

# **Dressing Aesthetic Citizenship: Muted Colours, Masculinity and Nation-Building among young Uzbek Men in Tashkent, Uzbekistan**

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# **Dressing Aesthetic Citizenship: Muted Colours, Masculinity and Nation-Building among young Uzbek Men in Tashkent, Uzbekistan**

This article explores the sartorial practices of Uzbek men across diverse urban contexts in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, highlighting the significance of muted colours as a discursive site for asserting aesthetic citizenship. Drawing on 13 months of fieldwork, this article depicts how the dressed bodies of working-class young men are intertwined with notions of hegemonic masculinity and Uzbekness. It also analyses how nation-building narratives give rise to gendered sartorial norms and forms of self-discipline, bolstered by everyday dress regulations. I argue that working-class young men's preference for muted colours, rooted in the Soviet aesthetic's prioritisation of practicality and simplicity, serves as a somatic means of de-beautification, which allows them to both distance themselves from 'foreign' fashion and consolidate masculine subjectivities. Thus, embodied sartorial practices become a gendered stance against supposedly *zararli* (harmful) foreign ideologies and an assertion of aesthetic citizenship against a background of an ongoing surge of gendered nationalism in Uzbekistan.

Keywords: Uzbek men; masculinity; sartorial practices; de-beautification; aesthetic citizenship

## **Introduction**

Taking a Lezginka<sup>1</sup> dancing class in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, was an unexpected experience that opened my eyes to the role of muted colours in shaping Uzbek men's performances of masculinity, Uzbekness (*O'zbekchilik*) and citizenship. The class was made up of around twenty Uzbek male students between the ages of 15 and 35. Upon entering the classroom for the first time, I found that everyone was dressed in black T-shirts and pants, a dress code that not only persisted throughout my time in the class but also extended beyond it. One month later, I asked a close friend in the class whether the black clothing was part of a class uniform and if I should also wear black. To my surprise, he explained that there was no uniform and that the preference for wearing black was simply a personal choice. In the second month, despite no explicit request to

wear black, I found myself irresistibly drawn to a bazaar. There, in order to conform, I also made a ‘personal’ choice and purchased several black T-shirts and pants specifically for the dance class.

Even beyond the dance class, I encountered recurring expectations and reminders from friends and acquaintances that, as an adult male residing in Uzbekistan, I should dress in less colourful, but muted colours. The widespread preference for muted colours in men’s daily clothing, along with a prevailing apprehension when deviating from this implicit gendered dress code, was evident in urban and even more strongly in rural public settings, including in schools, mosques and bazaars. It soon became apparent to me that, like elsewhere, sartorial practices play a pivotal role in embodying and shaping identities, including among working-class young men residing in Tashkent, who constituted my main interlocutors. This article concentrates on the role of muted colours within the sartorial practices of these young men, revealing how they (re)produce masculinity and assert citizenship through bodily self-making in Uzbekistan. Since this article primarily focuses on the outer appearance of dress in everyday life, I will not delve into other aspects of attire, such as design or fabrics.

My positionalities and identities influenced the direction of my research towards examining the daily dressing practices of working-class young men. In this article I draw upon 13 months of fieldwork in Tashkent, Uzbekistan from 2021 to 2022 amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to participant observation and 30 in-depth interviews with key interlocutors, I engaged in digital ethnography by creating TikTok videos to collect data related to gender and sartorial practices (Zhao 2024), to adapt to COVID-19-related restrictions. Besides the Lezginka dance class mentioned earlier and online digital spaces, my primary field sites were cafés, restaurants, gyms, barbershops, bazaars and households in Tashkent. As an international postgraduate student who was

male, unmarried and fluent in Uzbek language rather than Russian, most of my interlocutors tended to be male, young (20–30 years old) and Uzbek-speaking university students who had recently moved to Tashkent from other regions (*viloyatlar*) in pursuit of better education or job opportunities. They were mostly working-class. As a result, my data primarily pertains to this specific group of working-class young men.

