GENDER- NEUTRALITY
and its effect on the symbolism of garment

Graduation Thesis
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19-01-2018
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This thesis is the result of four months research and is the final part of a four-year study at Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences.

My motivation to research gender-neutrality and the meaning of garments is derived from a personal interest in gender studies. Researching a topic that I am passionate about has allowed me to grow my skills, connections and knowledge about this specific development in the fashion industry. Throughout the process of writing this thesis I gained insight into the complex but interesting concept of gender-neutrality.

I would like to thank my coaches, Brigitte Schriks and Sander Schellens for supporting and guiding me throughout the process. A special thanks to Fred Goudswaard, the librarian at Amsterdam Fashion Institute.

Syra Mistry
This thesis will contain the findings of the research done in gender-neutrality and its effect on the symbolism of garments. Next to this, it will give the reader a bet-ter understanding of the shifting social attitude which is moving away from the tra-ditional binary gender system and explains how gender plays a role in the fashion industry (Napoli, 2016). The main question that will be answered in this thesis is: ‘How will the movement of gender-neutrality affect the meaning of garments?’

Gender can be explained via three fragments, biological sex (based on our genitals), gender identity (the way we feel on the inside) and gender expression (the way we demonstrate our gender) (TEDTalks 2013). Gender is culturally defined therefore multi-pie gender constructs exist. Gender-neutrality can be seen as a gender construct that al-lows people to move from left (male) to right (female) on the gender continuum with-out being limited by gender stereotypes in their choices and expressions and is thus related to gender identity (BOF, 2017). Since gender is open for change it allows for creativity and an open mind towards accepting that gender is not merely being male or female but that there are other constructs that people can identify themselves with.

There are multiple factors that play a role in how meanings are created through cloth-ing. The choices we make or preferences we have in regard to the clothing we wear are shaped and directed by the social environment we live in and do not emerge from in-dependent thoughts (Johansson, 2017). A possible way to analyse clothing is to see it as a ‘language’. The purpose of any language is communication. Within our society or group, we take on a certain role, a position that comes with certain social and be-havioural expectations to which people try to conform. Our day-to-day life and the inter-action between people gives meaning to our selected clothes. However, the appearance of a person is made up out of different elements (clothing codes) such as colour, texture and form. The difficulty lies in the fact that these codes are open for interpretation. With conventional signs, the meaning is clear to everyone but this is not the case for aesthetic codes because the meaning is not fixed. Aesthetic codes are for a part reliant on formal design elements which have a clear meaning and on the other hand there are fashion codes which are less clear. What is important to consider is that a meaning changes over time and cultural and social developments have an influence on these meanings.

The process of teaching gender characteristics can be seen as a social institution (Lorber, 1994). This is so embedded in our society that the value of our identity is directly linked to the society we live in. Because we as a society consider gender norms to be so ‘normal’ it takes a conscious disruption of our expectation of how men and women are supposed to act to realize how they are created. This is currently happening in society as gender differences are blurring. The challenge that is currently facing society is that for most humans the social is the natural because norms and expectations that come with gender status are built into our sense of worth and identity, and by blurring gender differences you simultaneously question their identity.

Individuals choose their dress according to the categorization they think they belong to, either male or female. Certain clothes are seen to be appropriate for a specific gender, and what is considered appropriate is culturally determined. Next to this, the form of objects, attire, accessories and colours also have gender meanings. Because gender lines are blurring these days and fashion has always reflected what is happening in society, fashion is experimenting with the idea of gender not being the primary factor in selecting clothes by offering unisex and gender-neutral clothing. Next to this, fashion can have an influence on the current social norms in a society. One example is the androgynous business dress of the 1980s, where women started wearing a form of attire that was stereotypically considered only for men. However, now it is considered ‘normal’ for women to wear business suits. The meaning of business attire changed to being appropriate for both men and women.

Western society is currently in a period of change where old values of the traditional bi-nary system still exist and are evident in our day-to-day life ans new values are taking its time to develop. The results of the survey, which was specifically conducted for this thesis, indicate that while 56% of the respondents sometimes wear clothing from the opposite gender (new value), shapes like flared jeans and fitted shirts are still recognized as stereotypically for women and cargo pants and straight shirt are still recognized as stereotypically for men (old value). This tells us that old values still have an influence in society on what people consider appropriate for a certain gender. However, throughout fashion history, we have seen many social norms questioned which ultimately made room for acceptance and modified social norms. These changes in attire have always come with challenges. So, this will not be any different for the constructions of gender.

Gender-neutrality, even though it is in its early phase of acceptance, is already influencing the meaning of garments. Within what timeframe gender-neutrality will become an accepted norm is hard to say but it is inevitable that fashion companies and consumers will have to get used to the fact that clothing will not merely be based on the traditional binary system as we know it today but will reflect all forms of gender construction and thus also gender-neutrality.
1.1. Rationale
In recent years gender-neutrality has been a topic of discussion on a social and a political level in Western society. Observations of a changing attitude towards gender can already be made such as Amsterdam publishing a language guide for civil servants with gender-neutral suggestions in July 2017 (Willems, 2017). Next to this, the Dutch railway and the London metro have announced they are going to address its passengers with ‘dear passengers’ and no longer with ‘ladies and gentlemen’ (Bolle, 2017). As gender is a social construction, the relation between gender and appearance, in everyday life, becomes a medium with which we can shape our impressions of what it means to be male or female (Kaiser, 1994). Additionally, there is a difference between sex and gender, by definition gender is socially created and reconstructed. In contrast, sex refers to the biological differences between males and females. At birth, infants’ genitalia are examined and they are labelled accordingly. In everyday life, clothes cover genitalia. Hairstyles and other forms of appearance management are used to construct a masculine or feminine image and indicate a relation between clothes and gender (Kaiser, 1994). These four, namely observation of a changing attitude towards gender, the relation between gender and appearance, the difference between sex and gender and the relation between clothes and gender, relate as they each play a role in understanding the complex discussion on gender and its social construction.

Dominant fashion brands, such as H&M, are focussing on gender-neutral clothing lines and are moving gender-neutrality into the mainstream spotlight (Chapek, 2017). This means blurring the lines between what is traditionally considered male or female. The role of gender is perceived as fluid rather than fixed by generation Y (birth year ± 1980 to 1995) and generation Z (birth year ± 1996 to present), this in contrast to the perception of previous generations (Eva Schulte, 2016). We see this happening with young style bloggers and celebrities, like Jayden Smith, who are ignoring old ‘rules’ (Chapek, 2017). They are dismantling stereotypes and as a result changing the power relations between men and women (Schulte, 2016). Therefore, from a sociological perspective, it is fascinating to observe the shifting social attitude from the traditional binary gender system towards gender-neutral clothing. The binary system is a cultural system that is based on categorizing people as being either male or female. (Chapek, 2017).

