

## **Epiphenomenology of the Closet: The Multiplicity of Gender Identities in Everyday Life**

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### **Chapter One – The Elephant in the Room Is Hiding in the Closet**

Closets. Everyone has them, in both senses of the word: as a physical space used to hold clothing and as a psychological space used to hold secrets. For decades, scholars of fashion have argued that the contents of our physical closets, our clothes, are a vitally important medium of communicating social information (e.g., Craik, 1994). Although clothing has traditionally been understood as a visible marker of boundaries between social classes (Bourdieu, 1984), fashion literature has increasingly recognized that with the rise of mass production, clothes can denote an inordinate volume of identities. While class remains an important site of investigation, the influence of gender identities on clothing has become increasingly salient (Crane, 2000). Performativity theory suggests that clothing is part of the social construction of gender as a binary system that perpetuates female and male as discrete, oppositional categories (Butler, 1990). All of these ideas emphasize the broad social importance of fashion for defining some of the most fundamental boundaries of social life, such as class and gender, but they fail to fully account for the complexity and multiplicity of identities expressed in clothing displays. After infiltrating 24 closets with a camcorder, I discovered that the tools of gender performance are too diverse to be accounted for by the gender binary. Instead, I found that we translate the messiness of clothing choices into a dichotomous gender system by filtering out the complexity of reality.

The sociological study of fashion has long been concerned with what our clothing choices communicate to those in the social world around us. Traditionally, fashion has been looked to as a marker of class boundaries, as the ability to choose clothes for aesthetics rather than for function and durability is a distinctive marker of membership in upper class strata (Bourdieu, 1984; Veblen, 1912; Simmel, 1957). However, more

recent examinations of fashion have shifted away from class-based explanations and toward how individuals make use of fashion as a means of personal expression. Fashion, and its more mundane counterpart clothing, have come to be viewed as nonverbal media for communicating not just class, but also ascriptions ranging from education to political affiliation (Niederer and Winter, 2008). The idea that superficial engagement with fashion is an activity restricted to cultural elites has been essentially dismissed in favor of examining topics such as how clothing is intricately tied to the body (Craik, 1994; Entwistle, 2000), artistic and political expression (Wilson, 2003), and interpersonal communication (Barnard, 1996; Davis, 1992). The link between all of these studies and related others, however, is the leading role that consumer agency plays in the symbolic construction of so-called “self-expression.”

Following a trajectory similar to that of fashion scholarship, the sociology of consumption has recently undergone a shift away from its historical focus on examining the use of market goods for the purpose of establishing and reifying class stratification (Bourdieu, 1984). Instead, focus has shifted to the complex relationships between producers of goods, consumers of goods, the goods themselves, and the social context surrounding both actors and artifacts (Griswold, 1994). Accordingly, while socioeconomic status remains important in consumption studies, it is now viewed as one of many factors that helps to construct consumer wants and desires (Zukin and Maguire, 2004). Consumption is now seen as a visible and consciously-created reflection of the multiple social identities which comprise the self (Fine and Leopold, 1993). Of the various goods which consumers use to that end, clothing serves the most primary role. It has become increasingly inexpensive in the twentieth century, thereby allowing individuals to express a wider range of styles regardless of their class status (Crane, 2000). This view of clothing as enacting multiple identities is consistent with the idea that the self is not a fixed entity, but rather changes each time it is enacted in interaction, with different selves being more prominent in different contexts (Goffman, 1959; Hall, 1990; Cerulo, 1997). The performance of identities through clothing, then, is how our self comes to life in the social world. Performance of identities, however, does not merely reflect individual creative whims; instead, systems of classification order and structure all social practices (Douglas,

1966), and out of all the things our clothes can communicate, the most important and overarching is our gender.

You would be hard-pressed to find anyone in the social sciences today who would argue against the idea that gender is among the (if not *the*) most fundamental ordering structure of social life. Even if you avoid frequent exposure to academic exchange about gender, it is extraordinarily difficult to ignore the role of gender in our daily lives. There are quite possibly an immeasurable number of ways in which gender shapes our lives and interactions with one another, but I believe that one of the most important and ongoing is our clothing choices. Just walk into any clothing store in any mall anywhere – you will almost certainly find that it either has a stark, obvious divide between the men’s department and the women’s department, or that it caters solely to men or to women (Davis, 2008). Look at sizes on the labels of the clothes in those stores – the dimensions of a men’s small are quite different from those of a women’s small, and pants and suits are sold on an entirely different scale of integers depending on which side of the store you are. There are other differences as well: how vibrant colors are, how subtle patterns are, how many darts the back of a shirt has, the line created by a pair of pants, the range of possible accessories. Many of us might take the role of gender in our sartorial selections for granted, but once you look, the differences provided for us are impossible to ignore. But why do so many of us automatically ignore half of the items for sale in the mall on the basis of gender?

The answer is simple, but its ramifications are enormous: to be taken seriously as human beings, it is absolutely essential that we express a culturally appropriate, easily categorized and identifiable gender. For fans of Saturday Night Live in the early 1990s, the recurring sketch about the ambiguously-gendered character Pat illustrated the extent to which individuals will go in order to categorize person whose gender presentation does not immediately appear clearly female or clearly male. While audiences laughed the discomfort other characters experienced as a result of interacting with Pat, odds are that most all of us would be similarly uncomfortable with a person we were unable to easily gender. Anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) offers a compelling explanation for this: we need clear-cut categories in order to make sense of our world and

how to interact with it, so the simplest way to deal with anomalies is to force them into one of our existing categories. We do this frequently in our daily lives, asking for clarification to ambiguous statements or writing off an unusual occurrence as an oddity that is not likely to recur. So why is our ability to think and behave so violently disrupted when we encounter gender ambiguity or a gender anomaly? Yes, gender is a massive part of our social lives in ways that we often ignore as the metaphorical fish ignores water, but why does it have such sweeping social power? Gender obtains its power because of its tie to our bodies (Pitts-Taylor, 2007).

