

In What Ways has the Move to Androgynous Fashion in the Late 2010s and 2020s Destabilized Clothing's Association with Gender Norms in Fashion Design?

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Abstract

Androgynous fashion has been on the rise in the late 2010s and 2020s, seen more frequently in the public eye through things like celebrities, fashion releases, and social media. This increase in prominence significantly influences and possibly destabilizes clothing's association with gender norms. This paper's objective was to examine the rise of androgynous fashion in the late 2010s and 2020s and the implications it has in the disruption of the public perception of gender identity. The research consisted of assessing and interpreting the history of androgyny and how it came into the public consciousness. The background of androgyny and its use historically was examined. Drawing from this framework, it looked at the rise of androgyny and its increasing prominence in the modern fashion scene. The analysis within this paper addressed the many societal factors that affect the public's attitudes toward androgyny, including high fashion and celebrity influence. The way gender and fashion interact is addressed through the historical review of the role of women in the fashion industry and the acknowledgment of the growing number of diverse gender identities today. It also examined how the concept of gender performativity influences the potential androgynous clothing has to strengthen gender diversity and inclusivity overall and how it reshapes the way society as a whole perceives gender. This paper created a look into how androgyny has grown in the fashion scene over time, and how societal perception of gender in fashion may continue to shift in the future.

Keywords: Fashion, Androgyny, Gender

1. Introduction

Lately, there has been increasing discussion around different gender identities and ways of gender expression. Awareness of different gender identities is seen even at the governmental level, and many celebrities are defying gender barriers through their appearance or dress. For the first time, widely known celebrities are identifying as non-binary or somewhere outside of the typical gender binary, such as Demi Lovato, Sam Smith, and Lil Uzi Vert. Different gender identities are coming into the public consciousness - celebrities, government officials, and general online discourse acknowledging alternative gender expression. As this became more prevalent, it began to influence fashion's perception, individually and societally. Many pieces of typical men's clothing were being worn on women and vice versa, as well as clothing worn that did not fit into either categories of "men's," or "women's." Throughout previous research of feminism and sexuality while preparing for writing this paper, it became obvious how popular the concept of androgyny is in fashion right now. The gender norms previously seen in fashion were being disrupted and altered, and perception on different clothing styles and their relationship to gender were as well. The goal of this paper is to contribute to this discussion, clarifying how androgyny in fashion influences the creation, presentation, and public perception of gender.

Androgyny is a concept seen throughout many aspects of fashion throughout history, but has had an exceptionally large increase in the late 2010s and 2020s. How has the rise in popularity destabilized gender norms in fashion? This is what will be addressed in this paper, making use of data from different levels on the hierarchy of the fashion world, from designer to consumer. The use of androgyny in high fashion and runway collections and pieces will be discussed, as well as noting some designers that have interpreted androgyny. It will also be shown how these trends are made palatable to the general public, through the means of celebrities and influencers. And lastly, how the use of androgyny in fashion shows up in the wardrobe of the general public will be assessed. The rise of androgynous fashion in recent years has disrupted the clothing typically associated with each gender, how society perceives each gender, and the creation of new collections or pieces. It is important to assess and analyze the growth of androgynous fashion to understand how it affects and changes societal perception of gender, now and in the future.

2. Discussion

I would like to preface this paper with an establishment of the terms being used throughout the research and analysis. Over the course of this writing, the terms “women’s fashion,” “men’s fashion” and “androgynous fashion” will be put in use. An important thing to understand about the use of these words is that most big and influential brands in fashion still group the items they sell into “men’s” and “women’s;” very rarely will you see a brand group all their clothes together with no designation of the gender they’re supposedly designed for. This research intends to exist outside of the discourse of “what is a man?” and “what is a woman?” – as what constitutes a “man” or a “woman” is an artificial construction. Regardless of whether the gender binary exists, most of the world still operates under a very binary understanding of gender, and despite the rise of androgyny in recent years, fashion tends to be discussed from this binary point of view. Even the use of the term “androgyny” implies the existence of the gender binary. Essentially, when men, women, and androgyny in regards to fashion is mentioned, the ongoing conventions related to the terms is being referred to.