Fashion has long toyed with gender boundaries, from men in wigs in the 1700s to David Bowie in the 1970s. But the social developments now are suggesting a new phase of gender-fluidity. It is less about men in skirts and more about men and women sharing skirts (Ferrier, 2014). Recently, Parisian brand AVOC won the prestigious ANDAM Award (National Association for the Development of the Fashion Arts). The idea behind AVOC is to go beyond gender and social conditions by offering gender-neutral clothing. The focus lies on creating one collection around the same aesthetic, language and creative direction (Fraser, 2017). Department stores, like John Lewis, are also tapping into this shift. John Lewis has become the first major UK retailer to introduce ‘gender-neutral’ labelling from its children’s wear range (Taylor, 2017). Even Dutch retailer, Hema, announced that by the end of 2017 all gender signs of children’s wear are going to be removed in both their stores and in their clothing (Witteman, 2017).

Classifying clothing by gender is the way the fashion industry has operated throughout history. Gender roles set by society have established certain characteristics that defined particular colours and silhouettes as gender-specific (Napolite, 2016). As the social attitude towards the traditional binary gender system is questioned I wonder what this will mean for the symbolism of garments. This research therefore provides answers to how the movement towards gender-neutrality affects the meaning of garments in Western society. These findings will be relevant for fashion companies, as it will give insight in a development that is occurring in our society and how this will impact the fashion industry.

1.2. Aim of the research
The thesis will give the reader a better understanding of the shifting social attitude that is moving away from the traditional binary gender system and give insight into a gender-neutral future and its impact on fashion. The outcome of the research concludes into an article that is relevant for marketing strategists, fashion trend watchers and designers.
1.3. Research question and sub-questions

Main research question

How will the movement of gender-neutrality affect the meaning of garments?

The above question will be derived from the following sub-questions:

What is gender-neutrality?
How are meanings created through clothing?
What are the existing social norms of gender?
What is the current state of gender in fashion?
1.4. Methodology

The triangulation technique has been used to retrieve the necessary information. With triangulation, more than one theoretical schemes are analysed to explain a phenomenon, in this case gender-neutrality.

What is gender-neutrality?
In order to answer the main question, it is crucial to define gender-neutrality. This sub-question forms the more general theoretical framework of the research and has been answered by collecting secondary data in the form of literature research. Additionally, empirical data in the form of interviews have been held with; a professor at the University of Amsterdam, a master student of Literary Studies and Cultural analysis and parents who raise their children gender-neutral, to gain an understanding of opinions and motivations of people who are familiar with gender-neutrality on a day-to-day basis.

How are meanings created through clothing?
In order to answer this sub-question, it is important to define how these meanings are created. Because only by defining this, the main research question can be answered. Using mainly literature in the form of books, journals, articles and websites this sub-question forms the second general theoretical chapter of this thesis.

What are the existing social norms of gender?
To find out how gender-neutrality can influence the meaning of garments the existing social norms of gender have been researched. This chapter allows for a more specified part in the thesis after answering the first two sub-questions. This sub-question focuses primarily on figuring out the gender roles in society by contacting online communities, following news outlets, and having interviews with people who raise their children gender-neutral to provide insight into consumers opinions and motivations.

What is the current state of gender in fashion?
Because gender-neutrality is part of gender identity, which is a cultural construct of gender, the current state of gender in fashion has been analysed. The information has been collected by primary data in the form of a quantitative method: a survey, to quantify opinions and behaviour of consumers. The criteria for my sample selection are based on garments that are already worn by both men and women to be able to figure out where the tipping point of male or female is. The questions are asked using the Likert scale to gain a more balanced answer.
1.5. Organisation of the report
The first chapter of the thesis introduces the orientation phase, complementing the starting point and preliminary research. The second to fifth chapters concentrate on answering the sub-questions. The last chapter includes a conclusion based on the data collected and gives an answer to the main research question. Finally, a suggestion for further research will be given.

1.6. Limitations of the research
Even though this research was carefully prepared there are some limitations to this thesis. Limitations within the survey exist, by only showing silhouettes of garments, other variables (texture, colour, material) that can have an influence on the results are eliminated. Next to this, 78% of the respondents identifies with female thus the results of the survey are for a larger part from a female perspective.
2.1. Introduction
This chapter will focus on what gender-neutrality is. In order to understand the linkages between clothing, appearance and gender, it is important to recognize that culture provides a way of socially organizing our thoughts about gender categories (Kaiser, 1994). Because all societies differentiate in some way between the appearances of males and females, certain social expectations of what it means to be male or female are often understood in a simplified manner. (Kaiser, 1994). The culture we live in provides a framework for persistent beliefs, but the way we address and express gender changes over time (TEDTalks, 2013). We see this change happening with emerging debates about what gender is and gender constructs like androgyny, genderless and gender-neutrality appearing in social questions.
To understand the complexity, gender will be explained via three fragments: biological sex, gender identity and gender expression.
2.2. Biological sex
The difference between gender and sex is important to establish as it is often misused. Gender is determined culturally, socially and psychologically and refers to appropriate behaviour and appearance for males and females (TEDTalks, 2013). What constitutes as appropriate is depending on time and place. Sex refers to the biological aspects of maleness and femaleness and is solely based on a person’s genitals, even though other factors like chromosomes and hormones play a role (TEDTalks, 2013). However, there are also people born with both male and female reproductive organs who we call intersex. At a young age, from a medical standpoint, it is determined whether this individual is a boy or a girl and will be raised as such, which can create confusion when this individual grows up (BOF, 2017).

In Judith Butler’s book ‘Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversive identity’ (1990) she discusses the relation of gender and power which is key to understand the complexity between sex as a biological factor and gender as a cultural construction. The theory explains the concept that gender is based on culture, not biology. She questions the existing norms of only two binary genders (male and female) and considers gender as a free-floating artifice and therefore suggesting that there are endless variations of genders (Johansson, 2017). According to Butler, the theory of performativity can be reflected on gender. The heterosexual binary sex and gender perspective are seen by many people as a natural expression of their biological sex but it is important to consider that it is the way that anatomy is socially invested that defines gender identity and not the body itself (King, 2004). Thus, in other words, for Butler gender is a doing, it can only exist in a society or culture and as such is something that people ‘do’ rather than what they ‘are’ (Rocamora, 2016). Everything that does not comply with the male hegemony is considered abnormal (Butler, 1990).

