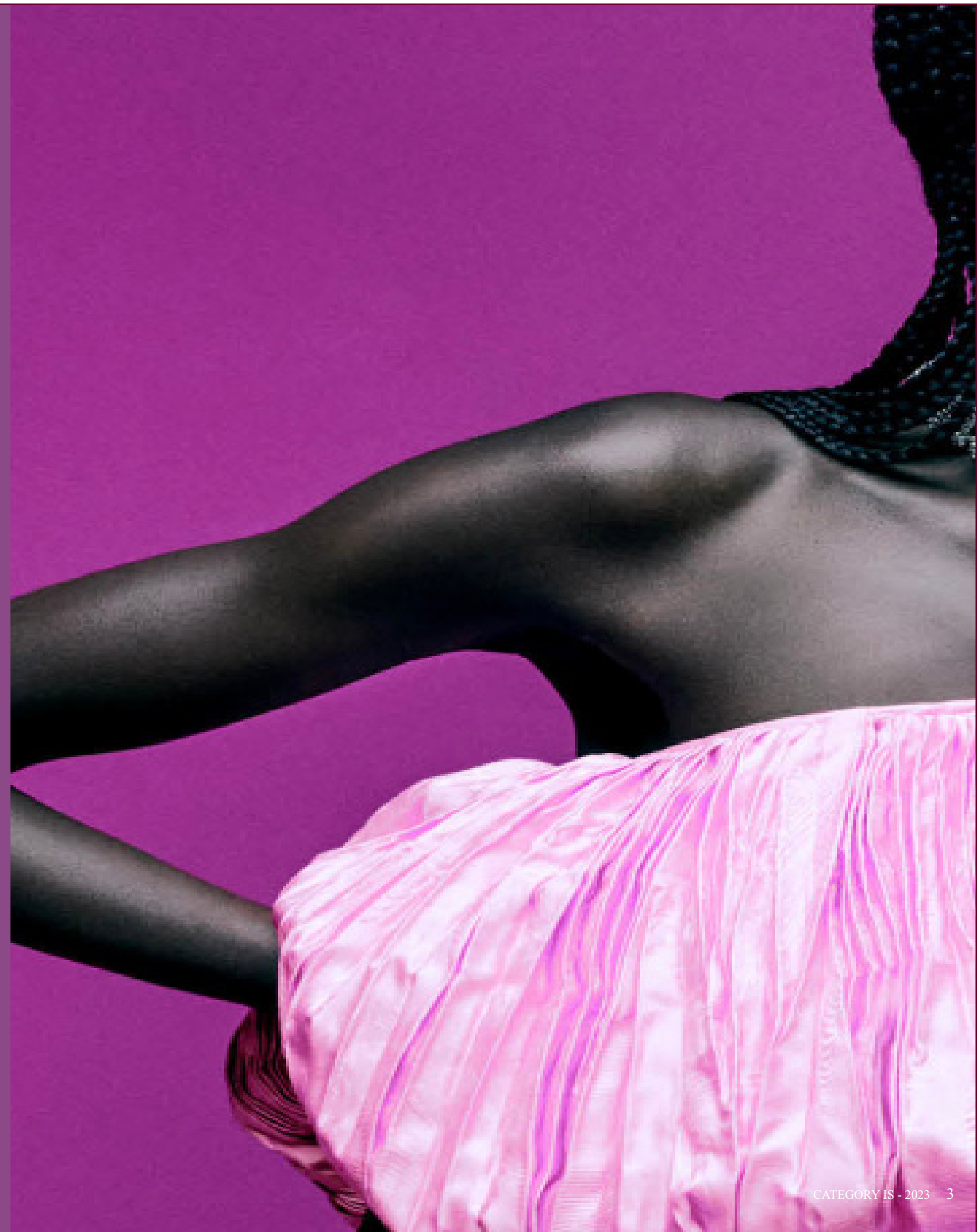




# CATEGORY IS...

# CATEGORY IS...

We are a team of fashion students aiming to highlight and portray important subjects within the fashion world, distinguishing between both the physical and societal aspects of such. We have a passion for fashion, which we hope to portray through our thorough, heartfelt, and dedicated work, of which we shower every issue of our beloved magazine in. 'Category Is', is not only a monthly passion project, but also a piece of cultural significance, in which we believe we will change minds and fuel the ever-changing dialogue that surrounds the industries encapsulating the fashion world. 'Category Is' is a mission aiming for resolution. We don't have all the answers, yet we remain dedicated in our pursuit of resolution.



# UNISEX & GENDERED FASHION

*Welcome to the 1st issue of Category Is.*

This issue of ‘Category Is’ aims to deconstruct the societal and industrial implications behind gendered clothing, specifically pinpointing uni-sex, queer, and heteronormative fashion as its focus areas. The importance and relevance behind this magazine issue is highlighted by its focus points. The social norms and ‘laws’ behind gendered fashion has a sizable influence over entire user- and consumer-bases, in which said influence specifically is applied to hurt and repress several minority communities. This twisted collaboration between societal constructs and capitalism, creates a limiting and controlling culture that can be traced back to roots planted deeply within the most raw and primal forms of sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and racism.

Even though unisex fashion was born with the intent to blur the binary gender ideas and norms through fashion, unisex and the fashion industry still have some way to go. In our society today unisex still has rules that are tied up to the heteronormative ideas of binary genders. And these ideas are seen in the marketing of unisex. Unisex fashion, which is a practice in design and mediation with a long and complicated history, and currently inform our choices when dressing ourselves. The articles of this magazine will explain these machinations.

The articles contain critique using theory, some of which is available for our readers to explore on their own. Please enjoy the thought-provoking articles within this magazine.

