

# The Development of Unisex Clothing

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**Abstract.** Unisex clothing has broken the boundary between males and females in a physical way. It developed in the 20th century and matured in the 21st century. People are trying to get more rights in an inclusive and open atmosphere. They choose clothes they like, getting rid of the traditional restrict. Women wearing men's clothing has been recognized by the overwhelming majority of people in today's society. But men wearing women's clothing isn't acknowledged widely. This phenomenon can be related to the concept of the dominant society. Some reasons are listed in this article. In foreign countries, the theory of unisex clothing has been relatively mature. China's cognition and development in this respect are relatively lacking. However, China has made some achievements in unisex clothing. Around the world, many brands and celebrities can be seen publicizing unisex clothing, promoting the circulation of this type of clothing. Unisex clothing is accepted widely in the world now. Although there are lots of limitations, some solutions are come up. Unisex clothing will develop in the diversification and equalization of clothing. Designers will emphasize more on the characteristics of the word "unisex".

**Keywords:** Unisex clothing; fashion trend; women's wear; men's wear.

## 1. Introduction

Unisex clothing, as a trendy way of dressing, began to develop in the 20th century and matured in the 21st century. In the past, women were strictly restricted to only wearing women's clothes acknowledged by feudal thoughts. At the same time, men would be mocked if they wore women's clothing. Nevertheless, unisex clothing broke the stereotype about gender opposition, calling for equality and respect for gender.

Unisex clothes have been surveyed for some years, getting praise and recognition. There have been various types of unisex clothing since the 20th century. The traditional definition of clothes in male and female has been broken with the emergence of unisex clothes. People get more rights to speak out about what they like to wear and the society becomes more and more inclusive and open. People's minds become more open and the gender boundaries of clothing become more and more blur. As a consequence, unisex clothing is more and more popular.

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The unisex clothing is not just about the choice of the wearing, but symbolizes the improvement of human status and national progress. Dare to say people's own opinions instead of following the times aimlessly. In the society, many brands and celebrities can be seen to publicize the unisex clothing, promoting the circulation of this type of clothes. However, there are a long way to go through the obstacles, showing something about the attitude of the society.

When talking about male and female, apart from different physical structures, the psychological aspects are all the same. Just prejudice and social rules distinguish human. This concept has also affected the clothing field [2]. Exploring the unisex clothing is an important issue, showing respect and equality to gender.

In foreign countries, the theory of unisex clothing has been relatively mature. But China's cognition and development in this respect are relatively lacking. There is a long way to go because more obstacles and prejudice need to be overcome. However, some achievements in unisex clothing can be seen in China, presenting the progress of the people and society.

## 2. Origin

Unisex clothing is aimed to blur the boundary between the male and female. The word "Unisex" originated in 1960s, and the word "unisex" first appeared in The New York Times in 1968 in an article about "Monster Shoes"[3]. Unisex clothing is the product of the times where people pay more attention to themselves, calling for freedom and equality. The design of unisex clothing style lies in mixing the design elements of men's and women's clothing, integrating this kind of design style into various aspects of clothing, such as style, color, fabric, texture, pattern, etc. [2]. It is a way to acknowledge that people choose clothes according to their preference not the gender.

If a piece of clothing can be worn by men and women of physiological gender, it is not only loose in style, but also deconstructed or mixed in different forms, or even deliberately done by designers to express gender-neutral clothing [4].

Before the First World War, western capitalism grew at a rapid speed with the development of industrious revolution. At that time, women sought to the rights for themselves, attempting to wear clothes for men [5]. As time passed on, women's power kept rising, struggling for diverse choice for clothes. There are women's smoking clothes designed by Yves Saint Laurent in 1966, appealing for "Pursuing individuality and showing authority" [2]. Smoking clothes retain the pattern design and wide shoulder line characteristics of men's tuxedo, but at the same time they are redesigned according to women's body lines. Before smoking clothes came into public view, evening dresses of the same kind were exclusive to men with upper class. A change in men's fashion is believed by some scholars that it is from peacocks' style originally started in 1960s and the beginning of subculture aesthetics in 1980s [6]. "Peacock Revolution" changed not only male fashion, but also male posture, paying attention to body shape.

