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Beyond Masculine and Feminine: A Study of Gender-Neutral Clothing, Social Acceptance, and Individual Expression

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Abstract
A major trend in modern fashion is the shift toward clothes that are not strictly defined as male or female, breaking away from traditional gender norms. In the present research paper, a discussion about the gender-neutral clothing with a focus on social acceptability and personal expression is included. The research method implemented in the study is the secondary research method by analyzing the academic literature, books, research articles, fashion studies, industry reports, and valid electronic sources in relation to gender, fashion, identity, inclusivity, and consumer behavior. Results suggest that when it comes to choosing clothes, gender neutral clothing gives individuals more freedom to choose clothes that are more comfortable, more to their personal style, and more in keeping with their identity, not socially-given gender categories. The analysis also shows that cultural norms, perceptions of peers, exposure to the media, brand communication and generational attitudes play a role in social acceptance. While today's consumers and especially younger generations are becoming more accepting of genderless clothing, there are still obstacles to its more widespread acceptance in society. The study shows that the preference to change clothing towards gender neutrality is a sign of far more than just a clothing change; it is a sign of an attitude towards gender, identity, inclusivity, and freedom of self-expression changing over time. Gender neutral fashion not only breaks down the rigid divisions of male and female, but also provides a platform for people to express themselves in a more authentic way and fosters a more inclusive and flexible fashion landscape

Keywords: Gender-Neutral Clothing, Genderless Fashion, Social Acceptance, Individual Expression

Introduction

Fashion is a way to articulate a person's social identity, cultural values, personality and gender, traditionally. The binary opposition between the male and the female has long been a theme of clothing systems. Traditionally, men have been seen as wearing pants, jackets, suits, and tight-fitting clothing, while women typically wear dresses, skirts, loose or tight-fitting clothes, and specific colors, patterns, or designs. While these differences have emerged over time and across cultures, it's often been the fashion industry that has perpetuated the notion of genderspecific clothing. But today's social and cultural shifts are challenging these hard and fast rules and promoting a more fluid view on fashion and self-expression. (Kantarcıoğlu & Kubat Dokumacı, 2025) (Hendrickson, 1998)

In a general sense, gender neutral clothing is clothing that is not limited to either the universal male (masculine) or female (feminine) gender. It also features genderless clothing, unisex clothing, clothes that aren't necessarily considered to be just for women or just for men and clothes that are gender fluid, meaning someone can choose to wear a dress or a skirt, or a blouse or a shirt, or whatever they want, regardless of what is “appropriate for each gender. Gender-neutral fashion is a sign of a more significant shift in the fashion-society relationship. What most people consider 'man's' or 'woman's clothes' is now less the expression of a man or a woman and more a vehicle for people to build and express themselves in a variety of other ways. It's been noticed in particular with younger consumers, who tend to have more open minds on shifting concepts of inclusivity, individuality, gender and personal expression. More and more, clothes are being designed in a gender-neutral way, and this can be related to the fashion industry. Shared collections, gender-inclusive product categories, flexible silhouettes, oversized designs, neutral styling and marketing campaigns with multiple identities are gradually becoming commonplace in the fashion industry. This change has been further accelerated by the use of digital platforms and social media which offer places for today's consumers to come across, talk about, replicate and reinterpret fashion beyond the traditional gender norms. The visibility of 'unusual' attire in mainstream culture has increased due to the activities of influencers, celebrities, designers and online communities. So, clothes that were once deemed as odd or even quite specific to a gender can start to be seen as commonplace in everyday wear.(Blanco, 2023) (Reilly & Barry, 2020)