Editors

Clara Ebdrup, Mathias Praëm and Astrid Eeg Schøler

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# Gendered Fashion

## *The Clash Between Queerness & Heteronormativity*

### Introduction

The fashion world is a complicated, sometimes even cruel, world. From sexism and queerphobia, to slavery-like work conditions, the fashion world is not stranger to controversy, and today we'll be exploring exactly that. The fashion world consists of a devilish collaboration between capitalism and the patriarchy, which perpetuates specific problem areas within the industry, both the physical one and the social one. This collaboration targets specifically women and queer people, which highlights a whole different problem than 'just' the patriarchy and capitalism, that problem being how heteronormativity controls the portrayal, and creation, of gendered and genderless fashion. Hereunder the overall goal is to further an understanding of the effects of heteronormativity, on gendered and non-gendered fashion, and the implications behind its patriarchal and queerphobic roots.

### Queerness Through Fashion

Queer fashion is in its essence, fashion worn and created by queer people. There is a deep history with queer people and fashion, with some of the earliest and most important queer

environments being centered around fashion embodying queerness. Take the underground queer ballroom scene in New York in the 80's as an example. This scene was centered around queerness expressed through fashion. Grand outfits displayed in categories on makeshift runways, by houses of chosen families, competing in front of judges, for rewards in forms of trophies, glory and legendary statuses. These ballroom scenes appeared all over the world, and is one of few reasons as to why queer people have such a connection to fashion. Another reason as to why, is because the possibility to express gender and identity through fashion is so deeply rooted in queerness and queer lifestyles. It is a chance to stand out, be unique, and most importantly, be your own version of yourself. Hereunder fashion is not only deeply rooted in queer history, but also in the creation of everyday queer identities. Queerness is often expressed or even heightened through fashion, and it is a very common part of queer identity and expression, most of the time expressed as a way to not conform to heteronormative or non-queer ideas or societal expectations.

An attribute of a specific kind of forced conforming exists on grounds of a heteronormative and patriarchal society. Hereunder both queer people and women are suppressed, fashion being the preferred tool of suppression. Queer people are forced to conform to heteronormative ideals through fashion, mostly on grounds of fear tactics or violence, these being attributes of a society that centers around a heteronormative masculinity. On the other hand women are suppressed through fashion in a similar sense, that being through sexism and the chains of heteronormative femininity. This forced femininity aims to not only control, but also entangle women in a specific role that serves and lives by standards that stands to please the male gaze, and toxic masculine environments. In both of these cases people of colour, specifically, has historically had a harsher and much more brutal history with said implications of a heteronormative patriarchal society, not only being victimized by queerphobia and sexism, but also racism. A heteronormative society exists primarily within the ideals of the white, heterosexual, cis-gendered male.







An interesting, yet obviously sad, phenomenon occurs under this societal gaze, where victims of this layer of societal oppression still strive to achieve its attributes, in hopes of meeting the requirements to no longer be 'less' than, in a societal view that does not appreciate those who are 'different'.

### The Effects of Heteronormative Fashion

Heteronormative fashion is a collection of overall ideals, projected into the fashion world and industry. It is not only an idea, but a reality. Said series of ideals have an almost complete control over a global industry and phenomenon, and thereby control over an enormous consumerbase. The ideals of 'the manly man' and 'the feminine woman', are certainly some of the most important parts of this system. Connecting it all is a series of societal gendered expectations, focused around how people 'should' act, and the roles specific members of society 'should' play. Even apparent non-gendered clothing and fashion suffers from the almost inescapable heteronormative environments infesting the fashion world. This is especially seen when taking a closer look at both the design and advertising strategies surrounding unisex fashion.

As will be explored later on in this issue of 'Category Is...', unisex fashion is heavily influenced by boxy and baggy cuts, gray, white and black colours, and a simple hint of a 'street' style. 'Street' often being a baggy t-shirt and cargo pants. So while unisex fashion is advertised as the 'neutral' choice, it still seems to sway towards a more masculine and restricted style, whereas gender non-conforming fashion speaks to the creative and individual self, promoting and creating fashion truly made for anyone to wear, however and wherever they please. Even though unisex fashion is a sweet attempt to smudge the lines between what people should and could wear, it was still sadly a concept made within the borders of a heteronormative design world, whereas gender non-conforming, or gender non-specific clothing, is made mainly by queer people for everyone, completely severing the ties between the root cause behind a toxic and dangerous industry, that root cause being toxic masculinity. The difference between queer fashion and heteronormative fashion is, as earlier explored, grand. So now that we somewhat understand the difference between the two, why is it then important to be able to distinguish between them? And why would that make a difference at all? Well, understanding the difference between heteronormative and queer fashion is a simple matter, because their differences are rooted in problems we all face every single day.

Far from all men are willing participants in this heteronormative society, but they still earn helpful and rewarding awards simply for being white, cis-het, men. Understanding that privilege is important to then further an understanding of the effects of a system that builds you up, while specifically tearing everyone else down. As a minority, meaning everyone who are not white, heterosexual, cis-gendered men, it is important to understand the history that our fashion portrays. Understanding the regressive and oppressive ways that fashion has been used against minorities through several decades, is principal to understanding the root and cause of our own existence within the system, while understanding how our ancestors evolved and slowly but surely, in a way, are assisting us in freeing ourselves through fashion, as they attempted. Understanding these implications and the systems that sustain them, we can further a better understanding of what we must do to further evolve through fashion, while also staying true to who we are. The creation of identity happens thorough how we express ourselves, and in what better way can we learn to express ourselves than to begin by understanding ourselves?

# The Gender Binary Expressions and Sexist Tensions in Unisex Fashion

The unisex movement arose in the 60'ties as a correction of the strict gender stereotypes in the time after the second world war. Unisex fashion is still very much present in todays fashion society. Unisex styles today mostly embody the stereotypical masculine ideas of clothing, such as baggy jeans, plain t-shirts and/or sweatshirts etc. This means the stereotypical feminine styles such as skirts, dresses, high heels etc. are not represented in the unisex fashion scene as much?

How does this tie with heteronormative and internalized sexist tensions in the fashion industry and in our society in generally and how can fashion blur the stereotypical binary genders in fashion?

