



Fashion as an Expression of Trans Identities

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Abstract. In a world where ideas are in constant flux, society negotiates long-standing words that refer to sex and gender in favour of more diverse terms, such as trans identities or non-binarity. This article will address how fashion can help express a non-normative view and lived experience of gender. As this area of research is still developing in Portugal, the methodology chosen for the present work was the case study. Through the analysis of two young Portuguese fashion brands (Ivan Hunga Garcia and Amor de la Calle), the paper explores how the creators behind them see the non-binary movement; the connection between gender and fashion; and their relationship with other like-minded individuals. The conclusions explore how new trans fashion approaches might translate into more inclusive realities for everyone.

Keywords: Gender and fashion · Trans identities · Non-binary gender · Inclusive fashion

1 Introduction

Western societies heavily rely upon categorising one's identity to guide their social interactions, which means that—in these countries—dimensions such as gender tend to be viewed as binary concepts [1]. At birth, the biological dimension of the human body, which considers hormonal, chromosomal and gonadal structure aspects, as well as internal and external genital morphology [2], acts as a determinant of one's sex, defining it as male or female. However, this process usually occurs in a heuristic form: what seems like a penis in ultrasound is made to signify “male”, and its absence or visual occlusion is understood to mean “female”; this, in turn, is socially and conceptually converted into being a “man” or a “woman”. Furthermore, gender is considered the social and political understanding of bodies based on specific cultural norms imposed onto this apparent corporal dimension of sex [3], masculine to male and feminine to female. However, when gender definition does not linearly present itself, the binary approach used by this process may not correspond to the personal reality.

Additionally, ideas on gender norms and stereotypes vary significantly according to the time and place we find ourselves. What society expects from a woman in Portugal today differs considerably from what was expected 50 years ago. In the same way, accepted women's behaviours today vary significantly between cultures and even within the same culture—for example, between social classes. This mutability can be understood by conceiving gender as performative [4]. Gender is also an ongoing negotiation

between subjects and the socially available notions of manhood and womanhood [5]. Therefore, it becomes apparent the contingency of our current understandings of the notions of masculinity, femininity, or gender overall.

While often biology and the concept of “sex” is mobilised to ground supposed objectivity for maleness and femaleness, research has long demonstrated that “sex” is both a technological system aimed at producing that selfsame binary [6]. Without considering environmental aspects’ role in that materiality, there is no unmediated access to the biological and material reality that is usually organised under the designation of “sex” [7]. Furthermore, that is why, for instance, Sari van Anders [8] coined the term “gender/sex”.

Currently, statistics show that almost 2% of people are born with intersex characteristics [9], which indicates that, in these cases, the set of biological elements previously mentioned does not correspond to one of the two categories. The study of human chromosomes detected that individuals could be born with a set of chromosomes that are neither XX nor XY. In the Turner syndrome, for instance, one of the X chromosomes is missing or partially missing (XO) [10], and in the Klinefelter syndrome, people have both an X and Y chromosomes, as well as an extra X (XXY) [11]. Often, intersex people are not even aware of their variations, and this diversity of biological experiences is not something that has only been recently discovered [cf. 12].

From a cultural point of view, perceptions about the human body changed significantly over the centuries as much as gender. Thomas Laqueur [13] posits that in classical Greece persisted a one-sex model, where the female genital anatomy was seen as an involution of the male’s and, therefore, as an internal version of it, with the same organs (the vagina corresponding to the penis, the womb to the scrotum, and the ovaries to the testicles). Even now, views on biological sex depend on where we are in the world, with the example of Hijras in the Indian subcontinent being an example of a locally-recognised community, which is composed of people who in the West would be labelled eunuchs, intersex or transgender [14]. These realities lead us to understand that the concept of sex is also more complex and less stable than the binary view that has been constructed and upheld by western societies [3]. As mentioned above, a clear-cut distinction between sex and gender is impossible. There is no material experience of sex without a cultural context, just as there is no cultural experience of gender without material and embodied dimensions coming into play.

Given the theoretical perspectives addressed, this research adopts Judith Butler’s conception of gender. Namely, on the “heterosexual matrix” as a way to understand how concepts such as gender, sex, and sexual orientation are perceived (and often confused) in our society. These notions are normatively understood in this way (see Fig. 1): a person is born with assigned sex (male or female). Accordingly, they are also assigned a gender (masculinity or femininity, respectively), and finally, each gender is associated with a given sexual orientation (towards the sex considered “opposite”). However, Judith Butler tells us these linkages are contingent rather than necessary. Instead, what happens is that embodied and culturally situated experiences are all diverse from one another, so the bodily existence of subjects is never fully capturable just under the concepts of “man” and “woman” alone.

