

A Kernel Inquiry into Genderless Fashion: The Social Concepts It Conveys

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Abstract: In recent years, a type of clothing form for both men and women, which is called genderless clothing, has become popular. This concept has appeared more and more frequently in people's eyes and become a global trend. The popularity of genderless fashion is not just a style of dress, it is accompanied by a variety of social concepts and progress. This study reviews the development of genderless fashion and analyzes some of the core reasons why it has become a global trend, exploring the development of social attitudes that fashion reflects. It is mainly related to four factors: Generation Z's need for expression, non-binary gender identity, the awakening of feminist consciousness, and brand-new consumer demand. These findings help people understand the connection between fashion trends and social values, the spiritual needs of contemporary people and also provide apparel developers with a more comprehensive perspective to further recognize the core needs of consumers.

Keywords: gender, unisex, fashion, feminism

1. Introduction

Fashion has always been a significant means of self-expression, as well as one of the most important ways of disseminating information. Social perceptions and values will be mapped onto clothing trends. For a long time, binary gender concepts have created established gender patterns in the fashion market. Instantly, until the late 1800s, women were expected to wear dresses to emphasize femininity and elegance. Because of society's gender stereotypes, women are expected to be sexual, gentle, and handy, while men are mature, capable, and serve in major diplomatic roles and jobs. Prom dresses and suits each have these distinctive characteristics: dresses show off beautiful lines and ornate dresses, emphasizing the feminine, while suits slim down the figure, make people look straight, and conform to the expectation that men are smart and reliable. These old-fashioned notions have been abandoned in modern times, but there are still many gender-specific stereotypes that are reflected in clothing design.

Genderless style refers to the state of designing clothing from a neutral point of view without pointing to a clear position of either gender. At a time when men's and women's clothing styles are polarized in response to gender perceptions, the genderless style has emerged as a unique fashion trend and has created an unprecedented craze at the moment. The genderless fashion phenomenon has recently emerged as a new standard and has been cited as a major trend among consumers.

Nowadays, the advancement of fashion is not only reflected in the design of the clothing itself but also in the avant-garde concepts it spreads and evokes in people's consciousness. Clothing is not only about visual effects but also about people's spiritual needs. Genderless fashion, an emerging craze in recent years, has seen fewer in-depth studies on its core, mostly centered around only one characteristic of the fashion. Most people also merely follow this fashion trend without seeing the essence behind it and its projection of social issues, and the existing literature is mostly one-sided, rarely providing a more comprehensive view of the trend. For example, Jo B. Paoletti describes the rise of genderless clothing in the post-war period in terms of sexuality theory. However, most of the existing research focuses solely on the impact of genderless fashion on masculinity and femininity while ignoring other aspects of its role. The purpose of this article is to study the history of the development of the genderless fashion wave and its reflection on the needs and values of contemporary people and to explore the real core of fashion communication.

2. Analysis

2.1. Genderless Fashion Phenomenon

2.1.1. The Historical Development of Genderless Fashion

The origins of the genderless style can be traced as far back as the women's pantsuit revolution of 1851. For a long time, wearing pants was a male prerogative, and Western women fought a long battle to legalize pants. In the 19th century, women who wore pants on the street were liable to imprisonment, and although the Napoleonic Code later repealed the ban on wearing pants, it was not until the mid-19th century that the clothing reform movement broke the mold. Amelia Bloomer was a 19th-century advocate of the American feminist movement. She was a strong advocate of freeing women from the confines of the traditional long skirt to wear more comfortable pantaloons for a variety of activities. In 1851, she recommended Elizabeth Smith Miller's "Turkish trousers", now known as "bloomers", in her newspaper, *The Lily*, which gave women the right to wear pants under their skirts, popularizing the style of "pantaloons" and breaking down gender stereotypes in dress for the first time [1].

The popularity of pantsuits was just the initial step in breaking down gender-fixed dress codes. In the 1930s, the first female model wearing jeans appeared on the cover of *Vogue* magazine, suggesting that jeans were no longer confined to men's workwear, but were becoming a garment for both men and women. The trouser suit in turn evolved from a generic garment to a neutral fashion trend. In the 1950s Hollywood films used jeans as a symbol of defiance, with screen images of Marlon Brando and James Dean taking hold, which popularized jeans and t-shirts and made them a fashion trend [2]. This fashion became the democratization of clothing by defying the suit generation and was the first appearance of the modern genderless trend.

Another historic genderless fashion movement took place in 1968, inspired by the space race and futurism. Paris runway shows designed by Pierre Cardin, Andre Courreges, and Paco Rabanne all featured egalitarian "space-age" fashions inspired by a future society that did not differentiate between men and women [3]. Although this trend was short-lived, it has had a lasting impact. Designers used simple, fluid silhouettes, graphic patterns, and new synthetic fabrics to create what they saw as "gender-neutral" clothing, and it made a huge impact. However, due to the limitations of the era, these garments were made of tights made of synthetic stretch fabrics, which made the wearer's gender more visible. Even though gender-neutral images were not realized on a practical level, the idea of gender neutrality began to be popularized and took hold in people's minds.

