Lines of Flight: a Deleuzo-Guattarian Exploration of Style as Resistance
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Abstract

Expanding critical scholarship on fashion, gender, and identity, this study aims to explore how dress and style can be used in a strategy of resistance through analyzing Chinese youths’ narratives about their appearance, personal style, gender, culture, and self. The study mainly draws on the philosophical ideas of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to engage with a research agenda, which disrupts the transcendent logic and challenges binarism and essentialism as the guiding approach to fashion studies. Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of rhizomatic thought and becoming, this exploration works within the realm of post-qualitative research. The study develops its argument through tracing two lines of creative “becoming” or lines of flight emerging from the “molecular mapping,” pointing to the moments of rupture and deterritorialization: gender and style: the ethics of consumption and style. The findings demonstrate the subversive potential in dress which challenges normalcy and regularity as well as consumerism, highlighting the complexity, multiplicity, and heterogeneity of gender, fashion, and subjectivity. It advocates the creation of more inclusive spaces and potential socially just territories through fashion and clothing.

Keywords: gender, style, identity, Deleuzo-Guattarian inquiry, social justice

Introduction

Current research in culture and fashion studies has focused on the extraordinary fashionable dress (Buckley & Clark, 2012), as well as “spectacular” subculture styles. However, the ordinary and everyday style has attracted less attention. While studies have investigated how subculture groups use dress and clothing as a strategy of resistance against the mainstream culture (e.g., Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004), they have been criticized for lack of women’s experiences in the research (e.g., McRobbie, 2000), and the tendency to ignore individual stylists’ subjectivity (Clarke, 1990). Moreover, much of the existing literature on gender, identity, and style is situated in the Western context (e.g., Kaiser, 2012), but the “style narratives” (Tulloch, 2010) of Chinese individuals are sparse. This study seeks to fill the research lacuna in this field by exploring how everyday dress style can be a site of resistance, difference, creation, and personal expression through analyzing Chinese youths’ narratives about their appearance, personal style, gender, consumption, and self.

Theoretical framework

This study draws mainly on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s (1987) philosophy of immanence and concepts such as becoming and line of flight to engage with a research agenda, opening up possibilities of theoretical triangulation. Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy of immanence is grounded in the situated bodily practice and the lived experience of everyday life, critiques the application of singular explanations or accounts, and rejects unitary and coherence, emphasizing difference, individuality, heterogeneity, and multiplicity of fashion, style, gender, and identity. It encourages different, pluralistic, and rhizomatic way of thinking.

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Becoming is one of the key concepts in Deleuze-Guattarian analysis, which suggests creation (rather than reaction), difference (from the norm), and multiplicity. “All becoming is a becoming-minoritariant” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.291), which is a continuing process of challenging and destabilizing an established system, order, or norm. The process of becoming is driven by desire that is a positive and generative force from within rather than a negative lack, which allows possibilities for thinking differently and moving away from normative or expected ways of being as well as binary categorization and essentialism associated with traditional understandings of gender and identity (such as femininity/masculinity, or normal/abnormal). The concept of becoming also rejects the pre-established starting point and end point, as well as the linear or straight progress. As Deleuze & Parnet (1987, p. 20) argue:

To become is never to imitate, not to “do like,” nor to conform to a model and “there is no terminus from which you set out, none which you arrive at or which you ought to arrive at. Nor are there two terms which are exchanged. . . . For as someone becomes, what he is becoming changes as much as he does himself. Becomings are not phenomena of imitation or assimilation, but of a double capture, or non-parallel evolution, of nuptials between two reigns.

As developed in the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the concept of line of flight (or deterritorialization) refers to “a movement by which we leave the territory, or move away from spaces regulated by dominant systems of signification that keep us confined to old patterns, in order to make new connections” (Roy, 2003, p. 21). Following such lines of flight enables us to break down rigid boundaries and clear-cut categorization, move away from the norm, and create new connections and relations on a plane of immanence, disrupting hierarchies, dominant norms, and power structures and opening up opportunities for becoming-other or becoming-minoritariant. Methodological issues are briefly discussed in the next section.