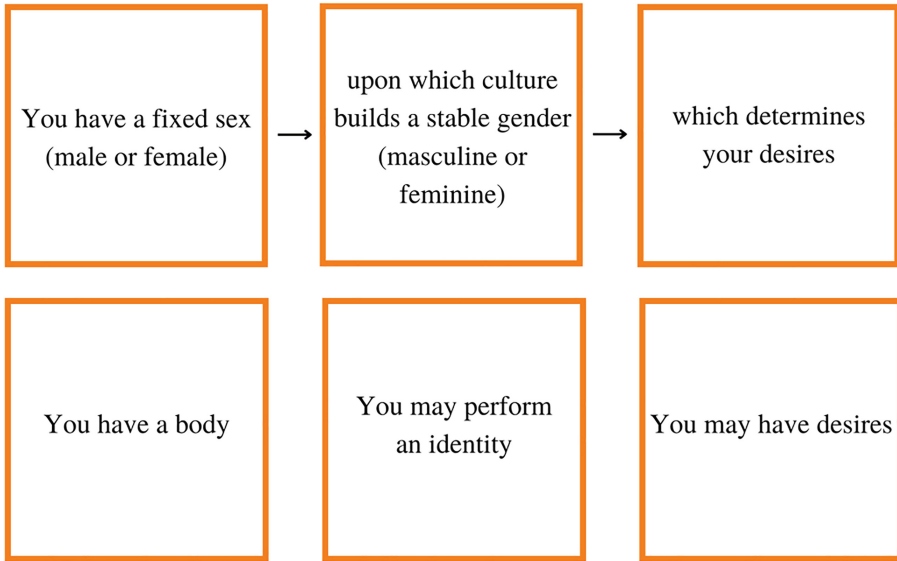


Fig. 1. A graphic summary of the heterosexual matrix, originally conceptualized by David Gauntlett (The top part of the diagram represents society’s view on the concepts of gender, sex, and sexual orientation, whilst the bottom corresponds to Judith Butler’s perspective on the topic.). Source: Barker, M.-J. and Scheele, J., 2016 pp 218–222 (adapted).

Despite other authors and researchers agreeing that gender and sex are socially constructed concepts, Butler was a pioneer in moving from a polarised view and perceiving it as something more fluid that allowed for a whole spectrum of different identities [15]. The author’s perspective is critical to the present research since it focuses on the people whose gender identities go beyond a binary notion. The term “trans identities” will, thus, be used as an umbrella term to represent everyone whose gender does not match with the one assigned to them at birth. There is also the term “non-binary identities” within this, which—by straying away from the traditional, understanding of gender as something either “masculine” or “feminine”—further encompass identities such as agender, bigender, demigender, or gender fluid. However, as with any term that comprehends a significant number of people, it requires recognising that each one of these people will have a unique experience. Not everyone in the trans community will necessarily identify themselves as non-binary and vice-versa [16]. Therefore, our intention with said choice is to try and comprehend as many individuals as possible who experience their gender in a non-normative way.

In addition, Butler's work on how "gender is instituted through the stylisation of the body" [17, p. 419] is critical for our study. Here, the author considers the role of fashion in the continually-renewed process through which the body constitutes the illusion of an abiding gender and how this process maintains and reproduces systems of oppression. According to this perspective, the reality of gender depends on the means people use to express themselves publicly (as with fashion). In order to challenge the current notions, it is necessary to rethink the connotations given to them. Regular performance is necessary (even if it happens unconsciously) since people will always perceive it; however, it is necessary not to comply with current notions by adopting a subversive practice and challenging social expectations [16]. Breaking down preconceived notions means opening a new era where everyone's experience, including those currently repeatedly marginalised, can finally be seen as having equal validity [15].

Researching gender is also a way of rethinking fashion's role in creating a free, safer, and more inclusive society. One that no longer guides itself by categorising individuals based on physical criteria alone. Fashion must value genuine connections and recognise that how people dress, accessorise, and present themselves does not necessarily align with who they are in terms of gender identity. By focusing on the Portuguese trans non-binary community, the present research aims to understand how normativity acts as an oppressing factor for social groups. It also focuses on how the social potential of fashion can create a renewed sense of belonging, among other possible promising applications.

