# Dressing for Desire: An Exploratory Mixed-Methods Pilot Study on Clothing, LGBTQ+ and heteronormative Identities in Spanish and Mexican students
# Vestirse para el Deseo: Estudio piloto exploratorio con enfoque mixto sobre vestimenta e identidades LGBTQ+ y heteronormativas en estudiantes españoles y mexicanos

*Melissa García-Meraz [a], Claudia Margarita González-Fragoso [b]*

**Abstract:**

This exploratory mixed-methods pilot study examines how university students in Spain and Mexico use clothing as a tool for romantic self-presentation, revealing how gender and sexual orientation influence fashion choices. Drawing from symbolic interactionism, cultural studies, and queer theory, the research highlights how LGBTQ+ and heterosexual youth navigate normativity, desire, and identity through dress. Using visual ranking tasks and open-ended responses, the study identifies two main aesthetic tendencies: normative/traditional styles and expressive/alternative fashion. Bisexual and sexually diverse participants displayed more variability and resistance to normative codes, particularly in Oaxaca, where regional conservatism increases the stakes of gender expression. Men identifying as sexually diverse preferred casual, non-traditional styles, rejecting formal clothing as symbols of hegemonic masculinity. Meanwhile, heterosexual participants aimed for social adequacy and comfort. Clothing thus emerges not merely as decoration, but as a space of negotiation—between visibility and safety, belonging and dissent. Findings underline fashion's political and affective dimension in dating contexts, especially for youth constructing their identities in varying sociocultural terrains.

*Keywords:*

*Gender identity, symbolic consumption, LGBTQ+, fashion scripts*

**Resumen:**

Este estudio piloto exploratorio con enfoque mixto analiza cómo estudiantes universitarios en España y México utilizan la vestimenta como herramienta de autopresentación romántica, revelando cómo el género y la orientación sexual influyen en las decisiones estéticas. A partir del interaccionismo simbólico, los estudios culturales y la teoría queer, se identifica que jóvenes LGBTQ+ y heterosexuales negocian la normatividad, el deseo y la identidad a través de la moda. Mediante rankings visuales y respuestas abiertas, se identifican dos tendencias estéticas: una normativa/tradicional y otra expresiva/alternativa. Las personas con orientaciones sexuales diversas mostraron mayor variabilidad y rechazo a códigos normativos, especialmente en Oaxaca, donde el contexto conservador acentúa los riesgos de expresión de género. Los hombres de sexualidad diversa prefirieron estilos casuales y no convencionales, rechazando lo formal como símbolo de masculinidad hegemónica, mientras que los participantes heterosexuales priorizaron la comodidad y la adecuación social. La vestimenta se revela como un espacio de negociación entre la visibilidad y la seguridad, la pertenencia y la disidencia. Los hallazgos subrayan la dimensión política y afectiva de la moda en los escenarios de citas, especialmente para juventudes que construyen su identidad en contextos socioculturales diversos.

*Palabras Clave:*

*Identidad de género, consumo simbólico, LGBTQ+, guiones de moda*

[a] Autor de Correspondencia: Melissa García-Meraz, Institución: Facultad de Psicología Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México | Ciudad-estado: Ciudad de México | País: México, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7761-8069, Email: melissa.meraz@psicologia.unam.mx

[b] Co-autora: Claudia Margarita González Fragoso Institución: Área Académica de Psicología, Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo | Ciudad-estado: Pachuca de Soto, Hidalgo | País: México, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8400-6033, Email: email@uaeh.edu.mx

## INTRODUCTION

Clothing functions as more than mere material covering; it operates as a symbolic and affective interface through which individuals construct and negotiate their identities. In university contexts, where young adults explore autonomy, relationships, and self-definition, fashion becomes a crucial medium for romantic self-presentation. Prior studies have shown that clothing communicates not only aesthetic preferences, but also adherence to or resistance against gender scripts and cultural expectations (Bovone, 2016; Entwistle, 2000).

Despite growing scholarly interest in fashion, identity, and romantic behavior, research examining how clothing choices for dating vary across cultural contexts and sexual orientations remain limited. Most existing studies have focused on heterosexual norms, often overlooking the symbolic tensions faced by LGBTQ+ individuals as they navigate visibility, desirability, and safety through dress (Siddiqui & Rane, 2024).

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, Stone (1962) emphasized the importance of appearance —particularly clothing— in shaping identity, challenging the overreliance on language in theories of self-presentation. He argued that individuals express who they are through what they wear, and that identity is socially validated when others recognize these visual cues. Building on this, Braidotti's (2000) notion of nomadic identities highlights how subjectivities are multiple, mobile, and situated within global circuits of power and consumption rather than rooted in a single, stable category. Clothing becomes one of the key technologies through which these shifting, "on the move" identities are negotiated across different cultural, temporal, and economic contexts.

While the meaning of clothing evolves over time (Tortora & Marcketti, 2015), many styles and practices have historically been gendered, allowing individuals to both signal their own gender and interpret that of others through dress. In recent years, the emergence of non-binary fashion has disrupted these norms, favoring garments that blur or reject traditional gender distinctions and that circulate transnationally through fashion industries, marketing, and digital platforms (Kaiser & Green, 2021; Mackinney-Valentine, 2017). These trends are not merely aesthetic innovations: they are also connected to LGBTQ+ struggles for recognition, the commodification of diversity by global brands, and new forms of youth consumption that rework gender as an open, negotiable field rather than a fixed binary.