In this article, I conceptualise these men's everyday sartorial practices as an embodied form of gender work, in that they create and reinforce masculine identities through clothing and bodily self-making. The analysis of sartorial practices among working-class young men, which closely aligns with post-Soviet Uzbekistan's nation-building narratives, which will be elaborated in the following section, contributes to the ongoing debate on aesthetic citizenship by shedding light on the often-overlooked experiences of Central Asian men and the connections between dress, masculinity and aesthetic citizenship. Through examining the feminine self-fashioning of Turkish women in Istanbul, Liebelt (2019) proposes the concept of 'aesthetic citizenship' to emphasise the critical role of beautification and processes of distinction between gendered citizens in a competitive urban environment. In contrast to female Istanbulites, who engage in aesthetic body modification as a form of middle-class distinction, this article delves into the more popular aesthetic practices of working-class young men from Central Asia, and how these feed into assertions of gendered nationalism and aesthetic citizenship ideals in Uzbekistan. These practices specifically arise from anxieties rooted in concerns over potential political, economic and social exclusion among new urbanites in diverse urban spaces. The anxieties are particularly evident in a highly homophobic and heteronormative society that prioritises hegemonic masculinity, where non-conforming gender practices, sexualities, or class status are scrutinised.

Moreover, the use of muted colours in the sartorial practices of Uzbek men across various everyday settings is deeply influenced by the Soviet Union's (especially from 1960s to 1980s) promotion of 'socialist' aesthetics that emphasise practicality and simplicity (Karpova 2015; Olmsted 2015), and, I argue, represents a form of self-discipline and internalised conformity with state regulation, ideologies and societal norms. In the present, this sartorial practice in Uzbekistan serves to de-beautify male dressed bodies, feeding into Socialist Soviet aesthetics and post-Soviet nationalist discourses on global fashion as 'foreign' and 'beautiful' and as feminising male bodies alongside other supposedly *zararli* (harmful) ideologies, such as homosexuality. These discourses reflect a deeply ingrained social apprehension about sartorial choices that might challenge public expressions of hegemonic masculinity in the Uzbek context. As a result, working-class young men often reinforce hegemonic masculine subjectivities through their sartorial choices and by the use of muted colours and by performing national belonging against a background of rising gendered nationalism in Central Asia. This embodied gender work is intertwined with Uzbekistan's ongoing nation-building project, which is explicitly gendered and prominently emphasises a masculinised interpretation of Uzbek nationhood (Megoran 2004, 2008; Zhao 2022, 2023).

In the context of Central Asia, dress studies have placed a particular emphasis on the resurgence of Islam in the post-Soviet independence era, especially in regard to women's veiling practices (Kamp 2011, 2014; Northrop 2004; Suyarkulova 2016). In addition, most research on the (re)production of national identities within and beyond Central Asia tends to focus on female bodies and women's dress (Gradszkova 2007, 2014; Gul 2022; Kim, Molchanova, and Orozalieva 2022; Nozimova 2022). Although there is an emerging body of research worldwide on men's national dress and the assertion of national identity (Martinez 2017; Wolters 2020), limited attention has been

paid to understanding young men's sartorial practices and their gender implications, especially in Central Asia. To fill this gap, this article draws upon ethnographic fieldwork in Uzbekistan and explores how muted colours provide working-class men with a space to express and strengthen, rather than challenging, existing gender norms, due to the symbolic association of particular colours with hegemonic masculinity and aesthetic citizenship in present-day Uzbekistan.

Following the introduction, I will delve into the literature on masculinity, citizenship and nation-building in relation to the notion of Uzbekness in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. Three subsequent sections will present my research findings: firstly, focusing on self and social regulation of everyday sartorial practices; secondly, examining the relationship between social class, market and sartorial practices; and thirdly, presenting how Uzbekness is reaffirmed through clothing and masculinity in daily lives. In the concluding discussion, insights will be offered on how everyday sartorial practices serve as a platform for expressing gender and Uzbekness, giving rise to aesthetic citizenship in contemporary Uzbekistan.

