# Is Gender(Less) Becoming a Counterculture in Fashion?

Eduarda Loureiro(✉) 

CIAUD, Research Center for Architecture, Urbanism and Design, Lisbon School of Architecture, Universidade de Lisboa, Rua Sá Nogueira, 1349-063 Lisboa, Portugal
`eduardamsloureiro@gmail.com`

**Abstract.** Fashion and gender are two concepts that are deeply associated in today's western societies. The idea that one can stand without the other seems preposterous but it might be closer to the norm than we think. We can say that gender(less) is still a counterculture within fashion, but what we argue is that fashion, in its essence, should be genderless. In the sense that, everyone should be able to wear whatever they identify with. Sadly, that's not the case. Through imposed social and cultural norms, people are made to wear garments and accessories that quickly set them apart within the male/female binary. There is this assumption that we must be one or the other, and cross-dressing can be seen as an attempt to question our sexuality, which has nothing to do with gender nor gender identity or expression. In this paper, we are deconstructing what it means to go beyond the binary and challenge the norm with fashion as the catalyst.

**Keywords:** Counterculture · Gender Identity · Gender Expression · Fashion Design

## 1 Defining Fashion and Gender

Fashion is a vast concept, correlated with clothing, hair, decoration and behavioral associations. It has long been present alongside several societal marks in history and we can coin certain styles and visual cues to certain periods. We could call fashion the sidekick of history because it has indeed been a way of representing cultural and societal shifts, in space and time.

There's this belief that fashion is an expression of your personality and you can tell a lot by how a person dresses. It's becoming increasingly more common that this isn't necessarily true (at least the first part), but instead, fashion is an expression of your identity, of who you feel you are and want to be. You can tell a lot by how a person dresses, but you don't get to trace one's personality based on that. This issue goes beyond personality, and what we are here to discuss is gender, or lack thereof, and how that impacts the fashion industry. Before going any further, it's important to define

accurately the terms that are going to be referred to, regarding gender, gender identity and gender expression. Although Nagoshi, Nagoshi & Brzuzy [1] present academic definitions of these concepts, Laurel Wamsley [2], a NPR News Reporter, defined all three in a way we deemed most adequate for this paper:

- "Gender is often defined as a social construct of norms, behaviors and roles that varies between societies and over time. Gender is often categorized as male, female, or nonbinary.
- Gender identity is one's own internal sense of self and their gender, whether that is man, woman, neither or both. Unlike gender expression, gender identity is not outwardly visible to others. For most people, gender identity aligns with the sex assigned at birth (…). For transgender people, gender identity differs in varying degrees from the sex assigned at birth.
- Gender expression is how a person presents gender outwardly, through behavior, clothing, voice, or other perceived characteristics. Society identifies these cues as masculine or feminine, although what is considered masculine and feminine changes over time and varies by culture".

The history of gender is quite troubling. As a concept and lived reality, it has been changing rapidly, especially in Western cultures and societies, since the mid-twentieth century [3]. We can say it has evolved through years (and dare we say centuries) of mostly patriarchal societies, cultures and oppressed groups that are not cis-white-male dominated. Meyerowitz [4] argues that "historians should analyze the language of gender, [and] observe how perceived sex differences had appeared historically as natural and fundamental oppositions". She also defends the idea that, in different historical contexts, masculinity represented a myriad of words like strength, protection, independence, discipline, and femininity was associated with weakness, fragility, helplessness, and emotionality. In order to justify these power relations that were socially established, people that were mostly in *charge* called it "natural differences between sexes" [4].

Nowadays, these concepts are all being challenged by younger generations, as it seems to be the norm with all generations. Millennials and Gen Z'ers are defying what it means to be a man, woman, masculine or feminine, and giving it a new branding. Traditional roles are being questioned and people are starting to create different dynamics than the ones most of us grew up with. Gender is a social construct [5] imposed by what we call tradition and values, and the fact is, it varies from culture to culture, meaning that, as a man-made-concept, it can be deconstructed. Universalistic claims are based on a common or shared epistemological standpoint and are understood as the articulated consciousness or shared structures of oppression [5]. All these models are flawed and exclusionary because they don't take into consideration the many different factors that exist within a person. Since gender identity can be described as a feeling, there are no measurements or quantifiable factors to make up for it. We cannot label a feeling, so it can be difficult or confusing for most people to accept it or even understand it.

