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## Redressing Dress Codes: The Effects of Sexualized School Dress Codes

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# Redressing Dress Codes: The Effects of Sexualized School Dress Codes

“When we refuse to be the master’s tool, we expose the violence of rods, the violence’s that built the master’s dwelling, brick by brick.”

~Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (2017)

*This paper analyzes the way society sexualizes women’s bodies through the education system. I am writing about dress codes because fellow classmates and I have been affected by this. It is important for society to understand that a sexualized view of students perceived as female can affect society as a whole. I hope that readers of this essay will want to change this system and redress the dress codes they have unwittingly followed.*

## Introduction

In high school, I got my first taste of institutional sexism when I was escorted out of the classroom for wearing a sleeveless shirt. As an innocent ninth grader I was mortified. I did not put on my new sleeveless shirt that morning thinking I was going to be humiliated in front of my whole class. I was confused as to why my education suffered for that class period while the boy sitting next to me, also in a sleeveless shirt, went unpunished? Why was my body being picked out and sexualized for the whole class to see? Even at the young age of fourteen, I knew this was wrong. Why did no one of higher power fight back?

Throughout my middle to high school experience, our school dress code became stricter and stricter. During the warmer times of the year, it was tremendously hard to find ‘appropriate’ clothes that were weather friendly. It was also difficult to express fashion and style with the limiting dress code. I found the dress code irritating and demeaning to the women in my class and me. Little did I know the dress code was the beginning of systematically sexualizing young women’s bodies in society. Over half of the women in my grade at some point would be taken out of class and coded for something as senseless as a shoulder showing. It was a bigger deal for a female student in my school to violate the school dress code than to actually be in class.

This paper analyzes the way society sexualizes women’s bodies through the education system. I am writing about dress codes because fellow classmates and I have been affected by this. It is important for society to understand that this sexualized view of students perceived as female can affect society as a whole. I hope that readers of this essay will want to change this system and redress the dress codes they have unwittingly followed.

### **A Gendered Institution**

Whether you realize it or not, the American education system has

gendered students from the very beginning. Early on, students are separated by activities and games that have gender specific categories. During playtime, society encourages boys to play with trucks and construction tools while encouraging girls to play with Barbies and kitchen sets. I remember walking in the halls of elementary school mindlessly following the “girl’s line” while the boys had their own separate “boy’s line.” If students went in the wrong line, the teacher would scold them and tell them to follow the “rules.” In high school, the girls went in a separate gym to do yoga while the boys got the choice of weight lifting or hockey. As a girl, you were not allowed to choose the “masculine” activities and the boys were not allowed to do the overwhelming perceived “feminine” activity, simply because these were the rules. Students rarely broke the rules because the American education system functions as a gendered institution.

According to Wade and Ferree (2015), under a gendered institution, rules and regulations enforce and affirm gender roles and performatives. These institutions enforce a gender binary of male and female, leaving little room for individuals who do not fit the mold. Students are categorized as either girls or boys, thus placing them into different categories and shown to be valued differently amongst social spaces and

activities. The gendered institutions create policies and procedures that require individuals to follow the instruction on how to appear and behave as either a man or a woman. School dress codes are one of the many formal policies that American schools use to enforce gender conformity. These dress codes support and enforce a gender binary. If an individual falls out of the binary, they are not only reprimanded by their peers, but also penalized by these codes.

In this essay, I analyze school dress codes using a gender binary lens, because the pervasiveness of the gender binary is central to my critique. However, in the end, the only way to disrupt these hypersexualized codes is to dismantle the gender binary. With disrupting the binary, we would be able to rid the schools of codes that hold individuals to rigid and different standards with regard to one's gender. Thus, the answer to solving many of the problems within school dress code policies is to disrupt the gender binary and create a society that treats individuals of all identity as equals.

### **Dress Codes Perpetuating Rape Culture**

Shauna Pomerantz (2007) conducted a study addressing the ways school dress code standards affected the case of Marcia Stevens and her community.