## A Short History of Unisex Clothing and Fashion

Unisex fashion first arose from the baby boom era of the 50's. Leading up to the second world war the gender stereotypes were hardly ever questioned and the fashion, in the western world, were following the gender norms. Unisex fashion appeared as a correction of the strict gender stereotypes at the time and is seen as a part of the second wave of feminism. In the 60's the term 'unisex' were used to describe a certain hair style advertised to the binary genders. And in 1968 the term was used for the first time by The New York Times to describe "monster shoes". For Europeans, unisex hereafter became a "weapon" to go against the stereotypical gender norms in the time after the second world war. Women looked away from the norms within fashion and men explored fashion trough the "Peacock Revolution". The Peacock Revolution in the 60's paved the way for men to explore clothes with a more extravagant style designed. Adding more colors, prints on shirts, and embroidery. Colors and styles were no longer restricted to the idea of genders at the time.

Through the 60's and 70's the unisex fashion aspired to cross and blur the traditional gender ideas. But it mostly became uniformly and turned forwards a masculine style. In the article "A Brief History of Unisex Fashion" Kimberly Chrismann-Campell writes that "the unisex movement may have made women's clothing more masculine, but it never made them unfeminine".

Despite the women's clothing being masculinized the men's fashion only had a short period of feminization. Even though the unisex fashion tried to erase the gender normative ideas in clothing, feminine stereotypical indicators was shown through accessories, makeup, and bras. This wave of unisex fashion is tracked to the mid 70's. The unisex fashion trend resurfaced again in the 90'ties.



Image by Smithsonian



## Unisex Today

When looking up the definition of unisex Merriam-Webster.com defines it as “the state or condition of not being distinguishable (as by hair or clothing) as to sex” and unisex fashion as “suitable or designed for both males and females”. So shortly said unisex fashion is defined by the idea of fashion fitting both binary genders. The word “uni” means “one” so the term “unisex” means “one sex” as to the two binary genders blending into one sex. So, the unisex fashion world is based on heteronormative norms of the binary - man and woman. Today’s standard unisex clothing has a very clear aesthetic which mostly consists of baggy pants, jeans, oversized plain t-shirts, hoodies, blazers, shirts and so on. Usually, the clothing items stemming from masculine fashion ideas.



Picture from ASOS.com



Picture by HUMBLE Magazine

When searching unisex on the site of a large fashion business such as Zalando.com mostly masculine fashion styles are recommended - with the first search primarily showing hoodies, large t-shirts, and sneakers - items that are shaped for the masculine frame. It should be mentioned that even though these fashion brands are selling unisex styles it is still difficult to navigate because the clothes are still divided into the sections: womenswear and menswear. Unisex fashion of course has exceptions when it comes to the masculine style. Not every unisex item, style, or brand design with the stereotypical masculine ideas in mind. However, finding these brands and items, where stereotypical feminine clothes is labeled as unisex, is more difficult and circumstantial. When investigating unisex fashion, you can wonder why the most unisex clothes today fits the stereotypical masculine fashion styles? And does this have any ties to sexism?

## Expression of Sexist Ideas in Unisex

As stated earlier in this article unisex fashion is mostly turned forwards a masculine style and as Chrismann-Campell expresses, the unisex movement made women’s clothing more masculine. When studying unisex fashion, it is clear how it is represented mostly through stereotypical masculine fashion items such as: baggy pants, oversized t-shirts, sweatshirts and so on. This baggy and oversized fashion has become the face of modern unisex clothing. The investigation of the emphasis on masculine styles and how this idea may stem from sexist tensions is interesting. It is important to state, that these subjects mentioned are based on traditional binary gender ideas and norms in the society.

Throughout history women has fought to gain the same rights as men. This included fashion and women has for long in history, in the western world, been restricted to certain traditional clothes. In the 1850’ties

Amelia Bloomer, a women’s rights activist, advocated for the “Bloomer” to be worn by women. The Bloomer were lose-fitting pants to be worn under their skirts. Again, in the 1920’ties women’s fashion changed to be more traditional masculine with a loser and sportier fit - this changed were enforced by World War 1 and women joining the work force. As well as women gaining the right to vote a few years before. In the early to mid-20th century, it was still only acceptable for women to wear pants at certain situations. Women wearing menswear firstly became a non-rebellious act around the 60’ties and 70’ties. And as mentioned, this is the time were the unisex movement rose. In the 80’ties the “power suit” (a blazer combined with a skirt) became popular. Through times women has had to adapt to the masculine fashion world to gain power and rights. This idea of traditional stereotypical masculine clothes worn by women to gain notion in a world build for men is still seen in fashion. Unisex fashion still enforces this idea of women wearing masculine clothes to gain respect in our patriarchal society.



