

Hoodie Today, Gown Tomorrow:  
An Ideological Rhetorical Analysis of Gender-Neutral Clothing

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## **Dedication**

To the friend who inspired my words on this topic.

To those who didn't believe clothing talked.

To the family, and teachers, and coaches, and friends

Who believed, or did not, that I'd do it.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to begin by thanking my gracious Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for the knowledge to understand, and ability to learn, and the grace to complete this project.

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Dr. Graves – Thank You

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## Chapter One

### Introduction:

#### Tell Me, Really, Why Did You Want to Write This?

“It is an interesting question how far men would retain their relative rank if they were divested of their clothes” ~ Henry David Thoreau<sup>1</sup>

“Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings.” ~ Genesis 3:7<sup>2</sup>

“Clothes are never a frivolity: they always mean something” ~ James Laver<sup>3</sup>

### *Introduction*

The American fashion industry is a multi-billion dollar business that influences almost every aspect of a person’s life. Little girls begin playing dress-up almost as soon as they can walk, creating caricatures of themselves in Mommy’s clothes. The continued emphasis on clothing throughout a little girl’s life insures that, whether it be a purse or a prom dress, a hoodie or a home-coming gown, what a woman wears will have an impact on who she is perceived to be. Although often more visible in women’s clothing, the importance of clothing remains true for men as well. A high school letter jacket, a football uniform, baggy pants worn with the crotch seam hitting at the knee, a Brooks Brothers business suit; each of these is a significant symbol of who the wearer is and with whom he will identify. Henry David Thoreau noted the

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<sup>1</sup> Henry David Thoreau. *Walden Civil Disobedience*. American Renaissance. Americanrenaissance.com. 2010.

<sup>2</sup> The Bible. New King James Version.

<sup>3</sup> James Laver. *Style in Costume*. (Oxford University Press. Oxford: 1949).

importance of clothing in the development of power and roles, Adam and Eve's first act after the Biblical fall was to create clothes, while James Laver highlighted the inherent communicative properties of clothing, and scholarship has recently begun to catch up to this literary knowledge.

One of the main communicative properties of clothing is the ability to indicate a specific gender identification. The late 1970's and 80's saw a renaissance of scholarship on the psychology, history, formation, and meaning of clothing. This research began with scholars looking to the Victorian Era in what has become colloquially known as "corset scholarship,"<sup>4</sup> but spread into the communicative properties of modern clothing soon after. Michael Solomon's *The Psychology of Fashion*<sup>5</sup> provided articles from leading scholars in several fields addressing various topics of clothing and fashion as communicative objects. In the 1990's this field was furthered by Ruth Barnes and Joanne Eicher's *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning in Cultural Contexts*,<sup>6</sup> which recognized the important communicative role played by clothing in the formation of gender identification within cultural norms.

Although this gender identifying and creating function has been served by clothing for thousands of years, several articles of clothing have recently been adopted by both sexes, creating several specific pieces of clothing, which are largely gender-neutral. The basic construction of the flip-flop, the logo hoodie, the unfitted T-shirt, and the baseball cap are very similar for both the male and female versions of the garments. These pieces of gender-neutral

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<sup>4</sup> For a fascinating work on the corset see Valerie Steele's, *The Corset: A Cultural History*. (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2001). The premise of her work is largely in opposition to the general consensus of previous scholarship on the subject, and therefore her bibliography provides a thorough review of all material previously published on the topic.

<sup>5</sup> Michael R. Solomon. *The Psychology of Fashion*. (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> Ruth Barnes and Joanne B. Eicher. *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning in Cultural Contexts*. (New York: Berg, 1992).

clothing have become popular in many age groups but especially in the Generation Y<sup>7</sup> and iGeneration<sup>8</sup> populations. These facts will provide the operational definition of the term “gender-neutral” clothing. For the purposes of this study, then, “gender-neutral clothing” will mean, “clothing pieces which are constructed with no significant differences between the male and the female versions of the article, are not associated with a specific occupation, and do not ostensibly transgress gender norms.” Because establishing a definition for gender-neutral clothing is a sidebar and not the main goal of this thesis the use, viability, and defense of this definition will be addressed throughout the remainder of this work.

These types of clothing may at first seem uninspired as a topic for research; however, they may gain significance in the reader’s eye when looked at as a covert violation of traditional sex roles.<sup>9</sup> Although much of feminist thought has moved past Betty Friedan’s original ideas,<sup>10</sup> there are still ways in which women and men are expected to fulfill traditional roles. Gender-neutral clothing breeds controversy to the extent that some individuals who choose to wear the items are belittled, demeaned, or assumed to be homo- or hetero-sexual,<sup>11</sup> in part because it violates these roles. It is interesting to note, however, that this clothing type is rarely identified as the cause of the conflict. Gender-neutral clothing, then, should be looked at because it

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<sup>7</sup> Ranging from those born in the late 1970’s to the late 1990’s according to Howe and Strauss. The present research references most specifically those in the under 30 demographic.

<sup>8</sup> Those born in the late 1990’s through the present day.

<sup>9</sup> Betty Friedan. *The Feminine Mystique*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963). Friedan’s work looked at the effects of nurture on the understanding of what it means to be a woman and characterized this socially constructed understanding as “sex role conditioning” [see Imelda Whelehan’s *Modern Feminist Thought*]. This understanding, what Friedan named “The Problem that has No Name” (57), voiced the opinion that women who strove for experiences in the “male” realm of higher education, politics, and business, were unhappy because they had rejected their “natural” feminine calling.

<sup>10</sup> See Bonnie J. Dow and Julia T. Wood’s *The SAGE Handbook of Gender and Communication* for a thorough discussion of current thoughts and trends in the discipline.

<sup>11</sup> A friend of the author participates in the gender-neutral clothing phenomenon and has been repeatedly questioned about her sexuality based solely on her choices of clothing.

surreptitiously violates both the female and the male sex roles,<sup>12</sup> and forces a confrontation between cultural norms and current trends.

The present study will focus, for the sake of relative brevity, on the functions and effects of gender-neutral clothing on the female population. Research suggests that, in spite of significant changes and leaps forward in the roles and opportunities open to women, the United States is still in large part a patriarchal society.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, this examination seeks to analyze the trend of gender-neutral clothing and its effects on women, and to fill the gap left in scholarship to this point.

Chapter two will review literature on clothing as a form of symbolic communication and review scholarship on the topic of gender-neutral clothing to date. This review begins with the origins of symbolic communication and objectics and follows the development of the discipline into the study of clothing. This chapter will also review scholarship on the study of gender identity and gender creation through communicative objects. The specific study of gender will also look at the part played by sex roles in the hegemonic subjugation or freeing choice of the men and women who fill them.

Chapter three proposes a critical rhetorical approach to examine the ideological causes and effects of gender-neutral clothing on the women who wear it. This chapter seeks to understand the inherent and assigned meanings of clothing items as symbolic communicators of performed gender and identity. The approach also proposes sites of study for better understanding the problems caused for women by the clothing that carries a gender-neutral meaning. This understanding leads to the research questions: How do the meanings of gender-

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<sup>12</sup> The questions of sex roles will be addressed in greater detail in chapter two.

<sup>13</sup> Both research and anecdote point toward the truth of this statement. See Whisner, Brummett, Bulter, Fischer-Mirkin, Etkoff, Glick et al., and Jasper and Roach-Higgins.

neutral clothing work to sustain the subjugation of women in a male hegemonic society? And, How do the meanings of gender-neutral clothing work to thwart the traditional roles established by dress in a hegemonic society?

Chapter four focuses on dealing with the difficulties proposed by the choice of text. Because gender-neutral clothing does not have nice limiting edges or boundaries, this chapter will detail two important steps in the research. First, I will present a narrative description of the text currently under analysis. This step will include physical descriptions of the four items I have chosen to use, and popular culture conexting for the items. The second portion of this chapter will code the artifact for potential meaning by applying aspects identified as significant in Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity,<sup>14</sup> and the sites of analysis as proposed by Barry Brummett<sup>15</sup> to engender an understanding of how gender-neutral clothing communicates.

Chapter five will address the research questions with the aim of presenting both sides of the story about gender-neutral clothing. The examination of gender-neutral clothing cannot neglect the study of women who both knowingly and unknowingly participate in the trend. This chapter seeks to understand how the choice to wear gender-neutral clothing, the actions of those who do, and the understanding and use of that choice affects the meanings assigned to the clothes. Through an application of Butler and Brummett to the previously coded text, this chapter will offer a view of the liberating and the confining aspects of the gender-neutral clothing trend.

The final chapter of this work will address the findings of all the previous chapters. William L. Northstine, Carole Blair, and Gary A. Copeland's *Critical Questions" Invention, Creativity, and the Criticism of Discourse and Media*, address the problem of overly professional

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<sup>14</sup> Judith Butler. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* (New York: Routledge. 2006.)

<sup>15</sup> Barry Brummett. *Rhetoric in Popular Culture, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed* (New York, NY: Sage, 2010.) 180.

research in the field of rhetoric, and its penchant to effectively “rip the heart” out of rhetorical study.<sup>16</sup> Critical rhetoric, of which this study makes up a part, works to address this failing by providing, not just observations, but recommendations to its readers.<sup>17</sup> Chapter six will provide these recommendations with an emphasis on what steps can be taken by female wearers of gender-neutral clothing to thwart the more traditional meanings assigned to them.

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<sup>16</sup> William L. Northstine, Carole Blair, and Gary A. Copeland’s *Critical Questions” Invention, Creativity, and the Criticism of Discourse and Media*. (Boston, MA: McGraw Hill, 2003.) 18.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 43.

## Chapter Two

### Literature Review –

### Or the Information Generation Section

#### *Introduction*

In spite of the widespread popularity of gender-neutral clothing pieces such as hoodies and flip-flops, there are serious potential problems confronting the trend's female participants. As previously mentioned, in a patriarchal society such as the United States, women who wish to communicate through gender-neutral clothing are sometimes belittled or demeaned,<sup>18</sup> while in other cases they are assumed to be homosexual or transgendered.<sup>19</sup> To begin research into the potential helps and harms of gender-neutral clothing it is necessary to create a better understanding of how these symbols work in both the communication process and in the creation of gender and identity. In the following review of literature I will first examine some of the background and importance of clothing in communication. Second, I will review the theories of symbolic communication, which provide the foundation for the study of communicating through objects. And finally, I will review key sources on the use of clothing both to assist in communication as well as its potential to further disparities between the sexes.

#### *Background and Justification*

In *Survival of the Prettiest*, author Nancy Etcoff purposes that the desire for beauty is not a societal construct as often postulated in previous research, but an inherent biological need in

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<sup>18</sup> Mary Whisner. "Gender-Specific Clothing Regulations: A Study in Patriarchy." *Harvard Women's Law Journal* 17, (1982): 74-120.

<sup>19</sup> See note 11.

human beings.<sup>20</sup> Etcoff postulated that humans have always been forced to judge a person based on his or her outward appearance and that the concepts we often find beautiful and blame on social pressures, are actually biological indicators of a person's health and fitness. The theory of beauty as a biological necessity can be loosely extended to the concept of dress.<sup>21</sup> Having a designer outfit may not communicate anything about a wearer's health or reproductive ability, but it will communicate something about his or her leisure and luxury income. Communicative clothing – and I will argue that all clothing is inherently communicative – provides a means of expression and creativity to the wearer and allows him or her to symbolically identify with specifics in his or her culture.<sup>22</sup> The notion of clothing as symbolic communication finds its roots in early 20<sup>th</sup> century ideas of all communication as symbolic.

### *Symbolic Communication*

The theory of communication through symbols is largely credited to C.K. Ogden and I. A. Richards' *The Meaning of Meaning*, which set forth theories of signs and definitions, linguistic tools and communication through these.<sup>23</sup> Ogden and Richards' theory builds on the early work of Augustine and Francis Bacon and their interest in the epistemic, or cognitive, value of signs.<sup>24</sup> Ogden and Richards expanded upon their earlier work with the theory that words

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<sup>20</sup> Nancy Etcoff. *Survival of the Prettiest*. (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> Ernest Dichter, "Why We Dress the Way We Do." In *The Psychology of Fashion*, ed. Michael R. Solomon, 29-37, (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1985), 32.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 36-37.

