

“KINGS DON’T DRESS LIKE THAT”: ANALYZING COMMENTER
RESPONSES TO CELEBRITY GENDER TRANSGRESSIONS ON
INSTAGRAM

by
CORA CANNING

A THESIS

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Introduction

When thinking about celebrity expressions of genderless fashion and presentation, public figures such as Harry Styles, Lil Nas X, and Sam Smith are emblematic of gender nonconformity, self-expression, and current fashion trends. A recent study suggests an overall positive view of homosexuality and same-sex marriage within the American public, signaling a move towards the social acceptance of openly queer identity and expression (McCarthy 2022). However, the issue of transgender identity and presentation remains a prominent issue in social and political spheres. A 2022 poll by Gallup revealed America's split perception of transgender rights and nonconventional gender expression (Newport 2022). The public is generally divided over the moral issue of changing gender markers and the right to express and present oneself according to their gender identity and personal preferences. These shifting trends in the discourse surrounding queer identity acceptance suggests the need for further research on masculinities and masculine identity construction, as well as the potential role of other identities on gender nonconformity, public opinion, and acceptance.

This thesis will intervene in this gap by examining the public discourse surrounding celebrities and their perceived gender transgressions, or departures from normative gender presentations, on the social media site Instagram. Using social media as a window into social attitudes, this thesis asks the following questions: what the public discourse surrounding celebrities' perceived gender transgressions on Instagram? What is the relationship between the identity characteristics of the celebrity and the public discourse surrounding their gender expression?

Analysis of user comments from 30 instances of gender transgression performed by Harry Styles, Sam Smith, and Lil Nas X on Instagram revealed four main findings. The first

finding reveals that instances of gender transgressions on Instagram featured disproportionate rates of engagement between the three celebrities. The second finding of this study shows that responses towards instances of celebrity gender transgressions worked to establish boundaries of acceptability between gender transgression and other factors like body size, homosexuality, and invoking religious symbolism. The third finding reveals efforts to externalize the causal factors for an individual's gender transgression; thus, redirecting agency and choice away from the individual and towards the influence of a nefarious entity such as the Illuminati. Lastly, user responses discussed the possible emergence of a new wave of masculinity features a perceived increase in femininity and a rise in social awareness.

Literature Review

Overview

The existing literature in the fields of masculinity studies and cultural sociology provides the theoretical framework for my project, specifically through their analysis and definitions of culture and masculinity as socially constructed elements of symbolic life. Core literature on the subject discusses the nature of gender and masculinity as a highly symbolic and dramaturgical process through which meaning is simultaneously interpreted, created, and reinforced. These authors theorize that over time hegemonic masculinities, or forms of masculinity that justify and maintain dominance and inequality, have shifted to become more inclusive of fluidity and flexibility in masculine expression (Connell 1995:77; Anderson 2009:93). However, other sociological theorists posit that these fields have not ultimately become more inclusive. Instead, they operate to reinforce normative gendered expression through processes of strategic borrowing and distancing.

This literature review will begin with a discussion of masculinity studies and the field's evolution before descending more specifically to discuss the role of various identity characteristics such as race and body type. Next, it will discuss potential shifts and evolutions in masculine expression and identity. It will then explore the role of fashion and clothing as a significant element of gendered expression. Lastly, the review will break down how social media and emoticons play a critical role in studying culture.

Gender

In the repository of research analyzing gender identity and construction, most discuss the role of symbolic interactionism and gender as a performance. Various sociological theorists such

as Erving Goffman, Candace West, and Don H. Zimmerman have explored the construction, presentation, and expression of gender identity as a facet of dramaturgy and symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism is a sociological theory regarding the relationship of symbols and language in creating meaning, which posits that individuals act based on the meanings that individuals have assigned to things (Mead 1962). In terms of gender, this concept suggests that an individual behaves and is viewed in a gendered way through their use and production of various symbols, gestures, and interactions that they (and the rest of society) have imbued with a particular gendered meaning (Goffman 1959:550).

Goffman (1959) describes his theory of dramaturgy as a metaphor for theater, as individuals serve as actors managing their presentation to the frontstage (what is publicly displayed) and the backstage (an individual's true feelings and self). Here, the actors' roles, costumes, and lines serve as symbols that have been imbued with meaning to depict their characters. This meaning is also what the audience uses to decode the symbols and to understand what the character intends to convey. In gendered communication, the hairstyles, clothing choices, and demeanor that people hold and portray to the public on the front stage are imbued with symbolic meaning. It is the same meaning that others use to decode the symbols, thus reinforcing the meaning that is imbued into the symbol.

This relates to West and Zimmerman's (1987) theory of "doing gender", which explores the socially constructed nature of gender identity and its role as a social process, that is present and activated in everyday human interaction. The authors build upon Erving Goffman's theories of social interactionism and dramaturgy, to explain gender as an act done according to the socially constructed ideas of how one should present. They coined this process as "doing gender" to reflect how gender is embedded in everyday behavior and the work performed by an

individual that is required to express and present their gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987:127). Through this process, individuals adopt and engage with various gendered roles and norms to highlight their adherence to the binary categories of gender. These findings reveal a common consensus among sociological thought regarding the perspective of gender and gender identity as a social phenomenon and a series of interactional portrayals and displays. According to this literature, ideas of gender expression and presentation are relevant social processes from which individuals generate meaning and reproduce ideas of gender through symbols and behavioral interactions.

Masculinity Studies

Unlike “manhood” or the state of being a man, masculinity can be understood as “what makes one a man,” (Bridges & Pascoe 2016:3). Historically, masculinity has been conceptualized as predetermined and inherent to the individual based on various biological factors such as hormonal makeup and sex-based differences (Bridges & Pascoe 2016:5). However, this predetermined concept of masculinity fails to account for the significant influence of our social environments and the role of socialization and does not account for the diversity of bodies in the world. Later sociological concepts of gender such as sex-role theory proposed that differences between men’s and women’s behaviors were based on different social expectations (Bridges & Pascoe 2016:9). Though this framework begins to engage social structures with the formation of identity, the theory ultimately falls flat as the ahistorical nature does not account for diversity in the individual and the family and issues of gender inequality.

This thesis begins from the framework of masculinity as a social construct. In this case, masculinity, or what makes one a man, refers to the practices, attitudes, bodies, positions, expectations, and institution associated with those understood to be male (Bridges & Pascoe

2016:4). The theory of hegemonic masculinity grew from this, understood as the form of masculinity that is the most culturally exalted and justifying of dominance and inequality (Bridges & Pascoe 2016:18). Although hegemonic masculinity is often understood as the most “right” and currently accepted form of masculinity, it is not the only form that exists. Due to masculinity’s socially constructed nature, there is not one uniform definition or enactment of masculinity; instead, understanding masculinities as plural provides a broader perspective to encapsulate the ways that masculinity may be performed among diverse populations.

Variations in Masculinities

For instance, variations in the types and forms of masculinity are understood to originate from variations in those enacting and performing masculinity. Bridges and Pascoe (2016) identify that masculinity may manifest differently between individuals as not all men have the privilege to be understood as “male” compared to others (4). This suggests that individuals whose bodies exist outside of the idealized male appearance in size, gender expression, and color may be expelled from accessing and benefitting from hegemonic masculinity. Instead, they may occupy a subordinated or marginalized masculinity, in which they may share some grounds with hegemonic configurations while simultaneously becoming oppressed and marginalized by these forms (Bridges & Pascoe 2016:19). For example, the racist stereotypes associated with Black masculinities (such as athleticism and aggression) reinforce hegemonic masculinity as these forms exemplify masculine toughness. At the same time, they uphold systems of white supremacy through the racist associations of men of color with brutes and savages. Additionally, this exclusion from masculinity status may also feminize and sissify them in the process, through labels like fag, queer, bitch ass, and pretty boy (Bridges & Pascoe 2016:19). If individuals fail to

uphold the necessary criteria to be seen as masculine (for instance transgressive gendered appearance or queerness) they are defined as less-than and inherently unmanly.

