

THE EFFECT OF GENDER MODELS ON GENDERLESS FASHION PHOTOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

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Received: 2 June 2022

Revised: 25 July 2023

Accepted: 26 July 2023

Published: 12 December 2023

Citation:

Kuo, Y.-P. (2023). *The effect of gender models on genderless fashion photography*. *Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Studies*, 23(3), 633–641.

This research aims to explore how gender models affect consumers' perceptions in order to benefit genderless fashion photography, which could provide alternative body image envisioning in a media landscape dominated by gender understandings. The fashion photography's most straightforward goal is to enhance the garments' presentation to potential consumers by associating the fashion design with the personal desires of suitable models. From Unisex to Genderless, the progressive issue proposes advanced concepts to eliminate the gender silhouette, resulting in a contradiction between concepts and images in genderless fashion photography. The research proposed ambivalent fashion photography and genderless fashion complex by reviewing genderless fashion, gender in photography, consumer imagination, and genderless fashion photography cases. It uncovered the concept of eliminating gender and solicited public opinion in support. The results of the survey comparing visible and invisible gender models in genderless fashion images indicate that the choice of models has a moderate impact on how the garments are perceived, but it has no effect on how the design is understood. Notably, employing invisible gender models to prioritize the garments themselves can create a space for gender neutrality and the designer's vision. By focusing on the garments and experimenting with various photography styles, fashion brands can create a more inclusive and diverse representation of gender, exceeding customers' preconceived notions. Beyond being a passing trend, genderless fashion reflects the desire of individuals to express their unique identities. The research highlights the potential for fashion photography to embrace genderless concepts in garment design and brand marketing, thereby contributing to more thorough investigations into fashion and gender inclusivity and fostering inclusivity in the fashion and gender spheres.

Keywords: Genderless fashion; fashion photography; gender model

1. INTRODUCTION

Genderless fashion is a progressive field that explores the future of gender in human society and culture. The discussions about people's preference for expressing their self-identity through fashion, including genderless fashion has continued to evolve (Kuo et al., 2021). The Sex Equality survey revealed that 44% of survey participants supported expressing gender as a spectrum of identities, and 68% of young people argued that gender is non-binary (Olchawski, 2016). Therefore, the boundaries of fashion in binary sex fade away with the increasing number of individuals accepting the concept of gender fluidity. A non-binary approach to gender

would benefit from removing restrictions on what men and women can wear and advancing the gender equality conversation “wear and do what you want, not what society conditions you to want” (Attwood, 2017). People have a tendency to express their self-identity but are not governed by inherent labels, such as age and gender.

The manner in which individuals dress is a direct expression of their identity. Similar to age, gender is not necessarily a factor in clothing selection. Along with this concept, modern fashion trends aim to provide consumers with new ideas and options for balancing the performance of their garments in various situations (Kuo et al., 2021). Therefore, the genderless fashion trend is more than just a trend; it is a concept that encourages individuals to respond to personal identity in their looks.

Fashion photography intends to increase potential consumers’ understanding of collections and their desire to purchase garments through their appearance; models must be suited to the fashion style. However, the gender model fashion images will create issues that do not correspond to any gender concept and may conflict with consumers’ imaginations. The contradiction in genderless fashion is between the non-binary fashion department and the exploration of the gender-free space. Even though genderless fashion is trendy in the fashion industry, there is a noticeable disconnect with the public. The genderless fashion brands of today prefer to present both male and female models; the benefit is that it is easier to capture the imagination of the majority of consumers. Therefore, this study aims to explore the effect of gender models on genderless fashion photography and to provide expression ideas for genderless fashion photography. This research on genderless fashion photography asks how the gender models of images affect consumers’ relationship with their own identities. The genderless collections produce images that present alternative visions of what bodies can become within a media landscape dominated by gendered conceptions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Genderless fashion