The experience of being a woman in the modern world is a role accompanied by societal expectations that end up being imposed at a very young age. It's something that is physically present in men and women's usage of most things in society – language, clothes, makeup, traits, behaviors and even social conducts [6]. As women, men, boys and girls, we are conditioned to behave and look a certain way, but if we think about it,

that is only in the eyes of the beholder [7]. Western society sees and perceives children in an extremely stereotyped way, imposing on them binary ways of living. A little girl is expected to behave well, not be loud, wear dresses, frills, pink. A little boy is expected to be very active, play hard and wear shorts, caps and blue. It is indeed society that needs to know the sex of the baby so it can act accordingly [6]. Ideally, one should not feel the need to color-code babies and children, or promote certain type of activities for them to play based on their gender; they should be exposed to the exact same things and be able to choose whatever they prefer and are more inclined to – especially when it comes to clothes, colors, patterns and accessories.

Gender is subject to fashion [8], implicit in the way we define, exaggerate, or choose to suppress it, but fashion has been helping gender come out of its binary bubble and create this countercultural movement, a "system of warning signals to deflect gender-based assumption" [8]. It is not yet mainstream, but we do see it coming to light more in younger generations, who widely accept the reality of fluidity in gender expression. There is this concept, the *multiverse*, in which a person is not only one, but can be many different things (e.g. Harry Styles, who at 29 is a British reality-competition star, a style icon, a now-solo boy-band supernova, a movie star, a pop cultural shape-shifter) and the idea is that, people don't have to like all these versions of the same person, but only the ones that resonate with them [9]. We can say the same about the duality of gender and fashion; there is a multiverse within that allows anyone to explore any version of themselves as a fluid matter. If gender, gender identity and gender expression are in a spectrum, let fashion be the catalyst to explore all these areas, avoiding a confining definition and even perception.

## 2 Sex and Sexuality

As all oppressed groups might say, it is a matter of having a space to make them heard and seeing them represented in the mainstream culture. The current answer, to an incredibly layered subject, might be social media. It seems like the perfect tool for nonbinary and non-conforming people to find, and even model, their unique place on the gender spectrum [10]. It's still a sensitive subject to be discussed and target to mundane hatred, especially because there is a common misconception in associating gender with sex and sexuality, and one thing is not necessarily related to the other. In fact, they are completely independent concepts, both in theory and practice. With that, we have established the definitions of gender, identity and gender expression; let's proceed to define sex.

According to Princeton University's Gender + Sexuality Resource Center [11], sex is associated with our physical bodies and can correlate to genitals, levels of hormones, chromosomes, and other physical aspects. When we are born, we are assigned one of two sexes, based on biological factors such as hormones, chromosomes, and genitals; and intersex if the reproductive anatomy doesn't seem to fit the *typical* definitions of male and female. This seems to cause confusion because it might not be enough to describe what's going on inside a person's body. The reason behind using the expression "assigned [enter sex] at birth" relates to its determination by someone else, usually a doctor. Which may or may not align with what's going on with a person's body nor how they will feel/identify [12] in the future.

Last, but not least, the definition of sexuality is one of the many personal identifiers that best describe who you may be attracted to – sexually, emotionally, intellectually, or romantically—which, again, are very different concepts that can, or can not, be correlated. Some very common terms associated with sexuality are straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, and other identities in the spectrum.
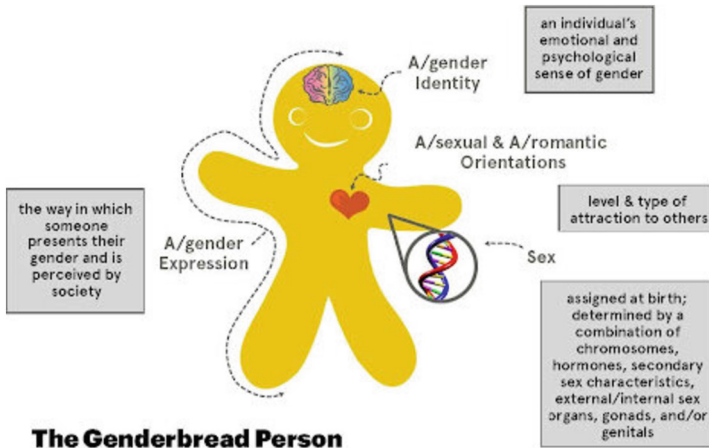


**Fig. 1.** The Genderbread Person [11].

On Fig. 1, we can analyze the *Genderbread Person*, a tool developed by Sam Killermman [an artist, author, speaker and educator] to explain all the concepts previously described. The definition of these terms might raise some questions as to its relation to this subject and paper, but the thing is, society commonly and mistakenly sexualizes the term 'gender identity' and 'expression', connoting it with the LGBTQIA+ community. It is, in fact, a very powerful community in bringing awareness to these oppressed groups and it help bring people together, but it has nothing to do with what a person feels they are in regards to their gender expression.