## 3. Development

In China, the design concept of unisex clothing is soft both for men and women. It is a vague gender awareness that men and women wear the same clothes beyond gender, which is free and easy, unique and diverse [7].

There has been a long history about unisex fashion in the West, but China's cognition and development in this respect are relatively lacking. Foreign designers and fashionable international cities such as Tokyo, Milan, New York have paid attention to the unisex clothes. With the deepening of reform and opening up and the general trend of economic globalization, the achievements of unisex clothing have been seen clearly in China [8].

Women in men's clothing is accepted by most of people. It is the symbol of the women's victory struggled for themselves and a way to try various clothes. Changing the angle is actually a way to recognize the dominated society, thinking that men's clothing can better reflect their strength, while women's clothing is synonymous with weakness [1].

However, the stereotype on gender should be discarded, affirming gender diversity. The phenomenon of men in women's wear is not recognized well which is the challenge for the dominated society and deep-rooted feudal thought [8]. At the same time, the unisex clothing eventually led to the Homogenization development of men. It has not achieved gender equality and freedom, but brought the trend of uniform development of clothing, which is not really gender-free [9]. But we can find some elements such as lace, folds and bright color are added in the men's clothes [2].

## 4. The Reasons for Popularity

### 4.1 Social media and idols

With the development of science and technology, people are connected tightly on the Internet. Some bloggers wear and publicize unisex clothing, letting people get a closer relationship with unisex clothing.

Stars are becoming more influential in today's era. People are willing to follow their advice, recognizing their aesthetic ability and choice. Some female stars wear neutral style and simple style. Some male stars wore "women clothes" in some formal occasion. From Korean Wave star Quan Zhilong to Chinese hot stars Wang Yibo, Cai Xukun, Zhou Zhennan, etc., "women's wear" has been included in the scope of daily wear [4].

## 4.2 Designers

The development and progress of unisex clothing can't do without designers who are the pioneers in this field. A famous French designer called Yves Saint Laurent broke the boundary between male and female in the clothing design. He created Sailors' coats, cone Bra, hunting clothes, see-through clothes and smoking clothes, showing Saint Laurent's unique design taste. And the smoking clothing enjoys great reputation. He provided an opportunity for women to explore a brand new way in clothing.

In the 2015 GUCCI men's autumn and winter collection, designer Alessandro Michele used a large number of women's elements to express the loudest resistance to the rigid definition of men's wear in the past. Five years later, the autumn and winter men's wear show made Gucci's men's asexual style road clearer [6].

## 4.3 Brands

In the early years, gender-free style was only exclusive to luxury goods such as Chanel, Burberry, Gucci and other fashion brands successively launched neutral clothing, which became the leader of this style. With the continuous development of gender-free fashion, fast fashion brands such as ZARA, H&M and sports brands such as Converse are slowly entering the gender-free track, and more and more gender-free fashion brands are beginning to emerge.

There are more and more brands about unisex clothing emerging on the market. Toodood is a unisex clothing series created in 2013 by Faye Toodood, a British multi-habitat artist and designer [4]. Toogood's clothing is not designed by sex, and both men and women can like it and wear it. This brand is calling for gender free, having no clear boundaries for gender. A Chinese clothing brand called Bosie is focusing on sexless [4]. The brand has fashion and leisure style, and takes "gender free" clothing as the starting point. In terms of shape, style and tailoring, it does not distinguish between men and women, and it ensures that both men and women can wear it by transforming the traditional size system.

In the past ten years, international fast fashion retail brands such as H&M, ZARA, GAP and Uniqlo have successively entered the China market. And by virtue of the low price, rapid iteration of clothing and the fashion style that keeps pace with the global fashion, it quickly occupies the minds of consumers. These international fast fashion retail brands provide consumers a way to buy unisex clothing which is cheap and available at the same time. As a consequence, unisex clothing is easier to be accepted and obtained.

For the brand makers, it is a very economical and profitable thing for men and women to share the same money. The fashion industry is the second largest water industry, and the total carbon emissions account for 8%-10% of the global total. If there is no distinction between men and women, as long as there is one production line, the cost will be halved from R&D to supply chain;

So unisex clothing opens a door for producers to make bigger profits, meeting with their capital needs.