Methodology

Inspired by Deleuze and Guatarri’s (1987) concepts of rhizomatic thought and becoming, this study works within the realm of post-qualitative research, interrupting the “clarity-seeking and closure seeking tendencies” (MacLure, 2006, p. 6) in data collection and analysis. Post-qualitative research allows me to move beyond “essentialist identities, brute data, and fixed categorization of phenomena and processes” (Martin & Kamberelis, 2013, p. 669), provide more dynamic understandings of the research agenda, and open up new possibilities and becoming, foregrounding individuals’ subjectivity as well as the materiality and vitality of non-human materials (such as clothing).

This exploratory study discusses the experiential and situated accounts of individuals’ reflection on their embodied dress style, fashion, gender, and clothing choice, accessed through face-to-face dialogues with 10 participants, informal friendly conversations, participant observations, and WeChat messages for clarification and depth, using existing literature and published narratives as supporting data sources. Informed consents were obtained, and participants are de-identified to ensure privacy and confidentiality. It is worth noting that this study sees research data as agentic matter, which has agency and the capacity to affect the researcher, rather than as passive things waiting to be collected, coded, and analyzed by the researcher (MacLure, 2013). As such, data analysis involves working intensively with data that can stimulate my thoughts, spark my interests, capture my attention, or “speak” to me (MacLure, 2013), allowing the “lines of flight” to emerge from analysis.

The inductive analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) was guided by the research
questions, the theoretical framework, and the existing literature. The findings of the study are open to “the interpretation of interpretation” (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000) by readers who not only can engage with the “audience validation” (Kvale, 2007), but also take part in the discussion around meanings individuals make in terms of style, gender, clothing choice, and sense of self. The lines of flight emerging from the analysis of research data are presented in the next section.

**Lines of Flight**

The study develops its argument on style as a site of resistance and transgression through tracing two lines of flight or lines of creative “becoming” that “dismantles social stratifications, opening onto an unknown field of differentiation” (Hickey-Moody & Malins, 2007, p. 6), challenging discursive determinism and pointing to the moments of rupture and deterritorialization: *gender and style*, and the *ethics of consumption and style*. We look at each of these in turn.

**Gender and Style**

Concerns about the relationship between dress and gender are not new. Current literature not only demonstrates the important role fashion and cloth play in terms of establishing the differences between two ascribed and essentialized gender categories, “masculinity” and “femininity” (e.g., Hollander, 1995), but also highlights the subversive potential in dress that challenges essentialism and binary gender discourse (Butler, 1990; Crane, 2000). Following this line of inquiry, this section looks into how individuals challenge hegemonic (or “molar”) gender norms through everyday style that includes both dress and body modification such as tattoos and piercing (e.g., Kaiser, 2012). In this study, *becoming-other or becoming-minoritarian* along lines of flight is another way of thinking about resistance that is driven by participants’ desire for authenticity, becoming and difference, not just a passive reaction to the “coercive powers of social structures” (Allfred & Fox, 2017, p. 2). Here, gender subversion or resistance emphasizes an action that “denaturalizes, destabilizes, and defamiliarizes sex and gender signs” (Garber, 1992, p. 147), rather than simply reversing binary sex and gender distinctions.

All participants in this research had a strong sense of challenging gender stereotypes in clothing, identifying themselves as those who are reluctant to conform to the mainstream style of dress and gendered clothing norms. PA1, a young man who was passionate about fashion, is introduced here as an exemplar of such a norm deviator who sometimes dresses up as a Lolita in everyday life. In his conversation with me, PA1 narrated his engagement with Lolita style, highlighting that he was not a cosplayer and that he was attracted to this effeminate and “fabulous” (Moore, 2012; see also Berry, 2017) style simply because “it is more beautiful and exquisite than other clothes.” Furthermore, his transgressive sartorial choice allowed him to express an “imaged self” that is a part of his authentic self or the true self: “When I wear the Lolita dress, I feel that I am different from others. It allows me to express the imaged self. . . . It is not cosplay, and I am not pretending to be someone else. It is me.”