### **Masculinity, Citizenship and Post-Soviet Nation-Building**

Masculinity, as a construct, is formed by societal norms and expectations that conform to heteronormative ideals imposed on males (Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell 2005). These ideals promote a particular, elevated form of cis-masculinity that often subjugates women, certain groups of men and non-binary people. The concept of hegemonic masculinity, introduced by Connell (2005, 2016), pertains to the set of gender behaviours that legitimise and perpetuate men's dominance over marginalised groups. In the Uzbek context, hegemonic masculinity typically revolves around notions of family obligations and adherence to Islamic piety (Zhao 2022). Megoran (1999, 2004, 2008) argues that, in public discourse, ideal Uzbek men are primarily depicted as dutiful

sons, who subsequently take on the roles of patriarchal family heads and providers for their wives and children. In addition, pertaining to the argument of this article, Uzbek men are also subject to specific expectations of physical appearance, such as conformity to implicit and explicit dress codes, which favour specific colours. These expectations highlight the physical and aesthetic nature of the construction and embodiment of Uzbek masculine subjectivities, which are integral to the assertion of highly gendered aesthetic citizenship among men in Uzbekistan. In earlier research on Uzbek masculinities (Zhao 2022), I highlighted that previous research has focused on the links between Uzbek masculinities and how men strive to fulfil the gendered expectation of providing for their family through labour migration, alongside the broader influence of the nation-state in shaping a gendered form of nationalism in a post-colonial context. Following up on this, this article focuses on sartorial practices as embodiment of masculine identities and assertion of aesthetic citizenship.

This focus resonates with an emphasis in the literature on post-Soviet transitions on the rise of gendered nationalism, including studies conducted in Uzbekistan (Bureychak and Petrenko 2015; Hankivsky and Salnykova 2017; Poplavskaya 2021). After gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Uzbekistan's nationalist discourses adopted an explicit gendered connotation, often representing power through masculine connotations and highlighting male heroic figures (Koch 2011; Kudaibergenova 2016; Megoran 1999, 2004, 2008), such as Amir Timur, the first ruler of the Timurid dynasty; Alisher Navoi, a Timurid poet and the largest figure in Uzbek literature; Mirzo Ulug'bek, a Timurid sultan, as well as an astronomer and mathematician; and Abdulla Qodiriy, one of the most influential Uzbek writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the portrayal of the young republic.

Furthermore, as Megoran (2008) argues, Islam Karimov, the first president of Uzbekistan, remodelled hegemonic masculinity to legitimise the independence of Uzbekistan and his own governance after the Soviet regime. Koch (2011) adds that masculinity frames were central to Karimov's militarised anti-terrorist campaign and nation-building discourses. In contrast, as Kudaibergenova (2016) and Aripova (2022) point out that women were rendered voiceless and seen as lacking agency in nationalist discourses in Central Asia, including in Uzbekistan and especially when it came to the public representations of the nation. The employment of hegemonic masculinity in representing the state illustrates how gender can be leveraged in political and nationalist discourse to consolidate power, highlighting the interconnection between gender, citizenship and nation-building.

The rise of gendered nationalism in Uzbekistan has been profoundly influenced by the Soviet legacy. As mentioned earlier, the aesthetic preference for wearing muted colours has its roots in the remnants of the Socialist Soviet legacy – aesthetic preferences for practicality and simplicity (Karpova 2015; Olmsted 2015). In Soviet times, as Bartlett (2006, 185–186) argued: 'fashionable dress and makeup had been identified as serious threats to the social body throughout the socialist times during which a puritanical concept that advocated modesty and unadorned simplicity had prevailed.' Consequently, by dressing the way they do, the men that I encountered during my fieldwork manage to reinforce conventional gender norms, actively masculinising their embodied appearance through bodily de-beautification. Moreover, they may effectively sidestep more colourful global fashion, which in nationalist discourse is often marked as foreign, feminising masculinity to the point of emasculating men or propagating homosexuality, which in itself has been stigmatised as a Western import across Uzbekistan (Reilly and Blanco 2019). Sartorial practices thus



ultimately bolster heteronormative masculine subjectivities, effectively becoming a way of ‘doing gender’, aligned with broader narratives of gendered nationalism in Uzbekistan.

In addition, the Soviet legacy has been instrumental in shaping notions of Uzbekness and citizenship in contemporary Uzbekistan (Critchlow 2018; Doi 1998; Rasanayagam 2011; Reeves 2009; Ruget 2014; Tiulegenov 2018). The concept of Uzbekness in modern day Uzbekistan is based on collective residence and socialisation and often engages in dynamic variations, involving moral frameworks, including Islam, as well as embracing collective values often linked with Soviet ideals (Finke 2014; Ilkhamov 2004; Rasanayagam 2011; Turaeva 2015). In this article I am particularly interested in how sartorial practices serve as a platform for both reproducing and redefining Uzbekness, thus emphasising the dynamic and gendered nature of Uzbekness. In addition, Soviet rule led to an arguably contradictory restructuring of different aspects of Uzbek social life, for example by introducing the women’s liberation campaign<sup>2</sup> and criminalising homosexuality,<sup>3</sup> which led to a continuous reaffirmation of conservative gender values in Uzbekistan after its independence in 1991 (Aripova 2022; Kamp 2011; Zhao 2022). As Reeves (2009, 7) points out, ‘a return to “tradition” has often, de facto, excluded women from full membership in the body politic by depriving them of rights to inherit and transmit property’, underscoring the highly gendered nature of the post-Soviet transition and nation-building projects in Uzbekistan.