These theories of subordinated and marginalized masculinity reveal that masculinity is not universal. Instead, masculinity cannot be understood without considering variations in the forms of masculinity and variations in those enacting masculine identity. This suggests that for individuals with identities outside of whiteness and the masculine ideal (gender expression, body size, ability, etc.), their engagement with and access to masculinity may depend on their personal characteristics. Furthermore, their subordinated and marginalized masculinities may be received less positively and therefore, be more policed. This element of variation within masculinity is relevant as it explores how various attributes and identities play an important factor in how masculinities are enacted and understood.

Inclusive Masculinities

Initial literature regarding gender as a social construct and the construction of hegemonic masculine identity has been expanded on to consider flexibility and fluidity in gender identity and expression. Eric Anderson (2009) discusses this ever-changing nature of definitions of masculinity and notes a possible transition to softer, less homophobic constructions of masculinity and masculine relationships. These kinds of “inclusive masculinities” may adopt elements of gender expression that are traditionally seen as feminine or queer and may even go as far as same-sex sexual behaviors (Anderson 2009:93). This form of masculinity operates in tandem with orthodox masculinity, to create a system where two dominant (but not dominating) forms of masculinity may become the new norm (96). Ultimately, Anderson’s framework of inclusive masculinities suggests that masculinities are becoming more accepting and normalizing of softer, and more normatively feminine forms of expression.

Hybrid Masculinities

Sociologists such as C.J. Pascoe (2014) and Tristan Bridges (2014) contradict this idea of more-inclusive masculinities in their definitions of hybrid masculinity. Hybrid masculinity refers to the process in which masculine-identifying folks adopt gendered elements that are conventionally considered ‘gay’ to construct a new, non-threatening masculinity that appears separate from the stereotypes of privilege and hegemonic masculinity. Author Jane Ward (2020) furthers this theoretical framework to include the concept of “woke masculinity”, which aids the individual’s self-protection, profit, and public relations. These perspectives suggest that a hybrid or woke masculinity may be enacted to appear more socially acceptable and safe; therefore, rendering the individual potential social image benefits and upholding structures of gendered authority.

Pascoe and Bridges (2014) state that hybrid masculinities may be achieved in a few ways: strategic borrowing and discursive distancing. Strategic borrowing refers to the ability of masculine-presenting folks to select when to break from gendered norms; allowing them to reap the simultaneous benefits of hegemonic masculinity and individual expression and self-definition (Barry & Weiner 2019). Alternatively, discursive distancing refers to the ability of men to situate themselves outside of and distant from hegemonic masculinity. Through this framework, men distinguish themselves as “good men” to appear non-threatening and socially aware. However, this process of separating “good” from “bad” men, “fails to account for the ways that presenting strength and power as natural resources for men perpetuates gender and sexual inequality even as they are called into question” (Bridges & Pascoe 2014:251). This process of crafting masculinity contradicts Anderson’s (2009) initial idea of inclusive masculinities and the shifting nature of masculine behavior. Instead of becoming more legitimately inclusive, Bridges and Pascoe

propose that individuals may adopt and weaponize hybrid or woke masculinities for personal and social gain. These findings suggest a pattern of masculine identity formation, in which individuals simultaneously borrow from marginalized populations and attempt to distance themselves from hegemonic and “toxic” forms of masculinity, such that they appear non-threatening and socially aware. As a result, these groups reinforce and reiterate existing systems of gendered power and authority instead of genuinely challenging and shifting from them.

Clothing and Gender

Clothing as a form of gendered ‘embodiment’, reflects how people’s experiences of their body form the basis for their sense of self (Barry & Weiner 2019:152). For many men, suits are a symbol of hegemonic masculinity, but also that their embodiment further reinforces gender inequalities. In interviews with different men of different identities, Barry and Weiner discovered that suits were perceived as both a gender-affirming tool and a restricting category of dress that fortified existing boundaries of masculinity. Men holding cisgender, heterosexual, lean, and able-bodied identities found that although suits restricted individuality and self-expression when worn, the wearer still benefitted from the garments’ association with masculinity, distinction, and success (Casanova 2015). This strategic embrace of conformity allowed the individual to maintain their privileged status within traditional white-collar masculinity. At the same time, gender affirmation for cisgender, heterosexual, and white men was achieved in part by exploring style and self-expression.

On the other hand, for men with various minoritized identities, suits simultaneously affirmed their masculine identity and distanced them from hegemonic privilege. For trans men and men of color, clothing served as a gender-affirming mode of expression, as it identified their bodies as normatively masculine, and acceptable. Their conformity to gendered clothing was a

necessary step to greater social success and acceptance (Casanova 2015). At the same time, masculine clothing and its associations were restricted areas of gendered life. For those with diverse bodies (bodies outside of the masculine, able-bodied, and thin norms), their body size and racial identity excluded them from accessing suits' associations with success and normative gender identity (Barry & Weiner 2019). Unlike white, straight men and masculine-presenting individuals, these findings suggest that Black bodies occupy a “distinctly queerer space ‘down low’” (Ward 2008:430); thus, lending them less flexibility in their gender and sexual identities.

These readings suggest a certain pattern of strategic borrowing and hybridization through dress that may be accessed by privileged populations. White cisgender and able-bodied men were able to choose when to diverge from dress norms as their bodies remained unmarked canvases for self-expression. On the other hand, it was found that racialized men and/or those with diverse bodies were unable to employ this strategic borrowing as their identities and appearance always situate them outside of the boundaries of traditional masculinity (Barry & Weiner, 2019).

Studying Culture

Cultural Objects

Culture refers to the behaviors, ideas, norms, and objects that express and hold meaning. This is reflected through the concept of the cultural object, which Griswold (2008) defines as a “socially meaningful expression that is audible, visible or tangible or that can be articulated” (12). The act of identifying a cultural object identifies it as an important element of the broader culture it belongs to and as something worth studying. By this definition it is not the object itself that is important, but rather the meanings and beliefs surrounding it that make it culturally significant. This reflects the need to examine cultural elements comprehensively and analyze

public opinion and sentiment to gain a better grasp of the surrounding meanings and relevant discourses.

The celebrities selected for analysis within this project hold significance as cultural objects due to their intersecting identities contributing to their social prominence. For instance, Harry Styles is a well-known musician who identifies as a cisgender white man who is unlabeled in his sexuality, and he is often identified as a spearhead of gender-fluid outfits and expressions. Sam Smith identifies as queer, trans, non-binary, and fat, and Lil Nas X identifies as a gay and Black rapper. These different qualities and identities are interesting to study as they place the individual in a unique position of social scrutiny and idolization.

Social Media

Social media serves as a salient forum for public opinion as it provides for a public, relational, and temporally sensitive representation of opinion. Opinions and sentiments expressed on social media platforms are published in an open and relational forum, not dissimilar to that of public meetings or blogs (McGregor 2019:4). In particular, the conversational nature of comments sections allows users to view others' takes on a given post or situation, and to share their own thoughts on the event; even striking up conversations and debates over the topic (McGregor 2019:4).

