

IT'S ALL A BLUR: EXPLORING GENDER EXPRESSIV FASHIONS

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Natalie Victoria Arida

San Marcos, Texas

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Natalie Victoria Arida

Thesis Supervisor:

Dr. Gwendolyn Hustvedt, Ph.D.

Family Consumer Science

Approved:

Heather C. Galloway, Ph.D.

Dean, Honors College

Abstract:

Gender expressive fashion is a way of dress where individuals can show what gender role they are filling that day. Someone who identifies as gender-fluid may change their role every day because they do not identify with any one sex. Individuals who classify themselves as gender-neutral do not identify with any sex; they can be considered unisex or genderless. An androgynous person exhibits characteristics from both sexes, and this can be shown through gender expression as well as sexual expression. A transgendered individual is someone whose gender identity is different from their assigned sex at birth. Over the past few years there has been an increasing acceptance for these different gender expressions, and with that has come a large fashion movement. Through history different gender expressive fashions have been popular trends with the masses; and through my research I aim to uncover if the current fashion movement will repeat history and fade away or, if this is a new social reality that will forever change gender expression. In order to do this, I will first define four different gender expressions, and then research the historical fashion trends for each category, followed by the current fashion for the different expressions. Thus far in my research I have found that while different gender expressive fashions are trendy with the masses, there also seems to be more of a physiological movement behind it this time. With the increasing acceptance of different genders, people now feel safe to express themselves and experiment with different gender expressions without being judged or hated by society. Future gender expressive fashion may become even more popular, and we may see a new market in the fashion industry.

Don't be into trends. Don't make fashion own you, but you decide what you are, what you want to express by the way you dress and the way to live." —Gianni Versace



One DNA's fall 2015 collection

Introduction:

Mark Twain once said, "Clothes make the man, naked people have little or no influence on society." If you believe this, and clothes truly do make the man, then what happens when clothes make the man a woman? If the primary purpose of clothing is to conceal our sex, then the main function of fashion is to exploit our gender. The clothing we wear signifies who we are to the outside world, and in today's society there is a lot of in between.¹ Men become queens, women become kings, and with androgyny, it is all left to the imagination. Iconic designer Miuccia Prada explains "fashion is instant language", because we live in a world where human contact has become very brief, what we wear says what we do not. With the increasing acceptance and popularity of gender-neutral, and other gender expressive fashions, individuals now have a lot to say

with their clothing choices. However, the question is, is this new trend directly influenced by the changing norms in today's society, or is this just another fad that will die out? To answer this question, I'm going to compare past and present gender expressive fashions to try and uncover why the trend died off in the past, then compare that to today's gender expressive trends, and see if there are parallels.

Gender-Neutral:

The term gender-neutral means not identifying with any one sex. This refers to the idea that social institutions, policies, and language should not create roles based on an individual's gender, in order to prevent discrimination stemming from the idea that one gender is more suited for a social role than another is. A popular example would be gender-neutral bathrooms or locker rooms in the workplace. The U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) require employers to provide access to restroom facilities, and cannot enforce unreasonable restrictions on use of the facilities. While there is no federal, state or municipal laws or regulations requiring employees to create separate bathrooms, OSHA does recommend allowing employees to select gender-segregated areas (bathrooms and Locker rooms) that coincide with their selected gender identity.² Along with gender-neutral facilities, gender-neutral language is becoming prevalent in public areas. This sort of language avoids bias towards a specific sex by using non gender-specific nouns and pronouns. For instance, instead of referring to an individual as a policeman or stewardess, you would refer to them as a police officer or flight attendant.³

Gender-neutrality has affected many areas of everyday life for individuals, and fashion is no exception. The strict and rigid gender roles of the 1950's lead to an increased popularity in unisex dressing in the 1960's. Girls wore pants, boys grew their hair long, and unisex "his'n'hers" outfits became popular which further blurred gender lines. Parisian designers such as Pierre Cardin⁴, Andre Courreges⁵, and Paco Rabanne⁶ all helped start this trend with their "space age" designs. They used simple silhouettes and new synthetic fabrics that had no historical gender associations. A lot of their designs were still feminine in nature but had masculine undertones, such as dresses with boxy silhouettes, and bold pant suits. These looks very considered gender-neutral for the time period, especially in comparison to the popular hourglass silhouette that dominated the 50's. The unisex trend did not last very long because by the 1970's Diane Von Furstenberg had created the wrap dress which drew woman away from unisex pants suits and put them back in feminine dresses.⁷ The wrap dress is an iconic feminine dress, with its deep V-neck line and cinched waist. Mrs. Furstenberg created this dress to make woman feel sexy and empowered, rather than gender neutral, she wanted women to embrace their femininity.