<sup>23</sup> John Paul Russo. *I. A. Richards: His Life and Work*. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins university Press. 1989), 110.

<sup>24</sup> Craig R. Smith. *Rhetoric and Human Consciousness: A History*. 3<sup>rd</sup>. Ed. (Long Grove IL: Waveland Press. 2009), 302.

have no inherent meaning, but are symbols that must be interpreted to create meaning.<sup>25</sup> Ogden and Richards' triangle of reference places the symbol at one bottom corner, the thought at the top of the pyramid, and the referent at the other bottom corner. In this model, the symbol is directly linked to the thought and the thought is directly linked to the referent, but the referent and the symbol are not linked. The symbol must be interpreted to stand for the referent.<sup>26</sup> A furthering of the concept of communication through interpretation of symbols came with publication of George Herbert Mead's ideas in *Mind, Self, and Society*.<sup>27</sup>

Mead's theory posited that human beings can only communicate with each other through language and that it is this language that defines human reality.<sup>28</sup> Symbolic interactionism purposes that it is only through assigning meaning to a symbol that humans are able to communicate using that symbol, and that the specific meaning is assigned to a symbol based on the social interactions and experiences of the symbol user. Mead's basic theory looked only at verbal language, i.e. the spoken and written word, but, happily for our present study, his theory has been expanded to include areas of non-verbal communication due to the prevalence of this type of meaning sharing behavior.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> C.K. Ogden and I. A. Richardson. *The Meaning of Meaning*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (New York: Mariner Books. 1989), 10.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 1274.

<sup>27</sup> George Herbert Mead. *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press. 1934)

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 191-192.

<sup>29</sup> Researchers have noted anywhere from thirty to ninety-six percent of meaning coming from nonverbal communication. However most agree that nonverbals account for typically over sixty percent of meaning communicated. For examples see Albert Mehrabian, *Silent Messages*, (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1971), Gary L. Wells and Richard E. Petty, "The Effects of Overt Head-Movements on Persuasion: Compatibility and Incompatibility of Responses," *Journal of Basic and Applied Social Psychology*. 1. (1980), Michael Argyle, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Behavior*, (Baltimore: MD, Penguin Books, 1967), and others. For a through review see Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo *Attitudes and Persuasion: Classic and Contemporary Approaches*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981).

Nonverbal communication is typically separated into seven separate areas of analysis. These areas include physical movement and facial expression called kinesics, the uses of space called proxemics, touch or haptics, physical appearance, chronemics or the way a person uses time, the use of the eyes called oculosics, and the use of symbolic objects called objectics or artifacts.<sup>30</sup> The importance of nonverbal forms of communication is two-fold and includes believability<sup>31</sup> and identification.<sup>32</sup> Albert Mehrabian has shown that up to fifty-five percent of meaning taken from conversation is actually gleaned from nonverbal messages in the areas of kinesics, proxemics, haptics, chronemics, and oculosics.<sup>33</sup> Although these functions are vital to communication, the present research leaves these at the wayside for the time being and looks, instead, to the equally important role of objects and physical appearance in personal identification. This review will now focus on key works in the area of objectics and the role they play in self-identification.

### *Clothing Talks: Communicative Symbols*

Communicative artifacts, which fall into the category of worn objectics, are “physical objects that are used in construction, display, decoration, or items that are a part of one’s wearing apparel.”<sup>34</sup> This definition of worn objectics includes a wide variety of artifacts such as bodily modifications and additions to the human body. Mary-Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne Eicher<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Charles U. Larson. *Persuasion: Reception and Responsibility*, Ed. 11<sup>th</sup>. (Emeritus IL: Thomson and Wadsworth. 2007), 224.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 235.

<sup>32</sup> Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins, and Joanne B. Eicher. “Dress and identity,” *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 10, no. 2 (1992): 1-8.

<sup>33</sup> Mehrabian. 75.

<sup>34</sup> Larson. 229.

<sup>35</sup> Roach-Higgins and Eicher. 1-2.

include garments, jewelry, accessories, coiffed or colored hair, tattooed skin, pierced ears, scented breath, rhinoplasty, and any other bodily modification, supplement, or hand-held object. Roach-Higgins and Eicher's 1992 publication *Dress and Identity*<sup>36</sup> presents a classification system for these types of artifacts divided first by modification or supplement. The purposes of the current study will look to artifacts in the supplement categories, which are divided into enclosures, bodily attachment, enclosure attachments, and hand-held objects.

Although some gender-neutral pieces of clothing may fall within the latter three categories, the present study will focus on the category of enclosures. In *Dress and Identity*, Roach-Higgins and Eicher argue for the use of the term "dress" in the field of clothing and textiles research and offer comparisons between their favored term and those used by other researchers.<sup>37</sup> The authors argue specifically against the term "clothing" on the basis that the word references specifically the category of bodily enclosures compared to dress, which is broader. It is for this reason I have chosen to use the term "clothing" in the present research and to define it as "an artifact designed as an enclosure of cloth or other material to be placed over, on top of, or around the human body for a purpose."<sup>38</sup> This will provide the functioning definition of clothing for the remainder of my research.

The nonverbal communicative aspects of clothing are well researched in several areas of communication study, most notably the realm of professional communication. *Business*

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Terms argued against by Roach-Higgins and Eicher include "appearance," "ornament," "clothing," "apparel," "costume," and "Fashion." (3)

<sup>38</sup> This definition is culled from the Oxford English Dictionary definition of "clothing," Roach-Higgins and Eicher's definition of dress compared to clothing, and Larson's definition of an artifact. ("clothing, n." OED Online., Roach-Higgins and Eicher, 1., Larson, 229)

*Communication Quarterly*<sup>39</sup> devoted the September 2009 issue to the premise that “business attire is not a mere preliminary to serious communication but is itself a form of communication.”<sup>40</sup> Author Thomas Kiddie presents an historical analysis of trends in business casual and business formal attire and advises that job seekers take careful note of a company’s attire guidelines.<sup>41</sup> Kiddie notes that this will be valuable both for reference when choosing clothing which will communicate the right message about the job seeker during the interview and to help the seeker choose an environment in which he or she will be comfortable long term. Peter Cardon and Ephraim Okoro also address the importance of clothing, focusing specifically on the communication of formal versus casual business clothing.<sup>42</sup> The authors found that, across gender and ethnic lines, various professional characteristics (such as trustworthiness, competence, and authority) are communicated along a continuum of formal to casual clothing.<sup>43</sup>

Another area of clothing communication that has been of interest to scholars, but also to society at large, is that of women’s clothing. In *Dress Code: Understanding the Hidden Meaning of Women’s Clothes*,<sup>44</sup> the author confronts the meanings of women’s clothes ranging from fashion seduction to business professional. Toby Fischer-Mirkin’s premise, however, is that the meanings behind clothes are often hidden from the very person donning the garments, making the interpretation of these significant symbols even more essential. Fischer-Mirkin recognizes the psychological implications of clothing, both on the wearer and on those who

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<sup>39</sup> Sam H. DeKay, ed. “The Communicative Functions of Business Attire,” special issue, *Business Communication Quarterly* 72, no. 3 (2009): 349-372.

<sup>40</sup> DeKay. 349.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Kiddie, “Recent Trends in Business Casual Attire and their Effects on Student Job Seekers” *Business Communication Quarterly* 72, no. 3 (September 2009): 350-354.

<sup>42</sup> Peter w. Cardon and Ephraim A. Okoro, “Professional Characteristics Communicated by Formal Versus Casual Workplace Attire,” *Business Communication Quarterly* 72, no. 3 (September 2009): 355-360.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 358.

<sup>44</sup> Toby Fischer-Mirkin, *Dress Code: Understanding the Hidden Meanings of Women’s Clothes*. (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1995).

observe, and sets out to provide an interpretation of many of the most common symbolic clothing items worn by women without knowledge of their communicative properties.

Interpreting the meanings conveyed by specific items of clothing, in addition to being the underpinning theme of this study, is also a theme pursued by Rebecca Holman in “Clothing as Communication: An Empirical Investigation.”<sup>45</sup> Holman presents an extensive review of the literature and research to date on the communication of clothing as a form of non-verbal discourse, as well as its function as a communicative identity creator. Holman’s article reports on her study of women’s clothing at the University of Texas at Austin and records the empirical findings of her two-part investigation.<sup>46</sup> Although Holman’s study is inconclusive<sup>47</sup> in determining the actual meaning of specific clothing articles, ensembles, or outfits due to the interference of physical features on the control model (facial expression changes were noted in some of the photos, skewing the collected data), her research does provide a theoretical basis for future testing of the specific symbolic communication of various clothing items and ensembles.

This theory of symbolic interactionism is also used to further substantiate the communicative and persuasive properties of clothing in Sandra Stansbery Buckland’s “Fashion as a Tool of World War II: A Case Study Supporting the SI Theory.”<sup>48</sup> Stansbery Buckland presents a case study of Akron, Ohio during World War II and the place of clothing in the

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<sup>45</sup> Rebecca Holman, “Clothing as Communication: An Empirical Investigation,” *Advances in Consumer Research* 7, (1980): 372-377.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 373.

<sup>47</sup> The inconsistencies found in Holman’s testing provide a strong argument for analysis of communication through clothing artifacts from a rhetorical analysis perspective. Holman’s study sought to “decode” the language of specific pieces of clothing in specific social situations. The amount of variables in just this limited study still prevented a solid answer to the original research question. The variety of social contexts, gender-neutral items, personalities, reactions, social norms, attitudes, values, and beliefs involved in gender-neutral clothing are prohibitive. However, the general ideologies of clothing phenomena and the positive or negative implications which surround them provide a strong area for analysis.

<sup>48</sup> Sandra Stansbery-Buckland, “Fashion as a Tool of World War II: A Case Study Supporting the SI Theory.” *Clothing and Textile Research Journal* 18, no. 3 (2009): 140-151.

community during the transitional period of “Rosie the Riveter” and women going to work. The author reviews the original Kaise, Nagasawa, and Hutton study on the theory of symbolic interactionism and uses the five tenets to develop a research methodology for the creation of the proposed case study. Results of the study confirm and reinforce the original theory of symbolic interactionism and the ability of clothing to communicate and persuade.

### *Clothing Talks: Communicating Identity*

Thus far, the research shows that clothing items are highly communicative symbols and important factors in the communication of a person’s identity. In the 1959 publication, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*,<sup>49</sup> Erving Goffman provides support for this understanding of the clothing/identity relationship when he argues that a person creates a version of “self” based upon his or her social interaction, his or her symbolic interaction. Goffman sees symbolic interaction as a performance of what a person wants to be, “a presentation of ourselves to others.”<sup>50</sup> The above presentation requires “wearing” a role whenever entering a new group and keeping up this performance throughout the interaction with the group. This performance allows the chosen identity to be continually communicated and reinforced. In discussing clothing, Goffman posits that these artifacts are so strongly communicative of personal identity because they are, in most respects, those most closely attached to our corporeal selves.<sup>51</sup>

The concept of dress as a communicator of identity, as well as the dramatic or “performance” properties of these artifacts, is also explored by Fred Davis.<sup>52</sup> Davis purposes

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<sup>49</sup> Erving Goffman. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, (New York: Anchor, 1959).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 252.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 112.

<sup>52</sup> Fred Davis. “Of Maids’ Uniforms and Blue Jeans: The Drama of Status Ambivalences in Clothing and Fashion,” *Qualitative Sociology* 12, no. 4. (Winter 1989): 337-355.

that the very ambiguity of the clothing symbols allows the wearer to communicate more about him or her self. Davis cites Coco Chanel's quip that "women should dress as plainly as their maids," to point out that one would only know how to dress like a maid if one was wealthy enough to keep a maid. This paradox and others like it allow fashion to communicate many subtle nuances of the individual to those in the know of how to interpret the symbols. The others who are able to interpret these complex symbols are those in a given social group to which the symbol user wishes to belong making clothing a significant symbol of both a person's individual and social identity.

