

## Fashion Do's and Don'ts: Clothing & Sexuality in *Like a Love Story*

*Helen Dinh, Simon Fraser University*

### Introduction

Abdi Nazemian's 2019 novel *Like a Love Story* encapsulates the 1980s scene in New York City, touching on the social issues of the time and the personal ones of three teenagers: Judy, Art, and Reza. Against the backdrop of the AIDS crisis and the LGBTQ+ rights movement, the novel's protagonists navigate not only their own lives but also the broader cultural and fashion zeitgeist of the era. In the novel, we see that clothing shapes individual identities and that catering to conformity limits self-expression. When individuals do not fit into conventions, they receive greater negative repercussions for their self-presentation. As a result, *Like a Love Story* exhibits how fashion can serve as a versatile tool for self-expression, but only when individuals conform to societal expectations.

### Fashion as a Tool and Self-Expression Agency

A significant and insightful study by Loureiro et al. draws on a number of sources to explore the impact of social influence and individual vanity on fashion product desires, presentation, and communication. They posit that "social influence is more important than vanity" (479) in how consumers choose what to buy and what to wear, accentuating the significant role of societal norms and close relationships in shaping opinions about fashion. The article discusses Leon Festinger's notion of Social Comparison Theory, which suggests that individuals are inclined to assess themselves in comparison with others around them (qtd. in Loureiro et al. 469). However, as Buunk and Gibbons describe, "a dark side could emerge for those individuals who believe they are worse than their peers or others in their social network" (qtd. in Loureiro et. al 469). This may generate the need to dress similarly: reflecting those around them may create a greater sense of unity and belonging because it lessens a division between them. Dressing differently could subconsciously isolate them from their social circle if the way they present themselves clashes with others. Therefore, the desire to be accepted plays a role in how people select clothes and certain looks. Solomon et al. describe the notion of value, "a belief about some desirable end-state that transcends specific situations

and guides selection of behaviour” (qtd. in Loureiro et al. 471). There are a few values to consider in presenting fashion, particularly choosing certain looks and articles of clothing to “demonstrate their social status [...] or to impress others” (Lawry et al. qtd. in Loureiro et al. 471). As a result, these “social values are related to what others say and reflect the participation of the community, the group of belonging and society” (Wiedmann et al. qtd. in Loureiro et al. 471). Fashion in this context is a means to eliminate the idea of being some sort of “Other,” and individuals will avoid creating new looks and dressing accordingly in order to avoid the occurrence of it. However, this strips away originality and character authenticity, when individuals dress to fit in instead of dressing to illustrate their identities.

Handmade clothing and unique looks allow individuals to express themselves creatively and align how they present themselves to their true character. Handmade and self-created looks are a separate form of fashion unlikely to pertain to what is trending or worn by the masses. These styles often demonstrate originality, attempting to create looks that have never been seen before, never been worn in a certain manner, or other means of individuality. The nature of these “becomes integrated with consumers’ sense of self and extends to their self-presentation during communication with others” (Westhuizen and Kuhn 768). The van der Westhuizen and Kuhn study underscores how individuals interact with handmade clothing and original looks as a means of self-expression. One aspect that furthers this notion is leveraging storytelling, which people can use as a tool to enhance self-presentation and identity. Encouraging individuals to share personal stories related to their clothing—such as why they purchase it and how it reflects their identity—enables a deeper connection between the person and their clothing choices (769).

Resisting conformity to social expectations in clothing choices holds importance because it allows for authenticity in self-expression and individuality. Choosing not to conform in fashion gives individuals the liberty to separate themselves from the constraints of what is acceptable in fashion styles or trends and express their personal preferences and distinct identities. As van der Westhuizen and Kuhn suggest, opting for handmade clothing or diverging from typical fashion norms enables individuals to assert their unique narratives and self-identity, contributing to a richer tapestry of individuality within society. Yet, it is important to recognize that not everyone can effectively defy societal norms to authentically express themselves. Factors such as societal judgments, particularly concerning one’s sexuality, can restrict free self-expression.