Another theory that defends the idea of gender being culturally and socially formed is that of Bourdieu, a French sociologist. He states that ‘the preferences and choices we make are directed and shaped by our mind and conditions of existence represented by our social class and do not emerge from an independent thought’, referring to habitus (Johansson, 2017). This can be further explained as the way individuals are unconsciously shaped and influenced in the way they perceive the social world and react to it. As well as the social, economic and cultural capital one possesses for example, education, intellect and style of speech (Johansson, 2017).

2.3. Gender identity
Gender identity is our inner self of feeling male or female. For most people, our genetic sex aligns with our biological sex which aligns with our gender identity (TEDTalks, 2013). Now for some people, this is not the case, someone who is physically male but identifies as female is a trans male or vice versa. Their gender identity is not in line with their physic.

2.4. Gender expression
Gender expression is how we demonstrate our gender through the way we act, dress and interact based on society’s definition of gender (BOF, 2017). Gender expression is categorized in masculine and feminine behaviour and defined by society’s gender stereotypes, for example, boys play with cars and girls play with dolls, men wear trousers and women wear dresses (BOF, 2017). What is important to consider and which demonstrates the complexity of gender is a boy who likes to wear dresses and play with dolls is not necessarily transgender but has gender expressions that are considered more female based on social definitions (BOF, 2017).
2.5. Gender stereotypes

It is undeniable that in many life domains there are differences between men and women. The question is to what extent these differences reflect the way men and women essentially are, and to what extent they result from the way we think men and women differ because of gender stereotypes (Ellemers, 2017). Individuals are immediately categorized in male or female gender. It even starts before birth; often the first question pregnant women are asked is whether they are having a boy or a girl. In the documentary, ‘The codes of Gender’ by Sut Jhally a clip is shown from Monty Phytons ‘The meaning of life’ where a woman is in the delivery room. Once the baby is born the doctor who delivered the baby says: show it to the mother. That’s enough. Sedate her. Numb the child. The mother replies: is it a boy or a girl? And the doctor answers: now, I think it’s a little too early to start imposing roles on it. Don’t you? (Gendercode, 2015). With this categorization people tend to compare men to women and women to men, creating gender differences. These differences develop over a lifespan, due to the way boys and girls are raised and educated (Ellemers, 2017). Boys are considered to be impetuous, aggressive and love the colour blue, get dirty, play sports and boys have no limits unless they want to be a nurse because that is kind of gay (TEDTalks, 2013). Girls, on the other hand, are caretakers, passive, love the colour pink, rather play with makeup and play house. These examples of stereotypes certainly apply to some people; however, the problem is the lack of options. We only have two options to describe all individuals (TEDTalks, 2013). So, the biological differences (thus sex), set the stage for shared beliefs about the characteristic traits and abilities of an individual and motivates people to make choices based on these beliefs and act according to existing expectations that come with being male or female. Therefore, it is difficult to determine what comes from within and what is culturally defined. It is nearly impossible to determine this as it would require an individual to be raised outside of cultural influences, which is impossible to realize. Gender is not only cultural, it is also political, which means judgements are given. In the binary system, male qualities are valued higher than female ones. Considered as typical masculine qualities are strength, rationality, power, wisdom and enterprising (Butler, 1990). Typical feminine qualities are balance, being friendly, emotional and caring. As an example, consider monetary value: women’s salaries for top positions in business are lower than men’s (Payscale, 2017). These qualities are not related to sex but to gender. Gender stereotypes are negative and can be harmful because they push people into boxes which limits them. As such, individuals who do not conform to the stereotypical expectations are often inferior in Western society. For example, women who work in a male-dominated business, are often seen as unfeminine, casting them as high in competence but low in warmth- just like men. But at the same time, flamboyant gay men are seen as low in competence and high in warmth -just like women (Ellemers, 2017). Next to this, in our society, it is more accepted for women to adopt masculine qualities because this increases the status of a woman but for men to adopt feminine qualities degrades their status (Ellemers, 2017). It can be concluded that gender stereotypes communicate how we think and expect men and women to behave.
2.6. Gender neutral

Society is slowly made aware that gender is more complex than what we are taught as children (TEDTalks, 2013). At the moment, there is a social and political discussion ongoing on whether the traditional binary system is the future and many questions are raised about early gender differences. The reason why there are so many ‘new’ definitions such as unisex, genderless, gender-neutral, is because the binary system does not apply to everyone, there is a whole group who cannot identify with being male or female (TEDTalks, 2013). Paediatric doctor Shazhan Amed talks about how these constructs of gender occur on a continuum. Non-binary people do not identify with being male or female and often prefer pronouns as ‘they’ and ‘them’ rather than ‘he’ or ‘she’. For others, gender expression is neither feminine nor masculine and they are androgynous (BOF, 2017). Next to this, some people move along this gender identity and gender expression continuum by sometimes identifying or expressing as male and other times as female, these people are considered gender fluid (BOF, 2017).

With these different constructs of gender, questions about the way children should be raised are brought up. The concept of Nurture versus Nature explains how gender identity develops (BOF, 2017). Before 1980 the ideology was nurture. You take a child, dress it as a girl, give it girl toys and it will identify as a girl (BOF, 2017). This changed with the case of the Canadian twin boys. During circumcision one of the boys’ penis was accidentally cut off. Now John Money, a psychologist at the John Hopkins University, who was a strong believer in the nurture concept, advised the parents to raise and nurture that boy as a girl. However, when the girl grew up, she felt disconnected with herself as she did not feel that she was a girl on the inside (BOF, 2017). This example shows that gender identity is a complex interplay of biological, hormonal, environmental and cultural factors rather than a simple social psychosocial construct of nurture (BOF, 2017).

The nurture concept plays into the idea that certain taste preferences which belong to gender stereotypes are fundamental in establishing a person’s gender identity. Renske de Graaf, a Dutch writer, goes as far as saying that when you give a child a certain categorization (male or female) and as a parent you act upon this, you automatically give the child taste preferences based on their sex (De Graaf, 2017). She neglects to mention that these taste preferences are also partly based on hormones. Here is where gender-neutrality comes into play, as it is part of the construct of gender identity. Gender-neutrality does acknowledge gender but does not let gender stereotypes (boys play with trucks and girls with dolls) that come with being male or female define or limit a person in their choices and actions.