Throughout Pomerantz's (2007) research, she identifies the ways school dress codes sexualize and gender stereotype the bodies of students perceived as female. She does this by analyzing Marcia Stevens's case, where she was dress-coded for wearing a low-cut tank top. Throughout this case, Pomerantz (2007) argues that Marcia Stevens was seen as a sexual object no matter what she wore because of her "large" and "bosomy" body (p. 375). This case is an example of the many ways society hypersexualizes women's bodies. Once the school coded Marcia Stevens for her "inappropriate" neckline, (Pomerantz, 2007, p. 375) they also labelled Stevens as a promiscuous girl (Pomerantz, 2007). Pomerantz (2007) argues that school administrations enabled dress codes to hold females accountable for upholding 'school morals.' In the situation with Marcia, she did not hold herself to these standards, and therefore, did not fulfill her 'duty' as a woman. By exposing her breasts with a revealing shirt, the school administration saw Marcia as a distraction to her male peers, teachers, and administration (Pomerantz, 2007). The idea that exposing female body parts distracts men is a problem in itself.

By sexualizing women's bodies in school, we do not hold men accountable for their actions, rather, we see men as unable to control themselves when

viewing a woman's body. In society, this can lead to a variety of problems including rape culture. Robert Jensen (2004) conceptualizes rape culture as follows:

[Ours] is a culture in which sexualized violence, sexual violence, and violence-by-sex are so common that they should be considered normal. Not normal in the sense of healthy or preferred, but an expression of the sexual norms of the culture, not violations of those norms. Rape is illegal, but the sexual ethic that underlies rape is woven into the fabric of the culture (p.55).

Unfortunately, this is the culture in which we live. As women and other marginalized genders, we grasp our keys between our knuckles on a dark walk to the car praying no one attacks us. We only go out with friends, with the hope we can keep each other 'safe.' We always make sure we are wearing something that does not expose too much skin, something that covers the parts we would get in trouble for if exposed in a school setting. Perhaps, this was the school's most important lesson to all of us young and impressionable students. Nothing regarding language arts, math, or science, but everything regarding the female body and the way we can sexualize it. We learn to ALWAYS cover up, and if you chose not to, you are responsible for the consequences. Not

anyone else, just you. We must connect school dress codes and rape culture because the school administration perpetuates the objectification of women's bodies and constructs women as the problem. When school-aged boys learn from a young age that they do not have to control themselves around women because of the way they are dressed within a school setting, they will also hold themselves to this idea outside of school.

As a society, we must recognize the way we condemn women for violence against them. In studies regarding rape culture, this is called victim blaming (Valenti, 2009). If we blame women for the way they dress during school hours, and argue that this distracts boys and makes them unable to control themselves in the presence of a woman, we are also leading society to believe that a woman's appearance is at fault when men commit crimes of rape and sexual assault. This becomes apparent in rape cases when comments such as, 'What was she wearing?' and 'Her choice of clothing was asking for it' arise.

According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN, 2018), two out of three sexual assaults go unreported. RAINN (2018) additionally conducted a survey with the intention of understanding reasons associated with not reporting. It found that the majority of victims did not report because they

feared retaliation (RAINN, 2018). This can be directly connected to the social construction of stigma associated to sexual assault victims. Jackson Katz (2006) brings attention to this issue through the amount of victim blaming that resulted from the sexual-assault charge against Kobe Bryant. Quickly after the victim reported the rape, media outlets channeled all attention toward her. Katz (2006) suggests that people all over began to question her morals, mental stability, sexual practices, and characteristics. In this instance, instead of focusing on the famous basketball star who committed the abhorrent crime, society was turning the blame to the vulnerable female victim. Katz (2006) states that through victim blaming,

The primary message to girls and young women is simple enough: if you have been raped, do not tell anyone. Look at the price you will pay-- especially if the perpetrator is popular. People will not believe you. They will actually blame you for damaging his reputation (p. 156).

A similar message is sent to girls and young women who break the dress codes: if your dress attire is showing any skin at all, you are a distraction to others, and therefore, you are the problem and you will be reprimanded for it.

### **The Chastity Belt of Dress Codes**

Regina Rahimi and Delores Liston (2009) addressed the way female high school teachers changed their views on students who had been dress coded. Rahimi and Liston (2009) conducted interviews with teachers and concluded that teachers perceived students differently after they were coded for dress attire. Throughout this study, Rahimi and Liston (2009) explored the way teachers viewed dress codes and the appropriateness of dress code policies. The authors found that many of the teachers interviewed held strong double standards between their female and male students in relation to perceptions of, or assumptions about, the student's sexuality (Rahimi & Liston, 2009). This study suggests society's control over female sexuality is so embedded in our culture that most of the time we do not even realize how gendered it is. This double standard is important to recognize because, as a society, we must see how we encourage young boys to have sexual experiences without negative repercussions, but when girls engage in the same behavior, we brand them with an offensive label. This study additionally recognized the way teachers saw female sexuality as a problem through the idea that women should remain pure and not express sexuality (Rahimi & Liston, 2009). The teachers not only encouraged females not to express sexuality, but they also expressed