This study reviews the history of unisex fashion to describe how people began to rethink the dichotomous gender concept and it considers the gender experiments in design. According to Chrisman-Campbell (2015), unisex is a topic that continues to develop. Through this approach, people from diverse backgrounds have discussed the issue of gender neutrality and developed a variety of related concepts over time. As a result, exploring the future of human society and culture in terms of gender is a progressive result of unisex fashion. Designers create varied works based on their understanding of these various concepts. In addition, people have made multiple attempts to merge, separate, or combine gender characteristics, and designers have created different works based on their interpretations of the concept of unisex (Kuo, 2021a). In 1966, the term “Unisex” (n.d.) was coined. Through movements such as women’s fair and gender freedom, people continued to engage with this issue and offer more advanced gender concepts; similar terms appeared in the 1980s in the “no gender” concept, such as agender, genderless, and gender-free (Kuo, 2021a). In the 1950s, “sex” and “gender” had similar meanings, but some have since defined them differently. “Sex” refers to the biological and physiological nature bestowed at birth, whereas “gender” is a personal and social construction (Paoletti, 2015). Thus, people began to consider and accept the possibility of physical and psychological gender inconsistency and the concept of genderless identity. Since the term “unisex” already exists, other terms with a similar meaning, but with interesting distinctions, have been created. Furthermore, the core concept transferred from physiological sex to psychology identifies the elimination of gender existence (Kuo, 2021a).

The research titled “Exploring the Third Gender in Fashion: From Consumers’ Behavior to Designers’ Approach toward Unisex Clothing” discusses whether the unisex label and typical markers of femininity and masculinity in clothing had an effect on consumer behavior. The results showed that the majority of consumers tend to dress in accordance with their gender identity; however, the unisex label would affect consumers’ willingness to wear certain outfits. Moreover, the researchers concluded that consumers are more likely to prioritize fashion style in choosing clothes (Bardey et al., 2020). Under genderless fashion, the designer and consumer prioritize the preference style over the gender category.

2.2 Consumer imaginary

When purchasing goods, consumers frequently engage in mental activities accompanied by their imagination. Therefore, consumers may imagine the “ownership model” of the product and the type of psychology and satisfaction that will result from using the product (Zhou, 2015). According to novelty, independence, and creativity, imagination can be divided into reinvented imagination and creative imagination. The two types of imagination help consumers understand the function and design of products when purchasing products by advertising clothing styles. Therefore, the strategy activities of advertisements

are significant (Zhou, 2015). For the fashion industry, a fitting model within a constructed space recognizes the use, appreciation, and social values of commodities and influences the judgment and evaluation of entities (Zhou, 2015). The goal is to build the imagination of garments to constitute their “ownership model” and thus benefit from a deeper understanding. With this concern in genderless fashion, the understanding and value would not be limited to the goods themselves, but rather to the genderless concept that the designer wishes to express through the collection. Fashion photography is important for the public to understand the design; moreover, it is an excellent medium for conveying the designers’ perspectives on gender. Consequently, the selection of models and how a model presents the clothing would be a factor in advertisement strategy; the gender model would undoubtedly be worthy of consideration.

2.3 Genderless fashion photography

Some people are acutely sensitive to gender because they perceive the world from a binary perspective (Paoletti, 2015). The binary view is easy and practical to promote goods with labels, such as the kids wear dress stereotype of blue for boys and pink for girls. However, this is merely the result of the gender-oriented marketing of the manufacturer established in the 1940s (Paoletti, 2012). The gender-labeling trend began with children’s clothing, spread to teenage wear, and eventually reached adult wear. According to the gender binary, the fashion industry divides the solid gender departments into fashion weeks, retail spaces, and magazines.

Fashion photography is about fashion, with its most straightforward interpretation emphasizing that the photographs are meant to attract buyers (Aspers, 2005). The public sees fashion photography to be a relatively unrestricted field. The fashion advertisement photographs are the result of a continuous negotiation process between the fashion industry’s key players, including photographers, brands and their press offices, model agencies, and magazines (Aspers, 2005). Moreover, an advanced or controversial concept, such as genderlessness, necessitates additional negotiations. The photographers, editors, and art directors interviewed for the research on the gender fluidity of fashion photography indicated that the concept of gender-fluid is missing in the fashion industry and that the images do not reflect this (Misslin, 2020). There is a gap between the genderless concept and the extent of genderless fashion photography, despite the fact that the gender of models is a matter of general preference. In genderless fashion photography, dealing with the gender of models’ images is a complex negotiation problem.