Research exploring the relationship between clothing and identity within LGBTQIA+ communities remains scarce and often narrowly focused on sexual orientation. Clarke and Turner (2007) found that appearance norms among individuals identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual were rigid and socially enforced—those identifying as lesbian were often expected to adopt masculine styles, while gay men were associated with tight clothing, bright colors, and fashion-consciousness. No specific appearance norms were identified for bisexual individuals. Subsequent studies (e.g., Huxley et al., 2014; Clarke & Smith, 2015) confirmed that dress plays a role in signaling sexual identity, though some participants felt pressure to conform to stereotypical "camp" or "modern" gay male aesthetics.

In line with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach, clothing can be understood as part of an everyday "performance" through which individuals manage impressions in front of others. The romantic date, as a highly ritualized scene, intensifies these dynamics: the dressed body becomes a complex social message that communicates gender, availability, status, and desire. Rather than a neutral adornment, clothing operates as a symbolic language that allows individuals to position themselves within, against, or at the margins of dominant romantic scripts.

Judith Butler (1990) expands on this reading by conceptualizing gender as a performative practice. Clothing thus becomes a repetitive act that embodies and reproduces—or challenges—gender norms in specific affective rituals, such as flirting, going out on a date, or negotiating the beginning of a relationship. In this sense, aesthetic decisions about how to dress for a date are far from trivial: they condense tensions between what is socially expected and what is personally desired, between belonging and dissent. For many LGBTQ+ individuals, these romantic rituals also constitute a space of resistance, where the dressed body can question heteronormative assumptions and open other ways of being seen and desired.

From a Bourdieusian perspective on social structure and distinction, concepts such as *habitus*, field, and different forms of capital help to explain how clothing choices are patterned by class trajectories and embedded in broader fields of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1984). Attire not only expresses individual taste but also reproduces social divisions, signaling proximity to or distance from dominant norms—even in the intimate realm of dating.

Moreover, studies on emotionality and gender dissidence, such as those by Ahmed (2014) and Halberstam (2011), invite us to analyze clothing not only as an identity marker but also as a site of affective struggle. In non-heteronormative contexts, attire becomes an instrument to negotiate visibility, belonging, and bodily safety.

Beyond aesthetic expression, dress in trans communities takes on a strategic and political dimension. Lewis and Johnson (2011), drawing on gender theory, documented how one trans woman modified her appearance—sometimes performing in drag or adopting a masculine aesthetic—when entering leisure spaces, driven by fear of negative responses. Her most positive experiences occurred when she felt affirmed in her gender identity, suggesting that clothing functions as both a tool of affirmation and a protective mechanism.

Complementing this view, self-verification theory (Swann, 2012) posits that individuals are motivated to seek confirmation of their self-concepts from others. In this context, clothing serves as a strategic medium for affirming one's gender identity, allowing individuals to align external perceptions with internal self-definitions. Together, these frameworks suggest that dress operates as a communicative, affective, and political tool in the negotiation of identity, especially within LGBTQIA+ communities.

Building on these theoretical foundations, recent research has explored how clothing functions as a tool for gender expression within LGBTQIA+ communities. For instance, Adomaitis et al.

(2021) examine the nuanced relationships between dress and gender identity, highlighting how apparel choices reflect, reinforce, and sometimes challenge normative expectations. Their findings underscore the importance of clothing as both a personal and social resource in navigating gendered experiences.

For members of LGBTQ+ communities, fashion often functions as a micro-political practice rather than a purely aesthetic choice. Clothing can operate as a dual strategy: a way to resist normative pressures and a means of recognition and safety within one's own community. Specific silhouettes, colours, and accessories can mark sexual and gender dissidence, signal solidarity, or reference queer and trans histories (Sandıkcı & Ger, 2010; Ahmed, 2014; Halberstam, 2011). At the same time, the same garments may expose individuals to surveillance, ridicule, or violence in heteronormative spaces. In this sense, getting dressed for a romantic date in non-heteronormative contexts is not just a "negotiation" of belonging, but an explicitly political act of visibility, resistance, and affirmation of identity.

These tensions are especially acute in conservative or highly gendered settings, such as some regions of Oaxaca, where deviations from conventional femininity or masculinity may carry social and physical risks. Here, clothing can alternate between a protective strategy —"passing", minimizing difference, or conforming to local expectations—and an assertive practice that claims space for non-normative bodies and desires in public and semi-public arenas.

While heterosexual individuals may unconsciously follow scripts rooted in cultural norms, LGBTQ+ daters often face additional tensions: whether to blend in, stand out, or subtly signal their identity to potential partners. These decisions are especially relevant in social contexts marked by unequal rights, limited visibility, or regional conservatism—such as in some areas of Oaxaca, Mexico (Bovone, 2006).

This theoretical framework enables us to understand how, in university dating scenarios, bodies are dressed not only to seduce but to narrate themselves to others. The study thus seeks to highlight the tensions between normativity and agency— between what is expected and what is desired in terms of clothing—among heterosexual and sexually diverse youth, in contexts such as Mexico and Spain.