### Close the Closet: LGBTQ+ Community in a Heteronormative Society

When looking at clothes and sexuality, an individual can change the former. Sexuality is a more complex aspect of identity, not something one can consciously alter or choose at will. Despite this, the acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in society is an ongoing process and not yet normalized in a hetero-dominant space. Conventional ideas of sexuality, in particular heterosexuality, are often associated with stereotypical gender roles. In this context, men are expected to be traditionally masculine and dominant and women are associated with femininity and submission. Stereotypes pertaining to male homosexuality specifically often minimize the relationship between men and masculinity, causing them to be seen and treated differently if they do present themselves as more feminine. According to Valsecchi et al.'s study, "straight men express more negative attitudes toward feminine, rather than masculine gay men, a phenomenon [they] label the gay-gender expression effect (GGEE). This effect stems partly from men's motivation to conform to the antifemininity norm of masculinity" (120). The nature of this suggests that when Queer men look and act in accordance with stereotypical flamboyance and femininity, it is likely that they will be judged and treated more negatively as opposed to if they were aligned with notions associated with the traditional idea of a man. Is the mistreatment of Queer individuals due to the fact that they oppose the conventional ideas of masculinity and femininity, and would the absence of this allow them to express themselves more freely sexually? The research implies that discrimination against Queer men may occur simply based on their sexual orientation, but is amplified in contexts where men's feminization is perceived (Valsecchi et al. 124). We can then understand the division between heterosexual males who separate themselves from homosexual males, in accordance with the findings of Valsecchi et al.'s study, to stem from personal sexual impulses, conformity to social norms, or beliefs in fundamental differences between heterosexual and homosexual males (124). The article concludes that "perceived men's feminization may increase men's affirmation of the dimension pertaining to heterosexuality—that is that 'real men' should not only conform to a straight sexual orientation, but overtly dislike gay people" (125). This suggests that Queer men are stripped of their male identities if they do not present themselves in a manner that correlates to what is approved in a heteronormative society. Overall, these studies show that Queer individuals are likely to be more socially accepted when their sexuality is concealed.

*Like a Love Story's* Queer Expression Matrix Diagram

## *Unwriting & Queering*

*Like a Love Story* captures four broad representations of how people can express sexuality based on the social context of their time. Four characters within the novel exemplify how heteronormativity restricts self-expression: Judy, Art, Reza, and Reza's brother Saadi. Judy and Saadi are both heterosexuals, whereas Art and Reza are both Queer, with Saadi and Reza tending to lean more towards conforming to societal expectations to avoid repercussions. Figure 1 shows clothing choices and their consequences. Before delving into these examples, it is important to highlight that the consequences discussed are specifically tied to negative perceptions of sexuality and do not encompass other social factors that might influence how individuals are perceived when expressing themselves through fashion.

**QUEER EXPRESSION  
MATRIX DIAGRAM**

CHARACTER NAMES:	JUDY	ART	REZA	SAADI
CLOTHING CATEGORY:				
SUBCULTURE UNIFORMS/MERCHANDISE		×	×	
BRIGHT OR FLAMBOYANT ATTIRE		×	×	
CLOTHES THAT OPPOSE TRADITIONAL GENDERED STEREOTYPES		×	×	

\*Being marked "X" in the chart indicates that dressing in accordance to these categories received negative judgement related to their sexuality

Fig. 1 how characters can or cannot express themselves due to their sexualities

The first category delves into subculture uniforms and merchandise, relating to how individuals dress based on their interests, a fundamental aspect of their identity. Yet, how they present themselves in this manner shapes others' perceptions. Saadi, Reza's step-brother, embodies the expected image of a conventional heterosexual man and leverages his privilege accordingly. Judy comments that she could "feel the condescension emanating from his lacrosse