2 Materials and Methods

The main objective of this work was to explore the role of fashion as a means of expression for people who define their gender identities beyond the standardised binary. Being an under-researched topic, especially in the Portuguese scene, we opted for a qualitative method to better understand the subjective experiences, given meanings, and perspectives of those who align with this identity [18]. This study constitutes the initial research aimed at testing the formulation of the theoretical concepts that frame this investigation and the approach to the respective subjects under analysis.

To our best knowledge, non-binary fashion designers and creators tend not to communicate their gender identity publicly, and the field is largely unknown. The research assumes, by consequence, an exploratory nature, and we selected the case study methodology as the most adequate for this study. The selected cases are the brands Ivan Hunga Garcia and Amor de la Calle [literally, Love of the Street]. These brands bring to the analysis two distinct but somewhat complementary perspectives on how the Portuguese fashion industry interacts with the subject of gender nonconformity.

Ivan—the person behind the eponymous brand—brings an often-neglected perspective on the subject by acting as a critical informant in providing context about what it is like to be a non-binary individual who uses fashion as a means of artistic self-expression in Portugal.

Martim Alvarez, the founder of the brand Amor de la Calle, conveys the many ways the trans community is helping to inspire new ways of thinking about fashion to everyone in the industry, including cisgender creators and designers like himself.

Data was collected using several techniques. Secondary data was gathered from published texts and images in digital newspaper articles, the brands' social media accounts and their official websites, alongside the Lisbon Fashion Week's one. Primary data gathering occurred at the "And Now What?" and "Metaphysical" editions of Lisbon Fashion Week, which took place on 7–10 October 2021 and 10–13 March 2022, respectively. In particular, at the "Sangue Novo" [lit., New Blood] Young Designers Competition, where Ivan Hunga Garcia and Amor de la Calle first presented their collections in 2021. Since then, Ivan entered, once again, in the 2022 edition of the competition, this time with the collection "O Último Prefixo" [lit., The Last Prefix]. This collection showcases a variety of models who, in one way or another, challenge the normative views of gender. As for Amor de la Calle, the brand launched at the beginning of the same year its official e-shop, where the 001 collection (presented at the previous edition of Lisbon Fashion Week) became available to the general public. More recently, in January 2022, the brand's second collection, "Trajes Alegres para Gente Triste" [lit., Happy Garbs for Sad Folks] was also presented as an additional representation that it is possible to cross traditional inspirations with new techniques, concepts and ideas.

After considering this background information, a semi-structured interview guide was designed involving both authors and Doctor Daniel dos Santos Cardoso, whose main areas of research are gender and sexualities; and carried out online using the Zoom platform by Sofia Batista. With total durations ranging from 60 to 90 min, the interviews with the brand's creators were recorded and later transcribed for further analysis.

Given that the main goal was to figure out the interviewees' views, opinions, knowledge, experiences and values regarding the topic, the questions asked aimed to detect and explore four primary relationships: between the designers and fashion; between the designers' understanding of one's gender identity and their work; between the designers and other people who work in the same sector or field; between the designers and their audiences/public.

Ivan Hunga Garcia was born in the year 2000 in Abrantes. The designer's gender identity is non-binary and they use gender-neutral pronouns, such as they/them. Graduated in Fashion Design by the ESAD school in Matosinhos (Portugal), they have also worked as a model, and more recently in editing, and production for a new project called Ignarus. Martim Alvarez was born in the Portuguese capital, Lisbon. The designer is a cisgender male, who uses masculine pronouns, such as he/him. Having started his artistic career in 2015, he has since created a magazine, worked as a stylist and photographer, and finished his degree in Fashion and Textile Design by the ESART school in Castelo Branco (Portugal), where he is currently living.

The subsequent analysis of the interview transcription, texts and images relied upon the thematic method of coding the data to identify and review four broader themes and patterns: the impact of external opinions on self-expression; the personal understanding and determination of identity; the normative dimension of gender in fashion; the sense of agency in the individual creative process. These topics were then examined to allow the researchers to understand Ivan and Martim's viewpoints.