One of the key points concerning gender neutral is the link with the social acceptance. Fashion isn't just about what clothes people wear, it's shaped by cultural values, family expectations, peer groups, community attitudes, media representation and social norms. People wearing clothing which is not typical for their gender might feel accepted or resisted. Although inclusive fashion can help to spread openness and diversity, the traditional notions of masculinity and femininity can still have an impact on

the interpretation of clothing choices. Thus, gender neutral fashion transcends the clothing itself to focus on the reactions of society. Social acceptance is especially important because clothes is a visible way of communication. For many things about identity it is possible to keep them private, but with clothing it is all observed and the clothing can impact how the person is perceived by others. Someone wearing an outfit that is neither male nor female can signal independence, creativity, modernity, inclusion or rejection of traditional gender norms. Meanwhile, social judgement can prevent people from wearing something that is unusual. So, there is a complex relationship between individual taste and over-arching social norms when it comes to accepting gender-neutral fashion. Another key aspect of gender-neutral fashion is personal expression. Fashion allows people to create and express their identity. Colours, fabrics, silhouettes, accessories, patterns and combinations of garments are used by people to communicate with their personality and feelings. The potential of gender-neutral clothing is to open up these possibilities by easing the restrictions of gendered clothing. It makes it easier for consumers to focus more on comfort, aesthetics, creativity, functionality and personal meaning. Clothing in this context is more than a product; it is a way for people to express themselves and assert their identities. (Díez Platas, 2020)(Pang et al., 2025)

The subject is also cultural as there are constantly evolving concepts of gender and fashion. These days, people are increasingly aware that there are many ways to express masculinity and femininity, not just by the specific clothes worn. There has been a great deal of variation in the differences of masculine and feminine clothing among societies and eras. The gender neutral trend in clothing is a part of a broader re-thinking of social norms. It is an occasion to explore fashion as a tool for the building, strengthening and changing of social values. In this context, the present study, "Beyond Masculine and Feminine: A Study of Gender-Neutral Clothing, Social Acceptance, and Individual Expression" is an investigation of gender-neutral clothing as a social and cultural phenomenon of the current times. The paper concentrates on how gender neutral clothes have developed over time, why they are accepted in society and what they add to the individual's expression and identity. The research aims to explore the dynamics of the boundaries between fashion, gender, society and personal identity, by examining existing literature and secondary evidence. In conclusion, the research underscores the significance of the shift from traditional gendered types of clothing, and its potential to influence a more flexible, inclusive and personalized definition of fashion in today's society.(Brown, 2024)(Green, 2018)

2. Literature review

(Bhaduri & Lou, 2026) The purposes of this study are to investigate the product choice and brand love of the generation Z consumers upon gender-based clothing brands and the moderated influence of the self-identified masculinity–femininity identity, fashion innovativeness and opinion leadership and self-esteem of the consumers. Three between-subjects online experiments were conducted using US Gen Z participants to examine the effects of gender-based clothing labels ("men's, " "women's, " "unisex" and unlabeled) on their clothing choices and brand love. The hypothesized main and interaction effects based on the social identity theory were tested using analysis of variance and regressions. Findings – The "men's" labels received the highest purchase intention ratings across studies, while the "women's" labels received the lowest evaluation ratings across studies, and "unisex" and "unlabeled" received favourable evaluations. These effects were moderated by traditional masculinity and femininity, but not by fashion innovativeness and opinion leadership. There was a mediational effect of self-esteem between the "men's" and "unisex" labels. Brand love was significantly predicted by purchase intention. This study connects continuum-based self-reported gender identity, innovativeness and self-esteem to the labeling research and uncovers complex paths for how inclusive and gender-neutral branding approaches impact Generation Z consumers' evaluations and engagement with a brand.

(Bhaduri & Carlton, 2025) Based on the above facts, the objective of this study is to gain insight into the perception of male consumer of gender-based labels on clothing and the impact of these labels on their perception of clothing brands, which are part of Generation Z (Gen Z). This online experiment included a sample of 310 male-identifying Gen Zs from all over the USA. Participants were exposed to various clothing items with four different gender labels (men's, women's, unisex and no label). The attitude toward clothing and attitude toward the brand were measured, and it was found that there was a more positive attitude toward clothing of the brands which used gender-inclusive label or none. These consumers also acquired more favourable attitudes towards these brands. This research aims to help understand the effects of gendered clothing labels on the male-identified consumer of Gen Z, especially in this time of growing gender fluidity. It offers empirical findings which may be useful to clothing companies to deal with the evolution of gender identity in fashion.

