How fashion functions for an increasing social awareness of the gender fluid Generations Y and Z

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Abstract

The to this article associated research report investigates the topic of gender identity within the adolescent Generations Y and Z in a fashion related context, in order to address a contemporary issue and to build an analysis that is supportive in the fields of fashion marketing / consumer research. The first part of the article aims to constitute a foundation for an understanding of who the gender fluid Generations Y and Z are, and what kind of role they have within the fashion business as consumers. The second part of this paper focuses on the supply side, as it intends to explain how the landscape of gender fluid fashion and fashion brands look like in 2017. Furthermore, the examined case studies’ results of the associated research report are pointed out – it is analysed how the Amsterdam brands NHTK and BONNE Suits do address the gender fluid Generations Y and Z with their brand concept, hence the focal point is set on the brands’ aesthetical characteristics / branding elements. Upon this we base the for this article relevant suggestions of what is important within gender-neutral fashion concepts that are specifically serving the consumer groups of the respective generations, additionally constituting a social footprint in order to be able to enhance the social awareness for the topic of gender fluidity. As fashion and society are depended on each other, and if brands with cool and outstanding concepts, can act as a social signifier on gender, thus be able to enhance social awareness for the topic, they concurrent can promote sales, and this circle repeats from the top which depicts optimally a win-win-situation for both – the industry and society.

Keywords: Gender fluid fashion; Generations Y & Z; Consumer research; Social awareness, Mini-Ethnography
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1. Introduction

This January issue of National Geographic was called the ‘Gender Revolution’. It dealt with “the shifting landscapes of gender” and explored the topic from different angles and in a very candid manner (National Geographic, 2017). The magazines’ voice is not the first, one picks up in terms of the gender discourse. In recent years gender diversity within all kind of disciplines, naming a few; science, sociology and civilisation, has been greatly discussed and has become more and more relevant. Especially, in the current western society’s adolescent Generations Y and Z the binary gender categorization seem not to be as dominant as ever before. Both generations have been confronted with the question of identity and the ‘self’ far more than previous generations (Stahl, 2016). Not without reason, Generation Y is described as self-centred and among other named GenerationMeMeMe (Hurrelman & Albrecht, 2016). Aspects like globalization, digitalization, economic and political instability makes the world in where adolescent members of Generation Y and Z have been growing up uncertain, and less defined in terms of boundaries (Bolton, et al., 2013). Furthermore, they have been raised to ‘become anything’. Consequently, they do not feel the need to determine themselves to ‘be anything’. Social labels do not seem to be as important as they may use to before - Generation Y and Z are considered to be the most ethnically and socially assorted since the middle ages (Possamai, 2014). One of the generations’ joint and outstanding trait is the disapproval of conformity and the questioning of almost everything (Bund, 2014). So they do with the debate of gender diversity. They challenge conventional gender stereotypes by interpreting what gender means to them.
Due to this gender role blur, the human’s sense of self seems to be evolving, as Anne-Marie Slaughter (2017) states in a commentary of the National Geographic’s special issue on gender. Nevertheless, there are still obstacles, disrespect and disapproval that Generations’ Y and Z gender fluid individuals face. Social awareness for this topic exists in 2017, but as with any social topic, especially with LGBTQ\(^1\) rights, Generation Y and Z, and society in general will still have to encounter great work.

However, the social awareness for this cultural phenomenon increased as well in the fashion and beauty industries. Observing the fashion business in recent years, gender-fluid and neutral collections have become conspicuous on the western hemisphere’s catwalks, public figures’ statements being gender-fluid or transgender gained international media coverage and substantially contribute to the gender discussion (Murdoch, 2016). Back in the days the sociologist Georg Simmel (1997) pointed out already that the fashion system would encompass modern socio-cultural occurrences. Jessica Ciarla (2016) enhances Simmel’s argument as she contends in an article in the Dallas News, clothing would be one of the critical social informants on gender, and it could be possible that fashion as a subject of art, has the ability to re-inform on how modern society perceives the world.