The romantic self-presentation of university students in Spain and Oaxaca offers rich ground for analyzing how culture, gender, and sexuality intersect through fashion. Spanish participants often express a sense of individuality and modernity in their clothing choices, drawing from globalized fashion trends and liberal dating norms. In contrast, students from Oaxaca, while also engaging with global fashion, may display a greater sensitivity to local cultural values, gender expectations, and family dynamics, particularly in the case of LGBTQ+ individuals who must navigate both tradition and desire.

In this context, the present work is designed as an *exploratory mixed-methods pilot study* that combines a visual ranking task with quantitative analyses (PCA and factorial ANOVAs) and qualitative open-ended responses. Our aim is not to produce generalizable estimates, but to generate initial evidence on how heterosexual and sexually diverse youth in Spain and Mexico

construct romantic clothing scripts at the intersection of gender, sexuality, and local cultural conditions.

## METHOD

**Participants**

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants, grouped by country (Spain and Mexico) and by sexual orientation. To ensure ethical and inclusive language, participants were classified as identifying with normative (heterosexual) or non-normative (including bisexual, homosexual, and pansexual) sexual orientations. The table includes information about age, gender identity, and relationship status, showing a diverse distribution across sites and orientations.

Participants from Madrid and Oaxaca were relatively similar in age (M ≈ 20–21) and included diverse gender identities. Those identifying with non-normative sexual orientations represented a range of gender identities and were slightly more represented in Madrid. Relationship status varied across groups, with heterosexual participants more frequently reporting being in a romantic relationship, while most participants with non-normative orientations reported being single. These patterns reflect diversity across both geographic and identity variables, providing a rich basis for analyzing symbolic self-presentation in romantic contexts.

*Table 1.*

*Descriptive Statistics by Sexual Orientation and Country (Spain and Mexico)*

| Sexual orientation | Country | n | Age M (Min–Max) | Women | Men | In a relationship |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bisexual | Madrid | 7 | 20.7 (19–23) | 6 | 1 | 5 |
| Bisexual | Oaxaca | 10 | 20.4 (18–22) | 6 | 4 | 5 |
| Heterosexual | Madrid | 14 | 21.4 (19–26) | 6 | 8 | 7 |
| Heterosexual | Oaxaca | 12 | 21.2 (18–23) | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| Homosexual | Madrid | 5 | 19 (18–20) | 0 | 5 | 0 |
| Homosexual | Oaxaca | 1 | 20 (20–20) | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Pansexual | Oaxaca | 1 | 21 (21–21) | 0 | 1 | 1 |

*Note.* Descriptive statistics for participants by sexual orientation and country. "n" refers to the number of individuals in each group. "Age M (Min–Max)" reports the mean and range of age. Gender is based on self-identification. "In a relationship" indicates participants who reported being in a romantic relationship at the time of the study.

Spain and Oaxaca (Mexico) were selected as contrasting yet historically connected contexts that differ in their gender norms, romantic practices, and clothing styles. The Spanish sample was recruited in Madrid, an urban setting marked by global fashion brands and greater public visibility of LGBTQ+ movements. The Mexican sample came from Oaxaca de Juárez, in southern

Mexico, where local dress traditions and more conservative gender expectations coexist with globalized youth cultures. This comparison allows us to analyse how romantic clothing scripts are shaped by broader sociocultural configurations in each context.

In both countries, participants were predominantly *urban/university students/ young adults*, but their sociocultural locations differed. In Spain, most participants lived in central, urban neighbourhoods with regular access to commercial and leisure spaces where dating typically takes place (cafés, bars, shopping streets). In Oaxaca, participants were recruited mainly from $urban/semi-urban$ areas of the state capital, with some participants commuting from peripheral municipalities.

We describe this study as intercultural not simply because it involves two national groups, but because it examines how romantic clothing practices are shaped by interactions between distinct cultural frameworks and unequal positions within global circuits of gender and consumption. Interculturality is understood here as the dynamic relationship between subjects socialized in different normative regimes of masculinity, femininity, and fashion, rather than as an essential difference between "Spanish" and "Mexican" cultures. Methodologically, this perspective is operationalized through the comparative design: country is treated as a key grouping variable, but the analyses focus on patterns of similarity and difference in romantic scripts, rather than on fixed cultural stereotypes. This allows us to address how local configurations of gender and dress are articulated within broader transnational processes.

## Procedure
Participants were invited to take part in a survey as part of a cross-cultural study on symbolic consumption and romantic relationships. After providing informed consent, they completed a visual ranking task along with demographic questions. The task was administered within a broader interview context, which was recorded and transcribed to ensure accurate scoring.

## Instrument
The instrument consisted of ten visual stimuli (labeled A to J) depicting distinct clothing styles, differentiated by gender. These were selected following a preliminary focus group to ensure cultural and symbolic relevance in both Mexico and Spain.

Participants were presented with ten visual stimuli depicting distinct clothing styles and were asked to rank them from 1 to 10, with 1 indicating the outfit they would be most likely to wear on a romantic date, and 10 the least likely. This forced-ranking task encouraged participants to comparatively evaluate all options, reflecting symbolic and aesthetic preferences related to romantic self-presentation. Each style conveyed different cultural and emotional cues, allowing participants to express or assess identity and desirability in the dating context.

