How can the gender-biased world of design embrace gender fluidity - and what does this future look like?

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Introduction

There are numerous theories on gender. They predominantly revolve around the notion that gender is biological and determined by sex, or that it is a concept created by culture and conditioning and, as such, is malleable and fluid. Such a binary, two-gendered world has been established under Western scope, under which these categorisations continue to have a harmful impact on individuals and their self-identity.

The symbiotic and fictional nature of gender has been played with in various spheres of society. As a performative concept, gender is used as a focus for entertainment and as a means of exploring identity and expression. This is evident in drag, which utilises fashion and make-up to highlight stereotypical 'feminine' and 'masculine' features and hint at the instability of binary gender boundaries. The creative possibilities within fashion allow these notions to be explored and for individuals to reveal identity, talent, and culture.

Fashion is also an area in society that plays a huge role in affecting trends and perceptions. As a result, fashion tends to lead the progress in inclusivity in terms of design. Branding follows closely behind, as new companies and designers, with inclusivity central to their ethos, are starting to appear.

Despite such an increase in the last few decades, both industries are still heavily directed by gender stereotypes and notions of binary design. Most mainstream fashion houses produce separate clothing for women and men, while branding continues to utilise gender-associated colours, types and visuals. As these mainstream brands attempt to engage with an ever-growing profitable consumer base of Gen Z, a generation which seeks brands with values of diversity, individualism and ethical production, many take approaches that are either gender-neutral, or tokenistic.

In fashion, this has translated into a rise in androgynous clothing, while branding has seen greater use of what is considered by many to be gender neutral colours, typefaces and imagery. This lack of distinction between a gender neutral, androgynous direction and a gender inclusive and fluid direction is misleading; it has the harmful effect of pressurising those who identify as non-binary to believe they

must conform to an androgynous aesthetic. There is a diversity of needs and desires, and to appeal to everyone these should be recognised and fulfilled.

An understanding of the individual as the target audience and the context of what makes something inclusive is also essential. The androgynous direction is a result of brands making a surface level attempt at such inclusivity, while a lack of in-depth knowledge around the topic means the changes being made for a more inclusive future could be misinformed and, therefore, unsuccessful. As more brands are building inclusivity as a core value and improving their social corporate responsibility, some make this their brand identity, with a transparent, literal representation of the principle in their aesthetics. Others communicate this with a more subtle, inconspicuous direction. Both can be successful; however such choices must be made to appeal to a large, inclusive audience – some of whom can be alienated if they do not wish to have their gender or queer identity defining their personal style.

To understand the foundation of fluidity, the varying theories around gender will be presented and the notion of gender as a performative concept will be discussed. This is followed by a study on fashion as a prominent leading creative industry in inclusivity, and as an area that allows individuals to experiment and perform gender stereotypes and ideas. Analysis of existing fashion lines, high fashion brands and more mainstream affordable clothing companies is undertaken to understand what is and what is not successful in genuine inclusive fashion. Subsequently, the same study and analysis is done within the scope of branding, with stereotypes used in advertising and the perceived 'gender-neutral' alternatives broken down into successful and unsuccessful. The contrasting directions of inclusive fashion and brands is explored, between those with tokenistic financial incentives versus the smaller companies placing inclusivity as a core value. Gender neutrality and an 'androgynous' aesthetic is explored as a means of avoiding gender stereotyping and general positive changes in other areas such as advertising are noted to understand the overall rate of progression.

Gender has been and still is a largely disputed topic and its understanding and definition vary within a wide range of theories and beliefs, and between cultures and people. The theories can be divided into three areas: biological, socialization, and cognitive (Naples, Hoogland, Wickramasinghe and Miller, 2016). The biological argument relies on historical explanations such as evolutionary processes, and a focus on genes and sex hormones to explain the differences in psychological and behavioural actions between men and women. A socialisation theory infers differences because of the different treatment boys and girls receive growing up – it posits that within these environments, stereotypes of gender as concepts are learned. Cognitive theories present children as active constructors of their own gender; as they seek and interpret knowledge around gender, they attempt to match their behaviour with the understanding they have gathered. It is important to note that many of these theories are based within a Western scope. As Connell comments, masculinity is not a concept held by all cultures (2005), and the behaviours and characteristics attributed to gender stereotypes will vary within different cultures. For example, in Western culture, body hair has great significance in presenting stereotypical masculinity, and so if a man with lots of body hair is seen in a dress, they may not be read as a woman but "as overtly ambiguous" (Hilton, Kevin, 2011).