To reflect back on the continuum Doctor Amed talks about, you have male on one side of the spectrum, female on the other and androgyny in the middle. Gender-neutral, as it does acknowledge gender but does not limit it, can move from left to right and back on the continuum. If we solely look at the word gender-neutral, it can be analysed as ‘neutral’ of gender (De Vent, 2017). As gender is a social construct, it is an object (for example a garment) that society does not deem for men or women but leaves it open for interpretation. So, the markers of gender are given up by, for example no longer addressing people with ‘he’ or ‘she’, no gender-based bathrooms or clothing sorted by gender (Auvade, 2017). The importance of identifying gender, with gender-neutrality, is irrelevant. As differentiation between male or female begins even before birth it is hard to imagine a world that does not primarily categorizes into two genders (Auvade, 2017). Gender-neutral creates the opportunity to neglect what is seen as masculine or feminine in order to create a neutral ‘expression’ that is considered equal for all (Johansson, 2017).
2.7. Conclusion
When considering all the information gender can be explained via three fragments, biological sex, gender identity and gender expression. Biological sex is based on our genitals, gender identity is the way we feel on the inside, and gender expression is the way we demonstrate our gender (TEDTalks, 2013). For some people, their biological sex does not align with their gender identity and thus cannot relate to the binary system. As gender is cultural there is a need for more gender constructs. If we take Docter Ameds’ explanation of gender being on a continuum we see male on one side of the spectrum and female on the other. Gender-neutrality, since it acknowledges gender but does not let gender stereotypes define or limit their choices, can move from one side to the other on the continuum. With gender-neutrality, the markers of gender are left out because the importance that we as a society put on gender is no longer of value (Auvade, 2017). However, this is also where gender stereotypes play a role, if we would take away all these stereotypes that our society is based on, people are left feeling confused and uncertain of their own identity. On the other hand, since gender is open for change it allows for creativity and an open mind towards accepting that gender is not merely being male or female but that there are other constructs that people can identify with. As clothing is the primary source of expressing gender, gender-neutrality raises questions especially for the fashion industry.
3.1. Introduction
Each individual dresses the physical body every day with clothes and therefore dress is a basic fact of life. The Western culture dresses the body through different means, such as clothing, cosmetics and tattooing and other forms of self-expression (Entwistle, 2001). This chapter will focus on how meanings are created through clothing because not only do clothes have the purpose to protect us from modesty but dress can also be a sign or symbol that reflects our own self (Entwistle, 2001). (Un)conscious communication through dress shapes a large part of our identity and expression, so the physical body when dressed reflects the ‘social body’. However, what constitutes as ‘dressed’ and what is considered appropriate varies according to the situation or occasion (Entwistle, 2001).
3.2. Communication through dress
The choices we make or preferences we have in regard to the clothing we wear are shaped and directed by the social environment we live in and do not emerge from independent thoughts (Johansson, 2017). Because we are not solely in control of what meaning our clothes generate and we are partly dependent on the interpretation of others a possible way to analyse clothing is to see it as a ‘language’. Along with any language, communication is key. However, the interpretation of what people try to communicate depends on multiple factors and is context dependent (Davis, 2007, p. 151). With certain combinations of clothing or a certain style, meanings will vary depending upon the wearer, the viewer (and his interpretation), their social group, the occasion and the place. The most significant way to express your identity is through appearance and the way we dress (Damhorst, 2004). The items we choose reflect our interests, age, gender, role, personality, status and membership in a group (Damhorst, 2004). The choice for certain items is based on more than just our idea of self-identity, they are also influenced by the society and culture we live in. Within our society or group, we take on a certain role, a position that comes with certain social and behavioural expectations to which people try to conform (Damhorst, 2004). For example, someone who has a dinner in a star restaurant would not likely show up in sweatpants but would choose a more formal outfit. So, because people try to conform to expectations and thus in a sense rely on others to ‘tell’ them how to behave, the society and the culture we live in limit our choices and thus we can never truly be individual (Damhorst, 2004).

Our day-to-day life and the interaction between people gives meaning to our selected clothes. According to Herbert Blumer, a sociologist, ‘the meanings of things are directly attributable to the social interaction one has with others’ (Damhorst, 2004). Thus, the viewer is part of determining the meaning of the wearers’ clothes. McDowell, a British fashion writer, talks in his book ‘The anatomy of fashion’ that clothes and their language is universal. He gives the example that everyone can distinguish the monk from the soldier, the judge from the builder, the bag lady from the Duchess. He suggests that overall our shared vocabulary of dress prevents us from moving too far from the norm, which comes back to the fact that people want to belong to the social group they live in (2013).
3.3. Clothing codes

Even though it can be stated that meanings are communicated through a ‘language’. It is not a spoken language but a sign language. With this comes an uncertain part of symbolism and the difficulty of understanding this (Davis, 2007, p. 149). Sapir, an anthropologist-linguist, says that ‘the lack of exact knowledge of unconscious symbolism that is attached to colours, textures, forms, postures and other expressive elements of a given culture makes it difficult to fully understand clothes’ (Davis, 2007, p. 149). Next to this, expressive elements can have different symbolic meaning in different areas. These elements can also be referred to as clothing codes and meanings can change by combining these codes in a way that experiments with conventional visual and tactile symbols of a culture (Davis, 2007, p. 154).

According to Fred Davis, a sociologist, clothing codes are somewhat reliant on formal design elements. Masculine vs feminine, historical frames of reference (bindings, stay, corseting is Victorian and pre-female emancipation; loose fit, exposed skin is post WW1 modern era), and linkages to occasions (light is informal/casual and dark is formal/serious) (Davis, 2007, p. 150). Because the interpretation of these codes is partly reliant on formal design elements, people who read them have a pre-constructed idea of what a certain code means. Another aspect of these codes to consider is that the slightest change in qualities (colour, texture, fit) can evoke a completely different meaning (Davis, 2007, p. 152). So, in short, the codes that are reliant on formal design elements have a clear meaning.

Next to this, there are also fashion codes which have a less clear meaning. These can be described by analysing how fashion and the meanings attached to this are created. Within our Western society, there are dominant/leading and less powerful groups. The fashion adoption curve of Rogers classifies adopters of fashion innovations into categories, based on the idea that certain individuals are inevitably more open to adaptation than others. If we purely look at clothing; designers and innovative people, who can influence others are often the first ones to introduce new ideas. With this, celebrities, magazines and social media play a role in promoting a new style or idea (Damhorst, 2004).