Oppressed and marginalized communities are groups of people that experience social, political, and economic discrimination and exclusion because of unequal power relationships across economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions. When it comes to the latter, we can talk about the countercultural dimensions, which can be a lifestyle and set of attitudes opposed to, or at variance, with the prevailing societal norm. At this point in history, whoever seems to go against the norm, can be defined as countercultural, which in this case would be anyone not identifying with the binary standard stereotypes. These countercultural phenomena have been happening for decades, but the most recent one was in the 1960's. It happened mostly in the UK and the United States, eventually extending for the entire western societies. This entails the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, the Sexual Revolution, environmentalism, gay liberation, and so on [13]. These moments lead us to suggest that gender is not being undone, but rather changing in its essence, and that fashion has a key role in this change, especially when it comes to re-imagining it [3].

Fashion is one of the ultimate self-expression forms, allowing us to be who we identify the most with, and also a way of creating this non-verbal resistance [14, 15]. G*etting dressed* starts as soon as we are born, and babies do not get to pick their own clothes, which ends up being a reflection of adult tastes, preferences [7] and beliefs – culminating in the message they are trying to communicate to society (e.g. pink if you're a girl, blue if you're a boy). Before the twentieth century, all babies wore long white dresses; slightly older boys and girls wore dresses and skirted outfits, because pointing out the child's sex would have been very inappropriate [7]. Nowadays, it seems like the more we know the sex, the easier it is for people to identify and adjust their behavior, attitudes, and expectations accordingly. The problem stands in the "stubborn insistence on reducing complexity to binary choices (nature or nurture, male or female, masculine or feminine)" [7]. What this invariably does, is create a stereotyped thinking and, consequently acting, on what it means to be one or the other, and the rejection of there being something else. Even within constructed categories, there are huge variations of factors that binary and stereotypical thinking simply ignore. For example, it does not make sense to try and instill social norms on babies and toddlers that have very similar body characteristics and are completely unaware of the meanings of masculinity and femininity. What this provokes is this notion that there are certain behaviors associated with being a boy or a girl and, eventually, a man or a woman.

When it comes to genderless fashion, there's this imposed impediment that says that women and men's bodies are different and, because of that, it's almost impossible to design clothes that fit both the same way. That is in fact true, but it doesn't necessarily determine what one should or should not wear, and therein lies the issue. The thing with fashion, and fashion design, is that it should be genderless in its essence; meaning that everyone should be able to wear whatever they want and feel more comfortable in. This counterculture movement we have been talking about, comes from people standing up for what they identify with, and being able to wear whatever they feel like on that day. If it's a man wanting to wear a skirt, a shirt with a pattern, or even pink, why would he not? Here is where the problem lies; we are mostly brought up in these very stereotypical environments where girls are supposed to behave and look a certain way, and the same goes for boys. If what Simone de Beauvoir argues is true, that a woman is not born a woman, but she becomes one, the same might me true for men. They are expected to "only engage in the masculine" [6]. Anything that might not be considered in a manly fashion can be seen as a threat to their sexuality and gender identity. So, it's also true that crossing over into different gendered spaces is way easier for women than it is for men [7]. It's considered a social norm for women to wear suits, trousers, or more masculine clothes, while it's not for men to wear skirts, dresses or even strong patterns [7]. The fashion world of today is more informal, in the sense that there are a lot more options available, and people don't have to be constricted to certain norms; but dress codes still determine what we wear, when we wear it and even what our clothing means [16].

Fashion can be a weapon for social change, and the long run idea is that fashion becomes something for everyone to express how they feel. In the fall of 2021, fashion weeks with collections for spring 2022 were not focused on a particular silhouette or color. A lot of designers were putting both men and women on the runways (Fig. 2) in a manner that was once coined "women's wear" [17]. Vanessa Friedman, *The New*

*York Times'* fashion director and chief fashion critic, wrote that "[it] wasn't gender fluidity or gender neutrality or dual gender (…) [it] was something new. Like… gender agnosticism" [17].



**Fig. 2.** Miu Miu spring 2022 [18].

Coco Chanel was part of the *revolution* that started a century ago when she started to *put* women in trousers (Fig. 3). What happened in the runway in 2021 was maybe a natural end of this progression of the 1920's [17]. It has become mainstream that women *can* wear pants, so maybe the same is starting to apply to men wearing skirts and dresses. But what we can argue is that, outside of the fashion bubble, most people are still freaked out by this scenario, and what comes into play are the power structures instilled in us. It may seem very disempowering for men to have access to what's typically female territory, as it somehow weakens them – because women are seen as the weaker, more sensitive and emotional *sex* [19]. Several societies and cultures already understand gender as something more varied than just man or woman, and their roles within the culture; but it's true that in most societies, a gender binary has been, and still is, the norm [10]. Fashion might be ahead of the curve on this one while still playing catch up with the broader culture [17]. And again, social media has played an immense part in the broadcasting and quicker spread to the public conversation of what it means to live beyond the binary. Wortham [10] writes that platforms like Instagram play an "unparalleled role in people's lives" because it is a way to connect to others who can be geographically isolated, but are part of the same community. What this does is put together and expose nonbinary, queer, trans people who can advocate for those who are still in search of their own identity. Representation is key and seeing it more mainstreamed than ever before can help discuss the logistics of gender.