To understand androgyny in fashion, androgyny must first be understood. Androgyny in its most literal form is a combination of the Greek words for man and woman. “Andro” is a prefix meaning man and “gyn” is a suffix meaning woman. However, if you are to look in a dictionary, the word androgyny tends to have two definitions. It states the literal definition, “the combination of feminine and masculine characteristics,” but it also states another definition: “the quality or state of being neither specifically feminine or masculine.” This is interesting, because if the word means a merging between male and female, why can it also mean neither male nor female? This can be seen throughout fashion as well, the terms “androgynous”, “unisex”, and “agender” used interchangeably. The comparison between unisex and androgynous does make sense, because unisex, a term used especially when referring to clothing, means something for both men and women, both masculine and feminine. But would agender, defined as, “of, relating to, or being a person who has an internal sense of being neither male nor female,” be considered the opposite of androgynous? The combination of two things vs. the absence of two things should be considered opposites, so why are both those things listed under the same definition of androgyny? This is because of the very narrow societal view of gender and the concept of the gender binary. Since a large portion of society is grouped into what is supposedly for men and what is supposedly for women, anything outside of those two concepts tends to be grouped together. Even though these two things would technically be considered opposite, being outside of the typical gender binary in any regard groups agender and unisex fashion together, combined under the term “androgyny”. Therefore, in this research, while there will be distinctions between the different definitions of androgyny when necessary, when something is referred to as androgynous it is necessary to understand it could be referring to either definition.

Gender tends to play a big role in fashion. Thinking from a historical perspective, fashion tends to be very female-dominated. The new existence of a surplus of free time coming after the Industrial Revolution, along with the imperative to signal status for the nascent middle class, solidified the pressure for mothers to stay at home doing housework, and thus more strongly associated the labor of making and repairing clothing with femininity. Even now, many people involved in fashion are women. According to a Fall 2020 study of students attending The Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), 83% of the student body identifies as female. At this point, it should be clarified that that women making clothes in the past does not necessarily mean that women-identifying people today are more interested in

fashion. However, that does mean that throughout history there has been and is a female influence in fashion. In a world where most jobs are catered to men and a male dominated workforce in almost every industry, it is easy to see that an industry that features many women can be very refreshing and can present a large appeal. There are many famous fashion brands started by women, such as Schiaparelli, Vivienne Westwood, Prada, Chanel, and more, and many famous women come from the fashion industry as models, such as Kendall Jenner, Kate Moss, Heidi Klum, and Tyra Banks. Fashion can also be combined with other areas of study or interest, such as art, photography, and music, that are harder to succeed in as a woman. (Bishop, 2022) Through fashion, women can follow their interests and still be able to succeed.

One may ask, what about male fashion designers? Although there are many well-established and popular female fashion designers, there are also many equally popular male designers, like Alexander Wang, Marc Jacobs, and Gianni Versace. One important thing to note is that most fashion is catered towards a female audience. Even though many prominent designers are men, a large portion of the pieces they are creating are designed for women. Therefore, in order to sell to women, they need to market towards a female clientele. Catering to a female audience requires listening to female voices and amplifying the interests of women in their clothing choices. Essentially, even if the clothing is being designed by men, they are in theory listening to the needs of women and making it possible to have women's voices shown to the public, especially in time periods where this wasn't possible or extremely difficult. Also, another key thing to take notice of is that in a large number of cases male fashion designers use their work as a way to express femininity in ways that would be outside of social norms and could otherwise place them in dangerous situations. Men being able to express feminine traits is also stereotypically associated with gay men, and being open about that publicly is not safe for everyone. Men creating clothing, especially clothing for women, has often been an outlet for them to express different aspects of their gender and sexuality whilst still maintaining safe environments for themselves. Even though there is a valid argument there that could expose issues in men only creating clothing for women, it allows many men a creative outlet to express their gender and sexuality safely, and if you think about that in that manner it can be considered a mutually positive relationship.