## 4.4 Z generation

Fashion has always provided the maximum freedom and tolerance for the design expression of "sexism". Unisex clothing becomes more and more acceptable, which is inseparable from the transformation of individual aesthetics [10]. The new "Generation Z" refers to the generation born between 1995 and 2009. They are seamlessly connected with the Internet information age from birth. They are greatly influenced by digital information technology, instant messaging devices, smart phone products and so on. The "China-Chic" phenomenon under the unisex clothing, which has been

rising from 2018 to the present, is the choice of contemporary Chinese young people [10]. The transformation of individual aesthetics can be concluded in the following aspects.

Firstly, Z generation prefers "new and unique" and emphasizes the fun of consumption. Secondly, Z generation meet social needs in the consumption of people and circles. Thirdly, in pursuit of "quality price ratio", Z generation's consumption decisions are affected by both "creativity" and "quality". Importantly, Z generation have strong feelings and patriotism, and they have a strong sense of identity and pride in Chinese culture.

#### 4.5 Social ideology

One of the reason for the development on the unisex clothing is the rise of women's power. During the First World War, women took part in the First World War instead of just staying at home. Feminist socialism born in 1960s and 1970s in the western world, calling for women's right. The feminist movement has continued. Women struggled for their rights and multiple choices. The unisex clothing let women to wear different kinds of clothes rather than the traditional type: dresses.

Queer theory inherits and develops feminism and homosexuality theory, transcending the simple "equality between men and women" and directly subverting the traditional gender dichotomy [11]. Queer theory holds that gender identity and sexual orientation are not "natural" but formed through social and cultural processes. Queer theory uses deconstruction, post-structuralism, discourse analysis and gender studies to analyze and deconstruct gender identity, power forms and conventions. This theory promote the concept of gender free, giving inspiration to the unisex clothing.

The open and inclusive atmosphere also encouraged people to do something according their preference rather than the stereotype. Take China as an example. Since the new democratic revolution, people's minds have been liberated. Feudal ideas gradually disintegrated, and the country paid more attention to protecting people's rights and interests.

### 5. Discussion

The convey of gender in clothes was very limited in the early days, distinguishing men and women by the clothes' appearance [7]. However, the unisex clothes broke the traditional dressing criteria, calling for a new standard.

The future development trend of unisex clothing will develop in two directions, one is the diversification of clothing, the other is the equalization of clothing [12]. The world will be more and more open in the future. As a consequence, unisex clothes will be more and more prevalent with people fighting for their rights and favors. Designers need to do some innovation in unisex clothing such as profile design style, fabric design and color design, emphasizing the characteristics of the word "unisex" [8]. The "individual freedom" of unisex clothing is the basic social criterion of industrial civilization and the extension of humanism. Clothes are human expressions and changes of clothes are the reflection of in the world communication [13].

Looking at the phenomenon of men wearing clothes with women elements from the feminist perspective. It is expressing the gender identity, gender diversity and hitting the traditionally dominant society [14]. The inclusive and open spirit in our society is constantly strengthening but we need more improvements. Men's clothing design has made more pioneering changes than women's clothing design, boldly showing more diverse temperament expressions [14]. It is not a very strange thing when men do some makeup or wear clothes with female features compare with the past time.

Fashion not only shows gender identity, but also strengthens gender identity. Whether men or women consume fashion goods, they accept social cognition and subject changes [5]. Unisex clothing is a way to embrace gender identity in a fashionable way, making us to fight for the inner voice.

## 6. Conclusion

The unisex clothing enjoys a long history. Smoking clothes and "Peacock Revolution" are the representatives of breaking the stereotype and embrace the unisex clothing. With open social atmosphere and the pursuit of individual rights, unisex clothes are more and more popular among masses. Unisex clothing is a symbol of equality and freedom, which should not be defined by gender. This clothing met with lots of difficulties in the path of growth. Women wearing men's clothing has been recognized, while men wearing women's clothing is not acknowledged widely. Some improvement and transformation need to be done to adapt to the era's needs.

The reasons for the popularity of unisex clothing are countless and this article describes five reasons: social media and idols, designers, brands, Z generation and social thoughts. In the future, unisex clothing is bound to have bright prospects and limitless possibilities by overcoming limitations.

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