The ambiguity of dress and its power to communicate identity is also explored by Cynthia Jasper and Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins in "Role Conflict and Conformity in Dress."<sup>53</sup> Jasper and Roach-Higgins' research looked at the dress of more than 5,000 Catholic priests and analyzed their conformity with the norms of the priesthood. The authors look at the subject of dress as a part of role enactment (a person's fulfillment of expected norms of behavior as prescribed by his or her job, station, title, place in society, etc.). The study found that social-psychological factors (i.e. a person's thoughts, attitudes, values, beliefs, ect.) were far greater predictors of dress conformity than were socio-structural factors such as class or job title.<sup>54</sup> This correlation between socio-psychological factors and clothing choice demonstrated the importance of identity communication in clothing choice.

The importance of dress in communicating identity is also recognized in several practical application studies, notably by John Stewart in "Appearance and Punishment: The Attraction-

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<sup>53</sup> Cynthia R. Jasper and Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins. "Role Conflict and Conformity in Dress," *Social Behavior and Personality* 16, (1998): 227-240.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 238.

Leniency Effect in the Courtroom.”<sup>55</sup> Stewart evaluated sixty criminal defendants on aspects of attractiveness and found that those who were dressed in a more attractive<sup>56</sup> manner were significantly less likely to be convicted of serious crimes and, when convicted, were afforded more lenience in sentencing. The ability of clothing to communicate nonverbally to a judge and jury returns to the greater believability of nonverbal symbols such as clothing and the important role they play in signaling identity to an observer

*Clothing Talks: Boys wear Blue, Girls wear Pink*

Clothing as a communicator of identity is also extended to its important role in communicating gender and gender roles. An infant child dressed in a pink hat is presumed to be a girl; if the hat is blue the baby must be a boy. This aspect of clothing functionality continues throughout adulthood but often with consequences more problematic, or even discriminatory, than cute. Peter Glick and his associates report on both the communication of gender and gender roles through dress in “Evaluations of Sexy Women in Low- and High-Status Jobs.”<sup>57</sup> Glick et al. researched the reactions to, and competence evaluations of, women in both high status (managerial) and low status (secretarial) jobs when the subjects were dressed in two different manners (sexy versus business professional). Research findings showed that women in the low status job category were evaluated at the same competence level regardless of their state of dress

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<sup>55</sup> John E. Stewart II. “Appearance and Punishment: The Attraction-Leniency Effect in the Courtroom,” *The Journal of Social Psychology* 125, (2001): 373-378.

<sup>56</sup> The definition given by the authors was limited to the seemingly interchangeable uses of the words “attractive” and “professional.”

<sup>57</sup> Peter Glick, Sadie Larsen, Cathryn Johnson, and Heather Bransitter. “Evaluations of Sexy Women in Low- and High-Status Jobs.” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 29, (2005): 389-395.

while women in the higher status category were evaluated as significantly less competent when dressed in the “sexy” manner.<sup>58</sup>

The result presented by this study demonstrates that women’s clothing is significantly communicative of gender aspects, not to mention a still existent bias in gender roles. Although some might argue this is a rather obvious finding, it highlights a central aspect of the present study. If some critics would like to argue that the age of hegemony based upon dress are over, that there is no difference in treatment of a woman in gender-neutral clothing than there would be of a man, the empirical research of Glick and associates provides a basis for the current claim of women in gender-neutral clothing as a site of ideological struggle.

This research also substantiates the foundations of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI). The inventory, developed by Sandra Bem, is based on research finding that some characteristics are culturally seen as stereotypically male or female or neutral.<sup>59</sup> Characteristics such as “childlike” are considered feminine while “independent” and “individualistic” are considered male.<sup>60</sup> Although questions have been raised over the years about the continuing validity of Bem’s inventory,<sup>61</sup> the research has repeatedly been found sound and applicable.<sup>62</sup> This continued finding of validity shows the continuing gender typing of characteristics found in Glick et al.’s research and is foundational to the present study.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 394.

<sup>59</sup>Shannon N. Davis. “Bem Sex Role Inventory.” In *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*. Ed. Jodi Brien, Los Angeles: SAGE, 58-60. 2009.

<sup>60</sup> Sandra L Bem and Steven A Lewis. "Sex Role Adaptability: One Consequence of Psychological Androgyny." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 31, no. 4 (1975): 634-643.

<sup>61</sup> Elazar J. Pedhazur, and Toby J Tetenbaum. "Bem Sex Role Inventory: A theoretical and methodological critique.." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37, no. 6 (1979): 996-1016.

<sup>62</sup> Cheryl L. Holt, and Jon B. Ellis. "Assessing the Current Validity of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory." *Sex Roles* 39, no. 11-12 (1998): 929-941.

Brien, Jodi. "Bem Sex Role Inventory." *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009. 58-60. Print.

Based upon this research, it is valid to conclude that the communication of gender and gender role is an important function of clothing. This raises problems because it is also a function which has received much notoriety for its bias toward the masculine sex. This bias, which some would argue is left over from the late stages of American Victorianism, can still be seen in American decency laws and workplace dress codes.<sup>63</sup> Mary Whisner provides a review of these laws and regulations, along with various legal cases which have challenged them.<sup>64</sup> When addressing the themes found through her research, Whisner notes that the use of clothing for gender differentiation is expected in our society; she states: “[differentiation of the sexes] is simply the enforcement of a set of distinguishing characteristics in order to set the sexes apart. It is prescribed – both socially and legally – that men are to appear in certain ways and that women are to appear in certain other, distinct ways.”<sup>65</sup> She also notes that “gender differentiation sustains and preserves patriarchy” as well as furthering the ends of sexual objectification of women.”<sup>66</sup>

### *Clothing Talks: The Clothes Make the Man*

The function of clothing to communicate gender is well established in the literature. This function, however, has also shown a penchant to be problematic by aiding in potential objectification or gender bias. These issues might seem like problems best addressed in an organization issues study if not for the vital role clothing plays in actually helping a person

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<sup>63</sup> Whisner. 74-75.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 74-120.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 118-119.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 120.

define who she or he is in her or his own mind. The role of clothing in the creation of a person's identity is explored by Russell Belk in *Possessions and the Extended Self*.<sup>67</sup>

Belk's article looks to understand the role of objects in identity; specifically, what objects a person considers a part of his or her identity. The author proposes the term "extended self" for the type of self identification which a person achieves through his or her possessions.<sup>68</sup> Belk studies the extended self within the construct of consumer behavior studies and the way people choose specific brands and works to establish the motivation behind a person's choice of clothing. His work also shows how consumers use possessions to self identify and even create their identity. Several other studies have also corroborated this finding.

The importance of clothing in creating an individual's personal identity has been researched in many fields including psychology, sociology, economics, aesthetics, history, and communication. George B. Sproles addresses each of these fields in his review *Behavioral Science Theories of Fashion*.<sup>69</sup> Sproles presents an historical overview of theories used to approach fashion within the behavioral sciences: "Psychologists speak of fashion as the seeking of individuality; sociologists see class competition and social conformity to norms of dress; economists see a pursuit of the scarce; aestheticians view the artistic components and ideals of beauty; historians offer evolutionary explanations for changes in design. Literally hundreds of viewpoints unfold, from a literature more immense than for any phenomenon of consumer behavior."<sup>70</sup> Sproles' chapter provides an extensive compilation of scholarly viewpoints on the

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<sup>67</sup> Russell W. Belk, "Possessions and the Extended Self." *The Journal of Consumer Research* 15, (1988): 139-168.

<sup>68</sup> Belk. 140.

<sup>69</sup> Sproles, George B. "Behavioral Science Theories of Fashion." In *The Psychology of Fashion*, ed. Michael R. Solomon. (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1985): 55- 70

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 56-57.

forms and functions of fashion and shows the overwhelming scholarly consensus that clothes really can “make the man.”

The “clothes make the man” phenomenon can clearly be seen in Marcia A. Morgado’s *The Semiotics of Extraordinary Dress: A Structural Analysis and Interpretation of Hip-Hop Style*.<sup>71</sup> Morgado addresses the communication and identity forming properties of what she terms “extraordinary dress,” a term she defines to mean any unconventional forms of dress,<sup>72</sup> and how it is used by individuals to create an identity. According to Morgado, youth use the building blocks of hip-hop style to identify with various cultural settings (ranging from afrocentresim to popular culture) and build a character and an identity for themselves. The author proposes that extraordinary dress forms defy cultural norms for a short period of time and thereby allow their users to define themselves in relations to a specific group and to society at large based largely on their clothes.

#### *Clothing Talks: The Clothes Make the Man a Man... or a Woman?*

The function of clothing as an indicator of gender has already been discussed above, however recent research<sup>73</sup> has begun to investigate the function of clothing in helping a person determine his or her own gender identification. *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning in Cultural Contexts*<sup>74</sup> is a compilation of published papers from the 1988-89 dress and gender workshop held at the Center for Cross-Cultural Research on Women at Oxford University.

*Dress and Gender* contains essays from experts in the fields of anthropology, history, sociology,

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<sup>71</sup> Marcia A. Morgado. “The Semiotics of Extraordinary Dress: A Structural Analysis and Interpretation of Hip-Hop Style.” *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 10, no. 2. (1992): 1-8.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 147.

<sup>73</sup> See Ruth Barns and Joanne B. Eicher.

<sup>74</sup> Ruth Barns and Joanne B. Eicher, ed. *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning in Cultural Contexts*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992).

clothing and textile studies, and many others, all having to do with the role played by clothing in the creation of gender identification within a society. Various researchers contributed chapters to this work and several will be discussed in greater detail below.

Suzanne Baizerman writes in “The Jewish Kippa Sruga and the Social Construction of Gender in Israel,” that both the making and wearing of the kippa<sup>75</sup> helps to create and reinforce gender identity in Israel as well as identifying the wearer with a specific religious sub-group.<sup>76</sup> Baizerman writes of the important role played by the kippa in the formation of gender identity in a social and religious context, noting that the Jewish religion views the enabler of an act, in this case the woman who creates the kippa so that her husband, brother, or son can pursue study, is in fact greater than the actor. In this way Jewish tradition reinforces the creation of a traditional gender identification and role, in both religion and in society, through the use of the kippa.<sup>77</sup>

Another essay pertinent to the present study included in *Dress and Gender* is Catherine A. Cerny’s “Quilted Apparel and Gender Identity: An American Case Study.”<sup>78</sup> Cerny looks at clothing as a sort of “uniform,” symbolically performing the function of allowing the individual to create an identity by tying them to the collective values of a specific community.<sup>79</sup> Cerny’s analysis finds that quilted items worn by the makers allow these individuals to develop an identity with other quilters through the activity of quilting and the symbolic values of these items (quilted clothing denotes the wearer as a participant in this activity) and the connection provided

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<sup>75</sup> The round, almost flat, crocheted head covering worn by orthodox Jewish men. Known in Yiddish as the yarmulke, or English as the skull cap.

<sup>76</sup> Baizerman, Suzanne, “The Jewish Kippa Sruga and the Social Construction of Gender in Israel.” In *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning in Cultural Contexts*, ed. Ruth Barnes and Joanne B. Eicher, (New York: Berg, 1992): 93.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 102.

<sup>78</sup> Catherine A. Cerny, “Quilted Apparel and Gender Identity: An American Case Study,” In *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning in Cultural Contexts*, ed. Ruth Barnes and Joanne B. Eicher, (New York: Berg, 1992): 106-121.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 106.

to others of the same passion. According to Cerny's analysis the quilted clothing holds a direct connection to the gender role development of these women.<sup>80</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In summary, the scholarship on the communication of symbols is extensive and the scholarship has consistently shown that clothing items are some of the most communicative of these symbols. Clothing functions to communicate identity and gender, but more than that, it plays a significant role in the formation of each. However, the importance of clothing as communication poses several problems for those who wish to communicate through gender-neutral clothing in United States, a society which is predominantly patriarchal. The phenomenon of gender-neutral clothing is prevalent in society and yet there has been little research in this area in the various scholarly fields. Although briefly mentioned by several authors reviewed above, the references to gender-neutral clothing are made only in passing and do not produce any extended study of the topic. This thesis will be a preliminary attempt to find the meaning of gender-neutral clothing through and rhetorical analysis. A rhetorical critical perspective will facilitate investigation into the nuances of meaning found in clothing and give insight into the possibilities and problems of this burgeoning trend.