Picture by Teddy Girls sourced from Ken Russell’s photography exhibition



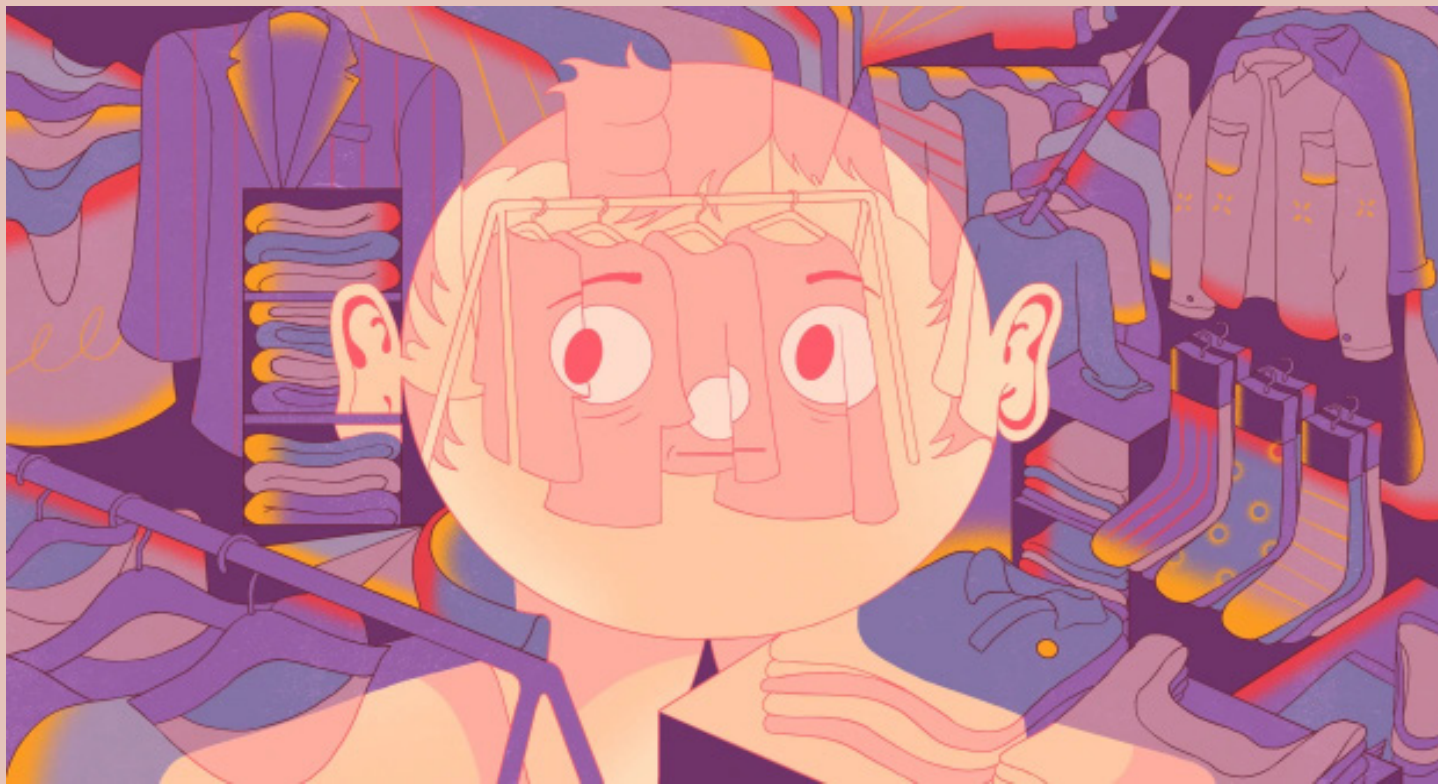


Image from What is gender-fluid clothing? Fashion industry experts explain.

## Erasure of Binary Genders in Unisex Fashion

It is established that sexist and stereotypical tensions is a part of unisex fashion. Therefore, it could be relevant to question what unisex could learn from fashion ideas where heteronormative and sexist ideas are not involved. And where the binary genders aren't a part of it. As stated earlier in the article the unisex movement in the 60's tried to erase the binary gender norms at that time. But the blurring of lines was tied up to the heteronormative gender norms.

As the society is growing and evolving to acknowledge that gender is more than just the binary genders, the fashion also must reflect this growth. Clothing should no longer be tied to the stereotypical binary genders and through fashion it must be shown that anybody can wear whatever they want no matter how they identify. The heteronormative ideas of gender norms and roles are no longer in center and there is a rising need for fashion to be more open and non-conforming and therefore become more inclusive to all identities. Unisex therefore differentiates form the idea of non-conforming fashion and/or gender-fluid fashion.

## Unisex Fashion vs. Gender-Fluid Fashion

When examining unisex clothing it is worth examining how the unisex presented today is not gender-fluid and what differentiates the two? And how unisex lack inclusivity because of this. Gender-fluid clothes can have a different meaning to different people. In the article "What is gender-fluid clothing? Fashion industry experts explain" Kala Hehr writes that "fashion industry experts say a truly gender-fluid outfit isn't an outfit at all. It's more a state of mind, fashionably speaking". Gender-fluid is, simply said, outside the limits of the traditional womenswear and menswear norms and is also defined as fashion that can be worn by anyone and matter how they identify themselves. Kala Hehr defines the difference between unisex and gender-fluid clothing in her article. Unisex clothing is designed to make way towards a future world where gender doesn't exist, but the unisex fashion still built upon the ideas of binary genders: male and female. Whereas gender-fluid fashion is proposed to free people form the stereotypical binary of genders. As stated earlier in the article unisex, the term "unisex" by direct definition means "one sex" and therefore appeals to the idea of the sexes considered to be one. This meaning also enforces the idea of the binary genders as focus the idea of man and woman. When comparing this to the definition and meaning of gender-fluid fashion the meaning of the two fashion expressions becomes different. Even though these definitions and differences is clear it is important to mention that the term "unisex" is used in a lot of different context and connections and the term is interpreted in different ways. This article presents it one way.

## Going forward

Unisex fashion was the beginning of a freer expression in fashion. But maybe because the historical start the unisex movement still holds many heteronormative, sexist, and binary ideas as this article has discussed throughout. Unisex fashion still tailors to the binary genders. Going forward unisex fashion could be learn from, for example, gender-fluid fashion and gain more inclusivity. Fashion, and therefore also unisex fashion, should no longer be based on the stereotypical binary genders. Society must through fashion show what you wear is not determined by who you are and how you identify. Fashion should reflect this growth in society. Fashion is an expression and should not be tied to traditional binary ideas of what to wear.

This raises the question: Why does fashion need to be labeled in general, why is clothing not just labelled for everyone who would like to wear it?