Pierre Cardin 1964 line

In today's society we see many parallels to the 1960's and 70's including fashion trends. Rad Hourani considered his spring/summer 2015 couture collection the first unisex couture collection in costume history. He features floor-length dresses, see through tops, and boxy-cropped blazers for men. His women's collections feature the same style boxy-cropped blazers, pant suits, and robe style dresses. He displays the men and women's looks together to show the similarities in the designs, and that the looks can be worn by either sex.⁸ Many other top designers highlighted gender-neutral designs at their spring/summer 2015-menswear fashion shows in Paris. Jonathan Anderson has been dressing in unisex uniform in his personal life for quite some time, and now is putting men in pussy-bow blouses (chiffon blouse that ties in a bow at the neck) on the runway. Gucci followed his example and featured their male models with long hair wearing lace and chiffon tops. Hedi Slimane used rock'n'roll clothes that can be interchangeable between the sexes, Givenchy showed knit skirts styled over trousers, and Prada mixed her menswear and womenswear collections to show the similarities between the two.⁹ These styles became very popular on the runway, and shortly trickled down to mass marked fashion companies such as Zara and Forever 21. Millennials across the country have been sporting genderless sweat shirts and jeans, but will this last? Currently this is still a very popular trend among the masses; but for individuals whose sexuality is representative of this fashion, they look at this as an opportunity to express themselves without being persecuted by the public. For these individuals, I believe this way of dressing will continue through their life regardless of what's "in style". Their sexuality has finally become widely accepted and they no longer need to hide it under gender restrictive clothing.



Rad Hourani Couture 2015 Spring Collection



Gucci Spring 2015 Men's Runway

Gender-neutral fashions have made their way from the runway, to the street, and now to the office. In the UK, the police department has implemented gender-neutral uniforms for their officers. In the past male officers were required to wear ties and had restrictions on their hair length, while female officers wore cravats and had restrictions on their nail polish. This uniform standard placed “unnecessary differentiations” on the officers, and created barriers for Trans individuals. In addition to the new uniforms, the UK police force also implemented gender-neutral changing rooms, restrooms, jail cells, and even updated its technology so individuals can be recorded under “non-binary genders and titles”¹⁰. All over the world, companies are changing their dress codes and implementing new gender-neutral regulations to accommodate for changing sexual norms. In the past, when gender-neutral fashions were trendy companies did not change their sexually restrictive dress codes. This leads me to believe that this time around gender-neutrality is more than just a fashion trend, but a new way of living that is being accepted even in the professional world.

Gender-fluid:

When an individual identifies as gender-fluid it means that their gender expression shifts between masculine, feminine, and everything in between. This can be expressed by the way they dress, behave, or express themselves. Many gender-fluid individuals like to be referred to as “they” in contrast to a definitive pronoun such as “he” or “she”. A gender fluid person likes to have the best of both worlds, by never identifying with one specific sex, and likes to have the freedom to stray from socially prescribed gender roles.¹¹ The New York Times noted that millennials are more comfortable with their gender expression than individuals in older generations are, because of their ability to easily find any information they desire on the internet. Baby boomers did not have access to unlimited unfiltered information in their youth to explore their gender identity, so they had to rely on the information provided to them by their schools, family, church, etc. This information was very limited and often biased because the idea of being gender fluid was not accepted until very recent years¹². Today’s youth is exposed to large amounts of unfiltered information on the internet and through social media, so it is easier for them to explore and research their gender identity. On top of the overwhelming amount of information that is at millennials fingertips, the idea of expressing any gender you want is not only permitted but often encouraged.

