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"Because they are me": Dress and the making of gender

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Abstract
Young people in contemporary South Africa inhabit a multiplicity of diverse, often contradictory, economic and socio-cultural contexts. These contexts offer a range of possibilities and opportunities for the affirmation of certain identities and positionalities alongside the disavowal of others. Dress – clothes, accessories and body styling – is one of the key components through which, within specific social conditions, people perform these identities. In making statements about themselves in terms of these multiple and intersecting group (or social) historical identities, the meanings soaked into people's dress simultaneously speak to the present and their aspirations for the future. This article reports on a study that explored how a group of third year students at a South African university use dress to negotiate the multiple and intersecting identities available to them in a context characterised by neoliberal democracy and market ideologies that continue to be mediated by the racialised legacies of apartheid. The study employed a qualitative feminist discourse analysis to consider 53 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted by third year students with other students on campus as part of an ongoing project exploring gender productions and performance. The discussion focuses on student understandings of ways in which contemporary clothes and dress signal gender. The research suggests that while there are moments in which clothes are acknowledged as expressions that can reinforce or challenge inequalities structured around gender, participants are also strongly invested in neoliberal consumerist understandings of clothes as accessories to an individualised self in ways that reinforce neoliberal market ideologies and reinstate hegemonic performances of gender.

Introduction

As observed by a growing number of scholars from a range of disciplines, how people dress matters (Davis 1992; Entwistle and Wilson 2001; Lehmann 2000; Moletsane, Mitchell and Smith 2012). Dress is as much about the transmission of meaning and the production or interruption of symbolic, social and psychological power, as it is about convenience and physical needs. Although what people wear carries meaning, caution is necessary in reading their dress styles because, as Owyong (2009, 195) remarks, people do not always don articles of clothing for the express purpose of conveying a pre-determined message. Hand-me-downs (or used clothes), for example, are often a significant cost-saver for people who are more concerned about thrift or personal finances than about the clothes they wear.

This article precludes this problem of "clothes without message" as it is grounded in a study that sought to find out the gender meanings accorded to clothes by university students in South Africa. Furthermore, hand-me-downs, from which ricochet questions of affordability as well as markets for second-hand clothing (Hansen 2000), indirectly raise the crucial point of the signification of dress as an aspect of neoliberal capitalist consumption, the underside of which is income inequality and poverty.

In a neoliberalist, commodity culture subjects are seduced into feeling and thinking about themselves as being free in their choice of clothing and other consuming desires. And yet, as many researchers have shown, the culture of commodification is a powerful framework for shaping and regulating identity and reproducing subjective, interpersonal, cultural and economic relationships (Allman 2004; Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Kaiser 2012). Dress is the focus of scholarly attention "not as a substitute for verbal sources when these are unavailable, but in order to reveal dimensions of political and social transformations that cannot be discerned in observed social behaviour or verbal and written articulations" (Burman and Turbin in Allman 2004, 4; see also Mitchell 2009). The choices people make – or might consider making – are always enmeshed with power relations – such as economic, political, gendered, generational and cultural relations (Allman 2004; Breward 1995; Crane 2000). As Benjamin (in Lehmann 2000, 164) once famously declared, "Fashion has the scent of the modern wherever it stirs in the thicket of what has been. It is the tiger's leap into the past. Yet this leap occurs in an arena commanded by the ruling class." A key component of an increasingly consumerist global culture, the clothing fashion industry simultaneously draws on and re-inscribes idealised identities structured around, among others, class, race, age, gender, sexuality and culture. As acknowledged across disciplines, from gender studies and cultural sociology to developmental psychology and cultural studies, dress is a key accessory to gender performance and the policing of gender binarisms within the still globally hegemonic rigid matrix of sex, gender and sexuality (Butler 1990). The global clothing industry remains predominantly presented to the public in gender divisive terms, and dress is deployed as a marker of gender identity from infancy to old age across contexts (see, e.g., Halim et al. 2014). Beyond simply serving as accessories to gender performances, clothes are central to successful achievements of dominant masculinities and femininities (Fair 2004; Kaiser 2012; Tulloch 2010). In Foucauldian terms, dress imperatives are mediated by globalised and institutionalised fashion operating at multiple levels of popularisation in ways that constitute part of a panoptic self-regulation of gender, class, age, sexuality and other forms of social identity and status. At the same time clothes as an extension or accessory to self-representation can also be drawn on within performances that resist and destabilise normative identities. Thus, "playing" with gender normative prescriptions on dress can destabilise continued binaries of gender and sexuality (Kennison 2002).