Despite the ways in which we can modify them cosmetically, medically, and otherwise throughout our lives, bodies are routinely viewed as the most natural visible expression of who we are. Gender identities are assigned to us at birth based upon the idea that newborn children have been untainted by social influence, so their bodies must express their most essential gender. In other words, despite the increasingly popular idea that gender is a social construction (not a biological fact), its connection to an entity as supposedly natural as the human body enables “female bodies” to be stringently associated with cultural proscriptions of “femininity” and “male bodies” to be similarly assigned expectations of “masculinity.” This presumed causal relationship induces a reality in which nearly all of us essentialize gender expression because we inextricably link it to so-called biological sex. Gender, then, ultimately exerts such a demonstrative influence over our lives because so many of us believe in the supposedly value-free objectivity and, therefore, incontrovertible truth of the natural sciences. So when that truth tells us that there are two (and only two) sexes which have immutable differences, we internalize and reproduce that truth in our everyday lives – lives in which our closets play a vital role.

While the social sciences have theorized the influence of gender to some extent since their rise in the late nineteenth century, assigning gender autonomous power in the social world did not begin until Simone de Beauvoir (1949) published *The Second Sex* in the mid-twentieth century. As a seminal work in feminist theory, *The Second Sex* laid the foundation for subsequent generations of gender scholarship by establishing patriarchy as the mechanism through which women were made to be the “Other.” De Beauvoir argues that women are not

intrinsically inferior to men, but rather come to be subordinated by the influence of the biological sciences, which idealize the male body, and the psychological sciences, which construct women as inherently mentally unstable. She further observes that over the course of Western history, an expectation of women's acquiescence to male superiority based on scientific claims has crystallized into a repetitive, oppressive structure moderating everyday social life. Keeping with de Beauvoir, then, we should expect women's closets to be universally constricting in both physical ways, such as eighteenth century corsets, and psychological ways, such as having a limited number of wardrobe options. However, all of us can certainly point to women in our lives who violate at least one (probably the latter) of these expectations – perhaps a friend who lives in t-shirts and relaxed jeans, or more certainly one who has more pairs of shoes than one could count using both hands and both feet. This reveals a major flaw in early social theory about gender: while gender is a powerful social force, it by no means controls individuals to an extent that completely deprives them of choice in their wardrobe selections.

This overemphasis on social structure at the expense of individual decision making was rectified many years later when West and Zimmerman (1987) theorized the performative nature of gender identities. In contrast to a conception of gender as a force unwillingly foisted upon all of us, the two sociologists argue that gender comes to exist only through communication and interaction. The authors share de Beauvoir's assessment of gender as an omnipresent entity in everyday social life, but they do not conceptualize us as passive, unthinking puppets of oppressive structures. Rather, they contend that each of us is an active social actor, making constant decisions about whether we should or should not adhere to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity. To them, gender is something that we *do*, not something that we *are*. However, the performative nature of gender does not make it a trivial occurrence. West and Zimmerman assert that gender is the only social identity that remains static across all situations; that is, regardless of where we are and who we are with, we are always fundamentally either a man or a woman, and crossing that boundary can have immense social consequences. Thinking back to closets using this idea of "doing" gender, we would expect to see wardrobe decisions made primarily (or even exclusively, considering the ordering power West and Zimmerman assign gender) based on the

owner's gender identity. While this paints a more accurate picture than de Beauvoir's theory might, there are still exceptions to the rule – one might be a family with an extremely low income, in which a younger sister may receive her older brother's old clothes, and another might be a man with a non-Western cultural background, who may wear what looks like a dress to ignorant eyes. While West and Zimmerman offer us a more grounded, realistic appraisal of how gender structures our lives, they erroneously dismiss other social identities as not significantly affecting (or sometimes taking salience over) gender performance.

While West and Zimmerman were developing their theory of gender as an absolute performance, feminist scholars like Patricia Hill Collins (2000) were critiquing the ways in which conceptions of gender focused almost exclusively on the gender experiences of white, upper-class, heterosexual individuals. Instead of describing gender as a singular force affecting our social interactions and experiences, she highlights an interlocking system of oppressions, in which a range of structuring forces inform the ways in which we think about and interact with the social world around us. Like West and Zimmerman, Collins does argue that we have agency in our social worlds, but unlike them, she contends that our individual actions are structured by a variety of memberships in distinct identity groups. For her, gender is one of the most prominent of those memberships, but she also recognizes age, class, race, religion, and sexual orientation as other similarly influential factors on our social lives. While Collins never discusses those identities as performative in nature, the huge amount influence she suggests they have on our social lives indicates that, if clothes are as socially important as I have previously argued, we should be able to see multiple, overlapping identities in people's closets. One example of this might be the way in which age and religion can modify the gender performance of a young boy at his christening, at which he would likely be expected to wear a white gown, a garment otherwise reserved for girls and women. However, Collins' theorizing fails to account for the reality that our identities, be they gender or anything else, are not necessarily able to be placed in discrete categories nor remain static over time.

Operating from the most recent school of thought in gender scholarship, queer theory, Judith Butler (1990) argues not only that gender is a perpetual social performance (like West and Zimmerman) and that it

depends on other social identities (like Collins), but advances those ideas a step further, contending that we constantly negotiate and renegotiate identity categories in each and every one of our social interactions. For Butler, this constant shifting of boundaries indicates that gender is certainly not a discrete binary system, nor is it as fixed and inevitable as our cultural discourse purports it to be. Instead of following popular discourse, Butler challenges the reader to interrogate heterosexuality, which she identifies as the source of our simplistic gender system, and view gender as the arbitrary and fluid entity that it truly is. Extending this idea to closets, we can see that an item that carries a gendered connotation in our social world, such as a miniskirt or a tie, would not necessarily carry the same meaning in a different social context. This demonstrates Butler's idea that gender performance is highly subjective. Yet again, though, existing theorizing about gender proves inadequate. While Butler and other queer theorists offer some of the most comprehensive accounts of the ways gender functions in our world, their deconstruction seems to erase everything we understand as a solid reality. Conceptualizing gender as a binary system may be shortsighted, but going back to Douglas, we need clear-cut categories in order to make sense of our surroundings. What we need, then, is an account of fluid, multifarious, and subjective gender performances that explains how it is possible for gender performances to be so complex at the same time that popular beliefs about gender are static, simple, and clear.

Based on 24 semi-structured group interviews with housemates focused on the physical contents of their closets and the secrets within, I conclude that each of us has the same elephant in our bedrooms. Our closets contain the secret that all of us have, and constantly perform, *multiple* and *dynamic* gender identities, and the salience of any one of those identities shifts depending on social context. In the chapters that follow, I intend to reveal the complex diversity of gender in our lives and expose the lengths to which we will go individually and collectively to maintain the façade of possessing a single, immutable gender identity. Along the way, I will examine the central role sexuality plays in mediating our gendered lives, offer evidence that crossing the gender divide is not always problematic, uncover other secrets contained in our closets, and most importantly, explain why this matters for all of us – whether we are female, male, or something else entirely.