their displeasure of female students wearing any type of clothing that did not fully cover all body parts (Rahimi & Liston, 2009). Teachers' views and perceptions of young impressionable students should be acknowledged because they can have a powerful impact on the students. For the most part, many of these teachers are the primary authority figure for students. Their role as a teacher goes further than what can be found in a textbook. Teachers have the ability to impact students outside academics and either show them acceptance or disapproval. In Rahimi and Liston's (2009) study, the teachers interviewed were showing their disapproval.

Clothing is not the only way we objectify women in schools. When school districts implement abstinence-only education, they are suppressing sexuality as well. Jessica Valenti (2009) studied the effects of abstinence-only education in the classroom. She found that abstinence-only education programs misinform many students, and that the abstinence-only curriculum is based on driving fear and shame into all things related to sex (Valenti, 2009). Many of these abstinence-only lessons and textbooks reinforce the unwritten societal law that women are responsible for men's sexual actions. In workbooks from *Sex Respect*, Valenti (2009) found lessons stating the following:

1. 'Because they generally become aroused less easily, females are in a good position to help young men learn balance in relationships by keeping intimacy in perspective'....
2. 'Girls need to be aware they may be able to tell when a kiss is leading to something else. The girl may need to put the brakes on first in order to help the boy' ....
- 3.) 'A woman is far more attracted by a man's personality, while a man is stimulated by sight. A man is usually less discriminating about those whom he is physically attracted' (p. 107).

All of these lessons are examples of the many ways schools that implement, and those who teach, abstinence-only education are reinforcing society's socially constructed gender roles. These programs are used to fortify the notion that blame should be put on the backs of women, thus supporting the idea that women (rather than men) should be policed for their sexual behaviors and dress attire. Valenti (2009) found an additional section from *Sex Respect* which reads, "A guy who wants to respect girls is distracted by sexy clothes and remembers her for one thing. Is it fair that guys are turned on by their sense and women by their hearts" (p.108)? This curriculum is yet again teaching the youth that a man is likely unable to control himself or be respectful because the female body is too distracting, especially with "sexy" clothes. What if, instead of teaching our female youth that

men are entitled to their “sexy” clothed bodies, we teach men and women about respect and consent? What if, instead of teaching our female youth how to avoid getting raped, we taught our youth not to rape? What if, instead of focusing the blame of rape on the victim, we actually focus our attention on the rapist who should be held responsible? What if we did not use dress codes to degrade and condemn women, but instead, to empower them? We could empower students through dress by enabling them to freely express their appearance without judgment and sexual harassment.

Rahimi and Liston’s (2009) study further examines the manner in which a young high school girl is told to behave. On one hand, school officials, churches, and authority figures express to girls that it is important to remain pure. Yet movies, social media, music, and fashion industries tell young girls that they need to look sexy in order to appear cool and well liked by peers (Rahimi & Liston, 2009). This is important to address while analyzing dress codes, because it is crucial to understand societal influences on young students. High school is already a confusing age when young people struggle to find themselves and their purpose in the world. This does not need to be further confused by enforcing a dress code that will not let a student fully express and discover who they are

as a person. From my experience, students wear an outfit to school because they feel confident in it; female students are not dressing to ‘receive sexual attention’ from their male peers or the school’s faculty.

### **Double Standards**

DeMitchell, Fossey and Cobb (2000) discuss elementary, middle, and high school principals’ perceived necessity for school dress codes. Their study found that 85 percent of the principals believed dress codes are necessary within their school. Compared to 15 percent of principals who regarded dress codes as unnecessary (DeMitchell, Fossey & Cobb, 2000). DeMitchell, Fossey and Cobb (2000) additionally found that elementary school principals were more likely to respond that a school dress code was unnecessary, while middle and high school principals saw an immediate need for dress codes. This part of the study was intriguing because in elementary schools there should be no need to sexualize girls’ bodies. This makes one think whether it is the female students sexualizing their own bodies when they reach middle and high school, or if it is the dress code of the school district that sexualizes the students. Are students breaking the code because they want to sexualize their bodies, or is the code being broken because it stands as a way to further sexualize female students?