(Anisa & Afif, 2025) As the fashion industry becomes more sustainable and consumer values emphasize sustainability, identity expression and resistance to fast fashion, the rise of thrift fashion is related to the rise of consumer values of Generation Z. This research is intended to understand the factors that influence Gen Z to buy thrift clothing rather than buying a new clothing, and to see the symbolic meanings and social dynamics in their shopping decisions in Purwokerto. The data collection included in-depth interviews with the young consumers, social media observations and documentation analysis with a qualitative case study

method. The results indicate that the perception of Gen Z with regard to thrifting clothes goes beyond just the economic aspect of fashion; it's also a way to convey identity, environmental awareness, and a rejection of mainstream culture. They get influenced by peers and visual content on social media platforms, which influences their choices. Moreover, young consumers have created unique branding and marketing strategies to satisfy the expectation of youth consumers, which is available in local thrift shops in Purwokerto. With the trend, new clothes shops are under greater pressure to innovate. This research helps to understand how youth shop in the development of urban contexts and gives practical suggestions to businesses that would like to be relevant in a changing fashion landscape.

(Lin & Wu, 2024) In response to the genderlessism concept, which challenges the conventional gender sensibility surrounding garments, there has been a change in the perception of garments The design process of clothing has broken away from the old gender norms and produced genderless clad designs to defy gender role. This paper starts with the consciousness of gender in the fashion design and then examines the origin of genderless fashion design, the masculinisation of women's clothes, the feminisation of men's clothes and the blurring of gender in this process. It takes a case study method to explore why genderless fashion has grown in popularity and what it is about. Examining influences of various factors like lifestyles, feminism, local cultures etc. It also analyses the characteristics of genderless fashion design in the East and the West. The historical constitution of the genderless garment, the impact of the genderless style on public clothing and social aesthetics, and the evolution of the genderless clothing, all indicate that there is a rising tolerance of all genders in society. Moreover, the evolution of gender-less clothing has opened the opportunity to designers to move beyond the traditional gender binary and focus more on a person's experience as a whole. This change of point of view opens up the field of social group aesthetics, as well as the perception of gender and the prospect of a more open and fair society.

(Manley et al., 2023) This paper examines the perceptions of consumers towards sustainable clothing and their reasons for buying it. Of the 682 Generation Z and Millennial consumers analyzed, there are similarities and differences between how they perceive sustainable clothing consumption and the extent to which they perceive its importance, value, and need. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, t-tests and text mining. The respondents knew that sustainable clothing is important in the environmental movement as a whole, as well as being environmentally beneficial. But there is a need for better communication between researcher, educator and business regarding other dimensions of sustainable clothing. Consumers' priorities and lack of knowledge can help the industry promote sustainable clothing consumption.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The present research paper is of secondary research design, which is used to discuss the aspect of gender-neutral clothing, social acceptance and individual expression in the context of the categories of traditional fashion for women and men. The study is descriptive and analytical in nature, with no primary data collection, surveys, interviews or experimental testing involved. It thoroughly reviews the current academic studies, fashion research, sociological research, industry reports and reliable digital sources to grasp how perceptions of gender-neutral fashion have evolved.

3.2 Sources of Data

The material for the study comes from secondary sources such as peer-reviewed research articles, books, edited volumes, academic journals, fashion and cultural studies, government and institutional reports, industry publications, fashion magazines and reliable online databases. Literature is consulted which is relevant to the study, with a particular focus on more recent literature and studies which look at gender, fashion, identity, inclusivity and social change.

3.3 Data Collection and Selection

Relevant literature is identified using keywords such as gender-neutral clothing, unisex fashion, gender-fluid fashion, social acceptance, individual expression, fashion identity, and gender inclusivity. Sources are selected according to their relevance, academic credibility, publication quality, and contribution to the research objectives. Duplicate, irrelevant, and non-credible sources are excluded.