Contemporary arguments have moved away from defining gender as biologically determined, which has been deemed "outdated" (Hanssen, 2018), and instead lean more towards gender as a "learned or chosen social behaviour" (Butler, 2004), that is fluid in nature (O'Keefe, 1999). Other theories that reiterate this include Foucault's prison theory, Berger's theory of surveying, and Mulvey's theory of the Male Gaze. Gender as a term has also been broken down by Hanssen (2018) into two parts involving "gender roles" and "gender identities". They present the first as the expectations and stereotypes each gender is expected to fulfil, while the second is how an individual may relate to or identify with gender. Judith Butler alternatively notes in 'Gender Trouble' (1990) that at the most fundamental level, gender itself may not even be something individuals 'have', but may be an attribute they are said to 'be', and is performative in each individual. This reinstates "gender identity" at the forefront of the gender debate. She comments on gender as a construct, with reference to Simone de Beauvoir: "One is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes

one" (de Beauvoir, 1963). If gender is implied as constructed, Butler notes that there must therefore be an agent to appropriate this gender, and that this construction cannot be reduced simply to a choice an individual has made (Butler, 1990). Ian Burkitt comments on this in 'Gender, Sexuality and Identity', asserting **"sex and gender are more like statuses we have to attain, or identities attributed by ourselves and others, rather than natural and inescapable facts"** (Burkitt, 2008, p. 112). He also notes that gender refers to roles and characteristics and is something which is "dependent on culture and is variable and malleable" (Burkitt, 2008, p. 112). Psychologists Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna both reiterate the role of culture in the performance of gender in 'Gender: an ethnomethodological approach', where they assert that an individual's gender is determined by their gender performance. This performance will be observed in social interactions under the cultural rules we have learnt from childhood, which create the basis from which we regard feminine and masculine attributes. These attributes will be determined through numerous means, such as "movement, behaviour, speech, dress, hairstyle, facial structure, body shape and build, and other physical features" (Burkitt, 2008, p.112). Erving Goffman produced a similar analysis, asserting it is "ritual-like displays" (1976, p. 69) and performances within social settings that establish someone's gender.

While genitals may be argued as the biological determinant of whether someone is male or female, these are hidden for most of the time; as a result people will assume an individual's gender through the aforementioned attributes. Kessler and McKenna refer to 'cultural genitals', a comment on how, once an individual has attributed a gender to someone through a cultural criterion, one assumes their physiology matches the assumption made. It is only in the West that this notion of gender identity and biological genitals must align. For example, other cultures, such as indigenous American tribes, welcome intersex babies at birth, who are referred to as "two-spirit" (Lang, 2016). In the West, many transsexuals take hormones to change their body to 'pass' as the gender they want to present, as it is felt that we must have the "correct anatomy to go with the gender we attribute to ourselves" (Burkitt, 2008, p. 115). The medical interventions that occur with the birth of intersex babies in Western society reflects the creation of a "two-gendered world" (Braun, Clarke, 2009). Burkitt asserts that being compelled to identify within this framework of male

or female causes instability in individuals who feel ashamed of having attributes of the opposite gender.

For example, a man with more feminine inclinations may feel less masculine and therefore less of a 'real man'. The harmful impact of such categorisations is made evident in research conducted by the LGBT Foundation, which summarised that transgender people "experience mental health difficulties at disproportionate rates compared with [cisgender] people" (2017). To ignore these needs for inclusivity is "a crime of prejudice towards a targeted group" (Hudd, 2020). Those who have the desire to live without social categorisation should therefore be recognised and supported. Intersex individuals are evidence enough that it is possible to live without such categorisation, as they are people who "have a sense of presence, agency and embodiment in the world that extends beyond their sexuality and gender" (Burkitt, 2008, p. 130). Such sexual minorities are challenging this ontological world of two sexes, and as a result support the notion that gender is symbiotic and fictional.

