

Inclusive Design as Promoter of Social Transformations: Understanding Androgyny in Contemporary Society



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Abstract This article results from a research work for the elaboration of a dissertation, within the master's degree course in Integrated Design of the Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo—Portugal, developed from Androgyny studies and its influence on genderless product design. With the development of this research, supported by literature review and research works, survey and case studies, issues related to the identity of the individual were deeply studied and understood, namely those related to gender expression, as well as the interpretation of social and cultural action in Androgynous Identity formation. Bearing in mind this theoretical framework, it was possible to identify and analyse products designed under the influence of genderless concept and its definition. The few cases that fit within the scope of the study reveal a diversity of approaches that are considered to be more based on commercial arguments than on an honest concern with gender issues and their influence on the characteristics of the product. Therefore, it is thought that there is an opportunity to investigate more about the subject at least in order to highlight the theme framed by the purposes of Design.

Keywords Product design · Inclusive design · Androgyny · Identity · Social stigma

1 Introduction

With the approach of this theme, the aim is an investigation that contributes to a broader view of contemporary society. The idea is to encourage reflection on Androgyny, genderless products and an inclusive design process that can lead to

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that typology. It is also intended to break with assumptions, trying to reflect upon the concept of androgyny, a topic that over time has always held a greater or lesser attention of society.

The lack of information on gender issues often results in products that could cause negative feelings and unnecessary exclusions. Thus, this topic was chosen to alert to a non-discriminatory view of the individual, seeking to respond to the need for greater integration within society, achieved through products respond to each person's daily needs and contribute to a more satisfying life.

For a better understanding of the topic in question, it is relevant to distinguish and frame some key concepts. According to the LGBTI¹ + Communication Manual [1], biological sex is inherent to the individual and identifies hormones, chromosomes and sexual organs characteristics. Sexual orientation is defined by the gender through which an individual is attracted on physical, emotional and spiritual level, considering his or her gender identity, gender expression or biological sex. Gender identity is characterized by the identification of the individual in relation to their gender, how they see themselves and what they think about themselves, which can be identified as men, women, transgender or cisgender. Finally, gender expression is classified by the set of physical and intellectual behaviours by which an individual externalizes his or her gender identity and the way they live and interact with others. Although society stipulates objects, ways of dressing and acting as male or female, today we have the most varied expressions that do not fit that binary gender pattern. They are ambiguous, neutral, multiple, partial expressions, among others.

2 Androgyny

Androgyny is a term whose etymology derives from the Latin *androgynus*, which derives from the Greek *ἀνδρόγυνος*, meaning *andros* (male) and *gyní* (female). Singer [2] defines androgyny as a being that contains two. For Robinson and Godbey [3], the androgynous individual is half formed by characteristics that are culturally defined as masculine and half formed by characteristics that are culturally considered feminine. Androgynous, therefore, is someone who has physical and behavioural characteristics of the female and male gender, making it hard to say to which gender he/she belongs to only by observing their physical and/or behavioural characteristics.

The concept of androgyny has emerged in virtually every culture from a mythological, legendary, philosophical or even religious point of view being thus possibly a millennial archetype. According to Singer [2] there are several items of evidence of androgynous tendencies in Western culture, present in people's moral as well as in society's habits or traditions.

¹ LGBTI + is an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Shemale, Transsexual, Transgender and Intersex. The + symbol refers to the inclusion of other sexual orientations, identities and gender expressions.

The sexual revolution in the mid-1960s was also considered a milestone for the deconstruction of a social structure that accepted as legitimate only the male and female concept prevailing until then. At the time, questions were raised regarding social and sexual behaviours, enabling the ideal of androgyny, recognizing authentic individuals.

Singer [2] believes that individuals should abandon gender and gender stereotypes, as there will always be a difference between the male principle and the female principle, regardless of social definitions.

