



# **Costuming Gender: An Investigation into the Construction and Perception of Drag Costume in Mainstream Film**

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
of the degree of Master of Technology in Fashion  
in the Faculty of Arts and Design at Durban University of Technology

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By

Shari Tamar Akal

Dissertation submitted in full fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Technology in Fashion in the Faculty of Arts, Department of Fashion and Textiles, at Durban University of Technology


I declare that this dissertation is my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree or examination at any other institution.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The years succeeding 1990 have seen a significant increase in the release of mainstream film featuring transgendered characters. The inclusion of such characters in popular film becomes a point of interest as transgendered identities differ from the hegemonic heterosexism of the audiences at whom these films are targeted. This investigation aims to gain a better understanding of how audience members read gendered identity through the visual appearance of drag queen characters in mainstream film. Due to the emblematic contrast between the male body and a hyper-feminine dress aesthetic, drag queens pose an overt visual challenge to the normative expectation of anatomical sex determining gender and gendered expression. This investigation is conducted from the paradigmatic perspective that recognises the impossibility of a 'correct' reading of dress aesthetics and is thus concerned with discovering the various gendered meanings audience members may attach to drag costume in film. This interpretivist standpoint, however, is held in conjunction with the critical understanding that prevalent contemporary socio-political constructs with regard to gender and dress will undoubtedly affect these perceptions. Segments from selected Hollywood films featuring drag queen protagonists were screened for a heterogeneous focus group and the subsequent discussion analysed through critical discourse analysis. Academic discourse concerning the socially constructed gender dichotomy and the debated subversive potential of the drag act is reviewed in order to provide a theoretical framework for analysing the participants' comprehension of gendered performance. Gendered associations with dress and the body together with film theory are examined to better understand how an audience may perceive gendered identity through drag costume in film and what affect this may have on their conception of sartorial gendered expressions in reality. Finally, to situate and provide further context for this investigation, Queer theory critiques of the representation and reception of transgendered characters in past mainstream films are considered.

## **DECLARATION**

I hereby confirm that this dissertation is entirely my own original work, and where the work of others has been cited, it has been fully acknowledged and referenced.

I hereby certify that this dissertation has not been submitted for a degree at any other university or institution.

It would not have been possible to complete this study without the funding of the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa through the Scarce Skills Master's Scholarship.

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# 1. Orientation of Study

## 1.1 Introduction

In this dissertation I seek to provide a contribution to the critical analysis of transgendered representations in mainstream film by focusing attention on an aspect of this representation that has not as yet been sufficiently deliberated: the role of dress in the construction and perception of gendered/transgendered identity.

The years succeeding 1990 have seen a significant increase in the release of mainstream film featuring transgendered characters (Brookey and Westerfelhaus 2001: 142; Stulberg 2014). The inclusion of such characters in popular Hollywood film becomes a point of interest as transgendered identities differ from the hegemonic heterosexism of the audiences at whom these films are targeted. As a central organising system in contemporary culture, gender significantly affects our daily social experiences (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 9) and has subsequently influenced the regulation of modes of dress.<sup>1</sup> Despite the ubiquity of gender in contemporary society it is often only consciously noticed by individuals when the dichotomous system is violated or challenged by alternative gendered expressions (Gagne and Tewksbury 1998: 81; Kaiser 2012: 36, 37).

Due to the significant role dress plays in the visual delineation of perceived gendered identity<sup>2</sup> and the ardent associations which exist between modes of dress and gender (Garber 1992; Entwistle 2000; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003), this investigation seeks to discover how audience members of popular film may perceive gendered identity through the representation of film characters who sartorially challenge the prevalent gender beliefs of contemporary society. Still and moving images of film costume therefore form the hermeneutical 'text' analysed by a sample audience, in the form of focus group participants.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'dress' is used rather than the terms 'appearance', 'clothing/apparel' or 'fashion'. This decision was taken due to the argument posited by Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992: 1-3). In their conception, 'dress' refers to the assemblage of modifications of the body as well as supplements to the body. Although one's dress adds to one's appearance the two terms must remain separate as 'appearance' can include biological bodily attributes whereas dress only includes modifications to the body such as tattoos, make-up and hairstyles. 'Clothing' or 'apparel' refer to physical garments and thus do not include the body modifications or accessories which are encompassed by the term 'dress.' Finally, 'fashion' is a term that is not exclusively related to dress and may include popular trends in housing, music *et cetera*. Furthermore, because 'fashion' expresses temporary trends, it is a term that does not include all types or styles of dress.

<sup>2</sup> This investigation is primarily concerned with gendered identity rather than sexual identity. Gendered identity refers to whether one considers oneself a man/masculine or woman/feminine. Sexual identity, however, refers to whom one considers oneself sexually and/or romantically attracted (Sexual Identity and Gender Identity Glossary).

Film costume has been insufficiently theorised in the academy (Gaines 1990: 181; Church Gibson 1998: 36; Street 2001: 1-2) especially considering the immense influence film has on contemporary society (Hammond 1996: 106; Kirk 2004: 170; Welzel 2010: 3). It has been briefly argued in literature (Wilson 1985: 169; Kellner 1998: 354) that film costume has influenced the way in which society has engaged with fashion and dress in the past, however this has not been extensively explored, nor has it been discoursed with regard to the influence film costume may have had specifically on sartorial gendered expression.

Of the various transgendered characters represented through popular film in the last twenty years, the scope of this investigation has been delimited to the critical analysis of drag queen protagonists exclusively. This decision was taken due to the emblematic tradition of drag artists to create combinations of masculine and feminine signifiers (Evans 1998: 202) in their performances and parody the conception of gender in contemporary society (Hammond 1996: 108; Cooper 2003: 515). Furthermore, due to what Balzer (2005: 128) terms “the great drag queen hype” of the 1990’s, drag queens have been more visible in the media over the past two decades than other recognised transgendered identities.

Queer theory critiques of the representation and reception of transgendered characters in past mainstream films; academic discourse concerning the socially constructed gender dichotomy; and the debated subversive potential of the drag act are reviewed in order to provide a theoretical framework for analysing the participants’ comprehension of the gendered expressions and perceived gendered identities of the drag queen protagonists in four selected Hollywood films and to situate and further contextualise this investigation. Film theory and gendered associations with dress and the body are examined to better understand how an audience may perceive gendered identity through drag costume in popular film and what affect this may have on their conception of sartorial gendered expressions in society.

## **1.2 Aims**

This investigation aims to provide a contribution to the critical analysis of sartorial gendered, and transgendered, representations in mainstream film. The central focus of this investigation is to gain a better understanding of the various ways audience members may read gendered and transgendered identity through the costume of drag queen protagonists in popular film from the past twenty years. Furthermore, this study seeks to discover what influence the readings of these drag costumes may have on the

understanding of sartorial gendered expression and perceived gendered identity in contemporary society.

### 1.3 Critical Questions

Critical question one: How is gendered/transgendered identity constructed and perceived through mainstream Hollywood film?

Critical question two: What role does costume/dress play in conveying the gendered/transgendered identity of the drag queen characters in the selected clips and stills of the films screened for the focus group?

Critical question three: What comparisons, with regard to gendered portrayals, do the participants make between the drag costumes; the costumes of the drag queen characters when they are not dressed in drag; the costumes of the 'homosexual' characters; and the costumes of the 'heteronormative' characters?

Critical question four: To what extent do the participants' readings of gender through the costumes in the screened films influence their understanding of gendered identity through sartorial expression in a social context?

### 1.4 Rationale

According to Lisa Stulberg (2014), "[w]e are at a pivotal moment in the conversation about transgender visibility". Gender politics and transgender issues have been represented and deliberated in newspaper articles; advertising campaigns; and popular television and film increasingly in the years 2013 and 2014 (*ibid*; Abraham 2014). Newspapers have reported on steps countries such as Australia, Germany, India and Pakistan have taken, to greater or lesser extents, towards the legal recognition of alternative or unspecified 'gender'<sup>3</sup> on birth certificates and/or various identity documents (Murry 2013; Paramaguru 2013; Castillo 2013). In 2014 the 'Let Books Be Books' campaign, which encouraged authors to cease designating children's books as either 'for boys' or 'for girls', has gained ardent support from poets, authors, publishers and retailers (Flood 2014). And finally, of greatest interest to this investigation, the representation of alternatively gendered or transgendered identities in popular film and television was particularly notable in the 2013 – 2014 season

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<sup>3</sup> The inverted commas have been added due to the conflation of biological sex and gender in the mainstream.

with the inclusion of recurring transgendered characters in four popular television series<sup>4</sup> and the academy award won by Jared Leto for his role as a transgendered woman in *Dallas Buyers Club* (Valleè 2013). Together with the recent increased visibility of fictional transgendered characters in popular film and television, celebrity actors/actresses, models and sportsmen/sportswomen have been publicly sharing their personal experiences as transgendered individuals and speaking out about transgender issues on a broader scale (Stulberg 2014).

In spite of what appears to be a progression in awareness of transgender issues in contemporary society, transgendered individuals continue to be significantly marginalised identities (Glicksman 2013: 36). The ubiquitous nature of heteronormativity (Dean 2006; Hubbard 2008: 5; Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 2006: 428) and the normative expectation that sex and gender correlate (Lorber 1994; Gagne and Tewksberry 1998: 81; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 10) result in the relegation of those who visually cross gender boundaries. Transgendered individuals, therefore, are often viewed as “highly stigmatised social deviants” (Gagne and Tewksbury 1998: 82) due to the lack of social space available to them within the gender binary system. Such identities therefore face not only marginalisation but often discrimination (Glicksman 2013: 36).

While the last two years have seen increased visibility of transgendered characters in popular film and television as well as a rise in awareness of transgender issues in other avenues such as newspapers, talk shows and particularly legislation, the increased visibility in popular film and television is statistically nominal when compared to the representation of heteronormative characters. Moreover, due to the long history of strict adherence to the gender binary in Western culture, and prescribed gender roles therein, the understanding of gender politics and transgender issues, outside of the academy, remains minimal (Kane 2005: 27; Glicksman 2013: 36; Abraham 2014; Discrimination Against Transgender People 2014).

Given the global impact Hollywood film (Kellner 1998: 361) has on the formation and negotiation of social identities (Banks 2007: 39); the prevalence and promotion of heterosexism in popular Hollywood film (Cover 2000: 71; Hubbard 2008; Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 2006: 427-28); and its reflection of Western society’s organisation of bodies according the male-female dichotomy; it has been argued that increased visibility of

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<sup>4</sup> *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (Moore and Schuyler 2001- present), *Glee* (Murphy, Falchuck and Brennan 2009-present), *The Fosters* (Paige and Bredeweg 2013-present) and *Orange is the New Black* (Kohan 2013 –present).

transgendered characters created for mainstream audiences necessitates critical consideration (Kirk 2004: 170). The representation of transgendered identities in popular film has therefore been highly debated in film and gender discourse. The role of dress in the representation of transgendered characters has, however, been insufficiently deliberated in these accounts.

As a fashion student, I have always been interested in how dress contributes to the expression and perception of identity broadly and to a gendered identity specifically. Kaiser (2012: 370) states that:

Style-fashion-dress affords opportunities to connect the dots across a variety of subject positions and, indeed, to explore ways of being and becoming as subjects in the world in ways that may otherwise be difficult to articulate.

The close spatial relationship between dress and the body results in dress significantly contributing to one's appearance and one's visual assessment by others (Rudd and Lennon 2001). Given the prevalence of the categorisation of bodies according to the male-female dichotomy (Lorber 1994), dress has come to play a significant role in the visual delineation of gender within the strict binary with which Western society operates. The normative expectation formed is that one's sartorial gendered expression and biological sex should correspond (Woodhouse 1989 cited in Entwistle 2000: 144).

What then, of those who wish to visually express the opposite gender to their anatomical sex or express ambiguous gender?<sup>5</sup> When discussing the representation of alternative identities in popular media, Cover (2000: 75) suggests that audiences "are likely to 'learn' through the iterative performances provided on the big screen". With popular film being such an influential aspect of the visual world in contemporary society, gendered expressions and transgender representations in popular film, and their possible effect on contemporary sartorial standards, should be critically addressed. Exposure to alternative gendered expressions through mainstream film may familiarise audiences with, and inform them about, transgendered identities. This may not result in such identities no longer being marginalised in a largely heteronormative culture, however it may result in a greater understanding and a lesser ostracism of transgender identities. Conversely, the

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<sup>5</sup> Individuals who wish to express a gendered identity that cannot be designated as 'male' or 'female', may be referred to as 'gender neutral' and therefore may be read as ambiguously gendered (Sexual Identity and Gender Identity Glossary 2005). Some individuals may wish to alternate expressions of 'male' or 'female' and may be referred to as 'bigendered'. 'Gender fluid' identities may be gender neutral, bigendered or may alternate between the two identities. Therefore gender fluid identities convey a wider range of gendered expression than pre-existing defined gendered identities (Understanding Gender 2014).

representation and perception of transgendered expression through popular film may reinforce existing sartorial standards which limit alternative expressions.

This investigation seeks to discover the understanding and reading of transgender through film costume at present with the acknowledgement that such volatile subjects as gender and sexuality; popular culture; and sartorial standards will continue to evolve and thus will require continual revision. As stated by Westerfelhaus and Lacroix (2006: 441), “[g]iven the fluidity of cultural constructions of human sexuality” the mapping of such representation and reception “will remain a necessarily ongoing project”.

## **1.5 Overview of Chapters**

### **1.5.1 Chapter Two: Literature Review**

Chapter two provides a discussion of literature on the various interdisciplinary subjects contained in this research topic. The significance of culture, the body and dress in the construction and expression of a gendered self are discoursed to better understand the concept of gender in contemporary society and how social members might perceive gendered identities. Particular emphasis is placed on the contribution of dress to the visual delineation of gendered and transgendered identities.

The traditional characteristics of a drag queen identity and the subversive potential of a drag performance are deliberated in order to provide insight into non-normative gendered expressions and how they differ from the heteronormative expressions of the mainstream.

Film costume; audience response; credited influence of popular film on identity formation in contemporary culture; representation of gender and transgender in mainstream media, and the critiques thereof; are discussed in order to provide context for the understanding of how an audience member might perceive transgender through costumed representations of drag queen characters in Hollywood film.

#### **a. The Gender Construct**

Gender is based on a classifying system that is organised around a strict binary opposition – male/masculine and female/feminine. This male-female dichotomy is learned from such a young age that the misconception that gender is a biological fact, rather than a constructed behavioural role, is often adopted. The subsequent expectation that has developed is that one’s sex and gender correlate (Gagne and Tewksbury 1998: 81; Brown



2001: 37). Individuals whose biological sex and gender do not correspond and do not adhere to this expectation are collectively referred to with the umbrella term 'transgender' (Stewart 2008:1). This, as well as more specific terms such as 'cross-dresser', 'transsexual' and 'drag queen', have been created in order to linguistically accommodate identities that cannot be categorised within the heteronormative gender binary system. Such terms may however be considered insufficient or defamatory.

### **b. The Drag Act: Parody and Subversive Potential**

Although drag queen performers create varied and nuanced gendered expressions, a drag performer is traditionally biologically male and typically constructs feminine signifiers on a male body in order to stage interesting gendered performances for audiences (Newton 1979). Drag performances are often comical parodies of gender and sexuality in contemporary culture (Hammond 1996: 108, Cole 2000: 50). This parody of heteronormative society and the "obvious discontinuity between anatomical sex and behaviour" (Evans 1998: 202) has been credited with subversive potential as it "exposes gender as performative" (*ibid*) and undermines the prevalent perception that gender is natural. The drag act has, however, simultaneously been accused of reinforcing the gender dichotomy. The literary debate regarding whether drag performances are subversive or reiterative of hegemonic heterosexism has not been resolved by promoting one viewpoint over the other but rather it has been suggested that the answer to the subversive potential of any drag performance is context dependant (Butler 1999: 177). Both the intentions of the performer/s and the perceptions of the audience must be considered (Schacht and Underwood 2004: 12).

### **c. Transgender in Popular Film**

Mainstream media are an important element in defining the ideology of contemporary culture (Brookey and Westerfelhaus 2001: 142). In the past, popular film has been criticised for the exclusion (Cover 2000: 72; Evans 2009: 41) or 'negative' portrayal of queer<sup>6</sup> and transgendered characters (Russo 1981). Over the past thirty years the representation of transgendered characters has been touted as both increasingly visible and 'positive' as compared to the representations of the past. This 'positive' portrayal is however still of great concern to many Queer film critics. Although transgendered

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<sup>6</sup> Once a pejorative term, 'queer' has been re-appropriated inside and outside the academy since the 1980's (Doty 1998: 148, 149). It is now often used as an umbrella term for gay, lesbian, and bisexual, individuals as well as "the intersection or combination of more than one established 'non-straight' sexuality or gender positions" (*Ibid*).

characters are being represented more favourably, Queer film critics argue that they are not being represented accurately. Transgendered characters may only be presented through popular film if they “observe certain limits imposed on them by the conventions of the mainstream” (Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 2006: 427) therefore ensuring that they “pose no threat to the established order” (*ibid*).

This investigation seeks to discover what relevance in general terms the above critiques of transgender representation and reception through the prolific and influential medium of popular Hollywood film may have to sartorial transgendered representation and perception as read by a sample film audience. According to Street (2001: 4), although film costume often aids narrative it may be interpreted alternatively to “the main thrust of the plot and characterisation” thus “articulating a language of its own” (*ibid*). Perhaps while the narrative, characterisation and dialogue in the films selected may promote hegemonic heterosexism, the costume may be read as subversive to the heteronormative sartorial standards of contemporary society. Alternatively, the costume may reinforce categorisation and strict delineation of gender through dress.

### **1.5.2 Chapter Three: Research Methodology**

Both the interpretive and critical philosophical traditions inform the qualitative methodological approach of this investigation. Due to the impossibility of determining ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ readings of dress/costume aesthetics, the research strategy created for this study is geared towards the discovery of the various gendered meanings audience members may attach to film costume. It is however acknowledged that hegemonic gender and sartorial constructs will undoubtedly have an effect on the participants’ opinions.

Guided by the discipline of critical hermeneutics, a hybrid methodological approach, excerpts from four mainstream Hollywood films: *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything. Julie Newmar! (Foo)* (Kidron 1995); *The Birdcage (Cage)* (Nichols 1996); *Connie and Carla (CC)* (Lembeck 2004); and *Kinky Boots (Boots)* (Jarrold 2006), were screened for a focus group of eight heterogeneous participants in order to discover the extent to which drag costuming influences audience members’ reading of gendered identities.

The strategy for primary data collection is provided, including purposive sampling; online recruitment of participants; and the facilitation of a focus group. In order to ensure credibility, the resolution of ethical concerns and alternatives to the concepts of reliability

and validity are discussed. Furthermore, the delimitations and limitations of the investigation are outlined in order to stipulate the boundaries of the research.

Finally, in order to contextualise the discussion in the data analysis chapter, the methodology of critical discourse analysis which was applied to the data collected from the focus group discussion is described and motivated along with the practical steps commonly applied to analysis of qualitative data.

### **1.5.3 Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Discussion**

The various perceptions of the participants' are presented according to the emergent themes and sub themes which resulted from the analysis of the focus group data. The participants' perceptions are discussed in light of their support of or opposition to the literary arguments reviewed in chapter two and in what ways they address the critical research questions. Where the analysis of the data resulted in ideas that were beyond the scope of the investigation or only discovered after primary data collection, the ideas are briefly discussed in the context in which they arose but are further explored as areas of future research in the final chapter.

### **1.5.4 Chapter Five: Conclusion and Recommendations**

In the final chapter the concluding arguments subsequent to the discussion of the analysed data are presented along with recommendations for potential research endeavours. Given the interdisciplinary nature of this investigation, subjects that could not be sufficiently addressed are recommended for further enquiry.

## **1.6 Conclusion**

Chapter one outlines the purpose and rationale of this study and provides a brief overview of the chapters contained in the dissertation. The chapter to follow reviews, in greater detail, literature pertinent to the research topic and provides the theoretical framework against which the research questions are problematised and the perceptions of the participants are compared.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This investigation seeks to gain a better understanding of how various individuals from a popular Hollywood film's audience might read the gendered identity of drag queen protagonists based on their costume. In order to provide context for the analysis of participants' perceptions, the following literary subjects are explored: the construction of gendered identity in contemporary culture both generally and sartorially; the body and cultural ascription thereof; transgendered identities with specific focus on drag queens; and the representation and reception of gender and transgender in mainstream Hollywood film.

### **2.2 Identity Construction**

In order to understand how gendered identity may be perceived, one must first understand how identity is formed and negotiated in contemporary society. This investigation is rooted in a mixed conceptual approach of interpretive and critical traditions. From an interpretivist perspective, "the world is constructed, interpreted and experienced by people in their interactions with each other and with wider social systems" (Voce 2004: 2) and through such interactions, social beings are constantly creating meanings and making sense of their world (*ibid*). Thus in an investigation concerned with individuals' perceptions and understanding of gendered identity through the signifier (Phillips 2000; Arvanitidou and Gasouka 2013) of film costume, it is necessary to review literature which sheds light on how social beings make sense of their own and others identities in both general terms and specifically with regard to the construction of a gendered identity.

Hermans (2001), states that many psychologists work from the Cartesian perspective that culture operates merely as an external stimulus to the self which is "locked within" or "contained" in the mind. However, the social constructionist movement has seen the emergence of major theorists who undermine this assumption that the self is "self-contained" (Cresswell and Baerveldt 2001: 623) and instead acknowledge the relationship between culture and identity construction (Adams and Markus 2001: 16). According to this view "the personal realm is bounded with the social-cultural realm, not as independent entities, but as mutual defining poles" (Salgado and Hermans 2005: 8). In the Bakhtinian view of self, there is no distinction between culture and self. In fact Bakhtin's (1984)

theories are critiqued as running the risk “of dissolving the individual self wholly into culture” (Cresswell and Baerveldt 2011: 273).

Therefore, if the personal realm is not easily separated or distinguished from the socio-cultural realm, the beliefs, customs, ideas and behaviours of a particular society will impact on the construction and understanding of one’s own individual beliefs, customs, ideas and behaviour.

Overall, self is the cumulative result of socialization, which includes adopting observed behaviour of those who serve as social referents (role models), following rules or directives learned at the behest of others, and using trial and error in social situations (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992: 5).

This is particularly relevant to the conception of gender as a socio-cultural construct. Gender roles and behaviours which have been constructed by Western culture and learned through social situations significantly impact on the way in which one recognises and forms his/her gendered self and understands the gendered identities of others. “Gender is not an individual matter at all, but a collaborative affair that connects the individual to social order” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 31).

Valsiner and Han (2008:3) suggest that although cultural ideology is pervasive and always in action, it is rarely noticed. The adoption of observed behaviour is thus not always the conscious decision of social beings. Adams and Markus (2001: 9) refer to this unconscious adherence to societal rules as the “automatic shaping of self by cultural patterns that are implicit in everyday life”. This is a ubiquitous point made by gender theorists. Gender categories and hegemonic gendered behaviour are strictly adhered to by members of society but very rarely noticed unless specifically challenged (Gagne and Tewksbury 1998: 81).

The relationship between gendered identity construction and culture is paramount to this investigation as mainstream media, in the form of Hollywood film, is created for the entertainment of modern Western culture and is thus indicative of this culture’s beliefs, ideas, customs and behaviours. Chaudhary (2008: 11) states that it is through collective experiences (and it is argued by Hill (1998: 609) that the viewing of popular films is an example of such a collective experience) that “one gains an understanding of the prevalent beliefs of a particular society and these beliefs form the basis of how the other or others are assessed”.

The construction of self is a complex interplay between singular and collective identities predominant in the culture in which one lives. There are many collective identities in existence within a society or culture which will affect how one forms his/her individual identity and *vice versa*. “Individuals learn to believe in collectives and these affiliations are strong and pervasive” (Chaudhary 2008: 24).<sup>7</sup>

Categorisations exist in order for social members to simplify understanding and make sense of their world (Chaudhary 2008: 24). Externally created and imposed categories, however can result in a limiting or constraining of an individual’s identity (Adams and Markus 2001: 14). According to Chaudhary (2008: 22) “societies and selves are both imagined entities” and because neither is stable each can “impact [the] another reciprocally” (Schopflin 2001). The relationship between self and culture thus becomes quite complex<sup>8</sup> in that not only do individual and collective identities affect one another and can be formed or altered by their cultural milieu but they can, in turn, impact on the understanding of the larger cultural identity. After all, a cultural identity is determined by its social members and their various individual and collective identities and *vice versa*.

In the past, academic discourse regarding identity construction had been primarily concerned with the mind and had ‘suffered’ from what Ruck (2009: 8) calls “severe body-neglect syndrome.” Not only did this emphasis on the mind imply that the body lacked significance in the construction of self but it disconnected the mind from the body (Kaiser 2012: 32). However, throughout the twentieth century the concept of the self as embodied became more popular among influential theorists such as Deleuze, Derrida and Foucault (Grosz 2001: 141). The theorised body and its role in sartorial gendered expression is significant to this investigation as it is on the body that dress is displayed and in relation to the body that dress is assessed.

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<sup>7</sup> Adams and Markus (2001: 14) and Cresswell and Baerveldt (2011: 272) refer to these collective identities as “inherited categories” and “speech genres” respectively. “Inherited categories” or “speech genres” are identifying characteristics that are “inherited” in that they are assigned to individuals whether those individuals are willing to accept them or wish to resist them (Adams and Markus 2001: 14; Cresswell and Baerveldt 2011: 272-273). ‘Man’ or ‘woman’ are examples of such inherited categories.

<sup>8</sup> Hermans (2002; 2002; 2003) writes extensively on the impact of the relationship with ‘the other’ on the construction and understanding of self. Interaction with the other is the foundation of Dialogical Self Theory wherein it is posited that one engages in self-defining interaction outside and inside of oneself.

## 2.3 The Body

Negrin (1999: 108) suggests that the reason for outdated “disembodied” (Ruck 2009: 9) Western philosophy is that the mind represents the rational, and the body the irrational. Volumes of literature on the embodied self however, now exist and the body is no longer discounted in the construction of self (Grosz 2001: 141).

It was argued in section 2.2 that the self does not exist outside of culture. The body is “invested with cultural meaning” (Grosz 2001: 140) and thus becomes “an organism of culture” (Wilson 2001: 147). The body is therefore ultimately linked to the construction and understanding of self and has become the tangible and visual experience in which self is reflected (Rudd and Lennon 2001: 121).

Despite its tangibility and visibility, the body is not only a biological entity but also a social and philosophical construct (Payne 1996: 71). This duality is cleverly illustrated through Bakhtin’s (1984) theory of the grotesque body. The grotesque body is a literary trope in medieval literature that has been theorised by Bakhtin (1984). Among other attributes, the grotesque body features an exaggeration of the body parts which are “prone to the docking of the other” (Ruck 2009: 11). The orifices of the grotesque body enable it to interact with external substances, and thus it cannot be considered a complete and closed off physical object (Selleck 2001: 162). The lack of separation between the body and external substances is a metaphor for the relationship between the body and the social world.

The incomplete nature of the body allows it to be included as a part of a larger mass body and “in this whole, the individual ceases to a certain extent to be itself” (Bakhtin 1984 quoted in Cresswell and Baerveldt 2011: 266). Thus Bakhtin’s theory of the grotesque body visually articulates an enmeshing of the self with the body and the body with the world (Selleck 2001: 162). Cresswell and Baerveldt (2011: 267) offer an easily relatable example of how our learned and stylised actions incorporate us as part of a larger socio-cultural body:

In short, we come to learn what it means to frown by frowning along with others. Our own ‘inner’ experience...is ultimately social by virtue of our living life with others. People participate in activities together that are re-enacted time and time again and, in the course of joint participation in social practices, establish a communal style of corporeal expression.

The understanding that bodies participate in learned stylised actions, is a concept that is essential to this investigation. Judith Butler, one of the most prominent gender theorists,

believes that “gender is instituted through the stylisation of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler 1988: 519-520).<sup>9</sup> Although the primary concern of this study is the role of dress in gender perception and delineation, corporeal gesture and movement, which may be referred to by the term ‘kinesics’<sup>10</sup>, will also be considered due to the contribution of kinesics towards the appearance of a gendered body and identity.

In modern Western culture, vast importance is placed on the ‘look’ of our bodies (Featherstone 1991: 170). However, what is or is not considered to be socially accepted dress or kinesics is context sensitive and continually changing. “The body has a history in that it behaves in new ways at particular historical moments and [ ] the body should be understood not as constant amidst flux but as an epitome of that flux” (Csordas 1994: 2). The ruling socio-symbolic order greatly determines the conception of our bodies (Grosz 2001: 140). The body is therefore policed by society to adhere to the current “canon of reputability” (Konig 1973: 113). Failure to fall in line with what has been delineated ‘proper’ can result in a body being considered abject (Grosz 2001: 140-143) and may be stigmatised.

Appearance, gesture and bodily demeanour became taken as expressions of self, with bodily imperfections and lack of attention [carrying] penalties in everyday interactions (Featherstone, 1991: 189).

In an interview with Judith Butler, conducted by Meijer and Prins (1998: 277), Butler is cited as stating that:

The abjection of certain kinds of bodies, their inadmissibility to codes of intelligibility, does make itself known in policy and politics, and to live as such a body in the world is to live in the shadowy regions of ontology.

This investigation is concerned with how the “inadmissibility to codes of intelligibility” (*ibid*) of transgendered bodies which are marginalised and can be considered ‘abject’, is made known through sartorial gender standards and how these identities and adorned bodies are projected and perceived in the mainstream through popular film.

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<sup>9</sup> Despite Butler’s significant contribution to the concept of gender performance, she does not explore in detail the role of dress in this performance.

<sup>10</sup> According to (Harrigan 2005: 137): “Kinesics refers to actions and positions of the body, head and limbs.” This term has been chosen as it encompasses movement, gesture and posture (Harrigan 2005: 149-171), all of which may be visually indicative of gender (Tiljander 2007).



It is widely acknowledged that film is an influential medium of entertainment in popular culture (Gripsrud 1998: 202) and that it can impact on the minds and behaviour of social groups (*ibid*). Therefore if a certain kind of body is celebrated (Featherstone 1991: 170) and non-conforming bodies are ostracised through this medium, it may encourage viewers of popular film to hold themselves and others by these stylised dress and body standards against which not all members of the population can, or choose to measure.

Like the construction of self as a whole, gender is dually psychological and embodied, and is also profoundly dependant on socio-cultural context. Although hardly disputed in literature, the concept of gender as a construct is not widely understood in mainstream society. Due to the ubiquity of gender, it is often taken for granted as something natural and biological rather than something fictitious and constructed (Gagne and Tewksbury 1998: 81).

## **2.4 Gender: Construct and Category**

“From the moment of birth, a child’s world is organised along gender related lines” (Oliver, Sargent and Weaver 1998: 45). Due to the need of social members to use categories in order to easily organise knowledge and comprehend their world (Chaudhary 2008: 24), gender is based on a classifying system which is organised around a strict binary opposition – male/masculine and female/feminine. The difficulty with organising gendered identity within a binary opposition is that it is extremely limiting and many individuals do not conform to the hegemonic heteronormative ‘ideal’ around which this gender binary is created, resulting in marginalisation. Due to the indoctrination of the male-female dichotomy from such a young age, it is assumed that gender is “bred into our genes” (Lorber 1994: 45). The consequent expectation from the presumption that gender is natural is that one’s anatomical sex and one’s gender correspond (Gagne and Tewksbury 1998: 81; Brown 2001: 37). This expectation is discredited by the majority of theorists in the field of gender studies. The terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ must be differentiated (Lorber 1994: 55; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 10). “Sex can be radically discontinuous with gender. The two are not fixed and stable as commonly thought, but linked by cultural threads that can be willingly broken” (Entwistle 2000: 144).

The presentation of someone whose appearance or actions do not correlate with their biological sex breaks these cultural threads and challenges the expectation that sex determines gender (Gagne and Tewksbury 1998: 99). Such individuals cannot be

categorised within the limited gender binary and are thus labelled with the umbrella term 'transgendered' (Gagne and Tewksbury 1998: 81; Stewart 2008: 1). 'Transgender' is a term that was created in order to linguistically accommodate alternative gendered identities such as transsexuals, cross-dressers and drag queens (Sexual Identity and Gender Identity Glossary 2005). These terms are however problematic for the following reasons: they were created in relation to the heteronormative gender binary and thus continue to deal with gender through stereotyping; the definition of 'transgender' and subsequent terms are source and community dependant; some alternatively gendered individuals consider some of these terms pejorative; and finally it can be argued that further categorising identities who have been oppressed due to their lack of adherence to initial societal categorisation may be considered counter-productive and hypocritical.

Gender categories of any kind will always be limiting as there cannot be a category that perfectly describes and includes every individual's gender identity (Garber 1992: 17). Transgenderism is a space of possibility that calls attention to not only the category crisis of male and female but "the crisis of category itself" (*ibid*). Eliminating all gender categories, however may also be problematic. As Copjec (1989: 54) suggests: "One only becomes visible- not only to others, but also to oneself- through (by seeing through) the categories constructed by a specific, historically defined society."

Without socially constructed, and widely accepted categories and definitions, humans would not be able to identify subjects or communicate concepts to each other. According to Fiske and Hartley (1978 cited in Williams 2002), there is no "experience which social man can apprehend without culturally determined structures, rituals and concepts". These determined structures, rituals and concepts enable shared understanding between social actors and are primarily supplied to them through language (*ibid*).

Language and terminology therefore play a vital role in the understanding of gendered identities. In an attempt to describe gendered identity, the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine' are most often used. It is the normative expectation that a 'male' will be 'masculine' and a 'female' will be 'feminine.' However when a biological female displays characteristics commonly associated with the construct of 'masculinity' she may be described as a 'masculine female'. Describing a female as masculine is progressive in the sense that it is theorising gender as independent of sex (Butler 1999: 10), however the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine' are dichotomous and remain limiting in the expression of a wide variety of identities. Furthermore, the definitions and connotations of words like 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are constantly changing (Paechter 2006: 30). Therefore, can one really define

a 'masculine female' or an 'effeminate male'? The words created to describe and delineate gender are thus insufficient. However, can gendered identity be linguistically expressed without such words? Our understanding of gender through language has largely depended on words such as 'masculine' and 'feminine'.

Due to a history of patriarchy, femininity, which was constructed in relation to masculinity (Paechter 2006: 8), is "located at the negative pole" (Cixous 2001: 67) and is considered "passive in relation to active" (*ibid*) masculinity. Although, in the twenty first century as compared to previous centuries, gender roles have changed, some residue from the former way of thinking may remain. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003: 21-22) state that girls who behave 'like boys' are admonished for not being 'ladylike', although the categorisation of tomboy is available to them and earns a degree of respect in Western society. Boys who behave 'like girls', however "are severely sanctioned" (*ibid*). Schacht and Underwood (2004: 7) state that men deemed effeminate are considered failed or inferior men due to the lesser esteem the status 'woman' carries as opposed to superior status of 'man' (Lorber 1994: 61).

Drag queen protagonists in the films reviewed in this study take on the dress and kinesics of women although they are anatomically male. What are the perceptions of audience members when it comes to biological males characters taking on the dress and gestural behaviour of what was once thought of as "the weaker sex" (Welzel 2010: 3)? Would the audience members' reaction differ if the protagonists were anatomically female and were exhibiting masculine behaviour?

## **2.5 Gender: Identity and Performance**

According to Butler (2001: 74), three areas that need to be inspected when conceptualising gender are: anatomical sex, gendered performance and gendered identity. The difference between 'gendered performance' and 'gendered identity' is paramount in this investigation. Gendered identity is the way in which an individual self-acknowledges his/her gender whereas gendered performance, or gendered expression,<sup>11</sup> is the way in which an individual acts out gender (Gender Identity and Gender Expression 2011). This includes sartorial choices, movement and communication (*ibid*). Gender is

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<sup>11</sup> Although Butler (1990; 1999) primarily uses the term 'performance' rather than 'expression', the phrase 'gendered expression' is commonly used by other gender theorists and numerous glossaries.

thus both an external and internal matter. Gendered identity is an internal experience whereas gendered expression is recognised by social members who read the gendered expression of an individual and perceive an assumed gendered identity (Sexual Identity and Gender Identity Glossary 2005; Paechter 2006: 12-14).