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<sup>80</sup> Cerny. 118.

## Chapter Three

### Rhetorical Approach:

#### Don't Call it A Methodology<sup>81</sup>

##### *Introduction*

In March of 2010 an issue of *Life & Style*<sup>82</sup> magazine hit news stands and caused a firestorm of criticism, both from the publication's readers and scholars of sociology, psychology, and human sexuality.<sup>83</sup> The issue featured two side-by-side pictures of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie's three year old daughter, Shiloh Jolie-Pitt. The first photo showed the child dressed in a black satin coat with wispy, shoulder-length blond hair carrying an Easter basket, while in the second she was dressed in a yellow collared polo shirt worn under a grey sweater and black trousers with a close-cropped pixy haircut. Although the clothes were technically still "girls clothes" many readers felt they looked "boyish." Magazine readers and conservative commentators voiced opinions making it clear, in no uncertain terms, that girls should look like girls, while GLAAD<sup>84</sup> activists and other commentators loudly supported the parent's decision to allow the child a choice in dress.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Thank you to Dr. Michael C. Leff who taught his students that rhetoric does not require a specific formula or set of rules, but an approach, an understanding, a scholar's mind. One of the great scholars in our field, Dr. Leff passed away before I even had the pleasure of meeting him, but his students carry on his work and his dislike of formulaic rhetoric.

<sup>82</sup> "Why is Angelina Turning Shiloh into A Boy?" *Life & Style Weekly*, 4 March, 2010, Front Cover.

<sup>83</sup> Luchina Fisher. "Brangelina Dressing Shiloh Boyish: Jolie and Pitt Getting Heat for Daughter Shiloh's New Boyish Look," *ACB News: Entertainment*. 9 March, 2010. <<http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/angelina-jolie-brad-pitt-turning-shiloh-boy/story?id=10019080&page=1>> (accessed 11 April 2011).

<sup>84</sup> The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.

<sup>85</sup> Extensive blog entries and online commentaries have featured reader-review comments criticizing both sides of the clothing issue. A thorough critical analysis of this particular incident does not have a role in the current study, an overview of this topic does show the importance attached to clothing in the observed meanings and identifications of gender.

The firestorm of commentary and invective created by the *Life & Style* cover photos shows the incredible power still attributed to clothing in the creation of gender. Director of Family Formation Studies at Focus on the Family, Glen Stanton, worried that the mis-gendered clothing could create gender identity problems for the child in the future<sup>86</sup> while GLAAD senior director of media programs Rashad Robinson also tied the child's choice of clothing directly to gender stereotypes and gender-identification based ridicule. According to the parents,<sup>87</sup> Shiloh's choice of the so-called "boyish" clothing was based solely on the child's love of the Peter Pan story, but the firestorm created by the magazine cover indicated a major tenant of the present research study. The perceived gender of our clothing and identification of our gender by observers are inextricably linked by American culture. The phenomenal popularity of gender-neutral clothing combined with its perception as counter-cultural by much of the American main stream when worn by women, raises significant ideological questions.

### *Ideological Criticism*

To better unearth the meanings and communication of gender-neutral clothing, I will undertake an ideological analysis of these texts. According to Sonja K. Foss, ideological criticism looks beyond the obvious structures of a text in order to discover its underlying beliefs, values, and assumptions.<sup>88</sup> Gerianne Merrigan and Carole Huston note that ideological criticism uses text analysis to better understand and shed light on "power-dominance relationships,

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<sup>86</sup> Life & Style Weekly.

<sup>87</sup> ABC News: Entertainment.

<sup>88</sup> Sonja K. Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice 4<sup>th</sup> ed.* (Long Grove IL: Waveland Press, 2009.) 209.

describe consciousness (or lack of it), and depict hegemonic processes at work.”<sup>89</sup> Karyn Rybacki and Donald Rybacki also follow on the above ideas, but further their application formula by noting, “an ideological model identifies what is considered to be good and right from a particular... philosophy.”<sup>90</sup> With this approach in mind, I will undertake to find the meanings of gender-neutral clothing through the use of ideological criticism.

Much of current ideological criticism finds its roots in Marxist criticism as originally purposed by Karl Marx.<sup>91</sup> According to Barry Brummett, the original thoughts of Marxism dealt with “ideology, class, and the distribution of power in society.”<sup>92</sup> These thoughts looked primarily to the philosophy of materialism and the importance of economic issues in the formation of ideas.<sup>93</sup> Marxism, as an ideology, focuses on class struggle and the hegemonic struggle for power. Struggles for power as seen from the Marxist viewpoint are most often located around materials of value such as property, money, and support of ideals.<sup>94</sup> Applying Marxist ideology to an artifact involves analysis of that artifact for the purpose of identifying the material centers around which it coalesces and the hegemonic ideologies which undergird it.

The theoretical basis of Marxist ideological criticism was expanded with the importance of democratic systems of governments on the international scene.<sup>95</sup> Democratic societies demonstrate a distinct hierarchy between classes, genders, races, and religions, but the governing

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<sup>89</sup> Gerianne Merrigan and Carole L. Huston. *Communication Research Methods*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2009.) 278.

<sup>90</sup> Karyn Rybacki and Donald Rybacki. *Communication Criticism: Approaches and Genres*. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. 1991.) 141.

<sup>91</sup> Brummett. 156-157.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. 156.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. 157.

<sup>94</sup> Rybacki and Rybacki. 145.

<sup>95</sup> Malcolm O. Sillars and Bruce E. Gronbeck. *Communication Criticism: Rhetoric, Social Codes, Cultural Studies*. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2001.) 262.

laws of democracies expressly provide for equality among these various groups. Scholarship in ideological criticism began to examine how the aforementioned hierarchies could remain in place and largely unchallenged in light of the voiced philosophies of equality propounded by these systems.<sup>96</sup> Critics purposed that symbolic discourse was the main way in which these inequalities were maintained. These types of discourse originally focused on traditional verbal forms of communication, but were also expanded to include all symbolic communication, whether verbal or nonverbal.<sup>97</sup> John B. Thompson's<sup>98</sup> later definition of ideology as "the ways in which meaning serves to sustain relationships of domination" cemented the role of symbolic communication in critical studies. This will function as the definition for the remainder of this study.

### *Development of Social Power and Hegemony*

The scholarship of critical communication focuses on the symbolic representations of power relationships within discourses. J.R.P. French and B.H. Raven's seminal study in the scholarship of power through communication notes that many types of social power exist within a democratic society.<sup>99</sup> Reward power, institutionally derived power, coercive power, interpersonal power, authority; each of these power types provides a basis for hegemony in democratic societies.<sup>100</sup> Some of the most subtle of these power types fall within the category of

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<sup>96</sup> Sillars and Gronbeck. 262.

<sup>97</sup> Yuey See Monica Owyong. "Clothing Semiotics and the Social Construction of Power Relations." *Social Semiotics*. 19, no. 2 (June 2009). 191-211. <http://web.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/ehost/pdfviewer?vid=3&hid=105&sid=29a0e366-cee7-4fc8-aa27-025319c7112e%40sessionmgr114>

<sup>98</sup> John B. Thompson. *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication*. (Cambridge, Eng.: Polity, 1990). 131-32.

<sup>99</sup> J.R.P. French Jr. and B.H. Raven. "The Bases of Social Power." *Studies in Social Power*. Ed. Dorwin Cartwright. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1959.) 150-167.

<sup>100</sup> Sillars and Gronbeck. 263.

social power. Social power is defined as “the ability to influence thoughts, decisions, and actions of others” through traditional social hierarchies, familial relationships, or norms.<sup>101</sup> The present study will focus on clothing in general, and gender-neutral clothing specifically, as a form of social power.

Sillars and Gronbeck address several areas of social power, but also note the role it plays in the development of hierarchies and hegemonies.<sup>102</sup> In a discussion of how hegemony functions within a social power structure, Brummett notes that “hegemony is a remarkable phenomenon; because of it, oppressed people not only accept but often participate in their own oppression” and that “the tools of ideology and hegemony tend to be occluded.”<sup>103</sup> The hidden nature of social powers is one of the main warrants used for critical studies. Hegemonic structures are not easily observed and, therefore, one of the main purposes of ideological criticism is to call attention to injustices and increase the political and social awareness of the rhetor.<sup>104</sup>

The occlusion of hegemonic social powers is clearly seen in many areas of nonverbal symbolic communication and one such area that has come under recent scrutiny is the rhetoric of clothing.<sup>105</sup> Yuey See Monica Owyong, when discussing the role of clothing in the creation of social power, notes that “meaning is made, enacted and communicated in a myriad of ways” and that one of these ways is through the semiotic meaning of the clothes we wear.<sup>106</sup> Owyong looks

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<sup>101</sup> Sillars and Gronbeck. 263.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. 264.

<sup>103</sup> Brummett. 163.

<sup>104</sup> Rybacki and Rybacki. 149.

<sup>105</sup> Recent popular panels presented at several regional and national communication conferences have addressed the rhetoric of clothing as a form of nonverbal communication. (See Central States Communication Association Conference – 2011, [http://associationdatabase.com/aws/CSCA/pt/sp/Home\\_Page](http://associationdatabase.com/aws/CSCA/pt/sp/Home_Page): Women’s Caucus, National Communication Association – 2010: Various Panels, <http://www.natcom.org/>).

<sup>106</sup> Owyong. 191.

at the distribution of power and the role played by clothing in these distributions, placing special interest in the role of clothing in women's power struggles. The emphasis on women's struggles for powers, although a valid and possible area of study for Marxist critics, is more commonly found in the feminist scholarship branch of critical studies.

The social power exercised by clothing can be seen in a variety of arenas,<sup>107</sup> but women's studies have represented the greatest contributions to the field. In addressing the ideological stances and effects of gender-neutral clothing, this study will employ feminist ideological criticism to address the following: How do the meanings of gender-neutral clothing work to sustain the subjugation of women in a male hegemonic society? To answer this question, a review of the feminist critical method follows.

### *Feminist Critical Studies*

Feminist thought holds that men and women do not experience the world in the same ways.<sup>108</sup> Although the term "feminist" has both positive and negative connotations and is a term which has been co-opted for many purposes within the last century, the overarching theme agreed upon almost universally within the feminist sphere is that the goal of feminism is to gain equality for women.<sup>109</sup> Feminist critical studies look at rhetorical acts with a two-pronged purpose. Feminist critics attempt to explain how inequality between men and women is created through texts, but they also examine these texts "to discover sources of female empowerment, to explore the ways in which inequalities may be refused and overthrown."<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> See Morgado's work with hip-hop style. Although not the main focus on her study, the social power of the clothing trend is observable.

<sup>108</sup> Rybacki and Rybacki. 142.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. 142.

<sup>110</sup> Brummett. 178.

Much of feminist scholarship addresses issues having to do with sex and gender, issues which raise questions about the basis of these constructs. Arguments range across a wide spectrum as to whether gender identification is an innate characteristic or a socially constructed category.<sup>111</sup> The foundation of gender identity is far beyond the scope of the present research study to investigate, but for research purposes Judith Butler's view of gender as performative will provide the basis for continued inquiry.<sup>112</sup> Butler states that the "performativity [of gender] must be understood not as a singular act, but rather as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names."<sup>113</sup> This means that the repeat acts of an individual are the means by which they create their gender identification.

Butler's work will provide the basis for analysis within the present study. Butler does not see gender<sup>114</sup> as a fixed concept. She posits the view that by performing our gender roles we identify with a specific gender and its norms.<sup>115</sup> The concept of gender, then, becomes highly textual and discursive, focusing not on the physical sex of the individual but the ways in which they identify and perform a gender.<sup>116</sup> In this way a person with a male sex may identify with a female gender concept and vice-versa, either sex may also identify with an androgynous gender type. Butler proposes that gender is changeable and, because of this quality, can be seen,

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<sup>111</sup> Brummett. 180.

<sup>112</sup> Butler.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. 236.

