women some control over their clothed images and identities, spaces to permit personal agency and negotiated images. Maybe it is possible for women to ‘fashion their way to freedom’” (Guy et al., 2001, p. 7).

Third, Craik (2005) examined the role of uniforms, a type of dress conforming to the same standard and worn by members of the same group, in giving public meaning to the body. Standard analysis of uniforms finds they embody order, discipline, confidence, and authority (e.g., Caillois, 1961). In contrast, her analysis, which ranged from religious orders, to the military, to fetish groups, to leisure sportswear, demonstrated that the significance of uniforms is dialectical; they embody fear and love, discipline and boisterousness, asexuality and sexuality, compliance and disobedience. “Uniforms are ambiguous masks of appearance, on the one hand intending to unambiguously place the attributes and role of the person, yet, on the other, part of the complex social play that can be deliberately appropriated, subverted, or rejected” (p. 6). Importantly, Craik also noted that, “while one uniformed body is striking, uniforms are most effective when they appear en mass in a display of identically kitted out persons” (p. 47). Missing from Craik's analysis, however, is the role that a uniform worn in a social leisure context (i.e., dress-up) might play in public re-evaluation of the ageing body.

Ageing and women's dress

Twigg (2007) noted the role that dress or clothing plays in women's lives in later years is underdeveloped. She provided two reasons for the conceptual gap. First, to date social gerontology, has emphasized older women's “need, functioning, and deficiency rather than expressivity, identity, and choice” (p. 287). Indeed, the study of older women's dress is seen as a “trivial subject that does not merit serious analysis” in social gerontology (p. 287). Second, early feminist writing (e.g., Daly, 1979; Friedan, 1963) ignored *everyday* dress and clothing (Entwistle & Wilson, 2001) to focus on *elite* fashion, and concluded that “Fashion distorted the natural body through subordinating practices like high-heels, corsets, and objectifying fashions that reduced women to objects of a sexualizing gaze” (Twigg, 2007, p. 288). Importantly, Twigg (2007) also argued that early feminist writings made the blanket assumption that theory derived from examining *elite* fashion was applicable to all women, to all dress, and to all age groups. She also noted that,

At the heart of the issue is the assumption that elite fashion is about sexuality and that older people—certainly in the eyes of the young—are beyond sex. Their clothing choices are therefore of no interest or relevance to the studies of fashion [or to the study of feminism] and indeed, to include them would in the eyes of many, degrade the subject matter (p. 287).

Twigg (2007) acknowledged that post-feminist writing has broadened the concept of dress to acknowledge *everyday* dress as a source of aesthetic pleasure, self-development, and personal reflexivity (e.g., Dumas, Laberge, & Straka, 2005; Guy et al., 2001; Tseelon, 1995). But again, older women's

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