

# The Roots of Genderqueer Identity Through Consumption: Androgynous and Unisex Fashion in the 20th Century

Kim McKeage

*Hamline University, Saint Paul, Minnesota, USA*

Elizabeth Crosby

*University of Wisconsin – La Crosse, La Crosse, Wisconsin, USA*

Jeffrey McKeage

*Independent Scholar, Saint Paul, Minnesota, USA*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to examine cycles of androgynous/unisex fashion in the twentieth century United States. Current social trends have highlighted elements of androgyny or unisex clothing which have been adopted by genderqueer consumers as a manner of uniform, yet the roots of this dress are historical. We examine ways in which the fashion industry and common usage have incorporated gender-free elements specifically to portray an androgynous or unisex style.

**Design/methodology/approach** – We approach the subject through the examination of textual accounts and historical images of androgynous fashion throughout the 1900's.

**Keywords** – Androgyny, gender, fashion

**Paper Type** – Extended Abstract

## Extended Abstract

Genderqueer consumers have emerged as a distinct market segment, especially in the United States, since the 1990's. While claiming and enacting a complex identity, much of the public performativity (Butler, 1999) of genderqueerness occurs through clothing and personal grooming choices. Our research with contemporary genderqueer consumers has unearthed strong notions about clothing (and other) choices that mark their identity, leading us to ask where the roots of these signifiers might have come from. The purpose of this current project is to explore the roots of contemporary genderqueer clothing sensibility in 20th century fashion history, especially in the U.S. and Europe. Our research shows that the roots of genderqueer fashion consumption may in part lie in earlier Androgynous and Unisex movements.

For purposes of clarity, it is important to distinguish between some key concepts. Genderqueer is a complicated term that individuals use to describe their gender as being beyond the traditional male/female binary. This incorporates notions of ungendered or genderless, gender-blending or blurring, as well as bigender or third gender. Androgyny is similar to that notion, being a concept of gender unclarity or mixing/blending, sometimes characterized as third-gender. Androgyny has been characterized as having characteristics of both male and female, which is a subtle but important distinction from the more umbrella concept of genderqueer which can include having characteristics of neither. Unisex, on the other hand, is more about something, often a consumer good, being deemed appropriate for either of the traditional gender binaries. Unisex is not a category as disruptive of gender but rather accepting of the binary and providing some product or service deemed appropriate for both. It is also important to note that Gender is not Sex (biological assignment to a category). Nor is it Sexuality (homosexuality or bisexuality, both sometimes included in the term "queer"). West and Zimmerman (1987) note that sex "was what was ascribed by biology," while gender "was an achieved status: that which is constructed through psychological, cultural, and social means" (125).

One of the theoretical perspectives often used to study the effects of clothing and grooming on social interactions is Symbolic Interactionism. As Johnson, Crutsinger, and Workman (1995) note, social interactions rely on shared meanings, and one of the earliest assessments we make of others in

social situations is a gender assignment. Often, the visual assessment of gender precedes any discourse, and indeed one of the issues often cited by transgender or genderqueer consumers is being “misgendered” - when another misreads gender cues and addresses the consumer with incorrect gender pronouns. However, compared with transgender individuals, genderqueer consumers may or may not see this as a problem.

Ambiguous gender performativity (Butler 1999) is part of the goal in genderqueer consumers’ adoption of clothing, accessories, and personal grooming. Apparel such as “jeans and a hoodie” have come to signify a genderqueer identity among the subculture in a manner that may confuse the uninitiated while signaling membership to other members of the community. (Hall and Jefferson, 2006) This may be an act of reflexively deviant consumption as defined by Ozanne and Murray (1995) whereby people utilize items from the marketplace but alter their sign value. Barthes (2006) describes this process as a fundamental aspect of developing “Dress” where the use of an item has been designated as meaningful by a social group. He characterizes this as a process where

"a dressing object that is at first constituted by the degrading of a dress object can subsequently transform itself once more into a secondary dress object; this occurs as soon as this degrading actually functions as a collective sign, as a value. For example, the outfit can gesture towards the using of all the buttons on the shirt ... [someone] leaves the top two buttons undone ... becomes dress again as soon as it is constituted as a norm by a particular group." (p. 10)

This study considers that process of reconstituting objects as norms within gender variant consumer groups. As does Barthes (2006, p. 9) we consider the study of Dress to be an appropriate subject for historical consumer research.

Given genderqueers’ intention toward ambiguity, the more important roots of fashion consumption for genderqueer consumers are deemed to be in the Androgyny vein. We are exploring fashion history throughout the 20th Century in both images and written fashion history, looking for evidence of formal social acceptance or promotion of fashions that intentionally confuse or allow for ambiguity about the wearer’s gender.