However, the middle class plays an important factor in rejecting or accepting a new idea and determines whether it succeeds as fashion or simply just passes through (Barnard, 2007). An example is the Agender pop-up concept space of Selfridges in 2015. The department store created a genderless shopping experience for its customers and introduced the mass consumer to genderless shopping. However, it was merely a temporary concept because for the majority of consumers it was too far from what they are used to, which is selecting clothing items based on gender. But even now department stores continue to experiment and promote genderless shopping (London 2015). So even though influential people can introduce a new idea, the ‘less powerful’ group determines whether a new idea is adopted or not. Once a style has been adopted by a significant number of consumers, it can create an added meaning and represent the lifestyle of people who have adopted the new ideas.

But a fashion code is open for interpretation. There is a considerable variability in how different social groups understand and appreciate the meanings (Davis, 2007, p. 152). During the first phases of a new fashion cycle, the symbolism of dress is more ambiguous and differentiated (Barnard, 2007). In order for the new idea to change a meaning of clothes, the members of a social group need to have some similarities about what constitutes appropriate behaviour for the time and situation. Without this, there will be a lack of understanding and the new style will not be accepted (Damhorst, 2004). Thus, meanings of dress and appearance are created and maintained as individuals collectively deal with dress (Damhorst, 2004). Additionally, time and occasion are important factors to consider as they can influence the meaning that is assigned to a certain style. A style or clothing that ‘said’ one thing last year can say something different today (Davis, 2007, p. 151). Therefore, ascribing meanings should be done with caution.
3.4. Conventional codes
An important note to make is that codes of clothing are not similar to conventional signs. Conventional signs are designed to communicate direct messages and notions, such as, traffic signs. Everyone knows the meaning and they are not open for interpretation, they have a fixed meaning. With aesthetic expressions (clothing codes) the idea of what needs to be communicated is open for interpretation. Where the problem lies is that an aesthetic code is often perceived and used as a general code and thus the interpretation is somewhat ‘false’. Individuals forget that interpretations can vary and cause miscommunication and a lack of understanding among groups (Davis, 2007 p. 152). Because meanings are ambiguous it is hard to make sure people interpret clothing symbols the same way.

Subcultural signifiers are getting mixed. It could be argued that rules are being broken, take for example, mixing sportswear with workwear (Winter, 2014). In the past, it was considered inappropriate to wear active wear in the workplace. Such as, the sneaker which has become an acceptable type of shoe for individuals to wear, in many occasions (work, parties, every-day-life). Before, the sneaker was primarily used based on its function, a shoe designed for sports.
3.5. Reading messages

Colin Campbell, a sociologist, is critical about the approach of many sociologist seeing consumption as an endeavour to construct and to inform others of their ‘lifestyle’ or ‘identity’ and that ‘consumption’ is best understood as a form of communication (Campbell, 2007, p. 159). Campbell thinks that many sociologists favour this approach of seeing consumption as communication because of three assumptions. Firstly, because people generally find an individuals’ appearance ‘meaningful’ it is presumed to have a meaning. Secondly, since it is generally assumed that people choose to wear what they wear, it is assumed that this ‘singular’ meaning is intended. Finally, since clothing is displayed, in the sense of being worn in public, it is assumed that individuals must be ‘making a statement’, or ‘conveying a message’ to those in a position to observe them (Campbell, 2007, p. 166). However, objects can be meaningful without having a symbolic meaning (for example, a paper-clip, their meaning is effectively equivalent to their use), just as they can be regarded as symbolically meaningful without having a single unambiguous meaning (Campbell, 2007, p. 166).

Consumers cannot avoid wearing clothes and therefore are unable to prevent others from ‘reading’ meanings into the clothes they wear. An observer analyses an individual’s outfit, perceives a ‘meaning’ and thus assume that the wearer must be the ‘creator’ of that meaning, and must have created it for some purpose. Consequently, they go on to infer that the outfit represents a ‘message’ that the wearer intends to send to whoever happens to be in a position to receive it (Campbell, 2007, p. 166). But Campbell notes that the belief that people’s clothes can be ‘read’ for the intended ‘messages’ they contain, probably continues to persist as long as no attempt is made to falsify it (Campbell, 2007, p. 167). He suggests that if clothing were a true language, and consequently individuals had to understand and respond correctly, they would quickly discover the full extent of their failure to ‘read’ the clothing of others (Campbell, 2007, p. 167).
3.6. Conclusion
When considering all the above information it can be concluded that multiple factors play a role in how meanings are created through clothing. Dress can be seen as a ‘language’, in which communication is the purpose. The items that an individual chooses are not only based on self-identity but also on the social position this person attains in society. With this, certain behavioural expectations play a role. The look of a person is made up out of different elements (clothing codes) such as colour, texture and form. The difficulty lies in the fact that these codes are open for interpretation. With conventional signs, the meanings are clear to everyone but this is not the case for aesthetic codes. The aesthetic codes are partly reliant on formal design elements which have a clear meaning and on the other hand there are fashion codes which have less of a clear meaning. To merely say that clothing is a ‘language’ and via that meanings are attributed to clothing is a bit short sighted. Because the meaning of clothes is partly dependent on the social group we live in. The meaning can change over time, such as a society constantly evolves. Additionally, as Campbell mentions, if it were in fact a true language, clothing would be interpreted correctly, as the wearer and the receiver would read the same meaning of a person’s look. However, this is not the case with clothing, as miscommunication often occurs. Next to this, influential people introduce new ideas, but the ‘less powerful’ group determines whether a new idea is adopted. Once a style has been adopted by a significant number of consumers, it can create an added meaning and represent the lifestyle of people who have adopted the new ideas. The fashion adoption curve of Rogers classifies adopters of fashion innovations into categories, based on the idea that certain individuals are inevitably more open to adaptation than others. This influences in some way if certain styles (e.g. gender-neutral fashion) is accepted or rejected. So, meanings of clothing are created through multiple factors such as the wearer and their self-identity, the society that they live in and the expectations that come with this and the occasion and time the look is worn.
4.1 Introduction
This chapter will focus on what the existing social norms of gender are because gender is the primary feature in a person’s perception and is used to (un)consciously classify individuals (Ellemers, 2017). As mentioned in chapter 2, in Western society people are categorized based on the binary gender system. By categorizing people, certain behavioural expectations and gender stereotypes are raised in a society that create social norms based on informal understandings among members of the Western society. This makes individuals behave in such a way that they conform to social norms. What these norms are will be described in this chapter.
4.2. Gender in society
Differences in men and women do not come naturally but are developed over a lifetime due to the way individuals are educated and raised (Ellemers, 2017). Because characteristics are taught from a very young age it is hard for individuals to distinguish what is a natural expression of their biological sex and what is culturally defined (King, 2004). Lorber, a sociologist, sees the process of ‘teaching’ characteristics and traits (men are assertive and strong and women are passive and more loving) as the social construction of gender (1994). She refers to gender as a social institution because ‘gendering’ is done from birth, constantly and by everyone to the point that it is one of the major ways that humans organize their lives (1994). The process of gendering and its outcome are even legitimated by law, science and societies values (King, 2004). Therefore, it is hard for people to believe that gender is constantly created out of human-interaction and social life. As it is so normal to us it takes a conscious disruption of our expectation of how men and women are supposed to act to only then pay attention to how it is created (Lorber, 1994).