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1. LGBTQ: Acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and/or Questioning, according to Human Rights Campaign Foundation (2017).
There has not been done a lot of research yet whether fashion as a subject has the ability to be an gender informant, neither the landscape of gender fluid fashion and brands has yet been thoroughly examined. There are no suggestions or advice given how to approach the new consumer, referring to the gender fluid Generations Y and Z. This new consumer uses brands in a liberal manner to express their own individual identity, likewise due to the generations’ changing thinking patterns and values, their buying behaviour appears to have become less predictable (Van den Bergh & Behrer, 2013). Moreover, trend forecasting agencies have foreseen, brands and companies will be and have been facing blurred and less defined consumption patterns, due to a far-reaching “reassessment of conventional identity signifiers” (Anon., 2015). In order to be able to react accordingly with an aligned (gender fluid) brand concept, this article aims to provide suggestion how to approach the target audience concerning aesthetical characteristics and branding features, as there has not been given any similar literature / advice to marketers and entrepreneur in the industry yet. This is, however, reasonable, as both, Generations Y and Z represent the consumer group of as they dispose of vital purchasing power.

2. Methodology & Limitations

2.1 Methodology

The methodology approach of this article is based on the methodology approach used for the corresponding research report. It has two main focuses, for one the analysis of the demand side, namely the current gender fluid adolescents of Generations Y and Z, and its role as consumers in the fashion business. The second part of the approach examine how the supply side addresses these generations, and what kinds of
characteristics and brand identity traits are used to enhance the social awareness of the topic of gender identity / fluidity. The overall method used for this paper is a mini-ethnographic case study, a multi-method approach, as the combination of ethnography with the method of case study seemed most applicable to the design of the research question and the overall structure of the paper. For the first part, furthermore a literature review is used to grasp the definitions of the gender fluid Generations Y and Z, as well as to understand what the role of fashion and fashion brands is within an adolescent identity forming- and orientation process. Throughout this combination of methods valuable outcomes could be gained, and ambiguities (literature review) could be clarified. Additionally, potentials for business implementations could be discovered (Fusch, et al., 2017), which is relevant in case of this piece of advice. The results for the second part of the report, and therefore this article are constituted by the method of case study which consists of multiple additive data collection methods and are examined upon their approach towards a gender fluid consumer group, whereby the focus on the representation of the brands is set which simultaneously is used to form suggestions relevant for this article. The blend of both methods allow application of the studied content in the real world (Fusch, et al., 2017).

2.2 Limitations

The overall paper might be limited in the following four identified scopes of limitations, namely the scope of geography, societal and demographic scope, the capacity of time and last the scope of transferability.

2.2.1 Scope of geography: Within the scope of geography the study is limited as it only targets and incorporated the western society’s adolescent Generations Y and Z, whereas the primary research is even limited to the fact that only Dutch individuals took
part. The limitation scope of geography is also applicable to the case studied brands, as they are both based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands and found by Dutch entrepreneurs.

2.2.2 Societal and demographic scope: The paper is limited due to the fact that the current Generations Y and Z’s members are aged from 16 to 27, but the respondents only represent the age group of 20 to 26-years old persons. Furthermore, it shall be explained that due to time reasons only five gender fluid adolescents could be interviewed.

2.2.3 Scope of time: The paper is limited to the aspect of time as well, as primary research could be conducted within a few weeks, which limits some of the above mentioned facts, as well as the fact that I, myself as a researcher could only become embedded in the culture that is being studied to a small extent. However, the method of mini-ethnography case study was among other reasons, chosen for this reason and implies therefore the notion of “mini-ethnography”.

2.2.4 Scope of transferability: According to Fusch, et al. the subject of transferability is a qualitative term or concept. Due to the matter of fact that the nature of a qualitative study is unique, the results may cannot be transferred to another study (2017). Being aware of the above stated limitations, however, we assume that a good collection of data has been gathered as well as reasonable and valid analysis have been made, thus generalizability is diminished and transferability is to a certain extent given.

3. Consumer Research

3.1 Introducing Generations Y and Z

Sociologists are not in complete agreement about a standardized extent of time, members of Generation Y were born in however, for this article we frame the period for the respective cohort from 1980 until 1995. Whereas, the still adolescent part of this
generation is confined to the years of 1990 until 1995, aged 27 – 22 today. The western society’s Generation Y in size is similar to its parental generation (baby boomers), according to Van den Bergh & Behrer, they make up almost half of the world’s population (2013). Yet, in nature they distinguish themselves considerably. One of the key formative traits for Gen Y is their early exposure to technology. Especially the internet is used for generating knowledge, instant and global communication and connectivity as well as entertainment (Kleinschmit, 2015). Due to the digitalization, globalization, the economic crisis couple of years ago, as well as the western world’s political circumstances and their consequences, Generation Y has grown up in an era where subjects like uncertainty and a fast-moving nature are ordinary. Shaped by these world occurrences and ever ongoing changes, members of Generation Y are facing a world of insecurity, which they take for granted. They think anything and everything is possible and the word determination seems vague for them, which is also attributable to the fact that they have been raised by their parent’s to embrace individual empowerment (Van den Bergh & Behrer, 2013).