Judith Butler's works have contributed much to gender discourse since the first publication of "Gender Trouble" in 1990, particularly to the understanding of gender as a performance (Bakshi 2004: 215; Gamel 1996). It is suggested that gender is performed ritualistically and repeatedly by individuals on a daily basis (Butler 1999: xiv, xv). Individuals who form part of and who differ from the heterosexist socio-sexual order enact this performance (Schacht and Underwood 2004: 13). Butler (1988: 519) refers to gendered performance as "an identity instituted through a stylised repetition of acts." Arvanitidou and Gasouka (2013: 3) use the word "ceremonial" to describe the process of the body incorporating and reiterating social information through kinesics. The ability to perform the stylised acts associated with either pole of the gender binary, although available to anyone, is not always socially acceptable to be enacted by everyone. There are "constraints on who can perform which personae with impunity" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 10). Due to the mainstream understanding of gender as congruent with biological sex, performances where the sex and gendered acts do not correspond may be ill received, especially when a man takes on the gender performances associated with women as he may be perceived as taking on a persona that is inferior to the one that he was biologically given.

There is a debate in the academy regarding whether the external performance or internal understanding of gender is most important in the construction of a gendered self. Paechter (2006: 12-14) states that from the one point of view gender is "fundamentally about how one is recognised by others, as opposed to who one experiences oneself, including one's embodied self, to be." However, she also presents the opposing argument, popular within the field of social science, which is that "gender is [] centrally concerned with who one considers oneself to be, not how one appears to others" (*ibid*).

Considering both points of view, it can be argued that the need to establish supremacy of one view over the other is not necessary. The construction and understanding of gender can be simultaneously created by what is felt internally and what is performed for others. However, this duality can be problematic when what is performed for others and what is psychologically determined for oneself do not correlate. This could be due to the performance being misread by a social audience or because the person who is performing

gender is intentionally displaying a gendered identity that is not congruent with the identity that is internally felt.

The performance of gender, therefore, can be manipulated in a social setting or can be performed with dramatic intention outside of daily interactions. This is of particular interest in an investigation which examines the performance of drag queens who perform gender in the way that Butler (1990, 1999) suggests every individual does, but also who literally stage gendered performances for an audience. Evans (1998: 202) describes this as “a play within a play” where “the theatrics of gender in everyday life” are further dramatised.

## 2.6 A Brief History of Drag Queens

Schacht and Underwood (2004: 4) describe drag queens simply as individuals who perform being women in front of an audience who are aware that they are biologically men. The term “drag” is essentially defined as “the wearing of apparel and accessories that designate a human being as a male or a female, when it is worn by the opposite sex” (Newton 1979: 108) and is thus similar to the term ‘cross-dressing’ (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Definitions 2014). In order to represent themselves as women to an audience, drag queens wear clothing easily associated with the feminine gender (Newton 1979: 108).

The term ‘drag queen’ became well known in the 1960s, particularly after the Stonewall riots in 1969.<sup>12</sup> Awareness of the drag subculture increased from this point to the 1990s where media exposure of drag queens is said to have reached its peak (Evans 2009: 43). In the early 1990s the music video for the hit song *Vogue* by Madonna, featured a dance style later termed “voguing” that had originated at drag queen balls in the 1980’s (Livingston 1990). Around the same time Ru Paul’s<sup>13</sup> music video for the song *Supermodel (You Better Work)* became very popular on MTV (Balzer 2005: 117). The mainstream success of these videos was perhaps what encouraged Hollywood producers to create the films *Foo* (Kidron 1995), and *Cage* (Nichols 1996), both of which featured drag queens as the film’s protagonists. This hype, however, was short lived (Balzer 2005: 117). Despite

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<sup>12</sup> Drag queens were said to have played a pivotal role in the Stonewall Riots. They were the first to initiate the damage of public property as an act of defiance against the New York police who had been harassing the patrons of gay bars (Balzer 2005: 114). The Stonewall Riots resulted in increased public awareness of non-normative gendered and sexual identities and increased self-acceptance of the identities within the ‘LGBT’ community of that time (*ibid*).

<sup>13</sup> Ru Paul is an American drag queen singer and television personality.

their popularity in media in the 1990's, most drag queens continue to perform for niche audiences in gay bars (Bakshi 2004: 16). Brown (2001: 37) suggests that this is because drag queens remain a marginalised identity "from the larger cultural setting" (Bakshi 2004: 16). This is perhaps due, according to earlier research, to the designation of drag queens as "failed men and representatives of the stigma attached to all gay men" (Schacht and Underwood 2004: 7).

## **2.7 Conflation of Definitions: Drag Queens and Other Transgendered Identities**

Gendered identity rather than sexual identity is the primary concern of this investigation, nevertheless it is important to clarify the ways in which the academically defined conception of a drag queen differs from other transgendered identities where 'men/former men'<sup>14</sup> don women's clothing. 'Transgender' is a termed being used to encompass a range of gendered identities and has been defined by Keegan (2013: 2) as "a multivalent and politicised term collecting multiple forms of transitional, medically transitioned, and non-conforming genders." Although the following discussion explores the definitions and misconceptions of various transgender categories it is important to note that gender categories can be limiting and pejorative to the vast spectrum of sexual and gendered identities that may exist.

Drag queens are typically homosexual men (Hammond 1996; Evans 1998; Hanson 2005; Balzer 2005; Kane 2005; Carsley 2007). The term "queen" is a generic noun for a homosexual man (Balzer 2005: 113) and thus the term "drag queen" is synonymous with homosexuality. However, occasionally heterosexual men or even women<sup>15</sup>, heterosexual or homosexual, may choose to become drag queen performers. As Balzer (2005: 119) states: "Though very exceptionally, heterosexual men or women perform as drag queens and are tolerated within the drag community, the drag queen identity is strongly linked to a gay identity." As it is neither common nor traditional for heterosexual men or women to perform as drag queens, this investigation focuses on the typical case of homosexual males as drag queen performers.

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<sup>14</sup> Many transgendered individuals do not like to be referred to as 'former men/women'. This written here only for the purposes of clarification.

<sup>15</sup> When women perform 'drag' dressed in feminine attire, they are known as drag queen performers even though they are not technically cross-dressing (Harris 1999). When women actually dress in drag, that is masculine attire, they are referred to as drag kings (*ibid*).

The terms 'cross-dresser'<sup>16</sup> and 'drag queen' may be easily confused as a cross-dresser is defined as a person who adopts the dress, and possibly the gendered behaviour, of the opposite sex for purposes of emotional or sexual gratification (McWilliam 2006: 50). It is therefore possible for one to claim the identities of both cross-dresser and drag queen. Cross-dressers, however, do not necessarily perform their gendered impersonations in front of an audience, whereas this is one of the defining characteristics of a drag queen (Schacht and Underwood 2004: 4). Furthermore, it has been argued by McWilliam (2006: 50) that drag queens exaggerate their adoption of the opposite sex's assumed gender codes whereas cross-dressers may wish to 'pass'<sup>17</sup> as members of the opposite sex. It is also widely accepted that many cross-dressers are heterosexual (GLAAD Media Reference Guide – Transgender Issues 2014) whereas, as discussed above, it is customary in the art of female impersonation that drag queens are homosexual men.

Another sexual and gendered identity that exists in the drag and transgender community has been categorised by the term 'transsexual'. When one is a transsexual individual one psychologically identifies with the opposite sex and may undergo medical surgery in order to change one's body to that of the opposite sex (Sexual Identity and Gender Identity Glossary 2005). Before undergoing this surgery one is termed a pre-operative (pre-op) transsexual (*ibid*) and after the surgery is complete, one may prefer the term transsexual man/woman or transman/transwoman (GLAAD Media Reference Guide – Transgender Issues 2014). With regard to anatomy, a notable difference between a typical drag queen and a transsexual is that drag queens are most often completely anatomically male (Hammond 1996: 108). In his definition of a drag queen, which is confirmed by Kirk (2004: 172), Schacht (2002: 159) specifically states that drag queens are "individuals with an acknowledged penis, who have no desire to have it removed". Some drag queens may undergo breast implant surgery but will not proceed with an entire sex change. With regard to the sex or gender with which one psychologically identifies, some drag queens may be pre-op transsexuals as they consider themselves as women in men's bodies (Evans 1998: 201).

Some drag queens consider themselves as women; some as men; some as neither; and some as both (Balzer 2005: 118-119). In the drag community, a community in which individuals defy the normative convention of the gender/sex binary, it is not surprising that

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<sup>16</sup> 'Cross-dresser' has recently replaced the term 'transvestite' which is now considered defamatory.

<sup>17</sup> An individual who "passes" in gendered terms is one whose preferred gendered expression is convincing to those around him/her (Holmes 2003: 5).

linguistic categories such as 'drag queen', 'cross-dresser' and 'transsexual' continue to be insufficient and may be considered derogatory. Drag queens, therefore, do not only gender-bend but also transgender-bend. This investigation, however, is concerned with the archetypal understanding of a drag queen: biologically male; one who performs the gender of the opposite sex in front of an audience; and one who may draw attention to 'his' male anatomy. As Kirk (2004: 172) states: "He is no longer a drag queen when the desired end is to be perceived as a woman, not as a man posing as a woman."

## **2.8 The Subversive Potential of Drag Performance**

Evans (1998: 202) suggests that it is the obvious discontinuity between anatomical sex and behaviour (including the 'feminine' clothing worn) which "exposes gender as performative" and undermines the authoritative perception that gender is natural. This contrast of exaggerated symbols of femininity on a male body enables a drag queen performer to parody sex and gender differences (Hammond 1996: 108; Cole 2000: 50). It is the parody of sex and gender difference, together with the exposure of the performativity and social construction of gender, which enable the drag act to be credited with subversive potential. The capacity for the drag act to undermine prevalent gender standards is, however, a contentious literary subject.

Many theorists argue that while drag performances may challenge the existing categorising gender system, the drag act also has the ability to reinforce it (Butler 1990; Schacht 2002; Brown 2001; Bakshi 2004). Although for at least some attendees of a drag performance homosexuality and transgenderism is redefined (Hanson 2005:1), Evans (1998: 199) suggests that "it is heterosexuality rather than homosexuality that is revealed in the drag act". This may be due to the fact that in the creation of an overt contrast between the 'male' body and a 'feminine' persona, the male-female dichotomy remains firmly in place. Harris (1999: 62) argues that "if any version of gender mimicry or masquerade is to be effective as a resistant or subversive strategy, at some point or on some level it must be clearly legible as differing from the norm". The art of drag may encourage an audience to question the social construct of biological sex determining gender, but does it question the fixed sexual and gender categories with which society organises identities? Furthermore, does the exposure of gender as a concept subvert the sex-gender categorising system? Evans (1998: 203) suggests that the 'revelation' that gender is constructed not natural does not make gender unappealing to the viewer. Social actors may desire to be recognised by society as that very construction which has been



'exposed'. As Harris (1999: 75) states, using mimetic gender performances and role reversals in order to expose gender as behavioural rather than biological is "not the same as a collapse" of the system. It "is only the first stage of a deconstruction not an end point" (*ibid*).

Despite the many theories postulated in literature, whether or not drag performance is reiterative of, or challenging to, hegemonic heterosexuality remains largely context dependant (Shapiro 2007: 267). Schacht and Underwood (2004: 12) state that "what is and is not subversive is a complex interplay between performer and audience". Thus performers' intention and audiences' perceptions must be discovered in the context of the films selected for this investigation. Sufficient information cannot be gained regarding the specific intentions of the fictional drag queen performers, nor their creators. Generalised assumptions however can be made regarding intentions of mainstream Hollywood film and the necessity to appeal to a large demographic public. A greater understanding of the possible perceptions of the various members of an audience of such films can be gained through the discovery of the participants' readings of the filmic drag performances during the focus group discussion.

Drag performances have not only been criticised for possible reinforcement of the gender binary but also for the perpetuation of gender stereotypes (Kirk 2004: 174) and the degradation of women (Haaken 2005: 322; Carsley 2007: 2). Cooper (2003: 515) suggests that "the camp performances of drag queens can be seen as highly elaborated satires of *straight* [italics added] society" and that the flamboyant clothing they wear may be "interpreted as ridiculing America's bad taste and mocking normative sexuality" (*ibid*). While the drag act may mock straight society and normative gendered identities, none of the literature reviewed for this study postulated arguments regarding how drag queen performances specifically mock heterosexual men. Rather, it seems to be a consensus among theorists that it is heterosexual women that are parodied in the drag act. This is because most often "stereotypical and exaggerated images of females" (Bakshi 2004: 217-218) are presented to the audience. Although this derides heteronormative society in general terms, the focus is on feminine stereotypes (Robertson 1997: 278) rather than masculine ones.

The performances of masculine stereotypes enacted by biological women, such as transgendered identities are referred to as drag kings, have not been as successfully entertaining as the reverse. In her book, *Staging Femininities: Performance and Performativity*, Harris (1999) discusses the various performances of a British comedian,

Rose English, and multiple critics' responses to these performances. According to Harris, when Rose English, who is biologically a woman, dressed as a drag queen, critics found it humorous and a successful performance of pastiche. However, when performing in actual drag, a woman impersonating a man, reviewers did not attribute laughter or pastiche to her performance but rather described it as solemn and pretentious. This prompts the question of why one performed identity would be 'better received' than the other when enacted by the same performer? Armistead Maupin (interviewed in Epstein and Friedman 1995) states: "It's funny for a man to act like a woman because it's one of the prerogatives of being the oppressor, you can always make fun of the oppressed." Due to the history of sex/gender inequality in Western society, "masculine behaviour in women is often less stigmatised than feminine behaviour in men" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 37). Therefore, perhaps when a woman dresses like a man she is seen as striving to take on a more valued gendered persona and this may be a reason why Rose English's performance as a man was seen as pretentious. In the documentary, *The Celluloid Closet* (Epstein and Friedman 1995)<sup>18</sup>, film critics and writers discuss a scene from the film *Morocco* (von Sternberg 1930). In the scene Marlene Dietrich is dressed in a top hat and tuxedo, an outfit coded as masculine at the time, with her hair and make-up in a feminine style. Quentin Crisp (interviewed in Epstein and Friedman 1995) comments on how Dietrich is remembered in this scene as both elegant and sensual. He adds how differently the scene would have been received if it were a man dressed as a woman by stating:

There's no sin like being a woman. When a man dresses like a woman, the audience laughs, when a woman dresses like a man nobody laughs – they just thought she looked wonderful.

It is not uncommon for women dressed in aspects of masculine attire to be received as fashionable. In fact; suits, fedoras and braces have been considered fashionable items for women for much of the twentieth century and into the twenty first (Harpers Bazaar 2011; Elle 2013). Dresses, however, have never been fashionable for men and are therefore still a powerful tool in a drag queen performance. How would members of a contemporary audience compare the drag queen characters in the films selected, to women dressed as men in films such as *Sylvia Scarlett* (Cukor 1935); *Victor Victoria* (Edwards 1982) and

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<sup>18</sup> Based on the book of the same title by Vito Russo (1981)

*She's the Man* (Fickman 2006); where biologically female characters dress as men in order to hide from someone/thing or to assume the privileges of the male persona?<sup>19</sup>

In order to gain a theoretical framework through which to understand the differences between male bodies wearing female clothing and *vice versa*, literature concerned with the relationship between the body and dress is explored.

## 2.9 The Adorned Body

Entwistle (2007) suggests that although both dress and the body are highly theorised subjects they have most often been theorised separately. Dress and the body, however, have a very intimate relationship. Bodies provide the context for dress, and thus dress should not be studied without careful consideration of the body (Rudd and Lennon 2001: 122; Kaiser 2012: 7).

Flugel (1971: 20, 91) discusses the irony of how decoration, which essentially covers areas of the body, has become the means through which we display our bodies. The primitive exhibition of the naked body has therefore been misplaced onto clothing with the result of clothing becoming an “extension of the bodily self” (Flugel 1971: 34- 36). Because clothing is added to the body, it enables the body to attain a size, shape or movement that could not be achieved otherwise. If a narrow waist is considered desirable, clothing can be arranged on the body in a way that accomplishes the illusion of a narrow waist. Dress therefore, has the ability to hide and/or display our bodies and to blur its boundaries (Arvanitidou and Gasouka 2013: 3). A male can use clothing, make-up and accessories to create the aesthetic of a female which is consistent with current cultural expectations (Hanson 2005: 10-11). He can build up his bust and hips to create a curvy form and can either grow his hair or wear a wig (*ibid*). The donning of high heels will not only achieve the look of a feminine ensemble but may assist in changing a ‘masculine walk’ to one more closely in line with a ‘feminine walk’. While clothing/dress can do much to alter the appearance of the body it may not be able to transform it completely. If the male in question is very tall and broad, he may still look like a male in feminine clothing due to the associations made with his unadorned body.

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<sup>19</sup> Images of drag kings from popular film cannot be used as a point of comparison as there are no existing popular films which feature drag king characters. The lack of media proliferation of drag kings becomes a point of interest in the data analysis stage of this investigation and is deliberated further when recommendations and future research potential are discussed. See sections 4.3.4, 4.3.7 and 5.3.4.

Negrin (1999: 104) argues that both the adorned and the naked body are products of culture and that it is a fictitious Western construct that the unadorned body is natural, pure and unspoilt. If the body was truly a blank canvas, it would not be seen as unusual for male bodies to wear female clothing or for much older bodies to wear 'younger' clothing.

There are social restrictions on clothing...which restrict people and increase the pressure on the participants to adapt into prevailing standards about their appearance and behaviour...Because of these regulations, tension is created giving a strange ability to clothing; to express separation or deviation from the social group, thus contributing to the creation of subgroups (Arvanitidou and Gasouka 2013: 4).

Homosexual, anatomically male bodies are organised in the sub group of 'drag queen' based on the cultural associations (Rudd and Lennon 2001: 124) made with both male bodies and 'feminine' dress. In her book *The Way We Look: Dress and Aesthetics* (1998; cited in Rudd and Lennon 2001: 123), DeLong posits a model for understanding the interplay between the body and clothing in the assessment of one's appearance. It is called the ABC (apparel, body, construct) model.

When apparel is worn on the body, the body becomes a critical component of this appearance. Body structure, proportion, parts, surfaces and movements contribute important information to viewers and influence how the apparel 'works' on the body. This composite image of body plus dress is presented to the viewer in the context of surrounding space, including physical space, social setting, and cultural environment (*ibid*).

Therefore, when a tall, broad, muscular (proportions associated with male bodies) body wears tight, pink, lace garments (design elements associated with feminine clothing) in contemporary society, it is the normative belief that this combination is incongruent. It is this incongruence which drag queens use in their performances to draw attention to the social construction of gender.

The drag act is a complex performance which relies on ubiquitous associations with dress and the body to create what has been described by Newton (1979:103) as a "double inversion". The performer is stating:

My outside appearance [clothing, make-up and accessories] is feminine, but my essence 'inside' [body] is masculine. At the same time it symbolises the opposite

inversion. My appearance 'outside' [body] is masculine but my essence 'inside' [self] is feminine (*ibid*).

This double inversion highlights how incredibly significant dress and the body are to the drag act.<sup>20</sup> Dress, together with stylised gendered kinesics, enables the male performer to visually take on the persona of a woman. Neither inversion described by Newton (1979) would be readable to an audience if dress and the body were not laden with various constructed meanings which make each aspect of the body and each item of dress a signifier that allows the drag queen to present a statement about the performativity of gender (Brookey and Westerfelhaus 2001: 154).

A male body donning the dress/fashions, and enacting the kinesics<sup>21</sup>, associated with a female gendered identity defies normative social conventions and is thus susceptible to social judgment and critical analysis. What clothing is put on which body can result in praise or ridicule from society. The relationship between the body and dress is thus complicated, volatile and imperative to the art of drag.

Much like gender, Entwistle (2007: 94) describes dress as being “a ubiquitous aspect of our social embodiment, a basic fact of social life” so much so that it can be entirely taken for granted. Individuals may not be aware of the role that dress plays in the way in which they construct their identities or assess the identities of others. However, dress is a significant social symbol used by individuals in identity definition because “(a) clothing is used in daily activity, (b) clothes constitute a frequent public display, and (c) clothing choice is an easily manipulated symbol” (Feinberg, Mataro and Burroughs 1992: 18).

## **2.10 Dress as Communication of Identity**

The socio-cultural significance of fashion and dress is often underestimated (Konig 1973: 112). The association with commodity fetishism (Church Gibson 1998: 36) and frivolity often discounts fashion discourse as a substantial academic subject (Davis 1992: 39;

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<sup>20</sup> Newton (1979: 100) describes various different levels in which masculine-feminine oppositions can be played out through clothing in drag performances. Some drag queens may wear male underwear underneath their drag clothes suggesting that the female clothing is a costume. Inversely a drag queen might wear female clothing underneath male clothing suggesting that it is the male clothing that is a costume and the masculine behaviour is an act. The emphasis of the male anatomy of the female impersonator is an important aspect of the drag performance as drag queens are not trying to “pass” as women (Hanson 2005: 2;12). As Newton (1979: 102) states: “The whole point of female impersonation depends on maleness.” Some drag queens will remove a fake breast or take off their wig during a performance in order to break the illusion that a female is performing (Hammond 1996: 111).

<sup>21</sup> The combination of the body, dress and gendered kinesics is cardinal in this investigation and will be explored further in sections 4.3.5 and 4.3.6.

Church Gibson 1998: 36). Arvanitidou and Gasouka (2013: 2) credit fashion and dress as a subject of intense sociological, historical, anthropological and semiotic analysis in contemporary social theory. Flugel (1971) posits that it is not the tangible properties of dress that make it important to society but rather the intangible properties. These intangible properties are the meanings dress visually communicates to a social audience (O'Neal and Lapitsky 1991: 29). Before a word is spoken, assumptions about one's identity are created through the evaluation of what he/she is wearing (Stone 1962 cited Lurie 1981). Fashion and dress, therefore, not only function as a powerful means of visual communication but of social interaction (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992: 1). Dress is said to be so indicative of one's identity that "to put on someone's clothes is symbolically to take on their personality" (Lurie 1981: 24).

Many fashion theorists (Laver 1968; Lurie 1981; Davis 1992; Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992; Barnard 2002) have written texts based on the foundational concept that clothing can communicate information about the wearer's identity. Dress in contemporary culture plays a significant role in the assessment of one's personality, social standing and has a significant impact on an individual's feeling of social validation (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992: 5). Although dress is often used to express individualism, the need for social validation may limit these expressions. A great risk is taken when individuals distinguish themselves with their choice of dress as in doing so they "bow to the judgment of the community" (Konig 1973: 113) that they are in. Deviations from the norm are necessary in the creation of new fashion trends, however these deviations are subject to social regulation and may be praised, but may also be criticised. Baudrillard (1981 cited in Negrin 1999: 114) states that fashion and dress is an institution which "best restores cultural inequality and social discrimination". This is perhaps due to the admonishment or marginalisation one is met with when dressed in a way which the society deems inappropriate.

On the basis of their experience through time with other people, individuals develop, in advance of interaction, notions of how other people are likely to react to their dress. If a person's predictions of reactions by others are accurate, the identity or identities this person intends to present via dress will coincide with that which others perceive. This coincidence in meaning is what Stone (1962) refers to as the validation of the self that leads to satisfactory social interaction. If, on the contrary, the meaning signalled by dress is different for presenter and reviewer,

interaction may proceed with difficulty or be terminated (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992: 5).

Therefore, when discussing the meanings dress can communicate, it is important to examine both the intentions of the wearer as well as the perceptions and interpretations of the social audience. Furthermore, interpretations of one's dress will also depend on the situation in which it is assessed. This is explained by O'Neal and Lapitsky (1991: 29) through the following points:

(a) The clothing that a person wears and the situation in which something is worn has an impact on perceived characteristics of the wearer, (b) characteristics assigned to the wearer are influenced by perceiver characteristics, and (c) the clothing a person wears affects the types of response received in the interaction which takes place.

When discussing how one puts an outfit together, Moletsane, Mitchell and Pithouse (2012: 3) suggest that specific garments are chosen by a wearer in order to communicate a particular message to his/her viewers. The intention is that the clothing worn will communicate to a social audience the way in which the wearer wants to appear (Arvanitidou and Gassouka 2013: 4) or will accurately reflect the wearer's perceptions of self (Moletsane, Mitchell and Pithouse 2012: 7). This perception of self is an "on-going process of self-construction, self-representation and self-reflection (*ibid*)."

The way in which the signifiers that make up an outfit, and the outfit in its entirety as a signifier, are interpreted by a social audience may differ entirely from what the wearer intended. Lurie (1981: 24) argues that "the most difficult aspect of sartorial communication is the fact that any language that is able to convey information can also be used to convey misinformation".

Clothing styles and fashions "do not mean the same things to all members of society at the same time" (Davis 1992: 9). How an outfit may be interpreted not only depends on the social situation one is in but it also depends on the subjective views of the observer (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992: 4) and is thus largely context dependant (Feinberg, Mataro and Burroughs 1992: 18).

Namely for the same signifier, what is signified, or what it implies are obviously different for different social groups and/or cultures, and therefore it is hard to perceive it. Also different values are associated with the dress code at different

time periods...The ambiguity of the dress code is a result of the temporary and capricious nature of fashion (Arvanitidou and Gasouka 2013: 5).

Kaiser (2012: 42) states that the potential for ambiguity in the presentation and/or interpretation of visual communication through dress is rampant. When various garments are put together on a body it can result in meanings that are mixed, fuzzy or contradictory -this may or may not be the intention of the wearer.

Ambiguity, in other words, may foster a kind of questioning or deliberation that may contribute to further interaction (e.g. verbal exchange) and new negotiations of meaning or understanding" (*ibid*).

The male body wearing female clothing is a contradictory message in the mainstream. The aspects of the drag performance to which Newton (1979: 102) refers, such as the removal of a fake breast or the wearing of masculine clothing beneath feminine clothing, creates further layered messages. It is this visual ambiguity that provides the potential for either the subversion or reiteration of heteronormativity.

Feinberg, Mataro and Burroughs (1992: 18) suggest that while dress may communicate aspects of identity, it may also reflect things other than identity or may reflect nothing at all. Despite the potential of miscommunication, misinterpretation and ambiguity, clothing remains a powerful visual medium through which aspects of identity are communicated. Commonly understood associations with visual images must be created for humans to communicate and understand each other. Therefore, although there is always the possibility of various interpretations of visual images, "hegemonic formations" (Phillips 2000: 65) exist where the attachment of specific meanings to specific visual images are shared by social members. Therefore, if one is intending to convey a particular personality trait through his/her dress, he/she may select a colour, proportion and/or style of clothing that is commonly associated with that trait. Costume designers in particular will select articles of clothing and create dress aesthetics for characters which they believe will convey a readable message to the audience. This message, however, may be intentionally confusing.

Given that this investigation is concerned with the perceptions of a mainstream film audience with specific regard to gendered identity, the relationship between dress and perceptions of gendered identity throughout history and in contemporary culture must be carefully considered.



## **2.11 Dress as a Communication of Gendered Identity**

Due to the conflation between sex and gender in the mainstream, normative expectation is that dress is not only indicative of gender but indicative of sex, “namely that feminine appearance indicates female sex and masculine appearance male sex” (Woodhouse 1989 cited in Entwistle 2000: 144). Therefore, when an anatomically male body wears clothing associated with females in a mainstream context, the result is often confusion and/or ostracism. There are occasions, however, when incongruent sex and dress is not judged by the mainstream as unusual because the biological sex of the body has been completely disguised by the dress. This is known in the transgender subculture as “passing” (Hanson 2005: 3-4). Dress can hide biological sex, if the wearer has bodily features in line with those associated with the gender wished to be displayed. Clothing may therefore disguise sex in its ability to display gender (Lorber 1994: 57). This is due to the unstable yet ubiquitous associations or hegemonic formations of gender with dress.

Just as associations have been made with bodily features and anatomical sex, associations have been made with design features and gender. Garber (1992) and Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) suggest that such gender associations are particularly evident in children’s’ dress. The fact that there are clearly defined boy and girls’ clothing sections in stores highlights that from a young age it is important in contemporary society for boys and girls to dress differently. Styling features such as bows; prints of images such as trucks; and popular animations or icons like Barbie or Superman are clearly sorted into ‘boy’ and ‘girl’. The most recognisable of these clothing differences is, perhaps, colour; blue being readily associated with boys and pink with girls. Garber (1992: 1-2) discusses how surprised readers of a news publication were to find out that before World War I pink was associated with boys and blue with girls. Garber suggests that the reason for the public’s ill ease regarding the inversion of colour association is perhaps because it “reversed a binarism” that disconcerted feelings of tradition, continuity, and naturalness of association. Butler (2001: 75) suggests that re-signification and re-contextualisation “deprive[s] hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalised or essentialist gender identities”. This is one of the goals of the drag act, to draw attention to the construction of gender in society through mimicry and role reversals (Harris 1999: 75). These reversals highlight the fact that gender/sex associations made with clothing are an arbitrary Western construct which can, and in some cases have, changed over time.

Together with specific colours, skirts and trousers are also aspects of dress which are quickly associated with gender. Although some men have been known to wear skirts and

the majority of Western women today often wear trousers, skirts are still considered predominantly feminine and trousers masculine (Entwistle 2000: 141; Lurie 1983: 225). The signs on public toilets will almost invariably show the male figure wearing trousers or shorts and the female figure wearing a skirt or dress (Entwistle 2000: 141). These signs quite clearly, and literally, illustrate an irrefutable link between gender, sex and dress. Garber (1992: 14) states that public restrooms are often a subject discussed in cross-dressers' accounts of passing as a cross-dresser does not 'satisfy' the requirements for either restroom door.

What society deems as appropriate dress for anatomically male bodies rather than female bodies is at the core of this investigation, as drag queens are typically anatomically male. In order to better understand the associations made with the male sex/masculine gender and dress in contemporary society, the creation of such associations in recent history must be examined as they impact on the sartorial standards society holds today.

## **2.12 Dress and Gender: Post Industrial Revolution**

Appropriate dress for men has changed dramatically since the eighteenth century when men dressed with far more extravagance and detail than in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The change from pre-industrial revolution to post-industrial revolution fashion was most salient in menswear (Steele 1985). Fashions were "extremely ornate" for both men and women prior to the nineteenth century (Craik 1994: 181). If men today dressed as they did during the reign of King Louis XVI they would be considered too femininely clad. However, after the reign of King Louis XVI, and throughout the industrial revolution, menswear became more and more simplistic and restrained (Craik 1994: 179). Steele (1985) suggests that it was the industrial revolution which increased the need for functional work clothes, as well as the reaction to the extravagance of the French court that led men to adopt a plainer dress. More simplistic fashions represented the antithesis of court dress: libertinism, corruption and triviality (Craik 1994: 180-181). It remained acceptable, however, for women to dress elaborately. Women were relegated to the domestic sphere and thus did not need to adopt the extremely practical garb of the working man.

As men's fashions became more austere, the wealth of a household was measured by the appearance of a man's wife (Veblen 1970 cited in Negrin 1999: 101). Decoration, which was considered frivolous, became a feminine pursuit only. Men had to express their economic power through the vicarious consumption (Bell 1947 cited in Davis 1992: 39) of

fashion items for their wives and children. The post-industrial revolution man discarded his need to be considered beautiful and was concerned only with being useful (Flugel 1971: 111). His attire became completely functional; the more restrained his attire, the more serious and useful he appeared (Flugel 1971: 112). On the contrary, women's fashions were largely impractical. De Beauvoir (1975: quoted in Negrin 1999: 103) suggests that this was because "society [was] not seeking to further [women's] projects but to thwart them." She continues to explain that:

The skirt is less convenient than trousers; high heeled shoes impeded walking; the least practical of gowns and dress shoes; the most fragile hats and stockings are the most elegant... Costumes and styles are often devoted to cutting off the feminine body from any activity (*ibid*).

After the shift toward the restrained male fashion aesthetic, men who dressed extravagantly; were concerned with their appearance; or subscribed to individualistic male fashions; were associated with marginalised subcultures (McNeil 1999). Furthermore they were looked at with homophobic suspicion and considered as having questionable morals (Craik 1994: 191; Cole 2000: 31). This association continued well into the twentieth century.

No period of culture has known as great differences as our own between the clothing of the free man and the free woman. In earlier eras, men also wore clothing that was colourful and richly adorned... Happily, the grandiose development in which our culture has taken part this century has overcome ornament. The lower the culture, the more apparent the ornament (Loos 1982 quoted in Negrin 1999: 102).

As evident from the above excerpt written in the 1980's, distinction between men and women's dress was perhaps more evident in the nineteenth and twentieth century than ever before in history. The clear distinction between men and women's dress meant that adopting aspects of the opposite sex's dress would be easily noticed and quickly punished. There are many accounts of groups of men being socially judged for adopting garments or aesthetics associated with women from as early as the seventeenth century. The most well-known example of such an identity is the Macaroni (Evans 2011).

The Macaroni aesthetic which bore great resemblance to the "feminine" clothing of the time (McNeil 1999: 425) was created as an overt reaction to the shift towards simple and practical male fashions. Some credited the Macaroni aesthetic as a performance style of

self-expression, or “a war of style” (McNeil 1999: 411-412) that aimed to expose the norm of sober masculinity as an arbitrary construction (Rauser 2004: 105) and subvert normative gender and sexual roles (McNeil 1999: 419). Much like drag performances which may be credited with subversive potential, the performance of the Macaroni used emphasised speech, kinesics and dress to reveal male subjectivity “as a process rather than a natural system” (McNeil 1999: 441).

Many viewed Macaronis as “sexual deviants” who represented a neutral or ambiguous gender (McNeil 1999: 431), “a confusing middle space between male and female” (Rauser 2004: 105-106). Although the Macaroni did not wear entirely female clothing as do drag queens, their excessive decoration caused a blurring of gender boundaries and categories “and thus put pressure on the serious, bourgeois ideal of masculinity” (Rauser 2004: 103).

Over one hundred years later the association of decorative and elaborate clothing with the feminine rather than the masculine remains intact.

This imaginary femininity weighs heavily on the fate of the detail as well as of the ornament in aesthetics, burdening them with the negative connotations of the feminine: the decorative, the natural, the impure and the monstrous (Schor 1987:45; quoted in Negrin 1999: 108).

From the time of the Macaroni to the contemporary, marginal room has been made for decoration in what is deemed appropriate male dress. Although particular aspects of clothing associated with women have been adapted into male fashions, clear distinctions remain between masculine and feminine dress.

## **2.13 Gendered Identity in Contemporary Dress**

It was during the 1980s that a significant shift in men’s interest in fashion became apparent and the conservative look of menswear began to give way to the more expressive looks designers were offering (Craik 1994: 176). The twenty first century is an age of post-metrosexuality. Men have become more aware of their appearance and are less restricted by the gender associations of the past (Davies 2008: 9). It is no longer unusual for men to wear pink or to wear certain items of jewellery like simple rings, earrings or necklaces. However, despite the changes in the colours, shapes, fabrics and the inclusion of accessories in men’s fashions over the last thirty years, the dominant looks of menswear continue to resemble the restrictive shirt, trousers and jacket look of the twentieth century

(Craik 1994: 190) and generally remain less decorative and often more practical/functional than womenswear.

Therefore, menswear has only evolved to the point of “partial emancipation” (Wilson 1985: 165) in that there remain many shapes, fabrics and accessories that would be deemed too feminine for a mainstream male body to wear. Wilson (1985: 165) explains that although in the 1960s men occasionally wore skirts and caftans, in general, in order for a man to wear a dress or skirt he had to define himself as a cross-dresser. Although Wilson (1985) wrote this in the mid-1980s, in 2014 men who don skirts, dresses or other overtly feminine garments or accessories such as high heels, remain as part of marginalised gendered identities and are labelled as cross-dressers or drag queens. Lurie (1981: 6) claims that “most men, however cold or wet they might be, would not put on a women’s dress”.<sup>22</sup>

How, then, would a mainstream audience in the twenty first century, having experienced the evolution of men’s fashion over the past thirty years perceive the gendered identities of the drag queen protagonists through the costume featured in the films screened for the focus group? How would these perceptions compare to the identities evoked by the costumes of the homosexual characters who are not costumed in drag, or furthermore the costumes of the heteronormative characters? In order to craft specific questions to participants about the role they believe costume plays in their perception of the gendered identity in the selected films, existing literature on the role of costume in film must be discussed in general terms as well as applied to the expression of gendered identity.