For Muraro and Boff [4], the androgynous being is classified as a heterosexual individual who coexists perfectly with the characteristics that conventionally belong to the opposite sex, referring to sensitivity, loss of fear and affection in man and creative intelligence in woman. “Only are androgynous those who are able to reunite the opposites within themselves: men and women, activity and passivity, mind and body” [4, p. 251]. It is necessary to emphasize that we cannot confuse androgyny with hermaphroditism, being hermaphrodite, or bisexuality. Júnior [5] believes that for a long time, the term androgyny was understood as synonymous of hermaphrodite, but this concept is already obsolete. According to Carvalho [6], the term hermaphrodite refers to a figure of sex whereas androgynous is related to gender and bisexual to sexuality. Nevertheless, according to Garber [7], the confusion between bisexuality and the androgynous or hermaphrodite terms is due to the meaning of the word bisexual, i.e. ‘two sexes’. Nowadays, designations, among others, such as non-binary, gender-fluid or genderqueer cover the topic of androgyny. Judith Butler [8], an important American philosopher in favour of the Androgyny concept, proposes queer theory as performative of gender acts that destabilize the categories related to body, sex, gender and sexuality, enabling approaches beyond binary gender concepts.

2.1 Androgyny in History and in Different Areas of Knowledge

The androgyny concept has gone through many interpretations throughout history and has been linked with various legends and myths. Androgynous characteristics have always existed, to a greater or lesser extent, and are present throughout the whole history of human reality and imagination. There are reports and studies related to Androgyny theme in Antiquity, in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, during the Enlightenment and in the Victorian Era, among others.

In both the Fine Arts and Visual Arts, androgynous influences were found in works by artists such as Sandro Botticelli’s (1445–1510) painting *Virgin and Child with Five Angels* (1483); Miguel Ângelo’s (1475–1564) sculpture *Sleeping Slave* (1513–1516) or Claude Cahun’s (1894–1954) photography *Self-portrait* (1920).

In Theatre, one of the most significant examples is the option to exclude women from stage, in favour of castrati inclusion. These boys, who had perfect singing voices,

were subjected to castration in order to keep their high-pitched voice. Francesco Bernardi (1686–1758), for example, was a famous Italian castrato.

The film industry also plays an increasingly important role in disseminating information on gender minorities. The influence of cinema on addressing LGBTI + issues is undeniable. Nepomuceno [9, p. 2] states that “This generation of filmmakers stood out for making films with less sensational approaches on bodies, genders and sexualities’ differences being instead more concerned about the complexification of ambiguous and transgressive subjectivities”.

There are several films which have successfully approached gender matters, such as, among others, *Marocco* (1930) directed by Josef von Sternberg (1894–1969), in which the character played by Marlene Dietrich (1901–1992) appears in an erotic performance scene dressed in men’s costumes and kissing another woman; *Some Like It Hot* (1959) by Billy Wilder (1906–2002), with Marylin Monroe’s (1926–1962) participation, in which two musicians pretend to be transvestites to be part of a female band; *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), a film directed by the Australian Stephan Elliott (1964-), which is about transsexuality and drag queens. More recently, several films by the Spanish Pedro Almodóvar (1949-), especially *Tudo Sobre Mi Madre* (1999), which features a transgender male character who tries to seduce men and women.

In the field of Fashion, and according to Roland Barthes [10], fashion is understood as a social phenomenon and as a manifestation of individuality, and any coverage used on our body is part of an organized, normative and recognized system by society. When we talk about fashion, we must go back to the significant changes that occurred during the fourteenth century, where the female silhouette began to differentiate itself from the male one. Later in the second half of the eighteenth century, between the 1770s and 1780s, in England, came out the macaronis, aristocratic men obsessed with fashion who dressed and spoke in an effeminate manner. By the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, appeared the figure of the dandy, who is historically characterized as a man who paid attention to his silhouette and physical appearance, sometimes using false artifice and other extravagances to achieve the ambitious aesthetic perfection.² However, the dandy of the nineteenth century cannot be confused with the macarone or other young men with exacerbated customs. Riello [11, p. 64] states that while the eighteenth century macarone was fashionable by being excessive, the dandy stood for moderation. Moving into the twentieth century, fashion is somewhat ambiguous, where binary gender and female identity have undergone changes supported by fashion designers who were precursors in gender boundaries. In the crazy 1920s, young women took on a modern attitude. The desire for freedom was mainly associated with an intellectual elite and artists of this era laid the starting point for sexual and women’s emancipation. Women could already express a new awareness about their body, thus emerging a new ideal of female beauty. The ideal of beauty associated with the rounded forms that prevailed over the past decade has been abandoned to make way for a slender woman with narrow hips, small chest, long legs and small head, an androgynous silhouette which put an end to women’s