Social media also allows public opinion to be temporally significant, due to the user's ability to immediately respond and follow a particular post or event. These moment-by-moment feedback and responses provide a glimpse into the real-time reactions and opinions of viewers within their given contexts (McGregor 2019:4). As such, an analysis of social media comments based on relevance and timeliness reveals the discourse surrounding a particular event or in this case, instance of gender transgression, in ways that other forms of media may not.

Social Media, Hate Speech, & Hate Crimes

Social media is a profound tool used to communicate with users all over the globe. Although these platforms have many positive benefits including connecting individuals on a global scale, there is also the risk they have also become hubs for white supremacist and far-right affinity groups. This behavior is commonly targeted at people of color, women, and religious minorities. These online spaces quickly become echo chambers, which proliferate hate speech through processes of normalization and romanticization.

The proliferation of hateful behaviors and sentiments on social media is supported, in part, by the romanticization of violence. This refers to the idolization of violence in such spaces, as individuals of these groups can promote and explore these extreme ideologies without ‘real life’ consequences (Hatzipanagos 2018). One ex-skinhead remarked that, “In the physical world, if you’re standing in front of someone and you say something abhorrent, there’s a chance they’ll punch you. Online, you don’t have that, and you escalate into further physical violence without a threat to yourself.” (Hatzipanagos 2018). This suggests that online spaces have become a space to explore and ‘try out’ hate speech and hate crimes, without the fear of physical or social consequences. Normalization refers to the process through which abnormal and subversive ideas and actions may become the new ‘norm’. On social media, users “see others use hateful words, slurs and ideas, and those things become normal... these norms are powerful because they influence people’s behaviors” (Hatzipanagos 2018).

Together, processes of normalization and romanticization operate to aid the rise of hate speech on social media. Both the volume and the frequency of hateful rhetoric on social media sites creates a bubble, or echo chamber, in which the significance and strength of these opinions become amplified. Users are exposed to high rates of hateful slurs, words, and ideas, and begin

to view them as normal processes. At the same time, the lack of social backlash in these spaces allows folks to explore the expansion of hate speech into targeted violence. As a result, it is the platform's proliferation and publicity of these sentiments which facilitates the rise of hate speech and hate crimes on social media.

Instagram

Instagram is a photo- and video-sharing social networking platform owned by the parent company Meta Platforms. According to Pew Research findings from 2021, 59% of Americans use the platform daily, and 39% use the application multiple times per day (Schaeffer 2021). Furthermore, younger users aged 18-29 reported that 73% used the app daily (Schaeffer 2021). The app permits users to upload their media, edit and apply filters, and organize posts by hashtags and user tagging. Posts can be shared publicly--or with preapproved followers, based on the poster's privacy settings. The high rates of daily users and the availability of public posts suggest that individuals regularly engage with the postings and images shared by other users, and are exposed to the posts, experiences, and opinions of others. Viewed in conjunction with the temporal and relational aspects of social media, Instagram comments and engagements are effective platforms for public discourse and meaning making in our digital environments.

Emojis & Emoticons

A critical element of understanding sentiment on social media is understanding various emojis and their usage. Emojis and emoticons refer to "various small images, symbols, or icons used in text fields in electric communication (as in text messages, email, and social media) to express the emotional attitude of the writer [and] convey information succinctly" (Merriam Webster). Users may use these in lieu of or alongside of traditional written comments to "supplement, replace, and even reverse the language" of the written messages (Lu & Wu 2022:

713). For example, the use of the smiley face emoji 😊 may be used to make the message more polite or decrease the seriousness. Additionally, emojis may reveal significant alternative interpretations and transmit emotions attributed to the message such as sarcasm. As a result, they transmit the kinds of information that would normally be unavailable in written communication.

Emojis are also temporal, as their symbolic meanings change based on the context they are used, and the social significance attributed to them at the time. The meaning that users assign to them is based on the influence of popular culture and current events. Therefore, due to the abstract and subjective nature of emojis and their meanings, it is extremely difficult to determine a universal meaning of emojis. For example, the use of the 🧊 emoji is identified as “cold face,” as the color and icicles reference turning blue from hypothermia (Anon. 2024). However, in popular culture the emoji is commonly used in the phrase “that was cold 🧊” to describe being heartless or seemingly cold-blooded specifically when referring to or insulting someone else (Anon. 2018). These contradictory meanings of the cold face emoji highlight the existence of multiple significant definitions and uses based on contextual factors. One person might use the emoji to depict being physically cold while another person may use it alongside a heartless ‘roast’ of a peer.

Ultimately these factors culminate in a distinct lack of research that discusses the role of emojis and emoticons in sentiment analyses of public opinion and discourse. Their relatively recent conception as well as the temporal nature and subjectivity of their use has historically excluded them from being understood as a viable source of meaning and sentiment. However, this lack of study poses a significant gap in the field of sentiment analysis as emojis may hold important meanings in popular culture outside of what is commonly agreed upon by Unicode definitions.

As a result, studies that explore culture and sentiment must attend to the meanings that emojis can provide by incorporating them into research initiatives as they can reveal vital information that would otherwise be left out.

Methods

The public nature of celebrity posts on Instagram yields all comments available to the public, regardless of an individual user's personal privacy settings on their account. Users may browse posts, comment on other users' content, view trending content, and follow other users to add their content to their personal feeds. Due to the public nature of this networking platform and the freedom to publish and comment on photos and instances with limited restriction, Instagram remains a salient representation of general social discourses and public opinion.

Research Questions:

- What is the public discourse surrounding celebrities' perceived gender transgressions on Instagram?
- What is the relationship between the identity characteristics of the celebrity and the public discourse surrounding their gender expression?

Research Design

This thesis utilizes grounded theory and an inductive research process. This form of research seeks to generate meaning from the systematic collection and analysis of data, to uncover and conceptualize patterns or relationships regarding social processes external to any pre-existing ideas or theorizing (Noble & Mitchell). This is unlike the deductive process, which begins with the formulation of a hypothesis and then proceeds to test and ascertain the validity of that theory. Rather, the inductive process entails collecting and analyzing data simultaneously, such that abstract codes and relationships are constructed inductively and emerge based on the data and behaviors observed. These codes then reveal the social processes at play and are integrated into a theoretical framework (Noble & Mitchell).

Using this structure, this thesis seeks to develop meaning regarding the reception and discourses surrounding celebrity gender transgressions on Instagram. The resulting codes and social processes revealed through the qualitative content analysis will be transformed into a broader theoretical understanding about masculinities and unconventional gender expressions on social media.

Selection and Sampling

Data for this sample was collected from the social media platform, Instagram. The date of selection was randomly chosen as October 26th, 2023, using online random date generation software ranging from a period of 61 potential selections. 30 full *instances* of celebrity gender transgressions were selected on Instagram during the study period. On the selected date of data collection, the instances recorded were limited to the ten most recent posts by the celebrity featuring gender transgressions. This number was chosen to obtain a relevant and recent glimpse into the discourse surrounding the selected celebrities and their instances of gendered norm violations. I selected three celebrities who serve as cultural objects, due to their public expression and transgression of hegemonic gender norms and gender expressions outside of the cis-heterosexual norm. These celebrities included Harry Styles, Sam Smith, and Lil Nas X.

An *instance* of gender transgression was defined as a single post of one or more photos in which the user engages in a transgression of gendered expression. A transgression is defined for the purposes of this study as a departure from normative gender presentation; specifically, the wearing of normatively feminine clothes by individuals socialized into masculinity. Each sampled post contained either the subject wearing: skirt(s); corset(s); dress(es); **OR** some combination of glitter; sparkles; sequins; ruffles; feathers; pink.