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body, from his beefy arms busting out of his polo shirt, and from his white baseball hat dangling from the back of his chair” (207). Art states how he calls “[Saadi] and his friends ‘white hats’ ’cause they’re always wearing those dumb white baseball hats” (Nazemian 65). In contrast to his stepbrother’s more basic attire, Reza opts for “a t-shirt with a decal of Madonna’s face on it” (148), resulting in Saadi describing him as Judy’s “gay boyfriend who loves Madonna so much” (217). The note to make here is to acknowledge how both characters can dress in relation to their interests, Saadi with sports and Reza with Madonna, and one is openly accepted by a heteronormative society while the other is ridiculed (Art ridicules Saadi, but this ridicule is unlikely to lead to Saadi being Othered). Examining the clothing articles themselves, one item, a plain white hat, inherently appears basic and aligns with the typical attire of conventionally masculine straight men. Its counterpart, however, showcases more personality and self-expression. Yet, this uniqueness is viewed through a heterosexual lens, prevailing in an era that is not entirely accepting of the Queer community. As highlighted in Valsecchi et al.’s study, where masculinity aligns with standard masculine interests and femininity with more unconventional ideas, adhering to such norms might affirm someone’s heterosexuality. Consequently, Reza faces limitations in freely expressing his desired clothing style compared to his brother due to the constraints of heteronormativity.

The second category looks at certain pieces of clothing, in particular, bright or considerably flamboyant attire (fig. 1). When exploring this clothing category, the novel illustrates that it is generally less acceptable for homosexual men to wear this type of attire, as it often reminds others of their sexuality. Heterosexuals do not face the same dilemma. Upon meeting Art and taking note of his bright hair, Reza’s parents discuss how they “wonder why [Art’s father] allows his son to dress like that... [grateful that] none of [them] have children like that” (61–62). In contrast, in deciding what to wear, Judy considers how “Art says [she is] a summer, which means [she] look[s] good in this kind of hot color, but... Maybe [she’s] a winter... [She] think[s] about what [she] could do with the fabric. It could be a dress. It could be flowy. It could be asymmetrical. It could be simple and classic, even though [she doesn’t] do simple and classic” (95). This passage highlights the contrast in how bright colors are perceived in self-presentation. Judy faces no comments like Art does, allowing her the freedom to express herself through self-created fashion without significant boundaries, as highlighted in Westhuizen and Kuhn’s article. This emphasizes Judy’s greater freedom of self-expression compared to Art, who faces judgment and criticism for wearing similar bright and vibrant colors.

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One example that we could see as negating figure 1 in this category is a piece of clothing that Reza receives: “the sleeves are blue, and there is the illusion of an orange vest laid atop the shirt. On the back are two thick stripes, outlined in gold, and inside the gold stripes are tiny figures of plants and goats and flowers” (223). Despite Reza being a Queer character, he has not openly revealed his sexual orientation to those around him at this point in the novel. Consequently, how the garment he wears is judged differs from the criticism directed at Art for his bright clothing. As the shirt is a gift made by his girlfriend Judy, Reza is presumed to be heterosexual and therefore avoids ridicule for wearing it. This situation reinforces the observation that negative consequences and judgment arise specifically when an individual’s Queer identity is recognized.

The third category examines clothing that challenges traditional gendered concepts (fig. 1). In relation to sexuality, Queer individuals might encounter increased pressure to adhere to these traditional norms to align with conventional ideas of sexuality and gender. For instance, being gay is often stereotyped as less masculine, leading some individuals to restrict their self-expression to appear heterosexual, especially in environments where others might not be open-minded. *Like a Love Story*’s Art can illustrate this notion. Art, when wearing a plain suit to disguise himself as a non-Queer individual, thinks to himself “about how easy it would be if this were who [he] was, a person who liked his red ties, and his boring haircuts, and his trades and deals and golf games. A person who didn’t like boys, who didn’t hate convention, who wasn’t so angry. For a moment, [he] even wish[ed] for this, for an easy life” (77). This demonstrates how Queer people, in dressing how they desire, to illustrate their identities, sacrifice a life of safety and comfort if their self-presentation does not align with a heteronormative lifestyle.

However, as certain icons rise in Hollywood and elsewhere in popular culture, they have the potential to help normalize the expression of Queer identities through their appearances. One notable example mentioned in the book is Madonna.

#### Madonna’s Influence

Nazemian’s *Like a Love Story* makes multiple references to the pop icon, generating the question, why her? The book loosely touches on this notion, stating how some of the gay characters in particular, will “always be more into female divas, even when the world is enlightened enough for gay men to be pop

stars and movie stars. Because worshipping a gay male star would be too literal for [them]. [They] need layers and symbolism” (86).