² Almeida Garrett (1799–1854) is considered by many to be one of the first Portuguese dandies.

curves and made them look like “skinny boys”. For the first time, women’s legs were seen as a sensual and an erotic part of their body in detriment of chest and hips. Their hair was cut very short which was nicknamed *garçonne* haircut. They used make-up and new methods to cover up the chest and female body shapes. The idea was to look thin at any price, even if they had to starve. The erotic ideal was therefore a certain androgyny. These advanced women were nicknamed Flappers [12]. When we talk about 1920s fashion, we must refer to Coco Chanel (1883–1971), known for her classic and timeless taste and for having felt the need to change the postwar women’s wardrobe, motivated by her dislike for excessive ornaments and adornments.

Innovative in her creations, she brought many articles of men’s clothing—some of which had been worn by women during the war years—into fashionable woman’s wardrobe. Chanel turned blazers, cufflink shirts, cloaks, berets, and typically men’s tailoring, in thick wool tweed, into women’s fashion. The increasing acceptance of trousers by women was no longer considered eccentric but strictly of utilitarian use in sports and leisure. This innovation in women’s outfit is largely due to the contribution of Chanel who, even before World War I, began wearing men’s tight pants and shirts to go horse riding. Also, Yves Saint Laurent (1936–2008) determined the fashion of the 60’s and 70’s when he launched *Le smoking* in 1966, a women’s tuxedo made up of pants, a coat and a gray silk blouse.

2.2 *Androgyny Today*

Contemporary androgyny presents itself today with increasingly evident characteristics, not only in individuals, but also in artists and other public celebrities, allowing a break in the dichotomy that promoted behaviors and categorizations with gender stereotypes.

In the *LGBTI + Communication Manual* [1] we can find the Genderqueer and Non-Binary Pride Flag. This flag which was created in 2010 by Marilyn Roxie and officially established in 2012 is defined by three colored bands with distinct meanings. The first band, lavender in color, represents androgyny and androgynous people; the second white band symbolizes gender neutrality, and finally the green band portrays identities that are defined beyond or without any reference to the binary gender system. According to the publication of *Practical Androgyny* [13], one of the representative symbols of Androgyny is the Necker Cube. This object, presented in 1832 by the Swiss crystallographer Louis Albert Necker (1786–1861), allow us an optical illusion: its design, though two-dimensional, can be visualized as a three-dimensional cube. This cube is often presented as a symbol of ambiguity and an illustration of the ability of the human brain to alternate between two states of perception.

Through an analysis of the search results for the term androgyny in Google Trends³ [14] it is possible to conclude that, over the last twelve months, the worldwide demand

³ Google Trends - Google tool that shows the most popular terms searched in a recent period.

for this word has remained constant, which allows us to infer the high level of interest on this topic, as showed by the following chart.

By filtering the search though different regions in the world, it is possible to conclude that the United States of America, Canada and Australia are the first three countries where the search on the web for the term androgyny was most significant. In the same survey, Portugal is the nineteenth country among the fifty-two countries where the research for the same term was evident.

Still within the internet, gender issues are also considered in social media. In 2015, Facebook started to allow free fill in the gender field without any specific descriptions [15, 16].

From the 14th July 2019 onwards, the United Kingdom has banned gender stereotypes in commercials. Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) made the decision based on evidences that suggest that stereotypes can “constrain the choices, aspirations and opportunities of children, youth and adults” [17].

In what comes to teaching, according to the publication of BBC News [18] at Egalia preschool in Stockholm, the teaching methodology involves a neutral and gender-free environment, from common spaces to toys. At this Swedish school, which opened in 2010, teachers avoid using pronouns like “he” or “she” and toys are made available to children without gender barriers so that everyone can play freely.