Responses

For each instance, a *response* was defined as the publicly available comment to an instance or post of gender transgression by the celebrities. For example, a single post of a male-identifying celebrity wearing a dress would count as one instance and one post. A comment that states “yasss, this is everything” counts as one response. Furthermore, a reply to that initial comment constitutes a second response.

Using comment exportation software, I extracted the first 100 responses from a particular instance of celebrity gender transgression. With three celebrities and ten posts per celebrity, this resulted in 3000 comments in total. I manually cleaned the results and excluded responses if they were not in English, were spam or promotional comments, or were missing enough context that I was unable to analyze them.

Analysis

Coding

All comments and responses were divided by their cultural object and then their connected post. Initial coding was conducted according to the following primary codes: “positive sentiment”, “neutral sentiment”, “negative sentiment”, “undetermined sentiment”, “relevance to appearance/clothing”.

Furthermore, coding took place regarding emojis, or emoticons, as each emoji is context specific and heavily tied to social trends and meaning. A secondary round of coding was performed, where comments containing emojis were given the code “emoji” and categorized based on both their given Unicode meaning and their meaning as symbols in pop culture. The following codes include: “anger”, “big eyes”, “clown”, “crown”, “devil”, “LGBTQ/gay/sexuality”, “god”, “prayer”, “smiley”, “heart eyes”, “crying laughing”, “crying”,

“disgust”, “puking”, “hearts”, “fire”, “frown”, “skull/dead”, “happy hand gestures”, “negative hand gestures”.

Code	Examples
“anger”	
“big eyes”	
“celebrate”	
“cigarette”	
“clown”	
“confusion”	
“crown”	
“crying laughing”	
“crying”	
“dead/skull”	
“devil/demon”	
“disgust”	
“face palm”	
“fire”	
“frown”	
“gay/lgbtq/sexuality”	
“god”	
“happy hand gestures”	
“heart eyes”	
“hearts”	
“kiss”	
“love”	
“nails”	
“negative hand gestures”	
“poop”	
“prayer”	
“puking”	
“rainbow”	
“sigh”	
“stoneface”	
“smiley”	
“stars”	
“unicorn”	

Table 1: Emoji/Emoticon Codebook

List of 33 codes specifically used in the case of emojis and emoticons. Emojis examples of each code used in the data are provided on the right.

Based on this insight and the initial coding process, I developed a set of focused codes and subcodes that were then used to recode the data with a focus on emotional expression and specific personal identity or characteristics. These included: “gender”, “Gay/ LGBTQ+”, “illuminati”, “disgust”, “transformation”, “Satan/the Devil/ Hell”, “religion/Jesus”, “violence/hate”. All coding processes took place via the qualitative content analysis software *ATLAS.ti*.

Code	Description	Example comment
Ally	The comment’s message relates to the support by an individual towards a particular social cause	“Thanks for supporting 🏳️🌈❤️”
Authenticity	The comment refers to an individual remaining true to themselves	“Thank you so much for transmitting authenticity and talent ✨! I love you , you have forever changed my life ❤️🔥”
Confusion	The comment expresses shock or uncertainty	“What the fuuuck is this ?? Can anyone explain what species is this? “
Devil/Demon/Satan/Hell	The comment mentions or relates to the Devil, demon(s), Satan, and Hell	“Soo satanic 🤒 “
Disappointment	The comment expresses messages of disapproval, embarrassment, or shame	“Shame on the mainstream media for always picking on Christian's and our faith! Respect our faith. Stop the disrespect and jokes and cussing!!!”

Disgust	The comment contains messages of revulsion towards the subject and its' behavior OR the comment references the commenters' repulsion to the post	“Dis nigga right here and all his life is disgusting.”
Drugs	The comment refers to the use of illicit substances for recreational or medical purposes	“You need to stop taking legal or illegal drugs your mother will be disgraced with you “
Emoji	The comment contains emoji(s) and emoticons	“🔥❤️🚢🌟😁👏”
Gender	The comment contains messages referring to gender and gender expression	“Sam you boy not girl 😊😂👉 “
Illness	The comment references disease, disorders, or sickness	“Fame got you into mental disorder.”
Illuminati/Hollywood Influence	The comment discusses or references the Illuminati and/or other conspiratorial groups	“Illuminati livin the life on devil's money “
LGBTQ/Gay/Sexuality	The comment discusses or mentions LGBTQ+ populations, homosexuality/being gay, or sexuality	“L.N.X. Gay”
Negative	The comment contains disparaging messages about the individual and/or their appearance	“You're clearly seeking attention that you know will be plastered over media, because what was the point of the Bible for the outfit exactly? Oh, okay.”
Neutral	The comment holds no subjective opinions about the individual and/or their appearance	“Cross-dressing has become a thing. To each they're own. 🙋”
Positive	The comment contains supportive messages about the individual and/or their appearance	“Absolutely Gorgeous ❤️💯❤️”
Related to Appearance	The comment contains messages about the individual's appearance, fashion sense, or expression	“Had the best nights ever and you looked absolutely STUNNING! 🌟”

Religion/Jesus	The comment mentions religion, religious beliefs, or religious figures	“L, Respect Our Lord Jesus Christ 🇺🇸”
Respect	The comment contains messages discussing respect and disrespect	“This is so incredibly disrespectful. My God is an almighty and loving God who does not deserve this. Please do not mock God.”
Transformation	The comment refers to an individual’s/ the state of the world change over a period of time	“Out of control. Old same smith is amazing. This is insane”
Trauma	The comment contains messages about traumatic experiences and/or the impact of these experiences	“Maybe you were molested”
Undetermined	The comment contains unknown messages about the individual and/or their appearance	“THAT DRESS?? “
Violence	The comment contains slurs, hate speech, or expresses a desire to commit physical harm	“Can I have a gun 😂😭 “

Table 2: Codebook

The left column features all 22 codes used across the three celebrities. The middle column includes descriptions of the codes, while the right column includes examples excerpted from the data,

Findings

Analysis of 3000 user comments from 30 instances of gender transgression performed by Harry Styles, Sam Smith, and Lil Nas X on Instagram revealed four main findings. The first finding is that instances of gender transgressions on the platform remained divisive to commenters. The second finding of this study is that responses towards instances of celebrity gender transgressions worked to establish boundaries of acceptability between gender transgression and other factors like body size, homosexuality, and invoking religious symbolism. The third finding identifies efforts to externalize the causal factors for an individual's gender transgression; thus, redirecting agency and choice away from the individual and towards the influence of a nefarious entity such as the Illuminati. Lastly, user responses discussed the possible emergence of a new wave of masculinity that is marked by an increase in femininity and a rise in social awareness.

Sentiment

Comments on all thirty posts, ten each from Harry Styles, Lil Nas X, and Sam Smith, were analyzed for sentiment, or the views and attitudes that commenters held and expressed towards the post containing gender transgression. The sentiment of each comment was coded as either 'positive', 'negative', 'neutral', or 'undetermined' according to the established codebook.¹

Across posts from all three celebrities, Harry Styles, Lil Nas X, and Sam Smith, most Instagram users expressed positive responses to these instances of gender transgression and the celebrities' appearances. Harry Styles had the highest proportion of supportive comments, with 831/999 comments (83.18%) expressing positive sentiments. This positive support declined in

¹ For Codebook, see Table 2

the cases of Sam Smith and Lil Nas X. Out of 906 comments, Sam Smith received 708 positive responses to their posts (78.14%) while Lil Nas X received even less support, with 520/988 comments containing positive sentiment.