## **2.14 Film Costume**

In the past, film costume has not been acknowledged as playing a significant role in the reading and understanding of film (Gaines 1990: 181). As such, existing literature regarding costume in film is more often anecdotal, descriptive or illustrative rather than theoretical (Church Gibson 1998: 36). Street (2001: 1-2) argues that only recently has costume been noted as a legitimate subject area in film discourse. This is perhaps due to the academic acknowledgement of clothing’s ability to visually communicate aspects of one’s identity and therefore function as signifiers that represent aspects of a film character’s personality and/or circumstance. Despite this acknowledgement there remains

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<sup>22</sup> Again, a statement made in the 1980’s which generally remains true over thirty years later.

limited, though not non-existent, literary resources regarding film costume as a theorised subject.

Gaines (1990: 193) suggests that the main role of film costume is characterisation as a support of the film's narrative ideas. Phillips (2000: 59-62) and Goldberg (2000) emphasise the importance of costume in communicating character to an audience by stating that characterisation in a film is as much visual as it is verbal. By referencing one's knowledge of the world and specifically the culture one lives in, one can make meaning from film costumes that may assist in the understanding of a characterisation (*ibid*).

Taken together then, the primary units of the body and dress present both aesthetic and social information which the viewer interprets and evaluates against some personal and/or socio-cultural standards (Rudd and Lennon 2001: 122).

The audience of a film will therefore mentally record what is in front of their eyes and will then make connections and mental associations with what they see in order to create meaning (Phillips 2000: 66). These connections and mental associations will most likely be a combination of an audience member's own desires, beliefs and experiences (Phillips 2000: 81) as well as hegemonic socio-cultural sartorial standards.

Meaning making through the interpretation of what people wear may be unpredictable, particularly when one's own experiences and beliefs are a part of the process. According to Street (2001: 4), although film costume often aids narrative, it also has the potential to transcend it, "offering alternative interpretations from the main thrust of the plot and characterisation" and "articulating a language of its own." Thus just as dress in daily life may be interpreted differently by the wearer and the viewers, film audience members may interpret the identity of a character through film costume differently to what was intended by the costume designer and perhaps even differently to each other. This does not, however, negate the influence of the costume designer and his/her ability to represent a clear message of characterisation to the audience through costume. Despite the potential for an array of meanings to be derived from the image of a character in a film, the costume designer can rely on a "conventionally accepted set of attributes" (Phillips 2000: 65) belonging to certain items of dress. An example of this may be the combination of a formal white dress and a veil. The style, colour and combination of dress items will be immediately readable to a Western film audience as a bride on her wedding day.

This individual-yet-common response can be explained as follows: As individuals, our values, even our experiences, are remarkably similar to those of others who live in the same society and are exposed to the same influences (Phillips 2000: 65).

Popular film and media contribute to the construction of these hegemonic formations and reciprocally rely on such formations in order to visually communicate. Archetypal modes of dress enable social members, to a certain extent, to anticipate how a dress aesthetic may be interpreted and received by others.<sup>23</sup> In order to visually communicate as quickly and clearly as possible filmmakers must often rely not only on acknowledged hegemonic formations but on dress 'clichés' in the form of stereotypes (Phillips 2000: 65). Stereotype is often utilised in commercial cinema which aims to appeal to the largest audience possible.

Working within commercial cinema and wishing to communicate effectively with an audience, screenwriter, director and actor must create a character from a familiar base model, but add (sometimes quite small) distinctive traits. "This is another aspect of the repetition and variation which sustains commercial cinema" (Phillips 2000: 66). The stereotypes or hegemonic formations of femininity with which drag queens construct an easily-read feminine appearance are what theorists have argued result in the reiteration of the gender binary and the degradation of women through the drag act. "Drag in contemporary Hollywood cinema gives us a touch of innovation (cross-dressing) in order to sell us some very bland forms of sexism" (Evans 1998: 214). Does the stereotypical feminine clothing used to costume male actors as drag queens in the films selected sell a sexist message to the audience? Or does the "touch of innovation (cross-dressing)" cause the audience to question how the mainstream visually constructs gender through dress in terms of prevailing gender standards?

The incongruent visual image of male bodies wearing female clothing is a deviation from normative expectation and thus may challenge audience members who think about dress

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<sup>23</sup> In an investigation conducted by Feinberg, Mataro and Burroughs (1992: 22) it was found that there was a close correspondence between the social identity that the subjects wished to project through the clothing items they selected and the meaning that the observers perceived. The results of the investigation suggest that there are conventionally accepted attributes associated with certain clothing items that when observed in a specific context, allow a number of people to derive the same or similar meanings. Furthermore, the subjects in the investigation were not professionals in the clothing/fashion industry but nevertheless were able to select clothing items which were easily readable by observers. It stands to reason, then, that a professional costume designer would be even more likely to successfully communicate aspects of characterisation to an audience through film costume.

in terms of contemporary gender norms. Depending on their pre-conceived notions of gender, sex and dress, some audience members may find the reassignment of typically feminine costume onto an archetypal masculine body as a thought provoking gender reversal whereas others may find it distressing. As Wilson (2001: 149) states: "Yet despite its apparent irrationality, fashion cements social solidarity and imposes group norms, while deviations in dress are usually experienced as shocking and disturbing."

An additional pre-conception of audience members that may influence the interpretation of drag film costume is their opinion of the public persona of the actor (Butler 1998) wearing the costume.

The star in a film has a signifying function which may be separate or different from the written character within the film script. Stars are 'signs', not necessarily or entirely subsumed within the character they are asked to play (Turner 1990: 102).

The subject of star persona served as inspiration for a line of questioning in the focus group discussions. Do the costumes conjure an identity which 'disguises' the actors' public image to an extent where knowledge of their 'personal lives' can be left behind and their characters in the film believed completely? Does an audience automatically dismiss the costume as the illusion and rely on the anatomy of the actor to indicate the 'true gender'?<sup>24</sup> Butler (1990) argues that this is often the case when drag is assessed by a social audience.

Together with the discovery of how costumes in the selected films are interpreted by the participants, while taking into account context, pre-conception and the persona of the actors, this investigation aims to discover how these interpretations may affect the way in which the participants view dress and gendered expression in social reality as a result of viewing the films. In the past, popular media has had a significant impact in shaping the sartorial standards in Western Culture (Street 2001: 8; Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992: 1). Considering the prevalence of film in contemporary society (Gripsrud 1998: 202) it is important to investigate just how large an affect film costume can have on the views of its audience.

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<sup>24</sup> Casting a recognisable heterosexual actor in the role of a transgendered character is argued as a "straightening device" by Keegan (2013:1) and will be discussed further in section 2.18.



## 2.15 Popular Film and Audience

“Movies might be made by actors, directors, and producers but they are ultimately made successful by audiences” (Turner 1990: 94). It is only through an audience that film acquires its socio-cultural significance (Gripsrud 1998: 202). The relationship between a film and its audience is therefore paramount. What will appeal to the social strata for which a film is being created largely affects the choices made throughout the production (Williams 2002). Reciprocally, it has been suggested that a film can have a significant impact on the interests and beliefs of its audience. Cover (2000: 76) argues that due to the extent to which meanings are reconstructed by each audience member, it is difficult to quantify or strictly define the specific effects media may have on its viewers. It is, however, not disputed by theorists that generally film has played an influential role in the perceptions of individuals in Western society (Turner 1990; Hammond 1996; Gripsrud 1998; Ismail 2005; Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 2006; Welzel 2010; Albers and Gallage 2011). In her argument for the impact film can have on the minds and behaviours of social groups, Gripsrud (1998: 202) states that leaders of the Bolshevik revolution cited film as the most effective tool of propaganda. Ismail (2005: 1) argues that many people base “their subject knowledge on what they have seen on the cinema screen” and argues that the film industry, and Hollywood in particular, must be aware of this immense influence and must carefully consider filmic representations. Varying reasons for the influence film can have on its audiences’ perceptions of the world have been postulated in literature.

Turner (1990: 110-111) suggests that the power and influence of film in contemporary society comes from its ability to blur the boundaries between the imaginary and the real and to, as closely as possible, replicate the audience’s experience of the world. “Representation appears as perception” (*ibid*). Albers and Gallage (2011: 1) state that it is the familiarity and reflection of real life on the screen which enables the audience to identify with the characters and engross themselves in the narrative.

Responding to characters as if they were real people with real histories and real psychologies is a normal and pleasurable activity for audiences. We immerse ourselves in the fictional world the film offers us and let our imaginations take off in whatever unpredictable direction the particular interaction between film text and spectator dictates (Phillips 2000: 63-64).

Turner (1990: 113) claims that the processes through which audience members identify with what they see on the screen are equivalent to the way in which individuals construct

their identities within society. “The power of the individual’s look is important within Freudian and post- Freudian theory since it is part of the individual’s self-definition and relationship to his or her environment” (*ibid*). Thomas (2005: 2) similarly states: “Seeing is, after all, a way of negotiating the relation between the self and the things that surround it, and Lacan contends that it is in this relation that the idea of selfhood is created”.

MacCabe (1981 cited in Turner 1998: 197), however argues that regardless of the possible political content of a ‘realistic’ film, filmic realism is “a set of representational codes that offer the viewer a comfortable position from which to see the representation” and thus any potential for a critical or progressive reading of the text is defused.<sup>25</sup> MacCabe’s argument may be paralleled with Bakhtin’s (1984) discussion of the limited effect of carnival on the hegemonic structures of society (van der Wal 2008: 15). Although carnival is presented by Bakhtin as a form of rebellion within the sanctioned, repressive systems (van der Wal 2008: 14) and an eccentric rejection of social canons (Robertson 2011), the revolution is only temporary; exists within the surreal carnival space (van der Wal 2008: 15); and is thus not actualised in everyday life.

The images presented to an audience through film, and the meanings derived from them, may therefore contribute to an audience member’s understanding and construction of identity. The desire to create a pleasurable viewing experience for a mainstream audience, however, may result in a largely uncritical reading of the essentially unreal film text. How then, would viewing images of drag queens in popular film affect audiences’ conception of gendered identity? McWilliam (2006: 89) states that:

Hollywood genre films and the narratives that define them are one of the most popular and influential mediations of not only ‘the meaning of gender and sexuality in dominant culture’ but also ‘the forms of embodiment and social relations that are themselves at issue’ in the public sphere.

According to Oliver, Sargent and Weaver (1998: 46), research into how viewers respond to gender-stereotyped portrayals in media is vitally important as “differential viewing of media entertainment may serve to exacerbate sex role stereotyping and behaviour differences”. This is of particular concern in mainstream or popular film which, in an attempt to be as relatable as possible to a wide social strata, may make use of gender stereotyping. Thus perhaps a mainstream film audience will not read non-normative

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<sup>25</sup> Turner (1998:197) states that McCabe’s argument was largely accepted when applied to mainstream Hollywood film, however, was fiercely contested when applied to more radical film projects.

identities critically but will view stereotypical identities as confirmation of pre-determined expectations. Phillips (2000: 62) explains this regarding various widely accepted social constructs, like those relating to gender:

The film itself is likely to reflect and reinforce this 'formation'- either unconsciously because it is itself a product of this formation. More likely, it will do so in a calculated way in order to guarantee that it 'speaks' to the audience and will thus be commercially successful.

Carroll (1996) argues that popular film is particularly impactful due to the formulaic narrative which is easy for a wide audience to follow and understand. Due to the potential impact and the accessibility of popular film it is important to investigate to what extent a film may be invested with meaning and then understood and potentially reconstructed by its audience. This is particularly important regarding sartorial expectations read through a film that is representing non-normative identities that a mainstream audience may not have otherwise been exposed to.

## **2.16 Construction and Reconstruction of Meaning in Film**

Phillips (2000: 85), Goldberg (2000) and Williams (2002) acknowledge the widespread opinion that watching a film is a passive event for the audience, however, argue that it is "very much an active process" (Williams 2002). It is their contention that it may seem like a passive activity as the process of 'interpretation' and 'comprehension' often occurs sub-consciously. Audience members constantly and automatically engage in applying their "natural perceptiveness and critical intelligence" in relating to film texts (Phillips 2000: 69). Cover (2000: 75) suggests that what audience members 'naturally perceive' when watching a film are meanings that are coded or invested with connotations which the audience will then decode.

The sexual orientation and gendering of audience members will likely play a role in the way in which an audience 'decodes' a mainstream film featuring transgendered characters (Evans 2009: 41-44). A transgendered individual may, perhaps, respond to a transgendered character differently to an individual who is 'normatively' gendered. According to Cover (2000: 76), it is improbable that audience members who have had

limited prior knowledge about non-normative gendered/sexual identities will have an oppositional response to the heteronormative ideals represented on the big screen.<sup>26</sup>

Counsell and Wolf (2001: 177) suggest that:

Meaning does not exist in the material world, it is a human product, a product of culture, and the interpretation of plays and paintings, novels and films requires a reader who is culturally competent.

Therefore, a spectator's competence depends on the social knowledge necessary to interpret texts and the task of decoding a text must be approached with the "required interpretive strategies" (*ibid*). The initial interest in this topic of investigation stemmed from the peculiarity of the inclusion of transgendered characters in films created for mainstream audiences and therefore by simply being regular viewers of mainstream film, the focus group participants are equipped with all the social knowledge and interpretive strategy necessary for the interpretation of the 'text'.

In order to enable audiences to actively construct meanings through film texts, filmmakers use codes and conventions of representation which are likely shared by the audience (Williams 2002). In semiotic terms these codes are made up of symbolic, indexical and iconic signs organised by paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations.<sup>27</sup>

The codes and conventions of behaviour, language, mode of dress, dialect are all things we are familiar with in the real world and therefore are applied in film and television because they already have meaning associated with them (*ibid*).

As discussed in section 2.15, popular film particularly will make use of "conventions of behaviour" and even stereotypes in order to be easily relatable to a large demographic public. These ubiquitous conventions or stereotypes allow audience members to attach the desired meanings to what they see. Therefore, with regard to gendered portrayals in popular film, heteronormative ideals and gender stereotypes will be common as they are

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<sup>26</sup> Due to the potential of differential readings of the selected films according to varying gendered and sexual identities, the self-acknowledged gendered and sexual identity of each participant was considered in the focus group selection. A participant who is well versed in gender discourse will most likely respond to a film featuring transgendered characters differently to one who is not. Thus in order to procure a large variety of perspectives, heterogeneity in this specific area was desired. This, together with other sampling criteria is discussed further in section 3.4.1.

<sup>27</sup> According to Chandler (2014): symbolic signs are created arbitrarily through convention and cultural construction and do not resemble what they signify; indexical signs are a mode in which the signifier relates to, or is caused by the signified i.e.: smoke signifies fire; and finally, iconic signs are a mode in which the signifier resembles the signified e.g.: a picture of someone's face signifies that specific person. Paradigmatic relations are the meaning signs derive from their relation to other signs whereas syntagmatic relations refer to the meaning signs derive from the sequential order in which they are placed (*ibid*).

easily recognised and widely understood. The meanings individual audience members attach to such representations may, therefore, be similar to each other as they are constructed from associations that these members of the audience share. Phillips (2000: 85) explains this as follows:

Thus while the audience may be active in all kinds of ways, responding to character and situation, they still do so under control of the film text – and so tend to respond the same way, more or less.

Hall (1993 cited in Cover 2000: 75) refers to this similar interpretation where an audience member reads the meaning as it was ‘intended’ by the media producers, and/or similarly to other audience members, as the “hegemonic-dominant/preferred meaning”. Due to the interpretivist philosophical orientation of this investigation, the potential for the variation of perception from individual to individual is recognised and thus while audience members may construct hegemonic-dominant meanings these meanings may not be identical. An audience member may decode the meaning that was encoded by the media producers and recode it in a contradictory way. This is referred to by Hall (*ibid*) as “the oppositional meaning”. Finally, there is the possibility of a “negotiated meaning” (*ibid*) in that audience members may read some aspects of the meaning as it was intended by the media producers but other aspects as oppositional to what was originally ‘encoded’.

When assessing other literary contributions to the subject of filmic reading, Hall’s three positions discussed above are open to criticism. When attempting to analyse an audience’s response to a film, one may not be able to assess whether the audience has constructed similar, negotiated or opposite meanings to what were intended by the film maker/s as it may be difficult to determine what meanings the film maker/s wished to convey.<sup>28</sup> The creator/s of the film may not have described his/her intentions in a form that is accessible to the public. Moreover, determining ‘the intention’ of the film maker/s may be further impeded by the fact that a film may be created by a number of individuals who might not be sure of their meaning; might convolute their meaning; or might be at odds over the intent of the film (Goldberg 2000). Therefore it is problematic to base an analysis of audience response to film entirely on what was intended by the film’s creator/s.

Bennett (1983: 14) critiques the emphasis on the intention of the creator of a text, be it film or other, when he posits the concept of the “productive activation” of texts rather than

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<sup>28</sup> For example: it is beyond the scope of this investigation to be able to determine the intentions of each individual who contributed to the production of the four films selected for the focus group discussion. Logistically and financially it may be impossible to contact these sought after Hollywood filmmakers.

the 'interpretation' of texts. Bennett (*ibid*) argues that to speak of 'interpretation' is to permit variability only on the side of the reader, however there is a large degree of variability in both the reader of a text and the text itself. A text is not something that is untainted in its conception and is later endowed with multiple interpretations nor is its meaning subject only to the intention of its creator. Rather both a text and its readers are products of social constructions, the complex relationships therein, and are both subject to a variety of determinations (*ibid*). This, however, does not completely negate Hall's theory of hegemonic-dominant, negotiated and oppositional meanings. Bennett (1983: 14) acknowledges the concept of the coding and decoding of texts. He, however, suggests that both the text and its reader must be considered with regard to multiple constructions and context.

Cover (2000: 76) argues that what is lacking in Bennett's argument is the acknowledgement of the preferred code with which texts are inscribed. Given the discussions above regarding the aim of popular film to be relatable and appealing it's audience, it is probable that popular film is created through the construction of meanings which relate closely to the prevalent beliefs and interests of society at the time of the films production. It is thus also probable that those meanings are similarly understood by the audiences at the time of a popular films release. Oliver, Sargent and Weaver (1998: 48) state that:

Because gender role expectations are normative and shared, many individuals are likely to exhibit social perceptions, emotional reactions, and behaviours that are consistent with these expectations.

This statement does not imply that the meanings interpreted from film will always support normative ideals, nor is it being suggested that each audience member subscribes to purely normative beliefs. Rather what is being argued is that there exists shared cultural knowledge that occurs at specific times which will effect an audience member's reading and likely contribute to similar interpretations. Furthermore it must be acknowledged that if one is reading a popular film after it has been released, one must account for the changes in societal beliefs over that time period (Goldberg 2000).

When analysing a film as a historical document, keep in mind the film's contemporary audiences or authors. Your own personal reaction to the film may serve as a starting point, but you need to convert these impressions into historical

analysis—how are you different and similar to the historical audiences/authors?  
(*ibid*)

Due to the reciprocal effect prevalent societal beliefs and popular film have on one another (Welzel 2010; Albers and Gallage 2011), it is necessary to understand the recent history of how transgendered portrayals in film have evolved in both representation and reception.

## **2.17 Gender and Transgender in Mainstream Film**

Film and television in popular culture have become an important resource of information with regard to the way in which sexual orientation and gender roles are portrayed to the mainstream (Chow 1998: 170; Cover 2000: 72; Thomas 2005: 7; Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 2006: 427). The documentary, *The Celluloid Closet* (Epstein and Friedman 1995), discusses the portrayal of gendered and sexual identities in film throughout the twentieth century. One of the key conceptions highlighted throughout the documentary is the effect that film, particularly Hollywood film, has had on the formation and understanding of gendered and sexual identities in Western society. This is explained clearly by Richard Dyer (*ibid*), a noted film historian, when he says:

Your ideas about who you are don't just come from inside you, they come from culture. And in this culture they come especially from the movies. So we learn from the movies what it means to be a man or a woman, what it means to have sexuality.

Popular film and television, therefore have presented audiences with clearly defined social roles that further entrench limited social categories that are used to organise and make sense of social life ( Kirk 2004: 170).

Given the pervasiveness of gender differentiation, it comes as no surprise that the media also participate in dividing up the world in ways that both reflect and perpetuate stereotypes of gender (Oliver, Sargent and Weaver 1998: 45).

Through this division of identity it is suggested by Hubbard (2008: 5) that heteronormativity has been largely romanticised by popular media, film and popular music. Transgender and queer identities, however, have either been excluded from (Evans 2009: 41; Cover 2000: 72; Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 2006: 427) or have been 'negatively portrayed' (Keegan 2013: 3) by popular media. As Fejes and Petrich (1993 quoted in Brookey and Westerfelhaus 2001: 141) state:

When not outright excluding gays and gay themes, mainstream films have been criticised as portraying homosexuality at best as unhappiness, sickness or marginal and at worst, perversion and an evil to be destroyed.

This exclusion or discrimination was evident in film and media throughout the majority of the twentieth century however, toward the end of the century, transgendered and/or queer characters were being featured more frequently than ever before (Lang 1997: 331; Brookey and Westerfelhaus 2001: 142; Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 2006: 427). Of particular interest to this investigation is the increase of films featuring transgendered and/or queer identities who dress in clothing or fashions associated with the opposite sex. Garber (1992: 5) comments on this increase of visibility in popular culture: "Why is it virtually impossible to pick up a newspaper or turn on the television or go to the movies without encountering, in some guise, the question of sartorial gender bending?"

Despite the increased proliferation and change in recent filmic portrayals of transgendered and/or queer characters, the representation of such characters remains of great concern to many Queer film critics. One should not equate the visibility of transgender bodies in Western literature, film, television and virtual spaces across the internet as the end of the marginalisation of such identities (Keegan 2013: 1). Many Queer film critics argue that while transgendered characters may be represented more favourably than in the past, they are not being represented accurately (Evans 2009: 44). Inaccurate portrayals of non-normative identities in popular media are problematic due to the effect such media has on social knowledge. McWilliam (2006: 34) describes Hollywood's role in contemporary culture as "one of the most influential institutions of the public sphere, given, among other things, its global public profile and public reach." Brookey and Westerfelhaus (2001: 142) argue that due to the role mainstream film has in "defining and defending [a] culture's centre" (*ibid*), even 'favourable' representations of transgendered identities in the media must be critically considered.

Armistead Maupin (interviewed in Epstein and Friedman 1995) suggests that Hollywood is reluctant to present accurate representations of transgendered and/or queer characters on screen for fear that it will legitimise the subject of non-normative gender or sexuality. Therefore, in order for an alternative to heteronormativity to be *a part of* 'the world' of mainstream film, it must be represented as *apart from it* (Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 2006: 431). This is achieved by limiting what transgendered and/or queer characters may do, say or be in popular films.



Film theorists, reviewers and critics (Hammond 1996; Willis 1997: 294; Cooper 2003: 517; Kane 2005: 6; Holden 2006; Ebert 2006; Evans 2009: 45) have commented on how transgendered and/or queer characters in films and television shows are not permitted any display of their homosexual desire. Willis (1997: 294) states that the omission of sexuality for these identities “is the price of Hollywood”. Rather than the demonisation of transgendered and/or queer characters in the films of the past, recent representations of these characters have depicted the opposite extreme: deification<sup>29</sup> (Brookey and Westerfelhaus 2001: 143). Very often while the transgendered characters are denied the ability to act on their sexuality, they assist in unifying a heterosexual couple in the film or television show (Willis 1997: 294; Evans 1998: 211-212; Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 2006). This takes place in all four films selected for this investigation. This omission of homosexuality and support of heterosexuality promotes heteronormativity and privileges it above alternative gendered and sexual identities. Although the one dimensional role of “asexual hero” may be a more positive shift than the representation of transgendered and/or queer characters in the past, it is not accurate. By depicting these characters as too good to be true, they become elevated above and therefore removed from the mainstream (Brookey and Westerfelhaus 2001: 142-143).

Willis (1997); Brookey and Westerfelhaus (2001); Cooper (2003); Kane (2005); and Westerfelhaus and Lacroix (2006) all offer a similar argument that films and television shows that feature transgendered and/or queer characters often represent such characters as being largely concerned with the superficial in order to deflect away from the fact that these identities challenge the dominant heterosexist order.<sup>30</sup> In *Foo* (Kidron 1995), the drag queen protagonists solve problems of self-esteem, alcohol abuse and heartbreak in a small American town with a one day make-over of the female residents (Willis 1997: 301; Kane 2005: 35).

Knowledge of the history of the representation of all queer or transgendered identities through mainstream film and television assisted in providing context for how a

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<sup>29</sup> Not only do transgendered and/or queer characters not act on any sexual desire but their sole purpose in films is that of the rescuer and teacher of tolerance to their heterosexual co-characters (Hammond 1996; Cooper 2003: 521).

<sup>30</sup> Cooper (2003: 516) argues that, although it is “with a campy wink”, these identities are often represented through “a gay sensibility predicated on aesthetics, surface, and appearance, the preoccupation with clothing and style.” Rather than being allowed to challenge ideas of gender and sexuality, these characters only challenge people’s sense of style. Westerfelhaus and Lacroix (2006: 440) give the example of how the “Fab Five” in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Collins 2003) assist the heterosexual guest star of the show each week with aesthetic tips on how to dress, wax and keep a clean apartment, giving the impression that this should be the role of queer identities in a heterosexual world.

contemporary audience may view gendered identity through popular media and aided in the appropriate selection of materials provided for discussion in the focus group at the data collection stage of the investigation. The focus, however must now be narrowed to literature specifically regarding the representation and reception of drag queen characters in popular film.

## **2.18 The Representation of Drag Queens in Mainstream Film**

The representation of transgendered identities such as drag queens, cross-dressers and transsexuals in popular film is particularly interesting as not only do such identities challenge prevalent socio-cultural beliefs regarding sexuality but also challenge gender values and the way in which gender and sex are visually delineated. Frotscher (2013: 2) argues that in terms of readable bodies, heterosexuality and homosexuality are “two sides of the same coin” (*ibid*) in that neither challenge the male/female dichotomy. Therefore, while contemporary mainstream audiences may be more willing to engage with the representation of homosexuality than in the past, are audiences and creators of mainstream film eager to engage with the representation of characters who defy both heteronormativity and blur the boundaries of gender and sex? In order to limit the threat posed to mainstream sex/gender conception, Cover (2000: 75) states that popular films featuring transgender characters often present such characters in “an easily-read fiction of fixed sexual categories and identities.” Perhaps Hollywood does not believe that popular audiences will respond to gender neutral characters and unintelligible trans-bodies.

While transitional and non-conforming bodies may momentarily deconstruct the fiction of static gendered categories, transgender representation may also be manipulated to enforce these categories and to shore up their ‘ongoing foundational power’ through a proliferation of what Sara Ahmed has termed “straightening devices” (Keegan 2013: 1).<sup>31</sup>

To reflect the predominant ideologies of Western culture and constrain the challenge to heteronormativity that drag queen characters offer, it has been suggested that popular films attempt to “preserve a distance” (Evans 1998: 209) between the actor and the drag queen character he is playing. This is achieved by casting actors who are well known for their off-camera, masculine, heterosexual personas (Willis 1997: 289; Kane 2005: 25;

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<sup>31</sup> Frotscher (2013:1) discusses a similar concept to Keegan (2013) however uses the phrase ‘normalising strategies’ rather than ‘straightening devices’.

Frotscher 2013: 6-7). "...the straight press finds it necessary to insist and insist again on the heterosexuality of those involved in the production whose final textuality is so dangerously queer" (McKee 2000). Kane (2005: 25) states that the marketers of the film *Foo* (Kidron 1995), overtly emphasised the masculine persona of two of its stars: Patrick Swayze and Wesley Snipes. In trailers for the film, Swayze and Snipes are shown exercising with punching bags and martial arts moves before they are shown in feminine dress as drag queens (*ibid*).<sup>32</sup>

According to Evans (1998: 209), scenes where the male actor puts on his drag outfit, drag make-up and wig are included in popular films to allow the audience to separate the well-known heterosexual actor from the costume of a homosexual drag queen. Scenes of this nature take place at the beginning of both *Foo* (Kidron 1995) and *Cage* (Nichols 1996). Frotscher (2013: 7) argues with specific reference to these two films among others, that revealing transgendered character's biological form is a necessary tool to make these identities more palatable and readable to a mainstream audience because it plays on two largely accepted stereotypes regarding transgender: firstly that "there is always a truth that can be revealed" and secondly that "biology trumps all else" (*ibid*). However, it may also be argued that the inclusion of scenes in film where drag queens dress and apply make-up is purely for the purposes of providing insight into an important aspect of the art of drag – transformation from 'male' to 'female'.

The degradation of women through female stereotyping, as previously discoursed, is another common criticism of the representation of drag queen characters in popular film. Robertson (1997), Evans (1998) and Kirk (2004) argue that the type of woman being impersonated or performed by drag queen characters can reinforce dangerous, sexist stereotypes. In *Cage* (Nichols 1996), the drag queen protagonist, Albert, disguises 'himself' and acts like an ignorant, conservative housewife in order to please a senator. Albert is considered by the senator to be a better woman than his own biologically female housewife. This is made clear when the senator says of Albert: "They don't make women like that anymore." In *Foo* (Kidron 1995) the three drag queen protagonists uplift and bolster the self-esteem of the biological woman in the town by giving them make overs and teaching them, and the men in their lives, that they should be treated like ladies.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Evans (1998: 209) suggests that the casting of Terrence Stamp, an icon of heterosexuality in the sixties, and Guy Pearce, an Australian soap opera heartthrob, as drag queens in *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (Elliot 1994) allowed their characters to be more acceptable to a mainstream audience (McKee 2000).

<sup>33</sup> In a scene in *Priscilla* (Elliot 1994), Bernadette, a drag queen and pre-op transsexual, encounters a female labourer with a dirty tank top, no make-up and short hair. It is clear to the viewer that this labourer represents a

In the above examples, two themes seem clear. Firstly, these films have constructed and privileged the stereotype of “genteel ladies” (Evans 1998: 200) and secondly, in teaching the biologically female characters how to be ‘better women’ or earning the praise of a conservative senator, these films insinuate that men can do everything better than women – even be a woman.<sup>34</sup> As Kirk (2004: 178), in reference to *Foo* (Kidron 1995), states:

Women teach men to respect them, women are always dressed in the latest fashion, [and] women rescue other women from their silence and from their abusive husbands—at least when they are gay men dressed as women, drag queens.

The final common criticism is in reference to the dialogue of such films. The characters refer to themselves as drag queens but do not enact behaviour associated with the common understanding of the identity. Not only do the characters exhibit sartorial behaviour more commonly associated with cross-dressing and transsexual identities<sup>35</sup> but they do not express sexual desire of any kind, although the screenplays of such films do “weakly insist” (Maslin 1995) the characters’ homosexuality. Kirk (2004: 172) suggests that if the creators of the films are attempting to use drag as a “locus of discovery” (*ibid*) for a mainstream audience, it is limited by a lack of specificity regarding the definitions of transgendered identities. This causes such films to “pander to social ignorance” (Kane 2005: 27) and promote the conflation of the various existing transgendered identities (*ibid*).

Kirk (2004: 172) states that the creators of films like *Foo* (Kidron 1995) and *Cage* (Nichols 1996) have “mudd[ie]d the distinction between drag queens (gay men dressed as women) and passing (men disguised as women, who are often referred to as transsexuals)”. In *Foo* (Kidron 1995) the protagonists refer to themselves as drag queens but are never seen in public without their female attire nor do they publicly acknowledge that they are biologically men. When Albert disguises ‘himself’ as a housewife in *Cage* (Nichols 1996),

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lower-class woman (Robertson 1997:278). The labourer and Bernadette take each other on in both a verbal and drinking match. Bernadette outclasses the female labourer in both. Robertson (*ibid*) suggests that this scene privileges drag queen femininity over a biological “butch” female.

<sup>34</sup> A similar message is sent in the films *Tootsie* (Pollack 1982) and *Mrs Doubtfire* (Columbus 1993) (Evans 1998: 209 -210). Although these films do not feature drag queens but rather heterosexual men who cross-dress in order to get a specific job, these “women”, who are actually men, teach the biological women in the film to be better women. In *Tootsie* (Pollack 1982) Dustin Hoffman dresses as a woman to land a job on a soap opera and advises the women in the soap opera on how to stand up against their chauvinistic producer (Garber 1992: 5-6). In *Mrs Doubtfire* (Columbus 1993), Robin Williams dresses as a female Nanny in order to spend time with his children, in doing so he teaches their working mother how to organise her life and how to mother her kids. It seems a common theme that in films where men dress and pass for women, they fair far better in those roles than the biological women (Kirk 2004:178).

<sup>35</sup> A common conflation of transgender identities regarding drag queen characters in popular film encompasses whether the characters wish to pass as women or, as is customary of the traditional definition of a drag queen, acknowledge that they are biologically men.

the goal is to pass as a woman rather than impersonate a woman for an audience aware of the 'his' male biology.<sup>36</sup>

It is the contention of the theorists discussed here that in order to present non-normative identities in popular film, whether queer or transgendered, who challenge the heteronormativity and gender categorisation of the mainstream, filmmakers must make use of "straightening devices" (Keegan 2013:1) that lessen the subversive impact of the films and very often reinforce and perpetuate the normative beliefs of dominant culture.

While challenging normative assumptions about the morphological origin of gender in order to admit the possibility of trans identification, these texts nearly always end with a reinforcement of a binary system of gender, which operates as a form of narrative resolution (Keegan 2013: 6).

"Hollywood film is thus implicitly 'political' in the way it tends to support dominant American values and institutions" (Kellner 1998: 359). Hollywood film's support and perpetuation of hegemonic heterosexism results in the opinion of many Queer critics that the authentic expression of 'queerness' is only possible within non-mainstream productions such as avant-garde film, documentaries, and other independently produced projects that differ from traditional narrative forms (Doty 1998: 149).

This has significant implications not only on gender and sexuality in the public sphere but on the development of sartorial standards in dominant culture, which are cardinal visual signifiers of gender. This investigation therefore aims to gain a better understanding of whether the visibility of transgender in the mainstream can encourage an audience to reassess sartorial expressions of gender in society or if it solidifies the dichotomous gender binary and the role of dress in the delineation thereof.

While discussing the numerous academic criticisms of transgender representation in popular film, it is important to note that many of these arguments may not be evident to mainstream audiences. Bennett (1983: 15-16) makes the following argument with regard to academic criticism of popular texts:

These texts are usually studied, and not infrequently condemned, for their effects on "other people" without making any real attempt to take account of the specific determinations that mould and structure popular reading, that is, readings

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<sup>36</sup> In *Cage* (Nichols 1996), unlike the drag queens in *Foo* (Kidron 1995), Albert does not always wear female attire and there are many scenes where he is seen in public without heels, make-up or a wig.

produced outside the academy and at a considerable remove from the critical discourses that circulate within it.

Furthermore, although many theorists criticise the representation of drag queen characters in popular film as reinforcing dangerous sexist stereotypes (Robertson 1997; Evans 1998; Kirk 2004; Frotscher 2013), some theorists attribute possible 'positive' consequences to the inclusion or marginalised identities in popular media. Cooper (2003: 531) argues that although there are 'negative' connotations to transgender visibility in popular film, inclusion in such films provide some degree of validation to the outsider group presented. Furthermore Cooper (*ibid*) argues that these films might pave the way for more honest portrayals in the future. Perhaps the reality television series *Ru Paul's Drag Race* (Murray and Stevenson 2009), which is currently on its seventh season, would not be as popular if it were not for the films like *Foo* (Kidron 1995) and *Cage* (Nichols 1996). Balzer (2005: 128) states that the exposure of the mainstream to drag queens, through popular media, during the 'drag queen hype' of the mid-nineties provided a younger generation with new possibilities and opportunities to establish themselves in the niches of the majority society" (*ibid*).

## **2.19 Reception and Critique of Films Selected**

Four films were selected and screened, in part, for a focus group in order to discover what perceptions audience members may have with regard to gender and costume in Hollywood film. For a brief description of the plot of each film see Appendix A. The literary critiques of the films discussed in the sections to follow served as significant inspiration for the creation of many of the questions posed to the focus group.