Social identifiers\(^2\) and stereotyped labels are challenged and newly interpreted to Gen Y’s individual needs (referring to chapter 1.4 How important is the notion of gender for these generations). Generation Y (and Generation Z) are considered to be the most ethnically and socially assorted at all times (Possamai, 2014). This is also reflected in the fact that they are auxiliary of social matters, and that they likely would choose a socially responsible company over an ordinary firm (Valentine & Powers, 2013).

\(^{2}\) Social identifiers: Ability (physical and mental), Age, Ethnicity, Gender, Race, Religion, Sexual Orientation, Socio-economic Status (Anon., 2017)
Moreover, Gen Y’s sense for identity is significantly more distinct than in previous
generations. Generation Z’s members were born after 1996 until the year 2010,
although different sociologists and authors utilize different data, and research is still in
beta (Kingston, 2014). Yet, we also have to state here that solely the adolescent part of
this cohort is the targeted group for this research report, namely the individuals born
from 1996 until the year 2001 (aged 21 – 16). Mainly, they are the offspring of
Generation X, and as above already mentioned, the name Generation Z derives from the
alphabetical order that implies from the previous generations’ names Generation X and
Generation Y.

They are many, in 2014 they counted two billion worldwide (Kingston, 2014). In the
specialist literature it is also referred to them as Centennials because the
generation’s already adolescent segment was born around the turn of the century
(Rodriguez, 2015). The author Larry Rosen named the respective generation
iGeneration due to the fact that they have been growing up with gadgets like iPods,
iphones and the gaming console Wii (Snyder Bulik, 2011). Don Tapscott, author of the
book Grown up Digital (2009), says; "it's like air to them", they would not only
consume technology as a life necessity, but also forcing yet another shift in how humans
apply culture, access information, and communicate with each other (Tapscott, 2009).
They have been growing up during economic recession, acquainted with global
warming and depleted resources in a world encountering terrorism. Nonetheless,
Generation Z is among others characteristics, considered as empowered – collaborative
and eager to make the world a better place – environmentally and socially (Kingston,
2014). Their community-focused mind set is also illustrated in what the New York City
based advertising agency Sparks&Honey found out; 60% of the insider of Generation Z
would want a career that has a social impact (Rodriguez, 2015). Compared to
Generation Y, Gen Zers are less self-centred but more self-aware about the civil role to fill-in in this world (Merriman, 2015). They express themselves, very much like Generation Y, tolerant towards social signifiers, as for instance ethnicity, age, sexuality and gender.

Concluding that both generations exhibit different kinds of beliefs and values shaped by certain for each generation relevant world events and the current ‘zeitgeist’ that make them to be ascribed with their particular generational traits. However, they demonstrate some resemblance which makes them play a crucial role regarding fashion marketing business, and the discussion of gender. Generations Y and Z are marked to their early exposure to technology. By their parental generations they have been raised to empower themselves, and to experiment in order to find out what they want in life and who they truly are. They are the most socially and ethnically assorted generations ever, and other than in previous generations, boundaries that social signifiers like age, nationality, sex and gender impose, play less a role in their lives, which among other reason, stated in the following text section, make these two generations relevant for the content of this study.