Noteworthy, migration reflects the agency of Uzbek citizens in asserting citizenship. External migration offers Central Asians the opportunity to assert themselves as public actors, pursuing novel forms of citizenship through diasporic communities and advocating for migrants’ rights (Ruget 2014). Trevisani (2014, 256)

underscores this agency by highlighting the emergence of ‘New Uzbeks’: ‘A significant proportion of the ruled have developed an ambivalent relation to the social order shaped by the new state, oscillating between attachment and compliance, and ... this attitude sustains the asymmetric relationship between state and society.’ In addition, diverging from civic law’s conventional emphasis on primordial ties, particularly ‘blood’, as the key criterion for defining Uzbekness, Doi (1998, 79) accentuates the role of the expressive arts, particularly dance, in portraying ‘a wider repertoire’ of meanings of Uzbek citizenship. In what follows, I consider the use of colours in dress as an expressive art of identities, accentuating the agency of these men in projecting Uzbek citizenship in Tashkent. The following section will shed light on how a group of young men do masculinity by wearing muted colours in an attempt to embody and assert aesthetic citizenship in post-Soviet Uzbekistan.

### **Sartorial Selves and Social Regulations**

Much like my friend from the dancing class, Ulug’bek also viewed sartorial practices as a matter of personal choice, indicative of a significant degree of internationalisation of gender discourses. Ulug’bek was 25 years old and from the Ferghana Valley. He worked as a logistics assistant in Tashkent when we met. As Ulug’bek explained, ‘I don’t think there are any taboos [in ways of dressing]; I simply want to buy the clothes I like and choose the colours that appeal to me. That’s why I rarely buy light-coloured clothes.’ Upon getting married, Ulug’bek’s wife assumed responsibility for buying his clothes, occasionally from bazaars and, on occasion, from brand-name shops when their financial situation permitted. According to Ulug’bek, he never told his wife what to buy, and she tended to select clothing based on her own perception of what a man should wear. Interestingly, as Ulug’bek said, her choices generally suited him, allowing him to blend in with other men and become ‘just another face in the crowd’,

emphasising the significance of individual agency and self-regulation in conforming to gender norms through their intentional clothing selections.

Most interlocutors reaffirmed that they thought there were no specific cultural taboos related to clothing colour, suggesting that sartorial practices and aesthetic preferences are usually internalised as personal tastes rather than social restrictions. For example, many participants mentioned that they often chose clothing in black, brown or dark blue because they personally prefer these colours and believe that they suit them well. For example, university student Sunnat, a rural-urban migrant from the Surxandarya region aged twenty-one, confided: 'I usually purchase black clothes because I believe they fit my appearance.' The internalisation of aesthetic dressing standards underscores how working-class men embody gender discourses to conform to gendered citizenship ideals within the nationalist discourses of Uzbekistan.

Despite the high level of internalisation, advice regarding dress from others such as family members and friends still serves as a major source of social regulation. As a male researcher during my fieldwork in Uzbekistan, I often experienced pressure when attempting to embrace sartorial practices that represented alternative forms of masculinity that are considered popular in East Asia, where I grew up, which was especially evident during my experience in the dance class. 'Don't wear those colours, bro. They're not good for you.' This is what I often heard when I wore clothes of colours that were uncommon among men in Uzbekistan, such as light green or pink. In addition, I once received advice from several friends who suggested that wearing black could make me appear more mature and win more respect in Uzbek society, emphasising the colour black's link not only to heterosexuality, but also to maturity and social status. Infringing upon hegemonic sartorial practices, such as wearing an unusual colour, may expose individuals to criticism and sometimes even physical attacks.