In Western society, we see that gender roles are changing and with this, new social norms concerning gender are established. Boys and girls are wearing unisex clothing, fathers are staying home to take care of children and men and women are getting the same education and jobs. Even in society this is carried through in our everyday life. Such as, the city of Amsterdam published a language guide for civil servants with gender-neutral suggestions and in Scandinavian countries, it is already considered normal to have one bathroom for all, so it no longer separated on the basis of gender (Willems, 2017).

The shift in society raises awareness of where gender comes from which creates controversy. By questioning the current binary gender system, the values assigned to it, is also devalued thus gender will have less power in our society. For most people, this is hard to understand because the norms and expectations that come with gender status are built into their sense of worth and identity, the way we think, hear, see, speak, fantasise and feel (Lorber, 1994). It can be stated that for most humans, the social is the natural. By questioning this, you simultaneously question their identity. Even though these changes in society (one bathroom for everyone, unisex toys, National rail services using a gender-neutral language) seem minor they are representations of new social norms and simultaneously question the very binary system that we are so used to and rely on.

This shift opens up opportunities in for example choosing people for tasks on the basis of their motivations, competence and talents –their demonstrated achievements and not on their gender, race or ethnicity –ascribed membership in a category of people (Lorber, 1994). These changes are expressions of collective values that are being loosened and this brings a time of instability and uncertainty. But also, creativity where people are looking for a new attitude towards life. Old values still have influence and new values are still being established which takes time. This change in gender perception moves very slow and can take generations before significant changes can be seen (Hamaker-Zondag, 2009).
4.3. Social construction of gender

The choices and preferences of people do not merely come from themselves but are influenced and shaped by social expectations (Johansson, 2017). Stereotypes are used to determine what information is considered of value and what not (Ellemers, 2017). Individuals who do not conform to these stereotypes create confusion. An example is cross-dressing, where individuals play with the ambiguity of masculinity and femininity. Culturally prescribed gender norms (men wear trousers and women wear dresses) are played with as males put on feminine dress and vice versa. With this, they challenge social interaction with their appearance (Damhorst, 2004). Another example is androgyny, a person who is neither masculine or feminine, for most people it is hard to accept individuals who identify as androgynous because the difference between being male or female gets blurred (Damhorst, 2004). However, the term androgyny has become a signal of a body ideal that stands for gender equality (Johansson, 2017).

In our society people who cross-dress or identify with androgyny are devalued because gender signs and signals are missing or ambiguous and this makes most people feel uncomfortable due to the fact that these individuals cannot be placed within a certain gender status (Lorber, 1994). But, these people are paving the way for change and questioning the current norms and status quo when it comes to assigning gender categories to humans. We see here that with the use of fashion, individuals are able to explore the boundaries of what is considered appropriate. An example of that fashion can have influence and change norms or a status quo, is the one of the androgynous business dress of the 1980s. In the 80s this questioned the stereotypical look that was assigned to men and women. Now, it is considered ‘normal’ for women to wear business suits. This indicates that there is room for modification and variation especially when you take into consideration that gender is taught throughout a lifespan and thus is considered a process.
4.4. Conclusion
To conclude, as Lorber mentions, ‘you can see the process of teaching gender characteristics as a social institution’ (1994). This is so embedded in our society that the value of our identity is directly linked to the society we live in. Humans always search for ‘approval’ which can only be achieved when you ‘fit’ into your community, which creates stereotypes. Existing social norms are not always noticeable straight away but when someone does not conform to them, it is obvious to observers. With gender, it is the case of individuals not identifying with the traditional binary system. Because when a person does not identify or expresses stereotypes such as, a male has masculine characteristics (strength and stability) and a female has feminine characteristics (affection and nurturing) then people are left confused because these individuals cannot be categorized. We see here that with the use of fashion, individuals are able to explore the boundaries of what is considered appropriate. Thus, the meaning of clothes can change and simultaneously can influence societies norms of what is considered appropriate for men and women to wear.

Because we, as a society, consider gender norms to be so ‘normal’ it takes a conscious disruption of our expectation of how men and women are supposed to act to be able to realize how they are created. The challenge that is currently facing society is that for most humans the social is the natural and by questioning this, you simultaneously question their identity. Currently, we are in a time of disruption which brings instability and uncertainty but simultaneously allows for creativity to find a new outlook on life. However, what is important to keep in mind is that society, when it comes to gender, is dealing with old values that still have influence while new values are still being established. This movement towards new values takes time and can take generations before significant changes are seen (Hamaker-Zondag, 2009).
CHAPTER 5 GENDER IN FASHION

5.1. Introduction
This chapter will focus on the current state of gender in fashion. To understand what state gender holds in fashion today it is necessary to identify how clothing and appearance cues are used to designate gender boundaries (Kaiser 1994). Because gender is so embedded in clothing, the questioning of the traditional interpretation of what gender is, has simultaneously raised issues in fashion.
5.2. Historical overview of gender in dress
Throughout time, differences in appearance and dress between man and women have changed. Before the Seventeenth/Eighteenth-Century sexual difference was not strongly marked in dress (Wilson, 1985). Before this, and to be a bit more precise, in the Fifteenth Century, it was difficult to distinguish men from women at a distance because fashionable dress was over the top and absurd (Wilson, 1985). However, by the end of the Eighteenth Century, increasing privacy, comfort and hygiene in everyday life created an opportunity to redefine modesty, decency and delicacy (Wilson, 1985). This led to gender differences in dress and became an instrument for gender individuality and its consciousness (Wilson, 1985). This continued in the Nineteenth Century where appearance became more and more a reflection of identity (Michelman, Miller-Spillman 2010). The beginning of scent, dress and surroundings that was seen as an extension of our personality helped to form our ‘self’ (Wilson, 1985). In the Twentieth Century, the sizing of garments due to the mass market development, caused a paradox in clothing (Wilson, 1985). Before this, clothing was not produced in large amounts. The paradox was that it aimed to individualize garments but at the same time put individuals into groups and thus can be seen as a tool that contributed to the increasing uniformity of mass society (Wilson, 1985).