2.1.2. Recent Modern Breakthroughs in Genderless Fashion

In the 1990s, the genderless trend resurfaced and became a mainstream trend. Unlike previous genderless fashion movements, which tended to introduce men's clothing into women's spaces, giving women the freedom to dress as they pleased, the new wave encouraged men to be able to wear feminized clothing as well. Fashion icons such as Kurt Cobain and David Bowie have worn feminized prom dresses to encourage and push the trend [4].

In 2016, Jaden Smith modeled for Louis Vuitton's women's ad campaign, and he's considered one of the flag bearers of genderless fashion. Dressed in a leather jacket and embellished skirt, he showed no less elegance and beauty in his male body. This major fashion campaign is highly symbolic: a globally influential fashion brand explains to the public the freedom of gender in fashion, which encourages many people who would otherwise be confined to a fixed gender fashion style to dress freely and express themselves confidently.

Genderless fashion began to be a huge global trend and has accelerated considerably in 2020. According to global shopping platform Lyst, searches for fashion items containing genderless-related keywords have increased by more than 33% since the beginning of 2021. Gender-neutral fashion is becoming more pervasive, no longer confined to the promotional and customized garments of big fashion brands, but rather an integral part of everyday wear, much like the popularity of jeans and t-shirts a few decades ago.

2.2. Exploring Contemporary Human Rights and Gender Issues Behind Genderless Fashion

2.2.1. Generation Z's Need for Self-expression

Generation Z, also known as Zoomers, iGen, Homeland Generation, and Gen Tech, is the new cohort of young. It is usually defined as those born between 1996 and 2010, and is a large group, accounting for 41% of the world's population by 2021, and making up a significant portion of the labor force and consumer spending. At the same time, as the youngest and most promising generation, their choices often determine the world's future trends. Therefore, there is no doubt that Generation Z's fashion choices have a great influence on the direction and changes of the fashion market.

Generation Z has been greatly influenced by the products of technology. Unlike their elders, Gen Z has been exposed to all kinds of high-tech electronics and the Internet since birth and has been exposed to a huge amount of information from these products since childhood. The high level of access to information has allowed Generation Z to learn about the world at a very young age without leaving their homes, and the growing sophistication of the Internet has made it easy for them to find out what they need to know. However, from another perspective, the vast amount of information available to them also allows them to consider further exploration of themselves at an earlier age. At an age when they already expect attention, a platform like the Internet, which allows them to present themselves to the world, allows them to see more possibilities for their uniqueness to be noticed, and at the same time amplifies their need for self-expression.

Generation Z especially emphasizes their independence and creativity and dares to challenge the traditions of older generations like never before. They are often resistant to stereotyping and being defined by others, and this is reflected in their fashion choices; Generation Z calls for freedom of gender expression [5], believing that dress styles should not be based on the stereotypical gender binary, as they are obsessed with freedom of self-expression, and firmly believe that it is up to them to decide which gender they want to present themselves as, rather than what is already established by the system already formed by society. Genderless fashion is very much in line with this

mentality of Generation Z, as it blurs the concept of gender and is extremely inclusive, giving them a lot of space and freedom of expression.

2.2.2.Non-binary Gender Identity

Since the 2010s, the concept of non-binary gender has become popularized as people have become more inquisitive about themselves. People realized that gender could be determined by more than just innate physical characteristics and that more consideration could be given to factors of acquired socialization. This group of people, known as genderqueers, has become more and more widespread and has received unprecedented attention from society. 2019 Wechsler's Dictionary searches for the word "they", which refers to non-binary genders, have increased by 313% compared to last year. This data suggests that the fluidity of this group of people has received great attention from the public as well as gradually gaining mainstream recognition.

Non-binary people often face multiple issues in their lives: dress is one of them. Clothing often carries specific gender connotations that derive from sociocultural constructs [6]. Due to the gender mobility of non-binary gender persons, gender-defined clothing such as men's or women's clothing does not interpret their identity, and such gender stereotypes can easily cause discomfort and increase gender confusion. Genderless fashion responds to their desire for freedom of gender identity [7]. Gender-neutral fashion does not presume the gender of the wearer, which first and foremost gives non-binary gender groups a great deal of respect and room for expression. On this basis, non-binary genders can face their true gender perception more comfortably and express to the outside world that they are not bound by a single gender, which is defined by the long-standing rules of society. In an era when these groups are widely recognized but not fully accepted by society, discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation is still prevalent. At least with genderless fashion, they do not feel a strong sense of exclusivity in what they wear. It gives non-binary genders a good option of not having to forcefully categorize themselves into a certain distinct gender image, which is quite friendly to the path of exploring people's identity perceptions. This is what many non-binary genders have been seeking for a long time: an adequate space.