## *Methodology*

In a twelve by twelve concrete square housing two twin beds less than four feet from one another, the only personal spaces college freshmen can claim are their closets. From the moment they arrive on campus just before beginning their first year, they are confronted with the reality of having to share their formerly private lives with a complete stranger. Even when students are forced out of dorms into apartments and houses off-campus in their years as upperclassmen, the anti-privacy culture persists. Unlocked apartment doors are the norm, and bedrooms are rarely any less public than living rooms. Given the scarcity of private space in college life, then, it is appalling how many students will allow a fellow student (armed with a camcorder, no less) into their last beacon of hope for uninterrogated space. Even more surprising is the enthusiastic candor with which so many of them expose and intently discuss all of the possessions in their closets, including clothes as well as other items ranging from Christmas decorations to adult novelties.

I am no psychologist, so I am unable to explain why people might be so willing to open their doors to a camera-wielding undergraduate, but I will confess that whatever the reason, it made what could have been a difficult process of obtaining participants remarkably simple. I found my first round of interviewees through organizations on campus in which I was a member and classes in which I was a student, and from there, I used snowball sampling to acquire two more rounds of participants. The only criterion I employed to filter participants was whether or not they had at least one roommate, as I conducted interviews in groups to facilitate individual openness and encourage the flow of discussion. These “focus groups” began in the common space of each apartment, where I explained the structure of the interview to all the housemates in a given group, and then proceeded from there to each bedroom in turn. The entire group would migrate from room to room with me, and the primary respondent would be the individual in whose bedroom we were currently. The others present were responsible for providing additional commentary to any of the questions and any of the target respondent's comments, and they also had the opportunity to ask questions of their own. On average, each individual closet took approximately thirty minutes to discuss, with total

focus group durations ranging from one hour to three hours. This format was incredibly helpful in getting the housemates of my initial round of respondents and all those in my second and third rounds to speak candidly, as many of them had never met me before.

When I first began the process of interviewing participants, I knew that I wished to investigate how a variety of individuals used their clothes to “do gender,” but as is called for by the interpretive method, I did not have a specific argument in mind. During my first few interviews, I relied on a broad range of open-ended questions to attempt to determine what generated the most conversation from participants and what was most helpful to me in identifying themes and possible arguments in my data. Questions covered topics such as participant’s favorite stores, their probable clothing choices for an average day of class, and the role of friends and family in outfit selection. After each focus group, I reviewed my interview schedule to eliminate questions that generated minimal responses and record new questions and follow-up questions that received significant feedback. I also tweaked existing questions to point more directly towards my thesis of multiple genders as it emerged from my data, as well as to explore subordinate recurring themes. The list of questions provided in the interview schedule that follows is reflective of the final product of that process.

## **Chapter Two – Why Would You Wear *That*? Dressing to Express Oneself...or Maybe Someone Else**

*“Self expression is the most important part of fashion; it’s similar to an individual canvas of art.”*

– Patricia Pao, Chief Executive Officer of Pao Principle

When you got dressed this morning, who decided what you would wear? If my participants were to answer that question for you, they would almost universally indicate that, obviously, you dressed yourself. You were most likely the person who physically reached into your closet to procure items to wear, and you most likely chose particular items based on what you believe they communicate to others. This popular view of clothing choices is evidenced in several arenas: top fashion designers (such as Patricia Pao, who is quoted above), view clothing as the primary vehicle for self-expression in our lives, and televised makeover shows encourage contestants to embrace their inner, “true” selves by changing their outer appearances (Davis et al, 2008). Although sociology has traditionally conceptualized our clothes as boundary markers (Veblen, 1912; Bourdieu, 1984; Simmel, 1957), recent examinations have shifted toward how we use them as means of personal expression. Diana Crane (2000), for instance, points to clothing as the primary component in the public construction of identity.

This notion that clothing choices are reflective of one’s sense of self was a common theme throughout nearly all of my interviews, but there was a notable difference between men and women. Female participants were intensely explicit about the connection between their senses of self and their clothing. Britney, for instance, said, “When I go into a store, I immediately know what to buy, because certain things just scream ‘Me! Me! Me!’” Similarly, Sam offered that “my hair, my chains, my man-pants, my ties...all that stuff tells the world that I’m a lesbian, and that label is really just right at the heart of who I am.” Male participants, on the other hand, discussed the relationship between their interior selves and their clothes with a measure of distance that most of the female participants did not. Rather than discussing their clothes as expressing their inner selves, most of the men I interviewed said that some (but not all) of their clothes reflected the things that mattered in their lives. As one

example, Steve stated succinctly an idea that arose in several interviews: “I think that if you went through my stuff without me here, you’d probably figure out what’s important to me without me having to tell you.”

Regardless of gender, however, each and every one of my participants made at least one (and more commonly, five to six) reference to the ways in which their clothes reflect something about themselves. One participant, the Me!-screaming Britney, staunchly defended over and over again her independence in her clothing choices more than anyone else I interviewed. When asked if her friends or family members exerted any influence over her wardrobe, she replied,

“Influence? No, no, no...I let my dad and my mom pay for stuff, but I always pick out what I want. And my friends, well, I wouldn’t tell them to shut up or anything like that, but I definitely don’t care whether or not they think something makes me look good or whatever. If I like something, I like it because it fits *me*, and that’s way more important than my girlfriends saying that they like my clothes or want to borrow them or something.”

Britney’s repetitive rhetoric about expressing herself with her clothes is completely in line with the fashion industry’s idea that our clothes should be, first and foremost, about *our* likes and dislikes rather than the likes and dislikes of the people around us. However, Britney was the only one of my participants who stuck vehemently to a mantra of self-expression throughout her interview.