## Women's Styles
**W-A**: Urban casual – laid-back and youthful.
**W-B**: Layered street style – creative and trend-aware.
**W-C**: Casual feminine – modest yet sensual.
**W-D**: Smart-casual – relaxed and professional.
**W-E**: Retro-modern – vintage and assertive.
**W-F**: Formal and elegant – ambitious and powerful.
**W-G**: Mexican traditional – cultural pride.
**W-H**: Indigenous-inspired – rootedness and resistance.
**W-I**: Fashion-intervention – rebellious and artistic.
**W-J**: Avant-garde tailoring – intellectual and bold.



**Figure 1:** *Women´s instrument*

## Men's Styles
**M-A**: Urban alternative – skater/creative identity.
**M-B**: Basic-casual – comfort and mainstream masculinity.
**M-C**: Smart-casual – responsible and emotionally available.
**M-D**: Business-casual – modern reliability.
**M-E**: Classic formal – mature and traditional masculinity.
**M-F**: Professional formal – ambition and status.
**M-G**: Mexican traditional – rootedness and heritage.
**M-H**: Ethnic contemporary – cultural pride with a modern touch.
**M-I**: Experimental – rebellious and norm-challenging.
**M-J**: Deconstructed tailoring – intellectual and fashion-forward.



**Figure 2:** *Men´s instrument*

Open-ended prompts accompanied the ranking to capture narratives and reasoning, enriching the analysis of symbolic consumption in romantic settings.

## Analysis
A Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was conducted to examine the underlying structure of participants' responses to symbolic consumption items. Prior to analysis, all items were standardized. The PCA was conducted using the *FactoMineR* package (Lê, Josse, & Husson, 2008) and visualized with *factoextra* (Kassambara & Mundt, 2020) in R. The Kaiser criterion (eigenvalues > 1) and scree plot guided the retention

of components. We also visualized individual scores and explored group clustering by sexual orientation and gender.

To explore differences in romantic outfit preferences among women and men by sexual orientation and country, a 2x2 factorial ANOVA was conducted for each outfit scenario (W-A to W-J or M-A to M-J). The between-subjects factors were sexual orientation (Heterosexual vs. Diverse Sexuality) and country (Madrid vs. Oaxaca). Separate analyses were run for each city to capture contextual differences.

## RESULTS

**Self-Presentation Through Clothing in Romantic Contexts: Women**

Figure 3 shows the individual factor map from the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) conducted on female participants, grouped by sexual orientation (bisexual and heterosexual). The analysis retained the first two components, which together explained 43.9% of the total variance (Dim1 = 23.4%, Dim2 = 20.5%). Overall, bisexual participants appear more dispersed across the two dimensions, whereas heterosexual women cluster more tightly, suggesting greater variability in responses among bisexual women regarding symbolic consumption or dating self-presentation items.
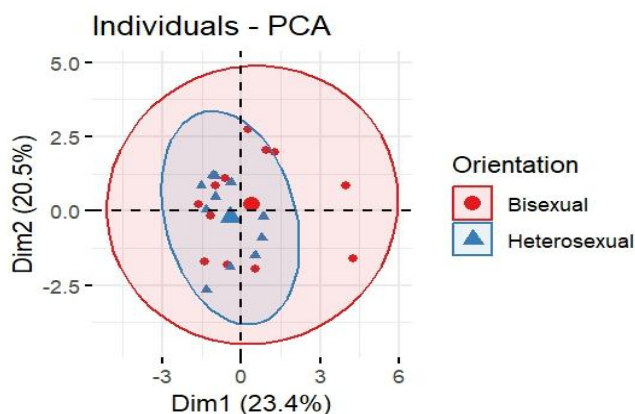


**Figure 3** *Principal Component Analysis (PCA) of Clothing Preferences Among Women by Sexual Orientation (Bisexual vs. Heterosexual)*

*Note.* The biplot represents the distribution of women participants along the first two principal components based on their responses to symbolic consumption items. Ellipses represent 95% confidence intervals for each sexual orientation group.

Figure 4 illustrates the contributions of each item to the PCA dimensions. The first component (Dim1) was mainly defined by items W-B (Layered Street style 27.3%), W-D (Smart-casual 19.7%), W-G (Mexican traditional 22.5%), and W-H (Indigenous-inspired 19.9%), suggesting this axis may represent normative or traditional dating behaviors. The second component (Dim2) was dominated by items W-E (Retro-modern 30.0%) and W-F (Formal and elegant 27.1%), potentially reflecting emotional expression or alternative styles of romantic self-presentation. These results indicate two distinct axes in women's dating self-presentation: one aligned with culturally normative scripts, and another related to more diverse or expressive behaviors.
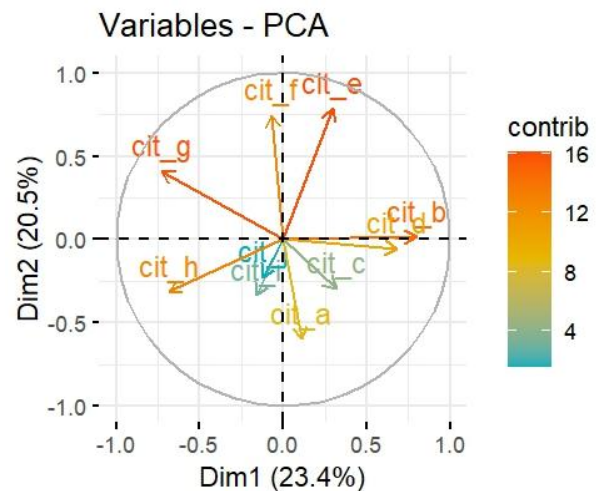