Although throughout this writing androgyny in fashion in recent years will be focused on, dressing in an androgynous way is not new. This research addresses how it has made its way mainstream in the last couple years, but people have been dressing androgynously for centuries. Some ideas considered feminine now, such as skirts, dresses, and makeup, were not only a big part of men's fashion in ancient societies, but in societies such as Ancient Egypt were worn on men and women equally. This may be because there was a less established sense of the modern gender binary that exists in society today, but also, simply, that beauty standards have evolved over the course of history. In older examples of androgynous fashion, it was often seen in the upper class. Aristocrats in 1800s England and France often wore similar, gender-neutral clothing. (Russel, 2020) Men also have been wearing heels, a typically feminine piece of clothing, since the 10th century, and many traditionally masculine clothing styles, such as the cowboy, feature heeled boots. (Bass-Kreuger, 2024) Moving forward in time, the 1910s brought women wearing pants into the public consciousness, coming from Chanel, and many female performers from the early 1900s introduced tuxedo-style outfits into their wardrobe. (Komar, 2016) Fashion and musical icons such as Prince and David Bowie wore more androgynous styles, and model Grace Jones brought media spotlight onto a more masculine looking female body.

Runway fashion often features models with more androgynous features or features usually seen biologically on the opposite sex. Female models often have more biologically masculine features, such as being tall, having a sharp jawline, and a square face. Male models also often have less "manly," characteristics, such as not being as muscular as is the typical Western beauty standard for men. Controversial collections that feature androgynous clothing, hairstyles, and makeup are often released by huge companies to create a buzz and try out new fashion concepts, so many collections featuring big brands and famous people have been released utilizing androgynous clothing. One important one that comes to mind is the 2017 shoot for Vogue Korea featuring Jaden Smith, which sparked much buzz and inspiration for other designers and people working at fashion-related companies such as magazines and editorials. This shoot featured Smith wearing skirts and flaunting his comfort in expressing his gender identity through his clothing. He became well known for this and was able to amass a bigger career after it. He also appeared in a shoot in 2016 for Louis Vuitton wearing a skirt, along with three female models, but the Vogue shoot amplified his being

known for his androgynous style. The way celebrities and brands interact is something important to take a brief look at now and will be discussed further when talking about influencers, who also have a big hand in what fashion is trending. Celebrities like Billie Eilish, who were already well known for an androgynous style, have partnered with brands to be able to market it. This leads into a different topic: the topic of branding, advertising and how they interact. This plays a role into how high fashion brands create their collections, and looking at androgynous high fashion it is crucial to be able to notice the bias of needing to sell and market a product. However, it is still essential to look at high fashion, since high fashion concepts eventually turn into trends in fashion for the everyday fashion consumer.

A common element in many designer or runway androgynous fashion is post-apocalyptic futurism, a style inspired by a dystopian world in the distant future, where people would wear what they need to survive. Much of the futuristic fashion of the past concerned robots, metal, AI, and the like, but these things have lost their mystique. Carrying around tiny robots everywhere is no longer some idea that will happen at some point in the future, and things like humanoid robots and holograms do exist. This does not mean futuristic fashion is dying down, however—it is just evolving. Once we've become disenchanted with the dream of chasing peak technological innovation, the next logical step is the apocalypse. Apocalyptic fashion also has roots in the fashion industry's role in fear of and creation of environmental harm and climate change. And if the fashion trying to be replicated is supposed to be post-apocalyptic, that discourages the need for gender. If the point of living, as it would be in a post-apocalyptic society, is simply to survive, then there is no need to concern ourselves about the roles of each gender. If you are just trying to survive, you will wear whichever clothes are most suitable and accessible for your environment regardless of who you think should wear what. So as designers are focusing on this futuristic, post-apocalyptic concept for their clothing lines, they are, by association, creating androgynous clothing. Clothing that discourages signaling a legible gender is important to the rise of androgyny because it allows us to see clothing without gender, something our society has been struggling with for a long time. By being able to see clothing in a genderless fashion with no details that would typically signify it as men's or women's clothing, clothing can evolve from a binary split to something androgynous, made for any/all genders. For big brands like Maison Margiela, showcasing this genderless clothing to the public is important for the increase of public knowledge and the popularization of androgyny.

