

# The Rise of Genderless Clothing and Its Impact on Gender Relations

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**Abstract.** The concept of genderlessness, which rejects the traditional gender consciousness associated with clothing, has led to a shift in the way clothing is perceived. The design process for clothing is no longer constrained by traditional gender norms, resulting in the emergence of genderless styles that challenge traditional gender roles. This paper takes the gender consciousness of fashion design as its point of departure and traces the genesis of genderless fashion design, analyses the evolution of the masculinisation of women's clothing, the feminisation of men's clothing and the blurring of gender lines in the process of genderlessness. It presents a case study approach to examine the reasons for the popularity of genderless fashion and its characteristics in terms of the influences of factors such as lifestyles, feminism and local cultures. It also analyses the characteristics of genderless fashion design in the East and the West. By examining the historical characteristics of genderless clothing, the influence of genderless style on public dress and social aesthetics, and the development of genderless clothing, it can be concluded that societal tolerance of all gender groups is increasing. Furthermore, the advent of gender-free clothing enables designers to shift their focus from the conventional dichotomy of gender to a more holistic approach that encompasses the human experience. This shift in perspective allows for a diversification of social group aesthetics, challenging traditional perceptions of gender and paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable society.

**Keywords:** Genderless clothing; design; trends.

## 1. Introduction

With the development of the times, today's society is increasingly open to exploring the relationship between gender and clothing. Mainstream clothing design with single gender characteristics is a popular topic now, so genderless clothing has become a new solution. The rise of genderless clothing was a corrective to the overly gendered stereotypes of Western baby boomers in the 1950s [1]. However, ever-changing fashion trends have meant that genderless clothing has not really become mainstream.

In recent years, discussions on social media such as Douban and Weibo about "freedom of dress" and "beauty service" have reopened the feminist discussion about gender stereotypes in clothing, and genderless clothing may be a new solution. Today, the fashion industry is still trying to break down gender boundaries in design, so that clothing is no longer just a visual symbol to distinguish gender boundaries. For example, YSL's oversized shoulder padded jackets in the last two years have allowed women to appear tall and powerful in a stereotypically 'masculine' way, and Fendi's Spring/Summer 2022 show featured male models in short suits, making waist-baring no longer limited to women. Therefore, this paper will explore the rise of genderless clothing, the positive impact it has had on the long-standing gender binary of clothing, genderlessness in both the East and West, and the changes that have been made to professional clothing as a result of genderlessness. Making all genders accessible, not only to women and men who are confined by cumbersome clothing, but also to sexual minorities who have expanded the boundaries of fashion and can step outside the traditional social.

## 2. Definition of Genderless Dress and Its Historical Development

The concept of genderless clothing represents a more inclusive approach to fashion, whereby styles are designed to avoid emphasising or differentiating between gender differences. This allows for a greater degree of versatility in wear, with garments suitable for both men and women. The term 'unisex' was first used in the US New York Times in 1968. It is an informal term that refers to the absence of a specific gender and the objective suitability of an item for any gender [2]. Cisgender fashion constituted a feminist politics of self-presentation and provided inspiration for the culture wars of the 1960s and 1970s. As an emblem of second-wave feminism and an exemplar of women's liberation, unisex fashion personified the "visual markers" of the evolving American culture of the mid-twentieth century [3]. The second feminist movement sought to achieve a series of social, cultural, economic and political equality. This movement challenged traditional dress culture and, at the same time, impacted the original male-dominated social structure. The boundaries of fashion differentiated by 'gender' were greatly blurred and crossed as a result.

The elimination of gender differences was a central tenet of this movement, and unisex fashion during this period sought to dismantle the rigid dichotomy between male and female roles, thereby challenging traditional gender norms. The renowned designer Coco Chanel was active during this period. She employed a strategy of directly incorporating men's attire into women's fashion, which became a defining feature of the era. In 1914, Chanel was inspired by men's cardigan jackets and rebelled by relaxing the waist and adding a sense of hard lines, thus creating the first prototype of the women's suit, which was made of tweed. In 1966, Yves Saint Laurent introduced the concept of 'unisex fashion' to the world of fashion for the first time, thereby initiating the integration of this concept into women's clothing. In 1966, Yves Saint Laurent introduced the concept of 'unisex fashion' to the fashion industry for the first time. This involved the bold introduction of men's designs into women's fashion, as well as the launch of the world's first women's smoking suit, which became a significant milestone in the history of unisex fashion. The evolution of women's suits continued throughout the 20th century. Initially, suits were tailored to resemble male-style jackets. However, women's suits gained popularity in the 1970s, becoming a symbol of women's resistance to gender stereotypes and the personal choices that accompanied new ideas [4].