<sup>114</sup> It is valuable here to note the difference between "gender" and "sex." The term sex refers to the observable physical features of a human body, either male, female, or androgynous. Although there is a faction within scholarship which believes sex to be a societal construction (Butler 236), most agree that sex is directly tied to the physical makeup of the body and that, sans surgical intervention, it is fixed. This is not true of the concept of gender. Gender references the identification of a person with the roles, norms, traditions, and types of a specific sex. Much recent scholarship (GLAAD, GLBTQ) has recently shown that gender and gender roles are flexible, malleable, and transmutable.

<sup>115</sup> Butler. *Bodies that Matter*.

<sup>116</sup> Brummett. 180.

influenced, challenged, and changed through texts.<sup>117</sup> Butler's basic concept of gender as performative provides an analytical point for investigation and rhetorical coding of a text.

Barry Brummett uses Butler's work to describe a type of analysis in which texts are "analyzed [coded] for the ways in which they show or support performances of gender." A text may outline or show the so-called "proper" roles of a woman and support them as foundational to modern society. These types of texts reinforce stereotypical gender norms and their associations with a specific physical sex. The application of performativity in this manner can highlight texts that support hegemonic messages. Application of Butler's work in coding texts can also reveal anti-normative and anti-hegemonic messages. Texts can illustrate different ways to perform gender by providing messages that challenge gender/sex relationship norms (i.e. a television show about a stay-at-home dad). By "transgressing"<sup>118</sup> the traditional lines of the male sex and performing a role typically associated with the female gender, this text would work to blur the traditional gender role lines.

To analyze the text of gender-neutral clothing pieces from a feminist critical perspective based upon Butler's work, Brummett offers five possible sites for analysis. These sites, or places in which to look for signs to code, include language and images that denigrate, silencing, lack, alternative rhetorical forms, and different ways of seeing.<sup>119</sup> In analyzing texts for hegemonic representations and performances of gender, Brummett first looks to language and images that denigrate. Silencing and lack are also examined. Clothing can also be looked at as an alternative rhetorical form, exemplary of a different way of seeing. The act of denying the female experience and limiting the field of female involvement with or through a text can be a strong

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<sup>117</sup> Brummett. 180.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. 180.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. 181.

indicator of the feminist or anti-feminist spirit of the text, while the forms and views of the text can also contribute to this understanding.

### *Research Steps*

This methodological review forms the basis for analyzing gender-neutral clothing in the following chapters. I will address the research question “how do the meanings of gender-neutral clothing work to sustain the subjugation of women in a male hegemonic society?” in chapter four and “how do the meanings of gender-neutral clothing work to thwart the traditional roles established by dress in a hegemonic society?” in chapter five. To form these chapters I will take the following analytical steps.

The flip-flop, the logo hoodie, the unfitted T-shirt, and the baseball cap are the selected pieces of gender-neutral clothing for the current analysis. To perform this analysis I use a narrative description of these artifacts as a “worn object text” and include outside source information including popular culture texts such as magazines, television, movies, and advertisements as supportive descriptors. These pieces of individual information will form a type of diffuse<sup>120</sup> text for analysis. As I look to code this diffuse text I will employ Butler’s concepts of gender performance as a sort of matrix for understanding. In this coding I will investigate Brummett’s sites of struggle in searching for meaning in the artifact.

The first step indicated by the literature is to code for the attitudes, values, and beliefs of the text under analysis. This forwards an understanding of the ideology found in the text. The second step is to look for any power structures inherent in the text that work to prop up control

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<sup>120</sup> According to Brummett, a traditional text is verbal, expository, discreet and hierarchical. This means it will use either the written or spoken word, make an explicit statement about a defined topic, be clearly delineated with an obvious beginning-middle-end construction, and structured by a specific creator. In contrast, popular culture texts can be all of these things but they can also be nonverbal or visual, metonymic and narrative, diffuse and not clearly delineated, as well as being democratic. (Brummett. 71-74).

relationships. Building off this step, the third step looks to identify how these power structures within the text are created, perpetuated, or suppressed. The analysis of these structures will focus on the areas of social power and hegemony. The final step in this approach will be to investigate the two prongs of feminist criticism: how inequalities are created in the text and how empowerment exists simultaneously in the text.

Social observers who voyeuristically observed and commented upon the dress of Shiloh Jolie-Pitt stumbled upon a major issue within our culture, an issue that will be observed in the present analysis of gender-neutral clothing. The ideological basis of criticism provides the root for this study by examining inequalities and hierarchies with the text. The steps of this approach will allow a thorough analysis of the diffuse text of gender-neutral clothing in popular culture. In coding I will pay special attention to both potentially empowering and potentially muting signs in the text. These meanings will be used to lead to the answers for each research question. With this as the set goal the following chapters will follow this path to meaning, beginning by answering the first research question.

## Chapter Four

### The Narratives and Codes:

#### How To Learn a New Language in One Thesis or Less

##### *Introduction*

The communicative properties of clothing have been recognized by parties as variant as God in the Garden of Eden, GLAAD representatives, and business professionals. This analysis, however, seeks to go beyond the mere recognition of clothing as communicative and develop understanding of what the symbols are actually saying. To accomplish this I will first address the present working definition. Second, I will provide a narrative description of gender-neutral clothing and a narrative expansion of this description. This narrative will include specific descriptions of the items and their positions in popular culture. I will next proceed with coding the gender-neutral clothing text for attitudes, values, and beliefs, power structures, power creation, continuance, and suppression means, and supports for inequality or empowerment.

##### *The Question of Definition*

The working definition of gender-neutral clothing for this study is “clothing pieces which are constructed with no significant differences between the male and the female versions of the article, are not associated with a specific occupation, and do not ostensibly transgress gender norms.” The first portion of this definition focuses on the shape, fit, and construction of the clothing articles. This may seem a difficult portion of the definition to defend, however, I personally have more than eleven years of experience in clothing and garment construction, three of which were in a professional capacity. This background has instilled in me a deep respect for

the actual construction of a garment. Aspects such as color, decorative choice, and styling may be the most easily and often noticed features of garments but they are peripheral elements. The actual design and construction of a garment are its central elements. Therefore, construction will be the first aspect of my definition of gender-neutral clothing.

The second facet of this definition deals with clothing that meets the first requirement of the statement, but does not play a part in the current study. An example of this type of clothing is found in the medical profession with the use of scrubs, or in military uniforms.<sup>121</sup> Although both men and women use these articles of clothing, they are primarily communicative of the individuals' association with his or her profession. The same can be said of delivery, warehouse, industrial, or other uniforms, which speak of a person's profession and not his or her choice of gender identity.

The final aspect of this definition also eliminates several types of clothing from the analysis pool of this study. Some might argue that all clothing can be gender-neutral. However, the present study focuses on those articles that do not, ostensibly, violate gender norms. A woman donning a three piece suit, oxford shirt, and tie; a man wearing a skirt, high heels, and a sequined tank top; each of these is an obvious violation of the gender dress norms<sup>122</sup> held by a large portion of American society. Although this aspect of the definition is problematic for several reasons, these issues will play an important role in answering the research questions in this study.

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<sup>121</sup> Michael D. Turner, Suneet P. Chauhan, Everett F. Magann, and John C. Morrison. "Physician Attire in the Military Setting: Does It Make a Difference to Our Patients?." *Military Medicine* 174, no. 8 (August 2009). 817-820.

<sup>122</sup> Any astute scholar will point out the circular nature of this portion of the definition and the problems occasioned by defining anything by virtue of cultural norms. This difficulty is recognized by the present researcher however, this difficulty is will actually play a role in answering the research questions.

### *Narrative Description*

An early incarnation of gender-neutral clothing as I define it can be found reaching the West Coast of the United States shortly after the end of the Second World War. The piece of gender-neutral clothing now most commonly known as the “flip-flop” finds its roots in the Japanese *zori* worn traditionally by those in the *Gesia* profession.<sup>123</sup> WWII veterans returning to the United States brought the footwear home as souvenirs. The simple slip-on shoe soon found a niche as a type of beach shoe and in the 1990’s gained an almost iconic status in popular culture with the advent of the \$3.99 Old Navy brand flip-flop. Flip-flops are manufactured from a universal pattern for both men and women, which are then labeled according to sizing norms that vary from country to country. Differences may be seen in the colors chosen for sale under each gender label, but construction is the same.

This phenomenon can also be seen in the logo hoodie. A hoodie is a traditional, long sleeved sweatshirt made out of a cotton or cotton blend with the addition of an attached, lined or unlined hood. This can be styled as a pull-on or zip-up garment. All of these modifications are constructed in the same way for both male and female versions of the article. The garment is constructed from a basic, unshaped, torso block, meaning it is not fitted on the torso and instead hangs straight from the shoulders to a band or hem at the waist of the wearer. The same construction is used for the un-fitted T-shirt. The garment is constructed with hemmed, mid-bicep sleeves, a basic collar, and hip-height hem. This garment is also constructed from identical male and female patterns.

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<sup>123</sup> Margo DeMello. *Feet and Footwear: A Cultural Encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara: CA. Greenwood Press. 2009. 27.

The final clothing article I have chosen for the present analysis is the ball-cap. This clothing artifact is more commonly male than the three listed above. However, it is also frequently worn by women without any ostensible violation of cultural gender norms,<sup>124</sup> and is even considered by some to be a provocative or “sexy” article of clothing.<sup>125</sup> This article is a brimmed hat made of six triangular sections connected by a fastener or rivet at the points and a band at the wide ends. This band is turned to the inside of the cap to create a dome shape to fit the top of the head and the brim is attached to the front to provide shade and protections for the eyes. The basic constructions of this garment can be changed with adjustable bands on the side opposite the brim, but this change is common for both men’s and women’s hats.

The above descriptions of the four specific pieces of clothing I have labeled as gender-neutral for the purposes of this study show the validity of the definition based upon construction. The work by Michael Turner et al. provides the defense for the portion of the definition that eliminates uniform clothing. This leaves open the need to further investigate the cultural aspect of the definition. I will dedicate the next section of this study to this third aspect. This section will focus on the meanings the four articles of clothing have taken on in the media and in popular culture.

### *Popular Culture, Media Frenzy, Celebrity, and Other things that Mean Something*

In addressing the popular culture aspect of gender-neutral clothing, the first example which would occur to a casual observer might be the firestorm created in 2005 when the Northwestern University national champion women’s lacrosse team met President George W.

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<sup>124</sup> Many examples of girls and women’s clothing stores which carry “ladies” baseball caps (constructed identically to those made for men) can be found with a simple web search. A good example comes from Amazon.com. "Disney Princess Girl's Baseball Cap Hat: Clothing." Amazon.com.

<sup>125</sup> See Maxim magazine. “Hot Girls in Hats.”

Bush wearing flip-flops with their dresses and skirts.<sup>126</sup> Although several of the students argued that they were not wearing the casual footwear identified as gender-neutral, examination of the incriminating photo shows that at least two of the women were.<sup>127</sup> Media coverage after the initial headline focused greatly on the appropriateness of the women's choice in footwear. Fashion editor Suze Yalof Schwartz of Glamour magazine commented that when wearing summer shoes for dressy occasions, "Plastic is definitely a don't... For women, it is good to show a lot of toe. Toe is hot in the summer, as long as it's in a high-heeled strappy sandal."<sup>128</sup>

The hoodie has also recently found a place in the popular culture kingdom. A popular item with college students for years, this garment has found a new incarnation as the business suit of the techno wunderkind. The first tech genius to break away from the business suit was Steve Jobs with a signature black turtleneck sweater and denim jeans,<sup>129</sup> but this has evolved with the fortunes of the 20-somethings CEO's for companies like Napster©, Facebook©,<sup>130</sup> and Tumbler©.<sup>131</sup> These silicone valley moguls don whatever feels comfortable at the time with little, if any, regard for traditions or norms of an office culture. This style of dress works for the

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<sup>126</sup> USA Today "NU's lacrosse team sparks flip-flop flap at White House ." July 19, 2005. [http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2005-07-19-flip-flops\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2005-07-19-flip-flops_x.htm) (accessed December 8, 2011).

<sup>127</sup> USA Today "NU's lacrosse team sparks flip-flop flap at White House."

<sup>128</sup> Suze Yalof Schwartz. Interviewed by Hannah Storm. Television interview. The CBS Earl Show. New York, July 13, 2005.

