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Dissertation Proposal
Fear the Queer - How has the Perception of Feminine Men Changed?

For my dissertation, I want to explore the perception of feminine and non-traditionally masculine men in recent decades. More specifically, I will be looking at past and present figures in mainstream society, and in alternative subcultures, who present or who have presented in either an androgynous or some sort of gender-bending way, including glam rock bands, drag culture in the 90s, contemporary figures such as Grayson Perry and Eddie Izzard. In order to narrow down my field of research, I will be looking at men from 1967 onward, as this is when the Sexual Offences Act 1967 was passed in Britain, decriminalising homosexual acts (Author Unknown; 2017; *Decriminalisation of homosexuality: History of gay rights in the UK*). I would also like to look at past and current trends in men's alternative fashion. This would include the current progression of the general acceptance of feminine presenting males.

Gender

To understand what it means to be perceived as masculine or feminine as a man, I first must understand what the difference between biological sex and gender identity is. Today, we live in a society where people are becoming more understanding and accepting of alternative, non-binary gender identities, and the distinction between biological sex and gender identity is more defined. The current way of thinking, in regards to gender identity, is that your biological sex is assigned at birth, and your gender is almost something that you create yourself; with gender existing on some sort of spectrum. According to Butler, (1990), '...gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the casual result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex'. Here, Butler explains that gender is not linked to, or defined by your biological sex and that the fluidity of someone's gender identity may be the result of your environment and conditions, as well as biological sex being fixed as opposed to fluid. By researching Butler's theories, I will be able to further understand the distinction between biological sex and gender identity, and therefore why and how biological men possess 'feminine' traits that may be a deciding factor in their gender identity and how they present themselves.

Speaking on their own gender identity on their television programme, 'Eddie Izzard: Marathon Man', Izzard is seen in a South African nail salon and tells the audience of their nails; 'I use it as a badge of identity'. Further into the programme, they also remark: 'I identify somewhat boyish and somewhat girlish. I identify both, but I fancy women.' (Izzard, 2016) It is here that Izzard makes the apparent notion that gender can be performative, and we can use our appearance to aid us in presenting our gender identity. In their case, Izzard's nails are their badge of identity and their transgenderism and alternative gender expression (*Eddie Izzard: Marathon Man*; 2016). Filming in South Africa, where homosexuality has been legal since 1998 and the legal change of gender has been permitted by law since 2013, but the treatment of LGBT+ people is often still inhumane. In 2011, lesbian LGBT+ rights activist Noxolo Nogwaza was raped and murdered in Gauteng, South Africa. The motive was believed to be 'corrective rape', a sexually motivated attack where people who are believed to be homosexual are sexually abused in an attempt to forcibly correct their homosexuality. (Tracy Doig; 2015; *Four Years on, Still no Justice for Noxolo*)



Photographer Unknown (2015) *Comedian Eddie Izzard joins the Welsh Labour election campaign during a visit to Cardiff* [fig 1]

Figure 1 depicts Izzard on an election campaign in Cardiff, in 2015, for a campaign with the Labour Party. As can be seen, they are presenting in a particularly feminine way, wearing typically female clothing, makeup and acrylic nails. Speaking in an interview on 'Alan Carr: Chatty Man', Izzard voices some of their worries with them getting involved with politics and jokingly adds: 'If they find out that I'm transgender, I don't know what I'll do' (2017). From this alone, it becomes apparent that their gender identity is something that they felt would interfere with their political career, and possibly how they will be perceived, especially as they self-identify as 'somewhat boyish and somewhat girlish'. In my dissertation, I will research further into the perception of biological men that have an alternative gender identity, with Izzard's role as a political figure being a specific point of interest.

Dress

With physical appearance playing a significant factor in how we are perceived by others, the way we dress often aids in presenting our character before we even speak. A public figure who uses fashion and transvestitism in their work is artist Grayson Perry. Writing of their transvestitism, Perry states: 'But I am a transvestite; I am turned on by dressing up in clothes that are heavily associated with being female' (2016). Without focusing on the sexual aspect of his transvestitism, Perry brings up the point of him dressing in 'female' clothing, which shows a sense of self-awareness- he is aware he is going against societally enforced norms by dressing in such a way. However, Perry's relationship with fashion and how it relates to his gender identity is different to Izzard's, in that Perry is more performative with the way he presents it- specifically as an alter-ego called Claire [Author Unknown, 2017, *Making Himself Claire: Grayson Perry's Dresses*]. Using this alter-ego as a way to present his work, Perry, as Claire, he can be seen wearing heavily decorated and elaborate costumes and pantomime dame-esque makeup. [fig 2] In my dissertation, I will explore Perry's use of costume and fashion in regards to how they affect the way he is perceived by others.