3.2 Their role as consumers within the fashion business

Gen Y’s sense for identity, whereas Gen Z’s value consciousness are representative within their consumption behaviour, too (Washkuch, 2016). They intend to choose the brands and products that fit their individual and that facilitate self-expression (Valentine & Powers, 2013), wherefore their brand awareness is very high. Nevertheless, Generations Y and Z are considered to be generally not brand loyal but they do like to experiment. The here studied adolescent part of society symbolize among other, the
group of tomorrow’s consumer with vital purchasing power which will only increase over time (Vijay & Varsha, 2013). According to Valentine and Powers the majority of money is spend for goods like clothes and shoes, sport gear, beauty and health as well as technology and food. People of these generational segment have a sound understanding of how marketing works and is used in these days (2013). With regard to advertisement strategies, Gen Y and Z like to be addressed in an experimental, experience-based, innovative manner, which does not make it easy for marketers to target these cohort (Van den Bergh & Behrer, 2013). They argue further that the “need for stimulation and instant gratification” (2013), resulting out of the joint belief - everything is possible, would also be representative in their consumer behaviour, which is linked to the group’s urge for uniqueness and ‘real’ connections. Connectivity is a key trait in the Generations’ Z description, as in great measure through social media their exchange of information takes place. Next to finding out about certain brands and products and being able to purchase them via apps, the aspect of sharing respective content is the most appealing for marketers. Just like the previous generation, they test all considerable elements of form and function – they are steadily on the hunt for the better in all aspects of life, authenticity and more experience (2013). Their influence in social media spheres, is another trait that makes them to be assigned as the consumers of tomorrow (Washkuch, 2016), and therefore crucial to mention within the context of this article.

The New York Times reported in an article in 2015, referring to a survey made by FuturesCompany, questioned adolescents between age 12 and 17 – part of Generation Z, that the young are concerned about their looks and the fact whether their clothes are in style (Williams, 2015). The answers of the interviewees given to the question what the meaning of fashion would be for them present a consistent pattern. Predominantly, it
means visual expression and living out creativity which could go so far that they slip within different kinds of roles every day. The roles performed through visual expression would be linked to certain fashion items, and are referable to a particular mood or occasion. Fashion as a subject means a lot in order to express their individual identity, their personality and even a mood.

According to Schroer, members of the studied generational segments are less brand loyal, and due to globalization and digitalization they are likewise amenable in changing fashion and style consciousness (Schroer, n.d.). This is also what the primary research affirms, members of Generation Y and Z do generally not identify with particular brands, the actual good has more relevance for them and is superior. The products they chose have a symbolic meaning, and are most of the times not consumed solely due to their function, but rather due to the symbol the product holds. The products’ meaning matches with the individual’s values and believes (Schroer, n.d.). In case members of Generations Y and Z are in favour of a brand, the company either has a very convincing, sustainable orientated background / brand story, or they own the patent of an innovative product. Pike states that nowadays adolescents chose brands more carefully by informing themselves prior about the brand’s stories. For the cohorts it is highly important to make within the immense amount of choice, the right selection suiting best their individual identity and their financial status (2016). It is further stated in the source that in past decades adolescents highly identified with brands, indicating the belonging to a certain group. However, in current times they care less about fitting in, but about making conscious consumption choices that are in line with their identity (Pike, 2016).

Gen Yers and Zers have too much choice in terms of determine themselves to stick to one or more brands that fits their personalities best (Van den Bergh & Behrer,
The aspect of experimentation is from important nature to them, and this is seemingly referred to every aspect of adolescent life. The adolescent period is a crucial period in the individual’s identity development process, and clothing would symbolize “the singularity and subjectivity of individual tastes” (Muzinich et al, 2003), which the respondents prove with the statements to the chapter’s compatible interview question. They argue that for instance mainstream brands with ordinary binary departments would not facilitate to learn or explore one’s gender identity, because the generations’ contemporary view of gender seen as a spectrum is not incorporated within their concepts. Generally, all interviewed individuals share a rather discouraged opinion about the fact that fashion brands would have the ability to help with the gender identity forming issue. However, the specialist literature reasons that identity construction indeed is accomplished through consumption, as humans naturally make buying decisions upon their identity or the identity they wish to convey to their surroundings, arguable whether this is a conscious or unconscious process (Phillips, n.d.). The same applies to the subject of (fashion) brands as they play a considerable role next to the meaning of products within the system of consumption. One interviewee explains that the gender fluid brands that are available and accessible may have the capability to help adolescents to find their gender identity, because they would include the challenging character that is so decisive for Generation Y & Z, and question gender as a concept per se, while leaving enough space for own interpretations, experimentation and discovery of oneself. Therefore, we conclude that the new consumer, depicted by adolescents of Generations Y and Z uses brands in a liberal manner to express their own individual identity (Van den Bergh & Behrer, 2013).