Wearing the hyper-feminine Lolita style enabled PA1 to take a line of flight from the rigid territory of heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990), and construct his appearance in a way that disrupted the traditional and essentialized masculinity and the notion of being normal.
His account of becoming-other provided an immanent disruption to the transcendental ideals of masculine norms of appearance. Echoing PA1’s account, another young man, PA2 created a line of flight away from gendered clothing norm:

Speaking of personal style, I have my own style. My daily clothing choices often have some female elements or feminine characteristics. For example, the silk, striped dress I’m wearing today is actually a woman’s dress. In fact, I think that you should have your own aesthetic, and you can wear whatever style of clothes you think is suitable for you. There is really no need for men to wear masculine clothes and women to wear feminine clothes.

In a similar vein, female participants in this study also challenged conventional gender stereotypes through their personal style and appearance. Their “molecular” challenges to feminine norms were driven by desires for difference and creative self-expression. They were reluctant to conform to feminine clothing that represents an ideal image of conventional “girly” femininity, describing their personal dress style as “not that feminine,” “gender neutral,” and “a bit rebellious.” For instance, PA3 reflected on her style and the gender norm:

I am a bit rebellious, you know. Basically, I wear whatever I want. I’m not bound by rules or traditional ideas of beauty and femininity. Who says that women should wear long hair, skirt, or high heels? I often wear boys’ T-shirts or pullovers. I prefer sneakers. I feel comfortable wearing them. I think that’s who I am. Generally speaking, I think my style is quite gender neutral.

Here, PA3 refused to internalize dominant feminine clothing norms, and demonstrated a capacity to cultivating a sense of self that is not keyed upon the ways the self is typically subjunctivized by others—an authentic self. Becoming-minoritarian in this instance is an active resistance to the fixed, transcendent ideals prescribing what a woman should be and what she should wear, which forms a line of flight over the dichotomous thought and majoritarian ways of being, breaking down gender stereotypes through clothing. Such an account of non-conformity was reinforced by other participants, such as PA4, PA5, and PA6. who wore individualized clothing with tattoos and piercings, further deterritorializing the striated territory of feminine norms of appearance. It could be understood that by bearing a “formerly masculine sign” (Mifflin, 2001) on their bodies, they had destabilized and challenged the transcendental ideals of femininity and the standards of feminine beauty. However, although this explanation may still stand, it is important to note that for PA4, PA5, and PA6, having tattoos and piercings is more about authenticity, artistic and self-expression, as well as the mnemonic quality of tattoo, thinking beyond the transcendent value of whether it is “right” or “wrong” to have tattoos and piercings on the female body:

Each of my tattoos has its own meaning, and it is an inspiration for my life. It’s something I think is worth keeping. It’s all part of me. For example, this tattoo, this figure is a Buddhist palm, and it symbolizes creation. And the graphics are also very artistic. I think they are very good and can reflect myself, so I got this tattoo done.
It is a kind of self-expression. I think it is very artistic, it is beautiful, and it can accompany me for the rest of my life. (PA5)

I am aware of the social stigma associated with tattoos. And I know there is prejudice against women with tattoos in society, but I just like tattoos. I'm attracted to tattoos because I like visual art and symbolic things. I just think tattoos are cool . . . the tattoos on my body are physical memories of the important events of my life. (PA6)

Data such as the above also highlight a key theoretical point: that resistance could be viewed as a process of becoming-other, driven by desires for authenticity and personal expression, and not so much about the traditional and dichotomized understanding of resistance (against an external power such as gender norm).

To sum up, in many ways, everyday dress style is a site of creation, difference, and resistance. Each of the participants engaged with a process of becoming-other or becoming-minoritarian along lines of flight, indicating a desire to overlook or think beyond the rigid boundaries of gender norms imposed on them.

**The Ethics of Consumption and Style**

Most of the participants’ data have suggested that they were engaged with some sort of sustainable consumption that “broadly denotes the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and foster a certain quality of life, while minimizing environmental harm to ourselves and future generations” (Hobson, 2013, p. 1). The second line of flight, therefore, concerns clothing consumption and sustainability, along which participants became conscious consumers who provide an immanent resistance against mass-production and postmodern consumerism. For instance, PA7 explained to me her clothing choices and personal style:

I mean I’m not really into the mainstream fashion. They are all the same. Currently I’m really interested in vintage style and recycled fashion, because they are all unique and it is hard to find an exactly same one in the world, plus they’re environmentally friendly.