Small-scale retailers and large fast-fashion companies have both released gender-neutral collections over the past decade. Rad Hourani presented the first gender-neutral ready-to-wear collection between 2005 and 2007 shown in Figure 1 (Hourani, 2007). In 2016, Zara, a fast-fashion brand, introduced the “ungendered” collection. In 2017, H&M added non-gender-conforming apparel called “Denim United.” These brands and retailers have created numerous images to promote their collections via campaigns, look books, and fashion magazine editorials. In contrast to how the clothing industry typically operates, these images help consumers communicate that their products can be purchased and worn regardless of gender identity. Based on this genderless concern, the images depict male and female models wearing the same clothing, indicating to the public that the collection does not belong to a specific gender department, but rather follows personal preference, as shown in Figure 2.

The 2015 collaboration of London-based unisex label Toogood with department store Selfridges on a temporary “agender” retail space stands out among the various genderless fashion images (Attwood, 2017). The collection is presented in the same manner by both male and female models. Figure 3 depicts how the project utilized the public gender stereotype by altering the model’s hairstyle or dressing men in skirts to reflect the solid gender dressing label.



Figure 1: The Look Book of Rad Hourani’s Gender-Neutral Ready-to-Wear Collection (Hourani, 2007)

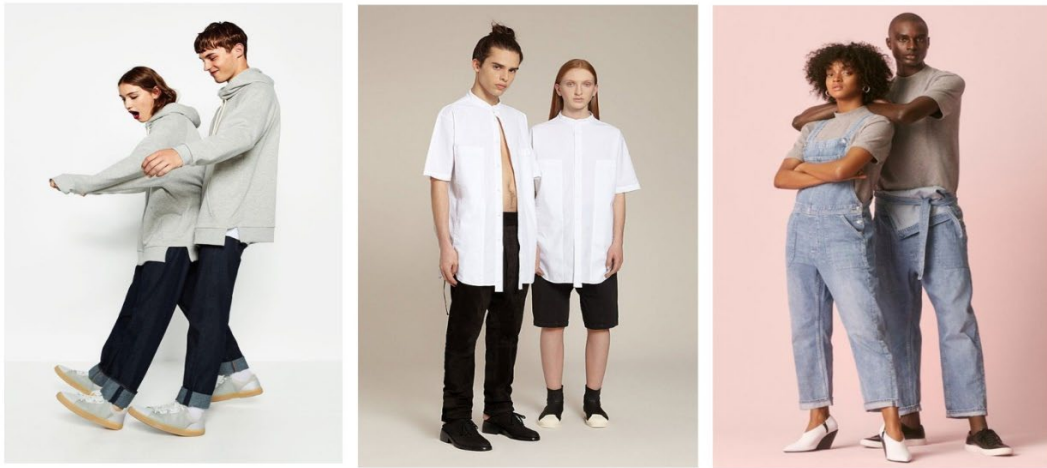


Figure 2: The Look Book of Agender Fashion Photography (Attwood, 2017)



Figure 3: Selfridges Agender Concept Space-2 (Vita, 2015)

2.4 Review summary

“It seems that, at its essence, all clothing is unisex. Rather, it is a culture and the norms that ascribe gender to an item of clothing and by continually labeling it, thus reinforcing the way it is perceived.” (Bardey et al., 2020).