These theories point to the importance of recognising gender as a fluid concept. Yet with a history of strong reliance on, and support for, the biological approach in Western society, those who identify outside the binary still face exclusion, alienation and discrimination (O'Shea and Boncori, 2019). Those who experience these challenges engage with spheres of society where gender is being deconstructed and performed to reflect the concept's fluidity (Abraham, 2019). Drag is a strong example of a form of entertainment that illustrates this and produces ironic commentary on the body gestures and actions that are used to present as male or female (Greaf, 2016). Such performances hint at the instability of the boundaries in the categorisations of male and female, straight and gay (Burkitt, 2008). Within drag, the use of fashion and make-up are key elements that produce each drag character's presentation – they are used to heighten feminine or masculine attributes. Queer communities who are still very much marginalised use these creative disciplines to bring concepts around gender and fluidity to the mainstream and find freedom within a society that excludes them.

Fashion has a huge role to play within society as a whole: It affects social status and trends, promotes creativity and stimulates society. It is a medium of expression and a way for individuals to reveal identity, talent, and culture. In one research study, a

participant made the personal comment that "fashion is inextricably linked to self-identity" (Hudd, 2020). Unfortunately, the main model of fashion, which is still followed today, attracts a mass audience using macho-masculinity and the hyper-sexualisation of the female form (Hilario, 2019). Take, for example, the advertisements of many recognisable high-profile perfume brands. Dior's advertisement, 'Homme Masculino Eau de Toilette' (Figure 1) depicts men in suits seducing women, while Jean Paul Gaultier 'Le Male' (Figure 2) portrays a woman in a pink corset waiting as a man pursues her.

Even the terminology used in the fashion and design industry are weighted by gender biases and stereotypes: Take for example the word "textiles" versus "materials". Seetal Solanki, founder of material research consultancy Ma-tt-er, points out that the former will evoke an image of a woman dressmaking over a sewing machine, whereas the latter will be of a man researching and designing new products (2017). Hilton and Kevin comment on this terminology in their research on 'Inclusive Design with Gender Fluidity' (2011), noting that the descriptive language of garments reinforces gender biases: For example, a shirt for a man versus a blouse for a woman. Other factors they noted used to distinguish garments as either masculine or feminine are choice of fabric, structure, detailing, and how they are worn (2011).

Throughout history there have been efforts to break down these gender stereotypes in fashion. In the 1920s it became more acceptable for women to wear pants in sports (Hilario, 2019) and by World War Two, the work of women enabled them to discard their corsets and wear trousers (Summers, 2015). The crucial turning point for gender politics and the dismantling of gender stereotypes was reached in the 1960s; this decade's fashion reflected the rise in gay rights and feminism, as seen in David Bowie's (Figure 3) prominence and the (Figure 4) YSL 'Le Smoking Collection'. The year 2017 sees the rise of co-ed fashion shows, where at least 13 brands combined their menswear and womenswear into one show (Hilario, 2019) (Chira, 2017). In 2018 the Calvin Klein spring collection of interchangeable clothes was a pivotal point in a slightly androgynous NY fashion week (Akdemir, 2018). As consumers continue to increasingly "resist gender clichés in fashion" (Steven, 2020) and prioritise fashion for its function and style over how garments have been designed for a specific gender or type of person, designers and labels are

increasingly venturing into more gender fluid approaches. A good example of this is the development of clothing lines under JW Anderson. Originally launching his brand as a men's line, Guardian journalist Healy (2013) comments how in 2010, "women buying his clothes led Anderson to venture into womenswear." Since then, "his men's and women's collections have functioned as two sides of the same coin" (Yotka, 2017) (Figure 5).