While resistance exists, post-apartheid South Africa is deeply embedded in global financial systems, and increasingly part of the transnational commodity context, one within which young people and their gender productions are caught in powerful, and often disempowering, currents of imagined futures. The consumption of globalised objects of

desire, including cars, technology, furniture and dress, has become a key marker in the making of a free society and free subjects (Howell and Vincent 2014). But while there may well be global circuits and pressures around meanings of gender and freedoms, how individuals present and re-present themselves as gendered beings should also be understood against particular local contexts. In shaping and framing the kinds of identities that might be imagined and produced, national, even subnational, space and historical time play an important role. In South Africa centuries of colonisation and institutionalised racial capitalism have created huge disparities of wealth and opportunities across different urban and rural contexts, complicating notions of the "traditional" and "modern" (Everitt-Penhale and Ratele 2015). The everyday choices around what to wear tell stories about people – stories about everyday negotiations of South African "modernities", "traditions", the contemporary and history. These stories, or perhaps, these songs (after Davis 1992, who proposes that the nonverbal communication of clothes is better described as song or music) are always contextual, suggestive, implying particular meanings (or playing with ambiguity) for specific audiences at particular times and places. To pursue Davis' (1992) metaphor, people's clothes are complicated melodies aimed at the communities with which they identify or aspire to, revealing much about their access to resources such as money or time, who they are allied to, what they desire or desire to be, and who they are not (Freitas et al. 1997). The opening up of spaces (e.g. via South Africa's constitutional imperatives and other post-apartheid legislations) for cultivating an appreciation for a diversity of gender and sexuality performance within a framework of gender and racial justice (alongside persisting poverty and economic inequalities) is important in understanding meanings and experiences of dress and clothing. While clothes do serve to reinforce and constrain gender, sexuality and other prescribed social identities, they also serve as resources for the making of different meanings (Nuttall 2009). For young men and women the possibilities of dress are "scaffolded by consumerist, marketing and digital technologies, and fed on sound-bytes of apartheid and colonial Southern and South African histories" and mediated by the "trans-historical, transcultural, visual and material resources" that are available to those, like the students in the study, who have access to the internet (Farber 2015, 7; see also Moorman 2004).

While the particular messages articulated by dress choices can be read as uncritical acceptance, as re-inscribing and affirming of the status quo (Ralfe 2004; Van Laren 2012), or as the result of authoritarianism (Lewis 2012), there are also messages of disavowal of certain identities or positionalities (De Beer 2012; Lewis 2012). As demonstrated by Freitas et al. (1997), it is often easier – and perhaps more important – for people to say *what they are not* (a point that seems especially pertinent in respect of young African men fearful of appearing gay) (Msibi 2012). People's clothes can preclude their being understood or "read", or tell tales that are ambiguous, disruptive or subversive; expressions of protest and defiance (Allman 2004; Lewis 2012; Moletsane and Lolwana 2012; Moorosi 2012). As these studies show, a critical analysis of clothes assumes that dress and self-styling is always embodied and always performative, expressions of intersecting identities in complex contexts, contexts that can be disrespectful and disinterested or supportive and nurturing.

Yet, as the following discussion suggests, the young people who participated in the study imagine themselves to be relatively free to choose what to wear, to have largely internalised and normalised the constraints surrounding their choices (Breward 2003; Crane 2000). Drawing on an ongoing study on gender making and expression, specifically narratives elicited in 2010 from a group of young men and women in higher education, we explored how these young people make gendered meaning of dress and how clothes and related accessories work in their stories to mediate social identities, both dominant and transgressive, and are a part of, or perhaps also barrier to, challenging social inequalities. By focusing on the narratives elicited from a small group of young men and women at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), South Africa, we offer critical insight into ways in which clothes are individualised gendered expressions of self in particular contexts of poverty, inequality, marginalization and hierarchy.