### **2.19.1 *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything. Julie Newmar!* (Kidron 1995)**

*Foo* (Kidron 1995) was released at what Balzer (2005: 117) terms the peak of the "great drag queen hype" in the United States. Despite the fact that *Foo* has been the subject of great criticism in academic texts (Lang 1997; Evans 1998; Brookey and Westerfelhaus 2001; Kirk 2004; Kane 2005; Evans 2009; Frotscher 2013), many of which have been discussed in sections 2.17 and 2.18, it was well received by the public. *Foo* (Kidron 1995) earned \$47,774,193 at the box office (Boxoffice.com 1995) and has, to date<sup>37</sup> received an aggregated score of 72% from 50,022 public voters on the popular film review site,

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<sup>37</sup> All aggregated scores from public voters of the four films were assessed on 10 February 2014.

rottentomatoes.com and an aggregated score of 62% from 16,758 public voters on the site IMDB.com.<sup>38</sup>

As one of the first mass marketed drag films produced by Hollywood (Kane 2005: 2), *Foo* (Kidron 1995) makes for a pertinent focus group discussion topic. What is particularly interesting about *Foo* (Kidron 1995) is the casting of Patrick Swayze and Wesley Snipes. Swayze and Snipes are 'branded' as archetypes of masculine heterosexuality (Maslin 1995; Kane 2005: 10). Willis (1997: 295) argues that the public personas of Swayze and Snipes "are, in fact, central players in this film's narrative." How would audience members respond to such masculine actors dressed as women? Would they find it believable that these actors are drag queens? Or would the costume and performance of the actors be unable to mask their masculine, heterosexual personas? Maslin (1995) credits the costuming in the film, while simultaneously criticising the film itself, when she states that all of the film's ingenuity "has gone into squeezing three masculine actors into giddy outfits and letting clothes unmake the man." She continues to state that "the casting and camouflaging of this film's stars is what works best" (*ibid*).

The director of *Foo*, Beeban Kidron demonstrated great confidence in the ability of the production team and the actors to create believable drag characters when he speculated the following: "By the end of the film I would guess that about 80% of the audience have stopped wondering whether they're men or women. They're just characters, and that's the strength of the film" (Kane 2005: 26). Kane (*ibid*) disagrees with this statement and argues that because the audience sees Swayze and Snipes in nothing but towels in the opening scene of the film their 'gender' is never in question and that they will be considered 'masculine' men for the remainder of the film.

According to Hammond (1996: 109) the size of the drag queens' bodies are consistently emphasised through the narrative and dialogue in *Foo* (Kidron 1995). In one scene a character comments: "For girls they are sure strong and big" (Hammond 1996: 109). Maslin (1995) makes specific reference to an outfit in the film worn by Leguizamo, stating that "he's pressing his luck" trying to convince the townspeople of Syndersville that he is a woman with his revealed broad shoulders. However, Maslin (1995) states that at the end of the film Leguizamo turns into a "gorgeous femme fatale" due to "the right evening gown" and "cosmetic wizardry" (*ibid*). To what extent can "the right evening gown" and

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<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, Patrick Swayze and John Leguizamo earned Golden Globe Award nominations for Best Actor and Best Supporting Actor in a Motion Picture Musical or Comedy, respectively and the film was nominated for a Glaad (Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation) award in 1996 in the "Outstanding Film" category.

“cosmetic wizardry” transform a body into that of the opposite sex? How do the physiques of Swayze, Snipes and Leguizamo influence the extent to which they look like woman? Is a more traditionally ‘masculine’ physique dressed in traditionally ‘feminine’ attire a more subversive statement with regard to gender and dress due to the overt visual contrast? Or does this incompatibility cause the audience to reject the actors as women thereby subscribing to the belief that biology determines one’s socially accepted gender role?

### **2.19.2. *The Birdcage* (Nichols 1996)**

*Cage* (Nichols 1996) remains one of the top grossing Hollywood films featuring transgendered characters as the protagonists to date, earning \$185,260,553 at the box office (Boxoffice.com 1996). It achieved remarkable commercial success topping the box office in its opening weekend and remaining at number one for three weeks (*ibid*). The popularity of the film is reflected in its aggregated score of 80% from 102,634 public voters on rottentomatoes.com and an aggregated score of 69% from 48,175 public voters on imdb.com.<sup>39</sup>

*Cage* (1996) has been criticised in a number of academic publications (Evans 1998; Kirk 2004; Evans 2009) for promoting gender stereotypes, however, of the literature reviewed, the number of such publications, and the criticisms contained therein, are far less than that relating to *Foo* (Kidron 1995). Evans (2009:51) states that *Cage* (Nichols 1996) was better received by a subcultural audience than *Foo* (Kidron 1995). This is due perhaps to the perception that “Armand and Albert don’t live in a separate world” (Robin Williams cited in King 1996). Reviewers and theorists, however, disagree. Maslin (1996) states that the narrative of *Cage* (Nichols 1996) “has little footing in the real world ...” Evans (1998: 211–212) argues that due its many ‘straightening devices’, *Cage* (Nichols 1996) privileges heterosexuality over homosexuality and “draws strict lines between those who can move out of a stigmatized group through performance, and those who cannot” (Evans 1998: 213).

Unlike the drag queen characters in *Foo* (Kidron 1995), the drag queen protagonist in *Cage* (Nichols 1996), Albert/Starina, is often seen out of drag. Furthermore the characters in *Cage* (Nichols 1996) represent a broader spectrum of gendered and sexual identities.

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<sup>39</sup> *Cage* (Nichols 1996) was, like *Foo* (Kidron 1995) nominated for a GLAAD award and was praised by a representative of GLAAD in a press release who stated that: “in ‘The Birdcage’ we go beyond the stereotypes to see the characters’ depth and humanity” (King 1996).



This enables a comparison between the costuming of different gendered and sexual identities represented in the film. Do these costumes effectively communicate the various gendered and sexual identities of each character or must the audience rely on the dialogue or the kinesics of the actor? In one scene of the film *Albert*, in an attempt to pass as Val's "straight uncle", dresses in a suit. He, Armand and Val decide that in a suit he looks "more in drag than in a dress" (Evans 1998: 211). Would audience members agree with this statement?

In the concluding scene of the film, the guests at Val and Barbara's wedding are seated on the traditional bride and groom sides of the church. According to Evans (1998: 212) it is clear that drag queens are placed on one side of the aisle and conservatives on the other side. How large a role do the costumes play in demarcating one side of the church as "conservative" and the other easily identifiable as "drag queens"? Evans (*ibid*) suggests that each side of the aisle is staring at the other "across a divide that seems unbridgeable." How "unbridgeable" is the divide between these two modes of dress? Given that *Cage* (Nichols 1996) was released nearly twenty years ago, are the dress styles between "the conservative" and the "non-normative" still so easily identifiable to a contemporary audience?

### **2.19.3. *Connie and Carla* (Lembeck 2004)**

*CC* (Lembeck 2004) did not fare as well at the box office as *Foo* (Kidron 1995) and *Cage* (Nichols 1996). The budget of the film amounted to \$37,000,000 and the film grossed only \$11,341,016 (Boxoffice.com 2004). *CC* (Lembeck 2004), however, received relatively high scores from online public votes. The film received an aggregated score of 71% from 12,751 public voters on rottentomatoes.com and an aggregated score of 62% from 6,019 public voters on imdb.com. *CC* (Lembeck 2004), though cited in academic film texts, is not the subject of much academic literary discussion. The literary response to the film that is discussed here is therefore in the form of film reviews.

The biologically female actresses in *CC* (Lembeck 2004) were tasked with enacting multiple gendered performances as female protagonists attempting to pass as males who are impersonating females. In light of Butler's (1990: 1999) theories of gender as performance, this film is of great interest to this investigation due to these layers of gendered expression. Holden (2004) and Ebert (2004) did not find it plausible that, in the

world of the film, the biologically female characters were able to convince anyone that they were male drag queens.

Its silliest illusion, which exempts it from any credibility whatever, is that these women, simply by painting their faces as clowns, donning oversize wigs, adopting flamboyant, camp mannerisms and lowering their voices a notch (when they remember to), could pass as men in drag for even a second (Holden 2004).

However, later in his article, Holden (2004) states that as a drag performer Toni Collette, who plays Carla, “resembles John Epperson as Lypsinka” (*ibid*), a popular American drag queen. If this similarity which prompted the comparison was able to be achieved, perhaps the filmmakers were somewhat successful in transforming females into male-to-female impersonators.

In the film there are a few scenes where Connie and Carla perform as drag queens with other biologically male drag queens. Of the four films selected, this occurrence is unique to this film and allows for the comparison of female and male drag queen performances.

#### **2.19.4. *Kinky Boots* (Jarrold 2006)**

*Boots* (Jarrold 2006) is the only film of those selected which is a collaboration between a Hollywood film studio and the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation). It is also the least grossing film, earning a total of \$9,950,133 at the box office (Boxoffice.com 2006). Although the film was not a huge financial success it received an aggregated score of 75% from 72,236 public voters on the site rottentomatoes.com and an aggregated score of 70% from 10,437 public voters on the site imdb.com. *Boots* (Jarrold 2006), like *CC* (Lembeck 2004), is cited in academic film texts, however is not the subject of much academic literary discussion. The literary sources discussed below are therefore from reviews of the film.

What makes *Boots* (Jarrold 2006) a beneficial selection is that the narrative of the film revolves around a dress item: shoes. Although dress and clothing play a significant role in each of the films selected, *Boots* (Jarrold 2006) has the most obvious correlation in that the plot follows the struggles of a factory shop that begins to produce a line of women’s shoes for men. There are therefore, a plethora of clips in which dress or clothing is the subject matter of the scene.

Where the representation of the drag queen protagonists has been criticised as stereotypical and inaccurate in other films (Evans 1998; Kirk 2004; Hammond 2006), the portrayal of Lola by Chiwetel Ejiofor is praised by Ebert (2006) who states:

Having provided us with Lola, the movie is conventional in all other departments. But Ejiofor's performance as Lola shows an actor doing what not every actor can do: Taking a character bundled with stereotypes, clearing them out of the way, and finding a direct line to who the character really is. Just in the way she walks in those kinky red boots, Lola makes an argument that no words could possibly improve upon.

Holden (2006) argues that the character of Lola does not defy anything but sartorial convention and that 'her' gender-bending is more reassuring to heteronormativity than defiant of it. "Hollywood still gets the jitters about gender-bending" (*ibid*) and thus in order to include characters who cross-dress, those characters must be presented to audiences in a way that either reassures the heteronormativity of the target audience or promotes it (Evans 1998: 214).

## **2.20 Conclusion**

This literature review has provided a theoretical framework which informs the research strategy of this investigation at both the collection and analysis stages. The literary arguments discussed above not only assisted in the selection of the clips to be screened for the focus group but aided in the development of the questions posed to the participants and provided a point of comparison against which the results of the focus group discussion were measured. The following chapter discusses the methodological approach and, where relevant, draws connections between the methodological choices made and the reviewed literature.

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

In light of the literature reviewed in the previous chapter, this chapter begins with the problematising of the critical research questions. Due to focus being placed on the meanings various audience members may attach to dress items and ensembles, this investigation is paradigmatically situated in the interpretive tradition. As discussed in the previous chapter however, shared hegemonic formations and semiotic values associated with dress exist in Western Culture. An interpretivist standpoint must therefore be held in concurrence with the critical understanding that socio-political sartorial standards will contribute to an audience's reading of film costume. Such readings cannot be quantified and thus qualitative methodological approaches form part of the research design. Following the problematising of the critical questions, the research strategy with regard to merged paradigmatic position and subsequent qualitative approach; sampling technique and participant criteria; recruitment of participants; focus group facilitation; ethical concerns; reliability and validity; delimitations and limitations; and finally method of data analysis; will be discussed.

#### **3.2 Problematising the Critical Questions**

Critical question one: How is gendered/transgendered identity constructed and perceived through mainstream Hollywood film?

The Hollywood film industry is a commercial industry which requires high revenue in order to cover the tremendous cost of production, and to make profit (Gomery 1998: 245). In order to be commercially viable, mainstream film must appeal to as wide an audience as possible (Turner 1990). Popular films must, therefore, be understandable, and to a certain extent, be relatable to the audience for which they are made (Kellner 1998: 355). The prominent opinions, beliefs and interests of mainstream society must thus be carefully considered if filmmakers intend to appeal to a large demographic public. In light of this, if one is to understand how gendered identity is constructed, and in what ways it may be perceived, through mainstream Hollywood film, one must investigate how gendered identity is constructed and perceived in mainstream society.

The prominent arguments in gender discourse discussed in section 2.4 have given an indication of how, according to academic literature, the mainstream perceives gender.

One of the most prominent literary suggestions is that it is a normative expectation that biological sex and gender will correlate and thus gender is often linked with the physical rather than understood as purely behavioural. Another prominent argument is that when conceptualising gender as 'masculine' or 'feminine', due to a history of Western patriarchy, the 'feminine' gender is considered a less valued persona than the 'masculine' gender. These arguments informed the questions posed during the focus group stage of the investigation in order to discover how the participants believe they, and others, perceive gender and how these perceptions might affect, or be affected by, the way in which gender is constructed and presented in mainstream film.

Critical question two: What role does costume/dress play in conveying the gendered/transgendered identity of the drag queen characters in the selected clips and stills of the films screened for the focus group?

As argued by multiple fashion theorists (Arvanitidou and Gasouka 2013; Kaiser 2012; Entwistle 2000; Davis 1992; O'Neal and Lapitsky 1991), dress plays a significant role in the communication of an individual's identity during social interaction in everyday life, on a broad scale and with specific reference to gendered identity. Due to the prevalence of this concept in literature, it has been proposed (Street 2001) that film costume will similarly communicate identity or gendered identity.<sup>40</sup>

Many of the works of fashion theorists (Arvanitidou and Gasouka 2013; Kaiser 2012; Davis 1992; Feinberg, Mataro and Burroughs 1992: 18; O'Neal and Lapitsky 1991) emphasise the importance of the wearer's intention; the viewer's reading; context; social validation or criticism; ambiguity and/or miscommunication; in the assessment of sartorial expression. An aim of the focus group discussion and analysis was to discover how significant the above literary concepts are to the way in which the participants read the gendered expressions of characters in film. Due to film being a visual medium, which an audience member is exposed to for a short duration, it may be assumed that the way in which individuals form first impressions of one's gender according to sartorial gendered expression in everyday life can be compared to the way in which audience members form first impressions of the characters in a film.

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<sup>40</sup> Due to the lack of literature available on the subject of film costume and the communication of characterisation, this investigation relies heavily on the concepts of dress as communication of identity in society and the ways in which they can be applied to film costume and characters.

Critical question three: What comparisons, with regard to gendered portrayals, do the participants make between the drag costumes; the costumes of the drag queen characters when they are not dressed in drag; the costumes of the 'homosexual' characters; and the costumes of the 'heteronormative' characters?

This question seeks to discover the extent to which costumes aid audience members in delineating sexual and gendered identity in films where there are heterosexual, homosexual and drag queen characters. What particular aspects of the costumes help to make this distinction? This investigation is primarily concerned with gendered identity, however due to the close relationship between perceived gendered identity and sexual identity in the mainstream, sexual identity perception will be nominally explored.

As suggested by Schacht and Underwood (2004), the drag act originated when clothing took on gendered meanings. It can thus be assumed that an audience would not visually recognise characters in films as drag queens if it were not for the overtly feminine costumes in which they are dressed, together with the juxtaposition of their easily read 'male' bodies. This argument is based on the normative expectation that an individual's gendered expression will correspond with the individual's anatomical sex. Thus the combination of feminine costume and male actors may enable an audience to quickly identify the characters as drag queens but what does this mean to audience members with regard to gendered identity?

In order to address the question of comparison and delineation of gendered identities, degrees of gendered associations with dress and the body must be established. Do the participants consider some dress items and physical attributes as more feminine or masculine than others? As stated above, a stark contrast between a 'masculine' body and 'feminine' dress can be indicative of a drag queen identity. What gendered identity is read when the contrast is less blatant?

The close relationship between dress and the body both spatially and conceptually is posited by Entwistle (2007) and Rudd and Lennon (2001). How one element affects the other in the reading of gendered identity is thus of great interest in this investigation. Furthermore, due to the continued reference to kinesics in multiple works reviewed in chapter two, this question seeks to discover the role of kinesics in gendered expressions and perceptions.

Critical question four: To what extent do the participants' readings of gender through the costumes in the screened films influence their understanding of perceived gendered identity through sartorial gendered expression in a social context?

In the same way that the existing socio-cultural order will influence what is presented to a mainstream audience through film, it has been suggested that films may have a significant influence on the perceptions of the audience and therefore reciprocally affect that very same socio-cultural order (Oliver, Sargent and Weaver 1998; Gripsrud 1998). In the past, films were credited with having an impact on the way in which audience members engaged with fashion (Wilson 1985: 169; Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992: 1). How does viewing the sartorial behaviour of transgendered characters in film affect the way in which audience members view associations between gender and dress in contemporary society? Can non-normative gendered expressions represented in popular film lead audience members to question gender categories and the way in which contemporary society visually delineates gender? Or do such expressions further reinforce existing sartorial gender standards?

This is an important question when discussing drag queen characters specifically as the inquiry into the subversive potential of drag performance is much debated in academic literature. The answer to such an inquiry however is largely dependent on context (Butler 1999: 177). Both intentions of the performer as well as the gender expectations and individual meaning making of viewers will contribute to how whether a drag performance challenges or reinforces the current gender categorising system and pervasive heteronormativity (Schacht and Underwood 2004: 12). The specific intentions of the directors, producers and actors involved in the films selected cannot be discovered, however possible intentions of Hollywood film in general have been considered. The participants' comments during the focus group discussion shed light on how drag performances may be read by audience members through the medium of popular film and to what extent, if any, such readings may affect the way in which the relationship between dress and gender is viewed in social reality.

### **3.3 Qualitative Research in the Interpretive and Critical Traditions**

This investigation is rooted in a mixed conceptual approach whereby qualitative methods are informed by both the interpretive and critical philosophical traditions. Although the interpretive and critical paradigms have both ontological and epistemological differences

and similarities (Kinsella 2006) their “theoretical marriage” (*ibid*) can result in “vibrant hybrid traditions” (Prasad 2005: 149) such as critical hermeneutics, which will inform the research strategy of this investigation.

### **3.3.1 A ‘Marriage’ of Theory**

Prasad (2005: 3) states that when conducting a qualitative investigation there are no clear-cut guidelines to follow and that occasionally, in order best to serve the research topic, a mixture of paradigms (Gephart 1999: 2) and methodologies must be adopted. It is posited by Deluca (2000 cited in Kinsella 2006: 12) that a theoretical marriage of paradigms can be viewed similarly to a human marriage in that the partners do not have always to agree, but rather the relationship is enriched by each partner bringing a unique identity and a different set of opinions to the table. The combination of subject matter discussed in this investigation in particular necessitates a creative and inclusive style of inquiry. In fact, Nagasawa, Hutton and Kaiser (1991: 53) suggest that the study of the social meaning of dress and fashion in particular “demands an integrative approach, invites creative as well as critical inquiry, and fosters acceptance of a spirit of diversity in research methods, strategies, and explanations”. Furthermore, although each of the philosophical traditions subscribe to specific conventions, they will to a greater or lesser extent be influenced externally and cannot be entirely separated from each other (Prasad 2005: 11).

Ontologically, interpretivists believe that there is no pre-existing, single ‘reality’ that is “waiting to be discovered” (Neuman 2000: 72) but rather that realities are multiple as they “exist in people’s minds” (Guba 1990: 26). Critical theorists do not subscribe to these beliefs and instead adopt a realist position (Neuman 2000: 77). They believe that there is “only one or very few, correct points of view” (Neuman 2000: 81). The meanings a social actor attaches to a particular garment or ensemble cannot be proven as true or false and thus, in the context of this study, it is difficult to make the case for a single ‘reality’ and a position of relativism must be taken and the interpretivist perspective favoured.

Epistemologically, interpretivists are primarily concerned with subjective view points and the way in which individual social members make sense of social events and settings (Gephart 1999: 5). Critical theorists share this subjectivist epistemology (Guba 1990: 24). Prasad (2005: 149) states that “[c]ritical theory is as much invested in exploring subjective life worlds as any interpretive tradition, but brings a critical edge and ethical tone to its analysis”. An aspect of this “critical edge” to which Prasad refers is the primary concern of



critical theorists regarding existing social injustices and asymmetries and their effect on the perceptions and actions of individuals in society (Prasad 2005: 109).

These contradictions and forms of exploitation are masked by ideology, a publicly disseminated theory of everyday life events which people use to explain or make sense of events and which encourages people to accept the status quo structures of society as natural, unalterable givens (Gephart 1999: 8).

From the literature reviewed in section 2.4 it is clear that many gender theorists (Eckert and McConnell-Ginnet 2003; Butler 1999; Gagne and Tewksbury 1998; Lorber 1994) believe that the ideology of sex determining gender encourages people to accept gender as “natural” and “unalterable” which results in the marginalisation of those whose gender and biological sex do not correspond. Due to the fact that this research topic is centred on the subject of gender, the participant’s perceptions must be understood critically, in light of the prevailing gender politics of contemporary society in which they live. These prevalent beliefs would certainly have some effect on their perceptions and therefore a purely interpretivist position with regard to epistemology cannot be taken and the perceptions of the participants, although accepted as subjective, must be analysed critically. Bauer and Gaskell (2000: 14) make a case for critical analysis in qualitative research when they argue that the desire of interpretive researchers to “see through the eyes of those being studied” may result in simply replacing the researchers’ assumptions/perceptions with those of the informants. “In this way, via a sort of ‘empiricism by proxy’, qualitative research may repeat the errors more commonly associated with unreflective positivism” (ibid).

Together with the focus on the hegemonic structures that may influence individual social member’s perspectives, critical researchers aim “to transform the (real) world by raising the consciousness of participants so that they are energised and facilitated toward transformation...” (Guba 1990: 24). This investigation is primarily concerned with understanding the way in which participants attach gendered meanings to various aspects of dress through film costume and less concerned with actively “emancipating oppressed groups from [] domination” (Prasad 2005: 109). This investigation however does discuss a performance style that often aims to draw attention to the fallacy of the correspondence between sex and gender as well as the construction of gender and gender roles in society. There is the potential, therefore, that the discussion in the focus group, and throughout dissertation, may inspire further questioning of the prevailing sartorial gender standards active in contemporary society.

This investigation acknowledges and borrows from both the interpretivist and critical traditions in its attempt to discover the varying perceptions of the participants with regard to sartorial gender representations in mainstream film while analysing these perceptions critically with a consideration of the shared beliefs with regard to gender in mainstream culture.

### **3.3.2 Hermeneutical Methodology**

Due to the “pluralization of life worlds” (Flick 2006: 11) acknowledged by the interpretivist tradition as well as the inability to deem perspectives and meanings attached to dress as correct or incorrect; quantifying the data gathered from this investigation is neither desirable, nor possible (Leedy and Ormrod 2004). Rather than quantification and generalisation, this investigation aims to understand the variety of possible interpretations of the phenomenon of visual representations of transgendered characters in mainstream film.

Phenomena are whatever we observe (perceive) and seek to explain... More generally, we might say, phenomena are whatever we are conscious of: objects and events around us, other people, ourselves, even (in reflection) our own conscious experiences, as we experience these. In a certain technical sense, phenomena are things as they are given to our consciousness, whether in perception or imagination or thought or volition (Smith 2009).

The phenomena of interest, “given to our consciousness” (*ibid*), are the images of drag queens, as well as other gendered portrayals, in mainstream film and forms the ‘text’ that was analysed by the participants at the data collection stage of this project. It is the discovery of “perception or imagination or thought or volition” (*ibid*) that results from viewing this text that this investigation aims to achieve.

Simply explained, hermeneutics emphasises a detailed reading of text (Neuman 2000: 70). This text may take many forms: written words, conversations, pictures *et cetera* (Kinsella 2006: 2). As stated previously, the ‘text’ studied by the participants in the focus group took the form of still and moving images of transgendered characters in mainstream Hollywood film. The focus was specifically on the costume (clothing, hair, make-up and accessories) of the transgendered characters. Each participant read the text through his/her subjective experience and various meanings were created (Neuman 2000: 71). The consensus among these constructions was sought through contemplating the text’s

many meanings as interpreted by its readers and discovering the connections among these messages (Neuman 2000: 71). However, in light of the significance of the hegemonic structures which influence the beliefs and actions of a society, these meanings were analysed critically with regard to the normative gender and sartorial expectations of contemporary society. The methodological strategy of this investigation is therefore not simply hermeneutics but what Prasad (2005: 149) terms a “synergistic and vibrant hybrid” tradition: critical hermeneutics.

Context is vital to the discipline of critical hermeneutics (Kinsella 2006: 4-5). Full and meaningful textual analysis cannot be achieved without understanding the culture in which the text was produced (Prasad 2005: 32-33). Therefore, the costume of the transgendered characters in the clips and stills screened for the focus group were considered in light of the culture in which Hollywood films are produced. One must not only contemplate in what culture a text was produced but also *for* what culture a text was produced. In order for mainstream film to be relevant to its audience, film must to some extent imitate everyday life. According to Flick (2006: 238), Hollywood films contain “social reflections on social experiences”; they reflect on key moments of history; on certain institutions; on social values and relations; on domains of everyday life; and on emotions. Therefore the study of mainstream film cannot take place without the critical reflection on the powers and politics that dictate mainstream social behaviour and beliefs. It is in this consideration of context that the partnership of critical theory and the discipline of hermeneutics become particularly beneficial. Insights into the text must be viewed “from critical perspectives with respect to power, the potential misuse of language” (Kinsella 2006: 12) and a consideration of those “individuals who are marginalized or subordinated” (Kinsella 2006: 14). Therefore the understanding of the hegemonic heteronormativity of the mainstream and the limitations of the dichotomies of male/female and masculine/feminine is paramount when interpreting the meanings attached to the costume of transgendered film characters and the bodies that wear them.

When deliberating context, the subject of the author of a text, be it film or other, must be addressed. Bennett (1983: 14) and Prasad (2005:38) argue against an inflated emphasis on this intention. A text often develops “a life of its own” (Prasad 2005: 38) and carries meanings that are not necessarily congruent with what the author intended, that is if this intention is able to be discovered at all. It is seldom the case that a reader of a text is able to ask the author about his/her intentions. This does not mean that if it is possible to do so, the author’s intentions should not be considered, but rather it must be understood that

there are a variety of factors which may influence the creation and interpretation of a text along with the author's intentions. It is not possible to discover exactly what the producers, directors and costume designers of each film selected for this investigation intended,<sup>41</sup> however, the "socio-cultural and political forces" (*ibid*) at the time of the production of each film have been considered. These forces contribute to the understanding of context in the analysis of the selected films.

In the discipline of hermeneutics the hermeneutic circle is cardinal to the understanding of context (Kinsella 2006: 5). A basic explanation of the hermeneutic circle is that the reader must gain knowledge of the context of a text before it can be understood. Gaining an understanding of the text itself, however, will aid the reader in understanding said context (Prasad 2005: 35). Kinsella (2006: 5) describes this in terms of parts and the whole: "construing meaning of the whole meant making sense of the parts and grasping the meaning of the parts depended on having some sense of the whole." The parts of the text studied by the participants are all the components which make up the visual appearance of the drag queen protagonists. How the various aspects of the dress, body and kinesics of the protagonists are read separately will contribute to how they are read as a whole. How the entire appearance is read as a whole may affect the way in which each individual aspect is read.

### **3.4 Strategy for Data Collection**

Guided by the discipline of critical hermeneutics, four mainstream Hollywood films, described in Appendix A, were studied in order to discover the extent to which drag costuming influences an audiences' reading of gender identities. Specific clips and images from the films were presented to a focus group of eight participants and discussed in light of their perception of the 'text'.

#### **3.4.1 Sampling Strategy**

The individuals participating in the focus group were chosen purposively through maximum variation sampling. Maximum variation sampling seeks a group of individuals who will offer a broad spectrum of perspectives which relate to the phenomenon under investigation (Given 2008: 298). This may include extreme, typical and any other positions the researcher may discover during recruitment (*ibid*).

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<sup>41</sup> See section 2.16.

Maximum variation sampling does not produce a proportionate sample and therefore the results cannot be easily generalised (Castillo 2009; Dawson 2007: 54; Trochim 2006). Generalisation, however, is not the goal of this investigation but rather the goal is to maximise the opportunity to understand the different positions (Bauer and Gaskell 2000: 41) taken by members of a popular film's audience. The decision to create a focus group comprising of a small number of diverse participants allows the possibility of little consensus among participants. Patton (2002: 234-235), however, argues that although some researchers may view a lack of consensus as a weakness it can become a strength. If patterns do emerge from a heterogeneous sample, these patterns will represent "core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon". If common themes cannot be found through the data collected, this will not mean an unsuccessful or un-useful investigation as the goal of the investigation is primarily to develop understanding of perspectives. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2004: 94-95) it is not uncommon for findings in a qualitative study to be so specific to a particular context that they cannot be applied to other contexts.

Sandelowskil (2000: 337-338) suggests that when using a maximum variation sampling technique one must identify diverse characteristics or criteria from which one wishes to construct a sample. These criteria are based both on the researcher's practical knowledge of the topic of investigation as well as the available literature. The basic criteria through which participants were selected are as follows: age; anatomical sex; the participant's self-acknowledged gendered identity; the participant's self-acknowledged sexual identity; the frequency of which the participant watches film; the degree of interest the participants has in popular/mainstream film and television; how many of the four films the participant has watched; and the participant's depth of knowledge in subject areas relevant to the investigation.

Age forms part of the criteria as, according to the statistics from the Motion Picture Association of America (Barnes and Cieply 2011), the target age of the audience for internationally released mainstream films is between twenty and forty years. Therefore, only participants in this age bracket were considered. Anatomical sex, gendered identity and sexual orientation form part of the criteria as the film characters being studied are transgendered and therefore, it is assumed that differing perspectives, understanding, and experiences regarding transgendered individuals will be offered by a group of participants who are heterogeneous in these areas. The frequency with which the participant watches film; the degree of interest in popular/mainstream film; and whether or not they had seen

all or some of the films selected is important in participant selection as the goal of this research project is to discover the perceptions of social actors who would form part of a popular film's audience, particularly a mainstream film featuring transgendered characters.<sup>42</sup> Finally, the participant's depth of knowledge in the relevant subject areas forms part of the criteria as an individual who is well versed in film, fashion theory or gender studies may offer a very different perspective to an individual who is not. According to the film historian, Roger Ebert (2008), when analysing films with small audiences, he invariably found that each audience contained an individual or individuals who were proficient in aspects of the subject matter contained in the film being viewed and thus were able to offer a unique perception compared to the other audience members who were not.

It is assumed that differing cultural and social backgrounds will affect audience perception. Therefore, the participants were asked to provide basic socio-cultural information in order further to assist in selecting a heterogeneous focus group and obtaining a variety of perspectives.

### **3.4.2 Recruitment of Participants**

#### *Facebook.com*

A general message of recruitment (see Appendix B) was posted online on the social network site *Facebook.com*, where potential participants could volunteer to take part in the study.<sup>43</sup> To begin the recruitment of participants for this investigation, my status was updated with the general message of recruitment which appeared in the newsfeed of all my *Facebook.com* 'friends'. These 'friends' were asked to share this status with other 'friends' on *Facebook.com* who could share the status with more 'friends'. This allows a large number of people, both known and unknown, to view the message of recruitment.

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<sup>42</sup> Examples of undesirable answers are: if the respondent stated that he/she rarely watches film; if the respondent stated he/she is not interested in popular film or television and only watches art-house film; and finally it was imperative that the majority of participants had seen at least one of the films selected for the investigation. The decision was taken, however, to include one participant who had not seen any of the films selected for diversity of opinion.

<sup>43</sup> Each *Facebook.com* user registers with the website for a profile. Depending on the settings selected, the various activities that take place on this profile can either be viewed publicly by anyone who searches the profile or can only be seen by people who have been listed by the profile as "friends". One can update one's status with text, image or videos. This status will automatically be featured on the newsfeed of all the "friends" of a profile.

With over nine million users in South Africa alone, *Facebook.com* is the most popular social media site, and third most popular general site overall in South Africa (Meier 2013). *Facebook.com* is a helpful networking tool and thus a helpful tool for research.<sup>44</sup>

In order to ensure that interested individuals were not deterred from participating due to fear of their identities becoming known, the general message of recruitment assured potential participants of anonymity to the public throughout every stage of the investigation.

#### *Surveymonkey.com*

*Surveymonkey.com* is a site that assists in the creation of online questionnaires/surveys, the collection of responses and the analysis of the results. Once a questionnaire is designed, *Surveymonkey.com* creates a unique sharable link that grants direct access to the questionnaire created. The link to the online questionnaire was posted together with the message of recruitment on *Facebook.com*. When a potential participant clicked on the link via *Facebook.com*, he/she was directed to the site, created by *Surveymonkey.com*, which contained a brief letter of information (See Appendix C) regarding the investigation and below this, a questionnaire that could be filled out and submitted online. Once the potential participant clicked the “done” button, the data was immediately captured by *surveymonkey.com*. This data can only be accessed by the account holder who has a unique username and password. The answers contained in the questionnaire were downloaded and printed directly from *surveymonkey.com*, which revealed whether each potential participant fulfilled the necessary criteria discussed in section 3.4.1 and whether or not he/she would make for an interesting addition to the focus group. Furthermore, *surveymonkey.com* provides summaries of the data captured which assisted in determining the extent to which the group selected was homo or heterogeneous. This process can be referred to as intensity sampling where a researcher, through prior information regarding the potential participant, can select the ‘richest’ cases to make up the sample (Cohen and Crabtree 2006). “Qualitative researchers recognize that some informants are ‘richer’ than others and that these people are more likely to provide insight and understanding for the researcher” (Marshall 1996: 523).

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<sup>44</sup> According to *Zephoria.com* (Top 15 Valuable Facebook Statistics 2013) the majority of *Facebook.com* users are between the ages of 25-34 years which fits well within the age bracket outlined in the participant criteria for this investigation. *Zephoria.com* (*ibid*) also states that 53% of Facebook users identify themselves as female and 47% identify themselves as male. This almost equal division among users is helpful in an investigation where diversity in gendered identity and sexual orientation are criteria in participant selection. These statistics were created prior to the addition, in February 2014, of over fifty gender options Facebook.com users are able to choose from.

Once a sufficient number of responses were received in the amount of time allocated, participants of greatest interest were selected. In total twenty responses were received.<sup>45</sup> Although sufficient, relative to the size of focus groups suggested in literature, this number was slightly lower than what was anticipated. It was assessed on which date, of the two offered in the questionnaire, the majority of potential participants were available to participate. It was assumed that not every respondent would accept the official invitation to participate in the investigation and therefore fifteen respondents were sent an official letter (see Appendix D) inviting them to contribute to the investigation. Together with the letter of invitation the respondents were sent a consent form (see Appendix E) created to obtain written permission for participation in the focus group. This consent form was sent at this stage for the respondent's perusal, however, confirmed participants were only asked to sign the form at the focus group meeting.

### **3.4.3 Focus Group Discussion**

A focus group is a tool of research where a group of individuals gather together to discuss a particular issue for a length of time (Dawson 2007: 30-31; Leedy and Ormrod 2004: 146). Different suggestions of the number of participants in a focus group exist in the critical literature. Some suggest a group of ten to twelve participants (Leedy and Ormrod 2004: 146), some state that a group of four to eight is ideal (Kitzinger 1995: 301). Rabiee (2004: 656) similarly suggests between six to ten participants. DePaulo (2000: 5) advocates smaller groups to enable time for each participant to contribute. These suggestions together with the amount of viable responses from potential participants informed how many individuals were asked to participate in the focus group discussion. Rabiee (2004: 656) states that of the participants who do accept an invitation to participate in a focus group, a number of them do not attend. Rabiee (*ibid*) therefore suggests that a researcher over-recruit by ten to fifteen percent. Applying this strategy, eleven participants confirmed, however, this number dropped to eight due to last minute cancellation and/or non-attendance. The final number of participants in attendance was in keeping with both Kitzinger (1995) and DePaulo's (2000) suggestions.

The participants were asked to meet up with me, as the moderator of the group discussion, at a quiet venue, free from distraction (Leedy and Ormrod 2004: 147). Every effort was

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<sup>45</sup> It was evident that a number of the individuals who responded had a professional or educational background in fashion and is likely due to the topic being of greater interest to them. This resulted in a slightly imbalanced ratio of professions in the group of respondents.



made to ensure a comfortable atmosphere (Kitzinger 1995: 301). The participants were offered refreshments and snacks before moving into the boardroom where the discussion was held.

A brief introduction was given to the participants which explained the schedule for the hours to follow. Although a discussion duration of one to two hours has been suggested in literature (Dawson 2007: 81; Leedy and Ormrod 2004: 146; Kitzinger 1995: 301), three hours was allocated due to time needed to screen stills and clips from the chosen films.