**Fig. 3.** Coco Chanel wearing pants [20].

ALOK Vaid-Menon is a poet, comedian, speaker, author, and the creator of #DeGenderFashion, which is an initiative to *degender* fashion and beauty industries [21]. ALOK goes by the pronouns they/them and is a strong advocate representing nonbinary people everywhere. Through their speeches and writing, ALOK is one of the examples setting the language that guide others and define an existence of recognition and social viability. The term 'degender' isn't necessarily coined, but it very well describes this countercultural movement of de-gendering fashion. The option is not to eliminate gender from fashion but to implement this idea that anyone can wear anything.

If we think about the ways we can express gender, and of fashion as its vehicle from a performative perspective, "gender can be described as a way of repeatedly styling the body" [12]. But of course, this style is regulated by cultural discourse and a set of socially accepted norms across time and space. In Japan, there is a new wave of young Japanese men who are bending gender norms (Fig. 4). They are called 'genderless danshi' ['danshi' means young men in Japanese], a group of people who defy what it means to be masculine or feminine. The idea is not necessarily to become women but not to limit their fashion choices by gender, to whom the concept isn't necessarily real [22]. Contrary to western societies and cultures, where cross-dressing can be associated with sexuality, and the notion of defying it, in Japan it's mostly about fashion and self-expression. Indigenous tribes and descendants, living in Canada, believe that masculine and feminine coexist in one person and have a broader meaning, encompassing several terms used and passed down generations that see gender as a fluid and liminal term [23]. In other words, an identity not anchored on physical characteristics or a judgment in time, but a never-ending process of self-discovery.

**Fig. 4.** Toman Sasaki is a Japanese genderless 'danshi' [24].

## 3 Conclusions

Femaleness and fashion have been historically connected [3] and widely constructed through culture and society. It's safe to argue that garments, "as cultural artifacts", also reinforce this gender/ing of people [3]. What gender(less) does, is play with people's assumptions, which on its own, is a part of the counterculture. In the grand scheme of things, if we agree upon these theories, we agree that gender is inherently artificial and imposed by time and space [6], and consider it to be a learned and somewhat imposed behavior, that starts the moment we are born – and probably even before. This has led people to think about the concepts of gender, and sex, as one and the same, because that's how we have been taught and cannot remember a time without these gendered behaviors, social views, actions, and styles. From a young age, we operate almost like scientists, experimenting and gathering information to, ultimately, make sense of our surroundings [10]. Even as adults, we tend to use all available resources to create a sense of self but are ultimately limited by our immediate environment – as are children. It's not enough to theorize, but we have to see it, and fashion can be a vehicle for it. If we allow ourselves, and others, to dress the way we/they want, we are opening a world of possibilities.

Fashion should be an experiment, because we are not the same person everyday – we can feel sad, happy, nostalgic, annoyed, feminine, masculine, and our outfits can replicate those moods. We shouldn't shy away from buying/wearing whatever garment we want, and the reality is, a lot of people do. Whether it's because they feel uncomfortable, because they are bullied, because they are harassed or assaulted, just for dressing up in clothes that are *not suited* for them. This is the meaning of counterculture, going against your reality and stepping out of your comfort zone to attain a sense of self – that can quickly feel like you don't belong. Gender(less) is becoming more normative and has brought on a lot of conversations and even legal changes [10], but it's still yet to become

mainstream. It's true that a broader culture within the digital space is helping this process speed up and bring to light gender-explorative people.

Gina Rippon, neurobiologist, and author, explains that the way a brain functions, is through connections, which is how it generates predictions of the world around us. Sort of like a 'template' if we will, to establish the norms about what usually happens in a normal course of events [25]. It's now a scientific attested fact that our brains are continually changing and are in a constant adaptation of our surroundings. So, if our brain has no rules to follow, it will follow its own and go beyond what was initially thought possible [25]. "If we could follow a journey of a baby girl or a baby boy, we could see that right from the moment of birth, or even before, these brains may be set on different roads. Toys, clothes, books, parents, families, teachers, schools, universities, employers, social and cultural norms – and, of course, gender stereotypes – all can signpost different directions for different brains." [25].

What this means is that the more exposed babies and children are to all sorts of possibilities, the more they will be willing to explore and experience. Fashion can be the perfect ground for that experiment, and by removing all barriers of what is *acceptable* or not to wear, we are redirecting the boundaries of the gender-binary and turning garments into the free-for-all objects they can be.

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