Celebrity	# Comments with Positive Sentiment (%)	# Comments with Negative Sentiment (%)	# Comments with Neutral Sentiment (%)	# Comments with Undetermined Sentiment (%)	# Total Comments
Harry Styles	831 (83.19)	98 (9.81)	32 (3.20)	38 (3.80)	999
Sam Smith	708 (78.15)	112 (12.36)	20 (2.21)	66 (7.28)	906
Lil Nas X	520 (52.63)	307 (31.07)	45 (4.55)	116 (11.75)	988

Table 3: Distribution of Comments Based on Sentiment

A comprehensive breakdown of comments based on sentiment-related codes: ‘Positive’, ‘Negative’, ‘Neutral’, ‘Undetermined.’

Furthermore, comments were coded based on their relevance to appearance, or whether they contain messages about the individual’s appearance, fashion sense, or physical expression.

Celebrity	# Related to Appearance	# Positive Comments Relating to Appearance	# Unrelated to Appearance	# Negative Comments Relating to Appearance
Harry Styles	155 (15.52%)	133 (85.81%)	844 (84.48%)	15 (9.68%)
Sam Smith	175 (19.32%)	133 (76%)	731 (80.68%)	25 (14.29%)
Lil Nas X	236 (23.89%)	159 (67.37%)	752 (76.11%)	46 (19.49%)

Table 4: Distribution of Comments Based on Relevance to Appearance

Results of a code co-occurrence analysis based on the sentiment expressed (either 'positive' or 'negative') and whether they related to appearance.

These findings identify that Harry Styles had the lowest percentage of comments that discussed his appearance with a total of 155 comments across all ten of his posts. On the other hand, Sam Smith and Lil Nas X had the highest rates of comments discussing their appearances, with 175 and 236 comments respectively. In these cases, the overall higher rates of comments on Lil Nas X's and Sam Smith's appearances compared to Harry Styles' suggest that for certain individuals, issues of appearance and gender presentation were noteworthy of discussion or comment. For these individuals, due to the subversive nature of their actions and their preexisting social status, their physical appearance may be considered more controversial and worthy of being the primary subject of discussion. Opposingly, the low rates of comments centered around Styles' appearance reveal that Styles' instances of gender transgression may not be perceived as noteworthy enough to comment on. Therefore, their issues of gender presentation and perceived masculinity may occupy a lesser space in public discourse.

Gender Transgressions as Positive

These instances of gender transgression were primarily positively received by viewers and commenters. Comments that were coded as both 'positive sentiment' and 'related to appearance' were identified using a Code Co-Occurrence Analysis. Despite the low rate of comments, Styles had the highest rates of positive comments regarding his appearance, with 85.51% of comments relating to appearance also containing positive sentiments. Additionally, Sam Smith and Lil Nas X had the fewest positive comments of the three celebrities sampled, as only 76% of Smith's comments that related to appearance contained positive sentiment and 67.37% of Lil Nas X's comments were positive and related to appearance.

General Appreciation

The majority of positive responses were general comments expressing their appreciation, love, and support for the celebrity and their appearance. Many users chose to express their support and approval for an Instagram post through their use of positive emojis alone and in conjunction with other comments. These emojis, include but are not limited to “heart”, “heart eyes”, “happy hand gestures”, “stars”, and “fire”. In particular, the use of the “heart” emoji and its variants was the most common, as the emoji was positively coded 446 times across all three celebrities and all 30 posts. This was followed by the “heart eyes” emoji, which was coded 276 times, the “fire” emoji, which was coded 263 times, and various “happy hand gesture” variants which were coded 276 times across the 30 posts.

Authenticity

Smith’s influence as a nonbinary artist sparked responses of admiration and inspiration among commenters, as they referenced Smith’s gendered transformation and perceived authenticity. They state that Smith is a shining example of authentic self-expression, particularly through their alternative fashion. Commenters stated their admiration, saying:

“I admire your courage to express yourself in your body which is not "perfect pattern in our only slim world". Your confidence and attitude is faboules[sic]. Yes. We can be ourselves.”

“I love Sam's music. I don't give a rats ass if they wears a pink feather boa and struts around the stage in a glitter jock strap! I care less about the life they are living. Just give me the good tunes. Old Sam, New Sam, who gives a F**k! If they are happy, so be it”

“You wear the stuff I don’t have the guts to 😊👏”

“I like the one you are being now! Cus you are so confident and happy now”

These responses highlight a positive trend within the public discourse surrounding Smith’s appearance and gender transgressions, as fans received these posts positively as a display of

authenticity and bravery on Smith's part. These viewers' responses suggest that gender transgressions may be acceptable and positively received if they are viewed to be part of a transformation to an individual's authentic and genuine self.

Gender Transgression as Negative

A significant portion of comments for each celebrity was coded as containing negative sentiment. Harry Styles had the fewest negative comments in sum and proportionately, with 98 of 999 comments (9.81%) coded as negative. Sam Smith had the next highest rate of negative responses, with 112 of 906 (12.36%) coding negatively. Lastly, Lil Nas X had the highest number and proportion of negative comments, as 307 of 988 responses (31.07%) had a negative sentiment.²

Negative responses to these instances of celebrity gender transgression shared the commenters' general disapproval towards and amusement at the celebrities' choice of self-expression. Negatively coded emojis including, but not limited to "crying", "crying laughing", "angry hand gestures", "puke", "disgust", "skull/dead", and "prayer/cross" comprised roughly 8% of comments on average. In particular, the "crying laughing" emoji was negatively coded 68 times across all three posts. This was followed by the "crying" emoji, which was coded 38 times, the "puke" emoji, which was coded 36 times, the "disgust" emoji coded 21 times, and variants of the "angry hand gestures" variants which were coded 23 times.³

Disgust

A significant pattern among negative comments was the sentiment of disgust and disapproval towards the celebrity and their choice to participate in gender transgressions. Some

² See table 3

³ For a breakdown of codes see Table 2

users explicitly defined their feelings and sentiments towards these behaviors and the celebrities performing the transgressions as disgusting, stating:

“Dis n*gga right here and all his life is disgusting”

“it's like you are trying to be disgusting intentionally.... Its working 🤢🤢🤢”

“Psycho ! Disgusting 🤢 behavior”

Others used emojis and emoticons to represent these feelings of disgust, such as the use of the puking and gagging emojis, and other emojis with connotations and meanings expressing disgust. For instance, one commenter responded,

“🤡👁️💩🤢🤢🤢🤢🤢🤢”

These findings reveal that a significant response and sentiment that was present in user comments was that of disgust. In these cases, disgust was not only directed towards the behavior and instances of gender transgression themselves; but was also extended towards the individual performing the behavior as well. This suggests that Instagram commenters experience feelings of disgust towards gender transgressions and towards individuals who transgress normative trends of gendered appearance.

Violence, Slurs, & Hate Speech

Although in the minority, certain comments expressed negative sentiments beyond general disapproval and disdain. These comments went as far as to incite violence and utilize various homophobic and transphobic slurs and epithets. One commenter expressed a desire for a weapon, intending to harm themselves and/or others.

“Can I have a gun 😂😭”

Other comments used homophobic and transphobic epithets, stating:

“Drop a new song, F*ggot”

“I’m just trying to decide if this is a gay gladiator, tr*nsvestite or wanna be girl; he pronoun she”

These comments exemplify the types of slurs and hate speech found in the comment sections of gender transgressive posts, as users openly expressed deeply homophobic, transphobic, and violent sentiments in response. The comments highlight the prevalence and intensity of negative views about celebrity gender transgression among some users and commenters on social media.