The focus group discussion was recorded with audio-visual equipment (Dawson 2007; Leedy and Ormrod 2004; Kitzinger 1995) in order to capture spoken words as well as body language and gesture. Rabiee (2004: 656-657) states that it is important to observe the non-verbal interactions of a focus group as they are indicative of the group dynamic; they assist in tracking the general content of the discussion; and allow each speaker to be identified which aids in a fuller analysis of data.

Both still and moving images from selected films were projected onto a large screen and were clearly visible to each participant. A brief description and the motivation for selection of each clip is provided in Appendix F and the stills are provided in Appendix G. After viewing each clip or still, I opened the discussion. The focus group schedule (see Appendix H) allowed participants to discuss any opinions or perspectives they wished immediately after a clip or still was screened, before any direct questions were asked. This enabled the group to dictate the direction of the discussion and express the perspectives which they deemed most important (Trochim 2006). Neuman (2000: 261) states that this kind of open questioning allows for a wider variety of opinions; detailed answers; the clarification of meaning; and the discovery of unanticipated viewpoints. A disadvantage of this method of questioning however, is that some questions may not be asked and answered.

Rabiee (2004: 656) states that it is the group interaction that may be the most beneficial aspect of a focus group. Participants may feel more comfortable speaking in a group context rather than one on one with the researcher (Reed and Payton 1997: 766). Moreover, as opposed to a one-on-one interview, participants interacting in a group are more likely to use their own vocabulary; generate their own questions; and focus on what they deem to be priorities (Kitzinger 1995: 299). This interaction also helps to reduce researcher bias as the participants ask questions of each other and largely control the direction of the discussion (Dawson 2007: 31). Differences or similarities between the

participants' perspectives are revealed through the group discussion, during data collection rather than only afterwards when the data is analysed. The researcher thus has the opportunity to explore these differences and similarities in situ (Kitzinger 1995: 301).

Although focus groups can be a very useful tool of data collection, there are also possible disadvantages to group interaction. Although some participants may feel more comfortable sharing their opinions in a group context rather than one-on-one, other participants may feel more intimidated by the group dynamic (Dawson 2007: 30). Furthermore, some participants may dominate the discussion (Reed and Payton 1997: 796). At the beginning of the discussion the participants were informed that all perspectives were valid and opportunities were created for each participant to express their opinion on certain subjects. This was done in the hope that relatively equal participation could take place. However, due to the strategy of heterogeneity sampling, the group was made up of some confident participants and some shyer participants and thus complete equality of the sharing of opinions could not be expected.

Another disadvantage of group dynamics is that the presence of multiple participants in a room can compromise confidentiality (Kitzinger 1995: 300). Although this risk cannot be fully avoided, the participants were not introduced to each other by name. As participants arrived at the venue they were greeted and issued a number tag. In order to safeguard their identities the participants were asked to refer to each other by their number. It was a concern that the participants might find being referred to as numbers off putting, however, the light-hearted humorous manner in which it was done proved successful. Finally, the presence of multiple participants in one interview may result in the opinions of an individual being contaminated by others' opinions (Dawson 2007: 30) or that an individual is afraid to express his/her perspective as it may offend another members of the group (Kitzinger 1995: 300). Any inconsistencies or changes in opinions were tracked during the analysis of data and the participants were given the opportunity to write down any opinions they did not wish to share with the group.

### **3.5 Ethical Concerns**

The first ethical concern was that the participants were fully informed before committing to take part in the study (Trochim 2006). Dawson (2007: 154) states that participants must be given the necessary information regarding the researcher and research project. This includes: who the researcher is; on the authority of which organisation the research project

is being conducted; basic information regarding the subject and purpose of the research project; and details about what will happen with the results. Participants must also be well informed with regard to their possible role in the research project (Trochim 2006). This includes: the procedures and activities the participants will be involved in; the possible risks, if any, of participation; and the agreement of confidentiality or anonymity. The information above was clearly stated in the letter of invitation (see Appendix D) given to each participant and was verbally reiterated prior to the commencement of the focus group discussion.

It was not possible to grant the participants' complete anonymity as it was necessary to obtain their name and email addresses in order to contact them. However, participants were granted anonymity with each other and the public by each being assigned a numerical pseudonym (Leedy and Ormrod 2004: 144) that was used at every stage of the research project, including the dissertation. Participants were granted full confidentiality in that any information given throughout the study has been used in a way which makes it impossible for them to be identified (Flick 2006: 49).

There were no known physical risks in participating in this investigation; however, there were possible minor psychological risks. When discussing personal subjects such as sexual and gendered identity in a focus group context, there is a possibility that participants may take offense to the opinions shared by the group. Although this cannot be completely avoided, the participants were warned regarding this possibility before the discussion began and encouraged to view all contributions as subjective opinion. As the facilitator, I was willing to intervene in any line of discussion that might become aggressive and unhelpful. However no such situation occurred and no claim of psychological harm during the discussion has been submitted by any participant.

Once participants were fully informed about their role, and the role of the researcher, it was important to obtain their written consent (Flick 2006: 49). Each participant must offer his/her participation voluntarily and must be informed that he/she reserves the right to withdraw from the investigation at any stage. This was explained to the participants in the consent form (see Appendix E), discussed in section 3.4.2.

Finally, an ethical concern following the collection of data is the honest presentation of findings. The steps taken to ensure honest and credible findings are discussed below.

### 3.6 Reliability and Validity

The reliability and validity of an investigation is not only based on consistency but also on the potential of replication (Neuman 2000: 170). It has been argued, however, that the concepts of reliability and validity are more relevant to an investigation rooted in a positivist perspective and quantitative strategy rather than one based on interpretivist theory and carried out qualitatively (Trochim 2006). In this investigation, where the perceptions of social members with various lifeworlds are being studied, it is impossible to achieve the consistency and repeatability which the concepts of reliability and validity require. Qualitative researchers Guba and Lincoln (1985 cited in Leedy and Ormrod 2004) have thus created alternate standards against which an investigation can be measured. The alternative criteria proposed by Guba and Lincoln (*ibid*) replace the notion of reliability with dependability and supplant validity with credibility and transferability.

Traditionally an investigation is considered reliable if it can be replicated and achieve the same results (Neuman 2000: 170). Due to the emphasis on unique human experience in qualitative research, variability is expected (Krefting 1991: 216) and thus the concept of reliability cannot often be applied. Dependability, however, requires what Krefting (*ibid*) terms “trackable variability.” The researcher must account for the changing contexts throughout the research process and what affect, if any, they may have on the findings (Trochim 2006). Guba and Lincoln (1985; cited in Leedy and Ormrod 2004) use the term “auditable” when describing how a researcher must clearly describe the context in which the research is carried out so that the decision trail can be clearly followed (Krefting 1991: 221). In this and the data analysis chapter to follow, adequate description has been provided in order to ensure that the findings offered in the concluding chapter can be easily tracked.

Leedy and Ormrod (2004: 97) suggest that the validity of an investigation can be assessed by asking two questions: Are the conclusions drawn truly warranted by the data collected? And can these conclusions be used beyond this specific situation? The concept of credibility addresses the first question. There are many strategies a researcher may use in order to ensure that the conclusions he/she has drawn from the data collected are credible. This research project makes use of “theory triangulation” (Hales 2010: 16) which can be applied to increase the credibility of qualitative research. The emergent themes obtained from the analysis of the data collected in this investigation were triangulated with existing theories found in literature reviewed in the second chapter of this dissertation. There are no known literary sources which discuss an audience’s perspective of gendered

identity through drag costume in mainstream film specifically, however, literature regarding one or more aspects of the research topic were consulted and compared to the findings from this investigation. As Hales (2010: 16) states when discussing theory triangulation: “The different theories or hypotheses do not have to be similar or compatible; in fact, the more divergent they are, the more likely they are to identify different issues and/or concerns.” Due to the interdisciplinary nature of this investigation, a range of theoretical perspectives have been discussed in the review of literature. The data acquired from the focus group discussion and pre-selection questionnaire were compared to these conceptual and theoretical literary frameworks in order to discover any possible similarities or differences.

The concept of transferability addresses the second question: Can these conclusions be used beyond this specific situation? Both Trochim (2006) and Krefting (1991) claim that transferability is primarily the responsibility of the person who wishes to apply the findings of an investigation to another context or setting rather than the original researcher. The original researcher, however, is responsible for describing his/her research using sufficiently “thick” description (Leedy and Ormrod 2004: 100) as to allow others fully to understand the research context and be able to draw comparisons.

### **3.7 Delimitations**

This investigation discusses, to varying extents, many academic subject areas such as: fashion theory; gender studies; sociology; and film theory; however the focus is primarily on the socio-cultural ramifications of dress/costume in keeping with the qualification for which this dissertation is being submitted. Particular attention is therefore placed on theories of fashion as communication of identity; the adorned body; and film costume. Although films were studied in the data collection stage of this investigation the participants were focused on assessing the costume contained therein. Other aspects of film such as characterisation, narrative and casting were considered only as they pertained to or shed light on the way in which the costumes were perceived. Moreover, although discussed as a foundational theory of this dissertation, the ability of dress/costume to communicate *various aspects* of one's identity and circumstance is not discussed in detail but rather the investigation is primarily concerned with the way in which dress/costume may communicate gendered identity specifically.

Gendered identity rather than sexual identity is the primary concern of this investigation and thus sexual identity is not explored extensively. However due to the partial overlapping and interrelation of the two (Sexual Identity and Gender Identity Glossary 2005), sexual identity is discussed where relevant.

The films assessed in this dissertation can be described as mainstream or popular films. Art-house films were not considered. While transgendered characters have been more frequently featured in art-house film rather than mainstream film, it is the contrast of a non-normative identity presented for mainstream consumption which is of interest in this investigation. Furthermore, due to their accessibility; popularity and longevity in the film industry (Gomery 1998: 245; Kellner 1998: 361), only Hollywood films were considered.

The decision was also taken to delimit which transgender identity represented through film, and more specifically film costume, would be emphasised in this investigation. Drag queen characters explicitly are the focus of discussion with regard to costuming and the representation of gender. Various gendered identities are, however, discussed in this dissertation in order to provide context for, and the delineation of, what is understood as the defining characteristics of drag queen identities. The four films selected for focus group discussion and analysis therefore needed to fulfil the criteria of being well received by the public, made by, or in collaboration with, a prominent Hollywood film studio and feature one or more drag queen protagonists.<sup>46</sup>

Due to the necessity for the participants to physically participate in the investigation in the form of a focus group discussion, only respondents who live in Cape Town, South Africa could be selected. The location of the focus group was stated at the initial recruitment stage of the investigation and thus only Cape Town residents responded. It was not considered necessary to create a sample of various geographical locations due to the ubiquity of the topic at hand – Hollywood film (Gomery 1998: 253). Moreover, neither the time nor financial resources were available to warrant travel.

Unlike the delimitations stated above, which are determined by the researcher at the outset of an investigation, limitations are not defined by the researcher but are often encountered throughout the research process (Simon 2011: 286).

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<sup>46</sup>While immensely popular, Hollywood films such as *Tootsie* (Pollack 1982) and *Mrs Doubtfire* (Columbus 1993) feature protagonists who cross-dress and are not recognised as drag queens. These films are thus briefly discussed but were not selected.

### **3.8 Limitations**

Many limitations became apparent during the recruitment and selection of participants. This was due to individuals' unwillingness to freely give of their time in answering questionnaires and participating in a lengthy focus group. As mentioned previously, a larger number of respondents were expected than what was received.

A few days prior to the focus group meeting, two participants withdrew their participation which disrupted the heterogeneity of the group. Although there was not enough time to replace these participants with similar cases, the focus group remained sufficiently heterogeneous. It is out of the researchers control to ensure that all participants honour their commitment when participation is voluntary.

Time and financial resources were also limitations to this research. If sufficient time and funds were available, the decision would have been taken to conduct multiple focus groups where clips from only one or two films would be screened for each focus group.<sup>47</sup> This would allow the participants to spend more time on each topic and would resolve the issue of unanswered questions as a result of time constraints. Given the difficulty to assemble unpaid participants for only one focus group, there was little probability of obtaining enough voluntary responses to conduct multiple focus groups.

### **3.9 Methods for Data Analysis**

The data analysed in this investigation consisted of approximately fifty six pages of transcribed focus group discussion; non-verbal communication and interaction evident in the video recording of the discussion; and the pre-discussion questionnaires completed by the focus group participants. This data was analysed through the methodological discipline of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), an offshoot of Discourse Analysis (DA). In addition to this, relevant practical methods of analysis suggested in literature, commonly employed to analyse qualitative data in general, and used for the analysis of focus group data specifically, were also applied.

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<sup>47</sup>In the initial planning stages of the investigation, only two films were selected for focus group discussion due to possible time constraints. However, each of the four films chosen offered unique aspects of the drag act, allowing for greater variety in discussion topics. It was found after conducting the focus group that perhaps the original delimitation of two films might have been a better option for a three hour discussion as it was difficult to cover all discussion topics stimulated by the four films. Alternatively, only one clip could have been screened from each of the four films. Although the clips screened were an accumulative duration of only fifteen minutes, a smaller range of clips may have been a better choice due to the limited time available.

According to Jorgenson and Phillips (2002: 4), DA is not simply a method for data analysis but rather a theoretical and methodological whole where theory and method are intertwined. A researcher cannot apply methods of DA without accepting its philosophical premise. Methodology and method are distinct concepts wherein methodology refers to one's basic ontological and epistemological assumptions whereas method refers to the practical techniques used in research (Fierke 2004: 36).

Methodologically, DA recognises that social structures and meanings are not natural but socially constructed (Crawford 2004: 22) and explores how the ideas and beliefs evident in the social world came to be constructed and how they are maintained (Hardy, Harley and Phillips 2004: 19). Many of the relevant subjects of academic discourse discussed in this investigation reflect this philosophical position. Gender construction theory considers gender as a social construct rather than a natural given and clearly delineates biological sex from gender. The conceptual framework of fashion as communication of identity, and gendered identity, as well as the concept of the adorned body theorise fashion and dress through a semiotic understanding of the meanings social actors associate with images and thus cannot be understood as objective or natural but rather subjective and often arbitrary constructions. Despite the interpretivist framework through which these literary subjects are discussed and understood, this investigation recognises the critical position that there are hegemonic socio-cultural structures that influence society's beliefs regarding both gender and dress and the interaction between the two. CDA specifically explores the constructions of social knowledge, attitudes, ideology and structural relationships with regard to "dominance, discrimination, power and control" (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000: 448). Transgendered individuals challenge the dominant mainstream understanding that biological sex and gender correlate due to their contrast between biological sex and gender, which is often visually displayed through dress. Furthermore, certain transgendered identities, such as drag queens who are traditionally homosexual, also challenge prevalent heteronormative ideals. As a result many transgendered individuals are marginalised and suffer discrimination. Van Dijk (1993: 259), a noted scholar in the field of CDA, states that the core of CDA is:

A detailed description, explanation and critique of the ways dominant discourses (indirectly) influence [] socially shared knowledge, attitudes and ideologies, namely through their role in the manufacture of concrete models. More specifically, we need to know how specific discourse structures determine specific mental processes, or facilitate the formation of specific social representations.



The discipline of CDA will therefore be explored in this investigation in order to attempt to discover the focus group participants' social knowledge, attitudes and ideologies regarding the costumed gendered identity of drag queen protagonists in mainstream film and, as stated by Van Dijk (*ibid*), "how specific discourse structures determine [these] mental processes or facilitate the formation of [these] specific social representations." Furthermore, CDA recognises that discourse both constitutes and is constituted by the social world (Jorgenson and Phillips 2002: 61). Thus discourse is active in shaping and reshaping social institutions but also reflects them and is thus part of a dialectical and reciprocal relationship with the social world (*ibid*). This reciprocity is evident in the exchange between audience and popular film as well as the dynamic interaction between sartorial and corporeal standards and society. While film and fashion may have significant influences on society, both industries react and adapt to the changing desires and interests of their market and are thus engaged in a reciprocal relationship with the social world. Therefore, this reciprocity of influence must be considered in the understanding of the participants' perceptions.

In regard to method, CDA is inherently linguistic in that the analysis is done through a specific focus on the language used in texts (Jorgenson and Phillips 2002; Hardy, Harley and Phillips 2004; Laffey and Weldes 2004). The way in which social actors make sense of individual and collective identities can be discovered through patterns found in their speech patterns (Nikander 2006: 418).

In practice, a discourse researcher looks for pattern and order in how text and talk are organised and for how intersubjective understanding, social life and a variety of institutional practices are accomplished, constructed and reproduced in the process (*ibid*).

Van Dijk (1993: 251) explains that social representations in the minds of social actors can shed light on relations between "discourse and society, and hence discourse and the reproduction of dominance and inequality". In order to achieve an understanding of social representations on micro and macro levels, individual cases need to be examined in consideration of the larger socio-cultural context in which such social actors are situated.

Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000: 448-449), Janks (1997: 329-331), Jorgenson and Phillips (2002: 81 -86) and Mirazee and Hamidi (2012: 187-188) all discuss Fairclough's (1989; 1992; 1995) three dimensional model of conceiving of, and analysing, discourse critically. Figure 1 represents a common illustration of this model.

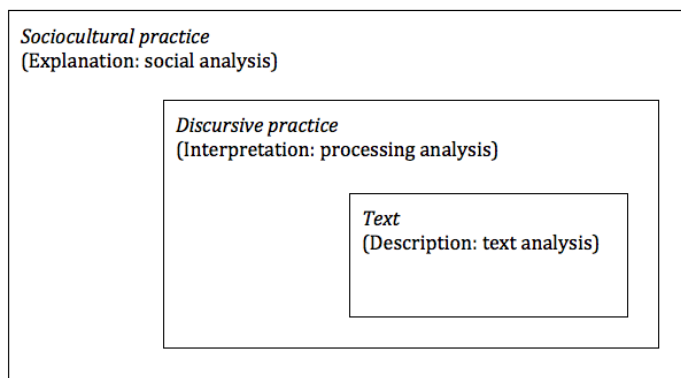


Figure 1: Fairclough's Three Dimensional Model of Discourse Analysis (Baxter 2014)

The model does not represent a chronological process in that each 'dimension' is interdependent and thus a researcher may have to jump from one 'dimension' to another in his/her analysis of a text (Janks 1997: 329-330). The dimension in the centre of the model, as represented by Figure 1, is referred to as "discourse as text" (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000: 448; Jorgenson and Phillips 2002:83). The data are analysed by focusing on the linguistic characteristics of the text. The dimension in the middle of the model is referred to as "discursive practice" (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000: 448; Jorgenson and Phillips 2002: 81). This focuses on the conditions under which the text analysed is produced, consumed and possibly interpreted (Mirazee and Hamidi 2012: 188). As it applies to this investigation both the text hermeneutically studied, the images of drag queen represented by mainstream Hollywood film, and the subsequent text which resulted from the participants' analysis -the data yielded from the discussion and questionnaires were explored. Finally the outer dimension of the model is "social practice" (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000: 449; Jorgenson and Phillips 2002:86). This dimension deals with "the ideological effects and hegemonic processes in which discourse is a feature" (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000: 449) or as Mirazee and Hamidi (2012: 188) describe it: "the ways in which discourses operate in various domains of society." This model emphasises the link between the personal and the social and thus individual actions and discourses. These three dimensions were implemented during the practical steps multiple theorists advise for the analysis of qualitative data generally and focus group data specifically.

The practical steps through which the data was organised and analysed are as follows: The first is the documentation of data (Schutt 2012: 324) in the form needed for analysis. The focus group discussion was recorded visually and the audio transcribed (Stewart 2006: 110) into typed text (Rabiee 2004: 657). The video was observed in order to account for the non-verbal interaction of the participants (Reed and Payton 1997; Rabiee 2004: 657; Stewart 2006: 111) and the typed text was used to analyse the specific language

used. The documentation of data in these forms was suitable for the application of the techniques of CDA (Nikander 2006: 419).

The second step is familiarisation with the data as a whole before it is broken down (Taylor-Powell and Renner 2003: 2; Leedy and Ormrod 2004: 150; Kawulich 2004: 96; Rabiee 2004: 657). In this step the transcripts and questionnaires were read and the video recording watched multiple times in their entirety. An understanding of the context in which specific aspects of the data occurred was therefore achieved. As Schutt (2012: 322) states: "The whole is always understood to be greater than the sum of its parts, and so the social context of events, thoughts and actions becomes essential for interpretation." It was necessary at this stage, among others, to apply the "discursive dimension" postulated by Fairclough (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000: 448; Jorgenson and Phillips 2002: 81).

The third step is the categorisation of the data (Taylor-Powell and Renner 2003: 3; Leedy and Ormrod 2004: 150; Kawulich 2004: 96; Rabiee 2004: 657; Stewart 2006: 116; and Schutt 2012: 324). Data was sorted into themes or concepts which emerged after studying the transcripts, video recordings and questionnaires as a whole (Rabiee 2004: 657 -658). At this stage "the discourse researcher is interested in identifying recurrent patterns in language use" (Nikader 2006: 60). Additionally the data was categorised according to concepts that related back to critical questions of the study as well as the literature review (Taylor-Powell and Renner 2003: 3). Data may be colour coded or categorised with the "cut and paste method" (Stewart 2006: 116) where similar quotes or ideas are cut and pasted together (Rabiee 2004: 658). It is imperative that when re-categorised, the sections of data are not removed from their context (Taylor-Powell and Renner 2003: 8). During this process new categories and themes should continue to emerge (Stewart 2006: 116). I moved on to the next stage of analysis only when I felt that no new concepts could be discovered (Taylor-Powell and Renner 2003: 3). It was during coding and categorisation in this stage of analysis that the "discourse as text" dimension became a focus of analysis.

The fourth step involves the discovery of connections or relationships between the themes that had been categorised. This was necessary in order to determine to what extent each concept may influence another (Leedy and Ormrod 2004: 151; Schutt 2012: 325). Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003: 5) suggest that at this phase of analysis the researcher should decipher what themes or categories seemed most important to the participants themselves. Stewart (2006: 115) states that in the context of a focus group the topics of most interest or importance to the participants are often those which they discussed for the longest amount of time. During this step it is also suggested that a researcher should

search for disconfirming evidence, alternative explanations (Taylor-Powell and Renner 2003: 9; Schutt 2012: 325) and seek individual responses which are inconsistent (Stewart 2006: 116). All dimensions of Fairclough's model were considered at this stage of analysis.

Interpretation and representation of the synthesised data was the fifth and final step of analysis (Taylor-Powell and Renner 2003: 5; Rabiee 2004: 658; Leedy and Ormrod 2004: 151; Schutt 2012: 325). There is no preferred method of representing the findings acquired from a focus group discussion. How the analysis presented is largely dependent on the aims of the research (Stewart 2006: 109). The aim of this research is to provide a greater understanding of the perceptions of a diverse group of participants and thus the analysis is presented in descriptive prose (*ibid*).

### **3.10 Conclusion**

In this chapter the paradigmatic and methodological approach as well as the specific research strategy for data collection and analysis were discussed. The following chapter discusses the results of the analysis of the video and verbatim transcripts obtained from the focus group discussion and provides connections between the participants' perceptions, research aims and literary arguments discoursed in chapter two.

## **4. Data Analysis and Discussion**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter will provide the description and analysis of themes which emerged from the data collected. These themes are discussed below with regard to: participants' perception; relation to literature reviewed; pertinence to the critical questions and the main objectives of the investigation; and where applicable, potential for future research. As stated in the previous chapter, due to the difficulty in applying the concepts of validity and reliability to qualitative study, a qualitative researcher must ensure that the way in which he/she arrives at the findings of an investigation must be "trackable" (Krefting 1991: 216) or "auditable" (Guba and Lincoln 1985 cited in Leedy and Ormrod 2004). This chapter seeks to provide sufficiently "thick description" (Leedy and Ormrod 2004: 100) to allow the conclusions drawn to be trackable and therefore possibly transferable for future research. The themes which emerged from the analysis have been organised into main themes and relative sub themes therein.

### **4.2 Group Interaction Relevant to Analysis of Data**

To ensure auditability of the analysis below, it is helpful to be aware of the following information. Participants 1, 2 and 6 work in various areas of the fashion industry.<sup>48</sup> The remaining five participants, however, have wide-ranging educational and occupational backgrounds.

The group dynamic of the focus group was extremely beneficial to this investigation. The participants played a large role in dictating the direction of the discussion and their enthusiasm towards some topics, and hesitation towards others, was clearly evident. The participants enjoyed deliberating, spoke naturally and often joked with each other allowing free flowing dialogue. Furthermore, the group dynamic encouraged participants to ask questions and clarifications of each other that might not have been asked otherwise.

Disadvantages of the group dynamic were, however also evident. The equal contribution of each participant was not achieved. Participants 2, 5 and 8 participated but did not contribute as much as participants 1, 3, 4, and 6 who participated relatively equally to each other, while participant 7 contributed the most. This did not prove greatly problematic in

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<sup>48</sup> This somewhat unbalanced ratio was a result of cancellation of previously confirmed participants as well as the appeal of the topic under investigation to individuals in the fashion industry.

the analysis of data, however it is noteworthy when assessing the discussion of the analysis. The group interaction and deliberation also resulted in nominal changes of opinion and inconsistencies, noted where relevant, as the discussion progressed. It can be argued however, inconsistent opinions, although challenging to analyse, may be deemed beneficial to an investigation that is concerned with varied perceptions.

## **4.3 Emergent Themes from Focus Group Discussion**

### **4.3.1 Theme 1: Gender Politics**

It was stated frequently in the literature review that the way in which an individual makes a gendered reading will depend on his/her expectations and understanding of gender in the context of both his/her personal beliefs and known societal 'ideals'. Gaining an understanding of how the participants negotiate gender and transgendered identities on these levels was necessary to address all of the critical questions in this investigation. How the participants perceive gendered portrayals through popular film and how this might be applied to their understanding of sartorial gendered expressions in the society in which they live could only be explored once the participants' conception of gender and transgender was first established. The analysis of the data resulted in the emergence of the following five sub themes under the general theme of 'Gender Politics.'

#### **Sub Theme 1a: Difficulty in Defining Gender and Transgendered Identities**

When deliberating explanations of terms like 'gender' and 'transgender' the participants were notably more reserved and hesitant to respond as compared to their contribution to other topics. The marked pauses before each participant spoke, as well as the use of phrases such as: "well I would say"; "that's what I think"; "I would imagine"; and "this might be incorrect", displayed the participants' unfamiliarity and discomfort with defining and describing these terms.

Although able to describe one's sex and sexual orientation, the participants battled to describe gender and distinguish it from anatomical sex. Participant 7, in an attempt to describe gender, verbally equated it with one's biological sex when he said: "...gender and sex, I think it was, but I think it's the same thing..." The participants' association between anatomical sex and gender was again evident when discussing the term 'transgender'. Five (1,2,6,7 and 8) of the eight participants agreed that it was a physical "transitioning from male to female or female to male" (participant 2). These examples

corroborate the literary argument of Lorber (1994: 55); Gagne and Tewksbury (1998: 81); Brown (2001: 37); and Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 10) that the mainstream understands gender as physical, rather than a socio-cultural state with possible physical implications.

The omission of certain terms also indicated the participants' lack of familiarity with gender politics. Although the terms 'transgender' and 'transvestite'<sup>49</sup> were used before the moderator by participants 4 and 6 respectively, terms such as 'drag king', 'transsexual' and 'passing' were not used when appropriate to do so. For example: when discussing participant 1's experience with an individual who had undergone a sex change, the term 'transsexual' was not used by her or any of the other participants; when participant 3 discussed "a woman transforming into a man" using dress, she did not know the term 'drag king', participant 2 was the only one to use the term; and finally the topic of a transgendered individual being 'convincing as a woman' was consistently discussed yet the term 'passing' was never mentioned. This confirms the literary argument that the mainstream is largely uninformed with regard to transgendered identities (Kane 2005: 27).

When discussing the 'correct' representation of a drag queen in film and traditional sartorial behaviour thereof, participant 7 stated that "most people" would not be concerned with whether the representation of a transgendered identity was 'correct' or 'incorrect.' This too reflects the mainstream's lack of concern with the semantics of gender politics. The other participants did not disagree with this point, however they did state that it would confuse viewers' understanding of transgendered identities and would be disrespectful of the filmmakers to not represent an identity correctly.

### **Sub Theme 1b: Gender as a Construct**

Only two participants (4 and 5) expressed an understanding of gender as a construct that could be separated from an individual's biological sexual state. Participant 4 consistently acknowledged his opinion that he found gender "ridiculous" and "so created". Participant 5 offered an explanation of 'transgender' which revealed her ability to separate one's sex from one's gender. The remaining six participants did not seem to have entered the discussion with a clearly defined viewpoint of gender as a construct and as distinct from a

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<sup>49</sup> The term 'transvestite' was used by the participants who did not seem to be aware that it is now considered pejorative in the LGBT community.

biological state. This suggests that the misconception that gender is “bred into our genes” is prevalent in the mainstream (Lorber 1994: 45).

### **Sub Theme 1c: Masculine versus Feminine**

The participants emphasised through words and gestures that society has conditioned individuals to view masculine and feminine as two distinct categories. Words such as “soft”, “emotional”, and “sensuous” were used by the participants to express society’s classification of the feminine, and words such as “power”, “stronger”, “control” and “cold” were used to describe society’s associations with the masculine. These perceptions suggest that associations with women have indeed been constructed as passive in contrast to the active man (Counsell and Wolf 2001: 67). Furthermore, these are words that are not inherently physical but behavioural.

When discussing society’s reaction to an ‘effeminate male’ as opposed to a ‘masculine female’ the participants agreed that the former would be more harshly criticised than the latter, however they wished to clarify that neither were socially preferable. In fact two of the participants (1 and 8) joked about how feminists are negatively viewed as too ‘masculine’. Participant 3 stated that during her childhood and teenage years when she acted like a tomboy “it just wasn’t socially acceptable” and she was often referred to by the derogatory term “dyke”. What can be deduced by these statements is that the participants recognise that it is preferable in mainstream society to enact the gendered behaviour which correlates to one’s biological sex (Gagne and Tewksbury 1998: 81; Brown 2001: 37).

It is interesting that the participants struggled to separate gender and anatomical sex yet were all able to speak with ease regarding behavioural associations with the feminine and masculine. The participants also felt comfortable discussing ‘effeminate men’ and ‘masculine women’ and gave the impression that such phrases were not unfamiliar to them. Such phrases, however, theorise gender and sex as independent (Butler 1999: 10). Despite the implications of these two observations the participants were not able to separate gender and sex when asked. It would appear that outside of the academy in contemporary society, social actors are well versed in the socio-cultural expectations of gendered behaviour yet have not theorised these behaviours as something distinct from nature.



### **Sub Theme 1d: Patriarchy in Contemporary Society**

On multiple occasions five (1, 3, 4, 6 and 7) of the eight participants explained that differences in gender perceptions are perhaps a result of society being “male dominated” for most of “our lives”. This statement was made when explaining: why they felt effeminate men are more harshly criticised than masculine women; why womenswear for men has not been commercially popular yet menswear for women has been a commercial trend for decades; and why men are often associated with practical and functional clothing while women are associated with frivolous elaborate clothing. These statements will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

A few participants (2, 6 and 7) pointed out that the discussed gender associations; traditional gender roles; as well as the degree of male domination in society are less evident today than in the past. However, the ease with which the participants were able to describe and agree on gender associations and roles as well as the numerous instances in which ‘past’ male domination was discussed suggests that although society may have changed in some respects, outdated connotations remain attached to words like “feminine” or “female”. Furthermore, when analysing other sections of the focus group transcripts, where the concept of ‘gender’ was not being specifically deliberated, the participants’ choice of language indicated their own continued adherence to gender constructs.

### **Sub Theme 1e: Marginalisation of Transgendered Identities**

On multiple occasions the participants confirmed the literary suggestion that despite some media popularity, drag queens are largely marginalised identities (Brown 2001: 37; Bakshi 2004: 16). These comments were made with the caveat that such identities have become more accepted today than in the past but not to the extent where they are no longer marginalised.

When discussing the sartorial gendered expressions of the drag protagonists in *Foo* (Kidron 1995) and *Boots* (Jarrold 2006) the participants used phrases such as “too scared...because they didn’t want to be judged”, “Charlie was embarrassed to be seen with Lola in feminine attire” and “they were scared of people’s perceptions of them”. These phrases indicate that it was obvious to the participants that transgendered identities are considered non-normative and that this difference is often criticised. Moreover, it implies that ‘difference’ is based first on a visual assessment as all of the examples stated were

in reference to transgendered characters being *viewed* by others, not interacting with others. Dress thus plays a large role in the judgement of transgendered identities as it is one of the initial indicators of a non-normative gendered expression.

Whether the judgement is negative or not, sartorial expression which is incongruent with anatomical sex will, according to the participants, be quickly noticed. Participant 4 stated that even in the case of non-overt expressions of cross-dressing, the act of cross-dressing is in itself overt. “You can’t really be that subtle if you are cross-dressing.”

The comments referred to above suggest that the acceptance of transgendered identities over the past few decades may have increased slightly but certainly not significantly. In fact Participant 4 referred to a recent example from his own life where he dressed in drag at a festival and as a result was threatened with violence by a stranger in a restroom.

### **Summation of Theme 1**

Although the discussion under theme 1 can be applied to all the critical questions in this investigation, as the understanding of gender and transgender will undoubtedly affect a gendered reading, theme 1 particularly addresses critical question one. In order to discover how gender would be constructed for and perceived by a mainstream audience, it is important to understand how the mainstream understands gender and transgender conceptually. The assumed correlation between anatomical sex and gender; the unfamiliarity with gender and transgender politics; the prevalence of well-defined gender roles; expected sartorial gendered behaviour; and the continued marginalisation and discrimination of transgendered identities; will significantly affect the representation and gendered reading of a transgendered character in popular film.

### **4.3.2 Theme 2: Media**

There is an academic acknowledgement of the significant influence of film on contemporary society (Turner 1990; Gripsrud 1998; Wezel 2010; Albers and Gallage 2011). It has been argued that in dominant culture film has had an effect on the formulation of identities and ideals generally (Carrol 1996; Ismail 2005) and on the understanding of gender roles specifically (Oliver, Sargent and Weaver 1998; McWilliam 2006). The data collection stage of this investigation was concerned with the participants’ personal perceptions of the influence of film. In order to address critical question one it was

important for the participants to discuss their personal viewpoints on the potential influence of film and its effect on social understanding and identity construction with specific reference to gender. These perceptions can be applied to the influence of film costume on the sartorial expression of gender and transgender and thus addresses critical question four. The analysis of data resulted in the emergence of the following five sub themes under the general theme of 'Media.'

### **Sub Theme 2a: The Relationship between Media and Culture and the Influence on Individual and Social Perception**

When discussing the effect of culture and media on the way in which individuals make sense of the social world (Chaudhary 2008: 11), most participants established that in contemporary culture one's ideas are influenced by: family life, which may include specific cultural and religious traditions; social interaction; and media.

Although the participants' perceptions and opinions regarding the extent of media effect on society were somewhat varied, all participants agreed that one's identity is shaped by the culture in which one lives. All except participant 1 felt media plays a significant role in establishing the prevalent beliefs and ideals of contemporary culture as argued by Gripsrud (1998: 202). Furthermore, the participants agreed that the relationship between media and culture is reciprocal. Participant 6 in particular stated that film is created to be relevant to "the masses", the masses will be influenced by film and thus that influence will have to be referenced in future films in order to remain relevant - "so it probably just keeps going round in circles."

### **Sub Theme 2b: The Influence of Film and Media on the Understanding of Gender and Transgender**

Participants strongly agreed that film does play a role in teaching members of society what it means to be a man or a woman (Richard Dyer interviewed in Epstein and Friedman 1995). Participants 3, 4 and 6 specifically mentioned how superhero and Disney princess characters have probably had a significant effect on boys and girls respectively in their formative years. Such characters have perpetuated the separation of 'man' and 'woman' and have contributed to the stereotypes of the men being heroes and women being princesses. These comments reflect the arguments of Oliver, Sargent and Weaver (1998: 46) that "differential viewing of media entertainment may serve to exacerbate sex role stereotyping and behaviour differences."

Furthermore, participants 3 and 4 deliberated and established the significant role of media in the perpetuation of heteronormativity. Many of the theorists' works discussed in section 2.17 state that in past films particularly, heteronormativity has been more visible, romanticised and elevated above alternative sexual orientations.