<sup>129</sup> Ryan Tate. "Steve Jobs on Why He Wore Turtlenecks." Gawker, October 11, 2011. <http://gawker.com/5848754> (accessed December 8, 2011).

<sup>130</sup> *The Social Network*. Film. Directed by David Fincher. Columbia Pictures, 2010.

The movie "The Social Network" is loosely based on the life of Facebook© founder Mark Zuckerberg. The world-wide popularity of Facebook rocketed Zuckerberg into being one of the richest individuals in the world before the age of 30. Zuckerberg is known for his ubercasual style of dress and company management. In discussing the movie, Zuckerberg was quoted by IMDb as saying that, although there were some factual errors in the retelling of his story, they did get his clothing correct.

(Amazon. "The Social Network (2010) - IMDb." The Internet Movie Database (IMDb). <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1285016/> (accessed December 27, 2011).

<sup>131</sup> Mike Vilensky. "High Fashion and Hoodies." *Wall Street Journal*. February 17, 2012. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204792404577227502136591254.html> (accessed March 12, 2012).

techno wunderkind, but the trend of college students attending job interviews in this gender-neutral clothing style has career advisors and human resources representatives at their wits end.<sup>132</sup>

The t-shirt is a slightly different item from the previous two. A simple Google™ search for “t-shirt” brings to light thousands of web pages selling these items emblazoned with slogans, logos, or witty sayings. Anything from political support to sexual innuendo can be conveyed through the printing on a t-shirt. These garments may have a bent to either men or women based upon the message conveyed, but all the basic garments are constructed along the same lines. The culture of t-shirt messaging has become highly popular in the United States. Political rallies are infamous for t-shirt distribution. Band t-shirts are a rite of passage for high school students. These garments encompass a culture unto themselves.

The final garment is the ball cap. The most notable recent popular culture incarnation of the ball cap is the above noted spread in a men’s magazine featuring ball caps as a major sex symbol. Television and movie performer Aston Kutcher was well known in his early career for almost always donning a so-called “trucker-cap,” or ball cap with a slightly greater length between the hatband and the crown of the head, featuring a mesh backing to replace the back three triangles of the cap. These two examples seem only distantly related, but they showcase the popularity of the garment, and its prevalence in American popular culture.

### *Coding for Meaning*

The above narrative of the four gender-neutral pieces of clothing currently under analysis provides both a physical understanding and a popular understanding of the items. With this

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<sup>132</sup> Beth Teitell. "Wear a Hoodie to a Job Interview?." *The Boston Globe*, October 11, 2011. <http://bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/style/2011/11/10/wear-hoodie-job-interview/DhVnV7rulwajIVZ8GFyZbO/story.html> (accessed November 18, 2011).

understanding, then, I will begin coding the artifacts for meaning according to the four areas found to be pertinent in the approach section of this work. I begin with coding for attitudes, values, and beliefs found in the text.

### Coding attitudes, values, and beliefs

The attitudes, values and beliefs of this gender-neutral clothing text can best be understood within the context of a popular post-modern ideology.<sup>133</sup> This ideology rejects the idea of a universal scientific truth and the strict classification of either/or categories. The postmodern view allows gender-neutral clothing to be defined solely by the wearer's intent. This highlights the first attitude revealed in gender-neutral clothing: a focus on the self, self-definition, personal truth, or personal meaning. The surreptitious flouting of social norms occasioned by gender-neutral clothing is justified in the wearer's mind because he or she personally sees nothing wrong with the clothing article. Traditional definitions for the artifacts, (i.e. flip-flops are for the beach, hoodies are for the dorm), are rejected. Meanings are re-negotiated and redefined (i.e. flip-flops are fine because they are "glitzy," ball caps are not sport or work apparel, but a sexual symbol). This process shows an attitude that holds personal significance, personal definition, and personal truth as paramount virtues.

The values and beliefs of the text are also tied to this postmodern ideology. The pop culture narrative of these articles included above shows the value placed on the individual as the

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<sup>133</sup> The popular understanding of postmodernism believes that most, if not all, apparent realities are only social constructs and are therefore subject to change as society changes. This belief emphasizes the role of language, power relations, and motivations in the formation of an individual's ideas and beliefs. In particular it attacks the use of sharp classifications such as "male versus female" and "right versus wrong." These concrete categories are seen as artificially limiting and outmoded. Post-modernism holds that language and meaning cannot be conveyed between individuals, each person must define his or her own reality according to his or her personal experiences, understanding, and beliefs. For a more through understanding of post-modern ideology see: Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*; Jacques Derrida. *Of Grammatology*; Michel Foucault. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences, The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

final authority on her or his truth. This is also seen in the beliefs evidenced in gender-neutral clothing construction. These articles inherently reject the black and white categorization into male or female as each article is constructed as both. A t-shirt is constructed in the same manner regardless of the gender to which it will eventually be marketed; it is not inherently categorized but later takes on the characteristics of the gender by which it is chosen.

### Coding for power structures

The next step in the coding suggested by the current rhetorical approach is to code for power structures inherent in the text. The first and most obvious power found in the text of gender-neutral clothing is that the people with the power in American society don't wear it. Current U.S. President, Barack Obama, best illustrates this concept. President Obama has been both ridiculed<sup>134</sup> and lauded as the most casually dressed man to ever occupy the mansion at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.<sup>135</sup> However, even he is only seen in less than denim jeans and a button down collared shirt at sporting events and while exercising. The vast majority of business executives still don business suits and ties every day. Television news anchors are expected to dress in a certain way, teachers often specify a dress code for presentations. Each of these cases displays a person with a type of social power and none of them are known for being clothed in gender-neutral clothing.

Although there are exceptions to the formal-dress rule, such as the silicone valley CEO's, the majority of socially powerful people do not use gender-neutral clothing when they are in

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<sup>134</sup> In a July 2009 interview with Meredith Veria on *The Today Show*, President Obama was asked to defend what political commentators and self-proclaimed fashion experts were calling his "mom-jeans" (meaning, unfitted denim blue jeans with a high waist).

<sup>135</sup> Sheryl Gay Stolberg. "White House Unbuttons Formal Dress Code ." *The New York Times*, January 29, 2009, New York edition.

positions of power. A second, although related, power structure found in the text of gender-neutral clothing is its inherent casualness. These articles are built with a neutral construction. This neutrality means they are not constructed to flatter a specific body type, nor are they designed to highlight any specific physical features. This flattery and highlighting is a key feature of professional clothing, a category that is designed to highlight the wearer's best features for a given situation (i.e. sensual curves for a woman at a ball, the broad shoulder and chest of a man chairing the company's board of directors). The inherent lack of fit in the present text illustrates another aspect of power structure that it perpetuates. Those who don gender-neutral clothing are adhering to a physical form that is perceived as powerless, a perception that is continually perpetuated when those with great social power choose not to wear gender-neutral clothing and those without that power do.

#### Coding for creation and suppression of power

The third area of coding focuses on how the text creates, perpetuates, or suppresses power. This step looks to identify how social power and hegemony are used, formed, or abused through, with, and by, the text. Social power, "the ability to influence thoughts, decisions, and actions of others,"<sup>136</sup> is seen in the current text in several areas. The first of these areas is categorization. Clothing, as a visual communicative object, is frequently categorized by appearance. It is pretty, ugly, professional, comfortable, any number of other categories. The current artifacts can be characterized as comfortable, casual (as noted above), easy-going, perhaps even ugly based upon a noted lack of fit. Conversely, they cannot be filed under such

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<sup>136</sup> Sillars and Gronbeck. 263.

titles as professional, fitted, powerful, or other more positively connoted labels. This subtly negative categorizing is a form of social power in the text.

A second form of social power coded in the text is seen through the feminist critical lens of the current approach. Social norms use the female body as a site of power and subjugation specifically through female sexuality.<sup>137</sup> The inherently unfitted nature of the current artifacts obfuscates this sexuality of form, making the female body a site of struggle as indicated by Brummett. This facet could also be seen as contributing to a form of hegemony because, as Owyong<sup>138</sup> noted, the communication of these articles is often not overt. The hidden communication of these articles means that many who don them are unaware of the cultural meaning they are proclaiming and are thereby playing into their own hegemonic patterns.

#### Coding for feminist aspects

The final aspect to be coded in this approach deals with the two prongs of feminist criticism: inequalities created by the text and empowerment found in the text. The most obvious inequality found in the text of gender-neutral clothing is once again found in the physical realm. I have already discussed the non-gendered construction of the four garments under discussion. It must now be noted, for anything to fit two objects of differing proportions, it must first be large enough to fit the largest object. In gender-neutral clothing, especially in the hoodie and the t-shirt, this means the article must be large enough to fit the normally wider shoulder dimensions of one who is physically male. This obvious physical difference evidences the inherent inequality of the construction of these gender-neutral clothing articles.

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<sup>137</sup> See Butler on the performance of the body as gendered.

<sup>138</sup> Owyong. 191.

A second aspect of inequality found in the text of gender-neutral clothing is the concept of addition and subtraction. The concept of the “ideal” female figure has changed drastically throughout history. A modern “ideal” woman is often expected to subtract weight from her frame, blemishes from her face and hair from all over her body while adding size to her bust with a push-up bra; the “ideal” woman during the American Civil War was expected to add a hoop-skirt and several crinolines<sup>139</sup> to her attire while simultaneously subtracting inches from her waist with a corset.<sup>140</sup> These additions and subtractions are expected of women who wish to conform to a societal pressure towards the “ideal.”

This concept of addition/subtraction represents both an inequality and a chance for empowerment within gender-neutral clothing. Although inequalities are observable in the text of gender-neutral clothing, (the “male ideal figure” is more easily recognized under gender-neutral clothing as it is made large enough to accommodate his mass) it may also contribute as aspect of empowerment. The assistances needed to achieve the “ideal” female form in a modern American culture are absent in gender-neutral clothing. Societal norms and expectations are defied. By flouting these norms, gender-neutral items violate societal expectations and obscure the so-called ideal in the women who wear them, thus leaving the wearer a larger freedom of self-expression and gender performance.

Because gender-neutral clothing refuses to play the addition-subtraction game with a woman’s body, it allows a neutral platform for a woman to express her identity without the hindrance of subtle conformity. The lack of gendered fit may facilitate a greater range of activity

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<sup>139</sup> Hoop skirts and crinolines were popular from the 1820’s to the 1860. Hoop skirts were bell-shaped wire cages worn to widen a skirt form all sides, crinolines were a type of petticoat or underskirt worn to hide the steel of the hoop. The most well known example of this type of clothing is Scarlet O’Hara in *Gone With The Wind*.

<sup>140</sup> A supporting garment worn under clothing from the 1500’s until the 1920’s. Made of stiff fabric and stiffening support or “boning” materials (including but not limited to: wale bone, cording, steel rods, plastic slats, and wooden slats). See Valerie Steele. *The Corset: A Cultural History*

than other, more specifically gendered, clothing types. A person can choose to perform his or her gender through channels other than clothing (i.e. communication style, accoutrements, accomplishments, physical or athletic prowess), when the clothing he or she chooses spurns a gender identification. Although the empowerment may not be inherent in the construction of the gender-neutral items, their very neutrality allows them to be used for empowering goals.

The narrative presented in this chapter has attempted to delimit some of the bounds of gender-neutral clothing for the purposes of this study through a working definition. In coding the artifacts that fall within these parameters, I have tried to present aspects that are found in both the physical construction and popular culture dimensions of the items. The next chapter will build upon this foundation to answer the research questions proposed in the approach.

## Chapter Five

### Research Questions:

#### The Making of Many Meanings

##### *Introduction*

The preceding chapter has provided a solid picture within which to code the articles of gender-neutral clothing that make up our artifact. It is acknowledged that there are an almost infinite number of variables and evidences which could be included in the preceding narrative, however, those presented do showcase the most well known, popular, cultural, and structural aspects of these gender-neutral clothing items in current American culture. Now that these aspects are coded, it is time to begin unpacking what these symbolic messages actually mean in respect to our research questions.