Fashion for gender fluid individuals varies largely, because their gender identity can change daily. Designers Tilly DeWolfe and Tom Barranca created the brand TillyandWilliam to allow “people to create their own identities, and [their] clothing is an effort to aid in that process”¹³. The two questioned why it was so hard for them to share clothing, Tilly identifies as female and Tom as male, so they got the idea to create new clothing shapes that bend to the will of the wearer. Their fashion line aims to remove the gender binary of how clothing is supposed to look and be worn, and empower the wearer to make those decisions for

themselves. TillyandWilliam’s clothing are made to be worn by men, women, and everything in between on the gender spectrum; and in addition the clothing itself can be transformed into different garments. For example, they have a simple black shirt that can also be worn as a dress or a cape; and this multifunction garment is modeled on a male with masculine physical features and platform lace up booties. The designers were quoted saying "Fashion needs to stop putting gender and people into little boxes..." and their gender fluid designs strongly support this. They are not trying to create a genderless world like gender-neutral designers are, but a world where people are free to express their femininity, masculinity, and anything beyond. People already know where to get clothing for their traditional gender role, so Tom and Tilly are providing another option and a different way to think about clothing¹⁴.



TillyandWillam’s multifunction black shirt

Many celebrities have been sporting gender fluid fashion designs within the past few years, some to depict their gender expression and some as a fashion statement. Rapper Young Thug, or Jeffery Williams, has introduced the idea of gender fluid fashion in the male hip-hop world, which is historically a hyper masculine music genre. On the cover of his latest mixtape, “No, My Name is Jeffery”, the rapper was wearing a Japanese-influenced powder blue floor –

length ruffled skirt, and white low-cut blouse with a hat resembling a parasol. The dress was created by Italian designer Alessandro Trincone, who made a brand aesthetic that is about people, in particular men who want to express themselves in a non-binary manner. Actress and model Ruby Rose has made a name for herself in the gender fluid community by sharing her story with the media, and helping to influence others to deviate from the rigidity of the gender binary. She wrote, produced, and starred in a short film titled "Break Free" that shows what it is like to have an identity that does not follow the status quo. The opening image is a very feminine Ruby Rose with long hair, a full face of makeup, covered up tattoos (she has a lot in real life), and wearing a bodycon (very form fitting) dress with heels. She disappointingly looks at herself in the mirror as she primps and slowly starts to remove the feminine frills; she first cuts off all of her hair and removes her heels, then moves to the bathtub where she washes away all traces of femininity such as make up. The ending features her bare faced, exposed tattoos, and dressed in a masculine blazer and pants. This video shows her transition from one end of gender expression spectrum to the other through a complete fashion makeover, and "the takeaway is that only you know who you were born to be, and you need to be free to be that person."¹⁵ This is not to be confused with her transforming to a male gender, this is to show that she can change her gender expression based on how she feels in the moment, and she does this through her fashion.



Young Thug's mixtape cover



Ruby Rose in "Break Free"

A fellow classmate, who for the purpose of this paper we will call *Jane*, identifies as gender fluid and helped explain what that really means to them (prefers to be referred to in a non-definitive manor). Jane was born a female, but never felt restricted by this gender role. As a child, they liked to play with all sorts of toys, Malibu Barbie and Spiderman was their favorite. Jane was lucky enough to come from a family that accepted them for who they were, and encouraged their gender fluid behavior. Jane described their style as an “ever-changing cycle of frilly skirts and basketball shorts”, rhyme intended. One day they would come to class with a face full of makeup and a pink dress, and the next they would come wearing baggy jeans with their hair concealed in a snapback cap. I asked them how they decided what they were going to wear that day and they responded with a simple “whatever the f*** I feel that day”. Jane said their fashion choices were a direct reflection of the sexuality they identified with, that day at least, and it was the easiest way to express themselves to the world. I asked how they felt about the current gender expressive trends, and if this influenced their fashion at all. Jane said they

were ecstatic that nontraditional genders are becoming widely accepted by the general public, and that while they have always felt the freedom to dress this way because of their supportive family; Jane has multiple gender fluid friends who have broken out of their shells in the past few years because they are no longer feel restricted to follow the traditional gender norms, especially when it comes to their fashion.