A large proportion of those I interviewed started from a similar mantra, but over the course of the interview process, slowly acknowledged the wide range of influences that mediate their clothing choices. The same Steve who insisted that his clothes indicate his priorities mentioned later in the course of his interview that his mother purchases most of his clothes, and that she often shops for him without his input or presence. “I’m a t-shirt and jeans kind of guy,” he noted, “so that makes it easier on her to get me stuff I’ll wear. She used to try to get me nicer stuff, like, um, polos and those button shirts, but I don’t wear that stuff a lot, so she stopped.” In a follow-up comment to a later question about what he wears around the house, he elaborated, “When I’m here [at college], I just wear whatever. Dirty t-shirts, ripped jeans, it doesn’t matter because the

only person around is George. Well, except when Hannah [his girlfriend] is here. But yeah, when I’m home, I always feel like I need to wear, I don’t know, real clothes around the house to make my mom happy.” Here we can start to see some of the give-and-take that goes into our wardrobes: Steve’s girlfriend and mother exert influence on him, but he ultimately is able to decide when and how that influence will work.

Steve’s roommate, George, also began his interview by saying that his clothing choices were reflections of himself. “You can see I’ve got more Alpha Epsilon Alpha letters than any human being should probably have, but my fraternity is my life, so I get a lot of wear out of them,” he quipped during the tour of his closet that began his interview. Unlike Britney and Steve, though, George was quick to admit that he is open to social influence in his shopping choices: “If I’m just going to be on-campus, I don’t really pay attention to what I put on in the morning, as long as it’s clean, but if I have something to go to or a big thing for work or, God willing, a date, I always check with a good friend to make sure what I want to wear is okay, because I know I don’t exactly have the best fashion sense.” This commentary further indicates that we choose our clothes not just based on what we prefer, but also take into account social pressures about what it means to be appropriately dressed. In this case, George does not trust his own interpretation of socially-appropriate attire, so he relies on his “fashion adviser of a best friend” to ensure that he meets the sartorial standards of his employers, romantic partners, and others in his social world.

Of all my participants, the ones who most overtly expressed the influence of others in their clothing choices were Carrie, Charlotte, and Miranda, three housemates and sisters of the same sorority. Charlotte, the first of the three I interviewed, set up the relationship between the three before I even had a chance to ask a single question by saying, “So do you need to see *my* clothes? Because a lot of my stuff is in my room, but I also have some of Carrie’s stuff and Miranda’s stuff, and they have some of my stuff in their rooms, too, and I think I even have a couple of tops at this point that I’m not even sure if I know who they technically belong to.” I asked all three of them together if that was because they shared clothes with each other, and Miranda responded, “Oh my god, you don’t even know. Like seriously, it’s like one of those things in here. What are they

called? Communes? Yeah, it's like that. We're not exactly the same size, but we're all close enough that we can trade stuff around and have it fit." Carrie added, "It's pretty much ridiculous. Like, I can't even think of the last time I went shopping by myself, because I always need to know what these two think. Even when I'm home and my mom and I go shopping, it's like I have two little voices in my head telling me what they think about everything I look at." Although these three women were the most extreme example of peer influence in my sample, they merely reflected with greater intensity a phenomenon that appeared repeatedly throughout my interviews – that our clothing choices are policed by the people in our lives in ways both overt and subtle. That is not to say that we are without agency in our clothing choices, but rather that such agency is fundamentally shaped by the individuals that surround us.

Even Britney, the staunch self-expressionist, acknowledged by the end of her interview that all of her clothes came from stores like Express and Club Monaco, which feature hundreds of retail locations throughout the United States. When I asked if she wanted to add anything else she had not yet had a chance to say, she replied, "It's kind of weird, I guess, because I've always thought my clothes really reflected *me*...you know what I mean? But it's not like I make my own clothes. I just buy things that I love from stores, so even though I still think my clothes are me, they're not unique, so it's not really the clothes that are unique, um...it's the clothes *on me* that make them unique." This idea that we need to purchase items to be able to express ourselves is one posited by Crane alongside her theory of clothing as identity. While it would be feasible to make one's own garments, not a single one of my participants mentioned an article of clothing that originated from a non-retail location. Because of this, the identities that we are able to express through our clothes are limited by what is available to us to purchase. If malls and stores are structured by stringent gender boundaries, then, it is reasonable to expect that our daily clothing choices would reflect the limitations created by those boundaries. Indeed, my interviews confirm this hypothesis, as the vast majority of my participants had wardrobes containing only articles of clothing marketed to their gender. However, this phenomenon cannot be explained exclusively by the use of physical space in clothing stores and shopping malls.

One of the benefits of conducting my interviews in groups was that I had an opportunity to witness peer interactions firsthand, and a pervasive theme of those group interactions was gender policing and subsequent gender defensiveness. All of my interview groups lived exclusively with same-gender roommates, and both men and women engaged in gender policing with roughly the same frequency and intensity. For example, when I was asking George what he might wear to work, Steve tossed in his two cents and sparked the following exchange between them:

Steve: Pink? Really?

George: Yeah...?

Steve: You sure you were in the men's sale rack when you bought that?

George: You're such an ass. Haven't you heard that real men wear pink?

In a similar way, the trio of sorority sisters had several brief exchanges that revealed their accountability for one another's femininity, including this one:

Charlotte: I still think that [a knee-length wool coat] makes you look like a man

Miranda: Yeah, kinda, but it's not as bad as that other one, remember?

Carrie: You guys *hated* that coat!

Miranda: Because you looked like a freaking shapeless, I don't know, blob or something. You couldn't tell there was a girl under there.

In both situations, the housemates of the people whose closets were being discussed openly evaluated clothing based on how well (or not, in these instances) particular articles gendered the wearer. Such interactions reveal that, while the gendered spatial orientation of malls may encourage shopping within one's specified gender category, an additional and perhaps more efficacious influence is social pressure.

My interviews indicate that such social pressure can come from a variety of sources. Friends were the most frequently cited influences on wardrobes, both in terms of what individuals buy and what they choose from their closets to wear. Family members were also frequently mentioned, but they appeared in much higher concentration when discussing influences on shopping itself. Job requirements and religious beliefs were two additional factors mentioned in interviews, albeit sparsely. All these pressures operate against the notion that clothing choices are, at their most basic level, about self-expression. Moreover, the prevalence of gender policing throughout my interviews suggests that getting one's gender presentation right is one of the most important reasons that those in our social worlds interfere with the contents of our closets. While Steve did not question the presence of ill-fitting shirts from high school in George's closet, he immediately jumped on the opportunity to comment on a pink shirt. There exists an abundance of evidence that gender socialization occurs demonstratively in childhood (Thorne, 1994), but in reality, our gender performances are constantly evaluated and either rewarded or punished. We do express our internal sense of gender through our clothes; in that sense, our closets do enable self-expression. However, we rely others to inform us about our success at portraying the femaleness or maleness we wish to express, and we also rely on them to provide us with feedback about the appropriateness of our gender presentation.