Not only women's clothing, but also men's clothing was influenced by the feminist movement, with scholars suggesting that men's clothing changed from the peacock style of the 1960s to the subculture aesthetic of the 1980s, and that men's clothing was no longer confined to single colours and monotonous silhouettes, but that bright colours were used in men's clothing and that gender differences in clothing began to narrow [5]. Yohji Yamamoto founded Y's in Tokyo, Japan in 1972 and debuted the first Y's womenswear collection in 1976. He boldly combined masculine qualities with the image of slenderness and softness of women. Breaking away from the Western preference for three-dimensional, top-down silhouettes on mannequins, Yohji Yamamoto started from two-dimensional, straight lines and advocated an asymmetrical form of modelling, with minimalist, streamlined silhouettes that emphasised individual freedom of choice and self-expression.

Rei Kawakubo's first show in Paris in 1981 was hailed as a revolution that undermined the hegemony of Western fashion, 'bringing comfort to the wearer and discomfort to the admirer'. This break with the stereotypes of men's and women's clothing was the very manifestation of genderless design, as Japanese designers from the East shattered the calm and fatigue of the Paris fashion scene in 1981. It can be concluded that gender-neutral clothing can be embodied not only by colours and decorative elements, but also by breaking down the traditional structure of men's and women's clothing. This way of breaking down the original structure of clothing is called deconstructionism, which is a way of expressing the theme of gender-neutrality by dismantling and reconstructing the original male and female structure of clothing to form a brand-new style without gender labels that has never been seen before.

The contemporary public perception of genderless clothing is that men and women wear the same style and design elements are intertwined, such as "women wearing men's clothes". The 'genderless' discussed in this paper is more inclined to break the systematic and theoretical conceptual system of

sexism in order to pursue the liberation of human personality, so that people are no longer limited by the restrictions of sexism of men and women, and therefore the use of the term ‘non-binary gender’ can more accurately describe the ‘non-binary gender’. The use of the term ‘genderless’ is therefore a more accurate way of describing ‘non-binary gender’.

### 3. Prevalence of Gender-Neutral Clothing

#### 3.1. The ‘Genderless’ Wave in the West

Since the 20th century, the structure of male-dominated societies has undergone significant transformation, with men and women achieving equality in both life and law. In 2016, the Oregon court officially recognised the legal existence of ‘non-binary’ genders outside of the male/female framework [6], marking a pivotal moment in the journey towards gender equality. This development represents a significant stride towards gender equality and the safeguarding of rights, offering legal backing and acknowledgement for those who identify as non-binary. As societal norms evolve and cultural attitudes shift, the portrayal of gendered elements in fashion design is also undergoing a transformation. Avant-garde fashion designers are pushing the boundaries of tradition and experimenting with their own creations, while simultaneously challenging the status quo and redefining the fashion landscape [7].

Following the 2017 announcement of the abolition of the distinction between women’s and girls’ wear, there has been a notable increase in the use of embroidery, lace, ribbons, and satin in Gucci’s design expression. Furthermore, in 2020, Gucci established a department dedicated to the non-binary gender (Fig. 1), resulting in a collection that effectively eliminates the conventional boundaries between gender and attire. Designer Alessandro Michele expressed his hope that the collection would serve to dismantle the traditional male-female dichotomy and facilitate the availability of more inclusive fashion choices for consumers.



**Fig 1.** Gucci Mx 2020 ‘Non-binary’ Mx Genderless Collection.

Palomo Spain was established in 2015 with the brand statement “Genderless Fashion.” In the Palomo universe, the concept of gender is fluid. Designer Alejandro Gómez Palomo’s anti-gender aesthetics are characterised by a romantic and intensely Hispanic sensibility, fusing womenswear with a design that challenges conventional perceptions of men’s fashion. The Palomo Spain Fall 2021 collection (Fig. 2) exemplifies this approach, combining masculine tailoring with a feminine aesthetic and drawing inspiration from the drama of southern Spain alongside the sophistication of haute couture. The Palomo Spain Fall 2021 collection (Fig. 2) juxtaposes traditional masculine tailoring with a feminine aesthetic and combines the dramatic flair of southern Spain with the sophistication of high fashion.