Image of Billy Porter from Fabriclore

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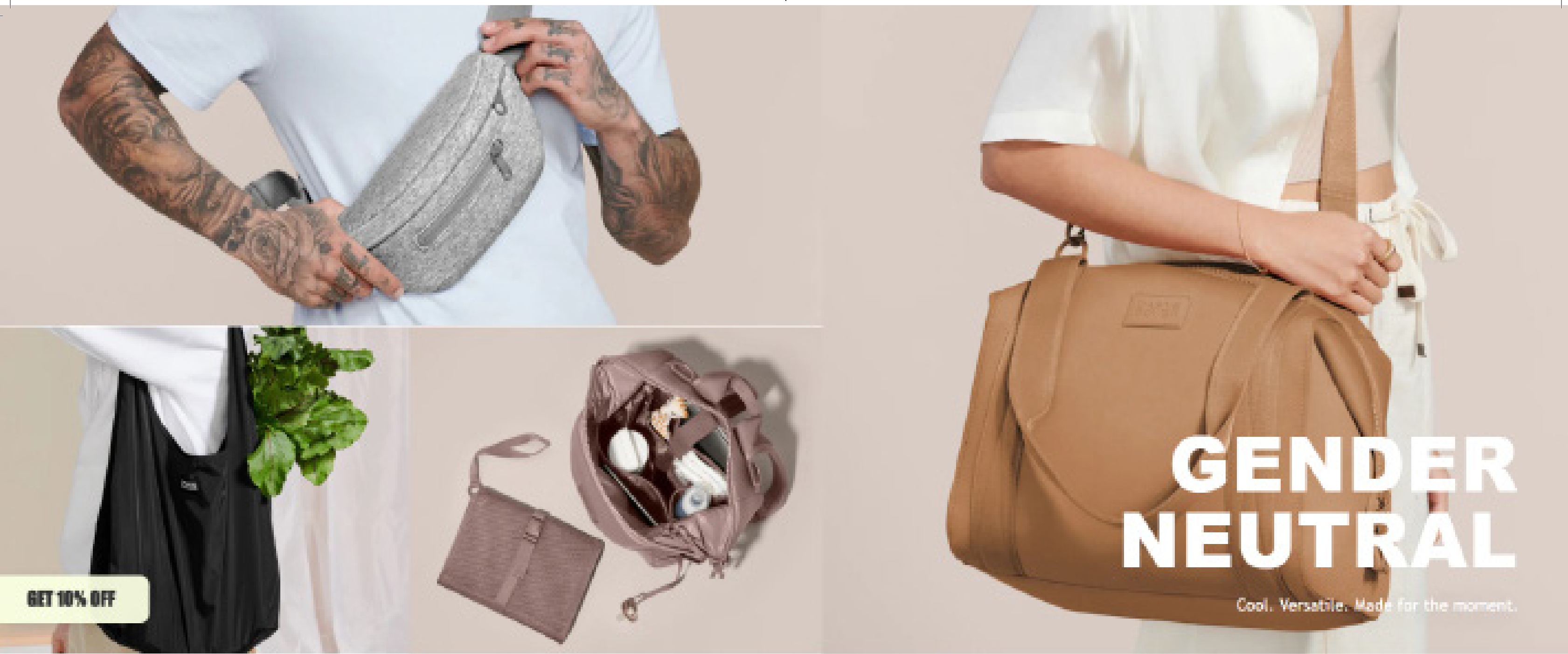
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Visuals from Dagne Dover

# Feature: Unisex Bags: Designs, branding and politics.

*"...bags are a low-commitment way to switch up your look because you can add them to any outfit and change them day to day as your relationship with style and gender fluctuates. A genderless fashion future doesn't take away from the gendered markers that can be so important..."*

- Fashion Journalist Sophie Wilson for Refinery29





£ 235

Luar Black Small Bag



£ 1950

Gucci Jackie 1961 Small Shoulder Bag



£ 20.99

COLLUSION Unisex Padded Tote in Black

Images courtesy of sellers: Luar, Gucci, Collision.

## Bags are gendered, now under the unisex category.

The fashion magazine *Voir* believe that the handbag is a social playing field with the potential to break down gender barriers and improve the fashion landscape. *Voir* has reported on bags that have had media appearances with both genders and which they consider ideal for unisex fashion; the Luar, The Bottega Veneta Padded Cassette, Zara leather cross-body, One DNA, Gucci Jackie and Collision unisex bags. All of which have extreme neutrality, letting the outfit project anything onto it. They are all neutrally black or with dark natural colours, which create projection and expression opportunities onto the rest of the outfit. *Voir* quotes the designer Ed Curtis stating, that the reason for making bags according to genders is purely a marketing purpose, and not a practical one.

Read, download or share The Gender-Neutral Bag Is Launching Fashion Towards Its Gender-Free Future by *Voir* fashion magazine:  
<https://www.voirfashion.co.uk/post/the-gender-neutral-bag-is-launching-fashion-towards-its-gender-free-future/>

## What role does gender play in bag design?

In an answer to a reader of the *Outside* lifestyle magazine, the backpacking expert Katie Herrel explains the difference between backpacks for women and men. To summarize her answer: women's bags are physically smaller in many ways, and have a different visual identity, these two factors meet in the middle, with a smaller carrying capacity. The exaggerated smallness is not ideal for the average woman, to which men's or unisex bags are more compatible. Her advice as an expert is to treat the woman's bag as a very small bag and ignore gender when wearing backpacks. Most unisex bags are of the backpack product type. However, the fashion builds on the legacy of the woman's handbag, the primary accessory for many fashion ensembles, in which all practicality is stored. As such, the handbag is being redesigned for the unisex market.

Read, download or share Men's Packs vs. Women's Packs by Katie Herrel for *Outside*:  
<https://www.backpacker.com/gear-reviews/men-s-packs-vs-women-s-packs/>

According to Elizabeth Segran writing for *Fast Company*: there are many new brands that design bags by shape and appearance for women, and less of this innovation happening in masculine or gender-neutral styles. *Fast Company* is a business media brand that examines and tests innovation in design. They tested bags that were both considered gender-neutral and practical. The design of these lean towards functionality and the working male aesthetic. Marketed towards men or pictured with both men and women of the conventional kind. The common trend of these is a large size and either a standard or available all-black colour scheme. Many of these are suited for heavy objects, sports equipment and electronics. MZ Wallace has the most opulent bag, and is a brand with a large female customer base, but for their gender-neutral bag they designed a large sports bag which has reached status for sportsmen and gymgoers. This selection is quite male-oriented with the fitting for large items, with fewer small compartments for toiletries. These bags are able to be held on the shoulders, and back, but not in the hands or on the hip, which make them suitable for upper-body strength only. These bags quite explicitly reject the presence of the handbag.