Alternatively, there is the argument that it is not only the consumer driving this change in normative fashion, but that the brands themselves played a large initial role (Newbold, 2017). Various brands used female models in their menswear shows to gain them more coverage, and to keep costs low combined women and men's shows into one. Following Alessandro Michele's debut at Gucci in 2015, where he used both male and female models to wear the same clothes, Gucci's sale trends (Gucci's tweedy, embroidered, nerdy style is on a huge winning streak — Quartz, 2018) encouraged other high street brands to take note. 2016 saw Zara launch a line called 'Ungendered', and Selfridges created an 'Agender' space in their London store. Of course, the economic foundation through which many brands are making these changes and pursuing gender inclusivity is largely down to the changes in the consumer base. A study by Mintel comments "consumers are looking for products that meet their needs, not products that force them into traditional gender roles" (Mogelonsky, 2020), and it has been pointed out that Gen Z is a large driving force in this change (Kopf, 2019). Quy Ma notes "Gen Z and Millennials value individual expression and uniqueness" (2020), and as they make up "35% of the population" and have tremendous spending power of an "estimated $143 billion in the United States alone" (Coray, 2019), it's no surprise that brands and fashion labels are aligning themselves with this generation's values. As these brands are making changes influenced by economic forecasts, most of this progression can unfortunately be attributed to tokenism. Fashion designer Charlotte Carbone highlights Pride month as a period which reveals those mainstream companies capitalising on a "gender inclusive stance… for a limited period" (Hudd, 2020), and asserts "queer people are creating for queer people, while mainstream corporate companies will only pander to queer people when it is profitable" (Hudd, 2020).

There is a lack of distinction however between a) gender-fluid fashion and b) gender-neutral, androgynous, or unisex fashion – which many people misinterpret as the

former. Androgynous fashion is often used to disrupt the gender stereotypes in fashion, through what Vogue journalist Sanders describes as "dull, often billowing garments meant to transcend suits and skirts," (2019) while gender-fluid fashion aims to break down normative associations "between skirts and women, suits and men" (Sanders, 2019). Producing garments and accessories that fall under a gender fluid scope is arguably therefore much more difficult to achieve. At Northumbria University, research was done into inclusive design with gender fluidity, in which informal interviews with gender fluid individuals showed the diversity of needs and desires: Some don't want to be mistakenly categorised as the opposite sex, with fluidity not exclusively a conscious behaviour, while others consciously decide which gender to perform that day (Hilton, Kevin, 2011). It must be noted therefore that although clothing created as androgynous is available to all and can be worn by everyone, it may not be appealing to everyone. For example, Burberry was responsible for popularising neutrality in mainstream fashion (Magalhães, 2020) with muted colours, and were also one of the first to allude to androgynous models in their ad campaigns (Beer, 2016) (Figure 6). As Magalhães further comments, androgyny can be used to communicate non-binary gender identification or to avoid gender stereotyping. However, this does not necessarily present gender inclusivity and can end up alienating those who do not find a gender-neutral aesthetic appealing.

Grouping together gender-neutral and androgyny with gender inclusivity may also have more of a negative effect: Inclusivity and LGBTQ+ blogger Ben Pechey comments "that you need to look a certain way to be non-binary is so harmful" and that "it can be hard not to internalise pressure to look androgynous" (Hall, 2020). Pechey provides insight into how to produce garments that are gender inclusive without being gender-neutral: "Don't remove gender from the garment, remove your expectations of gender on that garment. Don't see a dress as 'female', see it instead as a garment for someone who likes 'femme' styling" (Hudd, 2020). While brands like Burberry may adopt androgyny to "play respectable politics" (Hudd, 2020) truly inclusive fashion exists instead to "challenge and disrupt the gender binary" (Hudd, 2020).

High fashion designers and brands that have been appraised for genuine inclusivity include 'No Sesso' (Figure 7), which has the literal translation from Italian to 'no

sex/gender', Art School (Figure 8) and Charles Jeffrey (Figure 9). As these designers and brands are all led by Queer and/or trans folk, they play an essential part in ensuring inclusivity at every level of the design process and production. Jasmine McKenna from make-up brand Fluide reiterates the crucial nature of this, asserting that although there may be more diversity in models used on runway shows, behind the scenes there is a different story. Jannike Sommar reinforces this, asserting that the "biggest fashion groups in the world are still managed by straight, gender-normative people" (Hudd, 2020).