3 Results and Discussion

One of the first aspects that emerged from the analysis was the very prevalent sentiment of belonging to a larger-than-self system of people. The interview with Ivan emphasised how an excessive weight seems to be placed on what others think about one's appearance, and as a result it seems like most individuals often overlook their sense of personal taste depending on what they think others might prefer—for example, by frequently focusing on how a piece of clothing looks instead of how it feels on the body. To Ivan, there is an overall sense of prioritising a group's mentality over singular opinions. Therefore, tension prompted by feelings of imitation and distinction is a characteristic of the social condition and experience of what it is like to be human. As Georg Simmel [19] noted, individuals, value those they find exciting or superior and look down on those they do not. The individual's social needs for imitation, on the one hand, and distinction, on the other, raises the opposed senses of universality and individualism. There is, therefore, a process of aligning with societal expectations, which might mean a perpetuation of gender norms and stereotypes, omitting a sincere expression of identities that challenges the binary mentality.

This process brings to light Foucault's [20] findings on the concept of power and how it promotes social discipline and conformity through people's sense of surveillance, making individuals comply with pre-established, embedded norms. To Foucault [21, p. 93] "power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere". This goes along Butler's work and how there is not simply an external force acting on subjects, but subjects acting on each other and actively creating, recreating, contesting and validating certain norms in various ways.

However, applying these notions to the role of fashion in the social negotiation of current queer communities might help explain how the culture they are inserted in significantly shapes and conditions how those same creators and consumers express themselves. Since this community is often under strong social criticism, it could imply a stronger inclination (or chance) to let go of socially-imposed norms and express their individualities in a way that strays away from the more normative notions about gender and how fashion should express it. Processes of Othering create a fertile ground for the coalescing of identities and collectives [22]. As Martim put it about the people who buy his pieces, “it is more of a queer public because they are the ones who have more courage to wear my creations and do not feel so intimidated or shy about wearing the kind of pieces that I do [laughs]”. The perception Martim has about his buyers corroborates with Judith Butler’s work on Gender Trouble [16], in the sense that those who do not align with the heterosexual matrix might become aware of the fact that these concepts prevail within already-existing power relations. Since they had to—in some way or another—question and deconstruct society’s notions of gender, sex and sexuality).

Secondly, both interviewees’ points of view highlight that one’s personal determination of identity strictly correlates with that person’s concept of non-binarity. Specifically, Ivan attaches particular importance to understanding who themselves is, according to their sense of ideals, and even images not necessarily related to the human experience—such as the movement of the sea. Ivan’s vision promotes using concepts to make sense of existence without letting them define one’s individuality. The possibility of finding or adopting new ways to express themselves brings them a sensation of excitement. Consequently, the concept of non-binarity does not intend to create a new label of personal categorisation but instead to recognise the social movement and the way of thinking that characterises it. Thus, it is much more about seeing people for who they are, letting them explain themselves, and placing the focus on their personalities.

When asked about fashion’s role in this process, Ivan claimed that it was about recognising that the physical appearance of someone does not necessarily correlate to how they define themselves in terms of gender (identity); and specifically, when we are talking about people whose identity is non-binary “it is just about reading the person, by what they give you and not by the conceptions you already have of the type of person” they said. This vision is critical of Western society’s conventionalised ways and beliefs on how someone with a particular identity should dress. Martim’s experimentation with fashion points out how policing one’s gender practices affects everyone, even if the individual is a cisgender man. By dressing in a more “hybrid” way, this expression implied a profound questioning, done by others, of issues such as “*és o Martim ou a Martim?*” (meaning, are you Martim male or Martim female?).

Ivan and Martim also talked about how gender is currently present in fashion. There is a duality between newer efforts to challenge pre-established notions and the conventional methods of big corporations and those working in more commercial sectors. As Martim put it, “As a general rule, I think most fashion professionals, at least that I know of (...) include themselves (...) admire or work with queer people (...). The kind of people, honestly, who are probably not so motivated by that are colleagues from other types of work (...) still with fashion but (...) more commercial things”. The industry is still binarised and thrives on gender representation canons in many ways.

Three elements complement these ideas: *inertia*, brought up by Ivan, in the sense that there is a laziness to change the status quo—even though there is a growing social concern about issues such as representation, many brands are projecting an image that is not coherent with the true intentions of the said company; these practices then lead to *tokenism*, that is the appropriation of cultural movements in order to give a specific appearance (in this case, social consciousness related to the issues of gender) without actually changing behaviours or ways of thinking; the last element follows this idea and is about the *profiling* of the models hired to the runway. It is still prevalent the intention of having someone who is a “white canvas” that, in Ivan’s words, does not necessarily stand for anything. The models are often seen just as a means of displaying new collections, which results in a constant lack of representation of a particular group, namely of those who carry values and specificities impossible to separate from their looks. Guiding what is presented to the general public and what is left backstage, this dictates how inclusive, or not, people’s perception of others’ self-expression is.