Methodology
The data analysed here emerged from a feminist qualitative study conducted as part of an ongoing inquiry-based learning module for final year students in the Women's and Gender Studies Department at UWC in collaboration with the Institute for Social and Health Sciences of the University of South Africa (Unisa) and Violence, Injury and Peace Research Unit at the Medical Research Council (MRC). Students who register for this module are active participants, engaged as researchers in an authentic research project (Herrington and Herrington 2006; Herrington and Oliver 2000) that positions them as knowledge producers. Over the course of the semester, the students are taken through a series of assignments that aim to reproduce the "natural" stages of research (Shefer and Clowes 2015). After collaboratively refining the research question at the beginning of the course, the students conduct a literature survey and design their study in the form of a proposal before collecting, gathering and analysing data. The students are mentored through these components of research, given detailed feedback on each of these assignments as well as multiple opportunities to rewrite their work with the overall aim of producing a final research report that is examinable. A key aim of the module is to mentor undergraduate students into inhabiting scholarly identities with a longer term aim of working with students to publish out of this research (see, e.g., Clowes, Shefer and Ngabaza 2017; Ngabaza, Bojarczuk, Masuku and Roelfse 2015; Shefer, Strebel, Ngabaza and Clowes 2017).

The research question developed with the class in 2010 was: "How do clothes signal and define gender in different communities and contexts?" The feminist qualitative methodology employed was refined with the students and a collective decision made that each student would conduct semi-structured in depth interviews with four other students on campus. After training in research ethics, the students developed (as an assignment) an appropriate consent form that guaranteed voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, as well as the right to withdraw at any time. Once informed consent had been obtained, each student interviewed two female and two male students, transcribed these interviews and submitted them as another assignment. In total, with 120 students each interviewing four other students, over 400 interviews and associated transcriptions of varying depth and quality were produced as part of the coursework for the module.

The analysis presented here is drawn from the work of students whose interviews and transcriptions met the following four criteria, namely: (1) whether the student researcher had met the highest ethical standards in obtaining informed consent from his or her participants; (2) whether explicit consent from the student researcher (as well as his or her participants) was obtained that his or her interview transcripts could be used by the authors for further analysis beyond the requirements of the course; (3) whether full demographic details of the interview had been recorded; and (4) whether the interview had adequate richness and depth, and whether, in the absence of video facilities, nonverbal gestures and probing questions had been included. Of the interviews, 53 involving 29 female and 24 male students met these criteria. Being primarily concerned with the making of gender via dress, the analysis reports only the sex/gender of the students. However, we noted the following: the interviewees were between the ages of 20 and 28 with a median age of 22; the interviewees were all students at UWC; that UWC is a historically deprived university that was reserved for those categorized as "coloured" under apartheid racial laws but which now, in addition to "coloured" students, has a significant proportion of black students and a small number of white students;[1] and that students who study at UWC have historically come from a poor and working class background and this has changed though not dramatically in the new democratic dispensation.

A qualitative thematic analysis informed by critical discourse analysis was conducted on the 53 transcripts. In acknowledging that discourse analysis is a wide and contested terrain we mainly drew on the work of Potter and Wetherell (1987), Parker (1992), Burman and Parker (1993) and Van Dijk (1993). In reflecting critically on the views and meanings made by the interviewees we acknowledge the significance of language and how these serve particular functions within the larger framework of normative discourses on masculinities and femininities. In the presentation of direct quotes from the participants, pseudonyms are used to ensure anonymity. Except for minor editing, such as italicisation to indicate observation or give context for some of the extracts, we have left the transcribed interviews as submitted to us by students. We should also caution that the majority of students at UWC are non-native English speakers and this should be borne in mind when reading their responses.

Analysis
We present our argument within the articulation of two broad themes emerging from the data. Firstly, we start by illustrating how the participants set up clothes as "supposed" to define who they are, as representing individuality and identity, framed in neo-liberal individualist discourse (Soper 2001). Secondly, we juxtapose this with the way in which clothes emerge as serving a regulatory role in disciplining gender, sexual, classed and enculturated practices in

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[1] Many South African citizens continue to identify with the racialised identities, produced by centuries of racist colonial rule, which were codified into apartheid in the middle of the 20th century. In using these racial categories we acknowledge them as social constructs that have (and continue to have) a profound impact on material lives, experiences and opportunities and the meanings attributed to them by the participating students.

relation to the dominant constructions of what is desirable, that are referenced both globally and locally.