The most straightforward objective of fashion photography would be to strengthen the image’s purpose of presenting the clothes to potential consumers by associating the imaginative looks of appropriate models with personal appearance. Within a media landscape dominated by gendered conceptions, the genderless collections produce images that offer alternative visions of what bodies can become. By presenting both male and female models, the predominant genderless fashion photography strikes a balance between the solid gender clothing department and the gender-fluid section. However, while breaking down the similarities between what men and women can wear unquestionably advances the discussion on gender, some have argued that gender fluidity is more than simply swapping threads (Attwood, 2017). Although as a negotiated option, genderless fashion photography presented in male and female images is more accessible to the public’s imagination, it may not capture the value of the potential consumer.

Nevertheless, from unisex to genderless, the progressive issue proposes advanced concepts to eliminate the gender silhouette, resulting in a contradiction between concepts and images in genderless fashion photography. The genderless fashion trend is more than just a fad; it is a concept that encourages individuals to express their individuality through their appearance. The audience for genderless fashion seeks to explore the traditional gender fashion department in favor of exploring the space created by removing gender (Kuo, 2021a). Therefore, the visible gender or gender-neutral models without strong gender characteristics may not connect with the consumer’s imagination and undermine the fundamental concept of genderless fashion photography.

Therefore, this genderless fashion photography research posed the question of how the gender models of images affect the relationship between consumers and their own identities. It would provide a concept that removes the clothing's layered label, that is, the invisible gender models. However, it does not encompass removal of traditional gender silhouettes that emphasize gender characteristics nor gender-neutral silhouettes that blur silhouette, but removal of the gender image for consumers.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative research as a foundation for examining consumer perception, but also incorporates the results of public surveys to draw attention to fashion photography and the gender model. The study combines the methods of review and survey to determine the extent of the gender model's effect on genderless photography. Examining genderless fashion, gender in the photographs, consumer imagination, and cases of genderless fashion photography, this study explored how fashion photography can address genderless concepts with complex and ambiguous descriptions. The survey aimed to investigate if the public's perception and imagination of genderless fashion photography affects personal comprehension and perception of the design collection. In addition, the author gained a deeper understanding into the level of public acceptance of genderless fashion in order to contribute to more inclusive fashion and gender research.

The literature review found that predominant genderless fashion photography presents both male and female models to strike a balance between the solid gender clothing department and gender-fluid clothing department. However, from unisex to genderless, the progressive issue proposes advanced concepts to eliminate the gender silhouette, resulting in a contradiction between concepts and images in genderless fashion photography. Based on the concern, the study conducted a public survey to determine if the visible and invisible models will affect the public's understanding of the garments, and more importantly, to demonstrate whether the invisible gender model is consistent with the concept of genderlessness.

3.1 Survey setting

The survey aimed to explore the visible and invisible effect of models in genderless fashion photography. In addition, the survey produced one genderless design collection that was not commercially available, titled "Alternative" and awarded by A' Design Competition in 2021 of the Fashion, Apparel, and Garment Design Award Category, as shown in Figure 4 (Kuo, 2021b). The survey announcement was made during exhibitions of a collection in Thailand and Taiwan in order to collect visitor feedback.



Figure 4: Alternative Genderless Fashion Collection is the Iron Design Award Winner in 2020–2021 Fashion, Apparel and Garment Design Award Category (Kuo, 2021b).

The study utilized two distinct photographs of the same fashion collection: one photograph with gender-neutral models hidden in darkness, so that people could not determine the model's gender but could see the garments themselves (Figure 5), the other with explicit male and female gendered models to present the collection traditionally, as shown in Figure 6.



Figure 5: Invisible Models in the Genderless Fashion Photography Survey (Kuo, 2021a)



Figure 6: Visible Models in the Genderless Fashion Photography Survey (Kuo, 2021a)

3.2 The respondents

The composition of respondents is shown in Table 1, which consists of 63 men, 99 women, and 4 individuals of unknown gender. 27 respondents were fashion industry professionals, and 139 were members of the general public without a fashion industry background. In addition, 58.44% of respondents were between the ages of 20 and 40, and 91.56% of respondents held a bachelor's degree or higher. The survey was published online; consequently, the proportion of young respondents with a high level of education and the composition of respondents' fundamentals meet the objectives of the survey.