Due to its homogeneity or lack of distinctiveness, mass-produced mainstream fashion failed to form a productive encounter with PA7, evoking her desire for difference and becoming-other. As a result, she was attracted to secondhand clothing such as “vintage style and recycled fashion” that was unique and environmentally sustainable. PA7’s account demonstrated that her molecular resistance against the hegemonic or molar ways of consuming was not only about the need for self-expression and individuality, but also related to ethical concerns about the environment. Secondhand and vintage clothes not only offered PA7 the opportunity to participate in sustainable clothing consumption, but also opened space for her to conduct molecular search for uniqueness, individuality, and creativity in a becoming-conscious consumer. Emphasizing “currently”, PA7 highlighted the momentary-ness and eventfulness of the processes of becoming-minoritarian as well as the nomadic nature of deterritorializations. This detail was also found in other participants’ narratives.
Similarly, drawing a line of flight toward human and environment well-being, another participant, PA8, challenged dominant consumption norms and disrupted fashion’s cycle through using secondhand clothes (Bly et al., 2015) and purchasing fewer garments (Niinimäki, 2013); her relationship to clothing was informed by her concern for ecological well-being:

There is too much fashion waste caused by poor quality clothing . . . I think we should enhance the awareness of environmental protection. I also like the idea of recycling. For example, I have donated and recycled used clothes through Alipay or Xianyu app. I buy a lot less clothes now than before, and am really into secondhand clothes.

Furthermore, participants including PA9 were engaged with sustainable fashion consumption by purchasing items made of natural fiber or “eco-friendly” material as well as “durable and good-quality garments.” This strongly resonates with the findings of Connell (2011) on consumers’ eco-conscious clothing purchasing behaviors. Other participants, such as PA10, also expressed her concern for sustainability:

Making cloth is not just about making money or expressing a design idea, you need to think about nature, sustainability. . . . Fashion has a huge waste problem . . . I care about sustainability and do not mind wearing secondhand or recycled cloth.

To sum up, this section traces the line of flight away from the dominant and rigid territory of the traditional fashion system, concerning the process of becoming-conscious consumers as minoritarian subversion or resistance against unsustainable clothing consumption. More specifically, it uncovers that participants’ non-conformity to the “molar” ways of consuming was felt by them as a means to express difference, uniqueness, and individuality as well as care for environmental well-being. By engaging with secondhand or vintage clothing, participants not only disrupt the norm of fashion consumption, but also “question the notion of fashion being concerned exclusively with the new” (Clark, 2008, p. 428). Analytically, participants’ accounts resonate with the findings of Bly et al. (2015) on sustainable fashion consumption pioneers.

**Final Thoughts**

This post-qualitative study sets out to explore how everyday dress style can be used in a strategy of resistance through analyzing Chinese youths’ narratives about their appearance, personal style, gender, clothing choice, and self. By offering participants a chance to “speak” to us we are able to better appreciate the nuances and complexities of everyday dress and style. It draws on the philosophical ideas of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to engage with a research agenda, which disrupts the transcendent logic and challenges of binarism and essentialism as the guiding approach to fashion studies. The study develops its argument through tracing two lines of creative “becoming” or lines of flight emerged from “molecular mapping,” pointing to the moments of rupture and deterritorialization: gender and style, and the ethics of consumption and style.
The study demonstrates various ways in which individuals are negotiating expected gender and fashion consumption norms. The findings demonstrate the subversive potential in dress and style that challenge normalcy and regularity as well as consumerism, highlighting the complexity, multiplicity, and heterogeneity of gender, fashion, and subjectivity. Moving away from the dichotomized understanding of resistance which is a passive reaction to an active and external power, this study indicates that resistance is a process of becoming instigated by individuals’ desires of difference, creation, uniqueness, authenticity, and care for sustainability. It is important to note that resistance is processual and transitory, and involves continually exploring different new concepts, forms, and modes of knowledge beyond the confines of the rigid boundaries, clear demarcations, and binary oppositions. It calls for the creation of more inclusive space and potential socially just territories through fashion and clothing, advocating heterogeneity and uniqueness in fashion design which allows for personal expression, avoids gender stereotypes, and supports conscious consumption.

References