Individualised discourse on clothes in the construction of the self

The young people who participated in the study appeared to be largely uncritical of the cultural and historical constraints shaping their choices around what to wear. A strong discourse present in the participants' narratives, that echoes the work of Miller (2009) and Checinska (2015), was the notion that clothes are merely accessories to an individualised performance of the self. Clothes are used to generate a sense of individuality and uniqueness. Such a discourse functions to obscure the political nature of dress and obfuscate ways in which an individual's capacity to use dress is shaped and constrained by material conditions such as access to economic resources or information about the latest fashion trends.

These kinds of individualised narratives serve to delink clothes from the regulatory nature of dress, and to discount the ways in which clothes are always performances of class, race, gender and sexuality as well as other salient subject locations. Thus, the participants constructed clothes as accessories in their self-presentation, as a mode of self-expression, strongly framing their positions in a liberal-humanist and consumerist ideology (the language of advertising) of free choice, individual expression, "who they are" (assumed to be inherent and free of social and material constraints) (Kaiser 2001), as reflected in their responses:

Yes, it is the way I express myself (smiling) and the way I dress makes me feel attractive and more comfortable. (Female)

Yes it defines you as an individual not as your gender, what you wear and what you are comfortable … (Male)

Definitely more of a comfortable guy, (I) like simplicity and stylish. I also like retro and arty, being a design student and all. (Male)

It's supposed to be about freedom. People must wear clothing that make them feel comfortable and beautiful, the only way that you know how. (Female)

Different strokes for different folks. Maybe, the way I like to dress is not the way somebody else likes to dress. We are individuals and we are different. I like jeans, somebody else will like dresses and skirts and somebody else will like leggings. Somebody else can't look down on me because I wear pants. For different people it's going to be different. I think it's important that you know who you are and that you know what you feel comfortable in. If you don't feel comfortable in something, you shouldn't wear it because you will feel bad in it generally because you need to go with something that makes you feel good. (Female)

A heavily-laden discourse of comfort also featured strongly in the interviews. Clothes were spoken of in an individualised framework as facilitating access to mainly personal comfort, and to a lesser extent, identity-related comfort (Holliday 2001). In fact clothes were endowed as depoliticised objects that have the capacity to impact on sense of security, comfort and even happiness. Indeed the notion of being comfortable emerges very strongly in the narratives as something that can be taken for granted, assumed, as not in need of explanation by either participants or student researchers. The notion of comfort emerged as both a psychical and physical comfort. Clothes then are constructed as accessories that afford one comfort and also represent "who one is in the world" in a way that is comforting. The participants insisted that material realities or social contexts have little influence over their choices, that their choices are authentic, offering physical and psychically comfortable expressions of individualism:

Yes because I wear what makes me as a person comfortable and makes me feel good at all times every day. (Male)

I think that your clothes signal you as a person because its clothes that make me feel comfortable and the clothes that I wear as a person I think that it describes me as person. (Male)

The way you dress says a lot about you. What you put together and how you do it, says a lot about you. When I say that I don't know how expensive your clothes are but it depends how you dress and how you carry yourself. (Female)

My style and my way of dress is ... is just for me. I don't dress for nobody else. Comfortable ... I'd say comfortable. Ja, whatever, whatever I feel comfortable with you know, if I can wear walk around in a tracksuit whole day, I'll walk around in a tracksuit whole day, as you can see. (Male)

At the same time as they claimed that clothes are authentic expressions of the individualised self, hints of more complex understandings by students consistently emerged through the data. Embedded in these narratives, however much glossed over, are hints in which the comfort that is so highly valued in the extracts above is founded on access to material resources. Thus branded clothes and expensive items underpin a sense of confidence and comfort, reiterating the powerful way in which class shapes (and for many of the students in the study therefore undermines) social belonging and value:

I define dress as part of one's identity, as much as we wanna deny it, clothing most times define us, as it provokes certain feelings within, like say, like, I wear expensive sneakers I automatically feel good about myself, like, confident. (Male)