Image courtesy of MZ Wallace.



Read, download or share The best work and travel bags for everyone by Elizabeth Segran for *Fast Company*:  
<https://www.fastcompany.com/90361974/these-are-the-best-gender-neutral-bags-of-the-year>

## The branding of unisex bags

Fashion journalist Sophie Wilson wrote a piece on genderless bags for *Refinery29*, owned by Vice Media Group. Using the term "genderless" refers to an absence or loss of a quality, but Wilson uses it to refer to a new fashion freedom. She looks back at the handbag historically, to when it was worn by men and women equally, bags were then strongly modified to two genders, enough so that the product type became exclusive for women.

"Once upon a time, men and women walked around with identical purses in which they carried their coins. Bags were functional and they were genderless. When these purses evolved, they turned into pockets sewn into clothing or worn around the waist. Then, in the 1790s, fashions changed and womenswear became more figure-hugging. Women had to go back to carrying little purses, only this time they were fashionable and decorative, much like the stylish handbag we are familiar with today. The handbag industry grew and the idea that women might actually like the practicality of pockets became irrelevant. After all, there were bags to sell." Sophie Wilson

This is a hard social standard to walk back on.

The state of social change in men is reported on by Wilson. The tote bag is becoming more common because of the ban on plastic bags, but men are resisting the bag due to its likeness to the handbag product-type. A report by Mintel indicated however, that men's fashion is changing towards showing figure, as women's fashion has in the past, and this is popularizing the handbag for men. For designers such as Dior, the handbag as its own product type is given "masculinization", so the handbag for men, as indicated by the different name "handbag", is designed separately from women's bags, in an attempt to shake the negative connotations.



Image courtesy  
of No Sesso

Read, download or share Genderless Bags Are The Future. But What Exactly Are They? By Sophie Wilson for Vice: <https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/genderless-bags-unisex>

Unisex bag design draws on other influences than the male-female practicality dichotomy. All-unisex brand No-Sesso have designed handbags after the duffel bag and draw on POC street culture. The results are bags with a larger personality than the functional, masculine backpack. They are afforded more colour and texture and are petite. No-Sesso stays true to their message and do not enforce gender on their clothing. Products, although affordable, are however limited and sales time-sensitive.

Read, download or share Gender neutral brand No Sesso launches its first handbag collection by Victor Qunnell Vaughns Jr. for Ebony Magazine: <https://www.ebony.com/gender-neutral-brand-no-sesso-launches-its-first-handbag-collection/>

Designer Steven Ma believes that the functionality of the bag lies in between functionality and self-expression, which doesn't necessitate a gendered use. Female and male buyers seem to agree on prioritizing practicality, the Hermès Cargo Bag inspired by military appearance and practicality for example, has been a success with equal customers from both sides.

Some unisex-branded bags oppose practicality. The Telfar Clemens Shopping Bag is marketed towards men and women. The branding was carried out at a gender-bender event. The subversiveness of this bag lies in its ridiculously small size, another rejection of practicality. It is reclaiming impracticality. (Cited from Vice Media)

With the Lez Bag, gender-queer designer D Mortimer aims to sate a need for non-female handbags and also as a tool to express identity. Although it is "essentially genderless" they acknowledge that it has the purpose to sub-

gendered" which means there is a queerness to its neutrality or subversion of product type contra presentation. Mortimer considers the handbag product type to come with enough baggage, that they do not use the word handbag at all, therefore rejecting the feminine connotations instead of working with them. Functionally, it is a handbag, but it seems to grasp for the lost practicality of bags. The rejection of the word handbag due to the feminine associations, has led to cultural terms such as "manbag".

Sophie Wilson examines Machine-A, the London-based design store, is promoting "gender-fluid" fashion. The common practice of these pieces of clothing is to take a product type associated with women and use masculine materials to create a subversive impression. Machine-A, like many other brands, monitors the customers, and found the products bought by majorly men. Machine-A is a self-designated unisex brand but presents their models in a male/female dialectic in different clothing, and sells their designs in male-female categories. The details of fitting clothes according to gender or other physical traits is not acknowledged by the brand, which makes the categorization come off as arbitrary and in disservice to the goals of the brand. WWD describes Machine-A as gender-agnostic, which implies an indifference to gender that is not reflected in their practice. The case is the same for reporting on the brand Collusion which seems to indicate, that brands that calls themselves unisex are afforded more lenient coverage and little criticism, this is seen across fashion coverage and reports on brands. Karelis comments positively on this practice, and puts it in contrast to traditional marketing and calls it a change to reflect changes in society. Despite this misleading coverage, brands like One DNA make good on their promise to not differentiate between genders.



# Coverage of the Unisex fashion movement

Articles of fashion magazines refer to a subculture of consumption and expression but format the meaning of which somewhat. Unisex as featured in fashion magazines could be criticised by the distractive spectacle written of in the chapter The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception in Horkheimer and Adorno’s book of critical theory from 1944. In these articles, the bags and their associated culture are identified, catalogued and classified, and they are therefore what Horkheimer and Adorno call ”brought into the realm of administration.” On page 104. This form of classification reduces the properties of meaning that may be attributed to the products.