**Figure 4** *Contribution of Clothing Items to the First Two Principal Components in Women's Romantic Self-Presentation (PCA)*
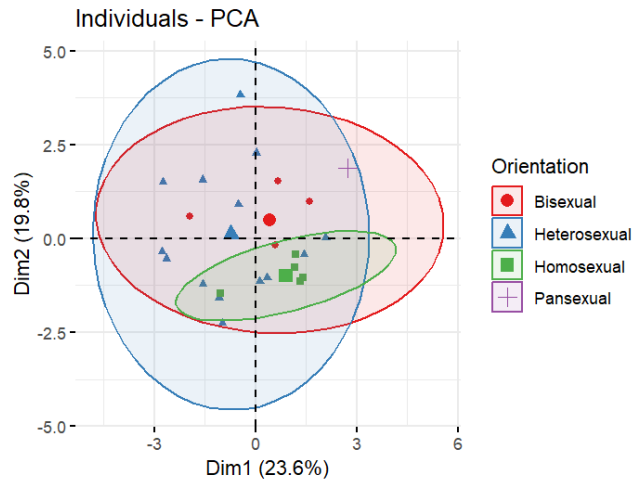
*Note.* This figure displays the contribution of each clothing item (W-A to W-J) to the first two principal components. Dim1 and Dim2 explain 23.4% and 20.5% of the variance, respectively. Arrows represent variable loadings; longer arrows indicate stronger influence. Colors reflect the degree of contribution, with warmer tones indicating higher values.

**Self-Presentation Through Clothing in Romantic Contexts: Males**

Figure 5 displays the distribution of individual scores on the PCA dimensions, color-coded by sexual orientation. Although the groups show partial overlap, a noticeable pattern emerges: bisexual and heterosexual male participants tend to cluster more tightly around the center, while homosexual participants are more dispersed, especially along Dimension 2. This pattern may suggest greater heterogeneity in how homosexual participants interpret and prioritize behaviors in dating contexts. The 95% confidence ellipses further illustrate the variability within each orientation group.

Taken together, these PCA results reveal key differences in how romantic behaviors are conceptualized, possibly shaped by cultural scripts and expectations linked to sexual orientation.

**Figure 5** *Principal Component Analysis (PCA) of Clothing Preferences Among Male by Sexual Orientation*



*Note.* The biplot represents the distribution of men participants along the first two principal components based on their responses to symbolic consumption items. Ellipses represent 95% confidence intervals for each sexual orientation group.

Figure 6 shows that items such as M-F (Professional formal 27.73 %), M-I (Experimental 14.19 %), and *M-E* (Classic formal 14.85 %) had the highest contributions to Dimension 1, suggesting their importance in differentiating individual responses along this axis. In contrast, items such as *M-C* (Smart-casual 23.26 %), *M-H* (Ethnic contemporary 24.14 %), and *M-D* (Business-casual 18.81 %) again contributed strongly to Dimension 2, indicating their role in shaping variance along that secondary axis. Items closer to the origin had less influence on the principal components.
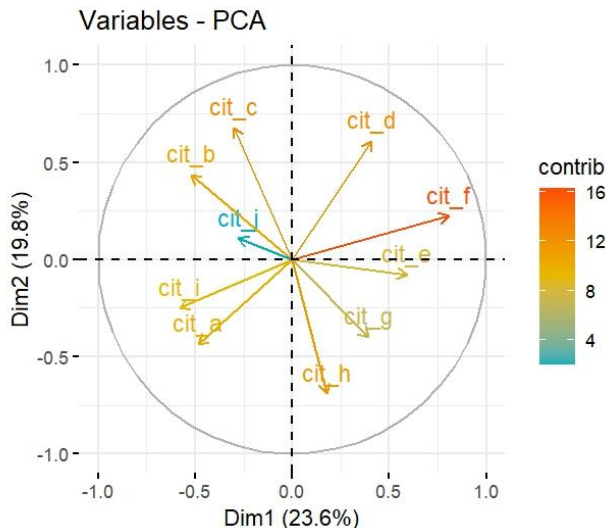


**Figure 6** *Contribution of Clothing Items to the First Two Principal Components in Men's Romantic Self-Presentation (PCA)*

*Note.* Vectors represent item contributions to the two main dimensions. Items with greater contributions (e.g., *M-C, M-D, M-H*) are located farther from the center and contribute more to the structure of the principal components.

## Cross-Cultural Differences in Symbolic Self-Presentation: differences per gender, sexual orientation, and country

Table 2 displays the mean scores and standard deviations for each clothing item rated by participants, disaggregated by gender. Participants evaluated how likely they would be to wear each item themselves (*W-* or *M-*). This summary allows for a preliminary comparison of male and female preferences in romantic self-presentation and partner expectations through clothing choices.