Table 1: Composition of Respondents

Gender identity						
Choice option	Male		Female		No gender	
Summation	63 (37.95%)		99 (59.64%)		4 (2.41%)	
Major related to fashion						
Choice option	Fashion major		Non-fashion major			
Summation	27 (16.27%)		139 (83.73%)			
Age						
Choice option	10–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60 and up
Summation	6 (3.62%)	28 (16.87%)	69 (41.57%)	47 (28.31%)	14 (8.43%)	2 (1.2%)
Education Level						
Choice option	High school	University	Master	Ph.D.	Other	
Summation	10 (6.03%)	88 (53.01%)	50 (30.12%)	14 (8.43%)	4 (2.41%)	

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study categorized the survey's summation data and the composition of respondents in gender and major to combine in the Table 2.

4.1 Results of the survey

The study categorized the survey's general sum value data in Table 2. First, questions 1 and 2 inquire separately about the garment understanding from Figures 5 (invisible model) and 6 (visible model). The results revealed that when respondents were asked to consider only one image, they grasped the garment's understanding of the invisible model in 87.35% of cases and the visible model in 81.93%. Both shooting styles for invisible and visible models yielded excellent results. Whether the models are visible or invisible, the subjective opinions of the respondents can adequately comprehend and capture the garment's appearance. The invisible model is more prevalent than binary gender models at 5.42%. However, respondents were asked with question 3 to compare the two images; the data revealed that visible gendered models are more prevalent than their invisible counterparts in only 3.61% of cases. Moreover, 37.35% of respondents selected "both," which supports the initial finding that respondents' subjective views can perceive and understand both aspects of a garment's appearance.

Table 2: Results of the Genderless Fashion Photography Survey

Unit: Percentages (%)			
Q1. From the clothing present on the hidden human body in Figure 5, can you understand the clothing look clearly?			
Choice option	Yes	No	
Summation	87.35	12.65	
Male	33.13	4.82	
Female	51.81	7.83	
No gender	2.41	0	
Fashion major	15.06	1.20	
Non-fashion major	72.29	11.45	
Q2. From Figure 6, where the clothing is present on males and females, can you understand the clothing look clearly?			
Choice option	Yes	No	
Summation	81.93	18.07	
Male	30.72	7.23	
Female	49.4	10.24	
No gender	1.81	0.6	
Fashion major	12.65	3.61	
Non-fashion major	69.28	14.46	
Q3. Between Figures 5 and 6, which helps you to best understand the clothing?			
Choice option	Figure 5 (invisible)	Figure 6 (visible)	Both
Summation	29.52	33.13	37.35
Male	13.25	10.24	14.46
Female	15.66	21.69	22.29
No gender	0.6	1.21	0.6
Fashion major	4.82	4.21	7.23
Non-fashion major	24.1	29.52	30.12
Q4. Do you agree that seeing the gender of the models will affect your impression of the clothes?			
Choice option	Yes	No	Maybe
Summation	66.26	16.87	16.87
Male	24.7	8.43	4.82
Female	39.76	7.83	12.05
No gender	1.8	0.6	0
Fashion major	8.43	3.62	4.22
Non-fashion major	57.83	13.25	12.65
Q5. Do you agree that hiding the model will be beneficial for focusing on the clothing itself?			
Choice option	Yes	No	Maybe
Summation	57.23	16.26	26.51
Male	22.29	7.83	7.83
Female	33.74	7.23	18.68
No gender	1.2	1.2	0
Fashion major	9.04	1.2	6.02
Non-fashion major	48.80	15.06	19.88

From the gender values in Table 2, the research found that the positive responses in Q1 and Q2 data remains the same for male, female, and no gender. However, in Q3, the proportion of positive responses in female and no-gender respondents flipped from invisible to visible. A similar condition appeared in those who majored in fashion to those who did not; the results showed that the non-fashion respondents reversed the

proportional relationship from the positive proportion relationship of Q1 and Q2. Only the males group still kept the invisible option in positive responses from Q1 to Q3.