So why should we care about presenting an appropriate and successful gender to the world around us? The answer to that question, which I will explore in the next chapter, is that it's all about sex.

### **Chapter Three – Sex: If You Try to Do Too Much with It, It's Like Wearing Too Many Accessories**

*"The first time I wore this shirt to a party, I got laid...so I've worn it to every party ever since, and it hasn't let me down yet, if you know what I mean."*

*– Lucky, one of my participants*

Why are college students so preoccupied with sex? Biologists might contend that we all merely fall prey to an ancient need to propagate the species, or maybe just that proximity to similar others exacerbates lingering adolescent hormone surges. Some psychologists argue that sex is one way we get both our physiological and belonging needs met on Maslow's hierarchy, and the more social-psychological oriented among them indicate that we all are just overwhelmed by pressure to have sex from our peers. Even within the discipline of sociology, there are a number of available explanations. For instance, Foucault (1990) takes the stance that historical attempts to repress sexuality actually serve to increase our discourse about it, and Carpenter (2005) offers that the insight that the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s made pre-marital sex available to young adults en masse. In short, there are as many attempts to answer this question within and across disciplines as there are colleges and universities in the United States. So with so many possible answers, how do we know which one is the most correct?

One theory that underlies the proliferation of these other hypotheses comes from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990), who offers the idea that sexuality works in tandem with gender to structure the entirety of social life. To Sedgwick, the power that gender has over our social performances is not autonomous; rather, it comes to life because it is inextricably tied to sexuality. The evidence of that connection can be seen in the way we categorize sexuality: of the seemingly infinite dimensions on which we could categorize our attractions to others, "sexual orientation" in our conversations and cultural discourse frequently refers to the gender of those individuals to whom we are attracted. Accordingly, one way in which sex exerts a pervasive influence over the lives of all of us, including college students, is because of its intertwined relationship with gender, that most fundamental ordering axis of social life. Taking the axis of gender and the axis of sexuality together, then, four categories emerge

which inform all of our interactions with others: “heterosexual” men, “heterosexual” women, “homosexual” men, and “homosexual” women. Being attractive to others (and, ultimately, to be able to participate in important social systems like families), therefore involves presenting absolutely concrete, identifiable, and appropriate membership in one of those four categories.

Of Sedgwick’s four categories, most of us would probably agree that the two categories of women taken together are the group most concerned with getting their gender “right” via attractiveness, and evidence to support that informal hypothesis can be identified throughout the social world. Makeover shows on a variety of networks disproportionately feature female candidates for wardrobe overhauls and microdermabrasion (Davis et al, 2008), and employees at skin care kiosks in shopping malls only assault female customers with promises of smoother nails and vanished wrinkles (Davis, 2008). In more formal ways, a variety of sociologists have observed similar trends. For example, Victoria Pitts-Taylor (2007) highlights women’s disproportionate pursuance of cosmetic surgery, and Rose Weitz (2001) examines female use of hair as a site of power. Bringing clothes back into the picture, Diana Crane (2000) argues along similar lines that, over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, clothing has physically and socially constrained women, as it has been the mechanism through which they could display their attractiveness to potential husbands. Most of us would probably not endorse such an extreme (and, in fact, probably argue to the contrary that women have acquired a great deal of agency over the course of the past hundred years). However, it is plainly obvious in popular magazines that women are expected to (and do) use fashion as a means for obtaining love and sex in ways that men are not. Even if many of us treat popular media as fluffy and inconsequential to decision-making processes in people’s real lives, the truth is that magazines do exert influences on individual choices in both subtle and overt ways (Carpenter, 2005).

Kandi is the embodiment of magazine fashion, and my interview with her highlighted how fashion magazines can affect women’s lives in far-reaching, bordering on unbelievable ways. Upon entering her bedroom to conduct her interview, the first thing I noticed was not her closet – it

was the densely-packed, neatly-organized bookshelf located adjacent to her closet, containing what appeared to be every issue of *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, and *Vogue* published in the last ten years. While the question from my interview schedule about sources of fashion inspiration had received minimal responses from my interviewees thus far in my data collection process, I knew that Kandi would prove to be the exception to that rule. In fact, I did not even have a chance to get to the end of my list of standard questions before her self-professed “addiction to fashion mags” emerged. She described her everyday style as “watered-down Cosmo style,” further noting that “absolutely everything in my wardrobe, except for my JMU tees and my Sigma Epsilon Chi letters, is inspired by one of my fashion mags.” The narrative she provided as we delved through her overpacked closet told a number of sub-stories about seasons and trends, essentially offering a chronicle of women’s fashion according to those three magazines over the course of the previous four years. Where many of the women I interviewed had drawers stacked full of the same Abercrombie and Fitch polo in different hues and degrees of faux-distressing, Kandi’s closet was an eclectic mix of trendy pieces specifically engineered to avoid “all that preppy crap most JMU girls wear around campus.”

I followed that comment on her part with the obvious follow-up question: what’s the benefit in not looking like everyone else? Her answer was simple: “I don’t have great boobs, so I need to do something to get attention from guys.” After I pressed her further about why that was important to her, she elaborated,

“To be totally honest, I mean, yeah, I’m at college and everything but, you know, I don’t really know what I want to do with my life. Well, I mean, I know what I want out of my life...a family, you know, a house in the suburbs with a really wonderful guy and really wonderful kids, but I just don’t know about the job part. I’m gonna have a job – there’s no freaking way I’d ever do the stay-at-home mom thing, but I just don’t have a serious career path in mind, you know? So it’s not like I’m at JMU just shopping for a guy, because I know I, um, you know, need a degree or whatever, but finding a possible husband before I graduate is, like, really, *really* important. So I use fashionable stuff to get guys to maybe be interested in me, because my body just can’t compare to some

of those really, you know, pretty girls on campus who can wear whatever and still have guys drool all over them.”

While it would be unfair to suggest that this is representative of all women in college, the handful of women who addressed their post-college futures in their interviews with me all indicated that having both a career and family were both priorities in their futures. Accordingly, dressing in a way that might attract desirable male partners was a priority for them in their current lives, and that theme was repeatedly evident in conversations I had with many of my female participants about what they might wear to a party.