It also raises the question of how dangerous the industry’s perpetuation of stereotypes can be if representativity is only done in a press-driven, superficial way. For Martim, these choices come, self-admittingly, from what feels like an “obligation to use size 36 bodies and cisgender women models in e-commerce”. Sometimes this choice results from the need to align communication with competing brands or the imagery of other established name brands that serve as an inspiration. However, it is interesting to note that these decisions are not entirely thought out and, when questioned, might promote a behaviour change. The Amor de la Calle’s creator tells us that he “had not thought about this (...) it can push other people away”. This thought is an example of how the socially-imposed notions of what gender should be like or how it should be presented in fashion exist as norms and, therefore, as something that can be done repeatedly without being questioned first.

When answering questions related to the individual creative process, Ivan said: “It ends up being... a natural manifesto, I guess. There is not that much concern for diversity if one is already in diversity”, and therefore, the practice is much more about materialising already-existing ideas and thoughts without much regard for what other people might think about it later. Due to not having a commercial aspect (since the collections are only presented at Lisbon Fashion Week and not sold), this process for the Ivan Hunga Garcia brand can seemingly separate itself from external reactions (and pre-existing conceptions about what people might want or need) and focus solely on personal ideas and intentions; which presents the risk of carelessly reproducing internalised ideological constructs. Consequently, this allows for a creation that often surpasses the humanistic, practical, functional requirements of everyday clothing. A reminder that fashion, as an art form, does not necessarily have to be something thought out with the purpose of being worn. As for Martim and Amor de la Calle, despite not having a gender identity that aligns with the notions of “trans” or “non-binarity”, there is an aspect of naturalness (reinforced by the creator) that allows for an intense influence of this community in the brand’s ethos. As Martim declared, “(...) me being a queer person, I think it has a lot to do with that (...). I do not know, trivial stuff, but enjoying watching RuPaul’s Drag Race, obviously, I am going to want to dress up drag queens at some point (...)”. As Ivan put it, “I think you can only represent what you already feel in some way”. The two case studies presented this idea very clearly.

However empowering this might seem, it also runs the risk of redeploying the same supposedly necessary and linear structure of the heterosexual matrix. If the representation comes from the feeling, then to each feeling, there is a representation matching it, and thus the possibility of normalising representations. Rather than adopting what Spivak calls “strategic essentialism” [23], the respondent reaffirms an essential perspective of gender, although based on feelings. However, it is important to understand this response in the context of contemporary transformations around the concept of art and what artists are supposed to be and do. As various authors note [e.g., 24, 25], authenticity has become one of the central articulations in the commodification of art. That is to say, the more ‘authentic’ (i.e., the more directly connected to purportedly non-mediated subjective experiences) an artistic product is perceived to be, the more potential it has to be economically and aesthetically valued. This trend, in turn, creates structural pressure on artists to disclose and produce themselves according to this logic—be it about gender, sexuality or any other dimension of their subjective experience.