The assumption of this study has been that, because clothing is communicative, this communication can have both positive and negative impacts on and for the women who wear the items. To unpack these meanings I will work to interpret the narrative from the previous chapter through the ideological lenses provided by Barry Brummett's notion of sites of struggle and Judith Butler's conception of gender performance. The first section of this chapter will look at how the communication of gender-neutral clothing can potentially be detrimental to women.

##### *The Detriment*

The first research question asks how the meanings of gender-neutral clothing work to sustain the subjugation of women in a male hegemonic society. The reader will understand that each of the potential detrimental and empowering scenarios included below is only a single

possibility in the vast spectrum of possible meanings. The interpretation of any diffuse cultural text (such as the one presented in Chapter Four) is based upon the observer's schema and context. To answer the first research question within the schema and context coded in Chapter Four, the first section of this chapter will focus on coding the artifacts through the schema of Barry Brummett's sites of struggle.

The first of these sites is found in language and images that denigrate women. This type of communication is well evidenced in the construction of the hoodie. Although this garment is constructed along seemingly neutral lines, the fact that the neutrality must be built to accommodate the typically larger male frame could be coded or understood by some as a subtle indication that the male frame is the "type" (or correct) form for the garment, hinting that the women is actually cross-dressing by wearing it.

This potential labeling renders the woman wearing gender-neutral clothing a-typical.<sup>141</sup> She becomes an example of that which society does not condone. The woman wearing gender-neutral clothing perceived by a viewer in this way is seen as an image of the un-feminine, the un-fit, the Other. These terms also foster a language of denigration; potentially labeling women in gender-neutral clothing with negative terminologies (un- or a- prefixes). This language of gender-neutral clothing can convey a judgment of these individuals as wrong, bad, and not-like.

An example of silencing, Brummett's second site of struggle, can be coded from the sexualization of the baseball cap in the Maxim© magazine photo series.<sup>142</sup> The baseball cap worn by a man might never be considered a sexual symbol, but this so-called men's magazine

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<sup>141</sup> It may be observed by some that, due to the post-modern ideology I have noted as so prominent in current American culture, some observers make a concerted attempt to avoid unthinking assumptions about others based upon dress. Although this is true in some circles, there are still cultural meanings attached to clothing articles. These meanings may be ignored, interpreted in differing ways, or even eschewed for divergent or conflicting meanings, but each of these meanings still exists in popular culture and is, therefore, a potential interpretation and source of detriment or empowerment for women.

<sup>142</sup> See footnote number 124.

trumpets the female in a baseball cap as a highly desirable and pseudo-pornographic figure. The use of the ball cap, if coded in this sexualized way, presents a problematic type of silencing to a woman who chooses to don the cap simply because of a bad hair day or a desire to shade the eyes from sun exposure. The woman wearing the ball cap may face overly sexualized expectations from a perceiver and, if she fails to meet these expectations, may be summarily dismissed.

A coding of the non-fitted construction of gender-neutral clothing items could also be read as upholding a suppression of women. When these articles are categorized as “un-feminine” from their basic construction (notice the negativity of the phrase its-self), the categorization begets other denigrating categories: sexual object, casual, lounging, slovenly, lazy, uncaring, ugly. Each of these categories, or labels, presents a characteristic which is antithetical to the “ideal” American woman. The sexualized woman in the ball cap is not lauded for her purity and fertility, but as an image for males to possess. The woman in the un-fitted t-shirt may be perceived as slovenly, overly casual, lounging. The girl in flip-flops and hoodie is filed away as un-caring of her appearance and too lazy or ugly to conform to the correct societal ideal.

Each of these categories and labels represents, at its root, a woman coded in a non-powerful or powerless position. Women who don gender-neutral clothing can be categorized as refusing to conform to society’s concept of the ideal woman. This perception of a refusal to conform takes away the typical powers of femininity, fertility, mother- and wife-hood, granted to a woman in a patriarchal society. The categories sometimes associated with gender-neutral clothing rob women of a traditional power, effectively silencing the wearers, and also contribute to the negative language of denigration I have discussed above.

The third site of struggle Brummett identifies is lack. The first easily identified portion of this site can be coded from the flip-flop. American fashion, based out of a reliance on sportswear fashion beginning in the 1930's and '40's, has perpetually focused on a woman's legs as a major erogenous zone.<sup>143</sup> This ongoing trend has deemed the ideal woman to have long and lean yet well muscled legs. The illusion of having these legs is frequently achieved through the addition of a high-heeled shoe. The basic, gender-neutral flip-flop does not have a heel and, therefore, forgoes this addition. The lack (be it only the lack of a common addition) can be perceived as a departure from the ideal. The flip-flop girl lacks the legs of the "ideal" female form.

A second facet easily identified in the category of lack is coded in the social power structures previously highlighted. Gender-neutral clothing items are rarely associated with the most powerful members of American society; placing gender-neutral items in a category of powerlessness, which could uphold the social power of those who do not participate in the trend over those who do. This lack of social power has the potential to prove detrimental to women who chose to don the garments, but can be of even greater harm if the wearer is unaware of this lack.

The "hidden" or obfuscated nature of what these articles communicate (identified by both Fischer-Mirkin and Owyong) is one of the main ways in which the items can work to perpetuate a type of social power unfavorable to the wearer. Because wearers are unaware of what may be communicated through their clothing, they, effectively, speak without learning the language. This phenomenon can perpetuate the communicative power already inherent in the text without turning it to any specific purpose. Although Butler argues that this type of power can be turned

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<sup>143</sup> Linda Welters, and Patricia A. Cunningham. *Twentieth-century American fashion*. English ed. Oxford: Berg, 2005.

to account if wielded by a knowing rhetor, the un-reigned power of the communicative article can simply perpetuate already hegemonic power structures.

In furthering this study of the potential detriment of gender-neutral clothing, I move from Brummett's sites of struggle to the schema provided by Judith Butler and the theory of performance. The text of gender-neutral clothing can be read for its suppression of power from the perspective of performance. The first aspect of performance that seems pertinent is its relationship to judgment. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler notes that, whenever a performance of gender is observed, a "normative judgment" is made about the performance and the person performing.<sup>144</sup> This means that the overarching culture holds a type of dictate over how a performance of gender, such as the way a person dresses, is perceived.

There are multiple instances in the coding where this implication of social power in this aspect of gender-neutral clothing are applicable to the present research question. If the noted casualness culturally attributed to gender-neutral clothing is judged as powerless, the person performing through the clothing may be judged powerless as well. If the construction of a hoodie is perceived as male, the woman who wears it may be judged for cross dressing, non-heterogeneous sexuality, or other potentially culturally negative characteristics. This perception also leads to a second important facet of performance.

To understand the importance of gender performance, we must recognize that American culture, like many, privileges sight above all other senses.<sup>145</sup> Butler notes that a perception of gender is equated with a physical reality, even if the physical reality is significantly different

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<sup>144</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Xxii.

<sup>145</sup> Both Butler and Brummett discuss this interesting phenomenon throughout their works on feminism. Brummett notes that the origins of lack come from the visual lack noticed when looking at the differences between male and female bodies. Women lack the visible sexual organs obvious on a male body. Although there is no actual lack, it is perceived because sight is the privileged sense. (Brummett. 180-182).

from the observable performance. To explain: American culture expects the adult male to have body hair, be broad shouldered, and be taller than a female counterpart, while a woman is expected to have a full bust, narrow waist, longer hair, soft or fair facial features, and to be shorter than a male counterpart. If these cultural norms are violated, the performance of physical sex and observed gender are out of sync. If a person who is physically female is broad shouldered, wears short hair, is taller than average, and then chooses to dress in gender-neutral clothing, the performance speaks of a male gender and the sense of sight asserts that the person performing must be as she/he appears. The simplest way to explain is that in American culture, much like the biblical Doubting Thomas, we will only believe what we see.

This aspect of visuality can be one of the main causes of subjugation for women who wear gender-neutral clothing. When a ball cap hides long hair and delicate facial features, a hoodie conceals the figure, and flip-flops do nothing to distinguish the walk or feminize the legs, the observer may assume based upon ingrained prejudice that the performer is of the “default” gender. Accusations of false advertizing may be leveled if the performer is found to be other than she appears. In sum, if the physical reality of an individual is different from the visual performance I observe, it is the fault of your performance, not my perception; you have lied to me.

The research question currently under consideration asks how the meanings in gender-neutral clothing work to sustain the subjugation of women in a male hegemonic society. I believe all the preceding research and analysis points to a single word final answer: Perception. It is the perception of gender-neutral clothing within some schemas or contexts as cross-dressing, as un-feminine, as wrong, which works to further female subjugation. Sight argues that what is

perceived is the only reality and when this perception is faced with a differing truth, the result can be truly troubling.

Perception, however, raises a second question. If negative perceptions can point to negative implications, and negative implications can pave the way for detrimental or subjugating actions, what happens when these perceptions are altered? This leads to the second research question: How do the meanings of gender-neutral clothing work to thwart the traditional roles established by dress in a hegemonic society? The next section of this chapter will work to answer this question.

### *The Possibility*

The introduction to this study noted that I would attempt to address both sides of the coin when it comes to gender-neutral clothing. The research and investigation so far bear witness to the need for this two-sided approach. Because artifacts are not explicit communication, Ogden and Richards would say they are not directly linked to meanings, they must always be interpreted within a given schema and context. An artifact may invite a specific meaning in one context or several meanings in another, but it does not demand or force them; the meanings are inherently interpretation based. It is this interpretation that makes the vital difference between the two research questions. In the first instance, gender-neutral clothing is the unrealized communicator employed by a rhetor who does not comprehend her own communication; in the second instance the rhetor again takes center stage, but this time with an understanding and purpose. To follow this knowing rhetor in gender-neutral clothing, I will begin again with Brummett's sites of struggle.

Language and images that denigrate, along with silencing and lack, were used in the first section of this chapter to highlight some of the negative messages of gender-neutral clothing. Looking now at alternative rhetorical forms and different ways of seeing, Brummett's construct accentuates the tensions found within this text. I begin with gender-neutral clothing as an alternative form of rhetorical expression; best understood in this case by a short detour into rhetorics of display.

Lawrence Prelli's *Rhetorics of Display*<sup>146</sup> provides a thorough anthology of current research into the rhetoric of display. Prelli posits that this branch of the rhetorical discipline is founded upon the classical Greek *deiktikos*, or showing forth which Aristotle used as the foundation for the epideictic form of rhetoric. These were communications that functioned specifically within the values of the surrounding culture and highlighted those cultural values. This definition of display was expanded in later centuries to include visualization in oratory, and later into visual communication such as art and performance. Prelli notes "Renaissance humanists presumed that all aesthetic displays are rhetorical performances before audiences capable of appraising the virtuosity of their execution."<sup>147</sup>

This focus on the performance and its place within a set of values carries into the modern rhetorical era where "the absence of widely authoritative standards for gaining compliance and commitment from audiences"<sup>148</sup> is characteristic – there is no universal schema provided by religion, culture, or society. Modern studies of display focus on the "relationship between rhetoric and display as manifested in the communicative practices and cultural contexts of our

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<sup>146</sup> Lawrence J. Prelli. *Rhetorics of Display*. Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2006.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid. 9.

times.”<sup>149</sup> The various articles on visual analyses included in Prelli’s book focus on what aspects of the considered texts are revealed and what aspects are hidden. The importance of this tension comes to the fore in the present discussion of gender-neutral clothing.

The tensions of gender-neutral clothing are evidenced even in the operational definition used for this study. The reliance upon cultural norms and values requires the interpretation of the reader within his or her context and as such it falls into the category of an alternative rhetorical form. As I noted from Brummett, alternative rhetorical forms become vital in the understanding of feminist’s reading of rhetorical artifacts because they allow for the communication of an “other” community. The alternative rhetoric provided by some types of display allows for an identity construction outside the normal bonds of a traditionally male dominated rhetoric. This identity construction can be used by a female communicator to transmit a message not easily sent or read through a traditional channel or in a traditional context.

The first non-traditional channel in which I will address the potential for gender-neutral clothing’s positive uses is through the schema of visual communication. As discussed above, Butler notes that almost all human cultures privilege the sense of sight over the other four senses. This can be problematic for women because gender-neutral clothing items highlight visible features more commonly associated with males. This aspect, however, can also have significant positive benefits. A woman who knowingly chooses to don communicative gender-neutral clothing items can use the items to highlight and accentuate a verbal message, announce her difference and individuality in identity and gender performance in a specific context, or even

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid. 9.

make a statement about surrounding culture. The visual nature of the message announces a person who is different before verbal communication can even begin.