3.4 Data Analysis

Content analysis (thematic and qualitative) is used to analyses collected secondary information. The literature is presented in key themes which address the development of gender-neutral fashion, the shift in gender norms, social and cultural acceptance, consumer and societal perceptions, identity and self-expression and the role of fashion brands and media. The selected sources are compared critically regarding similarities/differences, emerging patterns.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Beyond Masculine and Feminine: Gender-Neutral Clothing, Social Acceptance, and Individual Expression

The secondary analysis suggests that the concept of gender-neutral clothing is becoming more recognized as a trend of culture developing beyond just fashion, and is now more associated with identity, inclusiveness, social norms and individual expression. In the existing literature, genderless fashion is defined as a fashion that diminishes the gender segregation of men's and women's clothing, and lets consumers choose clothes based on personality, comfort, taste and identity instead of gender stereotypes. (Kim et al., 2022)



Source: https://www.dressarteparis.com/womens-androgynous-suits-tomboy-female-wedding-suits-outfits

4.2. Evolution of Gender-Neutral Clothing

It is evident from the literature that modern-day fashion, which is gender neutral, is breaking the belief that the clothing should be categorised as strictly male and female. It can be seen in the trend of using the same silhouette, oversized clothing, tailoring, neutral colour schemes, trousers, shirts, jackets, skirts and flexible designs. Fashion talk has shifted more and more in recent years to become more about fit, silhouette, comfort, function, and preference than to genderized classification. (Kim et al., 2022)

Table 1: Major Characteristics of Gender-Neutral Clothing

Dimension	Traditional Gendered Fashion	Gender-Neutral Fashion
Classification	Men's/Women's categories	Shared or non-gendered categories
Design	Gender-specific styling	Adaptable silhouettes
Colour	Conventional gender associations	Broad and flexible palette
Fit	Often designed around gender categories	Focus on comfort and versatility
Consumer choice	Influenced by gender norms	Influenced by identity and personal taste
Expression	Conforms more strongly to social expectations	Encourages individuality

The study results align with research conducted on genderless fashion consumers that indicates fashion value and fashion's expressive value are important. A study from 2023 revealed that there were statistically significant differences between Deviating from norms, Individuality pursuit and Fashion pursuit by gender identity. (Lee, 2023)

4.3. Gender-Neutral Fashion and Social Acceptance

The dimension of social acceptance becomes one of the most crucial factors affecting the taking up of gender-neutral clothing. While clothes can be used as a tool to break the cycle of traditional gender roles, there are interpretations of clothing within the social context. While many young consumers consider androgyn clothes to be for inclusivity and sustainability, a recent study in India showed that social acceptance and cultural comfort are still a significant hurdle in the mainstream adoption of androgynes. (John, Dr. Jiju Mathew, Dr. Rajeshwari Jain, 2025)

Table 2: Factors Influencing Social Acceptance

Factor	Influence on Acceptance	Interpretation
Cultural norms	High	Traditional gender expectations may restrict acceptance
Peer influence	High	Positive peer environments encourage experimentation

Media exposure	Moderate–High	Visibility normalises diverse fashion choices
Brand communication	Moderate–High	Inclusive marketing can reduce gender stereotypes
Age/generation	Moderate	Younger consumers often show greater openness
Individual confidence	High	Confidence supports non-conventional clothing choices

Research also indicates that fashion that is neither male nor female is not a purely neutral fashion. The fashion industry might create some of the same gender hierarchies it's trying to escape, Columbia Business School researchers have found in recent research, as gender-fluid product lines often draw upon traditionally male design elements. (Palmer, 2026)



Source: https://maybetodaynyc.com/blogs/blog/streetwear-cool

4.4. Clothing as a Medium of Individual Expression

Clothing has been strongly linked to the domain of self-expression and the construction of self-identities in the literature. Clothing does not have to be seen as a matter of necessity only, but can also express personality, values, social status, identity and attitudes to accepted norms. The individual pursuit, deviation from norms, fashion pursuit, and social recognition have been recognized as important dimensions of genderless fashion preference in research on genderless fashion. (Diamond, 2020)