An additional issue with inclusive fashion is that, while high fashion designers and brands reflect experimentation and freedom within their work, there is a need for more high street alternatives that are more accessible and affordable (Driver, 2018). A successful example of this is The Phluid Project (Figure 10), a gender-inclusive brand, which kicked off with a gender-free apparel store in Manhattan. It was "self-purportedly the first gender-free retail space in the world" (Kuga, 2018), with owner Rob Smith explaining in an interview with Vice "there's a lot of gender-free brands in the world, [but] most of them [are] over at the higher price point of $500 and higher" (Street, 2018). The Phluid Project shop stocked in-house clothing that communicate strong messages around important social and inclusive issues, such as "black trans lives matter" (Figure 11). These smaller brands approach inclusivity with a genuine ethos rather than a tokenistic one and are part of the collection of "queer people… creating for queer people" (Hudd, 2020). The Phluid Project is also a strong example of branding developed to reflect and instil these inclusive values in their customers.

With the huge rise in prominence of non-binary gender identification in Western society (Thompson, 2017), it is pushing companies to develop gender neutral assets (Magalhaes, 2020). Brands sustaining and conforming to gender stereotypes "are inadvertently alienating whole communities of people" (Thompson, 2017), including consumers who do identify as male or female and are growing to have less tolerance towards this type of branding. In this "gender revolution" (Tick, 2015), brands are avoiding gender/colour stereotypes and association (Cunningham and Macrae, 2011). This revolves predominantly around the notion that pink is for girls, blue is for boys: a stereotype that pervades all areas of branding and advertising (Hess, Valentyna, 2016) (Sukhraj, 2020). This colour/gender link was an inverted association created in the 1920s. Previously blue was linked to the Virgin Mary and,

therefore, more appropriate for girls (Bilal, 2019). Pink was a diluted form of red (associated with the military via uniforms) and therefore associated with boys. There is significance in the fact that this association of colour and gender was repositioned historically, as it suggests that other assumptions and stereotypes around gender can be changed and perceptions altered. In the same way that it gradually became more acceptable for women to wear trousers in the 1930s, non-binary genders and gender fluidity can become more acceptable today.

In branding, there are stereotypes within typography that are commonly used when attempting to associate brands with gender. Contrasting stylistic effects are adopted, with decorated, cursive fonts associated with women (Figure 12) while more geometric, sharp fonts are associated with men (Figure 13) (Magalhaes, 2020). It is also commonly believed that there are more gender-neutral fonts which companies should opt to use (Magalhaes, 2020), and that Helvetica is the power type of such neutrality (Just how neutral is Helvetica?, 2020). However, to give a modernist typeface such properties is misleading, as Modernism itself labours under a philosophy of rationality, positing notions of logic over emotion and the pursuit of mechanics (Neel, 1993). As asserted in 'A Handbook for Modern Designers', "just as in the works of technology and nature, 'form' must be created out of function. Only then can we achieve typography that expresses the spirit of modern man" (Tschichold, 1998). Modernist typefaces - and arguably the majority of commonly used commercial typefaces - were and are created by men (Morley, 2016), for an industry dominated by men (Webber, 2020). To attribute gender neutrality to such typefaces is therefore erroneous. It is also a misdirection to assume that qualities of blankness and transparency in typefaces is the acceptable strategy in appealing to all genders.

It is suggested in branding that to avoid "such egregious stereotyping" (Powers, 2019), gender neutral alternatives in colour choice and imagery should also be used. This involves avoiding pink and blue, unless they are in muted tonalities and using imagery that does not present stereotypical gender norms (Magalhaes, 2020). However, this aligns itself with the similar notion that gender neutrality is an inclusive direction and an appropriate method to avoid alienating customers. As discussed through a fashion scope, this fails to be truly inclusive and can cause more harm than good. An emphasis on product functionality is one common denominator of

gender-neutral imagery (Magalhaes, 2020). This is particularly prominent for skin care brands, such as Aesop (Figure 14), which places emphasis on values and attitudes rather than gender. Research project Basik (Figure 15) is also a good example of successful gender-neutral packaging, remarked as "packaging for a post-binary gender world" (Weiner, 2014).