The online student handbook for San Antonio's Premier School District Northside ISD (2018) states the following under the 'Dress and Grooming' Section:

Shorts and skorts may be worn at the elementary school level. In grades three through five, they should be no more than four inches above the top of the kneecap. Shorts and skorts are prohibited in grades six through twelve (p.D-8).

In this instance, the school officials are not only restricting the dress for a child in grades three through five, but they are also completely eliminating the allowance of shorts and skorts once a student graduates elementary school. This code, and many others, is designed to bury female sexuality before it even emerges. These types of codes systematically privilege the patriarchy while simultaneously squandering the insufficient amount of autonomy a young female has remaining.

DeMitchell, Fossey and Cobb (2009) also examined the styles of clothing that these school districts prohibited most frequently. Among these school districts, the majority of the prohibited styles were directed toward female students. At Hickory Ridge High School in Harrisburg, North Carolina, the school threatened a female senior named Summer with arrest for violating the school dress code. The school accused Summer of disobeying the code by

wearing a shirt that showed her collarbone and shoulders (Sherwin, 2017). The online student handbook for Hickory Ridge High School (2017) states: "No t-shirts that have been cut, spaghetti straps, off-the-shoulder tops, mesh tops, tube tops, or halter tops are allowed" (p. 3). Because of her off-the-shoulder shirt, the school found Summer to violate this code and removed her from class, hindering her education (Sherwin, 2017). The Hickory Ridge Online Student Handbook's (2017) particular dress code required students to follow twelve rules, with seven out of the twelve directly working to oppress the dress of female students. The rest of the rules on the list were working to limit the expression of race and ethnicity. DeMitchell, Fossey and Cobb (2000) found this to be a recurring factor with the way schools implement dress codes. If the dress codes are not used to hypersexualize women's bodies, they are used to conceal the expression of nonwhite race and ethnicity (DeMitchell, Fossey & Cobb, 2000). As this essay focuses primarily on the way dress codes sexualize the bodies of female students, further work should be done to critique the way intersectionality operates through the use of dress codes to oppress race and ethnicity.

Bleiberg (2003) makes it clear that dress code related issues are being put on the backs of women. Bleiberg (2003)

reinforces the idea that many individuals view dress codes as a necessary way to a means because women need to be controlled and guided. Bleiberg (2003) states, “Additionally, magazine and television ads promote skimpy fashions that adolescents interpret as appropriate for everyday activities, including school” (p. 6). As a society, we tell women that they need to dress in a certain fashion to be viewed as cool. However, in a school setting, we tell women that they must not wear the types of clothing seen as cool because many of these clothes are prohibited in a school setting. This is interesting because if a woman chooses to dress a certain way, she should be allowed to make that decision. With the school district deeming what a woman can and cannot wear, the schools are in turn taking away a woman’s bodily autonomy. It is also important to look at how ads displayed on television and magazines work to sexualize women’s bodies. Frequently, the apparel in the ads are not sexualizing women’s bodies, but the way the ads are created and depicted, work to sexualize the bodies of women. In turn, this creates the idea that any female wearing tightly fitted or skin-barring clothing must be seen as a sexual object.

Bleiberg (2003) additionally states, “Adolescents who wear low-cut pants and tight tops might not realize that they are sending a message that screams of

sex. Their aim is to be accepted and well liked, but not necessarily an object of lust” (p. 8). This statement is very contradictory. The author is arguing that the students dress in certain clothing options in order to be well liked but states that the students are unaware that the way the dress screams of sex (Bleiberg, 2003). If students do not realize that their outfits are screaming of sex, who is at fault? It is not the students in the outfits, but it is the individuals who sexualize the bodies of the students wearing these outfits.

### **Dress Codes and Superiority**

Simone de Beauvoir (1952/1989), an author and feminist theorist, brought attention to society’s view of women as other in her book, *The Second Sex* (1989). In this book, she recognizes the ways society works to show women that they are considered less important than men are. In the introduction of the book, de Beauvoir (1952/1989) states:

Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. Michelet writes: ‘Woman, the relative being ...’ And Benda is most positive in his *Rapport d’Uriel*: ‘The body of man makes sense in itself quite apart from that of woman, whereas the latter seems wanting in significance by itself ... Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man.’ And she is simply what man decrees; thus she

is called 'the sex', by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute – she is the Other (p. 26).