Pål Hansen, (2014), *Grayson Perry* [fig 2]

On the topic of Grayson Perry, something that he often discusses in his art is the idea of masculinity, what it means to him and how his transvestism coexists with his masculinity. With Perry being a transvestite, the possible assumption and perception of him would be that he lives as a woman and is very feminine himself. He writes: 'Because I am a transvestite, people often assume that this gives me a special insight into the opposite gender' (2016). From this, Perry tells us that a misconception is that because he is a transvestite and often presents female, he is treated like a woman as though he possesses the mind of one. In my dissertation, I will research further into the dichotomy between Perry's transvestitism, his masculinity and femininity and how he is in turn perceived by others. To do so, I will continue to read his 2016 book 'The Descent of Man', aiming to further understand Perry's use of gender expression, and how this affects the way that he is perceived by others. In doing so, I may be able to make connections with the writings of Butler, and answer the question my dissertation asks at the very beginning- 'how has the perception of feminine men changed?'

Masculinity

As mentioned previously, the current feminist ideology in regards to biological sex and gender identity is that they exist separately, with biological sex being determined at birth and gender identity being something that is a result of someone's environment and conditions. However, what does this have to do with somebody's masculinity and femininity, and does this have anything to do with their gender expression? Perry writes: 'For many males, being masculine, acting in a manly way, is unquestionably a biological part of them as their penis and testicles and deep voice. But masculinity is mainly a set of habits, traditions and beliefs historically associated with being a man' (2016). From this, we can understand Perry is saying that masculinity is not a part of a man's actual biological sex, but rather a societally enforced norm that has existed and has been passed down through traditional and almost ritualistic behaviours. According to Perry, masculinity is a social construct, similar to gender, that a shift from this behaviour can be seen as 'feminizing', and in turn damaging to a seemingly fragile, socially constructed masculinity. In 'The Descent of Man', Perry often mentions a figure representative of the typical native British businessman- white, heterosexual and of middle class, referred to in his book as 'Default Man'. Being a literal figure of power in a society that is becoming more and more politically correct, you might assume that the image of the 'Default Man' is becoming more blurred as we become more inclusive. However, Perry writes: 'I must confess that I qualify in many ways to be a Default Man myself, but I feel that by coming from a working-class background and being an artist and transvestite, I have enough cultural distance from the towers of power to turn around and get a fairly good look at the edifice.' (2016) From Perry's words about his own place in society, in regards to his occupation, background and his alternative expression of gender identity, he tells us that he feels he is almost perceived as lesser than, or at least there is a significant disconnect between men who are perceived as feminine and those that he would consider an example of the 'Default Man'. In my dissertation, I will use Perry's words and experiences in order to illustrate how feminine men have been perceived.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a subculture of drag culture was formed in New York City by dance club personalities James St James and Michael Alig called Club Kids. Known for their often heavy use of drugs, vivacious behaviours and more commonly known for their over the top costumes. Though Alig was later arrested for the murder of a fellow club personality, St James documented his experience and the downfall of Alig in his 1999 book *Disco Bloodbath*. Speaking on an episode of *Donahue* in 1993 where the main figures in the Club Kid culture such as St James, Alig and Richie Rich, they explain that they use these elaborate costumes to perform and entertain and that their drag is used as an escape from their every day lives, to feel accepted and inclusive. Though drag is a part of gay culture, the Club Kids on the *Donahue* show speak of inclusivity, with St James saying: 'I do the door of The Limelight, and I think that it's very important if you have nothing but this (referring to his fellow Club Kids) in the clubs, it gets very dull. You need a mixture of everything- you need old, young. We need drag queens, straight people, you need gay- you need a little bit of everything to make the club work'. (James St James, on *Donahue*, 1993) This almost reiterates that drag, the costuming that it entails and the femininity the Club Kids possess is not exclusive to gay men. However, the reception and questioning the Club Kids received from Donahue himself and his audience was less than welcoming, and it's this sort of interaction between the 'Default Man' and the possessors of these alter-egos who use gender performatively that I will explore in my dissertation. This is even more relevant now, with the introduction of drag culture in mainstream pop culture at the moment, especially with television shows such as 'RuPaul's Drag Race', with former Club Kid RuPaul Charles as the show's host.

To conclude my proposal, using the information I have already gathered, and with the further research I will conduct in relation to my dissertation, I will answer the question I originally asked at the start of my proposal- 'how has the perception of feminine men changed in recent decades?' To do so I will discuss societally accepted norms in regards to dress, alternative expressions of gender identity as well as feminist ideologies on the difference between biological sex and gender identity. Following consultations with my contextual practices lecturer, I will write a fully formed dissertation, with the aim of answering this question.

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[FIG 1] Photographer unknown (2015) *Comedian Eddie Izzard joins the Welsh Labour election campaign during a visit to Cardiff*. Available at: <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/gallery/comedian-eddie-izzard-joins-welsh-9035131> (Accessed 6th May 2018)

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