Although most pieces that are physically on the runway are either made to fit one specific person's body or are not "everyday wear" pieces, the design aspects featured in the work often can make their way down even to everyday wear. A large amount of designs that are seen on the runway are not made to wear for the average person, often being things that are there purely to show creativity, not something the average citizen would wear. However, as there are many people who analyze fashion trends and try to incorporate them into their outfits, different elements of clothes featured in certain collections tend to trickle down into everyday wear. Some examples of trends started on the runway are the 2010s resurgence of fringe and crop tops. When fashion analysts incorporate elements of pieces seen on the runway and make them known somehow, whether through posting them online, talking to others about it, or wearing it publicly so others can take notice and try it out themselves, people observe this and start trying to recreate the outfits they've seen that they feel drawn to. Brands also often do sell more ready to wear pieces that are either featured in the collections released on the runway or similar pieces, but people trying to recreate pieces or outfits they saw from a given brand and then sharing it tends to have an equal or possibly bigger sway on the general public, as not everyone keeps up with runway shows, and many cannot afford designer prices. Another part that plays into this, as mentioned previously, is brands placing their products on celebrities or other influential public figures, either for red-carpet events or in a street style way. Although not everyone looks at and analyzes runways, the trickle-down effect high fashion has down to ordinary people is detectable. Despite the fact that not every trend is started by big brands, many of the most famous pieces of clothing right now draw direct inspiration from high fashion. High fashion representing androgynous clothing trickles down to the consumer level to have large amounts of people wearing androgynous clothing. Androgynous clothing at the high fashion level is extremely influential because of the way it impacts the clothing decisions of large portions of the public.

I must revert back to how androgyny plays into the scheme of trends and who starts them. While just one instance of an established brand or public figure dressing androgynously may be considered just for publicity, the pattern of this occurring establishes it as a trend. As mentioned before, androgynous clothing is not new, but wearing clothes and doing things considered to be designated for the "opposite" gender has been very popular lately, and relates back to

how trends are started. The concept of dressing in clothes meant for men as a woman or for women as a man draws a lot from drag and queer culture. Even clothing that is not necessarily androgynous pulls from the eccentricity of drag and the exaggerated performance of dressing as a woman. Finding new ways to consider performance as a certain gender is a great influence on many aspects of fashion design and many designers' decisions when creating pieces. Going back to how public figures shape fashion, many influencers, even non-fashion influencers, have established previously hidden or foreign concept of men wearing any makeup, let alone complex and noticeable looks. Male celebrities have been wearing makeup for a long time, but because they have not been candid about it, this unrealistic and impossible beauty standard is created. Many male makeup artists also gained high status and created their own brands, such as Makeup by Mario created by Mario Dedivanovic, a makeup artist for many celebrities, like Kim Kardashian, Megan Fox, and others. Many female celebrities are also wearing clothing items that are typically associated with masculinity to events, such as suits or tuxedos. Some examples of this include Zendaya, Emma Watson, and Madonna. Well-known names sporting androgynous styles multiple times typically intended for the opposite gender has proven this to be something that is recurring, not just a one-off instance just simply for shock value.

Drag is very important to the modern understanding of androgynous fashion. By definition, drag is a performance of gender, both literally and figuratively. Although drag is an exaggerated form of the performance of being a woman, the message of the performance is crucial. The idea of drag is very old, stemming from ancient societies which didn't allow women to perform in theater so men dressed up as them, but the modern understanding is revolutionary. Drag in its modern perception by the public is inexplicably linked to being LGBTQ+. Drag was an extremely formidable part of underground gay and trans scenes during times when it was heavily criminalized, and drag queens made up many of the people in attendance of the 1969 Stonewall riots. Drag is so important to androgynous fashion because it is one of the only ways of dressing that outwardly criticizes the performance of gender. Firstly, it is exactly what androgyny is: the combination of male (andro) and female (gyn) traits. Secondly, it is mocking the performance of gender and putting on a show based on it. It points out the kind of ridiculous element of the performance of gender and how absurd the lengths our society goes to to maintain these norms. Modern media like Rupaul's Drag Race, which rakes in hundreds of thousands of viewers every year, help normalize and popularize the concept of androgyny, in contrast to even 20 years ago when drag was virtually unheard of and not shown to the public, only in underground scenes.