Talking about new perspectives and new generations, it is essential to mention Generation Z.⁴ According to Parker, Graf and Igielnik [19], approximately one third of Gen Z knows someone who uses gender-neutral pronouns.

According to The Irregular Report [20], Generation Z “(...) has power over their identity - what pronouns they use, how they dress, who they love, and which bathroom they choose. And it is not a niche. It is not an isolated reality only common among urban locations or western countries. It’s everywhere”. The same study also adds that about 45% of Gen Z expect their gender identity to change two to three times and that 55% say that dress is extremely important in expressing their identity, adding that 62% of this generation think their pronoun doesn’t fit their identity.

3 Identity and Consumption

Over the past decades, population growth and the development and spread of product sale companies have led to a significant increase in world consumer society. Thus, today, individuals need constant development and innovation in order to respond to their increasingly individualized needs.

Bauman [21] states that an individual’s identity is always under constant construction, never reaching a total and complete state. For the author, the pace of “liquid modernity” has created an ever more fluid and ever-changing world.

⁴ Generation Z refers to all people born between 1997 and 2012. Individuals born in this period are defined as digital natives, considered as the most tolerant and most diverse generation ever.

Hall [22] designates this event of displacement or decentralization of the individual, resulting in “identity crises”, stating that “the old identities, which for so long stabilized the social world, are in decline, giving rise to new identities and fragmenting the individual seen as a unified subject” [22, p. 7].

According to Schweriner [23], consumption became part of people’s lifestyle in the 1920s, when the economic and industrial “revolution” led to large-scale production with cheaper consumer goods,⁵ which caused a significant change in people’s identity. The constant search for transformations in media and technology has emphasized the rise of consumers’ wants and expectations, leading to the emergence of less and less defined identities [24]. Therefore, Bauman states that the likelihood of total satisfaction is almost nil as there will always be new archetypes and new alternatives, leading to the consumer craving for more [25].

The element ‘desire’ presented itself as a factor of conflict in the standards of the past. As a result, the choice for more hybrid behaviors, thoughts and products on the gender issue prevailed, raising the issue of androgyny as a way of consumption. According to Baudrillard [26], “Men and women today increasingly end up meaninglessly in both registers (...). Both models are not descriptive; they regulate consumption” [26, p. 97].

3.1 *Genderless Products*

The examples presented are considered relevant to the correct perception of the study in question, elucidating the importance and up-to-dateness of the topic. Colour, shape or function are points of products that can play a prominent role when described under the theme of gendered products.

In 2019, the Wild Flowers brand introduced what it claims to be the first non-gendered sex toy designed for multi-body adaptation. This product, called Enby (NB), short for Non-Binary, is a vibrator for users of all genders. Designed with a saddle shape and open functionality, it is sold in black and purple and appears, according to the brand, by the need for a redesign of sex toys, allowing them to have soft shapes, leaving aside the traditional allusion to sexual organs. Beyond the intentionally abstract form, the choice of colours does not appear to be random though.

According to Hallock [27], blue is the favorite colour both for men and women whereas brown and orange are the colours with less preference. Beyond the blue colour, men tend to choose green and black, while women turn to purple and green. In American cosmetics brands “Dermatologica” or “Non Gender Specific”, it is possible to conclude that the packaging was developed in neutral colours—black, white and gray—in order to promote a balance between male and female connotations.

⁵ Usually known as the Fordist production system - developed by Henry Ford, in 1914, which refers to mass production and consumption systems.

In visual communication, there are differences and trends, for example in typography. According to the publication on the Visme website [28], typically feminine fonts, such as Atlanta, Denver or Chicago, tend to be softer, curved, fluid and rounded. In the case of male-associated fonts such as Phoenix, Jackson or Austin, they turn to straight lines, strong serifs, geometric spacing and thick lines. Also, according to Visme [28], currently, gender neutral sources are characterized by being 'classic', readable and safe for, for example, web uses. Some examples are Bookman, ITC Bauhaus, Open Sans or Helvetica.