Thus, if clothes are not appropriately worn in relation to the external context of what is required, what is "correct", the punitive impact is felt in not fitting in and the discomfort of breaking normative practices:

Yes, how you dress kind of have a big impact on how you feel in society, because sometimes if I feel uncomfortable if my clothes don't match. (Female)

That it is the imagined response of others that underlines the role of clothing in achieving a positive sense of self is strongly evident in the participants' narratives. Clothes are a key part of the choreography of interpersonal relationships, communicating for and about individuals – in relation to others – so that they do not need to speak. As the quotations below suggest, within the competitive framework integral to corporate capitalism in a neoliberal market economy, clothes could signal professional success (or failure) through a demonstration of successful access to material resources against contexts of scarcity:

Yes, it does, I feel like it [clothes] affects how I see myself but more so how others see me. (Female)

Yes, to look professional when you work. Clothes help project these things, to show that I am better than others. (Male)

Drawing further on neoliberal ideologies of competitive individualism that exemplify self-realisation through individual choice, the participants emphasised that clothes should not and need not constrain them. Apparently assuming an essentialised, unitary self, outside of social contexts (Kaiser 2001), the participants largely rejected cultural constraints to insist they were free to express their personal desires, "feelings" and unique identities through their choices of clothes. The reproduction of neoliberalist individualist discourses, hinging around notions of personal freedom and the importance of forging an "own" identity, effectively serves as disavowal of material and ideological constraints on identity:

No, I should not be dressed in a prescribed way and they should dress the way they feel and one should not be prescribed on their religious view or gender. (Male)

It's supposed to be about freedom. People must wear clothing that make them feel comfortable and beautiful, the only way that you know how. (Female)

Student understandings that challenge social and cultural constraints on personal freedom and individual choice also emerged as a platform for making the self in resistance to authority, for example, against parental power:

I think it is freedom for me personally. When I grew up I couldn't dress in trousers because my mother didn't allow it and my father didn't allow it. Then when I went to high school, I started becoming rebellious and I told my parents I want to wear jeans because I saw I look good in it. I couldn't understand why I couldn't wear jeans. (Female)

At the same time, perhaps reflecting their status as university students, positioned to have a much wider range of options in the future, some participants did acknowledge class

divisions and how disparities of material wealth constrained their choices either currently or in the past. Such understandings emerged in the interviews through the articulation of hopes and dreams for imagined futures where economic constraints shaping the choices they make around clothes have fallen away, and where the negative impact of their failure to conform to social expectations around class has also fallen away:

[I wear] that which I'm able to afford to wear, like if I could choose what to wear I would choose quite expensive range of clothing … I won't say it is important but I do think that once I'm able to afford it, I will dress how I've always wanted to dress, a peculiar expensive classy style (*Giggles*). (Male)

… sometimes [I] can't afford what I would love to wear, like the expensive things (Female)

 (*Describes arriving in the Western Cape from another province, KwaZulu-Natal*) One thing I was concerned about was that I didn't have many clothes, like the guys around me. They dressed in labelled clothing. Your takkies [sneakers] must have a name, your jean must be Identity [clothing label], as I am wearing, now (*Both student researcher and research participant laugh*) also DH and Levis. I didn't have those types of things. I only had my normal clothes. I felt different … (Male)

While the students insisted that the clothes they wear are chosen on the basis of comfort, to express individuality in the face of parental or other authority, their narratives also revealed ways in which social expectations matter. Insisting, on the one hand, that clothes are a personal, individualised representation of an authentic self, the interviews also showed, on the other hand, how important it is for these students to "fit in", to reproduce normative expectations around class and culture.

Intersecting with class, of course, are gender and sexuality, and while these appear to be absent from the narratives outlined above, understandings of the gendered sexual self (and the disciplinary and regulatory functions of clothes in producing these selves) seeps through these individualised accounts as we go on to discuss in the next section.