With the growth of the non-binary gender community, as well as the adoption of homophobic laws and political protections for LGBTQ+ in an increasing number of countries, genderless fashion, which is revered by this group, has thus become even more popular [8].

2.2.3.Awakening of Women's Consciousness and Promotion of Women's Status

The emancipation of women has always been a major struggle in the development of society. Throughout the long history of mankind, the status of women has gradually been upgraded in one revolution and liberation movement after another, some rights have been guaranteed, and women's thinking has been further awakened. The trend of genderless fashion also epitomizes women's consciousness.

Genderless style first emerged from the feminist movement. Because women's social status has been oppressed and encroached upon by men for so long, women have had very little freedom to dress the way they want to. Although men were also subjected to stereotypical dress codes in the olden days, women were generally more restricted.

Women are coming to realize that they are oppressed by much of the male gaze and that society's overall aesthetic system for women is pretty much built by men. Their curves are one of the most important parts of this. Men tend to expect women to have full breasts and hips, and subconsciously instill and solidify this stereotypical idea of beauty by expecting women to dress in a way that shows this. Sexless clothing, on the other hand, strikes a blow against this: as it does not serve any purpose of displaying sexuality, and even intentionally blurs the curves of the body. This

allows women to feel physically and psychologically comfortable wearing them. Physically, the looser fit provides a more relaxed wearing experience; psychologically, they do not have to worry about being subjected to the male gaze and they have the freedom to take control of their bodies.

A large part of the popularity of genderless fashion is women's fight against gender stereotypes [9]. Women do not have to show off their curves to get attention, they have complete freedom over their bodies. They have complete freedom over their bodies, and with the awakening of women's self-love, women are more concerned about their comfort in what they wear. In addition, genderless fashion symbolizes the breaking down of gender stereotypes: there are infinite possibilities of gender expression within genderless expression, which is a projection of the progress of feminism and is further promoted by women.

2.2.4. Market Demand and Changes in Consumer Spending Habits

Although the idea of "sustainability" has been discussed for many years, "sustainable fashion" is an emerging concept [10]. Today, the world is facing a "fast fashion crisis", where styles and trends in the apparel market are ephemeral, driven by the demands of a constantly renewing market, fuelled by rapid consumerism and globalization. This has led many fashion production companies to abuse working conditions to meet the huge demand for affordable clothing in a very short period, leading to the depletion of natural resources and the degradation of ecosystems, which is a serious violation of the concept of sustainable development.

Today's consumers are no longer just one-way receivers of information and no longer follow market trends; on the contrary, they are more informed than ever before, obtaining brand-related information and product evaluations through a variety of channels, and often have their views on fashion concepts, to make the right purchasing decisions and ultimately change the course of fashion. They are equally attentive to the manufacturing process of goods and care about the impact it has on the ecosystem, which fuels the push for sustainable fashion. However, such a development model, which is often only ethically bound, can easily be shaken and broken by practical reasons, as it is very easy to lag behind the course of societal trends by adhering to traditional slow fashion styles, and not all consumer groups can afford the practices involved in sustainable production, due to time and other reasons.

Genderless fashion, on the other hand, offers an alternative to the revolution in sustainable fashion. Clothing in this category does not have a specific gender expression but fulfills the function of clothing, with characteristics such as width and comfort that can be utilized over a long period, while still possessing elements of fashion. While consumers' choices are often greatly limited when garments have gender-specific elements, genderless garments, as a medium of expression for all, no longer pose this problem, which broadens consumers' choices and saves them time in making purchases. On the other hand, genderless clothing reduces the amount of detail and process involved in the design, making it easier to manufacture and promote on the shelves, which is in line with the trend of sustainable fashion and preserves the industry's demand patterns.

3. Conclusion

The global popularity of genderless fashion today is proof that the values it expresses and transmits are universally recognized. At the same time, the concepts of society have progressed to a certain level. Generation Z's desire for self-expression is the strongest in generations, and because they are young and energetic, they have the basic ability to make changes in society according to their ideas and needs. Genderless fashion, as a kind of representation of the undefined Generation Z, conveys the voice of young people at this stage. The increased acceptance of non-binary gender identity perceptions is also a trend reflected in genderless fashion. Likewise, this fashion trend reflects the

awakening of women's consciousness and the enhancement of women's identity. Both trends represent an increase in the openness of societies and a greater appreciation of human rights. Along with the improvement of social civilization, people's concepts will further progress and open up. Genderless fashion, as a form of clothing with a high degree of freedom of expression, is in line with the trend of open-mindedness. In addition, the concept of sustainability is also projected in a genderless fashion. As people pay more and more attention to the ecological environment, sustainable development will be further promoted. The design and production model of asexual clothing is in line with this concept and is therefore popular with developers. To summarize, genderless fashion is a pioneering and highly inclusive form of fashion that carries and spreads many social concepts. It has a kernel of social progress, which is a good trend and will continue to grow in the future as society progresses, serving as a fad for a longer period.

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