In Fashion, Gucci creative director, Alessandro Michele, and Italian artist MP5 developed in 2019 the new identity of the Chime for Change campaign, called 'To Gather Together'. In the campaign image, it is possible to see yellow, black and white graphic elements, superimposed in silhouettes of human figures that hide their gender identification. With this, the brand intends to appeal to the global community's awareness of gender equality issues that are increasingly obvious in our society [29].

There are currently some specific brands for androgynous audiences, such as Tomboy Toes and Nik Kacy (footwear), Kirrin Finch, Peau de Loup, Androgynous Fox, Bindle and Keep (clothing), Luna Pads (intimate hygiene), Tomboy X (underwear).

In Interaction Design, "Q" is considered the first genderless artificial voice in the world. Created in 2019 through a partnership between Virtue, Copenhagen Pride, Equal AI, Koalition Interactive and Thirtysoundgood, it aims to end gender biases in artificial intelligence systems by calling for inclusion and diverse representation in the technology sector. "Q" made its debut at South by Southwest 2019, the Austin, Texas music and technology festival. The Vice group argues that binary gender perception perpetuates with stereotypes that some sectors of today's society struggle to change and, in an interview, the creators said they were in negotiations to implement this neutral voice on brands like Amazon, Facebook, Google and Apple [30]. The authors further add that male voices are commonly used in more authoritarian sectors and female voices in service sectors. This groundbreaking neutral voice assistant was created based on a set of people voices who identified themselves as non-binary and has been approved by more than four and a half thousand people from different European countries [31]. Concerning Jewellery Design, in 2015 the Estonian researcher Darja Popolitova concluded her Master in Jewellery and Blacksmithing, taught at the Estonian Academy of Arts in Tallinn presenting her thesis entitled "Androgyny: Jewellery Beyond Gender". Popolitova developed an investigation in which she considered the concept of gender as a disaggregation of totality, that is, a deconstruction of the androgynous being, in order to create male and female duality. The main thought of his project was based on an amalgam concept, where natural materials and synthetic materials were fused, generating several pieces of neutral jewellery [32].

4 Questionnaire Survey—Materials and Methods

A questionnaire survey was carried out in order to validate the researched information and to understand the general constraints and needs of non-binary public. This is a sensitive topic that involves personal information, and therefore, to access an audience in person is not feasible. Thus, it was chosen to develop this work online. Therefore, the questionnaire with a total of ten questions was developed based on a convenience sampling method. It was carried out in the online network of communities based on people's interests, called Reddit, more specifically in admittedly non-binary groups.

4.1 *Presentation and Discussion of Results*

In total, two hundred and eight responses from respondents aged fourteen to sixty-eight were registered. It was possible to conclude a greater adherence of younger audience as 59% of the answers refer to people between fourteen and twenty-four years and 30% to people between twenty-five to thirty-five years old. Regarding the gender with which the respondents identified themselves, 53% were non-binary, 34% female and 13% male. Regarding the origin of the respondents, 63% said they were from the United States of America; 23% from European countries; 6% from Canada; 6% from Australia and 2% from South Africa, India, New Zealand and Hong Kong.

Based on the above percentages, it is possible to corroborate some of the information mentioned in item 2.2.

In a first generic analysis of the questionnaire, it was found that 51% of the respondents consider suffering from prejudice for being androgynous. When asked about the need to disseminate information about non-binary gender issues in schools and educational institutions, 90% agreed.

Regarding the existence of enough genderless products that meet the daily needs of androgynous people, 75% were dissatisfied with the existing offer. Similarly, 84% of the respondents were dissatisfied with the scarce supply of genderless brands offer currently available.

When asked about the genderless products they need the most daily, there was general dissatisfaction with the availability of clothes not only for common use, such as shirts, t-shirts or gender-free pants that could model for different forms of the human body, as well as with the clothes intended for pregnant women. The footwear sector was referred as limited in sizes available and always conditioned to female and male gender. The same goes for personal care products such as shampoos or deodorants. Intimate products used during menstruation have also been mentioned as being usually allusive to gender stereotypes, as well as underwear that needs to be more neutral. The respondents also expressed dissatisfaction with the limited supply of neutral jewellery as well as genderless cosmetic products.