In section 2.18 it is argued that despite the many literary criticisms of mainstream film's perpetuation of heteronormativity and the 'negative' representation of transgendered identities, there are possible 'positive' outcomes to the representations of transgendered characters. These arguments were validated through comments made by participant 2. When describing his past exposure to drag queens, he stated that he had felt comfortable with transgendered identities from a young age due to him growing up watching films like *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Sharman 1975). Furthermore when discussing drag as an art form, participant 2 consistently used examples of what he had learned from watching *Ru Paul's Drag Race* (Murray and Stevenson 2009). This suggests that mainstream film and television may indeed be a resource through which individuals learn about various non-normative and marginalised gendered identities (Balzer 2005: 128). This possible aspect of positive re-education of the mainstream must however be weighed against the potential for films to feature representations which further conflate the mainstream understanding of transgender.

After viewing two clips from *Foo* (Kidron 1995), participants 3 and 6 discussed their confusion regarding the sartorial preferences of drag queen and cross-dressing identities. This discussion was prompted by the desire of the drag queen characters in *Foo* (Kidron 1995) to pass as women - a desire more commonly associated with cross-dressing and transsexual identities rather than drag queen identities. The discussion between participants 3 and 6 not only indicated that neither of them were confident in their understanding of the subtleties between the sartorial behaviour of drag queen and cross-dressing identities but also confirmed the literary arguments made by Willis (1997: 302), Kirk (2004: 17) and Kane (2005: 27) that *Foo* (Kidron 1995) fails to accurately reflect the borders of the characters' sexual and gendered identity which causes such films to pander to social ignorance and promote conflation.

What is perhaps most interesting about the discussion above, inspired by *Foo* (Kidron 1995), is that viewing a film featuring transgendered characters did inspire the participants to question the sartorial expression of gendered identity. This observation directly addresses the fourth critical question. Therefore, the visibility of transgendered characters in popular film may encourage the deliberation of gendered expression as transgendered

characters often exhibit gendered behaviour that is alternative to ubiquitous mainstream associations between gender and dress. What is perceived by such visibility, however, may be inaccurate or unclear and thus fails to facilitate a greater understanding of transgendered sartorial expression.

### **Sub Theme 2c: Star Persona**

In the literature review, it is argued that casting masculine actors with a persona of staunch heterosexuality in transgender roles is a “straightening device” (Keegan 2013:1) used to make the inclusion of such characters more “palatable” to a mainstream audience. Moreover, this device serves to “preserve a distance” (Evans 1998: 209) between the actor and the transgender character he is playing.

The first screened scene from *Foo* (Kidron 1995) elicited immediate comments from participants 1 and 6 on the casting choice of Patrick Swayze and Wesley Snipes for the film. Participant 6 stated that he found it “a refreshing way of looking at drag queens” due to the roles being played by “two masculine actors”. Participant 1, however felt that their well-known masculine personas made it difficult for her to find them believable as transgendered characters. She explained that not knowing who the actor is when watching a portrayal of a non-normative gendered identity is “much more easily acceptable”.

Despite the differences in perceptions of participants 1 and 6, both participants quickly noted and commented on the irrefutable association between Swayze and Snipes and their pre-existing masculine personas. Although they had different interpretations, the persona of the actors clearly effected the way in which they read the characters.

### **Sub Theme 2d: The Role of Film Costume in Reading Character Identity**

It was an assumption at the outset of this investigation that film costume would be read by film audiences similarly to the way in which individuals read the dress of social members in reality. It became evident through the analysis of the focus group discussion that the participants were not only able to equate film costume with dress in reality but did so with ease. When speaking about a character from *Cage* (Nichols 1996), participant 7 stated: “I’m sure he realises that by dressing that way...he would be seen differently.” Participant 7 was discussing the character as if he was a real person who had dressed himself.

The ability for dress to communicate identity is a highly theorised academic subject (Konig 1973; Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992; Arvanitidou and Gasouka 2013). Film costume, however, remains insufficiently theorised (Gaines 1990; Church Gibson 1998; Street 2001). Due to the participants' ability to equate dress and identity in society with film costume and character identity, posited literary concepts regarding dress and identity can be applied to the way in which the participants perceived the film costume in the selected films.

Of particular significance is the communication of gendered identity through film costume. Participant 7 emphasised the importance of the costume in the visual delineation the protagonists as drag queens. Without the costume "they wouldn't be in drag and the whole scene wouldn't work". The specific role the costumes play in the delineation of a drag queen identity directly addresses critical question two and will be discussed later in this chapter.

## **Summation of Theme 2**

The participants demonstrated that film costume plays a significant role in the communication of character and particularly a character's gendered identity. It was also evident that the visibility of transgender in popular film and television can impact on the understanding of gender politics in the mainstream both generally and sartorially. However, due to inauthentic representations or heteronormative casting choices, mainstream film may further conflate such understanding.

### **4.3.3 Theme 3: Dress and Identity**

Applicability of concepts of daily dress and the communication of identity to that of film costume and character identity is proposed by Street (2001) and was observed through the focus group discussion and analysis. Thus in theme 3 and the sub themes therein the literary concepts of dress as communication of identity have been applied to film costume. The analysis of data regarding dress, costume and identity resulted in the emergence of the following three sub themes under the general theme of 'Dress and Identity.'

### **Sub Theme 3a: Dress as a Tool of Communication or Miscommunication**

The participants confirmed that they “frequently” utilise dress as a tool to assess individual’s identities and personalities, particularly in the case of “first impressions”. The ability for social actors to attach meaning and associations to aspects of dress is the central concept posited by fashion theorists (Laver 1968; Lurie 1981; Davis 1992; Barnard 2002). Not only did participants acknowledge this central concept but additionally brought up, without the moderator’s prompting, many of the supporting arguments discoursed in section 2.10.

The first literary argument identified by the participants is that the wearer consciously and intentionally constructs an ensemble that he/she feels projects the identity he/she wishes others to read (Moletsane, Mitchell and Pithouse 2012; Arvanitidou and Gasouka 2013). As stated by participant 4, when getting dressed “you are asking people to read something about yourself...that reading isn’t from nowhere, it’s coming from a point”. When asked, the participants enthusiastically agreed that they consciously consider what impression they may be creating through what they choose to wear. The second is that whether or not intended by the wearer, dress may communicate misinformation (Lurie 1981; Feinberg, Mataro and Burroughs 1992; Davis 1992; Kaiser 2012). All participants agreed that on occasion their first impression of an individual’s identity, based solely on dress, had been incorrect.

### **Sub Theme 3b: External Perceptions and Social Validation**

The participants expressed that concern over their appearance is in large part due to how other individuals may perceive them. The impact of others’ perceptions in the dress choices individuals make is pertinent to an investigation that is concerned with past, present and future sartorial gendered expressions. The need for social validation may limit individuals’ expression of identity through dress in that if the expression chosen is non-normative, it may be criticised (Konig 1973: 113; Baudrillard 1981: 51 cited in Negrin 1999: 114). If sartorial expression is criticised it may result in unsatisfactory social interaction, lack of social validation and thus a probable termination of future such expressions (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992: 5). Participants 2 and 7 illustrated this point when discussing the rarity of men wearing skirts. Due to the fact that skirts are not a popular dress item for men and are strongly associated with feminine dress, participant 2 stated that although he has a desire to wear skirts, he feels he does not have the confidence it would

require to deal with the negative attention wearing a skirt would attract. Although he did not express a desire to wear skirts, participant 7 similarly stated that he would only consider wearing a skirt if it became socially acceptable for men to do so. This line of discussion inspired participant 7 to ask the rhetorical question: “But what would people wear if nobody would judge everyone else, like what would you wear?” This question reiterates the constraint of social opinion on how individuals choose visually to present themselves.

### **Sub Theme 3c: Sartorial Readings are Context Dependent**

At various stages of the discussion, many of the participants (1, 2, 4 and 7) qualified their sartorial readings of the film characters with the disclaimer of context dependence. The participants stated that, specifically when assessing gendered expressions, readings would depend on geographical location, occasion and the way in which other individuals in the vicinity are dressed. Participants 1 and 4 agreed that a transgendered expression might be considered less “unusual” in a city as opposed to a suburb. This comment was likely based on the assumption that individuals who live in cities are more open minded than those who live in suburbs.

Participants 1 and 7 also stated that the reading of a transgendered individuals dress would depend on how other individuals in the vicinity are dressed. The example given by the participants, as inspired by a clip from *Cage* (Nichols 1996), was that if a man is dressed somewhat ‘effeminately’ and is surrounded by overtly femininely dressed men, he may be read as more masculine in comparison. If the same man is surrounded by ‘masculinely’ attired men, his dress style might be read as overtly feminine.

Finally participants 1 and 2 stated that sartorial readings are dependent on occasion. Participant 2 explained that at events where individuals are expected to don fanciful dress, ‘transgendered’ or non-normatively gendered dress would be considered more “fitting” than if the same attire was worn on an average day.

### **Summation of Theme 3:**

The participants found the subjects under this theme relatable. They were eager to contribute to this topic and shared very similar viewpoints. The discussion under theme 3 provides corroboration with the academic arguments that dress plays a large role in



expressing and reading identity in contemporary society and further suggests that the way in which individuals assess dress in daily life can be applied to their readings of film costume. The fact that the focus group discussion presented under this sub theme stemmed from viewing film clips demonstrates an audience's ability to relate film costume to their real-life experiences of dress. This observation directly addresses critical question four of this investigation which seeks to discover how audience members might apply what they read from film costume to how they view dress in society.

The possibility of miscommunication, ambiguity or unintelligibility of gendered identity through sartorial expression is paramount in the subversive potential of the drag act. The significance of social validation in dress choices plays a large role in the limitation or discrimination of non-normative gendered expressions in society. Finally, despite the participants' ability to relate what was viewed on screen to their own personal experiences, it is likely that viewers' response to character's exhibiting transgendered expressions would differ when taken out of the context of a film or a staged drag performance. Although the actual reading of perceived gendered identity might remain similar, normative expectations of gendered expressions may be less challenged or threatened in the context of viewing a film or drag show as compared to a real life encounter due to the expression being staged and thus possibly considered less 'real'.

#### **4.3.4 Theme 4: Gendered Associations with Dress**

The visual nature of dress together with the ardent associations made between aspects of dress and gender (Garber 1992; Entwistle 2000; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003) result in dress playing a significant role in the initial delineation and assumption of gendered identity. Despite the arbitrary nature of the construction of which design features, colours, silhouettes *et cetera* signify either 'masculine' or 'feminine', the normative expectation is that dress is not only indicative of gender but also indicative of sex (Entwistle 2000: 144). Like theme 3, theme 4 addresses critical questions two, three and four. The analysis of data resulted in the emergence of the following five sub themes under the general theme of 'Gendered Associations with Dress.'

##### **Sub Theme 4a: Fashion and the Feminine**

The participants, particularly participant 7, reaffirmed the literary suggestion that there exists a greater association between fashion and femininity than masculinity (Flugel 1979;

Craik 1994; Davis 1992). On three separate occasions the following opinions were offered: it is now becoming more acceptable for men to study fashion while in the past this was not the case; women are more likely to take risks with what they wear whereas men will only wear adventurous styles if it is popular to do so; women use dress as a way to attract male attention; and women take hours to get ready whereas men take minimal time. Vanity or greater attention on appearance being associated with the female gender rather than the male gender was an opinion that was also expressed by participant 5. The previous statements may be considered outdated constructs regarding gender and dress due to the progression of men's interests in fashions since the 1980's (Craik 1994: 178), however their articulation in the focus group discussion suggests that they are associations which remain today. Although such associations do not necessarily reflect the participants' personal beliefs, the participants were familiar with them. Furthermore, as stated above, the majority of the links between fashion and the feminine were raised by participant 7 who does not have an educational or professional background in fashion. This as well as the other participants acknowledgement of such constructs, illuminates the prevalence of these associations in the mainstream. The fact that the correlation between femininity and decoration was a construct that did not exist before the nineteenth century (Craik 1994: 181), exposes the potential for such associations to change.

#### **Sub Theme 4b: Menswear for Women versus Womenswear for Men**

The participants established that men's dress on women "seems more right" (Participant 7) than women's dress on men. Two of the participants (4 and 6) qualified that this is likely due to the fact that various aspects of menswear have been commercial fashion trends for women and thus contemporary society is accustomed to seeing menswear such as trousers, suits, waistcoats and fedoras on women. However, "it's sort of a one way traffic" (participant 4) in that fashions which are closely associated with women, such as dresses, skirts and blouses, have never been commercially popular for men. Although participants 3 and 7 argued that fashionable 'menswear looks' for women retain many feminine signifiers such as the fit of the garments; the choice of hairstyle; and the inclusion of make-up (See Figure 2 in Appendix G); and despite participant 7's statement that men have, in recent years, adopted some 'feminine' fashion items such as skinny jeans and jewellery; the significance of the incongruence of a man in a dress or a skirt as compared to the familiarity of a woman in a suit, trousers, braces or a blazer is not diminished. All participants conceded that in contemporary society, far harsher judgements about identity

would be made about a man in a dress compared to a woman in a suit, even a loose fitting suit.

The participants' perceptions of this topic support the literary argument that in recent years men are more concerned with their appearance than in the past and have adopted some fashions that would have been previously considered too feminine (Davies 2008: 9). However, as conceded by the participants there remain many silhouettes, fabrics and accessories that would be deemed too feminine for a mainstream male body to wear (Wilson 1985: 165). With regard to the restrictions of sartorial gendered expression of the past, men's fashion has thus only experienced "partial emancipation" (*ibid*). Feminine fashion items such as skirts; dresses and high heels worn by a contemporary male body, may designate him as 'too effeminate', a cross-dresser or drag queen.

#### **Sub Theme 4c: Men and Skirts**

The topic above motivated the participants to debate the absence of men in skirts in contemporary society. Regarding this topic all participants approved the following: despite a consistent showing of skirts for men on high fashion runways (participant 6), skirts for men have not yet become even marginally commercially popular; for a man to wear a skirt outside of a fancy dress setting where it *may* be more "fitting" (participant 2) would require a lot of confidence and would undoubtedly draw attention; and thus for the average man in contemporary society to feel comfortable in a skirt it would have to be a widely accepted commercial fashion trend (participant 7). Participant 2 offered two examples of unwanted attention as a result of men wearing skirts. One example was in reference to a friend who is consistently confronted, if not harassed, by strangers when donning a skirt and heels in public. The other was the widely reported entertainment news regarding Kanye West and a Givenchy kilt he had worn on stage in 2012. The entertainment news regarding Kanye West wearing a 'skirt' and the negative reaction it gained in social media was not discussed in the literature review of this dissertation and I was not aware of the event until participant 2 raised it as a point in the discussion.

Kanye West, a prolific rap artist, wore a Givenchy black leather *kilt* over trousers as part of a stage outfit at a benefit concert in 2012 (Sowray 2014). West was ridiculed in social media by fellow artists and their followers for his choice to wear a 'skirt' (Anisiobi 2013). This initiated much online debate and resulted in West "being the butt of several jokes" (*ibid*). West's decision to wear a 'skirt', although it had been labelled by Givenchy as a kilt

and is prominently featured in the 2012 Fall/Winter menswear collection where half of the looks were styled with kilts worn over trousers (Blanks 2012), was said to be “deplorable” (Sowray 2014). The opposing side of the online debate however, encouraged the fashion choice (*ibid*).

The public’s reaction to West wearing a fashion item that is ubiquitously associated with women, indicates that it has not yet been accepted by the mainstream as was confirmed by the participants when the topic was deliberated. Despite the ‘skirt’ being designed as a masculine kilt, being styled with other masculine signifiers, and worn by someone who is an established heteronormative and masculine celebrity, the public took issue with the fashion choice.

Perhaps over time commercial menswear will incorporate dress items with more obvious connections to femininity. It is however evident that the rate of change in this area is slow. Currently slimmer silhouettes, wider necklines, the inclusion of accessories, and the greater use of colour and pattern are what mark the progress of menswear toward the reflection of pre-existing womenswear trends.

#### **Sub Theme 4d: Men and Dresses**

Not once during the lengthy discussion between the participants regarding the adoption of skirts into contemporary men’s fashion did they mention the possibility of men wearing dresses. However, whenever the participants were discussing drag or men cross-dressing they did not use the example of skirts but rather the example of dresses. The analysis of the language and phrasing used when discussing these two topics indicated that there exists an even greater connection between the feminine and dresses than the feminine and skirts. For this reason it is apparent that skirts would more likely be adopted into commercial men’s fashions than dresses. Gendered associations with skirts as opposed to dresses may be an area of future research, particularly in the context of future fashion looks for menswear. In 1981 Lurie (1981: 6) stated that “most men, however cold or wet they might be would not put on a women’s dress”. Given the lack of dresses for men both on the runway and in commercial fashion and the participants’ perceptions in this investigation, Lurie’s statement, for the time being, remains true.

#### **Sub Theme 4e: Men Dressed as Women in Film versus Women Dressed as Men in Film**

The participants could not be shown images of drag kings in film for comparison to the drag queens in the four films selected as there are no popular films, or any films for that matter, which feature drag king characters. Only documentaries featuring actual drag kings exist. Stills of female characters who disguise themselves as men in the popular films *Sylvia Scarlett* (Cukor 1935); *Victor Victoria* (Edwards 1982); and *She's the Man* (Fickman 2006) (see Figures 3, 4 and 5 in Appendix G) were therefore screened for the participants who were asked to compare these costumed representations of men on female actresses to the costumed representations of women on male actors in the film clips already screened. It is acknowledged that the comparison is not a perfect one, given that the women in the above examples are 'trying to pass as men' in the films in which they feature; and the drag queen characters, with the exception of the three protagonists in *Foo* (Kidron 1995) do not wish to pass as women and often create theatrical portrayals of women.

Three interesting observations resulted from this comparison. The first was the participants' acknowledgment that it is easier to create a costumed representation of hyper-femininity than it is to create a costumed representation of hyper-masculinity. Due to the simplicity of the typical men's suit and the past adoption of menswear in women's fashion, in the participants' opinion, the men's clothing "still look[ed] feminine on the actresses" and the actresses looked "normal in comparison" to the actors who dressed as "extreme caricatured versions" of women. When asked how the participants would create a representation of hyper-masculinity, they could only refer to the John Wayne cowboy aesthetic.

Why could the participants not think of more references to create a hyper-masculine or stereotypical man when, by their own admission, so many stereotypical representations of women can be created? Perhaps this is because historically it has been more acceptable for women to express themselves through fashion and decoration, there are many more colours, silhouettes and accessories for women to express their personalities as compared to the static menswear look of the twentieth century which was limited, unvaried and consistently comprised of the shirt, trousers and jacket (Craig 1994: 190).

The second observation is that, as a result of comparing the representation of women on actors and the representation of men on actresses, participant 6 referenced a past gender

stereotype that perhaps persists today. The actors' attire projected the outdated construct that "women are frivolous beings" and the way in which the actresses were dressed denoted the stereotype that "men are thinkers" and in order for a woman's "thoughts to be heard properly in a masculine way" (participant 6), she must create an appearance that resembles a man. Participant 4 also acknowledged this mainstream expectation when he said: "You know, women can dress up to men to get to the top, but men won't dress down to women."

#### **Summation of Theme 4:**

The importance of theme 4 is to establish that due to the existence of powerful associations between dress and gender; vast difference between menswear and womenswear since the nineteenth century; and the normative belief that sartorial gendered expressions 'should' correspond with biological sex; cross-dressing is quickly noticed and is just as quickly criticised. Participants 4 and 7 demonstrated the ubiquity of sartorial gender associations in society through comments regarding cross-dressing when stating that it is "the most obvious version of us looking at how gender is constructed" (Participant 4) and that "the very term cross-dressing" illustrates the strong association society has between dress and gender (participant 7).

The comments of the participants discussed under theme 4, and the sub themes therein, particularly address critical question four in that the participants' readings of the costume encouraged them to assess the role of dress in gendered expression in contemporary society.

Potential for future research with regard to feminine signifiers in contemporary menswear became evident through analysis of this theme. This investigation focuses on overtly gendered sartorial expressions of non-heteronormative transgendered individuals. What are the perceptions of social actors when heteronormative men wear outfits that contain a few signifiers of the feminine? At what point does contemporary society deem a menswear look too feminine and therefore 'unacceptable'?

Although dress is an important visual tool in gendered identity perception, an individual's gendered identity is often read through the interplay of a variety of factors, three of which were consistently made reference to by the participants and are thus of particular relevance to this investigation. Dress, as discoursed above is one of these tools. The other

two, the body and kinesics, will be discussed in the themes to follow. The interdependence of these three factors was consistently established by the participants and directly addresses critical questions two and three which seek to discover how gendered identity is perceived and compared through different costumed transgendered representations in mainstream film.

#### **4.3.5 Theme 5: The Gendered Body**

Entwistle (2007: 93), Rudd and Lennon (2001), and Kaiser (2012) argue that due to the close relationship between dress and the body both spatially and conceptually, dress cannot be discoursed without careful consideration of the body for which it is made.

As stated in theme 1, the majority of the participants experienced difficulty in separating one's gender from one's biological sex, confirming the literary argument that in the mainstream individuals expect correlation between body and gender. The expected correlation between the body and gender; dress and gender; and dress and the body, plays a large role in the perception of gendered identity. As such, the themes discussed under theme 5 directly address critical questions two and three of this investigation. The analysis of data resulted in the emergence of the following four sub themes under the general theme of 'The Gendered Body.'

##### **Sub Theme 5a: The Adorned Body and Gender Demarcation**

After some discussion the participants recognised that contemporary society has specific associations with, and expectations of, both the 'male' and 'female' body. There are certain physical proportions and attributes, other than reproductive organs, that will conjure up an association of either male or female. When explaining how he visually determines if an individual is male or female, Participant 7 stated: "Those are the cues that you take the most from, like the shape of their bodies..." When discussing 'male' bodies the participants used words such as: "muscles", "big", "boxy", "hairy", "strong", "tall" and "thick neck". When discussing 'female' bodies participants used words such as: "long hair", "slender frame", "big bust", "hips", "hour glass", "defined waist" and "short".

The participants' comments illustrate the literary argument that both the adorned and naked body are laden with cultural associations and that no individual's naked body is a blank canvas (Negrin 1999: 104). The sex and gendered associations social members

make with both dress and the body separately may result in a variety of possible gendered readings when the two are combined and read together as one visual image. A 'demarcated' male body dressed in styles associated with the feminine may result in confusing or contradictory meanings in the mainstream, due to the visual challenge to the normative expectation that one's sex and gendered expression will correspond. These inconsistent meanings will contribute to the way in which the gendered and sexual identity of that individual is read.

After screening the initial clip of the meeting from *Foo* (Kidron 1995), participant 1 immediately commented that she saw a "huge contrast between all the feminine elements and the muscles" of the two drag queen protagonists in the scene. Despite the fact that the characters in the clip were dressed in full female attire, including make-up and wigs, participants 1 and 6 agreed that they "saw more man". Furthermore, the actors' physiques were described as "overpowering" and the actors' attire was described as "all the superficial stuff" (participant 1). This particular example not only demonstrates that the body, together with dress, were important reference points in the participants' negotiation of gendered identity but that because the body was described as "overpowering" and the dress "superficial", the participants perceived the protagonists' physicality as being of greatest importance when reading gendered identity.

The importance of the body in reading gendered identity was either directly stated or alluded to repeatedly by all the participants when discussing the characters in the selected films as well as individuals in society. When discussing the overall visual appearance of various characters the participants made the following comments: "although he is dressed like a woman, he still looks like a man dressed as a woman" (participant 1); "their big muscles are showing so it was a bit more of a giveaway" (participant 6); "his facial features are too strong; they are more masculine..." (participant 1). When discussing a cross-dressing individual in society, participant 8 stated: "He had long hair, long painted nails and...he was quite a big person, so he did sort of stand out." When discussing a transsexual individual in society, participant 1 stated: "He was quite a slender framed guy...it was so subtle, the transformation...it was just seamless."

The examples given above represent only a portion of the comments made by the participants regarding the role of the body in the perception of gendered identity throughout the discussion. Analysis of the data on this subject reflected that when a character's body is visibly read as the opposite sex of the gender indicated by the character's costume, the participants acknowledged that the individual may have a



gendered identity that is other than their biological state. The individual is however still considered and referred to, by the participants, as a man or a woman in accordance with their biology. This reiterates that the mainstream places a greater importance on the physical state rather than the gendered state of an individual – if this distinction is even made at all due to the convoluted understanding of sex and gender in the mainstream. This suggestion is further supported by the pronouns used to describe the transgendered characters in the film and the transgendered individuals the participants had encountered in their real lives. The pronoun ‘he’ was frequently used when referring to drag queen, cross-dressing and transsexual individuals.

The arguments made under this sub theme support Frotscher’s (2013: 7) position that a largely accepted stereotype regarding transgender in the mainstream is that “biology trumps all else”.

#### **Sub theme 5b: Overt Contrast, No Contrast and Ambiguity: Dress and the Body**

What has been briefly discoursed yet needs to be explored further are the following points: When the participants saw characters whose bodies and costume correlated with regard to gendered associations, i.e. masculine body with masculine costume, the participants considered these characters to be normatively gendered males. When the participants were able to make clear distinctions between the body and the way of dress due to an overt contrast between the two, i.e. a clearly masculine body and feminine costume, the participants read a non-normative or transgendered identity. Moreover, they ascribed the possibility of a drag queen, cross-dressing or transsexual identity, or depending on the degree of feminine dress – an effeminate male identity.

No contrast between body and costume therefore indicated a normative gendered identity. An obvious visible contrast between body and costume indicated a transgendered identity. When there was no contrast between body and costume but the participants were made aware that the character’s biological state was opposite to the gendered expression, the importance of biology was elevated above behaviour and the participant’s considered the character as transgendered. What gendered readings would be made when one cannot extract a definitive gendered association from either an individual’s body or an individual’s dress or both?

In the focus group discussion, only the subject of ambiguous dress on a non-ambiguous body could be discussed as the attention of this investigation is on the gendered identity of drag queen protagonists, specifically. The participants were thus aware that these characters were biologically men. The topic of gender fluidity and indistinct dress on gender neutral bodies is one that has great potential for further research.

Kaiser (2012: 42) states that there is immense potential for ambiguity in the presentation and/or interpretation of visual communication through dress and that when various garments are put together on a body it can result in messages that are mixed, fuzzy or contradictory. The participants found this to be the case when viewing certain clips from *Cage* (Nichols 1996) and *Boots* (Jarrold 2006).

Confusion as a result of mixed sartorial gender associations was first discussed after viewing a clip from *Cage* (Nichols 1996) where one among many drag artists on stage is dressed as Elvis. Participant 1 stated that this was an incredibly confusing concept as the biologically male performer was impersonating a female, wearing the dress style of a male celebrity. These multiple gendered dress and body associations created a convoluted gendered reading. Although the performer's body was clearly biologically male, the performer's dress was a mixed combination of feminine make-up, fabrics and colours but the hairstyle and identifiable "costume" of the male celebrity, Elvis.

Mixed sartorial gendered associations were also evident in the costume of Lola in *Boots* (Jarrold 2006). Although sometimes dressed in full drag, Lola is also seen costumed in the following attire: fitted jeans, patterned shirts, red leather jacket, heels, no wig, earrings and make-up. This mixture of both masculine and feminine attire together with Lola's large build, a physical attribute of actor Chiwetel Ejiofor, creates an interesting combination of gendered meanings.

From analysis of the participants' perceptions of the various screened images it is evident that there are degrees to which a sartorial gendered expression may be unclear. This ambiguity can be created as a result of gendered associations with both the body and with various dress styles. The ambiguity of the mixed gendered associations in a character's costume will inevitably cause the reader to question the gendered meaning which the costume designer wishes to portray and the reader may have difficulty placing such a sartorial gendered expression into a category or under a label.

### **Sub Theme 5c: Dress Used to Hide Biological Sex and Display Gender**

When discussing the costume of the drag protagonists in the films selected, three of the participants (1, 2 and 6) on separate occasions made reference to the ability of a garment/s to alter the shape of a body either by using suppression such as corsets; addition such as padding; and concealing such as garments or accessories used to cover parts of the body. Covering parts of the body which are easily associated with either male or female bodies was the technique that was most noticed by the participants. The participants' observations support Arvanitidou and Gasouka's (2013: 3) assertion of the ability of clothing and dress to hide or display aspects of our bodies which are associated with gender or biological sex.

The participants stated that parts of the body which were revealed or concealed by costume had a significant effect on their perceptions of the character's gendered identity. This was pointed out primarily by participants 1, 2, 6 and 7. Participants made statements such as: "So obviously the more that is covered the easier it would be for you to convince someone that you are someone that you are not" (participant 7) and "so much of the body was covered that it tends to look more like a woman. His masculine features are hidden" (participant 1).

Participants 1 and 6 stated that in the images where parts of the body indicative of sex, such as large muscles or a thick neck, were not covered by feminine clothing or accessories, it was a "giveaway" that the individual was biologically male. Later in the discussion the participants discussed how in the drag act, these parts of the body might be revealed intentionally in order to remind the audience that it is an anatomical male performing. What is important about the topic of covering and uncovering the body is that it again reiterates Frotscher's (2013: 6-7) argument that in the mainstream biology is elevated above gendered behaviour. In fact, Frotscher (*ibid*) argues that in popular films featuring transgendered characters, their bodies are uncovered for the audience in order to make their bodies readable and allow the audience to locate them within the gender binary.

### **Sub Theme 5d: Dress and the Body in Delineating Gendered and Sexual Identity**

Through the analysis of the costumes of various biologically male characters, the participants were able to make assumptions about the characters' gendered and sexual identities. This was especially evident when the participants discussed the images shown

in Figure 7 (See Appendix G). The participants felt it was important to disclaim that their readings of gendered and sexual identity were suppositions and not definitive. However, in an assortment of images of seven different male characters from *Cage* (Nichols 1996), all the participants were able to agree on whom they felt may be heterosexual, which they linked to a masculine gendered identity, and who was homosexual, which they linked to a feminine gendered identity, based on their dress. No characters were deemed asexual or bisexual. The participants associated plain and restrained men's dress on male bodies with masculinity and heterosexuality; and male bodies dressed "eccentrically", "flamboyantly" and "colourfully" with femininity and homosexuality. The word "flamboyant" was used by different participants (1, 3, 4 and 7) in numerous instances when referring to dress associated with male homosexual orientation. In images where the male characters were not dressed in colourful or printed fabrics but were dressed in specific garments, hairstyles or silhouettes that are typically associated with womenswear, the participants again felt that those characters were possibly homosexual. When discussing a specific character in Figure 7, participant 7 commented: "The hair, the crop top, the exposed mid-drift...there are a lot of cues there."

This sub theme not only reiterates the link between decoration and the feminine in the mainstream but also indicates that if a male body is dressed in such decorative attire, the feminine association and feminine gendered identity which such attire signifies creates a further association of homosexuality (Cole 2000: 2, 31). This too is an association dating back to the 1900s. The arguments of both Craik (1994: 191) and McNeil (1999) suggest that after simplicity and uniformity became desirable in men's fashion, men who subscribed to elaborate or individualistic fashions or were visibly concerned with their appearance, were considered homosexual.

Where characters who were biologically male were dressed in full feminine attire, including make-up and accessories, not only did the participants assume a homosexual orientation and a feminine gendered identity but a further possible classification of either drag queen or 'transvestite' was given. This indicates that there are degrees of feminine dress on male bodies that will influence one's reading of gendered and sexual identity. Dresses and skirts are so inherently associated with the feminine that the inclusion of such items in an ensemble worn by a male body will likely not just signify an effeminate gendered identity but signify a feminine gendered identity. The same may be said for high heels, make-up and certain feminine hairstyles.

This sub theme directly addresses the second critical question of this investigation in that the participants were able to assume the gendered identity and sexual orientation of the various characters according to their costume. Costume played a significant role in the expression of drag queen characters specifically due to the contrast between the male body and the overt feminine dress.

### **Summation of Theme 5:**

In their consistent referral to the body when analysing the costumes of the characters in the selected films, the participants corroborated the literary suggestion that dress and the body are inextricably linked. As demonstrated by the participants' readings, gendered and sexual identity perception is dependent on the combination of the body and dress and the degree to which each signifies sex and gender, and which gender each signifies.

The role of dress and the body in gendered identity perception has been now discussed, however, one remaining factor to which the participants often referred was the effect kinesics had on their reading of gendered identity. This will be discussed in the theme below.

### **4.3.6 Theme 6: Gender Performed Through Kinesics**

In the opinions of the participants, kinesics together with dress and the body, contribute to the signification of gender. As such, the sub themes discussed under theme 6 directly address critical questions two, three and four of this investigation. When discussing drag queen performers in and out of the films selected, the participants made statements such as: "put them in something normal but still rocking that walk..." (participant 1) and "there is much more than what you are wearing, like it's the movement and everything" (participant 4). The role of kinesics, together with other factors, in the expression of gender forms part of the central concept of Judith Butler (1990, 1999) who theorises gender as a performance and "an identity instituted through a stylised repetition of acts" (Butler 1988: 519). The analysis of data resulted in the emergence of the following three sub themes under the general theme of 'Gender Performed through Kinesics.'

### **Sub Theme 6a: Gender Performance as a Public and Private Ritual**

What stood out to the participants was that the overtly gendered kinesics enacted by the drag queen protagonists were not only performed in front of other characters but were also performed by the drag queen characters in private. Examples of such kinesics referred to by the participants were: “long elevated legs” when putting on stockings; “twirling pigtails”; and “skipping.” Although highly performed and stereotypical, these kinesics were considered very indicative and expressive of the female gender. The participants’ attributed the public and private performance of such kinesics to “ritual” which would assist the biologically male characters in feeling like women. The use of the word “ritual” by the participants was particularly interesting given that Butler (1999: xiv, xv) states that gender is performed “ritualistically” by individuals on a daily basis. Arvanitidou and Gasouka (2013: 3) describe what Butler (*ibid*) terms as ‘ritualistic repetition’ as a “ceremonial process” in which the body reiterates social information through kinesics. “Ritualistic” and “ceremonial” gendered kinesics become so engrained in individuals that they are not only performed in public spaces for others but in private spaces too. Perhaps this is also due to the fact that gendered identity, as with an identity of any kind, is not enacted purely for one’s external environment but also for oneself.

When discussing the stereotypically feminine kinesics enacted by the drag queen characters, two of the female participants (3 and 5) consistently commented on how such kinesics are not representative of how “real women” move and act due to the way in which they were stereotypically performed. An anatomically female individual may not need to be kinetically explicit in her performance of femininity in order for others to perceive her as female as the mainstream already has created a strong association between her biological state and her gender. An individual whose anatomy and gendered identity do not correlate may feel the need to blatantly express their self-recognised gender for society in order for social actors to perceive the correct identity. In the specific case of drag queens when staging performances, overtly feminine kinesics may be necessary in order to quickly communicate gender to the audience.

### **Sub Theme 6b: Dress, the Body and Kinesics in Delineating Gendered and Sexual Identity**

The association between gender and kinesics has been discussed allowing the role of kinesics and its contribution toward a gendered reading, together with the interplay between dress and the body, to be discoursed.

If a 'male body' is adorned in 'masculine' dress and enacts 'masculine' kinesics, one will read 'his' appearance as normative. However, if a 'male body' is adorned in faintly 'effeminate' dress and enacts slight 'effeminate' kinesics, one may assume an alternative sexual identity and perhaps a somewhat non-normative gendered identity but not necessarily a transgendered identity. If a 'male body' is dressed in 'feminine' dress, such an appearance will appear incongruent to a viewer with normative gender expectations, and the viewer may assume a transgendered identity and may additionally assume that the individual wishes to express a feminine gendered identity. This assumption will be further confirmed if the individual in question enacts 'feminine' kinesics. However, if the individual enacts 'masculine' kinesics, the viewer may assume a transgendered identity but be unsure of what gendered identity, again determined by understanding within a restrictive binary opposition, the individual wishes to express. Due to the associations contemporary society has made between dress and gender; and kinesics and gender; a correlation between dress and kinesics has been created and was noted by a participant in the investigation.

### **Sub Theme 6c: Sartorial Expectation as a Result of Kinesics and Kinesics Expectation as a Result of Sartorial Expression**

Participant 4, made a connection between kinesics and sartorial gendered expression that had not been discovered through the review of literature.<sup>50</sup> Simply put, participant (4) stated: "We associate certain mannerisms and certain ways of feeling with certain clothes".