Hidden Violence

Slurs were also expressed by users with emojis. In particular, the “cigarette” emoji was commonly used instead of the explicit use of homophobic epithets, specifically the F-slur.

“🚬”

These comments reveal a thread of sentiment that goes beyond simple disapproval and dislike; instead, they specifically invoke violence toward others using hate speech and slurs.

Furthermore, the use of symbolically relevant emojis to represent hate speech reveals an attempt to conceal the true meaning and intentions of their word. As social media and online forums have become spaces to explore hate speech without the fear of physical or social consequences (Hatzipanagos 2018), social media users may feel more comfortable expressing such extreme sentiments and views than they might in real life.

Boundary Drawing

Several comments attempted to define the boundaries of acceptable behavior along the lines of gender, religion, and sexuality. As part of this boundary-drawing process, viewers laid out the specific situations in which gender transgressions are and are not acceptable.

Body Size

Commenters specifically referenced personal characteristics in their reactions to celebrity gender transgressions. Specifically, commenters made note of Sam Smith's weight in their negative comments on Smith's posts and their instances of gender transgressions. One commenter repeatedly insulted Smith with their use of the "pig" emoji, while others responded:

"Miss the old sam...but whatever...but im confused it you want to where[sic] a dress then why the beard...and you gained so much weight...confusing...and the new songs...smh...not good for ssssooo many reasons...but your new fan base loves it...its just sad we lost the old you///such a voice... "

"Someone is making a fool of this man. Should we really be celebrating obesity?" The specific discussion and mention of Smith's weight became a recurring element of how commenters discussed their appearance. Smith's weight gain became a pressing factor in whether viewers accepted their gender expression. According to these sentiments, Smith's physical transformation (including their adoption of gender transgressive fashion) would have been less 'confusing' and 'foolish' had they not gained weight. These sentiments also suggest that in comparison, the appearance of a gender-transgressive individual with a thinner and more "normative" body would be more positively received due to their body privilege.

Body privilege, which builds on Peggy McIntosh's concept of white privilege, suggests that "beautiful" and idealized body types based on the Eurocentric white ideal become normalized by distinguishing itself as the dominant group against the Other. This framework asserts that "beautiful people" who fit the hegemonic norm are awarded body privileges by averting stigma. In contrast, "Obese" individuals experience greater rates of stigma, discrimination, and stereotyping (Kwan 2010:146). These findings mirror the sentiments present in Smith's comment sections, in which their experience and appearance as a non-thin and "fat" individual renders them less body privilege. As a result, this suggests that there is a boundary

line delineating how an individual's body privilege may determine how their presentation and transgression of traditional gendered fashion may be more negatively or positively received than others on social media.

These negative comments focused on body size and appearance reveal that an individual's personal characteristics determine how their gender transgressions are received. Commenters specifically targeted Smith's body size when discussing their transgressive fashion. Their statements highlight that their unconventional appearance would be less jarring if they were skinnier or held greater body privilege. This reveals the establishment of a boundary surrounding appropriate and acceptable of gender transgression based on the individual's size and personal characteristics. According to these findings, gender transgressions enacted by individuals with greater body privilege will be more positively received than gender transgressions performed by subordinated bodies.

Gender & Sexuality

Commenters established rules of acceptability regarding Sam Smith's and Lil Nas X's homosexuality and gender transgressions, stating:

“Kids look up to you. Great voice but whatever you got going on is gross man. Do better be better. Be gay all you want and post all the pictures you want but you got little kids looking at a grown man's ass and normalizing booby tassels as a man. You definitely pricked your finger and signed the deal with the devil.”

“Y do u dress like a woman just be gay n[sic] stay looking like man lgbt too much for me”

These statements establish being openly gay as acceptable while simultaneously demonizing gender transgressions and femininity. Through these comments, the authors establish a dividing line of acceptability between alternative sexualities and alternative gender expressions. In these

cases, homosexuality and gender expression are posed in opposition to each other, as homosexuality is accepted, and gender transgression is villainized.

Gender & Religion

Similarly, commenters attempted to establish a boundary between acceptable and unacceptable instances of gender transgression regarding religion and the inclusion of religious symbolism. A common sentiment among respondents was that gender transgression by itself was not inherently controversial. Rather, it was the simultaneous engagement with religious symbols like the cross and the Bible that was unacceptable and served as an affront to religion.

Commenters stated,

“I love the outfit with out the Bible. U don't need to bring god into this”

“Cute and sexy look but the Bible is not something you play with”

“Smh holdin the bible and being in them clothes is like mocking the good lord may the lord have mercy on you.”

These sentiments reveal a commonly held perspective among Instagram commenters that the celebrity’s gender transgression itself was not problematic. In fact, many of these comments held a supportive or at least neutral attitude toward the individual’s choice of clothing and expression. However, they did find issues with their choice of religious expression, claiming that the use of the Bible in this case was insulting and a mockery of Christianity and God.

Similarly, commenters expressed their fear and concern for these individuals due to the immense influence and power that religious figures and symbols hold. They expressed that transgressing gendered norms and invoking religion was a mockery of Jesus and the institution of religion. As a result of this mockery, there would be a punishment or consequence that would happen to the individual by the Lord or some other force; something that those who transgress gender will need to atone for in the end.

Furthermore, nonreligious users found issues with these posts, due to the controversial nature of these expressions. Unlike other users who believed that these posts were indicative of greater social change, these comments believed that the divisive nature of these displays would further existing racial and religious conflicts. One user expressed their fear that the post would contribute to other negative beliefs and prejudices towards minoritized groups, stating,

“I don't even believe in god and I'm like ok...the Bible? Like you're just trying to make yt [white] Christians mad and hate gay and black people even more”

This comment reflects the social perspective that religion and Christianity disapprove of gender transgressions. It states that gender transgression is far too subversive of an action to be accepted by religion, especially if a queer person of color performs the act.

As a result, a common theme that emerged was the perception that religion and gender transgressions were mutually exclusive elements of the social world. Religion was understood to be incompatible with gender transgression, and these elements together would exacerbate existing conflicts between groups based on difference and identity. Through these specific sentiments, it can be understood that the celebrities' gender transgressions were received neutrally; however, it is their engagement with and presumed 'mockery' of religion that pushes the instance into unacceptable territory.

Reinforcing Gendered Boundaries

Comments called upon gendered fashion, stating:

“Kings don't dress like that sis”

“That would have looked stunning on a hot female”

These comments highlight efforts in the public discourse to reinforce traditional ideals of gendered fashion--particularly, they establish key differences between what 'kings', or normatively masculine men, and 'females' would wear. In this process, viewers identify what is

masculine and acceptable relative to what is unacceptable. The creation of a binary between normatively masculine and normatively feminine reinforces these identities and labels these celebrities' appearances as inherently transgressive of masculinity due to their blurring of the lines. This distinction is always unequal: one part is always superior compared to the other side; however, they cannot be understood without placing the two parts in opposition to the other. As such, unconventional and transgressive notions of gendered fashion are demonized; a process that simultaneously values and reinforces what is acceptable to the public. This reveals an overarching theme in public responses to these instances of celebrity gender transgression, where commenters reinforce traditional expectations of gendered behavior and presentation in response.

Externalization

Recurring in the comment section were efforts to externalize and justify the causes of gender transgressions. This externalization was tied to two factors: the Illuminati and illness. These externalization processes work to reframe the cause of gender transgressions away from the possibility of shifting social attitudes and decision making of these celebrities. Instead, externalizing comments redirect responsibility for these instances of gender transgression to the work of various conspiratorial factors and their all-powerful influence on citizens and celebrities. Using externalization practices, these comments ultimately reveal the perceived social threat that instances of gender transgression pose to the fabric of American society.