In the following chapter we will be having a look at the supply side; how does the landscape of gender fluid brands look like in 2017, and how do the brands NHTK
and BONNE Suits address the gender fluid Generations Y and Z, whereupon we base the for this article relevant suggestions of what is important within gender-neutral fashion concepts that are specifically serving the consumer groups of the respective generations, and to enhance social awareness for the topic.

4. Supply Side

4.1 The landscape of gender fluid fashion and fashion brands in 2017

Observing the fashion business in recent years, gender-fluid and neutral collections have become conspicuous on the western hemisphere’s catwalks, public figures’ statements being gender-fluid or transgender gained international media coverage and substantially contribute to the gender discussion (Murdoch, 2016). Society and especially the fashion world encounters a trend concerning the subject matter of gender fluidity, since public figures and media personalities as for instance, Miley Cyrus, Ruby Rose and Jaden Smith have stated their gender fluidity verbally in public, and have been expressing their particular identity through fashion statements (Callewaert, 2016). Moreover, design houses like Givenchy, Gucci, Hedi Slimane, Prada and Raf Simons, to name a few, have been playing notably with gender aesthetics in their last couple of collections, displaying a blurring of conventional binary fashion characteristics (Fox, 2015). Miuccia Prada, founder and head designer of the luxury brand Prada, states, “more and more it feels instinctively right to translate the same idea for both gender”, (La Ferla, 2015). Commercial brands follow the trend and launch ‘ungendered’ and gender neutral collections; Zara received critics for its ungendered line however, as according to an article in Euromonitor International, it hasn’t been progressive enough (Kissane, 2016). Weekday, affiliated company of the H&M group,
launched a gender neutral collection, named MTWTFSS/HE already a couple of years ago with the intention to open society’s mind, and redefining and deconstructing the notion of gender (Ter Haar, 2013). The British department store Selfridges introduced a pop-up retail concept, called ‘Agender’ within their sales floor in 2015, and promoted the discussion with their campaign video ‘The Film’, featuring the transgender model Hari Nef (Agender, 2015). These fashion collections and retail projects, temporary in nature, seemingly have been perceived by society, and had an effect on the industry, as more permanent ideas involved – brands that focus on gender fluid apparel and a target market with heterogeneous consumer identities (Murdoch, 2016; Sheets, n.d.).

The landscape of gender fluid fashion brands is still assessable, therefore the description of a niche market is applicable (Knoep, 2017). The number of gender fluid (or differently titled, e.g. gender queer, gender neutral, agender) brands and labels that exist yet across the western’s hemisphere, however is in majority haute couture fashion and high priced. Assumingly, this might be exclusively accessible to a very small segment of the adolescent Generations Y & Z. Most of the yet existing gender fluid brands’ fashion are either exclusively available through wholesale or/and in the brand’s respective web shop. Merely, a few labels are established brands yet and serve their consumer also through retail. It was evident in the interviews that the knowledge about gender fluid brands is limited, as only the respondents with a closer background to the fashion business have known about some gender fluid brands in general, as well as about NHTK and BONNE Suits in particular. The latter were chosen for the study’s methodology. In the following we will be introducing the two cases, and the outcome that could be gained through the analysis of them in the associated research report.

4.2 Introducing case studies and results of the research report
The brand NHTK or NOBODY HAS TO KNOW is a retail concept, simultaneously offering collections from their in-house label NHTKSTUDIO. Foundation for the versatile fashion collections and items is the seeking for a more receptive and tolerant society in where acceptance, appreciation for each other and their differences, above all respect are manifested. Their apparel is made for everyone. Aesthetical features within their garments enable the wearer to feel free in latitude. Together with the written elements in their overall branding concept which speak for less boundaries in terms of age, size and gender are the key elements of the brand’s ID. Their plea – “Wear what you love. The rest? NOBODY HAS TO KNOW” (NHTK, 2017).

The founder of BONNE Suits, part of Generation Y himself (born in 1990), Bonne Reijn saw a niche market three years ago, as he thought there was an indispensable clothing item absent in the great variety of clothing available. The reason to create such item was to establish a garment that could be used to any kind of occasion at any time. His idea was to produce a clothing item with a high standard material quality that could constitute a key piece in everyone’s wardrobe. Reijn developed a two-pieced suit suitable for every kind of moment or experience, for everyone regardless their age, size, sex or/ and gender (BonneSuits, 2017).