**Table 2**
*Mean and Standard Deviation of Romantic Outfit Preferences by Gender*

| Item | Women M(SD) | Male M(SD) |
|---|---|---|
| A | 3.54(2.55) | 3.54(3.06) |
| B | 2.62(2.28) | 3.65(2.23) |
| C | 3.83(1.86) | 3.69(2.09) |
| D | 5.33(2.14) | 4.31(2.35) |
| E | 5.12(1.90) | 5.19(1.98) |
| F | 6.12(2.23) | 5.81(2.68) |
| G | 6.79(2.99) | 6.81(2.19) |
| H | 7.88(2.49) | 7.65(2.26) |
| I | 5.75(2.97) | 6.54(2.87) |
| J | 8.00(1.87) | 7.73(2.49) |

*Note.* This table presents the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) for each outfit item evaluated by female and male participants. Ratings were made on a 10-point scale, indicating the likelihood of choosing each outfit for a romantic date scenario. Items are annotated as A to J with indifference with gender.

## Differences between sexual orientation and country in women

Among women participants, a significant interaction effect was found for item *"W-*B**. Layered Street style – creative and trend-aware"* ($F_{(1, 20)} = 5.998$, $p = .024$), indicating that preferences for this outfit varied as a function of both sexual orientation and country. The mean scores suggest that participants identifying as sexually diverse from Oaxaca rated this outfit as less suitable for a date (M = 5.00, SD = 3.41), compared to heterosexual participants from Madrid (M = 2.17, SD = 1.17), sexually diverse participants from Madrid (M = 1.67, SD = 1.03), and heterosexual participants from Oaxaca (M = 1.67, SD = 0.82). Higher scores reflect a perception of the outfit as less appropriate for romantic contexts.

Additionally, item *"W-*I. Fashion-intervention – rebellious and artistic"* showed significant main effects for both sexual orientation ($F_{(1, 20)} = 4.507$, $p = .046$) and country ($F_{(1, 20)} = 5.227$, $p = .033$), indicating that women's preferences for this outfit varied across both variables. Mean scores reveal that participants identifying with non-normative sexual orientations (M = 4.67, SD = 2.42) rated this outfit as more appropriate compared to heterosexual women (M = 6.83, SD = 3.16), suggesting a greater preference for its use among sexually diverse women. Regarding the main effect of place of residence, mean scores showed that women living in Madrid reported a lower average (M = 4.58, SD = 6.92) compared to women living in Oaxaca (M = 6.92, SD = 3.40). This suggests that women in Madrid were more likely to choose this outfit for a date.

Finally, a significant main effect of country was observed for item "W-H. Indigenous-inspired – rootedness and resistance" (F (1, 20) = 10.697, p = .004), highlighting that women from different countries evaluated this item differently. Las medias muestran que las mujeres de Oaxaca reportan una media más baja (M = 6.50, SD = 2.43), lo que indica una mayor predisposición a su uso en comparación con las mujeres de Madrid (M = 9.25, SD = 1.71).

**Differences between sexual orientation and country in men**
Among men, some clothing preferences for romantic dates varied significantly according to sexual orientation or country. Specifically, a main effect of sexual orientation was found for item "*M-B.* Basic-casual – comfort and mainstream masculinity*"* (F (1, 22) = 4.93, p = .037), suggesting that men with different orientations varied in their interest in this clothing item. Regarding the main effect of place of residence, mean scores showed that women living in Madrid reported a lower average (M = 4.58, SD = 6.92) compared to women living in Oaxaca (M = 6.92, SD = 3.40). This suggests that women in Madrid were more likely to choose this outfit for a date.

Additionally, a main effect of a country was found for item "M-F. Professional formal – ambition and status" (F (1, 22) = 6.08, p = .022), indicating regional variation in this preference. The means show that men residing in Oaxaca reported a lower average (M = 4.67, SD = 2.93), while those living in Madrid had a higher average (M = 6.79, SD = 2.08). This suggests that men in Oaxaca are more willing to wear the *Professional formal.*

Other items showed marginally significant effects, such as "*M-A.* Urban alternative – skater/creative identity*"* for sexual orientation (F (1, 22) = 3.96, p = .059). Men with non-normative sexual orientations reported a lower mean compared to heterosexual men. This suggests that men from sexually diverse groups are more likely to wear*: Urban alternative – skater/creative identity* style clothing.

**Clothing Preferences Across Gender and Sexual Diversity Groups**
The open-ended responses revealed distinct patterns in clothing preferences across the four participant groups, highlighting how gender and sexual identity intersect with symbolic consumption and everyday dress practices.

1. Heterosexual women emphasized comfort and personal style within a normative framework. Their responses reflected a desire to feel at ease while maintaining a sense of individuality, even in professional settings:
"More casual, more normal, with what makes me feel comfortable." Or "Mainly respecting my own style, even at work."
This group tended to adapt their clothing to social expectations, but without abandoning their personal aesthetic.

2. Women from sexual diversity groups showed a strong preference for informal, comfortable clothing, often aligned with non-normative streetwear aesthetics. Their responses conveyed a rejection of formal attire and a pursuit of authenticity:

"Something comfortable, like sandals, ripped pants…" or "I really vibe more with streetwear, like option B."
The emerging tendency here was a resistance to normative dress codes and a celebration of expressive, non-traditional styles.