Clothes in the performance and regulation of normative gender roles
As has been widely illustrated internationally and locally, clothes have been powerful accessories in the representation and regulation of normative gender roles and identities in the past and present (Allman 2004; Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Entwistle and Wilson 2001; Moletsane et al. 2012). Thus, what women and men wear serves, in tandem with other aspects of their self-presentation, to reinforce and affirm their gender (and normative expectations around gender including heteronormative practices). Here the stereotypic enmeshment of a submissive femininity with a performance directed towards male attention (Berger 1972) juxtaposed by the active, economically well-endowed and physically powerful (and essentialised) masculinity is evident:

Women, I believe, wear high heels just to prove a point (*Smiling*) and they also wear short dresses to draw the attention of males. Men, on the other hand (*Rolling her eyes*) always wear jeans and match it up with a cool t-shirt, and then sometimes just to show off, they wear muscle tops that hugs their muscles to show their masculinity. (Female)

Femininity ... (*After a long pause*) I would say dresses and skirts because it describe you as a woman; and on the side of masculinity a suit because it makes a man feel successful and casual clothes like Nike, Adidas and many other brands. (Male)

Thus, the unsuited man, or the man wearing a tight bathing suit, is othered as is the woman who "reveals" too much:

(*Reflecting on inappropriate dress*) to be honest ... men in speedos is just plain nasty ... for women anything that leaves way too little for the imagination. (Female)

The power of clothing in defining gender (and other social performance) is evident in the narrative below. In the extract the participant highlights the powerful relationship between clothes and her own and others' gender performances. Thus, wearing a particular form of clothing necessarily prompts a particular performance since there are unspoken disciplinary regimes which frame the practices, including the affective experience, represented by the clothes:

... when I wear feminine clothes there's also a certain rule to how you behave, well a certain rule ... constructed rule that if you wear you have to be like a little lady and have to behave yourself and not eat too much and not swear, and be on your best behaviour. So I think that in ... in a sense also influences how I feel in my dress. (Female)

While clothing clearly prescribes gender for both men and women, the participants also revealed that the pressure appears intensified for women who stand to lose more if they do not conform (Eicher 2001; Hansen 2004; Ivaska 2004). While an essentialist notion of women as "more influenced than men" is applied in the narrative below, the imperative for women to "go with the norm" is nonetheless evident:

Well I think both sexes experience certain pressures, but for women it's elevated because we are influenced easily. E.g. a fourteen year old girl are self-conscious about her body and what her tummy looks like. She will look at somebody else and think this is what guys [go] for. She will feel more pressured to go with the norm. And also she will want to wear a certain type of clothing, skinny jeans, whatever with men, they are not going to feel pressured. They are not a necessarily influenced by the media, yes to a certain extent but then there's pressure from the girls but for the girls there's pressure from both guys and girls and from the media (*Counting on her fingers*). (Female)

The importance of dressing as a woman, including the conflation of femininity with tight clothes, that is to say clothes that reveal particular body parts (but not too much), emerged

frequently. As did the imperative for women to conform to what is constructed as feminine (not only by the men's responses but by female peer pressure):

I like various types of clothing. I like dresses, skirts and also jeans and trousers, things that are tight because they show my feminine side ...True there is. I remember when I was first year, I had a friend who dressed like a tomboy. She didn't wear makeup. She didn't ... she just liked wearing takkies [sneakers] all the time ... She started wearing heels because we told her you need to dress in a certain way, you know or maybe she felt out. Men just go with the flow but I think for women there's more pressure because she was outnumbered because she dressed in a certain way. (Female)

The participants highlighted the rewards available for women who conform to expected feminine dress and also a sense that it was more problematic for women not to conform to the pressures to dress in popular feminine ways (Lewis 2012). Dressing in feminine ways is a ticket then not only to acceptance within dominant heteronormative expectations, but also positive attention and regard and serves to ensure the individual is not negated as a woman:

If I get dressed like a girl people will greet me and they will give me compliments but if I dress in baggy things, like a guy, it's guaranteed that I won't get as much hello's and smiles. They will look at me and think, she doesn't know how to dress or she's another tomboy. They are going to although, subconsciously, we all do this, we judge someone by the way they dress. When you are tomboyish people will not feel to approach you but if you look feminine people will be able to figure you out because you look presentable and also friendly. (Female)

For men, underpinning choices around clothes was a strong emphasis on provider masculinity (Hunter 2006); a breadwinner discourse in which men are supposed to exhibit material wealth and an ability to provide for women and children. This discourse has been shown in local research to be central in shaping hegemonic masculinities in many communities (see, e.g., Hosking 2006; Hunter 2006; Niehaus 2005; Sideris 2005; Swartz and Bhana 2010). Thus, clothes appear here to also serve to reflect material success for men, as tied up with a capacity to earn and provide, either in the present or in the future:

Yes, to look professional when you (men) work. Clothes help project these things, to show that I am better than others. (Male)

Of course, when you see a man in a suit approaching you, you immediately assume he is serious firstly, that he's a professional and that he should be taken seriously. So I do think that ultimately one can earn respect through dress. (Male)

Also evident, and similarly linked to powerful, influential and competitive masculinities, as well as access to wealth, was the influence of music idols in shaping dress styles for young men:

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No, most of the guys where I come from, they like stylish clothing. It's actually the influence of the media and the music guys, you know how they wear those pantsula[2] guys. They wear All-Stars [sneakers] and tight jeans. It makes them feel to a certain point that they are up to standard. They are competing with the guys who are in the … what you call it … guys who are in the music industry. They want to adopt that culture, they want to do things the way they do things. (Male)

For these students, clothes served a disciplinary function that did more than simply reflect gender and class binaries but also spoke to choices with respect to identification in a global system where Euro-American hegemonies of life style are idealised. In addition to reinforcing gender normativity, clothes also served to express consumerist lifestyle desires and police sexualities through an emphasis on heteronormative individualised expressions of gender. For the female students in the study, this operated within the paradox of the whore-madonna, identified in international and local literatures on heterosexualities (see, e.g., Daniluk 1993; Shefer and Strebel 2001). Thus, women must dress sexually, but not too sexily, as that risks their being othered as a "slut", raising questions about their respectability. At the same time, not dressing in contextually "appropriate" feminine ways also risks censure through problematising their femininity and, relatedly, their heterosexuality. For men this works primarily within a homophobic paradigm, the well-acknowledged evidence that hegemonic masculinities take on power and meaning in relation to subjugated masculinities, in particular homosexual masculinities (see Freitas et al. 1997).

Reinforcing Msibi's (2012) work, the evidence from the participants suggests that it is particularly important that young African men are not perceived as gay. Thus, a powerful rejection of men who appear (dress) too closely to the feminine, in ways that in this cultural context are associated with gay men, was evident in the data. The narrative illustrates the way in which women's non-normative dress foregrounds questions about their gender, while men's non-normative dress foregrounds questions about their sexual orientation:

(*Laughing*) Men should not be wearing skinny jeans it is for females. Females should not be wearing baggy jeans, it makes them look like men. It is rather confusing to know whether they are straight or gay. (Female)

Clothes that are meant to be worn only by women cannot be worn by men. Then you would be viewed as a drag queen or gay. (Male)

Indeed, it seems that ambiguity or transgressions in dress were more tolerated (although noticed) in women than in men, again highlighting the investments of hegemonic masculinity in heteronormativity and the "othering" of gay sexuality:

Well, now that I've grown up and now that things such as ones individuality is to be practised, ha ha ha [giggles], I reckon it's okay for like females to wear clothing that looks "tomboyish"

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[2] Pantsula is South African urban subculture defined by a fashion and dance style, usually associated with masculinity and expensive, elegant clothes.

but I don't think men should wear clothes that look girly, like some gays do, it's just wrong! (Male)

Similarly, fluctuating between the individualist freedom discourse articulated earlier and the constraints on gender, some participants highlighted how they constructed their versions of femininity in alternative ways that drew on traditional masculinity, yet still very clearly serve to represent a version of femininity (possibly even more valuable as bordering on the risk of being othered as a tomboy):

I think my own because ... actually no ... cos to a large extent I do wear what's fashionable and stuff, but I also wear what I like. If I don't like that thing then I won't wear it. So I think it is like my definition of femininity cos I do wear a lot of like semi-guy clothes as well, like I borrow my brother's hoodies and stuff and like wear takkies [sneakers] and all that shite. So I think it would be my definition more than society's ja, Cos I think on those special occasions I conform to society's expectations but on a daily basis it's my definition of femininity ... which has been influenced by society to some extent but also not. (Female)

Some of the students appeared to be challenging gender normativity and stereotypes, taking up the spaces that arguably are on offer in a more socially justice and gender equal society. This appears to be particularly the case for young women who see normative femininity as potentially stifling. However, given the neoliberal emphasis on competitive individualism that shapes and frames the context within which the study was undertaken, such challenges tend to be individualised rather than understood as socio-political critiques of intersecting social hierarchies structured around gender, class and sexuality. In other words, whereas there are moments in which challenges to gender normativity are evident, students appear to largely accept the heteronormative gender stereotypes and to dress to stereotype while attempting through their clothes to signal that, as an individual, one is different.