After learning about my struggles with dressing, Asil, a 25-year-old university departmental administrator, candidly confided in me that he faced daily challenges with his sartorial practices. Given his international educational experiences in South Korea and China, Asil was more open to fashion and diverse dressing styles compared to most of his Uzbek friends in Uzbekistan who did not have overseas experience. Therefore, he found it challenging to conform to the dress codes prevalent in Uzbek workplaces. He expressed, 'I don't want to wear black all day like everyone else; it's monotonous. But I'm also concerned about potential judgment and marginalisation by my colleagues at the office and my friends, so I try to find a compromise solution.' During our interview, Asil shared that he sometimes experienced a sense of satisfaction after receiving positive comments from one of two of his colleagues when he embraced Korean fashion, which was considered by many of his colleagues as feminine (*hezalak*, *hajiqiz* or *ayolsifat*) and 'gay' (*havorang* or *gey*). The social regulation of sartorial practices underscores the notion that negotiating Uzbek masculinities through clothing is inherently relational and contingent on the recognition and acknowledgment of others.

Asil's cousin Abror, who spent his formative years in the Tashkent region before relocating to Tashkent city with his parents during high school, shared with me the influence his father had on his sartorial choices in various daily contexts. Abror recollected that his father impressed upon him the importance of wearing black as he matured. Whenever they went shopping together, his father consistently selected clothes in muted colours for him. However, upon relocating to China for a year-long exchange programme, Abror discovered a newfound freedom to explore diverse sartorial expressions. He encountered less scrutiny regarding his dress as a foreigner in China's big cities. Abror noted a significant shift in his father's attitude towards his clothing choices during visits to China, where his father refrained from commenting on or

regulating his dress, unlike back home. This departure from his father's previous behaviour underscored that sartorial practices are embedded in certain socio-cultural contexts and the performances of gender norms could be situational and relational.

### **Class, Shopping for Clothes and Sartorial Practices**

Social networks, integral to social regulation and closely linked to individuals' social class backgrounds, serve as an important indicator of access to resources and young men's performances of gender norms. Stratified social networks result in varying perceptions and acceptance of different sartorial practices. My interlocutors highlighted substantial income disparities and developmental disparities between Tashkent and other regions of Uzbekistan. As a result, many of them often had limited choices in terms of their attire and embraced a relatively conservative approach to clothing, being also less exposed to different sartorial practices. This suggests that the level of exposure to various dressing cultures and the access to fashion is significantly influenced by social class (Mazali and Rodrigues-Neto 2013; Skov and Melchior 2008), echoing Bourdieu's ([1979] 1984) concepts of habitus and taste.

More specifically, most of my interlocutors shared during the interviews or in casual conversations that they purchased clothing infrequently due to their financial situations. However, when the need arose, their preferred options for shopping were local bazaars and, at times, clothing shops, where prices were more affordable. In addition, they usually chose muted colours as a result of market availability, as they usually shopped for clothes at the local bazaars, where most clothes for men came in muted colours. By buying clothing at the bazaars, they were able to save money for other crucial necessities, such as private housing and a car, both considered vital for marriage, which is another central element in the construction of Uzbek masculinity. Asil explained to me:

I usually buy my clothes at different bazaars, where most of the items are very affordable. They may not be as high-end as the ones you find in branded shops, but the quality is decent, and I appreciate the affordable prices. Moreover, the bazaar is conveniently located near my apartment, and there are various options available, including small shops nearby. I often go there alone or sometimes with my male friends. It's a straightforward process—I simply make my purchase and leave. While you may not find the trendiest fashion pieces there, you might come across clothes with brand names. However, I can assure you that these brands are not genuine. I assume many of the clothes are imported from China. (Interview with Asil, 2022)

Asil also explained that he never came across a pink T-shirt at the market, and that most clothes for men were dark-coloured. Asil's observation closely mirrors my own. The range of clothing available in local bazaars was notably gendered and limited when compared to the more upscale shopping malls or branded fashion stores. Bazaars typically cater to the lower social classes, tailoring their offerings to the needs of their customers. In contrast, wealthier Uzbeks and foreigners tend to buy branded clothes, including more colourful clothing for men that can be found in shopping malls or at bazaars in more affluent suburbs. This highlights that sartorial practices, as well as the perception and performance of gender norms, are highly classed and may vary considerably between distinct social class groups.