Although Christina’s room and closet were much less initially striking than Kandi’s were, her comments about parties were laden with the same intent to attract men. At the very beginning of her interview, when I asked for a quick overview of her closet, she pointed out a fairly sizable portion (just over a third) of her closet and was what she described as her “party wear.” I inquired about why she might devote such a large portion of her wardrobe space to clothes that would ostensibly only emerge on Friday and Saturday nights. She replied, “You can wear the same shirt to class that you wore last week or on Monday or whatever, but I won’t wear the same top to a party twice in the same year,” and later added, “I go shopping for school maybe once a year...but I swear I go shopping for a new top to wear out that weekend twice a month.” Her roommates added perhaps the most telling commentary of all, though, when they (rather belligerently) asked why she would spend so much time and money on shopping when “guys just don’t notice that stuff!” Christina dismissed their inquiry at first, but revisited the question when I later asked her what she would wear to a party and why:

“Well, you know I’d have to go shopping for a new shirt or halter top or something, put it with maybe these pants [dark, tapered jeans]...and why? Well...I want guys to notice me, and I know *you all* [looking at housemates] don’t think they notice that stuff, but they have to learn to notice if they ever expect to get a girl to go home with them. Not that I’d ever go home with a guy I met at some party, oh my god, no, but I’m all about flirting and not

putting out, because getting to turn down some guy that’s been drooling on me all night is so powerful.”

Evidence from my interviews with Kandi and Christina suggests that, despite the work of feminists over the past decades to have women’s worth shifted away from their bodies, that emphasis is still present and still extremely influential. The women in my sample all dress themselves in different ways, according to what they believe to be most eye-catching, but nearly all of them shared a common goal of obtaining access to sex. None of them mentioned that they wore particular outfits as a means to engage in the physical act of sex, but many of them – whether talking about forming families or about obtaining sexual attention just to dismiss it – described male attention as a defining factor in determining what their closets contained. While women have certainly made significant gains in having their worth evaluated in arenas other than physical attractiveness, I find it to be incredibly evident that getting access to social rewards (including sex and sexual attention) requires getting femininity “right,” and a requisite component of that is wearing clothing that invites the male gaze.

The obvious flaw in my argument, however, is that I am employing a heterosexual assumption; in reality, not all women are dressing to invite the male gaze. In fact, many of them are dressing to dissuade it. When I first panned Taylor’s closet with my camcorder, my initial thought was that, had she not been standing next to me, I would have assumed it was a closet belonging to a male student. She confirmed this unspoken observation on my part during our initial tour of her closet: “So...I’m sure you can tell I don’t really do girl’s clothes. I have a couple of, uh, necessities that you can’t get from the guy’s section [gesturing to dresser drawers], but everything else came from there.” When asked about the reasons for her department-store boundary crossing, she indicated that “women’s clothes are just so damn uncomfortable! In a guy’s collared shirt, I can look good *and* I can move my arms! And it doesn’t cling to my body in a way that screams, ‘Hey! Over here! Look at my tits!’” She referred to dissuading male attention again when I asked what was important about getting dressed for a special occasion:

“You keep asking what’s important...in every situation, I need to be comfortable, I need to not take a lot of time to get dressed. And it needs to look like me, like I’m queer, because that’s really important, that people see that. So even when I want to take more time to get ready for something special, the queer thing is huge. I want girls to think I look amazing and maybe even handsome, and if I can get the straight ones to think that? Way better...but guys, I really don’t care. They can look or want me or whatever, but I think they probably wouldn’t.”

For Taylor, even though she dresses to invite female attention, she is still aware of the prevalent existence of the male gaze. Furthermore, she observes that dressing to “hide” her body is the catalyzing factor that keeps men from directing sexual attention toward her. Sex is still a defining factor in her wardrobe, just not heterosexual sex.

The idea that male sexual attention is body-focused also emerged in my interviews with gay men, including Will. Nearly all of his comments about why he might wear certain things were connected intimately to showcasing his body and obtaining attention from other gay men. Even in talking about what he might wear to class, he quipped, “Tight clothes. Not like spandex-tight, but I’m thin and have a great ass, so I love the way a tee and skinny jeans look on me. I know I look gay, but whatever, I am! And why not show off what I’ve got?” Will and many of the other gay men in my participant pool repeatedly offered answers to my questions that overlapped with the responses of my female participants in two important ways. First, both straight women and gay men discussed showcasing their bodies as means of attracting sexual attention from men. Second, both queer women and gay men highlighted the importance of being visibly non-heterosexual. For them, encouraging indiscriminate sexual attention is insufficient; instead, it has to be *queer* sexual attention. That is, getting their gender right is not about a simple equation that equates femaleness with femininity and maleness with masculinity, but instead about creating gendered displays that attracts partners of their desired gender.

In stark contrast, many of the straight men in my sample openly admitted that some of their clothing choices were motivated largely by trying to “not look gay.” Research conducted by Pascoe (2005) offers the idea that performing masculinity requires the repudiation of a gay identity,

and Kimmel and Mahler (2003) argue that masculinity necessitates homophobia. Lucky, the participant in my sample responsible for the quote at the beginning of the chapter, brought this notion to life. When I asked about getting dressed for a party, he was extremely forthright:

“Okay, wow, this is hard, because, okay, guys never admit to this stuff. I don’t think I’ve ever admitted to it, but...we think about what we wear. Maybe not as much as girls do, but there’s definitely calculation in looking like you don’t care, and even more about making sure you don’t look gay...and I know that’s really a bad thing to say, but it’s the truth. I love the attention I get from girls when I bother to look more decent than usual, but I couldn’t do it on a regular basis, because I don’t want to deal with people thinking I’m gay.”