Although mentioned earlier, many fashion trends build on runway or celebrity inspiration, fashion is also evolving. Generally, there is a greater public consciousness if not understanding of different gender identities beyond male or female. In 2021, the U.S. census asked about gender identities that fall under the non-binary umbrella for the first time, which showed 1.2 million adult U.S. citizens that (openly) identify as non-binary, whereas this population of people was not recognized federally at any point previously. (Anders, 2021) Not to dispute the fact that most of the world right now still operates under binary, heteronormative conditions, but gender identity has become a more relevant topic in the world recently. Governments in several countries are allowing gender neutral identities on IDs and driver's licenses, and acknowledging the existence of people who identify outside of the typical gender binary. (Perry, 2021) The inspiration for fashion trends does go both ways: as the general public becomes more aware of exploring gender identity, fashion designers adapt to this. This is a mutual relationship of inspiration: designers create based on ideas in the public eye and consumers get inspired by these ideas. So, as different identities become more widely known/more socially acceptable, fashion shows that. Fashion is an expression of the world around us. This can be taken very literally, like how one dresses when it is cold versus how one dresses when it is warm, but you can also take it figuratively. Fashion, like any form of art or identity, is an outlet for self expression and can be taken as a political act. (Singer, 2020) Fashion can be rebellious: you can protest harmful dress codes, set yourself apart from how the people around you expect you to look, create new ideas and spark conversation, and more. However you interpret how you want to dress is a personal decision, and clothing is a creative outlet that not only expresses how you want to be perceived and can outwardly express your support for something (whether it be a brand or a cause), but can define how other people perceive you.

The popularization of androgynous fashion in recent years is destabilizing gender norms. Even though androgyny has been visible in many different clothing styles throughout history, it overall hasn't been socially acceptable for very

long. The modern understanding of women wearing pants is a concept that has barely been around for 150 years, and wasn't socially acceptable until 100 years ago or less (depending on location). People still get judged based on what they are wearing in relation to what others perceive their gender as, often. But this proves the point exactly: people getting upset when others are dressing not in the way they traditionally expect them to represents an ongoing change in the perception of fashion. Even if many people do not align their views with gender non-conforming fashion, understanding that it is a part of self-identity and can change how you present yourself to the world shows a disruption from centuries of women having to wear certain things and men having to wear certain things with no intersection between the two. Many are resistant to even small change, so there is no doubt a large amount of the human population, especially ones who grew up with a more narrow perspective on the gender binary, would be uneager to accept this change with open arms. But this change in how people dress, how people perceive different styles, and how this has integrated itself deeper into identities is a disruption within itself. Stepping outside of, finding some point in the middle, or even completely ignoring the typical gender norms that the clothing one wears is typically associated with is a creative and self-expressive process, and as a society slowly comes to understand this, it is on the path to understanding and supporting different gender identities other than our own.

Gender norms in fashion are being re-evaluated, and allowing people the freedom to work inside or outside of them depending on what they feel like doing. The public is now opening up to the idea that clothing has no inherent gender. (Jacobs, 2021) Some elements of this recently come from one, the internet, and two, the pandemic. Because of increases in widespread access to the internet and social media, people are able to view styles that they have never seen before and clothing concepts outside of their social bubble. The internet allows you to explore anything, especially niche fashion interests you can look at to choose how you want to dress. The pandemic is very influential as well, because it gave people the time and the solidarity to reflect on their own ideals. A large issue in consciousness raising for any cause is that most people just simply do not have the time for it and will blindly follow whatever the most popular idea is unless given time to reflect and actively choose otherwise. The solidarity people obtained from the Covid-19 pandemic, although isolating, allowed many to reflect on how they were taught to perceive gender and its association with fashion. (Thorne, 2020) This allowed many people to open up to new ideas and create their own individual style, disregarding gender norms. The pandemic also changed people's methods of dressing generally, the move from a world focused on leaving the house and working in an office switching to staying and working at home provided the need for more comfortable clothing, such as sweatpants, since people no longer had to get dressed up everyday. (Jakpa, 2021) This also affects gender roles because a large amount of office wear is heavily binary and tends to contain very different standards for men and women in the workplace. (Valbrune, 2018) The temporary deletion of this need to fit into the binary for work every day allowed people to readdress their gender identity.