In addition, the experience of migration which exposes individuals to different social networks and class cultures, can also have a substantial influence on their sartorial practices. Interlocutors who had experiences studying or living abroad, such as Asil and Abror, tended to hold more open attitudes to dressing styles and were more willing to try different styles, compared to other interlocutors who had no overseas experience. For example, Asil cultivated close friendships during his studies in South Korea and China, establishing connections with both male and female friends from Uzbekistan, Europe and Southeast Asia. In their company, he felt free to dress as he

pleased without concern for judgment, whether they were abroad or met in special locales in Uzbekistan, such as upscale European-style cafes or restaurants. Conversely, Asil felt more self-conscious in other public settings after returning Uzbekistan, particularly when interacting with family members, colleagues and school friends who lacked overseas experiences. However, based on my fieldwork observations and interactions with Uzbek migrants in Australia, United Kingdom and China, it is important to note that having experiences abroad, by either working, studying, or travelling abroad, does not necessarily translate into being more open to different sartorial practices and social norms. For example, a significant number of Central Asian migrants including Uzbeks became more religious and conservative after moving abroad, for example to Russia (Eraliev 2018) or Japan (Dadabaev 2022), leading to even more constraints in regard to gender performances and sartorial practices.

### **Shades of Masculinity in Relation to Uzbekness**

The aesthetic preference for muted colours is related to the gendered connotations of colours in Uzbek culture. For example, for men, bright colours, especially pink, and different styles, such as Korean-style baggy or short pants, are often attributed to feminine beauty, ‘foreignness’, wealth and immorality. Asil elaborated on his preferences: ‘All yellow, pink and green colours are for women, and clothes with some patterns such as flowers are also inappropriate.’ According to Asil, men wearing colourful and flowery shirts is not part of modern Uzbek culture, highlighting how the notion of Uzbekness is embedded in sartorial practices. This perspective aligns with an experience he once had in the city of Samarqand, a major tourist destination in Central Asia. Asil had a light green flowery shirt that a friend had bought abroad for him, and he decided to wear it while travelling in Samarqand. To his surprise, Asil found that people approached and spoke to him in English, rather than Uzbek or Russian. Asil

smiled and remarked to me that ‘it is uncommon in Uzbek culture for Uzbek men to dress in this way’. Similarly, six of my interlocutors commonly mentioned being perceived as foreigners simply because they dressed differently. Through the internalisation of gendered norms, I found that these men actively engage in the self-regulation of their dress to conform, thus constantly restricting their own aesthetic desires, hereby reinforcing, rather than challenging, masculine identities in line with the ideal of Uzbek men. It is also worth noting that Asil’s decision to wear the shirt challenged common assumptions about Uzbek men, emphasising the agency of some men who subvert the prevailing dress codes by adopting foreign or global fashions.

My interlocutors also highlighted their disinterest or intolerance towards brighter colours that are usually delegitimised as beautiful, feminine or ‘gay,’ which they perceived as contradicting the heterosexual and masculinised nature of Uzbekness. Same-sex sexual activities are criminalised in Uzbekistan and LGBTQ+ activities are usually marked as *zararli* foreign ideologies in public discourse in Uzbekistan. As Ulug’bek said: ‘I don’t like red. Who would like light yellow? Especially light colours and other red colours, such as pink, it’s a girls’ and LGBTs’ colour.’ A male interlocutor who is from Europe and self-identifies as gay shared with me that he enjoys wearing pink or light green trousers. However, he had been yelled at several times by his Uzbek boyfriend while living in Uzbekistan, who warned him to ‘stop dressing in these colours’ for fear of their sexual identities being discovered. The warning highlights the association of certain colours with homosexuality in Uzbekistan and demonstrates how gender norms can influence people’s sartorial performances on the background of homophobia and the heteronormative definition of Uzbekness.