This line of discussion was inspired by a clip screened from *Cage* (Nichols 1996). Albert, who is a biologically male character yet enacts kinesics commonly associated with the feminine is dressed in a simple black suit; no make-up; no accessories; and a masculine hairstyle. There was consensus among the participants that this looked incongruent. Even

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<sup>50</sup> The connection between gendered expression and kinesics was made clear through the review of literature, however the link between dress and kinesics specifically, was not discoursed.

though his anatomical sex and costume corresponded, which is what is considered normative in the mainstream, his kinesics did not.

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003: 10) state that the stylised acts that are associated with either pole of the gender binary opposition can be performed by anyone, however, in society it is not always acceptable to do so and will depend on the degree to which the readers of the performance subscribe to normative gendered expectations. Because contemporary society is more accepting of specific alternative gendered expressions now than in the past, individuals have come to expect certain non-normative gendered expressions. Although not normative nor accepted by all, it is no longer uncommon for male bodies to enact a small degree feminine kinesics and sartorial expression. As discussed in sub theme 5.4, individuals who do so are often associated with homosexuality. Thus, due to these newly created expectations, the participants stated that it would have been more fitting for Albert to have been dressed in a slightly more effeminate outfit which corresponded to his effeminate kinesics expression. However, they did not state that it would seem more congruent for him to wear a feminine outfit as transgendered identities have not achieved the level of visibility of homosexual identities in the mainstream. As Frotscher (2013) argues unlike transgendered identities, homosexual identities challenge heteronormativity and not the gender binary nor the expected correlation between sex and gender.

### **Summation of Theme 6**

Once more, this theme reiterates the interdependence of the body, sartorial expression and kinesics in the expression and perception of gendered identity. This theme also demonstrates that the participants recognised that gender is performed consistently throughout one's life and not merely for external recognition.

Finally the link between dress and kinesics is a particularly interesting one. The relationship between gender and the body; gender and dress; gender and kinesics; kinesics and the body; and finally dress and the body have been academically acknowledged. These relationships are so clear because dress is made for and placed on the body and the body is the physical tool with which individuals move and create kinetic expression. It is more difficult to draw a link between dress and kinesics. Due to the signification of gender through the body, dress and kinesics, a link has emerged between



dress and kinesics and an expectation created that the gendered identity read from these two elements should correspond.

#### **4.3.7 Theme 7: Drag**

Drag is being discoursed at this stage of the chapter due to the relevance of all the previous themes to the topic of the perception the drag act. The interchange between body, dress and kinesics as deliberated above is of significant relevance. Hammond (1996: 108) states that the contrast of exaggerated symbols of femininity on a male body is what enables a drag queen performer to parody sex and gender differences. Therefore the drag act as represented in popular film is an ideal medium through which to discover how social actors read sartorial gendered identity. Theme 7 addresses critical questions two, three and four of this investigation. The analysis of data resulted in the emergence of the following six sub themes under the general theme of 'Drag.'

##### **Sub Theme 7a: Variation between Drag Performances**

Despite the difficulties the majority of the participants had with describing and defining gender, transgender and the differences between various transgendered identities, drag queens were not a completely foreign or new topic to the participants. Four of the eight participants (1, 3, 4 and 6), in fact made reference to live drag shows that they had seen.

The participants' descriptions of these shows indicated that there were many differences between previously viewed live drag performances as well as the performances featured in the screened clips. The drag shows described by the participants included performances where the feminine costume and kinesics constructed and enacted on male bodies were very believable; performances where the drag artists were not at all convincing as women in appearance or kinesics; performances which stereotyped women; and performances that were more serious with "nuanced" drag characters. The variety of descriptions indicates that there are many types of drag performances which exist and each is likely to have its own style, intentions and objectives. The reading of a drag performance is thus a complex interplay between performer's intentions and viewer's expectations and interpretations (Butler 1999: 177; Schacht and Underwood 2004: 12).

### **Sub Theme 7b: Drag Artists as ‘Convincing’ Women**

Without consulting the drag performer directly, one can only postulate the performer’s intended meaning. At no stage did the participants claim a conclusive objective of drag performance in general or with regard to making an audience ‘believe’ that the male performer is a woman. Participant 7 stated that a drag performer may dress as a woman “for a number of reasons”. Rather than promote a singular objective of the drag act, the participants discussed various possibilities: the performer might wish to look and act exactly like a woman to the point where, although the audience knows a man is performing, they are “lost in the performance” and ‘believe’ ‘he’ is a woman; the performer may wish to be considered convincing as a woman but break character every now and then in order to remind the audience that ‘he’ is biologically male; and finally, referring to a performance described by participant 3, and some performances in the screened clips, performers may want to create contrasts of male and female elements such as exposure of muscular arms combined with full female make-up and wig or even more stark contrasts such as beards and feminine dresses. In these cases the participants stated that the performer “knows he is not fooling anyone” (participant 7) but is intending to create an unusual gendered performance.

During the first half of the focus group discussion participants 3, 6 and 8 indicated that their understanding of a drag queen performance was that the performance should be somewhat believable. “Wesley Snipes in that movie is definitely like a male, he doesn’t make a very good drag queen, in my opinion” (participant 8). However, later in the discussion the participants began to consider the other possible intentions of drag artists, as listed previously. Participant 2 offered an opinion which was expressed in *Ru Paul’s Drag Race* (Murray and Stevenson 2009), which was that perhaps drag is not actually drag if it is too convincing. As stated by Kirk (2004: 172): “He is no longer a drag queen when the desired end is to be perceived as a woman, not as a man posing as a woman.”

### **Sub Theme 7c: Stereotype and Caricature**

The participants consistently commented on how the appearances of the drag queen protagonists, and drag artists in some of the live performances the participants had seen, were representative of stereotypes or caricatures of women. Both Bakshi (2004: 217-218) and Robertson (1997: 278) posit the literary argument that drag performances are often created around gender stereotypes with a particular focus on visually stereotyping women.

Viewing clips and stills from *Foo* (Kidron 1995) and *CC* (Lembeck 2004) particularly inspired the participants' talk of stereotype. Participants 3 and 7 stated that such stereotypical representations of women could be considered "degrading" and "offensive". The potential for degrading women through the drag act is argued by Haaken (2005: 322) and Carsley (2007: 2).

Throughout the discussion the participants proposed various reasons why drag artists might perform stereotyped versions of women: "We have a culture where we like to objectify" and perpetuate "highly sexualised femininity" (participant 3); in order for a man to embody a woman he must become "the most saturated version" (participant 1) of that woman that he can be; stereotypical or cliché gender associations will be the most efficient way to communicate to an audience; in reaction to a society in which it is difficult for non-normative identities, an overt statement must be made and thus over-the-top identity performed to "push back" (participant 3) and mock society; and finally, the performers are using stereotypes of women to make a statement about how contemporary society negatively views women "and to show you how silly it is" (participant 7). These observations describe readings which may perpetuate the gender binary and existing gender constructs as well as readings which could be considered subversive to the way in which gender is perceived and organised in society.

One of the above observations echoes an argument by Phillips (2000: 65) that in mainstream film particularly, stereotypes and/or clichés are used in order to communicate information quickly and efficiently to an audience. Perhaps drag queens construct stereotypical femininity in order to assist the audience in recognising the female gender, particularly because it is being constructed on a male body. Possibly if the costume or kinesics were more subtle, the combination of the male body and subtle sartorial gendered association would result in an indefinite reading and the meaning intended by the performer may be lost. Participant 4, raised this point and stated that the choice of costume in the films selected would be intentionally chosen according to what would communicate the anticipated meaning most quickly and efficiently.

#### **Sub Theme 7d: Subtle is Real, Overt is Fake**

Participants 3 and 7 in particular, argued the following on numerous occasions: when the drag queen protagonists were not in drag attire and were in more subtle feminine dress they looked more 'real' and reflected a 'truer' gendered identity.

Clearly this is more feminine dress but completely owning it as, you know as a male...they are not going too far with make-up or wigs...It feels a lot more authentic to me, more naturalised, like those characters are more comfortable with their sexuality (participant 3).

It looks like they are dressing that way not to put on a show but because that is how they feel comfortable and that is how they feel that they can best look on the outside how they feel on the inside (participant 7).

These comments directly address critical question three which attempts to discover the comparisons between the perceived gendered identities of the drag queen characters in and out of drag. Why did the participants feel that the overt drag costumes were not reflective of the characters' true identity? Was it due to the participants' opinion that the drag costumes were very stereotypical and stereotype is at odds with 'the real'?

#### **Sub Theme 7e: Possible Readings of the Drag Performance: Subversive or Reiterative?**

There is much literary debate regarding whether the drag act is reiterative of the gender binary or if the drag act sheds light on the hegemonic construction of gender and heterosexism. This unresolved debate was reproduced through the discussion among the participants as their perceptions of the drag act also indicated that there is potential for both subversive and reiterative readings.

Only participant 4 directly stated that drag performances may illuminate the construction of gender in contemporary society: "That's a guy and then he starts putting on these clothes and now he is a woman – so we see that construction very clearly" and "the humour of it, to show that gender is constructed." The other participants, however, allude to the subversive potential of drag through the previously mentioned observations in sub theme 7c. Although some of these suggestions support the argument that drag performances can be deemed subversive, others maintain the possibility of drag performances being degrading to women and reinforcing not only the gender binary but the dangerous culture of objectification. Just as with the participants' deliberation of the multiple possible intentions of drag performers, when discussing various subversive or non-subversive readings, participants did not promote one over another. This supports

Butler's (1993 cited in Kirk 2004: 174) suggestion that drag is an ambivalent medium through which numerous meanings may be constructed and perceived.

### **Sub Theme 7f: Drag Queens versus Drag Kings**

It was evident that the participants were far less familiar with the concept of drag kings as compared to drag queens. In fact, when the topic of drag kings was first introduced by participant 3 she did not use the term 'drag king' but rather "when a woman transforms into a man". The discussion was inspired by the topic of menswear for women and the images seen in Figures 2 and 3 (see Appendix G). Participant 3 argued that if a woman is wearing menswear that is fitted to her body; a feminine hairstyle; and make-up, it cannot be compared to "the reverse" of a drag queen. For the two to be comparable, a woman would have to have a masculine hairstyle; no make-up; possibly added facial hair; and a suit or clothing with a 'masculine' fit.

Participant 2 was the first to use the term 'drag king' and stated that he had learned about this transgendered identity through watching a documentary at a gay and lesbian film festival. When asked, the participants stated that they hadn't seen a drag king character in a film, in fact the documentary mentioned by participant 2 was the only media example given and was one that was produced on a small scale for a niche demographic public. It is noteworthy that there are many popular films which include drag queen characters but no popular films which include drag king characters. It can be assumed from the lack of media proliferation and the participant's limited knowledge of this transgendered identity that drag kings are a less recognised transgender identity in the mainstream. An important question to ask is why the drag king identity is so much less known and understood in popular culture when drag queens have been featured in popular film, music videos and even make-up campaigns throughout the past few decades?

Due to the delimited scope of this investigation to assess the perception of gendered identity through drag queen characters only, the topic of drag kings as compared to drag queens was not explored in detail, however further research is recommended and the potential of such research will be discussed in the chapter to follow.

## **Summation of Theme 7**

It was clear in both the exploration of literature and the analysis of the focus group transcripts that drag is a vacillating art form that is wholly context dependent. The performer; the spectator; and the location of the performance in both time and space; all have a significant influence on the creation and interpretation of any given performance. What was particularly interesting through analysis of the participants discussion was that their opinions evolved the more a topic was deliberated which resulted in the variety of viewpoints listed under this theme. The participants acknowledged that all viewpoints that were given throughout the discussion were valid and due to context dependence, no opinion was necessarily 'more correct' than another and even contradictory opinions were able to co-exist.

### **4.3.8 Theme 8: Category**

The concept of category is one that is at the centre of this investigation. As discussed in chapter two, social actors categorise their social environment in order to understand it (Chaudhary 2008: 24). The dichotomous way in which Western society categorises and makes sense of sex and gender has significant implications on how individuals' sartorial gender expressions are read and understood. Category as a theme addresses all four critical questions of this investigation due to the foundational role categorisation of 'masculine' and 'feminine' plays in the perception of gender and identity in society. This theme, however, particularly addresses critical question four as through the participants' deliberation of the concept of category, a greater understanding of transgendered identity through dress in a social context was achieved. The analysis of data resulted in the emergence of the following four sub themes under the general theme of 'Category.'

#### **Sub Theme 8a: The Pronoun Dilemma**

When referring to transgendered characters from the screened films, and individuals whom they had encountered in their lives, the participants consistently used pronouns which corresponded with transgendered individuals' anatomical sex rather than their gendered behaviour.

When participants 1 and 8 discussed a biologically male cross-dresser and a transsexual woman whom they had encountered, both participants used the pronoun "he". This is particularly interesting in the case of the transsexual woman who had surgically become

a woman. When discussing the drag queen character Chi Chi in *Foo* (Kidron 1995), participant 7 said “she looks like Halle Berry” and then immediately corrected himself and said “actually *he* looks like Halle Berry”. When referring to the same character, participant 6 began speaking by using the pronoun “she” but also quickly corrected himself and said “he/she” which indicates that both participants 6 and 7 did not feel that that it was correct to refer to this character as “she” despite the characters sartorial and kinematic resemblance to a woman. Participant 6 later in the transcript referred to the drag queen protagonist Lola in *Boots* (Jarrold 2006) with the pronoun “he” immediately. The notable exception, however, was that both participants 1 and 8 who had been consistent with their use of the pronoun “he” throughout the discussion used the pronoun “she” when referring to Lola. This inconsistency may be attributed to my use of the pronoun “she”, as the moderator, when introducing the character.

The use of the pronoun “she” actually prompted participant 3 to query the use of pronouns when referring to transgendered characters. She asked which pronoun would be considered ‘proper’ when addressing a drag queen. The participants shared their perspective that the preference would likely be person specific and thus stated that they would be unsure of which pronoun to use if not advised. Previous to the conversation regarding Lola or pronouns, however, the consistent use of the pronoun “he” indicates that even though they stated that they did not know which pronoun to use, they had opted to use the pronoun which corresponded with a character/individual’s anatomical sex rather than visual gendered behaviour.

This pronoun dilemma not only illustrates the mainstream’s choice to profit biology above behaviour (Frotscher 2013) but also demonstrates how dependent social interaction in contemporary culture is on category and labels. The mere act of addressing someone becomes problematic if that individual does not visually adhere to the gender binary. The desire to categorise or label was exemplified further when discussing individuals dressed in indistinct gendered attire. Participant 7 exclaimed: “Is it drag? Or is it cross-dressing? Or is it transvestism? Or is it someone just wearing what they want to wear, what they feel comfortable to wear?” This statement demonstrates not only that when one reads the dress of another individual they feel the need to label the sartorial meaning, but it also demonstrates that when the attire is gender neutral or ambiguous, the reader finds it difficult to categorise as a result of the limiting gender binary. When participant 3 described a drag show where the performers donned an unusual combination of feminine and masculine signifiers in dress she acknowledged: “I didn’t know where to put it, you know.”

Garber (1992: 17) explains that transgenderism is a space of possibility that calls attention not only to the problematic system of categorising individuals according to a gender binary but to “the crisis of category itself.” In the context of sartorial gender expression, the inability for society’s current gender category system to encompass the variety of gendered expressions in existence is problematic for both the individuals wishing to express alternative gendered identities and the individuals reading such expressions. As Butler (cited in Meijer and Prins 1998: 277) argues, bodies which do not adhere to what society considers intelligible gender are marginalised and their gendered identity unacknowledged. Social actors often do not know how to recognise alternative gendered expressions within the restrictive dichotomous gender system of contemporary Western society.

### **Sub Theme 8b: The Fear of Difference in the Crisis of Category**

The conversation regarding unintelligible sartorial gendered expressions lead to the deliberation of the role of category in the marginalisation of non-normative gendered identities in the mainstream. Most of the participants attributed resistance to non-normative identities to the fear and discomfort of having to “deal with” individuals whom they do not understand. Fiske and Hartley (cited in Williams 2002) state that social man cannot apprehend experiences without applying the socio-cultural structures, rituals and ideals that are prevalent in their social environment. Without category therefore, the comprehension of how to participate in, or contribute to, a social setting is compromised. This is demonstrated by the example of hesitance to address or refer to someone whose appearance is difficult to locate within the gender binary.

The participants suggested that together with fear, intolerance and insecurity are among the reasons for society’s marginalisation of non-normative identities. Participants 4 and 7 gave the following examples of how an individual might feel when encountering a transgendered individual whose biological sex and sartorial behaviour do not visually correlate: “I can’t go you are this or that thing. I am in between and that’s just awkward” (participant 4) and “I hate that I can’t put you into a box – why can’t you be in a box like everyone else?” (participant 7).



### **Sub Theme 8c: The Role of Dress in the Crisis of Category**

Just as gender is an arbitrary construct that has been organised dichotomously, clothing and dress which signify gender are learned associations and have been arranged according to the dichotomous labels of womenswear and menswear.

An example given by participant 7 about purchasing a plain black belt illustrated how important labels and associations are in delineating sartorial gender and yet how constructed these labels truly are. A salesman took issue with participant 7 buying a plain black belt for himself in the women's department. Although, according to participant 7's description, the belt did not have any 'feminine' signifiers and could just as easily have been sold in the men's department, it was the fact that it was labelled as 'for a woman' which prompted the salesman's judgement.

Due to the strict adherence to the labelling and organisation of dress into 'male' or 'female', the participants stated that when this system is challenged it is perceived as threatening to society. The mixture of feminine and masculine signifiers on a male body was deemed by the participants as a greater opposition to society's conception of gendered expression than full female dress on a male body as it is ambiguous and harder to categorise. Although full female dress on a male body, the expression most often created in drag performances, is a challenge to the normative expectation that one's biology will correspond with one's gendered expression, each element which makes up this gendered expression can be located within the gender binary - the body as male and the dress as female. If an individual's body is difficult to label as male or female however; if their sartorial gendered expression is neutral or an ambiguous mixture of masculine and feminine signifiers; or both; it is difficult to locate the body and/or the dress within the gender binary. The viewer may thus find it difficult to read and interact with the individual in question.

Although the participants conceded that neither expression would be deemed acceptable or normal in the society in which the participants live, the more subtle or ambiguous expression is more "threatening" to society's sartorial gender organising system than the expression of overt female dress on a male body. The subtle or ambiguous expression "hits closer to home" (participant 4) as not only would it be perceived as "more real" (participant 7) but it would be more likely to occur in daily life. Full drag is time consuming and it is improbable that individuals who are not drag performers would afford the time to transform themselves to such an extent on a daily basis. Furthermore, the participants explained that because drag is known as a theatrical art form and has a history of comedy,

an individual dressed in full drag in daily life may not be viewed as exhibiting a serious gendered expression. An individual who has constructed a more subtle and ambiguous gendered expression is however more likely to be taken seriously and may be read as exhibiting a self-recognised gendered identity. "It's not a joke, it's not a show, its real to who that person is" (Participant 7).

Perhaps more specific future research can determine whether other social actors would consider full drag on male bodies in daily life less threatening to the current gender system than mixed sartorial messages on male or androgynous bodies.

#### **Sub Theme 8d: Sartorial Gendered Expression in the Future**

Throughout the discussion participants claimed that traditional gender roles and constructs as well as sartorial expressions of gender have changed and are continually changing. Specifically that men are more concerned with appearance than in the past and have adopted 'feminine' fashion items like jewellery; foundation; skinny jeans *et cetera*. The participants were asked if they felt that society could evolve to a point where individuals no longer used clothing as a tool to decipher gendered identity. The response was mixed.

Participants 3 and 6 felt that a society free from sartorial gendered associations was almost unimaginable due to how engrained such associations are in contemporary culture. Participant 7 stated that it would be possible given the change that has already taken place in the twenty first century. When arguing his point, participant 7 brought up Kanye West wearing a 'skirt' on stage as part of his argument for the progression of society towards changing sartorial gendered associations. Participant 7 also stated that he believed that it is possible that if a dress item is designed that has the same silhouette of a skirt or dress but is designed solely for, and labelled as, menswear, it might become popular in men's fashion. I argue that these examples actually negate his point. Due to how badly Kanye West's decision to wear a kilt on stage was received by the public, this example suggests that society has perhaps not progressed toward sartorial gender bending as much as some might claim. The West example also illustrates that even if a garment is designed for men and labelled as 'a kilt' rather than a skirt, the association with the dress and skirt silhouette and the feminine seems impenetrable.

Participants 4 and 5 contributed very interesting perspectives when answering the same question. Both participants felt that the issue at hand “goes beyond dress” (participant 4), “is deeper than that” (participant 5) and is more a question of how society is arranged around ridged structures and the extent to which social actors adhere to these structures. Participant 5 expressed that she didn’t think that the world is going to made a better place if a man feels comfortable wearing a dress but rather society needs to learn how to be accepting and inclusive of difference on all levels, not just in sartorial expression. Participant 4 similarly stated that what we wear would be insignificant in a society that does not discriminate according to disobedience to the ‘norm’.

### **Summation of Theme 8**

Kaiser (2012: 42) suggests that reading ambiguous dress may foster a questioning or deliberation for the viewer. This was found to be the case when the participants compared more ambiguously gendered costume to the overt feminine costume of the drag queen protagonists in the films selected. According to the participants, when an individual’s body, dress or both are indistinct with regard to sex and gender it is difficult to categorise the individual’s gendered identity. Without being able to communicate with the individual, however, a resolution cannot be found. This may be the case when watching a film or sighting a stranger in everyday life. Furthermore a resolution may not be necessary if the said individual wishes to communicate a gender neutral identity that cannot be located within the gender binary. The deliberation of this topic revealed what Garber (1992) terms “the crisis of category.”

Due to contemporary society’s dependence on categorisation and labelling in order to communicate and interact, if one does not categorise to some extent, one cannot communicate. When an individual’s gendered expression cannot be located within the binary opposition, that individual’s gendered identity will be unintelligible to a viewer and thus unacknowledged. This is an uncomfortable place for both the individual in question and the social readers and often results in marginalisation or even ostracism of unintelligible identities. Ambiguous or non-normative dress, due to its significant role in the visual delineation of gendered identity, plays a large part in this prejudice. As Baudrillard (1981 cited in Negrin 1999: 114) states, fashion and dress is an institution which “best restores cultural inequality and social discrimination.” Unfortunately, as pointed out by the participants, changing what is or is not considered ‘acceptable dress’ is not going to solve this problem as it is merely symptomatic of a larger issue of the way

in which society operates. A set of sartorial standards regardless of how drastically they change from one century to the other will always exclude and marginalise certain identity expressions. Although sartorial standards changed drastically from pre to post- industrial revolution, and are continually changing today, this change has done little to solve the issue of marginalisation of non-normative identities. Dress continues to contribute to social discrimination.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

In order to address the first critical question of this investigation, an understanding of the participants' personal conception of gender and transgender as well as their beliefs regarding the mainstream's understanding of gender and transgender was established. The participants recognised that film costume played a significant role in the reading and comparison of the gendered identities of the protagonists assessed. Due to the gendered associations with the body, dress and kinesics in society, the varied mixtures of film costume, actors' bodies and the kinesics enacted resulted in different gendered readings. The discussion of these signifiers, the drag act, and its many intentions and interpretations addressed critical questions two and three of this investigation. Not only were the participants able to read gendered identity from the costume in the selected films but they consistently applied these readings to their current social context, addressing critical question four.

Despite the participants qualifying as audience members of popular film, they were able to echo many literary arguments regarding the reading of transgendered identities through mainstream film.

In the following and final chapter, the concluding arguments from the results and discussion of the data analysis will be described as well as recommendations and potential for future research posited.

## **5. Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **5.1 Introduction**

In this final chapter, the cumulative consideration of the aims, reviewed literature and results of data analysis are addressed. Additionally, potential future research opportunities which arose as a result of data analysis and which require further exploration are suggested.

### **5.2 Concluding Arguments**

#### **5.2.1 Transgender Perceived through Mainstream Film**

Kaiser's (2012: 42) pertinent suggestion that mixed sartorial messages can foster questioning or deliberation in a reader was evident through the participants' negotiation of perceived gendered identity encouraged by the transgendered constructions visible in the four selected Hollywood films. Therefore, Hollywood film may be a useful medium through which the mainstream can be exposed to, and educated about, transgender visibility and politics. As postulated in literature and observed through data analysis, this may, however, result in various outcomes: the exposure may enlighten viewers and provide information about non-normative identities that would not have been gained otherwise; regardless of the visibility of non-normative identities in the film, the heterosexist beliefs of the mainstream may be promoted above transgendered issues through straightening devices which are used to appeal to a large demographic public; or finally, the portrayal of transgender in popular film may inspire the questioning of non-normative identities but not provide answers or may further convolute understanding through inauthentic representation. If an education or promotion of transgender politics is not offered through the popular films in which such identities feature, little is done to address the restriction or discrimination of transgendered identities in society. As was observed through the participants' comments, a lack of understanding is one of the driving forces behind the relegation of non-normative gendered identities.

Furthermore, although popular film is a medium that is both influential and far reaching (Gripsrud 1998; Kellner 1998), the transgendered portrayals therein are not real and may thus be perceived differently to how a transgendered identity would be perceived in society. According to the participants, staged or filmed performances are less challenging to society's conception of gender because in such a situation one is not required to

socialise with the performer. This concept is well illustrated through Bakhtin's (1984) theory of carnival where the hegemonic symbolic order is inverted to allow non-normative expressions that are sanctioned during carnival time but considered transgressive in social reality (van der Wal 2008: 16-17). Therefore, although the gendered identity of a film character may be perceived similarly to an individual in society, the response to, or result of, the reading may be vastly different in real life situations.

### **5.2.2 The Visual Trinity of Gendered Perception**

The participants established that dress/costume does play a significant role in the expression and perception of gendered identity. However, what became clear was that dress cannot operate in this role alone. If dress is not read in conjunction with the body on which it is placed it is no longer dress but becomes lifeless clothing/apparel (Entwistle 2007: 95). The relationship between dress and the body is therefore vital. Furthermore, due to the associations made between kinesics and gender and the associations between dress and gender, a link between kinesics and dress has been created. The body, dress and kinesics thus all contribute to the construction of a visual gendered expression and perception of a gendered identity. The manipulation of one element will significantly change the way in which the other elements are read. A myriad of gendered expressions are thus available through differing combinations of these three elements.

### **5.2.3 The Subversive Potential of Ambiguity and 'Authentic' Expression**

The subversive or reiterative potential of the drag act was consistently referred to throughout this dissertation. It has been suggested in literature (Butler 1999: 177; Schacht and Underwood 2004: 12; Shapiro 2007: 267) and further exemplified by data analysis that the resolution of the debate is context dependant. In the circumstances of this investigation it was established that the participants found the more subtle construction of feminine signifiers on a male body or an ambiguous or gender neutral expression more subversive to the mainstream conception of gendered identity than the overt contrast created by combining stereotypically feminine dress and kinesics with a male body - a combination traditionally created by drag performers. Gendered expressions created by this combination can be easily located within the gender binary and do little to break down the categorising system with which society organises gender and dress and in which non-conforming bodies are restricted.

Drag performances may be subversive in that they have the potential to demonstrate that gender is a behavioural, rather than a biological state, however in the performance the body is easily read as 'male' and the dress and kinesics as 'female.' In order to be truly subversive of the dichotomous gender system, a drag performance must present something new and challenging to the audience (Harris 1999: 62). Furthermore, typical drag performances may reinforce heteronormativity or perpetuate dangerous sex and gender stereotypes (Kirk 2004: 174). This was observed by the participants in many clips from the films selected where the performances were not deemed subversive but rather described as clichéd and offensive to women.

In other clips from the films where the dress worn on the male body was subtly feminine, the participants found the expression “authentic” and indicative of a truer self-recognised gendered identity. Because the drag act has become relatively synonymous with comedy, theatrics and parody, overt drag expressions of the feminine were taken by the participants less seriously than subtle ones. Overt drag expressions were thus considered “less threatening” to the mainstream understanding of gender as they were perceived as a joke. Moreover, the participants stated that it was unlikely that individuals could afford the significant time and cost it would require to dress in full, elaborate drag on a daily basis. Thus, according to the participants, subtle feminine dress on a male body is a more feasible expression and thus a more challenging one.

Where the gendered expressions of the drag protagonists were perceived as ambiguous due to an unusual combination of masculine and feminine signifiers, it became difficult for the participants to locate the expressed identity within the gender binary. This was found to be far more subversive of the dichotomous gender system as it revealed the root of the problem: category. The participants found that in certain isolated clips, the protagonists' gendered identity was visually unintelligible. Without the supporting clips in the films where the protagonists' gendered identities were made 'clear', the participants would have been unable to establish and acknowledge a perceived gendered identity according to existing gender/transgender categories.

#### **5.2.4 Gender Perception and Expression without Category**

The discussion above begs the question: in order to subvert the gender categorising system is the elimination of existing gender/transgender categories in favour of ambiguity, the goal? As has been argued previously, creating new gender/transgender categories does not solve the issue of marginalisation as there cannot be categories which

accommodate the vast variety of identities which exist.<sup>51</sup> However, the act of eliminating intelligible category in favour of neutrality may not be possible as contemporary society requires labels and categories in order to relate and communicate. Without gender categories no gendered identity can be expressed or perceived and the acknowledgement and validation of identity cannot be achieved. This “crisis of category” (Garber 1992: 17) goes beyond dress and gender. Categorisation affects every aspect of human interaction (Chaudhary 2008: 24).

The elimination or confusion of category in the visual construction of an ambiguous gendered identity may be a useful tool in subverting the current system and exposing the incapacity of categories “to include or summarise the field of social relations” (Butler cited in Harris 1999: 71), however, it is not a solution to the lack of social space available to non-normative identities.

It thus may not be possible, or even helpful, to eliminate category all together but perhaps it is possible to alter the belief that those who step outside of ‘sanctioned’ category are being transgressive. The solution may lie in the education of the mainstream in the understanding and acceptance of alternative expressions and encouraging the termination of the policing of the non-normative.

### **5.2.5 The Role of Fashion in Future Gendered Expression**

Due to the visual nature of dress, sartorial standards play a significant role in the regulation of gendered expression and the conferring of social validation. The constraint of external perception on the dress choices of social members is made clear in literature (Konig 1973: 113; Negrin 1999: 114; Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992: 5) and was reiterated by the participants. The creation of new trends or standards is not the solution to the marginalisation of those who do not adhere to sartorial norms. The associations made between dress and gender have changed significantly from the seventeenth century to the twentieth (Craik 1994). These altered associations, however, have not necessarily allowed for more freedom but have merely changed which sartorial expressions are deemed favourable and which are deemed transgressive. Thus the introduction of specific aspects of feminine attire in fashionable menswear in the twenty first century (Davies

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<sup>51</sup> The intention of this statement is not to contest the creation or use of transgendered categories but to posit that the creation of further gender categories will not end the marginalisation of non-normative identities.



2008) does not necessarily imply the shedding of gender associations with dress but simply rearranges them.

In an article written in 2014, *Vanity Fair* writer, Kayleen Schaefer, reported on the trend of male celebrities adopting more feminine fashions of late, in which she used Kanye West as one of the examples, not only because of the kilt he wore on stage, already discussed in this dissertation, but also due to a Celine top, made for women, he had been photographed wearing in 2011 (Weiss 2011). Additionally reference was made to rap artist Pharrell Williams wearing a Chanel necklace; actor, Jared Leto's long ombre hair; and rap artist Kid Cudi donning an orange cropped top. Although this reinforces Davies (2008: 9) argument that men are choosing to become more experimental with fashion items that were previously designated as solely feminine, it does not support Schaefer's (2014) claim that these fashion statements made by select celebrities represent a significant turning point in sartorial gender bending for men.

Firstly, Schaefer (2014) failed to mention the negative response to Kanye West donning a kilt. The fashion choice was so ill received by the public that it prompted West to demand that Getty Images, a popular photo agency, remove all photos of him in the kilt from their database (Anisiobi 2013). West was ridiculed by fans and fellow rap artists for his choice to wear what had been considered 'a skirt'. The introduction of feminine fashion items into the stage outfits and red carpet looks of celebrities may suggest that high fashion advocates are in support of nominal gender bending or androgynous fashions and have been for some time, however its lack of adoption in commercial fashion as well as the public's reaction to men wearing fashion items that are ardently associated with women, indicates that it has not yet been accepted by the mainstream. This was confirmed by the participants when the topic was deliberated.

Secondly, and most importantly, even if womenswear for men, or what Schaefer (2014) terms 'gender bending', does become a fashion trend, the result is not increased liberty in fashion expression but rather a mere alteration of what is praised and what criticised. Therefore, if contemporary society is slowly headed towards a culture that supports nominal gender bending through dress, which sartorial expression will become marginal and ridiculed as a result? It is thus again proposed that in order to accommodate non-normative gendered expression, society does not alter which sartorial expressions are considered acceptable or which are considered deplorable but rather addresses the discriminative and restrictive effect of 'the acceptable.'

## **5.3 Future Research Potential**

### **5.3.1 Femininity in Contemporary Menswear**

As discussed in the previous chapter, it was observed that in the opinion of the participants, contemporary menswear has evolved significantly in the twenty first century. Men now display a keener interest in fashion as compared to much of the Twentieth century and have adopted specific aspects of womenswear that would have previously been considered 'too feminine'. The participants, however, were able quickly to identify which costumes of the protagonists were indicative of a masculine identity and which were indicative of a feminine identity. Despite the evolution of contemporary menswear there are many aspects of dress that remain strictly associated with the feminine. Dresses and skirts were examples consistently used by the participants - dresses seeming to have a greater association with the feminine than skirts.

This prompted a series of questions in the analysis stage of this investigation. What degrees of femininity exist in contemporary fashion? Given the evolution of menswear, at what point does a menswear look become too feminine and cross the boundary from 'fashionable' into 'unacceptable?' This may be a valuable area of investigation if the daring fashion statements of select male celebrities, as discussed by Shafer (2014), do pave the way for popular gender bending.

### **5.3.2 Subtle or Gender Neutral Expression versus Overt Gendered Expression**

It has been concluded that in this particular investigation the participants found the more subtle expressions of the feminine on male bodies to be a greater deviance from society's rigid conception of gender than overt drag expressions. This was, however, deemed the case with a specific group of participants in the context of watching specific film excerpts. The opinions of other participants may differ to the group assembled for the purposes of this particular investigation. Additionally, as argued previously, the way in which non-normative expressions are read through film may differ from how they are read in society. Perhaps if the participants were asked to interact with individuals in a realistic social setting their opinion of which gendered expressions would be perceived as "more threatening" to existing societal gender norms would change. Finally, if modern menswear fashion trends do continue to include aspects of womenswear, subtle constructions of the feminine on the male body may become desirable and thus lose subversive credibility.

### **5.3.3 The Role of Corporeal Androgyny**

It has been argued in this dissertation that when one or more elements of the 'body, dress and kinesics trinity' is not locatable within the gender binary there is potential for the perception of an unintelligible gendered identity. Due to the focus on drag queens, who are traditionally biologically male, androgynous bodies were not explored and only ambiguous sartorial gender constructions could be assessed. It is thus recommended that future research be conducted where gendered identity is read through various combinations of bodies, dress styles and kinesics which include androgynous bodies as well as bodies which are considered easily intelligible as 'masculine' or 'feminine'.

### **5.3.4 Is Femininity the Butt of the Joke?**

The lack of representation of drag kings in popular film as well as the participants' unfamiliarity with the identity, as compared to drag queens, suggests that drag kings are perhaps even less appealing to the mainstream than drag queens. This prompts the question of why one identity would be better received in a mainstream or popular entertainment context than the other? Due to this investigation being primarily concerned with drag queens, the possible answers to this question require further research.

What has been suggested in this investigation, and which may serve as a starting point for future research endeavours, is that the humour of drag queen performances is often in the form of parody, and although it is suggested that what is parodied is heteronormative society, most often due to the impersonation of women in the drag queen act, femininity rather than masculinity is mocked. When men dress as women it is regarded in Western culture as amusing as they are mocking an inferior gendered persona (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003:37). Women dressed as men, however are viewed as striving for a 'loftier' social position (*ibid*) which may be viewed as pitiable. As pointed out by the participants, this is the explanation for why menswear for women has been a long enduring commercial fashion trend, where conversely womenswear for men has never been commercially popular, and in fact is only recently becoming visible in high fashion. Therefore, when used for entertainment, women dressing as men is seldom found humorous but rather either found pretentious or solemn; as in the case of Rose English (Harris 1999); or considered an appealing fashion statement; as in the case of Marlene Dietrich in *Morocco* (von Sternberg 1930).