Table 3: Individual Expression Through Gender-Neutral Clothing

Expression Dimension	Role of Gender-Neutral Clothing
Individuality	Enables consumers to construct distinctive personal styles
Identity	Provides flexibility in communicating identity
Creativity	Allows combinations beyond conventional gender categories
Comfort	Reduces pressure to follow gender-specific designs
Social communication	Communicates attitudes toward gender and fashion norms
Confidence	Can strengthen a person's sense of authenticity

Another study looking at nonbinary dress strategies released in 2025 also suggests that clothes could be employed to shape gender perceptions, defy normative expectations, or assert safe navigation in social settings. This illustrates how the function of clothing is not only to express oneself but also to engage in communication with the broader social context. (Magyarlaki & Pipkin, 2025)

4.5. Consumer and Fashion-Industry Transformation

A different dynamics between the consumer and the fashion brand is also reflected in the secondary evidence. A study of 9,722 online posts on the topic of genderless fashion revealed that consumers were talking about fashion products, beauty products, perfume, bags, skin care and other lifestyle items. The study illustrates how social media is an important place in which genderless fashion perceptions are formed and circulated. (Kim et al., 2022)

Table 4: Emerging Effects of Gender-Neutral Fashion

Area	Emerging Result
Fashion design	Greater emphasis on adaptable silhouettes
Retail	Movement toward shared/non-gendered product categories
Marketing	Increasing use of inclusive communication
Consumer identity	Greater emphasis on personal expression
Social norms	Traditional masculine/feminine boundaries increasingly questioned
Digital media	Faster circulation of gender-neutral fashion trends

When asked about the importance of clothing labels among men in the Gen Z cohort, the findings also indicate that clothing labels are important. A study male-identified Gen Z consumers revealed that those who had positive attitudes towards gender-inclusive labels or gender-free labels were more likely to be in the experimental group. (Joy et al., 2022)

5. Findings

The secondary evidence thus suggests that gender neutral clothes have meaning at three levels, which are interrelated: fashion, society and individual identity. On the fashion front, it helps to break the gender barrier in design and retail. On social level it questions the norms of men and women's clothing. On a personal level, it offers more possibilities to express personality, identity, creativity, and even personal values, but the evidence doesn't indicate that gender-neutral fashion is universally accepted. Peer reactions, social recognition, affordability, and public judgement concerns remain relevant to adoption, as do cultural expectations. This dichotomy between awareness and persisting social disconformity is especially evident in the Indian Gen Z. fashion-neutral clothing might be seen as a trend or a statement of social expression. Its significance is not only in the elimination of the “men” and “women” categories but also in providing more options for people to express themselves through their clothing. Therefore, the shift away from masculine and feminine fashion categories is indicative of a larger shift from clothing as a representation of prescribed gender roles to clothing as a medium of choice, identity, inclusivity, and individual expression.(Jasrotia et al., 2025)

6. Conclusion

Gender neutral clothing is a significant shift in the fashion world and it has broken the traditional gender divide of clothes. The secondary analysis shows that clothing is not just a utilitarian item anymore, it has become a means of expressing identity, personality, creativity or values, as well. Gender neutral fashion gives people more options to wear garments that are comfortable, preferred and a form of self-expression instead of what is expected of them based on their gender. The results also highlight that social acceptability is still playing an important role in the acceptance of gender-neutral clothing. While younger generations and today's fashion consumers seem to be more accepting of the inclusive styles, culture, peer perception, social expectation, and fear of judgement may still hinder broader acceptance. Along with it, fashion brands, digital media and inclusive marketing are playing a role in normalizing and making gender neutral fashion visible. Gender neutral clothing should not be seen as a passing fashion. It is a reflection of the general shift in social values concerning gender”, identity and personal freedoms. Gender neutral fashion also helps to open up space for all types of expression, leading to a more inclusive fashion culture where clothing is an instrument for making choices, asserting identity, getting accepted by society, and expressing oneself.

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