Androgyny:

A person who identifies as androgynous has characteristics of both sexes, and expresses this through their fashion, gender identity, and sexual identity. A person can display behavioral androgyny based on their participation in activities, accepting of roles, and adopting of attitudes that are usually associated with the opposite gender. For example, a female could play on a football team and be the “bread-winner” of the family, all while still identifying as female and being sexually attracted to males. Often times people in the entertainment industry (music, fashion, etc.) adopt behavioral androgyny to appear gender-neutral and appeal to both sexes to expand their fan base. On the other hand, a person can display psychological androgyny, which means they have conflicting feelings about their gender or sexual identity and fall somewhere in-between male and female on the gender spectrum. They are trying to display outwardly what they feel inside; a common example would be a homosexual female who dresses in traditionally male clothing. Androgynous individuals may be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or asexual; and they may dress in ways that makes their gender unclear.

To this day David Bowie remains one of the most famed and celebrated androgynous figures in pop culture. The erotic rock star caught the fancy of men and women, gay and straight alike, by displaying sexual ideals that appeal to males and females. He is famous for his

outrageous bodysuits, animal-print blouses, colorful pantsuits, and tasteful eyeliner and body glitter. Frida Giannini, designer for Gucci, commends Bowie on his ability to help men express their “feminine glamour and strength without losing their masculine sensuality”¹⁶. While David Bowie may be one of the most iconic androgynous individuals, he certainly was not the first. In the 1910’s Coco Chanel personified the independent roles women were going to have to take on now that the men were off at war through her new designs. She used men’s fabrics and provided women with the option of pants and masculine silhouettes that liberated women from constrictive corsets. In the 1960’s Yves Saint Laurent created the first tuxedo for women, and by the late 60’s there was a Peacock Revolution that enticed straight men to take on the fashioning’s of gay men. In the 1980’s we see Prince with his sequined jumpsuits and go-go boots, and Grace Jones with her flattop hair and buff physique. The 1990’s gave us Kurt Cobain who showed his androgyny with his blonde locks, eyeliner, and babydoll dresses¹⁷. In today’s society, the androgyny continues and is mass marketed. Brands such as HauteButch, Wildfang, and Marimacho make masculine clothing that is made to fit a variety of body types. These types of brands are great for androgynous women who have struggled to find masculine designs that fit their feminine body shapes. Actor/rapper/designer Jaden Smith has been making headlines with his recent androgynous fashions. He wore a white skirt over a black tux to prom, a flowered t-shirt dress to Coachella, and most recently featured in Louis Vuitton’s new womenswear campaign ad. For Jaden, wearing a skirt feels natural just like wearing pants felt natural to Coco Chanel back in the early 1900s¹⁸.



Jaden Smith in Louis Vuitton's womenswear ad

Androgyny is one of the more popular gender expressive fashion statements, and is widely worn on runways, red carpets, and street wear. An everyday example of androgynous street wear would be boyfriend jeans, which are jeans made for women in a men's "baggy" cut. This trend began with girls wearing their actual boyfriend's jeans, and the style took off from there. In retail stores, especially ones that specialize in jeans, "boyfriend jeans" is now a jean category and stocked year round. Most woman own at least one pair even if they do not identify as androgynous. Over the course of a few weeks, I began observing people who were dressed in androgynous fashions and asked them "what inspired this look today" and "would you consider yourself androgynous". I was able to speak with 15 individuals, 9 females and 6 males. Three of the nine women identified as androgynous; and they said that this was their everyday look and not an inspired fashion trend. The remaining six women identified as "straight"; some of the

women said that the baggier clothing was more comfortable and they liked the way the it felt, while others said they got the idea from celebrities and fashion magazines/blogs/websites.

Transgender:

A transgender individual is someone whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex during birth. Gender identity refers to a persons internal sense of being a man or a woman, so a transgendered individual's assigned sex and gender identity do not match. Trying to change a person's gender identity is like trying to change someone sexual orientation; it does not work, so most transgendered individuals try to make their outside correspond with their inside. This can be done by taking prescribed hormones or undergoing surgery, but not all Trans people seek to make this change because of their personal preferences and the large cost and risks that come along with transitioning¹⁹. Some may choose to simply change their name, hair, and style of dress to express their gender, especially those who are not yet comfortable with publicly expressing their gender identity. If a person does decide to make a medical transition they have to be prepared for a lifelong commitment. The process takes a minimum of 2 years to completely transition from one sex to the other, and the individual must take their hormone pills every day in order to stay transitioned. For example, if a male wanted to transition to female he would begin taking estrogen pills, but if he stopped taking them his beard would grow back, he would experience erections, and his breast would stop growing. Everything would be reversed, so deciding to transition is not something transgender individuals do on a whim. The Trans community has faced a lot of hate and violence throughout history, but within the last few years, they have become accepted by the general public. Celebrities such as Laverne Cox and Caitlyn Jenner are some of the biggest names in the transgendered community, and have helped normalize their community to the general public with their celebrity status.