Androgyny trending, or rather being more in the public eye right now, has disrupted the gender norms typically associated with the binary view of gender. A study from The Phluid Project reported that 56% of Gen Z consumers often buy clothing outside of their typically assigned gender. (Maculan and Whatling, 2021) Numerous big brands are utilizing unisex or genderless clothing, such as Balenciaga, Marc Jacobs, and Rick Owens often in association with the post-apocalyptic concept. Additionally, celebrities are wearing clothing not typically associated with their gender identity, which helps normalize it, and many average people are incorporating androgynous clothing into their wardrobes. (Yotka, 2020) The normalization of androgynous clothing by celebrities and popular brands is so important to the disruption of gender norms because normalizing not being confined to gender-based stereotypes in fashion allows for the widespread acceptance of different gender identities. This allows for people to dress how they want and to have less fear of being judged, and also allows for more creativity, because if you are confined to only some types of clothing it is difficult to be able to come up with new ideas and new ways to wear things.

Despite there being many examples of androgyny in fashion right now, one may argue: "How does the trend of androgyny fit other gendered trends?" For example, there has been a recent uprising of a hyper-feminine style, featuring elements like bows, ribbons, lace, pink, and elements of ballet in some cases (like ballet flats or the pink and ribbons resembling ballerina wear), which is considered very feminine, referred to as "coquette." (Roby, 2022) Coquette in French means "a female flirt," but this term is considered outdated. However, the modern understanding of a coquette style still is very closely tied to [traditional ideas of] femininity, not something one would consider androgynous. Traditional coquette style coming from the 1800s has many elements featured in this modern "coquette,"

style. It features hints of romance, utilizing things like cherries and roses, and the modern style does look like a new spin on, or an evolution of, the 1800s style. If you were to look at any social media, you can find thousands of posts or videos about this style. Looking on YouTube, you can find many videos titled “coquette aesthetic starter pack...”, “coquette amazon hauls...”, and other things of the sort. On TikTok, the coquette trend has over 1.3 billion views. (Santino, 2023) This is not the only example of a style that has been trending recently which is not androgynous. So why is androgynous fashion so significant?

3. Conclusion

The goal of integrating different gender identities and the facets of self expression that come along with them is to strive towards the goal of being able to express yourself however you want without fear of judgment. But expressing your gender identity through your clothing any way that makes you feel comfortable means that even if you feel comfortable with and gravitate towards very traditional ideas of your gender and it makes you happy, then that should be accepted too, without one fearing some sort of confusion in one's own gender identity. Once society is moving to a point, like it is now, where there are hundreds of styles you can pick elements from that make you feel comfortable in your identity, choosing to wear more traditional dress should not mean anything more than that you feel comfortable in the clothes you're wearing. The prominence of androgyny offers a choice. You no longer are required to dress the way typically associated with your gender: you can choose whether or not to. And fashion truly is personal: it is expressing your identity through your outward appearance. The key thing is the choice, and hopefully, strict societal gender norms through the means of clothing will no longer be so harshly enforced, meaning that you can choose to not dress within the confines of the clothing commonly associated with your gender. Expressing your identity in any form you choose encompasses all, and without the introduction and acceptance of androgynous into the mainstream fashion will not be as much room for choice and expression.

Although androgyny has been in use in fashion for centuries, there has been a recent big surge of it entering mainstream media in the late 2010s and 2020s. In high fashion, many designers are finding ways to incorporate it into their pieces, whether it be through genderless clothing or the adaption of clothes across genders. Many celebrities and influencers are marketing the defiance of gender norms and normalizing the expression of gender identity through clothing to the general public. Drawing inspiration from high fashion and celebrities or influencers, androgynous clothing is becoming incorporated in a rising amount of the average person's closets. Androgynous clothing is important to understanding gender identity and self-expression and its popularization is a crucial step to moving towards gender equality and the widespread acceptance of alternate gender identities. Clothing typically associated with each gender, how society perceives each gender, and the creation of new collections or pieces have all been significantly altered by the rise of androgynous fashion.

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