3. Heterosexual men expressed a desire to balance comfort with moderate normativity, particularly in contexts requiring social presentation. Their responses suggested a pragmatic approach: "Something that makes me look good and feel comfortable, but with a touch of formality." Or "Somewhere in between, I anticipate that in certain roles…"
This group leaned toward moderation, seeking a middle ground between casualness and normative adequacy.

4. Men from sexual diversity groups articulated a clear preference for casual clothing and a rejection of normative or traditional styles. Their responses were notably consistent in distancing themselves from conventional expectations:
"My tastes lean more toward casual…" or "What I like the least tends to be the most formal or traditional."
This pattern reflects a critical stance toward normative masculinity and a redefinition of style as a space for resistance and self-expression.

These findings underscore the relational nature of clothing choices, shaped not only by gender but also by sexual identity and cultural context. They also support the idea that fashion operates as a contested terrain, where individuals negotiate visibility, authenticity, and social belonging through normative and non-normative expressions.

## DISCUSSION
This study examined how clothing operates as a symbolic interface in romantic self-presentation among university students, highlighting differences across gender, sexual orientation, and national context. The findings reaffirm that fashion is not merely decorative but deeply embedded in processes of identity negotiation, particularly for individuals from sexually diverse backgrounds.

Among women, the PCA revealed two primary dimensions of romantic self-presentation: one associated with traditional or normative dating scripts (e.g., *Layered Street style*, *Smart-casual*, *Mexican traditional*, and *Indigenous-inspired*), and another aligned with expressive and alternative aesthetics (e.g., *Retro-modern* and *Formal elegant*). This aligns with Stone's (1962) and Entwistle's (2000) theoretical frameworks, which underscore the body —and dress— as a situated site of meaning-making and social recognition.

Notably, bisexual women displayed greater variability in their responses compared to heterosexual participants, suggesting more flexible or contested relationships to dominant fashion scripts. This finding echoes Butler's (1990) notion of gender performativity, as well as Kaiser's (2012) concept of ambivalence in dressed bodies, whereby individuals oscillate between compliance and resistance to normative aesthetics.

Statistically significant results reinforce this interpretation. For example, the interaction found in item *W-B (Layered Street style – creative and trend-aware)* revealed that sexually diverse women from Oaxaca rated this look as less appropriate for a date than other groups. This could indicate a heightened

awareness of local gender norms and their risks when transgressed. In contrast, *W-I (Fashion-intervention – rebellious and artistic)* was rated as more appropriate by sexually diverse women than heterosexual ones, suggesting that alternative fashion functions as both a political and aesthetic tool for self-affirmation —especially in less normative contexts (Ahmed, 2014; Halberstam, 2011; Sandıkcı, 2023).

Furthermore, women in Madrid were more likely to choose the *Fashion-intervention* outfit than those in Oaxaca, indicating that urban and perhaps more liberal settings may provide greater social permission for gendered and sexual expression through clothing. This reinforces previous findings that LGBTQIA+ individuals navigate appearance differently depending on regional contexts (Clarke & Smith, 2015).

Regarding men, results showed that sexually diverse participants were more likely to prefer *Urban alternative – skater/creative identity*, which aligns with previous literature documenting how non-normative masculinity often finds expression through alternative aesthetics (Huxley et al., 2014). Interestingly, men in Oaxaca were more inclined to choose *Professional formal – ambition and status*, while Madrid participants favored it less. This may reflect local constructions of masculinity where traditional roles are still linked to clothing codes signifying success and respectability.

The contrast between the styles identified in Oaxaca and Spain must be read within their broader sociocultural and historical contexts. In Oaxaca, the predominance of a casual-traditional style on dates reflects the weight of conventional expectations about masculine respectability, class, and propriety, especially in environments where gossip, family surveillance, and conservative gender norms remain strong. In this setting, dressing "too formal," "too fashionable," or "too different" can be interpreted as excessive vanity, femininity, or deviance, making a more low-key appearance a safer choice. In Spain, by contrast, the retro-modern and more formal styles observed among participants are embedded in urban consumer cultures where fashion is a legitimate arena for individual distinction, playfulness, and even mild gender transgression. Here, men can combine smart or vintage pieces with contemporary trends to signal taste, independence, and emotional availability in ways that are less likely to be sanctioned.

Our findings suggest that clothing and gender expression in romantic settings are not merely aesthetic preferences but practices with implications for health and social well-being. When young people feel compelled to adjust how they dress to avoid ridicule, rejection, or violence, their embodied identities become a site of chronic tension and self-surveillance. This is particularly relevant for men who do not fully align with local norms of masculinity or heterosexuality. Limited freedom to express oneself through dress can intensify stress, shame, and internalized stigma, all of which are linked to poorer mental health outcomes and reduced access to supportive relationships. Conversely, the possibility of dressing in ways that feel coherent with one's gender and desires may foster a sense of authenticity, belonging, and safety, which are key protective factors for psychological well-being. Framing gender expression as a health issue therefore highlights the social conditions under which certain bodies and styles are rendered legitimate—or treated as problems.