Moreover, the survey directly asked respondents, “Do you agree that gender models will affect your impression of the clothes?” and “Do you agree that the hidden model will be advantageous for focusing on the clothing itself?” The results of Q4 and Q5 showed that 66.26% of respondents agreed that gender models would influence their impressions of the garments. Meanwhile, 57.23% of respondents agreed that without visible models, they could focus more on the garments themselves.

Whether the models are visible or invisible, gendered or gender-neutral, the respondents’ could understand the garment’s appearance. The results provide implications for designers and brands that traditional gender model images are not a viable option for consumers. However, the most important aspect would be the apparel and style itself.

4.2 Discussion

The survey results demonstrated that the visibility of the models did not significantly affect the public’s perception of the garment’s appearance, but it did the impression, albeit not strongly. Therefore, the invisible gender model of a new paradigm in genderless fashion photography within the understanding and imagination of genderless fashion and benefit to focus on garments would be advantageous to generate a free space with various styles of photography to express the designer’s ideas. It has taken a long time for the gender-free process to push the boundaries, with a little change each time these trends emerge (Chrisman-Campbell, 2015). The study hopes to push the boundary further with these invisible models, which would be another way for genderless fashion photography to convey the no-gender concept.

However, the positive responses were reversed when both visible and invisible options were used. Meanwhile, the non-fashion majored respondents also exhibited the opposite pattern. Therefore, the researcher explores the extended question: does being gender and fashion-sensitive affect the understanding of photographs? The researcher intends to improve the survey and conduct additional phases of research to uncover additional hints.

Although history is still being made, the genderless fashion photography strategy has inspired the both men and women wear the same garments. As a means of evading the two gender groups, consumers can still understand the garment look and find it to be more gender-neutral. Focusing on the garment itself may be an option for a brand of unisex fashion that lacks a target group. For the genderless concept, the brand and designer have the freedom to experiment with different photography styles without being constrained by what customers traditionally expect. In order to contribute to more inclusive research on fashion and gender, fashion photography can incorporate genderless concepts and complex and ambiguous descriptions.

5. CONCLUSION

This study addressed how fashion photography can attend to genderless concepts with complex and ambivalent descriptions to contribute to more inclusive research on fashion and gender. It reviewed genderless fashion, gender in photography, consumer imaginary, and genderless fashion photography cases. In a media landscape dominated by gender norms, the research on genderless fashion photography sought to explore how the presence of gender models in images impacted consumers’ understanding and identities and to provide alternative options on body image. Male and female models presenting the same garment in genderless fashion photography may be more accessible to the general public, but may not resonate with potential consumers. However, the use of models with gender-neutral characteristics may fail to engage consumers’ imaginations and undermine the concept of genderlessness itself.

To address these issues, the research proposes the use of gender-neutral, invisible models as a means of pushing the boundaries of fashion and gender inclusivity. The results of the survey comparing visible and invisible gender models in genderless fashion images indicate that the choice of models has a moderate impact on how the garments are perceived, but no effect on how the design is understood. In genderless fashion photography, the strategy of presenting the same garment on male and female models inspires the public to transcend traditional gender categories. Moreover, it is important to note that employing invisible gender models to prioritize the garments themselves can create a space for expressing gender neutrality and the designer’s vision. By focusing on the garments and experimenting with various photography styles, fashion brands can create a more inclusive and diverse representation of gender, exceeding customers’ preconceived notions. Beyond being a passing trend, genderless fashion reflects the desire of individuals to express their unique identities. The research highlights the potential for fashion photography to embrace genderless concepts in garment design and brand marketing, thereby contributing to more thorough investigations into fashion and gender inclusivity and fostering inclusivity in the fashion and gender spheres.

As a preliminary exploration, the study combined gender-free issues and fashion photography, which had limitations in collecting multi-directional and large-scale data. However, according to the result and discussion, the researcher gained a positive response and extended more possible directions in the researcher area. Subsequent extensions of this study will improve this part to continue contributing research value to the gender-free fashion industry.

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