Drawing theory of Horkheimer and Adorno into the discussion around gender-subversive or challenging clothing may allow us to make the point that the product formats the culture it addresses in a way that removes negativity from the mind

of the consumer. They refer to this as a replacement of pain with jovial denial on page 112. The products here are presented as desirable, by even using normative desirable participant symbols such as the attractive man and woman, explicit mentions of nonbinary or gender nonconforming individuals are not present in much of the coverage, and neither are many gender-subversive statements, likely because they are considered political. This removes this consumption space from the serious, real-world issues around gender-neutrality.

The culture of gender-neutrality has become a paradoxical commodity, which removes the product from practical use enough to equate it to an ad itself, as Horkheimer and Adorno state on page 131. Fashion is typically used on the social battlefield and some fashion brands allow the consumer to weaponize their purchasing power for causes, but there are no mentions of gender-expression or social conflicts. The articles and the brands featured in them repeat positive statements or surface-level commentary compilation about the product.

The culture industry, that is to say, the advertisement practices in consumption media, has the role of informing the populus about culture, the authors proclaim on page 135. The consumer or audience recognizes that this form of conversation about the culture of a product is ignorant, but participates in emitting the discomforting details anyway, and repeating the communication from the authors, as they explain on page 136.

# Baggage of the handbag: The Manbag

Vice reports, that there is a taboo associated with men wearing bags. The concept was made a spectacle of in an episode of Friends. Meanwhile, unsustainable avoidance of the bag is considered a masculine expression of gender. Like many social rules, the masculinity of the bag is arbitrary, but is defined as a large, bulky size, that leaves the hands free and is not too colourful. Expressed by designers such as Dior. Reclamation of the feminine product is expressed in the popularity of the Dior bag. Which was originally designed for women and worn by several large female fashion icons in media.

Vice defines the handbag product type as a less practical bag that carries fashion expression, and which may be necessary due to the expression of the rest of the outfit. They express femininity and impracticality and therefore communicate a passive appearance:

”...these aren’t handbags hoodwinking us into thinking they are man bags with a little strap rearrangement, they are proper handbags. Handbags just as beautiful and just as innovative (maybe even more so) as any bag designed specifically for women.”

”So is it really just about not caring? Handbags for everyone -- is it that easy? Well, it can be. Handbags aren’t a political statement, despite the weight of gender signifiers that have been hung off them like little bag charms. They are just a piece of clothing. But it isn’t always easy for men to dismiss the ridicule they can be faced with for not being as masculine as is often expected of them.”

Read, download or share How the handbag became gender neutral by Ethan Price for Vice Media:  
<https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/qvgg87/how-the-handbag-became-gender-neutral>

This segregated product type may be phasing out. Fashion journalist Joelle Diderich states: ”The days of the man bag may be numbered. A growing number of men are ditching their messenger bags and backpacks in favour of handbags traditionally intended for women, whether mini styles worn crossbody, or travel-friendly maxi versions.”

“This is a very, very big trend. You see more and more men being very confident in carrying what we call traditionally women’s-shaped bags, perhaps, and it’s all around playing with this gender fluidity,” said Stavros Karelis, founder and buying director of London-based concept store Machine-A.

This comment is very telling that the discussion around gender-neutral bags is really about gender expression, and making sure men stop the ”social-devaluation” of what is associated with women, including small bags.

“I guess this confidence that the young generation of people have, that the gender doesn’t really matter anymore, is about the design focus, and how they feel very comfortable and confident by dressing up and showing something that is very beautiful in terms of



Image courtesy of Tortuga



Image courtesy of  
Giambattista Valli,  
accessed through  
Fairchild Media.



The neutrality of the bag, yet gendered clothing is demonstrated by Isabelle Chaput and Nelson Tiberghien, the influencers behind the Instagram account Young Emperors by what they wore at Paris Fashion Week, the same black outfit in gendered variants, with matching yet different bags.

Industry observers such as Tao Liang, the influencer “Mr. Bags” trace the shift back to 2018, when Kim Jones and Virgil Abloh took over as men’s wear designers at French luxury brands Dior and Louis Vuitton, respectively. They allowed men’s clothing to be less professional and fashion for men to be explored more. In his experience, men who prioritize fashion have to use bags made for women, but designers are increasingly trying to meet the demand for fashionable men’s bags. Bags for men are certain product types, and do not include the handbag.

Although fashion journalists have chosen to interpret the interest in smaller bags as a sign of new male fashion style which hugs the body closer and is more revealing and impractical, this would seem to indicate that beauty standards are rising for men. Since otherwise feminine fashion is not being adopted and there are still reservations about unisex fashion and segregation of male and female clothing.

Much of the discussion around genderless bags revolves around introducing bags for men, and therefore, Kim Jones’ design of Dior’s saddle bag. The purpose of the design is to fit the individuality, and is once again a reaction to pocket practicality:

“It’s a personal thing, as I hate having full pockets, so I always have a bag,”, he notes that it also fits the demands of the modern person that carries less electronics, as well as children. “Putting that big clip on it, it makes it even more like a design piece that’s aesthetically pleasing to men” says Jones.

Read, download or share Do Gender-neutral Handbags Spell the Demise of the Man Bag? By Joelle Diderich for Fairchild Media:  
<https://wwd.com/feature/the-man-bag-is-dead-hand-bag-gender-barriers-disappear-1235002269/>



Image courtesy of  
Fashionphile.com,  
retailer of the Dior  
saddle bag.

The popular Dior saddlebag design draws on the black military aesthetic and practicality that is used for unisex fashion. It is unmistakably designed to have the appearance of a gun holster. A collaborative variant features visible machine parts which maximizes this aesthetic.

## The problematization of the bag: public safety concerns

The terrorist attack on the 9th of September had a disruptive effect on the fashion industry. As journalists from Harper’s Bazaar report in interviews with those who worked in the fashion world during the event.

On the fifth day of the New York Fashion Week, the attack happened, it was however important to the producers that the show continued despite possible danger and visibly stressed models, the designer Adam Lippes recounts. Despite this, many walked away with trauma from that day.

