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Queering the Classroom: Intersections of Fashion and the LGBTQ+ Community

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Innovative Strategy/Practice

Throughout the United States there are over a hundred fashion-related programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and they often offer courses that broadly focus on the cultural or social/psychological aspects of fashion, appearance, and the body. In some instances, these courses have a unit on sexuality where they might focus on the LGBTQ+ community; however, the breadth of experiences related to the intersections of fashion and the LGBTQ+ community is not adequately or holistically addressed. Two faculty working within fashion-related programs developed a course specifically where students would learn in-depth about fashion within historical and social context from a non heteronormative perspective. These two courses titled “Queer Fashions, Styles, and Bodies” and “Queer Fashion” were the first to ever center a fashion course around queerness, an often overlooked topic despite the significant contributions the queer community has made over time to the fashion industry (Steele, 2013).

The purpose of this paper is to describe the structure and student learning outcomes of these two queer-focused fashion courses in order to provide insight for other programs that may want to develop similar courses. Additionally, we will provide suggestions for future changes based upon our teaching experiences learned from student feedback and personal reflections. The two courses were similar in many ways, but had unique approaches to teaching about the intersection of queerness and fashion. Each course will be described separately and then compared to offer implications for future instructors and programs.

Queer Fashions, Styles, and Bodies

Six student learning outcomes guided this senior level or graduate student course: identify and analyze key concepts and themes in the overlapping fields of fashion, appearance, and the body and LGBTQ+/queer studies; become familiar with and critique scholarly literature and foundational readings related to: LGBTQ+/queer studies; the queer community and fashion, appearance, and the body; identify and understand research methods and approaches that scholars from various disciplines have utilized to analyze and interpret topics related to the queer community and fashion, appearance, and the body; design and conduct original research using material culture in collaboration with other methods; integrate and utilize appropriate theories, perspectives, and/or critical analyses in the development and execution of original research; demonstrate an ability to critically analyze ideas related to the queer community and fashion, appearance, and the body, both orally and in writing, with heightened attention to power relations, marginality, privilege, and normativity. We read key texts in queer theory such as Butler (1990) and Sedgwick (1990) in addition to key texts in queer fashion including Steele (2013), Geczy and Karaminas (2013), and Cole (2000). We also read Feinberg (1993) with many

other supplemental readings for each unit. The weekly units centered around each identity in the LGBTQ+ community, yet we continually discussed fluidity in regards to each identity, and the issues with placing each identity in a single unit or “box.”

In this small seminar-style course, students were required to complete scholarship critiques and discussion questions for each reading, which guided each class session. Final projects included an oral history with an individual from the LGBTQ+ community, a material culture analysis of four of the person’s fashion-related items, and a corresponding 3000-word essay. We partnered with the LGBTQ+ center on campus to create a public event to display and present the final projects. Some students expressed dissatisfaction related to the academic readings as they felt they did not capture what it was actually like being or appearing queer. All students responded positively to the final project and the freedom in topic related to the project.

Queer Fashion

This undergraduate, sophomore-level course has seven key learning objectives: apply concepts of Queer Theory to historical fashion analysis; explain the relationship between LGBTQ history and fashion history; analyze concepts of gender and appearance constructed through sartorial choice; identify seminal LGBTQ designer contributions and influences upon fashion; define camp culture and queer aesthetic as they relate to fashion; summarize the relationship between sartorial choice and drag, LGBTQ activism, sexual expression, and homonormativity both within contemporary and historical contexts; and identify contemporary fashion styles that defy traditional gender norms.

Students in this course also read texts by Steele (2013), and Geczy and Karaminas (2013) in addition to eleven articles and also watch seven films. In-class discussions are organized in this large lecture format course via the use of discussion groups and relate to annotated citation assignments. Students apply knowledge gained in a group queer styling project, research paper and also complete two exams. This class is cross listed with Women and Gender studies and is also an option on the university’s general education program and is the first LGBTQ+ focused course to be available to the campus, and is a permanent component of the curriculum for Fashion Merchandising and Design. Course evaluations have been positive and an exciting outcome has been the interest from students of color. As intended, the course provides non heteronormative perspectives on fashion as process, and product. In this classroom fashion is intersectional crossing and connecting with various issues of gender, sexuality, and race.

Outcomes

Both courses attempt to disrupt a historical and contemporary review of fashion that is cisgender, White, and heterosexual. Queer Theory provides a framework to explore gender as performative and transformational over time (Jagose, 2009). Humans construct and interpret gender through sartorial choice and have done so for centuries. The authors wish to share our process of queering the classroom, best practices for curriculum development, and student responses. Generation Z views gender as a much more fluid construction and more than half prefer clothing that is unisex or androgynous (Tsjeng, 2016). Not only are courses such as this important for diversity and inclusion, but they make sense as fashion programs consider gender and its fluidity across our curriculums.

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