Lucky was the only straight man in my sample to openly discuss how he manipulated aspects of his wardrobe to avoid being perceived as anything other than heterosexual. Several others, though, addressed the idea that not caring about one’s appearance is indicatively heterosexual male. For instance, Steve, from the previous chapter, said, “On some level, I guess I do care about what I wear, because I won’t wear stuff that’s dirty...so yeah, I think I do care, just about different things than girls do.” George also offered what I find to be meaningful insight when he said, “I know a lot of people, including me, really, kinda think about not caring about clothes as a kind of real apathy about them, but after you’ve asked all these questions about my clothes, I’m kinda starting to think that I make a decision to not care about my clothes in the same way that some people do to care...so it’s really that all of us care about how we look, it just sorta manifests in different ways.” Following from that idea, if straight men were truly ambivalent about their clothes, they would not be able to offer any thoughts about the intent behind their clothing choices. In the case of Lucky (among others), that intent is obtaining sex from straight women, and it is incontrovertibly present in his interview. This reveals that all of us, regardless of our position within Sedgwick’s axes of gender and sexuality, are motivated to get our gender performance correct with our clothing in order to receive desired sexual attention.

Is it really true, though, that sex is the only motivating reason to present a clear and appropriate gendered self to the world? Of course not – there are numerous social ramifications to openly violating gender boundaries, and I will explore them in the next chapter.

#### **Chapter Four – Blender Trouble: When Crossing Gender Boundaries Hurts and When It Works**

Of all the individuals I interviewed, Taylor (who I introduced in the previous chapter) had the most visibly gender-crossing closet, and her stories made the consequences of frequent boundary violation most obvious to me. When I asked her what she might wear to a job interview, my question was initially greeted with a long, ponderous silence. I prompted her to share what she was thinking, and she said,

“Part of the problem is that I’ve never had an interview for a *real* job, one that actually mattered to pay my rent or something...and then there’s the other whole problem of having to dress up. I have a couple of skirts in here [gesture toward closet] somewhere, but I don’t feel like me when I wear them, so I try not to...I guess I would stand here for a long time, get frustrated, eventually pick a dress shirt, hope that the person interviewing me is more interested in what I can do than how feminine I’m, well, I’m not.”

While she did not explicitly state that being inadequately feminine was a liability in terms of her future career, she acknowledged that there is a risk in appearing non-gender-normative in the professional world. There also exist potential threats to personal comfort, as she noted in her response to my question about what is important about getting dressed for class: “I have long hair, so I don’t get mistaken for a guy all that often, but I’m pretty self-conscious about it...it’s just pretty awkward when people realize they’ve screwed it [gender attribution] up, and I hate dealing with it.” These comments highlight that there are very real social consequences to having a closet filled to the brim with clothes from the “wrong” side of the store.

Despite the problems with her visible gender crossing, Taylor was also quick to admit that her clothing choices were not the most socially dangerous clothing choices one could make. “Yeah, I feel awkward sometimes, and I know that doing what I need to do to be comfy can sometimes be an issue, but...well, okay, if I were a guy in a skirt, I’d have a lot more problems getting a job than I do as a girl in pants, and I can be pretty sure nobody’s gonna try to beat me to death over it.” In comparing

Taylor to a hypothetical gender-flipped equivalent, it is evident that the visibility of one's gender crossing is linked to how problematic that crossing is. There is no longer a cultural taboo regarding women wearing pants, while one persists about men wearing skirts, so we see the former much more frequently than the latter. As a result, Taylor's experiences in breaching boundaries are not nearly as punitive as they might be if she were engaging in the same type of wardrobe crossing as a man.

Such sanctions were highlighted by Aiden, one of the men in my sample. When I asked him if there were any items in his closet that he never wore, he replied, "I don't think I have anything that I absolutely *never* wear, but I do have a couple things that only see daylight about once a year...like this fabulous number! Every girl should have a little black dress, even if she only comes out on Halloween!" I then inquired why the dress only left his closet on Halloween, and he said,

"Well, I don't have the energy or the time or, really, the money to do drag all the time, but girls just get way more fun clothes than us boys do. Halloween is just like, well, it's the one time I can put on a wig and do my face and throw on some fuck-me pumps and wear a really cute dress and have people think I'm freaking fabulous! If I went to school like that, Christ, everyone would think there was something wrong with me."

Here again, the conversation highlights that there are social sanctions for gender violations. Although Aiden does not offer tangible consequences such as job loss or potential assault, he is clearly aware that wearing clothes intended for another gender could produce an unwelcome result. His commentary also reveals something else about the nature of gender crossing: there are occasions on which it is acceptable (and perhaps even encouraged) to violate boundaries, but those opportunities are infrequent and require contexts distinct from our repetitive daily lives. His closet, then, contains the tools necessary to produce two very discrete gendered identities, and he chooses to keep one of them largely secret because of social pressure.

Another one of my participants who discussed having two separate gendered identities and using social contexts to keep them

separate was Amber. After introducing me to her 22 pairs of sunglasses, she continued the tour of her closet by saying, "Okay, so this side is Amber, and this side is Cherie...Cherie is my slutty, alcoholic, party-loving alter ego, so when I'm completely trashed and getting all up on some guy I don't even know or dancing on a table or something, I can say that was Cherie and not have to deal with it the next day as Amber." Throughout her interview, she answered all of my what-would-you-wear-and-why questions with two answers, one for her "real life" and one for Cherie. As one example, asking about her potential attire for a job interview was met with, "Well, Cherie wouldn't ever have a job, so I don't need to answer that for her, but Amber would probably wear one of these blouses with a pair of chic dress pants." My question about what she would wear to a party garnered a similar response:

"Let's do Cherie first, because she's easier...if Cherie's going to a party, she's going to wear something low-cut...jeans that are a size too small, something like that, yeah, and Amber, well, um...I do actually go to parties as myself sometimes, and I dress sort of the same, just...well, just less, okay, I look like less of a skank. I don't know, it's weird, but it really is like being two completely different people. Like I go to class and I'm this one girl, but then I go out and it's like, holy crap, this is still me but, uh, at the same time it's like I'm this other girl, too."

Although Amber's different identities do not cross the female-male divide like Aiden's do, she unmistakably performs two disconnected gender identities in her life, with social context being the factor that determines which is more appropriate. She also discussed experiencing negative social consequences as a result of her alter ego when I asked if anything in her closet had a good story behind it. She grabbed a purple tank top and said,

"A couple semesters ago, I wore this to a party...I was so hung over the next morning that I just went to class in the same clothes I wore out and slept in and yeah, it was gross, but anyway...after class, this guy comes up to me and he's like [voice deepens], 'Hey, are you Cherie?' I was so horrified, I was like 'um, no, I'm Amber, but I think you met Cherie.' I swear, for the rest of the semester,

he looked at me like I was some sort of like swamp creature or something.”