While fashion and marketing historians may recall the Androgyny Movement of the 1970’s within their own (distant) living memory, the movement’s roots are considerably older, with early examples going back to the 1910’s, as in one Lucile Ltd design. (Mendes and de la Haye, 2009). This design is an early example of one trend in androgynous fashions - the adoption of more masculine styles by women who still clearly are women. The history of trousers for women includes numerous examples of feminized adoption of men’s styles. Some of the widely-cited androgynous looks in the middle 1900’s are from 1940’s-era stars Marlene Dietrich and Katherine Hepburn. While both tended to remain clearly female, Dietrich in particular adopted styles that were quite traditionally masculine, especially the tie and pocket handkerchief of traditional suits, as in the following image. The tendency for women to adopt feminized versions of men’s styles is well-documented in research on women’s professional dress. (Cf. Johnson, Crutsinger, and Workman (1995); Cash (1985); Forsythe, Drake and Cox (1984), etc.)

Later, in the period of social upheaval related to the Women’s Movement and the counterculture of the 1960’s and 1970’s in the United States, the androgyny movement followed widespread adoption of blue jeans as a youth movement uniform. Rather than an offshoot of high fashion, this trend had roots in a more working-class sensibility, and started in part due to women flooding the workplace during World War II and adopting sensible work clothes for factory production. In some cases their clothing could be fairly indistinguishable from menswear. While women’s return to the traditional home sphere was also somewhat of a return to traditional women’s clothing, the rise of blue jeans and other counterculture attire meant an increasing acceptance of jeans and t-shirts for both males and females. By the 1960’s, bell-bottoms were wide and hair was long for both sexes. It was at that time that more widespread adoption of a look that was gender disrupting and confusing for a broad segment of the population occurred, and fashions were no longer feminized or masculinized to suit mainstream dominant culture.

Androgynous style was an element of cultural resistance, but not necessarily to gender as a construct. Welters and Cunningham (2005) cite Joyce Johnson (1983) who “described Trotskyite women she encountered in the Village in 1949 who wore ... men’s shirts over faded jeans.” (p. 154). They noted that Beat “Style” also incorporated a somewhat unisex look of “chinos, jeans, T-shirts, sweatshirts, sweaters and a variety of shirts” (p. 151) While sites of social resistance and disruption of

traditional gender roles norms, these trends were still not disruptive of gender as a basic category. Examples, generally in the vein of cross-dressing, continue through the second half of the 1900s and into contemporary times, and don't all involve men's styles.

Stanley Cohen's (2011) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* describes a cycle from deviance to assimilation that plays out in fashion as with other elements. "Folk Devils" are deviant groups that have attracted negative media and social attention. A set of words and images become symbols of deviance - like long hair was for males in the hippie era. Clothing and hairstyles are important symbols, and a stereotype is formed about them. Following Barthes (2006) that stereotype is considered Dress. Over time some adopt the style, then it rapidly diffuses, then commercialization and exploitation occur, then it declines, stagnates, then remains as a nostalgic memory. (p. 169)

Contemporary genderqueer consumers see the emblematic "uniform" (Dress) of genderqueer as jeans and a hoodie (hooded sweatshirt). As contemporary fashion cycles back to embracing Androgyny again, it appears to be doing so in a more genderqueer way, but not necessarily with this stereotypical look yet. However, the market is providing fashions that are ungendered and not modeled by individuals of a clear gender binary. As with so many social developments that start as disruptive and even subversive, we may see that fashion has co-opted the ungendered consumer as neatly as it once did Urban, Grunge, and Punk.

## REFERENCES

- Barthes, R. (2006), *The Language of Fashion*, Berg, New York, NY.
- Butler, J. (1999), *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Cash, T. (1985), "The impact of grooming style on the evaluation of women in management" Solomon, M.R. (Ed.), *Psychology of Fashion*, D. C. Heath Co., Lexington, KY, pp. 343-355.
- Cohen, S. (2011), *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Forsythe, S., Drake, M., and Cox, C.A., (1984), "Dress as an influence on the perceptions of management characteristics in women," *Home Economics Research Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 112-121.
- Hall, S. and Jefferson, T., (2006), *Resistance through Rituals*, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Johnson, J. (1983), *Minor Characters*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, MA.
- Johnson, K.K.P., Crutsinger, C., and Workman, J.E., (1995), "Can Professional Women Appear Too Masculine? The Case of the Necktie" Roach-Higgins, M.E., Eicher, J.B., and Johnson, K.K.P. (Eds.), *Dress and Identity*, Fairchild Publications, New York, NY, pp. 133-138.
- Mendes, V.D., and de la Haye, A., (2009), *Lucile Ltd: London, Paris, New York and Chicago: 1890s-1930s*, V&A Publishing, London, UK.
- Ozanne, J.L., and Murray, J.B., (1995), "Uniting Critical Theory and Public Policy to Create the Reflexively Defiant Consumer" *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 38, No. 4, pp. 516-525.
- Roach-Higgins, M.E., Eicher, J.B. and Johnson, K.K.P. (Eds.), (1995), *Dress and Identity*, Fairchild Publications, New York, NY.
- Welters, L. and Cunningham, P.A. (Eds.), (2005), *Twentieth-Century American Fashion*, Berg, New York, NY.
- West, C. and Zimmerman, D.H., (1987), "Doing gender." *Gender & society*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 125-151.