Caitlyn Jenner Magazine Cover

Transgender fashion all depends on the person. People who do make the transition typically dress in accordance with their gender identity, so a female who transitions to male will typically wear traditional male clothing and vice versa. Those who do not transition may still cross dress, some in their everyday life some in just their private life. However, just because an individual cross-dresses does not mean that they identify with that sex. For example, 17-year-old James Charles has become CoverGirls's new CoverBoy. He still identifies as male, but enjoys wearing makeup, and is darn good at applying it²⁰. This was a huge step for the Trans community and the public received James very well. When the ad first launched, his social media accounts were flooded with praise and admiration. People said things like "you have given me the courage to come out" and "you are an inspiration to us all" .Indian fashion designer Sharmila Nair used transgender women as the inspiration for her new collection of saris, and went one step further by having them model her clothing in a photoshoot that went viral²¹. These women have made the full transition and dress the part. For something like this to happen in India, it further proves that the acceptance of different gender identities is increasing

on a global level. Online clothing website Crossdressing Breast Forum Store, or CDBF store, makes clothes that specifically fit the needs of transgender woman and male crossdressers. The proportions and sizes are made to flatter their body type, and the online retailer sells items such as wigs, breast forms, and hip pads to further the feminine appearance. While there is still not an overwhelming amount of retailers like CDBF store, we are seeing more and more options for Tran's individuals.



CoverGirl ad Campaign



Red Lotus Transgender Photoshoot

Now that there is a general acceptance and laws in place to protect transgendered individuals, more and more people are making the change. I grew up with a girl we will call *Sally*, and she was very feminine. We would play dolls, talk about boys, do our makeup, and tons of other stereotypical female activities; we went to different colleges, but kept up with each other through social media. Slowly but surely she started making changes, first she stopped

wearing makeup, then she cut her hair off, then she started dressing androgynously, shortly after came out as lesbian, and now she identifies as a he. He goes by a male name and proudly and publicly identifies as transgendered. I asked him what caused the change, because we were so feminine growing up together. He told me that he never really felt feminine it was just what he thought he was supposed to do. Growing up and moving to a new place gave him the chance to explore his identity, and the freedom to do it without being judged by people who knew him as a her. I asked if he planned to make any sort of medical transitions, and he said “not as of now but I also never thought I would be Trans so who knows”. I next asked about his fashion and how it pertained to his new gender identity; He said changing his physical appearance and dressing in male clothing was the easiest way to express his gender identity. Dressing as a male made him feel masculine, and people treated him like a male. Lastly, I asked what he thought about the current gender expressive fashion movement, and if it influenced his coming out as transgender. He said that it was easier to transition because of all the public support, and that it is much easier to find clothes that fit his body type because of the increase in fashions available.

Conclusion:

After researching what different gender expressions mean, finding past and current fashions that represent these expressions, and talking to individuals who identify with these different expressions; I conclude that the current gender expressive fashion movement is not a trend, and that it is a new socially accepted way of dressing. Individuals who identify as Trans, gender neutral, gender fluid, androgynous, or anything else now have the freedom to express their gender identify without the fear of being judged or shamed. If we look at examples from history, we see that the fashion trends followed the fashion life cycle and died off when the next new trend came around. Different gender expressions were not socially acceptable in the past even when it was “in fashion”, whereas now they are. Not only has this “trend” already been

around for over two years, but also we have seen laws implemented that encourage gender-neutral policies and facilities. Companies have changed to gender-neutral dress codes and language in the office, retailers are being created to cater to specific gender expressions, and the public is accepting and educated. If companies and the government are willing to spend money on these policy changes, and people are creating businesses, it proves that this is something that will be around for a long time. While gender expressive fashion may be a trend for a few fashionistas, for individuals who identify with different expressions this is their opportunity to be who they want to, and dress how they want without being negatively judged or criticized.

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