Illuminati & Conspiratorial Ideation

A percentage of commenters discussed the role of the Illuminati and other conspiratorial influences as contributing to the transformation of gendered expression. The Illuminati is commonly understood as a nefarious and shadowy group that seeks to advance its interests

through its intervention and involvement in global affairs. Initially traced to the eighteenth-century group, the Bavarian Illuminati, the group remains a figment of the twentieth and twenty-first-century imagination of UFOs, the September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, and various financial crises (DiGrazia 2017:4).

Within the comment sections, the role of the Illuminati was invoked in several ways, most notably described as ‘Hollywood’s influence’ on performers and celebrities. In these comments, they identify the ways that Hollywood as an industry and fame have seemingly corrupted and “gotten to their [celebrities’] heads”. One comment on one of Sam Smith’s posts states,

“Miss the old sam... they took you from us. 😭😭”

The specific use of ‘they’ implies the force of an unknown and nonspecific entity contributing to Smith’s transformation in appearance and gendered expression. Other comments specifically call out the existence of the Illuminati and Freemasons as contributing to the changes in gendered expression.

“Illuminati livin the life on devil’s money”

“It’s a puppet, the illuminati war”

“freemasonic embarrassment ritual/men emasculation program”

These findings identify the contributing factor to instances of gender transgression among celebrities as being influenced by Illuminati involvement. The presence of the Illuminati and conspiratorial ideation is found to be associated with high rates of social change. As social conditions change, the resulting threat and insecurity that occurs in members of the hegemonic group may contribute to the belief in “narratives about hidden, malevolent groups secretly perpetuating political plots and social calamities to further their own nefarious goals” (DiGrazia 2017:1).

In particular, the construction of and existence of the Illuminati as a broadly threatening ‘shadowy’ group with so-called nefarious purposes can act as a blank template upon which individuals may project conspiratorial anxieties and insecurities regarding social change (DiGrazia 2017:7-8). These responses by commenters on Instagram identify the perceived social and political threat that gender transgressions pose to American society and masculinity. Rather than accept or recognize a potential shift in social attitudes and gendered meaning, the fear of social change and the ‘emasculatation of men’ is redirected and attempted to be explained by a secret society.

Illness & Manipulation

Other factors were identified as potential motivators that could have caused the celebrities’ gender transgressions. Though factors were mentioned for each celebrity, the reasons varied. For Sam Smith, commenters identified the transformation of their gendered appearance because of mental illness gained due to fame. They claim:

“Fame got you into mental disorder”

In contrast, gender transgressions are stated to be caused by physical and medical reasons for Lil Nas X.

“This emasculatation of the black man is getting out of hand . They fuck with our DNA through vaccines, food I personally don’t trust nothing if the white man has his hand in it. Mostly don’t trust the government, the doctors, the police, non-thing if it’s controlled and governed by Caucasians”

Lastly, commenters speculated that Harry Styles’ instances of gender transgression could be due to an external influence hurting him. Specifically, one commenter suggested that Styles may have been molested as a child, causing him to behave inappropriately and engage in various gender transgressions, stating:

“Maybe you were molested.”

These external factors have been identified as potential causes for these variations in gender expression. Like the role of conspiratorial theories, these justifications attempt to redirect the cause of gender transgressions away from the individuals themselves and towards a disturbing, external force, or reason.

These findings reveal an overarching theme of externalizing causation that is present across the comment sections of all three celebrities. These externalizing efforts attempt to redirect the cause for the celebrities’ gender transgressions away from the individual and their choices and towards the work of an anonymous force. These forces include but are not limited to, Hollywood, the Illuminati, DNA manipulation, mental illness, and molestation. Employing these justifications enables viewers to reject the possibility of a changing social world and values.

New Masculinities

Flexible Masculinities

The construction and expression of flexible masculinities were discussed in detail in the comment section of each post. Viewers identified the emergence of a new wave of feminine fashion among masculine-presenting individuals. Commenters expressed their appreciation and acceptance of normatively feminine fashion choices, such as pink, stating that it makes the individual more manly.

“🌟💙🌟💖 A manly man wears pink hearts 💖”

“Manly fr 💪💪”

“The future of men’s fashion 🍑👏”

Others expressed the appeal of a ‘new masculinity’ in fashion, one where men become softer and more normatively feminine in nature.

“You’re the men I want ❤️”

“Love a man that wears pink”

The influx of these comments reveals a theme that is present in public discourse, where men’s adoption of softer masculinity is attractive and highly sought after. This mirrors the concept of flexible masculinity as new waves of masculinity are becoming less traditionally toxic. Instead, they have started to adopt normatively feminine traits and qualities for the benefit of sexual attractiveness and a positive public appearance.

Woke Masculinities

Several comments discuss the nature of these flexible masculinities, identifying them as occurring for an intended purpose. One commenter highlights that Style’s adoption of feminine and normatively queer fashion choices and his stance as an LGBTQ+ ally have rendered him an air of social awareness:

“oh he's already changed. Very woke”

This comment reveals the perception of individuals who exhibit allyship and social consciousness around issues of oppression, conflict, and inequality, as ‘woke’. Woke, in the context of social media and popular culture refers to being aware and conscious of social injustice and racial inequality (Merriam-Webster). Through the adoption of ‘woke’ beliefs and social awareness, individuals intentionally portray themselves as sensitive and socially conscious for the benefit of an improved and elevated social standing and appeal (Ward 2020:27). For Styles, who identifies his sexuality as distinctly ‘unlabeled’ (Lenthang 2022), the choice to fly a pride flag seems to position him in a unique gray area where it is difficult to know if this display is a form of allyship or self-identification. Regardless of how he identifies, his open display of LGBTQ+ support has catapulted him into the spotlight of social activism where he is now recognized as the spearhead of wokeness and social consciousness.

Another user identified the adoption of normatively feminine and gay traits by masculine celebrities with the goal of social image gains and sexual appeal. In response to a post by Harry Styles, the user commented,

“I love that u play being gay on stage [but] get all the pussy that u want in real life”

This comment specifically targets the weaponization of femininity and queerness for personal gain and social benefits. They claim that Styles ‘plays being gay’ as part of constructing his social image by wearing feminine clothing and adopting a softer, more socially conscious form of masculinity. The commenter alludes that this is purposefully done to give Styles particular social and sexual benefits, as he is seen as a more attractive and approachable sexual partner and influencer due to his non-threatening and socially aware appearance. This intentional weaponization of normatively feminine traits and behavior is a necessary element of the construction of hybrid masculinities. This is not necessarily indicative of a genuine shift in Styles’ attitudes and gender identity formation, but rather a performative trend with the goal of social benefits.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that users on Instagram remain divided in their attitudes towards instances of celebrity gender transgressions on social media. Most comments responding to these posts by Harry Styles, Sam Smith, and Lil Nas X were overwhelmingly positive, with users praising the subjects for their bravery, authenticity, and support for LGBTQ+ rights and interests. Users also noted the emergence of a “new” masculinity popularized among celebrities, as they expressed their support and approval for celebrities and influencers who explored their gender expression and incorporated elements of femininity into their image. On the other hand, a significant percentage of comments across posts from all three celebrities revealed extremely negative responses towards gender transgression. The negative responses varied in sentiment, ranging from concerns for the celebrity and their mental health to hate speech, to blaming nefarious third parties such as the Illuminati and freemasons. These responses work to reinforce gendered notions of expression and systems of hegemonic masculinity. The comments also clearly police the boundary lines between instances of “proper” and “improper” forms of masculinity and redirect the cause for softer forms of masculinity to the work of an “all-knowing” third party. Ultimately, the wide range of sentiments expressed reveal the divisive view of gender transgressions; user responses varied from being extremely supportive to extremely repulsed and disgusted. The comments left on these posts ultimately reveal that instances of celebrity gender transgressions on social media remain a controversial topic, as gender transgression continues to be understood and policed as a threat to masculinity and the existing social order.