In the following, we will be looking at the brands’ aesthetical characteristics, hence the overall branding concept, including garment features like colour, shape and cut, material, as well as the appearance of their retail environments. Analysing the two gender fluid brands NHTK and BONNE Suits from Amsterdam, as well as juxtaposing their approach with the gender binary concepts of the fast fashion retailers H&M and Zara, exhibit that next to the gendered free retail space, the aesthetical characteristics of the garments as shape, cut and colour are the decisive features which match with the
gender fluid consumer’s taste and demand, as Generations Y and Z lay considerably more focus on the product. The respondents tell that the product should be as ‘loud’ as possible in order to reach them, which is attributable to the fact that Generations Y and Z are both not brand loyal and do not identify with fashion brands as previous generations did (Pike, 2016), as elucidated in the description of the generations. Furthermore, it is linked to the argument of Washkuch that it is crucial for nowadays brands to connect right and well with their target audience (2016). Considering this, and the fact that the segment’s members like to be addressed in in an experimental, experience based, innovative manner (Van den Bergh & Behrer, 2013), we can conclude that NHTK and BONNE Suits do reach their target audience preferably through their products that fit the audience individual needs and that facilitate self-expression. Both brands could be relevant for the gender fluid Generations Y and Z as their brands’ mission and vision matches, with the values of being open-minded, and more ethnical and socially tolerant and responsible. The garments’ decisive aesthetical characteristics, like shape and cut represent the joint belief - everything is possible, as they are either made for any kind of occasion, moment or experience (BonneSuit, 2017), or to be adapted to any kind of body shape through miscellaneous and heterogeneous cuts. NHTK and Bonne Suits’ aestheticisation of apparel speaks literally for less boundaries. So does their social footprint, as especially the brand NHTK pleas for more social awareness of the topic of gender diversity and fluidity within their branding concept. Their vision and mission statement for a more tolerant society with less judgement is repetitive not only within their ID, but retail environment and promoting strategy. Both, NHTK and BONNE Suits represent their target audience’s changing thinking patterns and values, and react with an outstanding concept to the trend of blurred and less defined consumption patterns, due to a far-reaching
“reassessment of conventional identity signifiers” (Anon, 2015). The studied cases acknowledge that fashion and the overall industry implements modern socio-cultural occurrences, as it happens currently with the debate of gender diversity. The conducted and analysed research demonstrates an existing common desire for aesthetic diversity, and the fact that fashion indeed is a critical identifier and social informant of gender, along with its ability to re-inform modern society to perceive the importance of gender diversity, fluidity and equality. In 2017, fashion functions for an increasing social awareness of the gender fluid Generations Y and Z as an aesthetical facilitator in order to express respective adolescents’ realities, namely self-identification and individuality.

5. Piece of Advice

In order to address successfully the gender fluid Generations Y and Z with a brand concept that additionally enhance social awareness of the topic of gender fluidity, it is foremost important to understand their ideas and concept of gender and being gender fluid, which namely is the idea of seeing gender as a spectrum. The for the research report interviewed persons, all stated that gender fluidity mean the nonconformity of the social construct of gender as we know it in our western world’s societies. The understanding of gender fluidity consists the rebellion of the social norm per se, and further determines the freedom of the individual to move and express fluid along the gender spectrum between male and female. The examination of gender identity forming issues revealed that adolescent gender fluid people struggle a lot with their aesthetical gender expression, as there are no fashion brands yet, that help them explore individually and freely from judgements, how they can show their gender identity suitable and comfortable. The latter implies the fact that there is a demand of the gender fluid consumer for gender fluid fashion brands that facilitate the process of learning
about one’s gender identity. However, the research has proven, the respective consumer is not brand loyal which means for the brand to find an innovative manner to enter the niche market, and to be as ‘loud’ as possible with a meaningful product (which gender fluid clothing in a niche market foremost embody), to reach each individual consumer, and to meet them at the interface of self-expression. Since the product is the subject to reach the target, the aesthetical features of it have to meet the cohort’s taste, expectations and demands. As Schroer states that due to globalization and digitalization, Generation Y and Z are likewise amenable in changing fashion and style consciousness (n.d.), which means to be prepared to react quickly. The respondents’ different tastes and ideas of what aesthetical features might be representative for a gender fluid segment, confirms the prior discussed urge for individualization, which leads to the suggestion to offer a product assortment as broad as possible in order to match with desire for aesthetic diversity. The case study subjects’ focus within their aestheticisation mainly on colour and shape and cut, whereas the latter the most decisive feature is in terms of not confirming the binary gender. Playing with the cut of a garment allows the wearer to play with stereotyped ideas, for instance men, naturally wearing skirts. Androgynous shapes and cuts are very important to the consumer segment as well, and as the both studied brands’ products show it is outstanding having one particular item that fits a heterogeneous group of clients, referring to the work men’s suit of BONNE Suit Amsterdam (BonneSuit, 2017). Moreover, the suit innovates itself through interesting materials and bold colours (Semmoh, 2017) which are crucial aesthetical features in terms of reaching the target audience as well, as the primary research has revealed. NHTK meets their customer demand with playing around with a lot of different materials, and an overall rather minimalistic style of clothing. Their unique
selling point lays in the added value of changing the clothes’ size with miscellaneous such as ribbons, bands and buckles (NHTK, 2017).