Amber localized negative social sanctions in one individual, but what she described was almost exactly the same as Aiden’s concerns about what might happen if he wore a dress to class. I find this difference in severity of response to be connected to the intensity of the boundary violation occurring. Because both of Amber’s identities, differently gendered though they may be, both fit under the umbrella of “female,” they do not evoke negative consequences en masse. In contrast, if Aiden were to alternate between female gender performance and male gender performance, he would likely draw more serious consequences from many more people in his life.

Although it might seem that closets containing multiple gender identities are unusual, my interview with Jeremy surprisingly destroyed that notion. He was one of the only participants who did not clean and rearrange before I arrived to interview him and his roommate. His closet only contained six articles of clothing (a suit, three ties, a windbreaker, and a wool coat), and the rest of his clothing was scattered throughout his room, piled both in and out of dresser drawers. When asked to come up with one word to describe his sense of style, he said, “Probably...relaxed. I wear a lot of jeans, a lot of t-shirts, a lot of sneakers. I think of myself as a pretty average guy, and my clothes are pretty average, too...I just like to blend in.” His answers were simple and straightforward, until I asked why he would wear a suit to a job interview:

“Expectations, mostly, I think, because I hate wearing this thing. It makes me feel like a totally different guy, and it’s just stupid, because it makes interviews useless...they say they want to get to know you, but they really just want to see if the guy you are in those five minutes is the guy they want to hire, and then you’re stuck being that guy as long as you work there. But the weirdest thing is that that guy is you, just a different version.”

His answer to my question about what he might wear on a date, he continued along the same lines, saying,

“Depends on who I wanted to be, which might sound pretty cheesy, but who am I kidding? It’s not about being yourself, it’s about being the right version of yourself for the situation, so it would have to depend on the girl and what we were doing and how long we had been together and all sorts of other stuff like that. Sometimes I’m the guy’s-guy on a date, and sometimes I’m the gentleman, and that changes what I would wear.”

Jeremy does not give names to his varying identities in the same way that Amber does, but his multiple genders exist nonetheless. Because he does not create absolute divisions between those genders and stays under the “male” gender umbrella, he runs a much lower risk of experiencing negative social consequences as a result of expressing multiple selves than Amber or Aiden.

All of the participants described in this chapter, as well as all the others I interviewed, have closets that contain the tools to construct differently gendered selves for any occasion in which they might find themselves. Jeremy’s emphasis on contextual factors draws attention to the fact that there is a complex interplay between social context and individual choice that goes into determining a person’s performed gender at any given time. For some of us, like Taylor, we choose to visibly layer multiple genders onto our bodies with our clothes regardless of context or risk of negative consequences. For others, like Aiden and Amber, our multiple genders become obvious only when we conduct side-by-side comparisons of our clothes across situations, enabling us in large part to avoid persistent social sanctions. For most of us who are like Jeremy, though, our multiple genders lie hidden in our closets, because keeping them a secret is necessary for social functioning. All of us have multiple and dynamic gender identities which we express through our wardrobes; the only difference among us lies in the visibility of those multiple identities.

## **Chapter Five – We’re All Obviously from Earth, So Why Do We Think That Men Are from Mars and Women Are from Venus?**

In chapters two and three, I explored how interpersonal influences and sexual attention affect wardrobe decisions and the ways in which they shape gender presentation. Thorne (1994) discusses how the individuals in our lives encourage femininity in girls and masculinity in boys, which indicates that our families and friends press us into two distinctly gendered boxes. Sedgwick (1990) suggests instead that the two ordering axes of our social lives, gender and sexuality, create four categories for appropriate gender expression. Both these phenomena were evident in my research, but my discovery in chapter four challenges these previously offered ideas for conceptualizing gender. I posit that each of us has a constantly changing array of possible genders, and in any given social situation, we choose what we find to be the most socially legitimate gender identity for that situation. That choice is based upon the individuals and broader social context around us, so ultimately, social structures are not herding us into one of two stable gender categories as has been previously suggested. In contrast, those structures actually encourage us to perform as many different and flexible gender identities as possible in order to adapt to as many contexts as possible.

Despite the existence of multiple gender identities in our closets and our lives, our world seems to function as if there are only two possibilities for gender expression and each one of us possesses only one stable gender. Birth certificates require either female or male to be listed in order to be valid, and having that designation changed at any point during one’s life requires significant intervention. Restrooms are largely only available with signs that say men or women, and to enter one that conflicts with your gender presentation is to risk harassment, assault, or perhaps even legal sanctions. Shopping malls, as I have already indicated, require that you choose a gendered side on which to shop. Although we may be free in malls to switch sides frequently (as opposed to bathrooms, which afford us less freedom to switch) one side must be chosen in any given moment. The two do not coexist; they are marked as separate.

Going back to chapter one, Douglas (1966) offers us insight as to why we continue to endorse a two-category gender system despite a

volume of evidence contradicting it: simplicity is the key. She indicates that the way we make order of our world, including gender, is by minimizing the available number of categories and exaggerating the differences between members of those categories. Instead of trying to negotiate tens of thousands of gender identities for each person in our lives, it is much easier to make sense of one gender for each person and only two total genders. Certainly, it is easier to provide two bathrooms than several thousand. Rather than accounting for the rich complexity of gendered possibilities in our world, our need for minimalism stifles individual expression. Unfortunately, this simplicity is seen as natural and inevitable (because of its connection to sex), and accordingly creates a culture of gendered expectations that punishes more people for inadequate gender performances than it rewards people for appropriate performances. Because our oversimplified gender binary creates a dichotomy between proper and improper gender expression, it also necessarily creates a system of stratified power. When we label something as imperfect, we also define it as dirty, something to be avoided. As long as gender exists, so too will power inequities, because the two are intricately connected through our attempts to impose order on the messy complexity of social life.

All hope is not lost, though; social structures in their current forms are only perpetuated through the exercise of human agency (Hays, 1994). Culture does not imprison us into a world without choice. Instead, it provides us with a range of options from which we pick and choose, enabling us to be active participants in the construction of our social worlds. Our closets reflect this symbiotic relationship: we choose clothing from among all available options that reflects what we wish to express to the people around us. Closets, then, are epiphenomenal to complex gender performances, many of which work to counter the simplistic binary gender system. In that sense, closets are the cultural toolkits (Swidler, 1986) for transgressive social action.

There is hope in our closets.

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