Finally, they were asked about which they considered to be the best way to raise awareness and promote the acceptance of androgyny by society. In this topic, they alluded to representativeness in the media, as well as in characters from series and movies, considering the high number of people they can reach. They also suggested integrating comprehensive gender issues in the education sector to promote knowledge, respect and inclusion in schools.

5 Conclusions

Androgyny presents itself as an archetype widespread in different eras and areas of knowledge although, for certain periods of time, with a complex or still little explored symbology. Technological advances associated with new patterns of daily life and new social perspectives have allowed transformations of mentality and consequent changes in identity. Based on what has been analyzed and presented, it is acknowledged that this is a constantly developing theme and that the area of Design is not yet sufficiently explored in what gender issues is concerned. However, it is also possible to conclude that the reduction of gender stereotypes and the gradual choice for neutrality play an increasingly important role, as we can see in some successful Design cases that prove their need and feasibility, legitimizing the difference that this type of product may cause, promoting society reflection as a whole and individuals in particular. In an age marked by constant changes, it is necessary to break prejudice, promoting equality and social acceptance. Nowadays, we experience multiple, undoubtedly more complex and comprehensive behaviors that come from a growing number of people who do not identify with the binary gender system, seeking for freedom and striving for individuality.

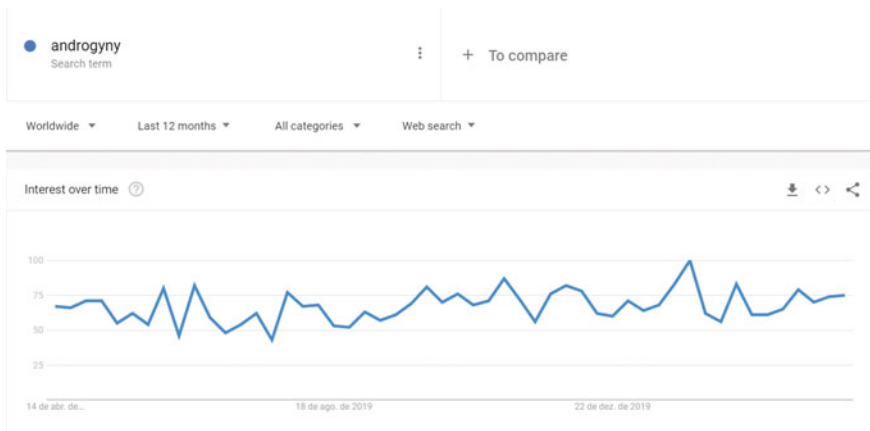


Fig. 1 Research chart of androgyny term in the last twelve months worldwide. Image taken from: <https://trends.google.pt/trends/explore?q=androgyny>. Access: April 10, 2020



Fig. 2 Enby product designed by Wild Flowers, 2019. Image taken from: <https://wildflowersex.com/products/enby>. Access: August 10, 2019



Fig. 3 Illustrative image of To Gather Together campaign, Gucci, 2019. Image taken from: <https://chime.gucci.com/homepage/>. Access: June 22, 2019



Fig. 4 From left to right. Metanoia V and Metanoia VI breast pin and Fazis I pendant by Darja Popolitova, 2015. Images taken from: <https://popolitova.com/portfolio/androgyny-jewellery-beyond-gender-2/>. Access: April 16, 2019

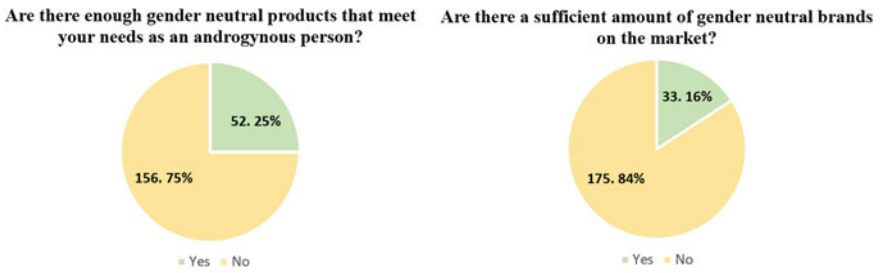


Fig. 5 Statistical data from the questionnaire survey related to genderless products and their existence on the market

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