To get an even clearer view of how the relationship between dress and gender has changed, the Twentieth Century will be looked at more in depth. In the 1950s, men followed a more restricted code of appearance that allowed them to focus on work and accomplishments rather than appearance. This was seen in their attire by angular design lines, neutral colours and simple hair and face grooming practices (Damhorst, 2004). Women contrary to men, had an elaborated code for appearance that did not focus on physical activity. In the 1960s an interesting development occurred that even today is highly important to gender relations in dress, the unisex and androgynous styles emerged (Damhorst, 2004). As women started to focus more on having a career, their attire needed to adapt as well. With these styles, gender differences in dress became less evident and allowed women to be taken more seriously in the workplace (Damhorst, 2004). Next to power dressing of women in the mid-1980s, men focused more on appearance and vanity, because traditional social roles changed. Previously men worked and women stayed at home, now that these boundaries were blurring, so did fashion. So, in short, this is an example of how social roles in society can ‘decide’ gender roles which influence fashion and how fashion can emphasise gender roles and perceptions.
5.3. Gender in relation to dress

One of the most significant ways of conveying gender is via dress (Lehnert, 2010). Judith Butler explains that people create identities to express their sexual and gender identity, by undermining, incorporating and affirming cultural ideas of gender (1994). The way people behave, talk, express and gesture go hand in hand with the way people dress because it is a mere expression of that (Lehnert, 2010). This means, gender provides a framework for dress that individuals use to express their identity with (Griggs, 1998). The norms and expectations that come with being a man or woman are closely linked to appearance (Damhorst, 2004). How one should act is guided by social expectations and part of this defines our self-identity. Because our identity is closely linked to dress the social groups we live in influence us when it comes to choosing items that we wear (Damhorst, 2004).

The presentation of our bodies when dressed, reflect our cultural body (Lehnert, 2010). Our biological body gets covered and we are able to create an aesthetic body that reflects an ideal of whatever it believes or wants to be, regardless if this is similar to our biological body, it creates a ‘fashionable/fictitious’ body. According to sociologist Gregory Stone, we think we know the other persons’ gender by looking at one’s appearance (1977). However, it is merely an expression of that persons’ identification and choice to how they wish to express themselves. In truth the individuals gendered appearance can, correctly or incorrectly, be a sign of a persons’ sex (Michelman, Miller-Spillman, 2010). Both the wearer and its audience fit what they experience into what they believe to be gender norms for dress even though this can be false.

We tend to choose our dress according to the categorization we think we belong to. What is considered masculine and feminine is reflected in the presentation of our clothing and its interpretation by others (Michelman, Miller-Spillman, 2010). In the Western world, a clear distinction between male and female are the ‘men’s trousers’ and the ‘women’s skirt’. This distinction has become less in the Twentieth Century, however only from one direction. Event today men do not wear skirts, despite attempts by fashion designers. This is backed up by the survey that was conducted for this thesis which had 55 respondents and of which 78% identifies as female and 20% as male. Individuals were shown several silhouettes from styles of trousers and shirts. The results of the question ‘Which of the following trouser/shirt would a man or women not likely wear?’: trouser: for men, only 4% answered ‘none’ while for women 24% answered ‘none’. Same for the shirts: for men, 20% answered ‘none’ and for women, 41% answered ‘none’. It can be implied that it is socially more acceptable for women to wear ‘male’ clothing than vice versa (please see for more detailed information Process book page 115-116, 119-120).

Important to note is that trousers are not naturally for men, but that in our Western society they represent masculinity and supremacy (Lehnert, 2010). This can be further argued if we take a side step and look at other cultures. In Indonesia for example, the sarong, a rectangular piece of cloth that people wrap around their waist is worn by both men and women. Also, in African cultures the ‘wrapper’ is worn by both sexes. In Western culture, the sarong and wrapper physically resemble our definition of a skirt (Damhorst, 2004).

There is more involved in gender relations than just men and women ‘dressing their part’. Throughout time fashion has always reflected political, economic and religious issues and has changed accordingly and thus visibly reflects any tension between genders (Michelman, Miller-Spillman, 2010). Forms of gendered dress have changed (silhouette, fabric, colours) but the difference in gender has endured (Michelman, Miller-Spillman, 2010). Additionally, certain objects, attire or accessories have gender meanings attached to them. The heel of a shoe has become one of the most visible tools to express female gender construction (Wright, 2007, p. 197). The form of this object is an important component in attaching meaning to a shoe. The shape of the stiletto was associated with the display of female sexuality because it accentuates the bottom and breasts due to a different posture. In the 1950s, due to technical issues, it took some time before it could be mass produced, and then it was seen as a conventional ‘feminine’ attribute. When the stiletto was finally ready for mass production the meaning had changed.
According to some the stiletto is labelled as an instrument to make women immobile and passive, however, the women who adopted this type of shoe wanted to set themselves apart from the conventional female image and replace it with a ‘modern’ woman, who was active and economically independent (Wright, 2007, p. 203). The stiletto symbolised female liberation rather than subordination. The stiletto is an example of how design can be used to objectify characteristics that are linked to gender within the social context of that era, in this case emphasising femaleness. Next to this, at the moment of design or production, not all meanings are set because the meaning is partly dependent on time (Wright, 2007, p. 205).