Madonna challenges conventional female representations by contrasting stereotypical expectations. This notion aligns with Jose Blanco Fiske’s view (1153–54) that Madonna creates meanings by recontextualizing ideological signifiers, giving them new connotations, and creating new styles that mock traditional ideas. Madonna’s deliberate ambiguity in her personas invites diverse interpretations (1153–54). This intentional vagueness challenges assumed universal archetypes and emphasizes Madonna’s control over her image and narratives. Fiske’s article scrutinizes Madonna’s manipulation of popular culture and fashion to challenge these conventional ideas of women. Fiske sees this practice as common in popular culture, “where ideological signifiers produced in capitalist societies are taken from their context and recycled into a new style that leaves behind, and even mocks, their signifieds” (1153). Madonna’s exploration of diverse fashion choices, especially in her performances and publicity, aligns with Jungian analysis, particularly in relation to the “four stages of Anima development proposed by Jungian analysis: Eve, Helen, Mary, and Sophia” (Fiske 1154). In relation to the Anima figure, it “is useful to understand Madonna as a complex cultural system where emphasis is placed on the disconnect between signifier and signified” (1163). Through her “diverse personae” (1154), Madonna challenges societal constructs of gender and self-identity associated with unchangeable archetypes, pushing interpretations of feminine images beyond traditional boundaries. Her constant reinvention illustrates a post-modern world where archetypes are fluid and adaptable, enabling exploration and expression of individuality through various personas.

Arguably, some situations may involve stereotypes or biases against gay men affecting the decision to use a woman as a figurehead. These biases might stem from misunderstandings or preconceptions about gay men, resulting in a preference for a different spokesperson. Their messages could be undermined as a gay man is the one speaking it. Considering the societal setting of the novel in 1989, when being homosexual was more stigmatized due to the political atmosphere surrounding AIDS, a message conveyed by a gay spokesperson might be weakened. There was a heightened fear at that time that they were seen as spreading the disease, diminishing their societal impact. Women in influential positions could have a significant platform to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights. Their visibility and ability to reach wider audiences make them influential figures in promoting acceptance and equality.

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However, it should be acknowledged that while Madonna's fashion looks and choices transcend the boundaries of conforming to heteronormative standards, people arguably perceived her as an outwardly feminine individual with little direct association with queerness herself. Without this Queer factor, her stardom and celebrity status were a bigger focus, which generated positive associations with her unique looks and style. Unlike characters such as Art, the icon didn't face the aforementioned restrictions in self-expression, thus having more agency and receiving better judgment from others. Madonna had and has the social power to express herself through fashion, and it is no coincidence that her song "Express Yourself" inspires the main characters of the novel.

### Conclusion

In scrutinizing Abdi Nazemian's *Like a Love Story*, this analysis centres the social context and conventions of this era, examining the relationship between adhering to these heteronormative notions and expressing individuality through clothing. There is an amplified impact on those who diverge from conventional standards, facing heightened repercussions for how they present themselves. As a result, fashion emerges as a versatile means for self-expression, yet within the confines of societal conformity. However, I would like to acknowledge that my analysis of agency for self-expression is limited to a gender lens, neglecting other factors that might impose restrictions on self-presentation, such as class, race, and other categories that do not conform to predominantly Western-approved standards. Overall, fashion in this novel demonstrates that while it serves as a powerful conduit for self-expression, its true versatility faces hindrances when individuals do not align with societal expectations, revealing the complex relationship between conformity and personal expression within the realm of style and clothing. Just as Madonna inspires the main characters of *Like a Love Story* to express themselves, whether they already have a sense of a style that does so (Judy, Art) or are beginning a journey toward self-expressive clothing (Reza), Nazemian's novel itself may inspire young readers today to flout social clothing norms, even when it may make them vulnerable to criticism or ridicule.

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**Acknowledgments**

I extend my sincerest gratitude to Dr. Didicher for her invaluable guidance, support, and expertise throughout this endeavour. Her insightful advice and unwavering encouragement have been instrumental in shaping this work. A million thank-yous for this opportunity.



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