Furthermore, there are also strict dress codes for men enforced in certain public spaces including mosques, schools and universities to assert masculinity and Uzbekness



through de-beautification. These dress codes function as a form of institutional regulation shaping male bodies to conform with the national ideal of Uzbek men. Specifically, universities in Uzbekistan have stringent dress codes, known as '*kiyinish madaniyati*' (dressing culture), for both teachers and students. For example, a billboard at the entrance to one university campus reads 'Dress Culture of Professor-Teacher and Students', depicting pictures of 'recommended' (*tavsiya etiladi*) and 'non-recommended' (*tavsiya etilmaydi*) forms of clothing for men and women which go way beyond colour (see Figure 1). The university clearly endorses a dress code that prioritises formal attire while discouraging brightly coloured clothing, as well as informal or fashionable clothing like jeans, which my interlocutors explained are deemed immodest in Islam. Additionally, there are specific constraints for men regarding religious attire, and for women regarding clothing that is deemed provocative or unconventional, such as short dresses with low necklines. The billboard underscores the moral aspects of everyday clothing, particularly in formal settings like schools, where considerations of both Islamic principles and gender norms take precedence.

[Figure 1 near here]

Throughout my fieldwork in both rural and urban Uzbekistan, I found similar billboards or even written rules displayed in other public universities or colleges. Public actors, such as academic institutions and their personnel, take an active role in 'disciplining' youth's appearance with reference to notions of civility, modernity and professionalism. This 'discipline', as part of social regulation, also plays out in forms of distinction among young men, who scrutinise each other and sanction looks that violate

norms or fail to conform to standard fashion, perhaps also because they do not have the means to afford branded clothes. As confirmed by my interlocutors, the dress code depicted on the billboard was deeply rooted in their daily lives, as many of them tended to adhere to it without much consideration. However, some also shared that they occasionally deviate from these dress norms, choosing to wear more stylish clothing that would be deemed inconsistent with Uzbekness within both school and non-school contexts. To navigate public space or institutions, they usually brought along supplementary, more conservative clothing, using it to conceal more daring clothing. For instance, some of my male interlocutors, including Asil and Abror, mentioned that they frequently chose dark coloured ‘conservative’ clothes in public spaces, such as trench coats, duffle coats, or pea coats during winter. This allowed them to conceal what might be considered more colourful and fashionable clothing underneath. Once they entered a more relaxed environment or were among friends who embraced different sartorial practices, they felt comfortable revealing what they wore underneath.

Moreover, an interesting observation I made during a birthday party in Tashkent in late 2021 once again highlighted the connection between sartorial practices and Uzbekness. There were approximately 20 people gathering to celebrate the birthday of an Uzbek friend. In contrast to what I saw in many public spaces, both men and women arrived at the party with vibrant dyed hair and in brightly coloured clothing. However, their colourful and stylish clothing was initially concealed by winter coats in muted colours, which they promptly shed upon arrival. Most attendees were Uzbek, with a few Tatar and Russian Uzbeks present. This different dress experience piqued my curiosity about how this group of young people navigated their dressing preferences, balancing social expectations with personal expressions of style. The scene also spoke of the contrasting practices of navigating public spaces and more intimate spaces, such as a

private party. For those gendered female and/or potentially feminine, wearing winter coats in muted colours in public may allow them to move inconspicuously, therefore affording protection. When sharing my observations during that evening with my Uzbek interlocutors, my Uzbek interlocutors from the regions stated that they did not consider these people, both male and females, ‘authentic’ Uzbeks (*sof O’zbek*) due to their unusual sartorial and other cultural practices such as green hair. My interlocutors made it clear that distinguishing between ‘authentic’ Uzbeks, ‘fake’ Uzbeks (*soxta O’zbek*), Uzbekistani Russians, Russians from Russia and foreigners in the streets of Tashkent was relatively easy. This distinction extended beyond facial features and skin complexion to include their distinct dressing styles. This exclusion of certain groups from national belonging indicates the presence of a collective perception of Uzbekness that is closely tied to sartorial practices.

### **Concluding Discussion: Gender and Aesthetic Citizenship in Uzbekistan**

In the anthropological literature, fashion and dress have long been recognised as crucial sites for constructing and embodying identities, with a particular emphasis on gender identities (Davenport 2020; Edward 1997; Hansen 2004). The styling, fabrics and wearing of clothing hold significant importance for people of different genders, as colours, forms, shapes and materials of clothing possess gendered associations that vary depending on the context and individual identity (Swain 2003; Vanska 2019). The use of colour in clothing is crucial for self-expression in relation to social identities based on gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity and citizenship (Kodžoman 2019). In addition, colours serve as an important symbol in the discourse, visual representation and emotional entanglement of nation-building projects (Bankov 2021; Batuman 2010; Köse and Yılmaz 2012).