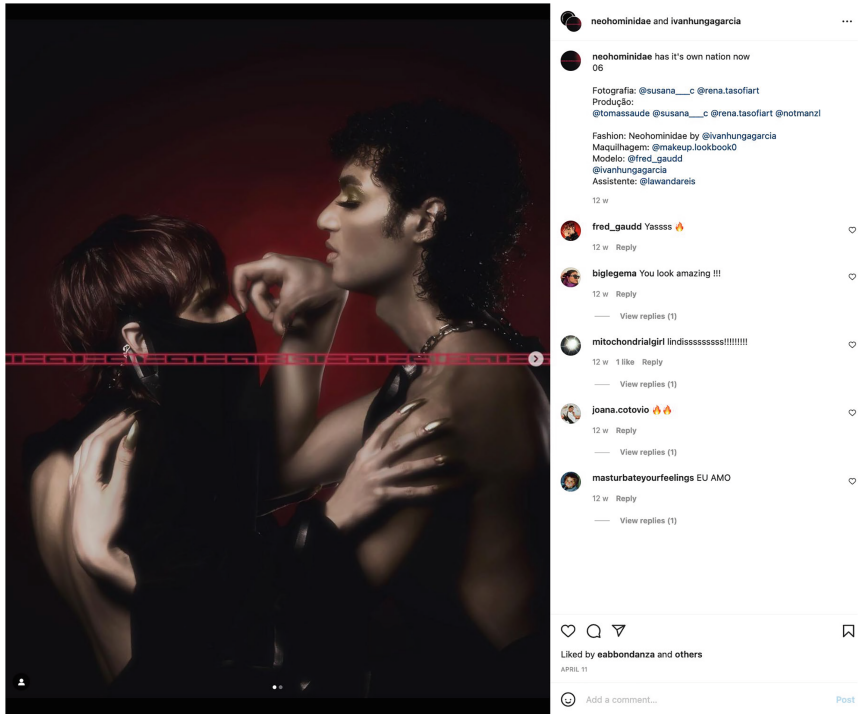


Fig. 3. Screenshot of a post on the @ivanhungagarcia account about a recent project where Ivan is involved (In the middle of the overall praise of the designer’s work, it stands out the use of gender-neutral language. User @mitochondrialgirl compliment the two people in the picture by changing the typical “o” in the Portuguese word “lindos” [lit., beautiful] to “i” and, therefore, moving away from the traditional use of masculine nouns—a practice that is standard in a language that has a grammatical gender system.). Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcOQDA9MQsG>

Despite Ivan Hunga Garcia and Amor de la Calle having two distinct action plans when it comes to their goals and ambitions, two other coded topics revealed to be present in both of them. The first one is *the user experience*. There is special attention placed upon the physical interaction between the body and the piece(s). Ivan focuses on the creation of something that only the user can experience as simultaneously behavioural and psychological—which also can be understood as a social analogy around the deconstruction of gender. Martim talks specifically about the casting experience, and the importance of ensuring every model (trans, non-binary or not) feels comfortable with what they are wearing. He claims that “a non-binary or a more queer aesthetic, (...) comes very much from comfort”. He means that it does not matter if someone is wearing something commonly considered to be more eccentric or soft; the focus should be on what those pieces make that person feel—promoting what should be a positive relationship with fashion. In this sense, there is a clear, sensible and material connection with gender, fashion and aesthetics. This can also be conceived as an *ethos*—a non-binary aesthetic is thus inseparable from acting in an embodied way that seeks to centre the experience of those bodies marked by the cisnormative system as being wrong or misaligned.

The other topic has to do with *community-building*. Throughout both interviews, the designers repeatedly mentioned the importance of choosing one's team and models who can personify (and bring to life) the pieces of each collection. People who relate in terms of their outlook on identity and that for Martim can “feel excited about these sorts of questions and casting”. Ivan expresses the need to create an “interactive network of collaboration”. This connectivity multiplies when they present and expose the collections to more people who share the same views. Therefore, this is a cycle where all the decisions are closely-interconnected, as illustrated by Martim: “that is why (...) I want to have these people in the casting (...) because I know [they] will be able to reach the public that I want, or at least the public that I want will receive these people well when they see them in a campaign, in the runway, on Instagram, wherever”.

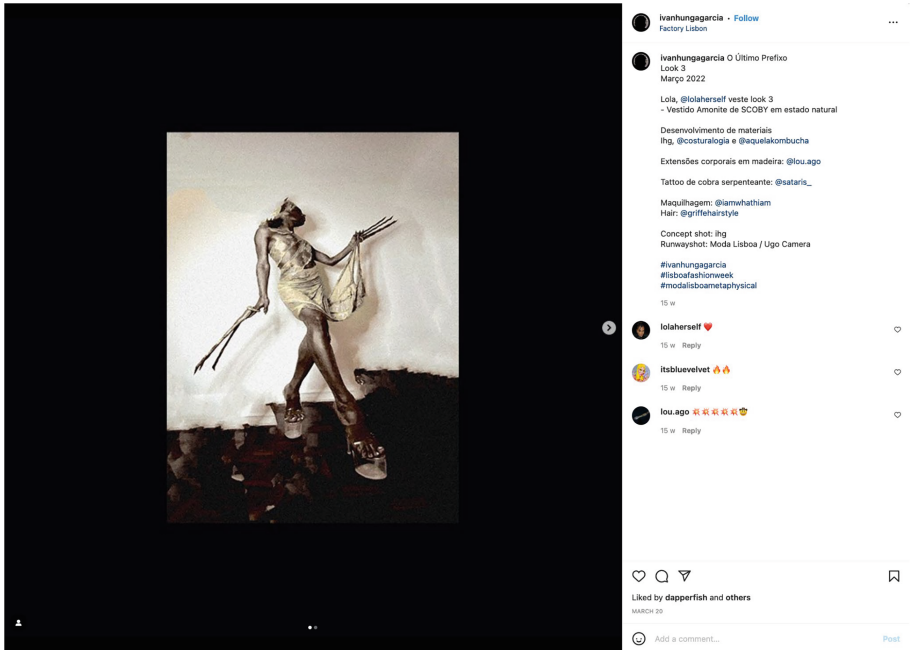


Fig. 2. Screenshot of a post on the @ivanhungarcia account about one of the looks from the “O Último Prefixo” collection (It is visible the support given to the post by some of the brand’s collaborators.). Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbVLarfsDqS/>