Next to the aesthetical characteristics of the products it is also important to have the right tone of voice when approaching the gender fluid Generations Y and Z. NHTK and BONNE Suits do this both differently. BONNE Suits does not do things intentionally (Semmoh, 2017) the brand has the position to be perceived as cool with offering a garment that has already an iconic status within the niche market. The trial and error strategy of the brand’s founder, as well as his network within the fashion industry in Amsterdam has helped him to gain such reputation (Semmoh, 2017).

NHTK, in comparison makes it visually clear that they do want to have a voice within the discussion of gender diversity / fluidity. Their retail space, as well as their social media account claims for more social awareness and tolerance toward the social signifier of gender. They promote local gender fluid artists and collaborate with them, in order to reach a wider but particular audience. A few weeks ago, the brand has collaborated with the singer-/songwriter IX alias Marnix Dorrestein (also interviewed for the research report), and they launched together a gender fluid jacket that simultaneously worked as his new EP (NHTK, 2017). This has been an innovative and surprising marketing move, and certainly attracted the gender fluid consumer group that know of the brand, as the launch has been a success, according their Instagram profile (NHTK, 2017).

As the latter example shows it is important to have a certain voice within this discussion and rise it whenever possible, in order to educate people that such gender fluid brands exist and that they do outstanding stuff to encourage the topic at one hand, but to reach the consumer and to include gender not confirming people within the niche (market), hence society.
6. Conclusion

We conclude that there are several things to consider when approaching the gender fluid Generations Y and Z with a particular fashion branding concept that simultaneously offers the ability to enhance the social awareness for the topic of gender fluidity. For one, the concept of the notion of gender fluidity or similar gender concepts should be clear to the company. It would be helpful to use further ethnography to find out whether the ideas stated by the interviewees participating for the related research paper match with an extended vision. Furthermore, the brand should think about an overall concept to address the adolescents’ gender identity forming issues, which are ubiquitous during adolescence, and seen as an obstacles, revealed by the respondents. This could be done by adding an extra value, for instance a programme that supports the learning of different gender concepts, pronouns and hence how to perform and express accordingly facilitated through the brand’s gender fluid apparel. Next, the company should be aware that by entering the niche market and serving the respective clientele, it has a certain social responsibility has it represents its consumers mind-sets and beliefs, hence forms part of an anti-social movement, or at least manifest a rebellious mission.

Regarding the aesthetical characteristics and branding features within the products itself, the company has to be loud and outstanding. A product that is innovative and matches with a shared demand representative for the cohort would be an advantage. The shape and cut and colour, nevertheless are the most important components to consider. Next to matching the taste of the clients, they should illustrate the fluid character of the topic and contribute through eye-catching details to an increased social awareness, as the segment likes to be different and the rebellious character the topic brings along – ‘off’ the norm (referring to an interviewee’s statement). As the example of BONNE Suits shows things can happen organically, but one need the connections and the boldness to try out certain things, which would be appreciated by both generations, as
they are in favour to experiment. NHTK speaks out loud what they think and are straight-forward in order what they expect from their customer, hence society. Since the analysis shows both examples work, one has to see itself what approach fits one’s ID and zone of comfort the best.

However, to conclude it is important to have a social footprint, as fashion and society are depended on each other, and if brands with cool and outstanding concepts, can act as a social signifier on gender, thus be able to enhance social awareness for the topic, they concurrent can promote sales, and this circle repeats from the top which depicts optimally a win-win-situation for both – the industry and society.

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