Further analysis of responses left by users reveals that the divisiveness of gender transgressions manifests in differences in the rates of user engagement with gender transgressive

posts. This is represented in the disproportionate distribution of comments explicitly discussing the celebrities' appearance. For instance, Harry Styles received the fewest comments that specifically discussed his gendered expression and appearance. Of those comments, Styles received the most positive responses, suggesting that the public viewed his transgression of gendered fashion in a generally favorable light. In contrast, Sam Smith and Lil Nas X received higher rates of commentary on their appearance, and those comments were more negative in sentiment. Smith received higher rates and more negative comments specifically discussing their fashion than Styles. This pattern was further reinforced by Lil Nas X's comment sections, which featured highest rates of comments related to his appearance that were also the most negative.

This pattern of engagement may also be related to the various intersecting identities and characteristics that each celebrity held. For Styles, who identified as white, cisgender, and sexually unlabeled, his transgressive fashion expression as an able-bodied, and normatively attractive man may have rendered his unconventional appearance less note-worthy. In contrast, for Smith and Lil Nas X whose fat and Black bodies occupy a queerer space, their instances of gender transgression may be more divisive. These reveals a trend of division among users as their rates of positive and negative engagement vary based on the individual, the content in their posts, and their individual intersecting identities and characteristics such as gender identity, body size, and sexuality.

These findings build on the literature suggesting that masculinity is a delicate identity category that can be threatened by issues of sexuality, religion, and physical characteristics. The study reveals that gender transgressions continue to occupy an extremely controversial place in society and public discourse, as most social media users remain divided on the issue. The study also shows that social media users draw boundaries and externalize causes as an attempt to

explain phenomena and police changes that they note in their social worlds. Lastly, the findings of the study suggest that personal and identity factors such as body size, cultural influence, race, and gender identity may influence how the public perceives gender transgression. For those with greater social and cultural capital because of their identities, their transgression of gendered behavior may be perceived as less controversial for them than others. Their privileged position also means that they may also intentionally adopt elements of gender transgressive behavior for various social and sexual benefits. Overall, these findings provide a nuanced view into the social discourses surrounding celebrity gender transgressions and offer critical insight into how social media users engage with and understand celebrities' gendered appearance.

Limitations

This study is limited due to several factors. First, as I did not speak to those who commented on the Instagram posts, no claims can be made about the intent or sentiment of the users. As a result, the sentiment and meanings derived from the comments are the result of my own interpretation, rather than firsthand accounts. Second, the representativeness of findings is limited by the study's small sample size. With only thirty posts and roughly 3,000 comments sampled, the limited number of responses recorded serve as a snapshot into the discourse surrounding gender transgression and cannot be unilaterally applied to the field. Third, the study cannot address the content of comments that were not publicly available or those written in languages that are not English. Lastly, the temporal nature of Instagram comments renders the findings significant to a particular moment in time. As different trends and events occur, these responses may no longer be representative of the period.

Conclusion

The findings of this paper provide several implications and indications of key trajectories for future research on masculinities. First, analyzing language and meaning in social media comment sections can help to reveal the complex social processes and discourses that are present in online spaces. The findings presented by this study reveal that social media comments contribute significant meanings and sentiments that should be considered when studying discourse and opinion. Second, the findings continue the process of refining and clarifying the state of homophobia and transphobia present in American society. As same-sex and transgender rights remain in the spotlight, it is vital to consider the state of homophobia and transphobia in American discourses. Although users discuss an array of themes that highlight the positive transformation of masculinity as more inclusive and woke, systematic analysis reveals that gender transgression is still perceived as posing a significant threat to American society and hegemonic masculinity. As a result, increasing boundaries are actively being drawn between acceptable and unacceptable instances of gender and sexual transgressions. Lastly, the findings complicate current understandings of masculinities by considering the role of intersecting identities on masculine identity formation and its reception in online spaces. Individuals' identities and personal characteristics such as race and body size are considered in discussions of gender transgressions. As such, gender transgressions among celebrities may be perceived differently depending on who is performing these transgressions and in what context they are enacted. These findings reveal the need for further systemic analysis of gender transgressions, particularly analyses that incorporate social media and comments as salient forms of social meaning.

Appendix

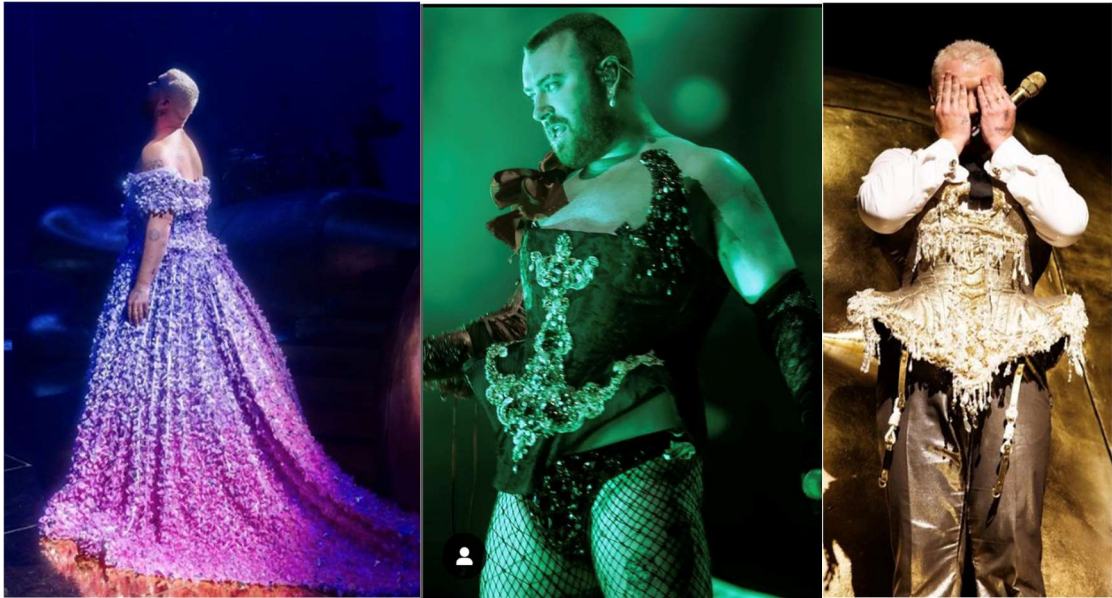


Figure 1: Sam Smith

Examples of gender transgressions enacted by Sam Smith. Smith's gender transgressions frequently include a combination of traditionally masculine and feminine elements, like neckties, button-down shirts, corsets, jockstraps, and skirts. They tend to be highly ornate and intricately decorated.



Figure 2: Harry Styles

Examples of gender transgressions by Harry Styles. Many of Styles' transgressions include traditionally masculine elements like athletic shoes and suit vests that are brightly colored and decorated with sequins, glitter, fringe, and feathers.



Figure 3: Lil Nas X

These are a few instances of gender transgressions performed by Lil Nas X. His transgressions primarily include the use of wigs, feathers, high heels, and dresses/skirts. As an element of his unique style, he incorporates costume-like elements, with the use of various props and outfits mimicking other celebrities' outfits.

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