In regards to the feedback given by these audiences, Ivan stressed, for example, how the walk of a particular model positively impacted people’s lives. These remarks highlight not only how fashion is essential and can be perceived as an artistic medium of individual self-expression but also as a social phenomenon with the potential to create new social connections and influence people’s perceptions of the world. Besides this, the specific case of Ivan Hunga Garcia’s brand brings a new outlook on how artistic (self-)expression can negotiate, and at least partially subvert, the arduous constraints of capitalist, profit-driven approaches to creation.

Finally, and as presented in the following images, we note how this relationship between brands and their audiences occurs. In both cases, high appreciation given to both creators by their co-workers, teams, and the public is manifest through the interaction with the posts, via comments, on the @ivanhungagarcia and @elamordelacalle official Instagram accounts. Moreover, when the people commenting are also a part of the queer community in Portugal (Figs. 2, 3, 4 and 5).

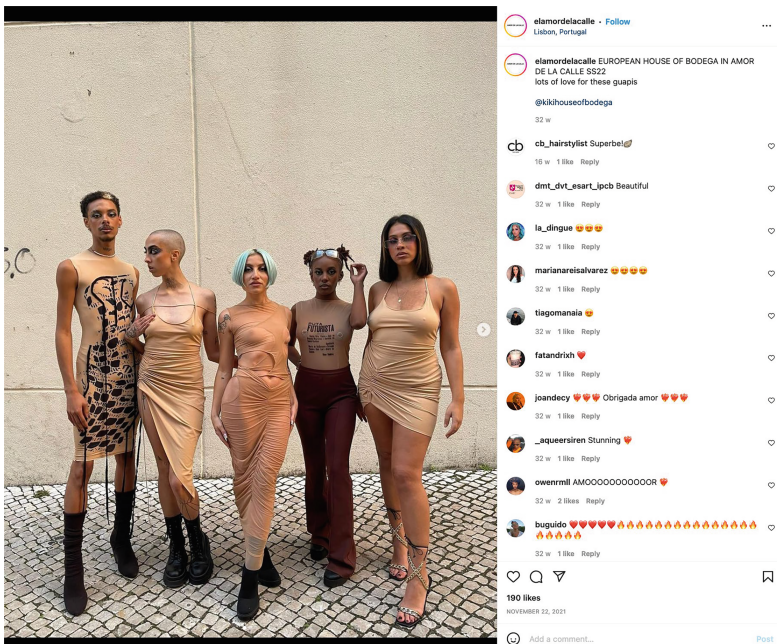


Fig. 4. Screenshot of a post on the @elamordelacalle account about a House of Ballroom wearing pieces from the brand’s first collection (Ballroom, Ball culture, or Ballroom Scene, is the term used to describe an underground LGBTQ+ subculture in which people walk (or compete) for prizes and/or status at events commonly known as balls [26]. Most participants belong to groups known as “houses” where chosen families of friends form relationships and communities separate from their families of origin, from which they may (or not) be estranged [27]. In this case, it is Amor de la Calle that uses gender-neutral language in the description of the post, in the use of the Spanish word “guapis”—once again by changing the “o” or “a” in “guapos” or “guapas” (the male version and female version of the word beautiful, respectively) for an “i”). Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CWlkojTMV6S/>