In modern-day Uzbekistan, fashion, specifically the use of colours, plays a

substantial role in showcasing heteronormative gender norms and in the expression of nationalist sentiments. The ethnographic data sheds light on the crucial role of clothing as a discursive site through which Uzbek men engage in and embody gender performance and contribute to the overarching nation-building narratives. The utilisation of muted colours among Uzbek men, backed by public institutions and the state, is strongly tied to the notions of ideal aesthetic citizenship in relation gender and sexuality. The preference of muted clothes over global fashion by working class rural-urban migrants is tied to a desire not to stand out from the crowd and can be interpreted as a form of de-beautification of male bodies. In this context, the concept of ‘beauty’ is inherently gendered as feminine and ‘somewhat gay,’ and its adoption by men is perceived as a direct challenge to hegemonic masculinity, defined as cisgender and heterosexual. Through de-beautifying male bodies by the way they dress, these men feel they join the collective campaign to ‘resist’ foreign ideologies that are considered harmful or *zararli* for men, including same-sex sexual activities, actively performing hegemonic masculinities, thereby further reinforcing existing gender hierarchies and homophobia. This article thus sheds light on the discursive construction of hegemonic masculinities and aesthetic citizenship in post-Soviet Uzbekistan through muted colours and everyday sartorial practices. Not least, through de-beautification by dressing in gender-conforming ways, my interlocutors are able to assert dominance from the marginal position of urban newcomers from the lower social strata by claiming Uzbekness, particularly in relation to those whose belonging to the nation may be perceived as questionable such as gender, sexual, religious, or ethnic minorities.

By imposing meanings and regulations on dressed bodies, the state and its institutional actors, such as public universities, aim to foster conformity among its citizens. In this context, the preference for muted colours, in contrast to global fashion

trends, I argue, represents an endeavour to foster civility and professionalism especially in the urban public space and state institutions. Moreover, the promotion of uniformity through the encouragement of aesthetic civility and professionalism serves to instil a sense of discipline and control within society. This pressure to conform to various dress codes reinforces the idea that one's body is not entirely one's own but is subject to the norms and expectations of the state asserting aesthetic citizenship from above. Through biopolitical disciplining, Uzbek state and public institutions regulate men's clothing choices without explicitly dictating what men should wear. By employing a combination of codes of conduct, forms of policing and institutional control, also relying on citizens' self-regulation and social norms, the state supports gender norm adherence among men. Thus, men who are violating gendered norms of appearance are being subject to policing and public scrutiny. Through its institutions and various regulations, the state thus projects a sense of aesthetic discipline and order among its citizens. In addition, in the contemporary Uzbek context, the recent discursive association of colours like pink and purple with non-normative gender and sexual subjectivities, marked as *zararli* and foreign, highlights novel homophobic anxieties. These anxieties are fuelled by nationalist sentiments in line with Islamic norms of propriety and against a discourse on supposedly 'corrupt' 'Western' values and influences that enter the society in the form of global fashion. This interplay of national anxieties and global integration shapes and reinforces Uzbekistan's aesthetic nationalism, where maintaining a heteronormative and homophobic image is paramount, especially for young men placed in the lower social strata.

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The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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### **Notes**

1. Lezginka, a Caucasian folk dance prevalent in post-Soviet countries, can be performed either by men alone or as a male-centric couple's dance. In the solo rendition, male dancers emulate the majestic movements of an eagle, characterised by rapid pacing and sharp body motions that overtly highlight masculinity. Conversely, in partnered performances, while the male dancer takes a dominant role, the female dancer adopts a softer stance, complementing the male's vigorous movements with gentle ones that accentuate femininity. This stark contrast in dance styles between genders has led to a pronounced gender division within dance classes.
2. The women's liberation campaign of the 1920s, known as *hujum*, represented a concerted effort led by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to eliminate gender inequality across the Union Republics of Central Asia. This initiative resulted in a significant push against the practice of veiling among women in the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic.

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3. Aripova (2022) notes that the 1926 Soviet Uzbek Criminal Code banned male same-sex relationships and the present independent Uzbek government continues to refuse to legalise homosexuality. The first president of Uzbekistan Islom Karimov had criticised homosexuality, describing it as a ‘vulgar’ representation of Western culture.

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### **Figure caption**

Figure 1. A billboard outside a university in Tashkent. Photo taken by the author.