This statement helps us understand the underlying power dynamics that influence student dress codes. Beauvoir (1952/1989) recognizes that society views men first and women second. Everything that society does is first for men. She also argues that women are only seen as relative to men, which depicts women as a man's object. This is important to observe in the dress code policies because most administrations believe a woman does not have the ability to do anything for herself. When a woman dresses in revealing clothing, societal norms conclude that she is partaking in this behavior for a man and not for the confidence in herself.

Beauvoir's (1989) theory can illustrate ways dress codes script that a woman "appears essentially to the male as a sexual being" (p. 26). One can recognize this in dress codes because most of the reasons behind the gendered policies are due to the idea that the female body distracts men. By creating a dress code intended to prevent the distraction of males in a classroom, the school system shows female students that they are less

important than male students are. The school district demonstrates that a man's education holds greater importance in society. It is important to recognize why schools penalize women for their dress attire. We must understand whether schools penalize female students because they dressed inappropriately or if schools penalize female students because women's bodies are so sexualized that anything they wear is considered a distraction to men. It is additionally essential to analyze the message we are sending to women when we penalize them for distracting their male peers. It stands to make women inferior to men. It holds men as society's greatest importance and women as the "other." The school districts are thus telling women that their education and growth is not nearly as important as men, because women are, in the end, supposed to be in the home. Through this, society demonstrates the belief that women should not care about their education because in the end they *must* marry a man who will be their breadwinner. Because, unfortunately, as hard as a woman works, she will never surpass the white, heterosexual, cisgender rich man that society paints as the ideal individual.

The consequence of dress codes is significant. In most cases, a female student missed class as a result of being dress-coded. Under the dress code

section in the Hickory Ridge high school student hand book (2017), it listed the consequences for violating the dress code as follows: a warning; change of attire, and parent contact; Saturday School; and 1 day of in-school suspension. We must consider whether it is necessary to take a student out of class to change their dress attire. We must further consider the necessity of taking a student out of class and making them sit in suspension during school hours for a dress code violation. We should not be taking away from a woman's education because of the possible 'distraction' she could be to men. In reality, we should recognize that larger issues arise when we take a woman out of the classroom, limiting her education.

### **My Closet, My Sister's Closet and Our Future's Closet**

Today, as I go to my closet to pick out an outfit, I take many factors into account. I consider who I will see, the environment I will be in, and most importantly, how other individuals will perceive me. Each setting requires a different dress attire to be socially accepted, from the clothing's colors to the amount of skin exposure. The school system has conditioned me to take something inherently simple and turn it into a complex process.

Today I find myself following these unwritten societal rules for my own protection. I find myself covering my shoulders with a blazer prior to attending an interview and reluctantly buying the skirt that reaches my kneecaps to ensure my body is not going to be sexualized by the individual conducting the interview. I send pictures of my outfits to friends asking for their reassurance regarding the outfit's appropriateness, guaranteeing it will not limit my chances of getting the job. I put my hair back and wear a high-collared shirt to send the message of professionalism. I follow these rules to try to receive the same opportunity as my male peers. However, my white, heterosexual, cisgender male peers may dress to look professional, but they likely do not get dressed wondering whether they look too sexual.

I search my closet for the perfect top to wear on a night out. I look for something I feel confident in, yet something that still covers the majority of my skin. I again ask for friends' reassurance whether or not the top is too much or too little, trying to find that perfect mix. I do not wear the top that exposes most of my back without a sweater to cover. I do not wear the top with the plunging neckline to assure my innocence. I stay close to those I trust hoping no one finds our clothing to be an invitation to our bodies.

I listen to my sister cry in the dressing room because she cannot find shorts long enough to provide the amount of coverage her school requires. I feel for her as she gets frustrated with the fact that her friend was coded for wearing a dress with spaghetti straps. I stick up for her as my dad disciplines her for getting in-school suspension because of her rebellious nature. I encourage her to break the code and show the district they should not control these aspects of a child's life.

It is time we use the education system to lift and empower students. Individuals should have the authority to wear what they feel comfortable in regardless of their gender. As a society, we should disrupt these codes individuals unwilling follow. We should give our youth a voice, and listen to this voice. We should not operate under these white heteronormative patriarchal systems anymore. We must use our voice to expose the problems gender construction creates in coding dress, and work toward change.

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