**Fig 2.** Palomo Spain Fall 2021.

In the field of clothing design, the mutual borrowing of elements from both men's and women's gender-specific designs has led to the blurring of gender norms in the appearance of clothing. This phenomenon can be observed in the feminisation of traditionally masculine attire and the masculinisation of traditionally feminine attire [8]. For example, elements of men's military uniforms are being incorporated into women's clothing, while lace, embroidery, beads and other traditionally feminine elements are being used in men's attire. The colour pink is no longer exclusively associated with women's clothing, and black, white and grey are also becoming more accepted by women. The traditional colour code is being challenged, and design elements are being combined with other techniques to form a unique style. In his Spring/Summer 2019 menswear collection for Maison Margiela (Fig. 3), John Galliano employed a range of traditionally feminine elements, including corsets, tight stretch trousers, high heels and soft tulle fabrics. This approach to design challenges traditional notions of gender identity, offering a reinterpretation of masculinity that transcends conventional boundaries.



**Fig 3.** Maison Margiela SS2019.

The boundaries between men and women have been eroded by fashion, and gender-neutral clothing is now at the vanguard of fashion trends, driven by designers. The fast fashion brand ZARA has released a range of unisex clothing items, which it has designated as “genderless.” Additionally, the company has created a dedicated online shopping category for these items. The phenomenon is not limited to any product, fashion company, or designer label; it is pervasive and infiltrating the consumer’s wardrobe.

### 3.2. Unisex Design in the East

As human beings value their gender identity, unisex garments are no longer limited to the Western fashion circle but has been widely explored in the world. Take Yohji Yamamoto as an example, his design concepts are based on the East, but also integrate with Western design concepts, and he is good at using deconstructionism to express genderlessness. Deconstructionism does not have a fixed form, it cannot be limited, and its core is anti-centre, anti-authority and anti-binary confrontation [9]. The idea of unisex in clothing design break the rules, overthrow the traditional pattern of clear distinction between men’s and women’s clothing, so as to reorganize a kind of boundless clothing, so that the “individuality” of clothing is greater than the “gender”.

The hippy and punk cultures of the 1960s and 1970s in Britain and the United States brought another possibility to fashion, as young people began to utilize clothing to express their self-defined identities. The concept of wabi-sabi as a niche Japanese culture coincided with these young, creative souls, and in the 1980s, Japanese designer Yohji Yamamoto, along with Issey Miyake and Rei Kawakubo, entered the vanguard of the Paris fashion scene. They incorporated wabi-sabi aesthetics into their clothing, combining Western-style architectural designs with Japanese local culture and clothing traditions, allowing the world to see the beauty that imperfection, mutilation, and nature can bring to clothing, and attempting to break through the social standards and constraints with their clothing. Wabi-silent aesthetics originated from Zen Buddhism and the tea ceremony, which is why Wabi-silent is also known as the “Zen of objects”. Unlike any existing Western fashion, “Zen” and “the combination of yin and yang” are unique to the Orient, and the philosophy behind their designs emphasizes the importance of clothing that highlights the essence of the human personality, rather than social stereotypes such as gender. In the designs of these Oriental designers, there is no sign of the Western popularity of tailoring structures. The Parisian fashion world was shocked by this highly groundbreaking, bold, subversive and different style from Western design.

Traditional clothing silhouettes are based on fitting the shape of men’s and women’s bodies and emphasizing the gender characteristics of men and women. However, Yohji Yamamoto’s clothing design is non-sexist, because Yohji Yamamoto did not bring in the traditional thinking pattern of men’s and women’s clothing design when he conceptualized his design. In “Yohji Yamamoto - I Drop a Bomb” he says, “I often think that symbols such as masculinity and femininity are just things made up for the sake of easy categorization and management. I hate any notion of masculinity that has been prepared and secretly implanted by the upper echelons” [10]. His design style has always been nonconformist and crosses gender boundaries. He believes that men and women have the same spirit and should not be differentiated. Yohji Yamamoto’s designs have always emphasized the blurring of genders, for example, his “Oversize” style of clothing, in which the first characteristics of the body are basically hidden by the clothing, breaking the monopoly of the traditional Western aesthetics of pursuing a silhouette that flatters the curves of women on the fashion. This wave of exaggerated proportions and the focus on clothing not on sexuality but on the clothing itself, which conveyed the aesthetic concept of “androgyny” in the realm of aesthetic sovereignty held by the West, impacted the inherent aesthetics of the West like a bombshell.