A second channel is found in the concept of the performance itself. Butler argues that the black-and-white conception of gender and identity is a distinctly male concept and does not fit with the reality of human individuality. Identity, she argues, is formed on a series of continua ranging across all aspects of human self-identification. This concept is beautifully illustrated in gender-neutral clothing. A woman may choose to wear gender-neutral flip-flops with a pink, frilled, lacy (read as distinctly female in American culture) skirt. The footwear could also be paired with a large black hoodie, baseball cap, and un-fitted gray sweat pants (which American culture would largely read a masculine). Both choices illustrate a performance of gender which falls somewhere along a male-to-female continuum.

This second channel can be likened to renaissance painters who first learned how to force a perspective. The female gender-neutral clothing wearer forces thoughts about the intersecting roles of dress, gender, culture, context, and beliefs to be addressed in the mind of those who observe. It does this by surreptitiously challenging the traditionally held patriarchal beliefs about the nature of gender. The forced perspective occasioned by an intentional rhetor employing gender-neutral clothing provides a platform for discussion of role and gender, and a platform for the female voice.

Thwarting traditional hegemony through gender-neutral clothing is not an overt rhetoric. Similar to the obfuscation found in the detrimental lack perpetuated by gender-neutral clothing, the challenge to traditional American hegemony in dress is subtle and easily overlooked. A gender-neutral t-shirt may have a written message challenging traditional norms, but most other

forms of gender-neutral clothing will only present challenges perceived by the sagacious, the discerning, those ready to look.

### *Synthesis*

The reader will note that I focus on “knowingly” versus “unknowingly,” or flippantly, using gender-neutral clothing. The knowing rhetor will grasp the attitudes, values, and beliefs of his or her cultural context and investigate how the chosen clothing will most likely be perceived in a given set of schema. The research on clothing to date leaves little room for the naïve belief that clothes serve a merely functional role. They must be seen as communicative, and therefore interpretable.

Gender-neutral clothing articles communicate messages that work to both sustain and challenge the subtle hegemony of American society, but these messages are only whispered by the physical items. The *interpretation* of a hoodie, t-shirt, ball-cap or flip-flop is the real persuasion of the article. Although aspects such as construction may favor the male form as “type,” the greatest persuasion is found in perceptions. The individual choosing gender-neutral clothing is communicating messages that are at odds with the traditional schema of gender performance. This *perception* of non-conformity is the foundation for the persuasive properties of gender-neutral clothing.

The rhetor who knowingly chooses gender-neutral clothing with the understanding that it conveys its message only in subtle tones and veiled hints will realize that this form of visual rhetoric can be perceived with meanings along a truly vast scale. Both detrimental and positive meanings, nuanced and often obfuscated, are conveyed through these articles. Audience perceptions of the wearer are influenced by an almost limitless number of extenuating factors,

and perceptions can be influenced for either the good or ill based upon any of these. Familiarity with the garments, setting, occasion, tradition, religion, bias, and knowledge can all influence the perception of the gender-neutral clothing wearer.

To the well versed rhetorician reading this manuscript, this interpretation and intention based discussion of gender-neutral clothing rhetoric may sound similar to the arguments in critical media studies on the role, limits, and functions of *polysemy*. Astute observation. Celeste Condit's<sup>150</sup> observations on the role and limits of polysemy are especially applicable to this rhetorical case. Although Condit speaks directly to the human pleasure response to media stimuli, her work lists several key aspects that limit the potentially infinite spectrum of potential audience interpretations. These limits are also found in the interpretation and perception of gender-neutral clothing. Condit suggests that "the ability of audiences to shape their own readings [of a given text], and hence their social life, is constrained by a variety of factors... include[ing] audience members' access to oppositional codes, the ratio between the work required and the pleasure produced in decoding a text, the repertory of available texts, and the historical occasion."<sup>151</sup>

Condit takes the liberty of placing limitations on what some have wanted to assert as a limitless spectrum of possible rhetorical interpretations. This limiting, especially the factors listed, is vital to an understanding of how gender-neutral clothing is used and interpreted. Although the potential meanings from the information I have supplied may seem boundless, they are, in fact, constrained by many factors. A hoodie may mean very little on a college campus in an 8:00am class on a Monday; here it is likely merely a choice not to dress up for class. But in a

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<sup>150</sup> Condit, Celeste Michelle. "The Rhetorical Limits of Polysemy." *Critical Studies In Mass Communication* 6, no. 2 (June 1989): 103-122.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid. 104.

location with less access to, or understanding of, potential oppositional readings – say a fundamentalist religious organization – the same clothing choice might be interpreted as a sign of rebellion. The same flip-flops that, on a certain historical occasion in the White House, were considered a newsworthy faux pas, would be de rigueur at a typical family reunion.

Polysemy, Condit argues, is not the simple retaking of social power through using otherwise negative messages and interpreting them to be pleasurable. The complex limitations of interpretations renders an overarching theory of audience power moot, but works to highlight the value of an interactive understanding of audience role. This is found in the interpretation of gender-neutral clothing as well as mass media. A knowing rhetor wearing gender-neutral clothing cannot simply assume that by donning the garments he or she will clearly communicate a message of independence or any other positive intent. The perception of the garments, and thereby the wearer's performance, will be influenced by a constantly varying balance of interactive performer-receiver factors.

Gender-neutral clothing is, perhaps, deceptive, for it is never truly neutral. Although these items may be non-gendered, they are still subject to interpretations by both the wearer and the viewer. The interaction of many variables can play a role in the limiting or broadening of potential interpretations. The knowing rhetor will seek to understand the cultural, historical, location related, prejudicial, religious, cultural, information, pleasure, and effort related factors that will influence a specific audience's interpretation of his or her clothes. A complete picture of exactly how each of these and other factors will be influential may never be perfectly attained, but a foundational understanding of them can facilitate greater understanding and, therefore, better communication.

## Chapter Six

### Strategy and Application:

#### Or, Therefore Go and Do Likewise

#### *Review*

James Laver hit upon one of the least frequently recognized truths of human communication when he noted that clothes were never a frivolity.<sup>152</sup> Since their fabled Genesis inception,<sup>153</sup> clothes have always held more meaning than meets the eye. The popularity of gender-neutral clothing and the negative impact popular perceptions of these items can have on women has been carefully discussed in the preceding chapters. With the foundation that inequalities still exist based upon perceived gender and physical sex, this study has shown the functions and effects of gender-neutral clothing on the female population.

I have established (despite the doubting chagrin of some in the field) the communicative properties of gender-neutral clothing items. Our understanding of the rhetorical nature of these items flows from the symbolic nature of language itself. I have traced the lineage of understanding communication as symbolic from the early work of Richards and Ogden, through the modern world of feminist and queer theory research. Objects are distinct communicators of a person's identity and I have argued that clothing items are some of the most immediately personal of these objects. This is especially true to the aspect of communicating a person's gender identity.

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<sup>152</sup> James Laver. *Style in Costume*. (Oxford University Press. Oxford: 1949).

<sup>153</sup> "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings." *The Bible*. New King James Version. Genesis 3:7

With this understanding I moved into a discussion of how to assess and read this symbolic code. Based out of my held belief, researched understanding, and experienced reality, I asked questions about the uses and misuses of these symbols in the female experience framed by the specter of hegemony still existent in American society. To answer these questions I found it expedient to turn to ideological criticism. You, as the reader, have traveled with me through an understanding of ideological criticism. Through my references to works by Butler and Brummett you have seen the female body as a potential site of struggle when it is performed in gender-neutral clothing.

To answer questions I found through this concept of the gender-neutral clothed body, you have taken in a description of what I consider gender-neutral clothing for the purposes of this study. I have presented a delimiting narrative of what are arguably the physical and cultural points of import for the current text, and I have coded these points for several ideological cues. Finally, you have observed how I believe these symbols should be read and interpreted for meaning. I have presented to you what I believe is communicated by these artifacts for both good and ill for the female in a still-hegemonic society.

### *Action*

In the above paragraphs I have used the individual personal pronouns both for the reader and for myself. Now, however, I would like to switch to an “us” mentality. The reader has been allowed to be passive until reaching this point. However, like most ideological studies, this research calls upon both the researcher, and the reader, to make an evaluative judgment. After deconstructing the minutia of gender-neutral clothing for the past sixty or more pages, I would like to provide something constructive that can be taken away.

The trend of gender-neutral clothing shows no sign of abating in the near future. It plays a large part in the wardrobes of many Americans and has become a staple of most college campuses. The pervasiveness of these items argues eloquently for an active participation by those of us who observe and participate in this clothing trend. We, as communicators, can work toward a consistent interpretation of these items as a positive performance choice for women who communicate through them. This change in perception and interpretation begins on the individual level, as communicators become aware of, and sensitive to, their personal perceptions.

This transformation in the realm of gender-neutral clothing begins when communicators work to eradicate the negative, hegemonic, interpretations – the silencing, lack, denigration, the misunderstood performances – often associated with these garments. Both the wearer and the observer of gender-neutral clothing must take an active role to achieve this perception transformation. I do not say achieved in a spirit of finality. Neither subjugation nor equality is a specific end goal. The communication of objects in general or gender-neutral clothing in micro represents a progressional development toward consistently better communication; a consistent progression only reached through individual determinations to make the change.

As scholars, I hope we each move forward, choosing to evaluate our own communicative garment choices with the knowledge of the culture in which we present them. The continuum of meaning gleaned from clothing communication and interpretation is aided by each individual who chooses to think first when speaking through clothes. The potential for subjugation and hegemony is only lessened when assumptions are avoided and, as individual observers, we choose to listen and see before we presume to judge.

### *Future Research*

Gender-neutral clothing is a largely untouched field in rhetorical studies and holds great promise for social scientific, theoretical, critical, and practical research. The potential for expansion upon this specific study is, I believe, also significant in both breadth and depth. I have established several criteria and definitional foundation for this study, which could be tested in specific situations or used as the basis for future research. These definitions and foundations could also be tested and questioned should other scholars take issue with this work; a prospect which I would welcome in future research.

Continuing research could also delve into the concept of interactive meaning making. The nature of interactive meaning-making is a small field within the realm of communication studies but represents a majority of how human understanding is created in “real life.” This field is, I believe, highly under-studied and could benefit from more brains attending to it. I believe application of interactive meaning-making scholarship to the area of objectics and visual communication research could enhance the current understanding of human communication.

Critical analysis would be well directed to examine how other types of clothing outside the business-professional communication realm are used, abused, and interpreted. The definition I developed in this study purposefully excluded uniform clothing, yet a large sector of the population goes to work daily in gender-neutral clothing. What does the police officer’s garb, the nurse’s scrubs, the soldier’s fatigues, or the delivery person’s attire communicate? What are the personal, performance, identification, and ideological ramifications?

I would also suggest that future research delve into the communication of clothing in other cultures and countries. The profusion of color in several Indian and African cultures and the intersection of religion, modesty, and culture in non-practicing Muslim women’s dress come

readily to mind. Many non-western cultures also exhibit clothing that is also nearly identical for both males and females within the population. I believe both individual studies of these cultures form a communication, gender identity, or interactive meaning-making perspective, and comparative studies of a social-scientific nature could yield great returns for scholars.

Finally, I would like to see more significant research on the communication of gender-neutral clothing, and clothing in general, undertaken in the field of communication studies. It is my hope that this study has functioned to highlight the inherently personal and highly important role played by clothing in the creation and identification of personal identity. Communication scholars in both the humanities and the social sciences could glean beneficial insight through pursuit of this channel.

### *Conclusion*

The enthralled child standing in her mother's closet knows nothing about the multi-billion dollar per year industry which is fighting to shape her into its ideal consumer and clothe her identity in their garments. This child, however, does know what she likes. Heels or flip-flops, skirts or jeans, hats or handbags – the clothes we choose speak volumes about our identity, and the way we interpret the choices of others can define our relationships and communication with them before we ever speak a word.

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