Alternately to a gender-neutral approach, many inclusive brands have a more palpable representation of their ethos through their logos, an essential foundation on which to portray brand identity. The Phluid Project is a strong example of a brand taking this transparent approach with their in-house slogan clothing and name. The latter was chosen to reflect this fluidity, with the PH presenting a sense of balance between 'femme' and 'masc', while 'project' presents inclusivity as an ongoing issue that is, as founder Rob Smith puts it, "a collaborative effort" (Kuga, 2018). The soft rounded, sans-serif joined letterforms in the logo itself reiterate this sense of fluidity and community. Such an approach is similar in the make-up brand Fluide, which showcases a similar name and wave form logo. Transparency of an inclusive ethos through the logo is also reflected through wide use of colour and abstract type, as seen in the logos of designers Hayley Elsaesser and Neith Nyers respectively (Figure 16). Arguably, such a palpable representation of inclusivity and fluidity has the potential to alienate consumers. For example, the use of rainbow colours in Elsaesser's logo could be associated with the tokenistic rebranding many large companies entertain during Pride month, while the use of connecting lines in the letterforms of The Phluid Project may also provide an aesthetic too literal for those who want more subtle, inclusive branding. Other well-known inclusive brands, which take a more inconspicuous approach with their logo designs, leave the inclusive ethos to other areas of branding, such as website design. This includes Telfar and Nicopanda (Pina, 2020), which utilise a more bold, commercial, high fashion aesthetic (Figure 17). Both directions are, however, appropriate as part of the designer's choice, and both appeal to different groups within the inclusive target audience.

Along with the rise in such inclusive branding, changes in other areas in branding have started to appear. Advertising is one of the main areas that needs more work, a point agreed on by more than 91% of U.S. marketeers (Oster, 2017). Big names in advertising agencies are making headway on changes. For example, Unilever

established an alliance with UN women to eliminate the prevalence of stereotypes (press release, 2017). Many advertising agencies are also reviewing their approach to advertisements that feature gender stereotypes (Sweney, 2019). In 2015 The Cannes Lion Award created the Glass Lion to recognise work addressing issues of prejudice and gender inequality (O'Brien, 2019).

Conclusion

It is evident that there has been steady progress towards a more gender inclusive world, particularly within the creative industries that are centred around individuality and self-expression, such as fashion. As queer artists and designers gain more of a platform and can prove that designing without gender is profitable, more mainstream fashion houses will follow. The branding around such industries will continue to note the importance of appealing to an ever-growing consumer base that looks for inclusivity and diversity, to ensure that they do not alienate such audiences and lose out on mass revenue. While most of these companies and brands follow this trend from a financial standpoint, there are increasing numbers which do so with a genuine ethos for change. While the latter is more powerful in ensuring permanent change for the future, both act as accelerators for a world which sees greater inclusivity, but it is crucial that inclusivity is taken on board at all levels, from those involved in the designing and modelling as well as behind the scenes.

The fundamental change needed for a more inclusive future will be driven by two co-existing factors. These are the new, more aware generations such as Gen Z, and the upcoming genuine brands that place inclusivity as a core value to their work and business. Cohesively they will approach inclusivity with a necessary humanistic approach and continue to help shift perceptions of gender. This not only ensures fairer treatment and improved livelihood for consumers but means there is space for exploring "new forms, sizes, tastes, colours and styles" (Buschi, 2019) and allows fresh, new brands and creative talent to appear and grow. With fewer barriers in fashion, branding, and gender, there will be greater freedom for all. There are notable strategies for greater inclusive fashion and branding that have been tried and tested as successful. For example, giving the spotlight to queer individuals who prove that such gender inclusive methods and products are appealing and profitable, such as Alessandro Michele at Gucci, and opening up the market to those such as Rob Smith from The Phluid Project, to enable an establishment of new inclusive brands and spaces. The tokenistic adaptation most large companies adopt are recognisably inauthentic, and therefore unsuccessful in their appeal to the aware consumer base of Gen Z. Large companies could learn a lot from smaller brands that place inclusivity central to their ethos, as these will generate a loyal customer base and ensure real change.

It is equally significant that, once inclusivity is made a genuine core value, they do not place a transparency of such values at the forefront of their branding aesthetic, as this could alienate possible customers. A strong balance or understanding of the individuals within the target audience is crucial when choosing such a direction. There are ways to engage with audiences that do not need to follow the gender binary, and simultaneously, there are also ways to engage with audiences that do not need to follow a stereotypical queer aesthetic. Each creative industry should approach inclusivity with an authentic and passionate direction.

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