Oriental designers include not only Yohji Yamamoto, but also Issey Miyake and Rei Kawakubo, who have also made an impact on the Western fashion world. They emphasized that clothing should highlight the essence of human personality, rather than social stereotypes such as gender. Not only did they show new design thinking and perspectives from the exploration of fabrics and deconstruction of silhouettes, which resulted in diversified design shapes, but they also broke the

binary order of the inherent form, broke through the stereotypical image of male and female genders, and realized the enhancement of the individual's self-perception of gender. On the western unisex design concept, the eastern aesthetics and philosophy of life are also integrated, so that the clothes are not only beautiful, but also endowed with a Zen flavour, adding a new understanding and feeling of the garment.

### 3.3. Influence on the Social Environment of the New Era

Under the guidance and promotion of modern designers and brands, it has had a profound impact on the consumer thinking of Generation Z born between 1995 and 2009. They are no longer bound by traditional thinking, abandon the idea of male-female gender opposition, and believe that gender is no longer an important identity marker, which is inextricably linked to the popularity of the trend of genderlessness. Contemporary clothing design has broken down the barriers between men's and women's clothing, and the relationship between gender norms and fashion in society has quietly shifted.

In recent years, Vietnamese, Indonesian, and Ukrainian airlines have introduced a new uniform policy for flight attendants to wear pants (Fig. 4), an innovation that has undoubtedly made waves within and beyond the aviation industry. For a long time, flight attendants have been subjected to a disrespectful and unequal workplace environment, with uniforms designed with tight or short skirts, which not only restrict women's freedom of movement and lead to privacy risks, but also inadvertently reinforce gender stereotypes.

As a workplace uniform that focuses on practicality and comfort rather than over-emphasizing gender. SkyUp believes that the new uniforms are based on the concept of dynamism and movement, and that women will be able to wear more comfortable, sporty trouser suits rather than suits with skirts. Flight attendants wearing loose-fitting pants will also present an elegant, professional image, while providing passengers with a friendlier, natural service.



**Fig 4.** SkyUp Champions series. calvertjournal.com.

This innovation by Indonesia Airlines is an example for other airlines and the wider industry. In July 2020, South Korea's low-cost airline Aero K unveiled a "gender-neutral uniform", where cabin crew and flight attendants, both male and female, wear lightweight pants and sneakers. The revolution in flight attendant uniforms represents a break with gender stereotypes and a move toward gender equality in the workplace.

In the future, the gender-neutralization of clothing will continue to evolve, and will surely lead to a change in the way people think, not only in the fashion world, but also in the aesthetic diversity of society. This is a good start, and in the future, more industries and companies may be able to abandon gender stereotypes and promote reform of professional clothing, creating a fairer, more diverse and inclusive working environment for women in the workplace, and aesthetically diversified development.

## 4. Discussion and Analysis

Clothing brands' emphasis on genderlessness is an indication that today's society is against gender stereotypes and focuses on individual self-expression rather than fulfilling socially constructed gender concepts [11]. The concept of genderlessness has created a worldwide craze and has received a profound impact in both the East and the West, which shows that the audience of genderlessness is no longer the socially constructed binary gender roles, but all individuals who are brave enough to express themselves. And the reform of flight attendant uniforms proves that changing times bring progress in thinking, and society begins to focus on women's comfort and safety in public, rather than fashionable appearance. When gender is binary, clothing becomes labelled, like the classic blue for men and pink for women [1], and this labelling affects an individual's perception of gender, which leads to all genders being limited to prescribed behaviours and the self not being liberated. Although stereotypes can help in making quick choices in confusing situations, the final choices are not always correct and shallow [12].

Meanwhile, in the traditional clothing industry, garments are often designed separately by gender at the design stage and the final product is expected to conform to societal requirements and norms for gender. The consequence of this is that the inertia of many designers is to design garments according to the stereotype of male and female genders. It is evident that genderlessness is more than just a style of dressing, it is a reform against social gender precepts and encourages individuals to be given the right to express themselves. This wave of encroachment can help liberate many people who have been influenced by "conventional" labels.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, genderlessness is gradually breaking down the gender binary in the world, giving women more freedom of clothing choice in the workplace, and making more people realize that the role of clothing is to express oneself rather than to display the stereotyped gender image of the society. Designers are returning their focus to the "human being" themselves, putting people at the core of their design. Clothing that has long differentiated between genders through gendered elements and symbols is no longer the only way to do so, and all genders can choose what they like rather than what conforms to society's standards. Women can wear safer rather than more ornamental work attire at the workplace, men can wear "feminine" colours or dresses, and no clothing is ever again exclusive to one gender or even become a shackle. Due to the necessity of clothing in everyday life, the rise of genderlessness has allowed more people to realize that all genders can wear what they like or are more comfortable in, without having to limit themselves according to society's stereotypes.

## Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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