“We were coming together as a nation and coming together as a city and coming together as an industry and coming together as people who were going to rebuild and be strong no matter what.” Said designer Tommy Hilfiger in response to the event.

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The following fashion shows were flavoured with a sentiment of resistance and pride, Lippes says: “We were the first show to happen again, on September 17. Oscar was very much like, “The show must go on. These people cannot win.” We decided to show in the showroom, with no music, no set, no anything, out of respect. We put one flower on each chair. And everyone wore a black armband with an American flag.”



Oscar de la Renta Spring 2002 Ready-To-Wear Show 17-9-2001. Look #14. Image courtesy of Vogue Runway

This spectacle seems to indicate a new direction for the fashion industry post 9-11. The designer Thakoon Panichgul said "Post-tragedy, there was a lot of new energy."

Read, download or share How 9/11 Changed the Fashion Industry Forever by Alison S. Cohn and Jessica Maitlin for Harper's Bazaar: <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a37387293/9-11-oral-history-september-2021/>

Handbag consumption is far from being without consequences to politics and public safety. In an opinion piece for the New York Times titled Terror's Purse Strings, journalist Dana Thomas writes on the circulation of money, created by the demand for bags. From 2000 to 2004, the average American woman went from buying two handbags in a year to four. The average price of a luxury handbag is 10 to 12 times its production cost, and counterfeits of these luxury handbags are quite popular with even the wealthy. The money from these counterfeit bag sales are cycled into criminal groups, such as terrorists, according to Ronald K. Noble, secretary general of Interpol and terrorism expert Magnus Ranstorp from the University of St. Andrews.

Read, download or share Terror's Purse Strings by Dana Thomas for The New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/30/opinion/30thomas.html>

## Bag-based discrimination

Can everyone carry bags? There are obstacles to wearing a bag in public, besides the issue of theft. Bags are part of your visual identity that carries suspicion in social contexts. Stores are allowed to refuse you entry based on the size of the bag, or you may be asked to show them the contents or confiscate it. For these reasons a bag can become a burden, and people may forego the practical big bag, for the smaller bag. This is a dilemma for women especially, as the common large unisex intrudes on male fashion and is considered a deviation from the safe, inoffensive and unnoticeable norm. This is true in that women's bodies are politicised.

It is difficult not to perspective to the culture of terror, when discussing bags in public.

clothes and politics. Henry Giroux coined the term "culture of terror" to refer to an atmosphere of suspicion and violence, and explained in his work, that political matters manifest as internalized militarism and racism. Rhonda Garelick writes, that this means women's bodies are politicized.

Read Bodies and borders. Bombshell: Fashion in the Age of Terrorism Rhona Garelick in Bartlett, D. (2019). Fashion and politics.

What does the law say about this? The National Counter Terrorism Security Office has created the H.O.T. principle as a public service tool to help identify carried items as threats. Due to this, people of good intentions carrying bags have to not conceal it in any way, including from rain or as part of the fashion, common items like wires and liquids must not be visible, they must act proper, you must keep it on your person and demonstrate ownership. But ultimately the guidelines are up for interpretation and encourage paranoia for others and staff in public spaces.

Sourced from the Counter Terrorism Alliance UK: <https://www.protectuk.police.uk/unattended-and-suspicious-items>

## The Privilege of fashion

While Garelick examines the consequences of the culture of terror on oppressed women, Minh-Ha T. Pham has covered the ways in which the privileged use fashion in the culture of terror. In her public article The Right to Fashion in the Age of Terrorism she covers how conformist fashion consumption inclu-

tures such as the San Francisco Mayoral office created campaigns to promote consumerism, in their case, symbolically turning the US flag into a shopping bag. This culminated in the Fashion for America: Shop to Show Your Support campaign in which CFDA communications director Fairclough talked of her 4,000 dollar handbag. Her couture dress and expensive bag were symbols of high class, which she equalled to everyday fashion consumption. In this way, privileged and patriotic values were assigned to cheap commodities, and fashion was addressed as a medium for expressing social values.

Read, download or share the Right to Fashion in the Age of Terrorism by Minh-Ha T. Pham, 2011, on JSTOR: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/655979>

Garelick likewise notes, that fashion is understood as a western right which encompass sexual freedom and anti-islam. The concept of what constitutes "western" is politically driven and flexible, but mainly normative and requiring of an opposition, which means it excludes challenging identities such as POC or of other religion, politics or visible queerness and anarchist. Garelick notes, that a general understanding of attractiveness dictates if subversive clothes can be worn.

"Men carrying a large bag versus men carrying a small bag are two very different things," she continues. "A man carries a large bag for a reason. If it's something small he generally has pockets to put it in, for a wallet or sunglasses or keys, whereas a woman might not. Size matters. You need strength to carry a large bag, for example, so there's less of a stigma against that." says Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell via. Refinery29.

Turning back to The Lez Bag, it is designed with aggressive, manly materials, but is





Photo by Natasha Dimitriou, courtesy of Lez Bag

bag carries vulnerability like the feminine bag does, in the way it reveals items to be stolen. It is therefore a bag that is reserved for when the carrier is safe in public, something which is also dictated by background and social status.

## Concluding Remarks

Garelick says, this paranoia is unfortunately a side-effect of a more hectic and populated public, the body constitutes a new border, and who gets to occupy your space is addressed.

Clothing is like a second layer of skin, which discriminates, it may persist of a bag, but a person is also perceived by their mannerisms, physical traits and language. Therefore, if a bag is in fashion, it may not be available to everyone due to what is afforded by social norms. As a consequence, your background may define how you choose to accessorize for unisex fashion.

The second layer of skin is also bodily containment for the identity, and it is internalized, so that normative gender-regulated clothing hinders gender expression.

Quite many social rules dictate the possibilities for wearing bags, but gender is a deciding factor in everything from the design to the expression of

Article by Astrid Eeg Schøler for  
The Category Is, 29-11-2023



Photograph courtesy of Active Inclusion Network via National Geographic