The open-ended responses further contextualize the quantitative results, revealing that clothing choices for romantic dates are deeply intertwined with identity positioning. Heterosexual women often emphasized comfort and appropriateness within a normative aesthetic, aligning with mid-range scores in items like Smart-casual (W-D: M = 5.33) and Casual feminine (W-C: M = 3.83). In contrast, sexually diverse women favored informal and expressive styles, consistent with their lower ratings for Layered Street style (W-B: M = 2.62) and narratives referencing ripped pants, sandals, or streetwear. This pattern reinforces the idea that non-heteronormative groups employ dress as a site of resistance, opting for nontraditional fashion to express authenticity and dissent.

Among men, heterosexual participants sought a balance between formality and comfort, aligning with moderate scores in items like Business-casual and Smart-casual (M-D: M = 4.31; M-C: M = 3.69), and often cited the need to appear "presentable" or "appropriate" for social roles. Conversely, sexually diverse men strongly rejected normative masculinity, reflected in their preferences for more casual or alternative styles, such as Urban alternative (M-A: M = 3.54), and in their discourse distancing themselves from formal or traditional clothing. These trends suggest that fashion functions as a strategic medium for negotiating gender and sexual visibility, where low scores in romantic outfit rank signal styles with greater emotional and symbolic resonance for each group.

From our perspective, these differences do not simply indicate that "Spanish men dress better" or that "Mexican men are more traditional," but instead reveal how young men in each context negotiate the intersection of desire, respectability, and risk through the dressed body. In Oaxaca, adopting a casual-traditional style may function as a strategy to protect one's reputation, to align with family and community expectations, and to avoid being read as insufficiently masculine or "out of place." This has identity implications: it restricts the range of acceptable self-presentation and narrows the space for experimenting with non-normative masculinities. In Spain, the retro-modern/formal styles suggest greater room to use clothing as a resource for differentiation and emotional expression, while remaining within recognizable masculine codes. Geographically, then, the comparison points to uneven conditions of possibility: what can safely be expressed through clothing in one location may entail higher social or physical costs in another. Understanding these patterned differences helps to situate romantic clothing scripts within specific regimes of gender, class, and geopolitics rather than treating them as universal preferences.

These findings contribute to the growing body of literature that frames clothing as a communicative, emotional, and political act (Lewis & Johnson, 2011; Swann, 2012). For LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly in more conservative regions like Oaxaca, dress can serve both as a protective mask and a signal of dissent or authenticity. In this sense, the act of dressing for a date becomes not only an aesthetic task but a complex negotiation between safety, desire, and recognition.

The cross-cultural component of this study highlights the relational nature of identity: what is deemed appropriate, attractive, or expressive in one setting may be illegible or even

dangerous in another. This echoes Doan's (2007) and Johnston's (2018) discussions on queer mobilities and the spatial regulation of gender variance. Future research should explore how these dynamics evolve as fashion increasingly becomes a globalized yet contested terrain.

## CONCLUSION

This study underscores that clothing in romantic contexts is far more than decoration; it is a stage for embodied storytelling, shaped by sociocultural scripts, class trajectories, and power asymmetries. For youth navigating their sexual and gender identities, what they wear on a date reflects not only personal taste but deeply social —and sometimes risky— acts of becoming.

**Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions**
These findings shed light on how romantic self-presentation is shaped by intersecting forces of culture, gender, and sexual orientation. By comparing university students across two culturally distinct settings, the study reveals both normative patterns and diverse expressions of affective and aesthetic identity. These insights may inform educational and psychological practices that promote inclusivity, particularly for students navigating non-normative identities. However, limitations such as modest sample size, reliance on visual stimuli that may hold varied symbolic meanings, and simplified categorization of sexual orientation constrain generalizability. In particular, the small sample size means that the Principal Component Analysis and factorial ANOVA results should be interpreted as exploratory patterns rather than as conclusive evidence of population-level differences. Future studies should expand sampling, adopt intersectional approaches to identity, and include qualitative or longitudinal methods to deepen understanding of symbolic consumption as an embodied and relational practice.

Beyond the quantitative patterns reported here, future studies should incorporate qualitative approaches, such as semi-structured interviews or focus groups, to explore how participants narrate their identities, desires and experiences of gender performativity through clothing. These methods would allow us to examine how people think and feel about their embodied self-presentation in romantic encounters, what kinds of pressures or freedoms they perceive when choosing an outfit, and how they articulate the tensions between normative expectations and their own wishes. Further research could also extend the comparative scope by including additional regions along the centre–periphery axis—both within and beyond Spain and Mexico—to analyse how geopolitical location shapes access to styles, courtship practices and possibilities for gender expression. Such work would deepen our understanding of how romantic clothing scripts are experienced subjectively and situated in unequal global landscapes of intimacy and consumption.

Finally, future research could explicitly build on previous qualitative work with trans populations in Spain, which has shown how clothing can operate as both a strategy of identity expression and a coping mechanism in the face of minority stress, for example through identity concealment, gender-normative presentation or cis-passing, and community support. Integrating these perspectives would allow us to examine how romantic clothing scripts intersect with distal and proximal stressors (e.g., discrimination, internalized stigma) and with active and passive coping strategies across different gender and sexual identities.

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