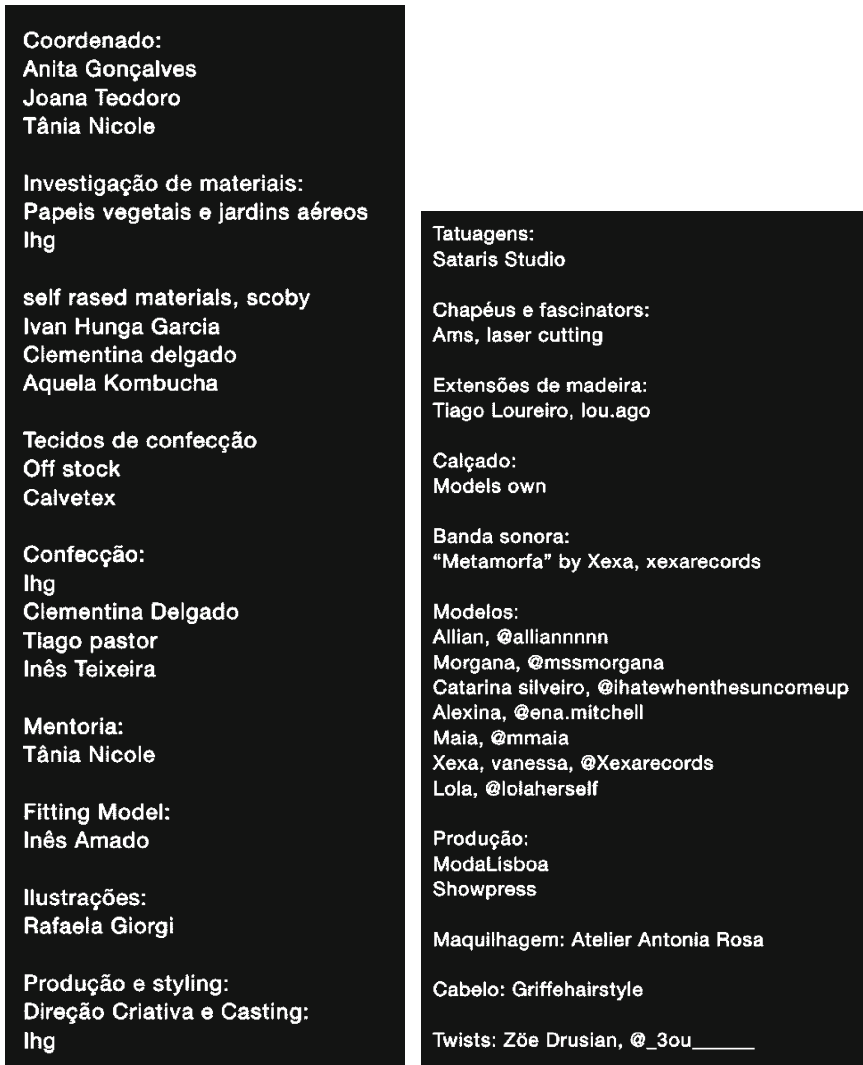


Fig. 5. Screenshots of the Ivan Hunga Garcia website about the “O Último Prefixo” collection (It is noticeable the credits given to everyone who was somehow involved in this project. It shows the high level of collaboration between models and the show production, either through personal lending items, such as the shoes or by creating the soundtrack used on the runway.). Source: <https://ivanhungagarcia.com/o-ultimo-prefixo>

4 Conclusion

The present study aimed to understand the role and importance of fashion to a group of people often neglected, overlooked and, therefore, understudied. Society relies upon

the compartmentalisation and categorisation of one's identities and experiences. Thus, studying fashion related to gender helps to move behavioural barriers beyond cultural and self-imposed constraints. Research on gender and fashion also opens up new possibilities for what might be a more inclusive future for every single person.

The current project emphasises the intrinsic role of fashion over every single person. The significance placed on others' opinions merely reflects how power structures benefit from this longing sense of belonging to a specific community or group of people. Maintaining the social and cultural status quo ensures that individuals will go to comply with what they think is necessary to fit into those units. It is impossible to step outside these discourses. However, once we, as a society, realise that there is a mandatory gender performance happening on a everyday basis for every single person, we can start challenging the pre-existing expectations that society places on us. By actively challenging the traditional gender notions, a space for less normative connections is created, not based on what society thinks a "man" or "woman" should wear but on people's specific interests and passions. Hence, fashion could gain a new dimension of creativity and individual self-expression no longer constricted by standardised notions or top-down approaches to trends. Such a change would benefit consumers and creators alike because ingenuine tries at (a now-necessary) representation would cease the need to exist. The spirit of creativity and materialisation of unique ideas could prevail without regard for social categories or labels and solely focus on building direct connections between individuals, as Ivan and Martim case studies show. Besides, this vision is compatible and, in fact, consolidated and emphasised with an industry that is now bound to work by the principles of sustainability, circular economy, and local-based production.

To sum up, and resorting to the words of Kimberlé Crenshaw [28, p.167], "placing those who currently are marginalised in the centre is the most effective way to resist efforts to compartmentalise experiences". Without valuing the experiences and teachings of those who are repetitively ignored and marginalised, it is impossible to deconstruct the social norms that limit and negatively affect all human experiences.

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