Even in contemporary society, as evident through the participants' comments, the feminine retains the frivolity and passivity with which it was created (Cixous 2001: 67; Paechter 2006: 8) and thus the derision of the feminine is a humorous tool for biologically male drag queens but unavailable to biologically female drag kings.

Women, as well as other groups routinely targeted for ridicule, retort that men enjoy the pleasurable release of laughter by positioning women at the receiving end... Dominant groups habitually rely on the shared pleasure of laughter to mark boundaries between insiders and outsiders (Haaken 2005: 320).

Although drag queens are not 'insiders' in the heteronormative world, they have a biological claim to the 'male' persona and therefore may mock the 'female.' Drag kings however, not only endure limited social space by expressing a gendered state that does not correspond with their biologically female state but, unlike drag queens, suffer the burden of the inferior position of femininity to which their biology, in a mainstream understanding, ultimately ties them.

## **5.4 Conclusion**

Popular film may be one of the best platforms to expose the mainstream to alternative gendered expressions and encourage deliberation of how society understands gender, transgendered identity and specifically the substantial role of dress in the expression thereof. Unlike the mainstream visibility of transgender in the past however, the end goal cannot be the promotion of the limited gender categories and heteronormativity found acceptable by the target audience. Rather the presentation and endorsement of authentically represented non-normative gendered identities should be created. Considering the necessity of popular film to appeal to its audience in order to be commercially viable, it is questionable whether this is in fact possible. However, given the progress made in the twenty first century regarding the visibility of homosexual and bisexual identities, and the lesser but notable progress in the visibility of transgendered identities in the mainstream, a slow advancement towards significant, and accurate, transgendered visibility may be achievable.

Although the visual nature of dress, sex and gender, and subsequent sartorial gender standards, contribute considerably to the marginalisation of non-normative gendered identities, a rearrangement of such standards will do little to resolve the issue of ostracism.

Preferably the education and support of difference as projected through popular media and the visibility of a large spectrum of gendered expressions therein, may begin to deconstruct the rigidity of and adherence to restrictive societal structures. A participant in this investigation said it best: "If society can deal with its fear and reaction to difference, then it doesn't matter what we wear."

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## APPENDIX A

### ***Too Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything. Julie Newmar!* (Kidron 1995)**

*Foo* (Kidron 1995) is a film that is written by Douglas Beane; directed by Beeban Kidron; produced by Walter F. Parks, Bruce Cohen, Mitchell Kohn and G. Mac Brown; and distributed by Universal pictures. It was released in the United States in September 1995.

*Foo* follows the journey of three drag queens, Vida Boheme (Patrick Swayze), Noxeema Jackson (Wesley Snipes) and Chi Chi Rodriguez (John Leguizamo) as they travel across America from New York to Los Angeles in order to compete in the Drag Queen of America Contest. Their trip comes to halt when their Cadillac breaks down just outside the small town of Syndersville, where they must spend a few days until the car can be repaired.

While in the small American town, the drag queens, who have introduced themselves to the townsfolk as “career girls”, quickly learn that this quaint town is not without adversities. From physical abuse, to abandonment, the women of the town have been poorly treated by men. The drag queens are able to help solve many of these problems through fashion and relationship advice as well as displays of physical strength which they use as a means to intimidate the men of the town and demand chivalry. While the town is undergoing its transformation Sheriff Dollard, a character framed as a bigot, whom the drag queens encountered on the road before arriving in Snyder'sville, is searching for Vida, Noxeema and Chi Chi, whom he terms as “boys in dresses”.

When Sheriff Dollard eventually discovers the drag queen's whereabouts he informs the townspeople that they are harbouring drag queens and warns them against “protecting these freaks”. However, in a display of solidarity, one after the other the townspeople exclaim “I am a drag queen”. The Sheriff leaves, empty handed and frustrated. The drag queens are touched by the surprising support of the town and, after the Cadillac has been repaired, leave Snyder'sville feeling enriched.

The film concludes with a scene at the Drag Queen of America Contest in Los Angeles where it is announced that Chi Chi is the winner.

### ***The Birdcage* (Nichols 1996)**

*Cage* (Nichols 1996) is the Hollywood remake of *La Cage aux Folles* (1978), the French film based on the play by Jean Poiret. The screenplay for *Cage* is written by Elaine May; directed by Mike Nichols; produced by Mike Nichols, Neil A. Machlis and Marcello Danon; and distributed by United Artists. It was released in the United States in March 1996.

Armand (Robin Williams) and Albert (Nathan Lane) are long time lovers who live together above a drag club, 'The Birdcage', in South Beach, Florida. Armand owns The Birdcage and Albert is the club's star under the drag name 'Starina'.

Armand's son, Val, whom he had prior to his relationship with Albert, informs him that he is engaged to Barbara, the daughter of the very conservative Senator Keeley. In order to appease the Keeley's, who would not approve of her marrying the son of a homosexual, Jewish couple who own and star in a drag club, Barbara lies to her parents and tells them that Armand is a cultural *attaché* to Greece and that Val's 'mother' is a housewife.

After a political scandal involving Senator Keeley's associate erupts, the Keeley's decide to go to South Beach to meet the future in-laws and escape the press.

In order to convince the Keeley's of the lies Barbara has told, Val reluctantly asks his father to "play it straight" for the evening. This means that his and Albert's apartment must be redecorated; Albert must be sent away; and Val's biological mother, Katherine, who Val has never met, must play the role of "housewife". Nothing goes according to plan and Albert ends up posing as Armand's wife, an act that is thoroughly believed by Senator and Mrs Keeley. The charade is up however, when Katherine, who has been stuck in traffic, unaware of the change in plans, arrives and introduces herself as Val's mother. Val decides to explain the truth to Senator and Mrs Keeley.

Immediately following this revelation, it is discovered that the press has followed the Keeley's to South Beach and have gathered outside the building. In order to prevent the press from obtaining photographic evidence of Senator Keeley fraternising with a drag club owner and star, Albert suggests that the Keeley's dress up like drag queens and exit the building with the audience and performers of the drag club. The plan works and the Keeley's are able to avoid the press.

The film ends with the big, white, Christian and Jewish wedding of Val and Barbara. The guests on the bride's side of the church are dressed in dull coloured, conservative attire. The guests on the groom's side of the church, most of whom are drag queens are dressed in bright and extravagant outfits. This is a clear visual picture of the different worlds that have come together to support the union of the young couple.

### ***Connie and Carla* (Lembeck 2004)**

CC (Lembeck 2004) is a film that is written by Nia Vardalos; directed by Michael Lembeck; produced by Tom Hanks, Gary Barber, Roger Birnbaum and Jonathan Glickman; and distributed by Universal Pictures. The film was released in the United States in April 2004.

Unlike the other films selected for this investigation CC (Lembeck 2004) stars two women as the protagonists. Connie (Nia Vardalos) and Carla (Toni Collette) are childhood friends who have always dreamed of being successful stage performers. It quickly becomes obvious that this dream has not yet been realised

After seeing their boss shot in a parking lot by mobsters Connie and Carla must immediately leave town and assume different identities in order to escape the mobsters and stay alive. They drive to West Hollywood where they disguise themselves as drag queens in order to book a regular drag gig at 'The Handlebar.'

Connie and Carla's drag act significantly increases the popularity of 'The Handlebar' which results in a feature in entertainment news. This leads to the mobsters learning of Connie and Carla's location.

The mobsters enter the club during the opening night performance of the newly renovated 'The Handlebar'. They are, however, soon arrested by the police. Connie and Carla must now explain the violent interruption to the audience and their fellow performers. They tell everyone they are really women who were trying to hide from mobsters but the audience thinks they are being humorous. In order to convince them Connie and Carla open their corsets to reveal their real breasts. At first, the audience and the performers are upset by the betrayal but a few voices in the audience and on the stage state that the art of drag is about accepting a true self, whoever that may be and that their anatomy should not matter.

The final scene of the film is the finale of the opening night performance. Connie and Carla have removed their drag costume and are dressed with simple make up, no wigs and form fitting evening gowns. The supporting drag performers are dressed as male sailors and have also removed their wigs but are still wearing their drag make up. They all sing the song "*There is Nothing Like a Dame*" from the musical *South Pacific* (Rogers and Hammerstein 1949).

### ***Kinky Boots* (Jarrold 2006)**

*Boots* (Jarrold 2006) is an Anglo-American film based on a true story. It is written by Geoff Deane and Tim Firth; directed by Julian Jarrold; produced by Suzanne Mackie, Nick Barton, Peter Ettldgui and Mairi Brett; and distributed by Miramax Films and Touchstone Pictures. The



film was released in the United Kingdom in October 2005 and in the United States in April 2006.

*Boots* tells the tale of a Northamptonshire shoe factory owner named Charlie Price (Joel Edgerton) who tries to keep his factory afloat after the death of his father. The factory, Price's and Son, manufactures conservative, hard wearing, men's dress shoes of which there is no longer a large demand due to cheaper imports.

A chance encounter leads Charlie to meet a drag queen named Lola (Chiwetel Ejiofor). The few minutes of discussion between them sparks an idea in Charlie. A few nights later, Charlie and one of his employees, Lauren, visit the drag club where Lola performs in order to ask her advice about a new product for the factory shop. Charlie intends to make "proper, good, decent, built-to-last boots for women that are men." Lola agrees to assist in the creation of the new range of shoes that must be produced before a shoe fair in Milan and temporarily works at the factory in Northampton.

After weeks of hard work, all the shoes needed for the fair have been made and to celebrate, Charlie and Lola meet for dinner. To Charlie's surprise, Lola, who has been uncharacteristically wearing men's clothes to the factory, arrives at dinner in her usual dress of women's clothing and accessories. Charlie is embarrassed and admonishes Lola. Charlie knows that this behaviour has probably upset Lola and fears that Lola will not meet him at the shoe fair in Milan. He will thus be without the models and choreography needed to present the new range of shoes on the catwalk. At the shoe fair where there is no sign of Lola, Charlie, dressed in a shirt, tie, suit jacket but no pants, nervously puts on a pair of the new boots and stumbles onto the catwalk. After falling face forward onto the catwalk, the lights change, the music starts and Lola and her drag queen dancers begin the choreographed show, all wearing the new range of shoes. The catwalk show appears to be a huge success.

It is revealed later that Charlie had called Lola and left a heartfelt message of apology on her phone that, among other reasons, compelled Lola to uphold her agreement with Charlie. *Boots* (Jarrold 2006) ends with Lola's regular drag performance where she announces to the audience that she will be leaving London and the drag club to work at the now named "Kinky Boot Factory".

## APPENDIX B

### Message of Recruitment Posted on Facebook.com

ATTENTION! FRIENDS! PLEASE HELP ME!

As you know, I am completing my Master's degree of Technology in fashion theory and gender studies at the Durban University of Technology.

As part of the investigation I am conducting field research in the form of a focus group discussion. I am looking for people who are interested in participating. The group will meet in Cape Town on a Saturday in a few weeks' time. The discussion will involve the sharing of opinions and perspectives regarding film costume in selected films. There will also be good coffee and good food. My aim is to assemble a very diverse group of participants so ANYONE who may be interested should click on the following link which will direct you a site that provides further details and a short questionnaire to be completed.

[https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/costuming\\_gender\\_survey](https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/costuming_gender_survey)

Please share this status with any friends that may be willing and able to participate. I am trying to get the word out to as many people as possible- I would greatly appreciate your help. Thank you so much!

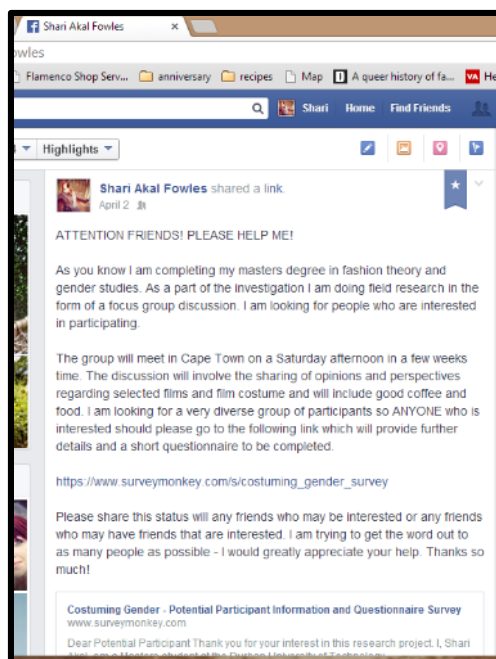


Figure 8: Screenshot: Message of Recruitment posted on Facebook.com

## APPENDIX C

# COSTUMING GENDER - POTENTIAL PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND QUESTIONNAIRE

## Introduction to Investigation

Dear Potential Participant

Thank you for your interest in this research project.

I, Shari Akal, am a Master's student at the Durban University of Technology. I am completing my Master's dissertation entitled "Costuming Gender: An Investigation into the Construction of Gendered Identity through Drag Costume in Mainstream Film."

The field research in this investigation involves a focus group that will take place either on Saturday, 26 April 2014 or Saturday, 10 May 2014. The group will meet at an office building in Cape Town (Buitengracht St). The meeting will last no more than three hours and refreshments (including good coffee) and snacks will be provided.

Please note that your participation in this investigation will be completely anonymous to the public throughout the investigation and in the dissertation (you will be referred to as a number - your name will never be used). Only I, the researcher, will have your basic information.

If you enjoy analysis and the sharing of ideas and opinions - this meeting should be an interesting and enjoyable experience.

Below is a request for contact information as well as a short questionnaire (should take only 5 mins) that will help me to determine which participants will make for the most diverse focus group. This contact information can be seen only by me, the researcher, and will be used only to communicate with you regarding this research project.

**1. Name:**

**2. E-mail Address:**

**3. Contact Number:**

**4. If asked to participate, which date would you be available to join the focus group?**

- ☐ 26 April 2014, 14:00pm - 17:00pm
- ☐ 10 May 2014, 14:00pm - 17:00pm
- ☐ Either date
- ☐ Can confirm later

Next

## Questionnaire

Please be as expansive as you wish.

**1. What is your age?**

yrs

Select from  
drop menu

**2. Are biologically male or female?**

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

Other (please specify)

**3. How would you describe your gendered identity?**

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Neither
- ☐ Both

If you wish to expand on your answer:

**4. How would you describe your sexual orientation?**

- ☐ Heterosexual
- ☐ Homosexual
- ☐ Bisexual

Other (please specify)

**5. What is the highest level of education you have completed? And, if applicable, in what subject?**

- ☐ Primary Education
- ☐ Secondary Education
- ☐ Tertiary Education: Diploma
- ☐ Tertiary Education: Degree
- ☐ Post Grad Education: Honours Degree
- ☐ Post Grad Education: Master's Degree
- ☐ Post Grad Education: PhD

Subject of highest degree (Diploma- PhD)

**6. What is your profession? If currently a student, please state at what level and in what subject.**


**7. Please choose whichever of the following words or phrases describe yourself (as many as you like).**

- ☐ Conservative
- ☐ Liberal
- ☐ Open- minded
- ☐ Religious
- ☐ Traditional
- ☐ Free spirited
- ☐ Cerebral
- ☐ Serious
- ☐ Happy-go-lucky
- ☐ Ambitious
- ☐ Passive
- ☐ Confident
- ☐ Opinionated
- ☐ Shy
- ☐ High-strung
- ☐ Laid back
- ☐ Blunt
- ☐ Sensitive
- ☐ Thick skinned


Are there any other words you would like to add which better describe yourself?

**8. Please rank the following in order of importance to you as an individual.**

 Politics

 Artistic pursuits (music, film, poetry, painting etc.)

 Philosophy

 Sport and exercise

 Economics

 Religion

**9. Which answer best describes the role of clothing style/fashion in your life?**

- ☐ I am an eager fashion trend follower
- ☐ I value personal style and know about trends but I don't follow them
- ☐ I don't care much about fashion but am aware of trends
- ☐ I don't really think much about clothing and fashion at all
- ☐ I think fashion is nonsense

Other (please specify)



**10. How often do you watch films?**

- ☐ Daily
- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ Hardly ever
- ☐ Never

Other (please specify)

**11. Please choose the statement which best describes your interest in film.**

- ☐ I only watch popular film
- ☐ I only watch art house film
- ☐ I watch popular and art house films
- ☐ I don't really watch film, I only watch TV series
- ☐ I watch popular film and TV series but not art house film
- ☐ I watch TV series and art house film but not popular film
- ☐ I watch it all!
- ☐ I don't watch any of the above

**12. Which, if any, of these films have you seen?**

- ☐ To Wong Foo: Thanks for Everything. Julie Newmar! (Kidron 1995)
- ☐ The Birdcage (Nichols 1996)
- ☐ Connie and Carla (Lembeck 2004)
- ☐ Kinky Boots (Jarrold 2006)
- ☐ I haven't seen any of the above

Thank you for completing the questionnaire.

I will contact you via e mail to let you know if you have been selected to participate in this investigation and if so, all further details will be given. You are free to decline participation at any stage.

If you have any queries you may e mail me at: [shariakalfowles@gmail.com](mailto:shariakalfowles@gmail.com)

Please click "done" to submit your questionnaire.

Prev	Done
------	------

Powered by **SurveyMonkey**

Check out our [sample surveys](#) and create your own now!

## APPENDIX D

STREET, COURT • ORANJECHICT • CAPE TOWN • SOUTH AFRICA  
• 8001 • PHONE: 084 20 • E-MAIL: SHARI@GMAIL.COM

# SHARI TAMAR AKAL

## LETTER OF INVITATION: FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

DATE: April 2014

TITLE OF RESEARCH STUDY: Costuming Gender: An investigation into the construction of gendered identity through drag costume in mainstream film.

You are invited to participate in a research study regarding audience perception of drag costume in mainstream film. This study is being conducted by the undersigned, Shari Akal, from the Department of Fashion and Textiles at the Durban University of Technology, as part of a postgraduate research project.

The focus group discussion will take place on **26 April 2014** from 14:00pm – 17:00pm. It will be held at the Urban Hub building, 142 Buitengracht Street, Bokaap, Cape Town.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study as a result of submitting the potential participation questionnaire at:

[https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/costuming\\_gender\\_survey](https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/costuming_gender_survey) . Please note that the information given in the questionnaire/s will be used to varying degrees in the dissertation. However, no contact information will be disclosed at any stage of the investigation.

There are no known risks or costs to you if you decide to participate in this research study. The duration of the focus group discussion will be approximately three hours. Please be aware that the focus group discussion will be recorded with audio-visual equipment, and transcribed.

Your participation in this study is anonymous to the public. In both the focus group and dissertation you will be referred to by a number. Therefore, the public will not be able to identify you or your answers and will not know that you have participated in the study. The number assigned to you during the focus group meeting will be changed in the dissertation in a further attempt to make any information you provide unidentifiable. Should the data findings be published, no individual information will be disclosed.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. **You are free to decline to answer any particular question during the discussion or withdraw from the meeting, should you not wish to continue for any reason.** A consent form is attached for perusal. This form will be given to you to sign when you arrive at the focus group meeting.

If you have any further questions about the study, please contact me at shariakalfowles@gmail.com.

  
Shari Akal (Mrs.)

## APPENDIX E

STREET, COURT • ORANJECHICT • CAPE TOWN • SOUTH AFRICA  
• 8001 • PHONE: 084 20 • E-MAIL: SHARI@GMAIL.COM

# SHARI TAMAR AKAL

## CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

I, Participant #..... (number)

confirm being over the age of 18 years, and hereby consent to participate as requested in the focus group for the research project on **26 April 2014**.

1. I have read the information provided in the letter of Invitation.
2. Details of procedures and any risks have been explained to my satisfaction.
3. I agree to audio/video recording of my information and participation.
4. I am aware that I should retain a copy of the Letter of Invitation and Consent Form for future reference.
5. I understand that:
  - I am free to decline to answer particular questions.
  - While the information gained in this study could be published, I will not be identified, and contact information will remain confidential.
  - The opinions I provide are my own and I have not been made aware of the intricate details of this investigation.
  - I may ask that the recording/observation be stopped at any time, and that I may withdraw at will from the session or the research without disadvantage.

**Participant's signature.....Date.....**

I certify that I have explained the information regarding participation to the volunteer and consider that she/he understands what is involved and freely consents to participation.

**Researcher's name.....Shari Akal.....**

**Researcher's signature........Date.....26 April 2014....**

## APPENDIX F

### **Clips Screened From *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything. Julie Newmar!* (Kidron 1995)**

Two clips were selected from *Foo* (Kidron 1995) to be screened for the focus group. The first is the opening scene of the film. In this scene two of the three drag queen protagonists, Vida and Noxeema, are seen getting dressed for the Drag Queen of the Year competition in New York. In this scene the audience see actors Patrick Swayze and Wesley Snipes wearing only towels and are then taken through the process of the two characters dressing in their padded under garments, feminine evening wear, make-up and wigs. This scene was selected not only due to the transformation from 'man' to 'woman' being significant in the art of drag but also due to the literary criticism this scene received. It was argued by Kane (2005: 26) that this scene was included in the film, especially at the very beginning, to assure a mainstream audience that the bodies which they will be viewing throughout the film are biologically male and furthermore are the bodies of two very well-known muscular and 'masculine' stars. It was argued that this would enable the audience to locate these bodies within the gender binary and that the heterosexism of the two stars would act as "straightening device" (Keegan 2013: 1) or "normalising strategy" (Frotscher 2013: 1) as to not pose a great threat to the normative gender expectations of the audience. It was thus of great interest whether the participants would confirm these literary arguments without prompting.

In the second clip selected from this film the three drag queen protagonists arrive at a motel in the mid-west on their way to California. Vida and Noxeema are extremely hesitant to enter the motel as they fear they will be ill received by the motel and its guests. Chi Chi insists that they enter the motel and storms through the entrance, forcing her travel companions to run in after her. The three are greeted in the foyer by the motel manager and are visibly surprised by how warmly they are received. They are then informed by the manager that "their friends" are in the adjacent room. They soon discover that the motel is hosting a women's basketball league and that the manager has mistook them for female basketball players. This scene was selected because it directly addresses the fear of ostracism that transgendered individuals face. The scene also alludes to the role of the body in the perception of gendered identity as the 'humour' of the scene relies on the understanding that female basketball players are taller and more muscular than the average women which is why the manager mistakes the drag queen protagonists as members of the female basketball league. Particular attention was paid to whether the participants would pick up on the 'humour' and what their perceptions were of the role of the body in the delineation of gendered identity. Considering this film was being viewed almost twenty years after its production, the selection of this scene sought to discover

whether the participants still understood the protagonists' fears of being ostracised or whether they felt that in contemporary society transgendered identities would not fear judgement or ostracism.

### **Clips Screened From *The Birdcage* (Nichols 1996)**

Three clips were selected from *Cage* to be screened for the focus group. The first clip was part of the opening scene of the film. In this scene the camera takes the audience through the entrance of the drag club 'The Birdcage' and settles on the stage to reveal multiple drag performers performing to the song *We are Family* by *Sister Sledge*. The scene ends with the drag queen performers running off stage where the camera reveals them stripping down to their underwear and re-dressing for their next performance. This scene was chosen as it was important for the participants to view and be able to comment on a popular film's interpretation of a traditional drag performance. Furthermore, it was interesting that the scene ended with the performers "uncovering" (Frotscher 2013: 6) and revealing their male bodies.

The second clip screened from this film features the drag queen protagonist Starina/Albert dressed in a plain masculine suit; no make-up; no accessories; a 'masculine' hairstyle; dress shoes and bright pink socks that are only uncovered later in the scene. This scene was chosen as it was of great interest to hear the participants' comments regarding a drag queen character not only out of drag but dressed in, other than the pink socks, completely masculine attire. Dressed in this way, what would the participants' perceive Starina/Albert's gendered identity to be? Furthermore, when the pink socks are revealed, would this alter or add to their initial perception? Due to the lack of overt feminine clothing, how would the audience read Starina/Albert's kinesics? Finally, this particular scene is discussed by Evans (1998: 211) where she states that Starina/Albert dressed in a suit is "more in drag than Albert in a dress." As the moderator, I sought to discover if the participants' might come to this conclusion without prompting, if not it was of great interest how the participants' felt about this literary observation.

The third clip screened for the focus group was a quick excerpt from the final scene of the film. The camera scans the guests seated in a church at the wedding of the characters Val and Barbara. The camera begins at the bride's side of the church where the pews are filled with individuals dressed in dark colours and conservative dress styles. When arriving at the groom's side, the camera shows the audience pews filled with individuals dressed in bright colours and eccentric styles and accessories. This clip was chosen in order to discover whether the participants felt that the costumes chosen sufficiently communicated the differences between the two sides of the church and whether such associations with dress still

exist today. In an investigation that is concerned with the way in which film costume communicates to the audience it was important to determine whether the participants found it easy to read identity from film costume and how they might compare such readings to the readings they make of individuals' dress in reality.

### **Clips Screened From *Connie and Carla* (Lembeck 2004)**

Two clips were selected to be screened from this film. In the first clip, the protagonists Connie and Carla enter a drag club and bar called "The Handlebar", unaware that it is a drag club. There they see a drag trio perform and overhear that this trio are moving their act to Las Vegas, leaving an opening at the club for a new drag act. Connie whispers to Carla that they should audition as the replacement act. Carla exclaims "but we're women!" to which Connie responds "no one needs to know that." The scene then cuts to the following day where the camera shows Connie and Carla enter the club dressed as drag queens, ready to audition. This scene was chosen to discover what the participants' opinions were regarding women rather than men dressed as drag queens as a concept and whether they felt the execution was successful.

In the second clip selected, Connie and Carla are performing on stage as drag queens along with other drag performers. At this point, the other drag performers as well as the audience at 'The Handlebar' are not aware that Connie and Carla are biologically women. This clip was selected as it provided the participants an opportunity to compare the biologically male performers with the biologically female performers and also to compare the representation of a drag performance from this film with the one screened for them from *Cage* (Nichols 1996).

### **Clips Screened From *Kinky Boots* (Jarrold 2006)**

Three clips were selected from this film. The first was a very short excerpt from a scene where Charlie presents Lola with the prototype boot he has made for her. Lola takes the boot out of its packaging and looks at it with wide eyes. At this point in the scene it is not clear whether Lola likes or dislikes the boot. Lola's feelings become clear later in the scene, however the clip screened for the participants was cut before Lola's verbal reaction. Cutting this scene at this point was intentional in an attempt to discover how the participants read the boot and how they felt Lola would feel about the aesthetic of the boot. Due to the variety of readings possible from any item of dress it was of great interest to ascertain how different the participants' readings of the boot would be; whether they would be able to make gendered associations

from the style features of the boot; and finally how they might make connections between what they assume Lola wants a pair of boots to look like and what she has been given.

In the second clip from this film, the camera follows very conservative men's shoes down a conveyer belt and amongst them a pair of tall, red, stiletto, snakeskin leather boots is revealed. The camera then pans past the factory workers' reactions to these boots. The boots are then taken off the conveyer belt by a pair of hands with long painted nails. The camera then moves upwards, following these hands as they put on these boots and zip them up. The camera continues past these boots, revealing the individual's legs, a printed shirt; a plain navy utility jacket and finally the camera reveals Lola's face. Lola is wearing make-up but no wig. This scene was chosen not only due to the contrast between the men's shoes and the boots but because Lola is wearing a very interesting combination of masculine and feminine signifiers. Due to this combination of 'male' and 'female' attire; a muscular male body; short 'masculine' hair and full feminine make-up, the moderator sought to discover the participants' reading of gendered identity in this ensemble as compared to ensembles viewed previously during the discussion.

In the final clip screened for the participants, Charlie and Lola meet at a restaurant for a celebratory dinner. Lola arrives at dinner dressed in full feminine attire which is quite different from what Lola has worn in the clip previously screened for the participants. This full feminine look makes Charlie very uncomfortable and he reprimands Lola loudly in the restaurant before rushing out. Outside the restaurant he continues to admonish Lola about her sartorial choices and states: "if you think you are...being the best of either sex, I have to tell you Simon. Standing there in a frock right now, you like the worst piece of both." This scene was selected as the dialogue directly addresses discrimination as a result of non-normative sartorial expressions of gendered identity. The participants were asked to pay special attention to the dialogue and comment accordingly.



## APPENDIX G



Figure 2: Marlene Dietrich in Morocco



Figure 3: Man in Wedding Dress



Figure 4: Katherine Hepburn in *Sylvia Scarlett* (Cukor 1935)



Figure 5: Julie Andrews in *Victor Victoria* (Edwards 1982)

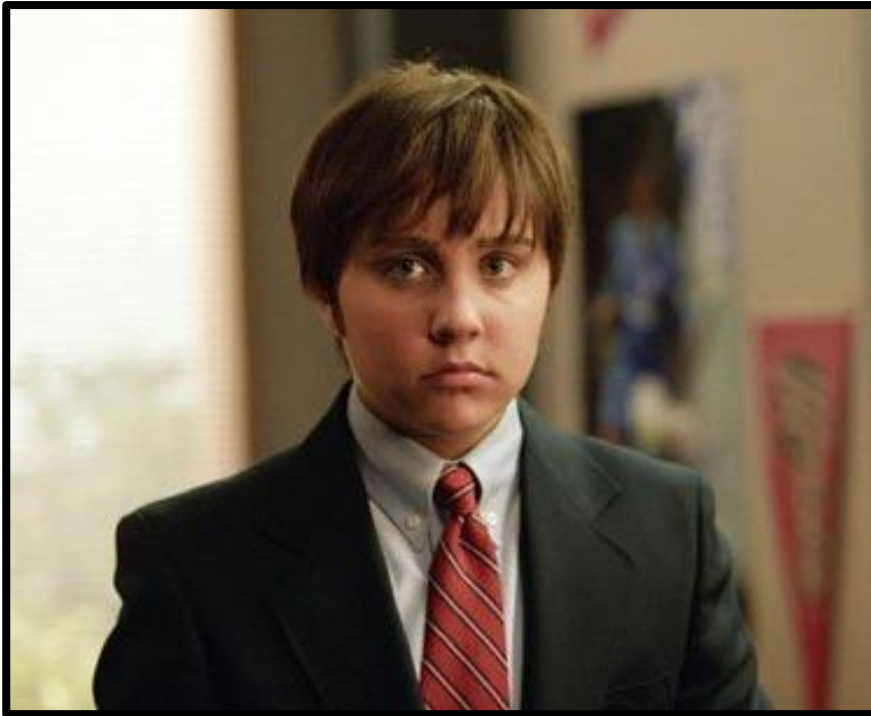


Figure 6: Amanda Bynes in *She's the Man* (Fickman 2006).



Figure 7: Screenshots from *The Birdcage* (Nichols 1996).





Figure 9: Screenshot from *Connie and Carla* (Lembeck 2004) and images of Lypsinka



Figure 10: Screenshots from *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar!* (Kidron 1995)

## APPENDIX H

### Basic Focus Group Schedule

The following is a basic skeleton schedule. It was intended that the direction of the discussion and asking of questions be determined by the participants' perceptions rather than a rigid schedule.

#### **'Costuming Gender' Focus Group: Saturday, 26 April 2014**

**14:00:** Arrival of participants.

Each participant is issued a number tag.

**14:00 – 14:15:** Refreshments

Participants are given refreshments and snacks and can briefly mingle.

**14:15 – 14:30:** Introduction

Participants are asked to go through to the boardroom. At each chair is a consent form and letter of invitation as well as a pen and a few sheets of paper. The participants are read the letter of invitation as well as the consent form so that they are reminded of their rights as a participant. All participants are asked to sign the consent form. Extra copies are provided and participants are encouraged to retain a copy.

The procedure and duration of the discussion as well as the role of the facilitator is briefly explained. Participants are encouraged to relax and freely give perceptions.

**14:30:** Commencement of discussion

**14:30 – 15:00:** Basic topics of investigation

What do the participants feel about the following quotes?

"Before a word is spoken, assumptions about one's identity are created through the evaluation of what he/she is wearing" [Paraphrased (Stone: 1962 cited in Lurie 1981)].

"If a girl behaves aggressively and gets into fights, she is often criticised for being 'unladylike' or 'inappropriate'. However, there is a categorisation of 'tomboy' reserved for girls who adopt a male rough and tumble style of play, who display fearlessness and refuse to play with dolls. And while in some circles 'tomboy' might be considered negative, in general in Western society it earns some respect and admiration. Boys who adopt girls' behaviours, on the other hand, are severely criticised." [Paraphrased Eckert and McConnell (2003:21-22)].

"Your ideas about who you are don't just come from inside you, they come from the culture. And in Western culture those ideas come especially from the movies. So we learn from the movies what it means to be a man or a woman, what it means to have sexuality." [Paraphrased (Dyer, interviewed in Epstein and Friedman (1995))].

Supplementary questions:

Do the participants use dress to initially assess someone's personality?

What do the participants think about the following terms: 'gender', 'sex', 'masculine' and 'feminine'?

What do the participants believe is the role of media in identity construction and more specifically, in the understanding of gender and gender roles?

**15:00 – 15:30:** Clips and stills from *Foo* (Kidron 1995)

What are the participants' perceptions, with particular focus on the costumes, of the following clips and stills?

**CLIP 1:** Vida and Noxeema get ready for Drag Queen of the Year Competition.

**CLIP 2:** Vida, Noxeema and Chi Chi stop at a motel in the Mid-West.

**STILLS 1:** Composition stills of Chi Chi in costumes praised and criticised by film critics (see Figure 10 in Appendix G).

**STILLS 2:** Comparison of Marlene Dietrich in tuxedo vs man in wedding dress (See Figures 2 and 3 in Appendix G).

Supplementary questions:

What do the participants think of the visual transformation from man to woman?

Why were the protagonists worried about staying at the motel?

What is the significance of the women's basketball league staying there?

Are some of Chi Chi's costumes more successful at making Chi Chi look like a woman than others?

**15:30 – 15:55:** Clips and stills from *Cage* (Nichols 1996)

What are the participants' perceptions, with particular focus on the costumes, of the following clips and stills?

**CLIP 3:** 'We are family' drag performance at The Birdcage

**CLIP 4:** Albert is dressed in a suit as Val's 'straight uncle'

**CLIP 5:** Wedding scene

**STILLS 3:** Composition stills of various biologically male characters (See Figure 7 in Appendix G).

Supplementary questions:

How does this scene compare to the drag performances participants may have seen in the past?

Do the participants agree that dressed that in a suit Albert “is even more obvious?” Obvious as what?

What role does costume play in the wedding scene? What does it say about dress, gender and identity in 1996? Has this changed in 2014?

Are the participants able to assume gendered and sexual identities from the costumes in the stills selected?

**15:55 – 16:10:** Break

**16:10 – 16:25:** Clips and stills from *CC* (Lembeck 20014)

What are the participants’ perceptions, with particular focus on the costumes, of the following clips and stills?

**CLIP 6:** Connie and Carla inadvertently go to a drag club and decide to audition as the new drag act.

**CLIP 7:** ‘I’m just a girl who can’t say no’ drag performance at The Handle Bar.

**STILLS 4:** Comparison of still of Carla vs image of Lypsinka (see Figure 9 in Appendix G).

Supplementary questions:

What do the participants think about the way Connie and Carla have transformed themselves? Are they convincing as drag queens? What does this say about gender and dress?

How do the participants compare the performances of the biologically male drag queens to the biologically female drag queen?

A reviewer compares Carla in drag to an existing drag performer, Lypsinka. Do the participants agree with this comparison?

**16:25- 16: 50:** Clips from *Boots* (Jarrold 2006)

What are the participants’ perceptions, with particular focus on the costumes, of the following clips and stills?

**STILLS 5:** Comparison of Katherine Hepburn, Julie Andrews and Amanda Bynes, as female characters dressed as men in film, with the drag queen characters from the selected films (See Figures 4, 5 and 6 in Appendix G)

**CLIP 8:** Lola receives the prototype boot

**CLIP 9:** Lola tries on the correct boot

**CLIP 10:** Charlie admonishes Lola's sartorial choices at dinner

Supplementary questions:

How do the participants compare the costumed representation of men on female actresses to the costumed representation of women on male actors?

What do the participants think Lola feels about the boot? Why?

How does Lola's outfit in the 'trying on the boot' clip compare to the full female outfit worn in the previous clip?

What is the significance of the dialogue in the final clip screened?

**16: 50 – 17:00:** Closing comments and Thanks to participants