Conclusion

The current study asked a group of mostly young students, growing up in both an unequal society and one in which neoliberal and consumerist values dominate, what clothes mean for them. We were particularly interested in the meanings that participants make of their clothes and dress and whether they are part of a normative or possibly alternative and resistant gender performances and other forms of social identification. In our critical feminist reading of the data, we identified two overlapping but also contradictory discourses that are dominant in the meanings young people make of clothes.

On the one hand, young people draw on notions of *individual choice* and *freedom*: clothes are resources to self-represent as a project of uniqueness and self-marketisation. Thus, the study highlights the power of neoliberal consumerist capitalist understandings of dress as a component of self-styling and individualised performance. Yet self-styling is also revealed as highly classed, hinging on access to particular resources; fashionable clothes are often not obtainable to those without adequate financial means. While the participants alluded to the constraints of financial resources in realising these individualised self-styling

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imperatives, it is evident that underpinning the dress aspired to in the fashioning of an individualised and gendered self is access to material resources. Access to resources in turn signifies access to an idealised material identity. Those who are not located in this idealised and hegemonic class location, that is those without access to resources to "shop", certainly aspire to and may attempt identification through gaining the clothing markers that represent such class location. It is interesting that the way in which poverty undermines access to idealised self-representation was somewhat glossed over by participant. This may speak to shame and discomfort in revealing class position and/or hurdles to the dominant narrative on self-styling.

On the other hand, the participants' narratives revealed the pressure to conform to particular dominant notions of *gender*: clothes are key accessories to the performance of idealised heteronormative gender positions. Normative gendered expectations framed in stereotypic and binary opposite notions of masculinity and femininity, and fashioned by hegemonic Euro-American versions of such a binarism, appear to shape dress. At other times dress is represented as performative in that it is entangled in performances of gender. In such a binaristic framework, dress is articulated as key to the disciplining and regulation of femininity (i.e. "too sexy" will be punished) and masculinity (i.e. you need to show that you are a provider through your "professional" garb).

These two discourses articulate with each other in nuanced ways, foregrounding both the hegemony of heteronormative gender constructions and ways in which neoliberal notions of individualised self and freedom are deployed to legitimate and reproduce conditions that bolster consumer capitalist values and disguise the inequalities inherent in global and local capitalism. Notions of self-control and self-styling also serve to disguise the constraints of gender, class and other forms of social power and identity that undermine the imagined freedoms that clothes offer. Thus, while some narratives also flagged how dress is more fluid in current contexts, allowing more space for men and women to engage in more ambiguous dress, little emerged in the narratives about how dress may be used to resist particular identities and transgress gender and sexual and other social divides. Challenges to heteronormative expressions of gender, in other words, tend to be individualised rather than understood as critiques of intersecting social hierarchies structured around gender, class and sexuality. For feminist educators the possibilities of dress as an accessory to transgressive sexualities and genders as political, ideological and subjective resistance, evident in critical and queer art such as Zanele Muholi's photography (see Lewis 2015), is disappointingly absent. In conclusion, the study flags the value of working with young people, sharing visual critique and narratives that raise questions about ways in which individualised notions of self-styling may obfuscate questions about material and ideological inequalities. Raising awareness of the dominant ideologies that bolster social inequalities inherent in fashion and dress imperatives and practices as they emerge in particular contexts is arguably an important strategy in gender justice goals. Also important, however, is the value of paying "attention to how the constructed and re-sculpted body – through dress, technology, or play – could be an integral part of personalised radical action that ha(s) profound political consequences" (Lewis 2015). Facilitating an

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appreciation of the radical potential of dress, not only for subjective struggles and resistances, but more importantly for destabilising normative and constraining frameworks of gender and other performances, may be an important project in larger struggles for social justice.

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