Gender-specific colours in attire enhance and stimulate gender-specific behaviour. Thus, people grow up with subtle non-verbal communications that encourages or discourages certain behaviour (Michelman, Miller-Spillman, 2010). The social construct of ‘blue is for boys and pink is for girls’ has not always been that simple. Pink and powder blue were used as lighter versions of red (the ‘masculine’ colour of blood and fighting) and blue (the iconographic colour of the Virgin Mary) around 1920. Changing gender roles and increasing secularization (process in which religion loses social and cultural significance) led to the colour blue signifying male professions rather than being a religious element. Pink was then established as a mark of femininity so that the gender binarism could stay intact (Koller, 2008). Later, marketing and consumer culture contributed to this. Women and girls are the main targets for the colour pink and marketing continues to relate the colour pink to femininity (Koller, 2008). So, colour preferences towards a specific gender have not always been the same throughout history and thus creates room for the thought that gender-specific attire is also sensitive to change and different interpretations. Therefore, what currently ‘belongs’ to a specific gender category might be different in the future. Exploring these options undoubtedly comes with challenges as it questions the current social norms of gender in fashion.

One of the results of the survey, gives an example of how gender is dealing with old values that still have influence on society while new values are being established. 56% of the respondents said they sometimes wear clothing that is typically associated/worn by people from the opposite gender. This shows that more than half is open-minded about clothing not necessarily being for one specific gender. However, what is interesting is that the results show that when individuals were asked the question: ‘Which of the following trouser/shirt would a man/women not likely wear?’, 87% answered flared jeans for man and 59% answered cargo pants for women. For the shirts, 52% answered fitted, round sleeve for man and 39% straight/wide for women (please see for more detailed information Process book page 115-116, 119-120). Flared jeans and fitted clothing are typically associated with femininity and cargo pants and straight/wide clothing is considered masculine.
5.4. New attitude towards gender

The relationship between the two sexes is based on their difference and thus is dependent on one another (Lehnert, 2010). Because dress is an expression of gender identity, it has to be acknowledged that dress can be seen as a weapon of control and dominance (Ridgeway, 2009). As clothing consists of codes, the elements of codes are linked to male or female. With the survey, individuals were asked whether a silhouette of a certain trouser or shirt was male or female. For example, the straight shirts were primarily considered ‘neutral’, while the fitted shirt was considered female (please see for more detailed information Process book page 116-119). This indicates that when a garment has more feminine attributes it is quicker associated with female, while a ‘male’ straight shirt is ‘neutral’ thus worn by both men and women. However, this is not to say that these codes that are linked to male or female are not open for change because the more people challenge traditional gender norms the less ‘normal’ they will become (Ridgeway, 2009). Gender stereotypes, to which we are so reliant, are being dismantled and are making room for words and expressions like: unisex. Unisex reflects a style of clothing that can be worn by either men or women (Damhorst, 2004). Androgynous, on the other hand means having physical characteristics of both sexes, so partly male and partly female in appearance. Because fashion has always been closely linked to what is happening in society, the breaking down of stereotypes associated with gender means fashion is open for interpretation allowing for experimentation outside the traditional clothing norms of male or female (Napoli, 2016).
5.5. Conclusion
When considering all the information it can be stated that we choose our dress according to the categorization we think we belong to, either male or female. Certain clothes are seen as appropriate for certain genders in our society, and what is considered appropriate is culturally based. Next to this, the form of objects, attire and accessories and colours also have gender meanings. However, the difference in items that are associated with male or female is blurred which creates room for experimentation outside the traditional clothing norms of an item being either for a male or a female. An example of this is unisex, where designers create clothing that is not specifically for men or women. The role of gender is of less importance in selecting a piece of clothing. Contradictory to this is that in the survey, more than half of the respondents said to wear clothing that is typically associated with the other gender while 87% considers the flared jeans not likely to be worn by man (the shape of a flared jeans is typically associated with femininity). This could be explained by the fact that old values still have an influence on society. This shows that old values and norms of certain styles assigned to males or females still exist, even with individuals who are open-minded towards wearing clothing from the opposite gender. Next to this, the results of the survey indicate that it is more accepted for women to wear men’s clothing than vice versa. To conclude, gender still plays a large part in fashion and for its consumers is the primary feature in selecting their clothing due to old values still having influence. However, fashion has always reflected what is happening in society. Because gender lines are blurring and new values are being established in society, fashion is experimenting with the idea of gender not being the primary factor in selecting clothes. Therefore, what currently ‘belongs’ to a specific gender category might be different in the future, hence clothing can be selected not on the basis of gender stereotypes but on individual preferences (e.g. choice based on gender-neutrality).
Firstly, it needs to be stated that gender is a cultural construction and that within the Western society we classify individuals as either being male or female. Currently, gender roles are changing and gender differences are blurring, with this, new social norms concerning gender are being established. However, this shift in society raises awareness of where gender comes from which creates controversy. The blurring of gender differences opens up the conversation of different gender constructions such as gender-neutrality. Gender-neutrality is not about ignoring the existence of males and females but not letting your gender limit you in your choices and expressions. Next to this, gender expression is the way we demonstrate our gender through how we act, interact and most importantly dress based on how society defines gender (BOF, 2017). Gender expression is categorized in masculine and feminine behaviour and defined by societies gender stereotypes.

Fashion has always reflected what is happening in society. So, it is inevitable that gender constructions other than the traditional binary system is experimented with in fashion, even though the majority of clothing is selected based on the two gender categories. These other forms of gender constructions are expressed in fashion through department stores experimenting with genderless clothing, designers creating collections that are not based on the selection of gender and high street stores offering unisex lines. When gender is no longer the primary factor of choice in clothing, it allows individuals to choose items based on personal preferences rather than what society expects them to wear based on their gender (stereotypes). Next to this, fashion can have an influence on the current social norms in a society. One example is the androgynous business dress of the 1980s, where women started wearing a form of attire that was stereotypically considered only for men. However, now it is considered ‘normal’ for women to wear business suits. From my secondary literature research, I can conclude that our Western society is currently in a period of change where old values of the traditional binary system still exist and are evident in our day-to-day life and the new values are still developing, which takes time. After conducting my primary research most striking to me was that old values still have an influence on what people consider appropriate for a certain gender even with people who said to sometimes wear clothing that is typically associated with the other gender. While individuals are open-minded to the idea of wearing clothing from the opposite gender (new value), they still assign certain silhouettes to a specific gender, either male or female (old value). Additionally, since gender is so embedded in our sense of identity and self-worth many people see the cultural as the natural, so gender being a natural expression of our self. Therefore, this shift from old to new values comes with challenges and many opinions on whether this is the ‘right’ way forward. I am not saying that we will live in an entirely gender-neutral world but it is inevitable that we as a society need to be conscious towards differences in individuals (so not only male or female) which requires an open and creative mind. Next to this, throughout fashion history, we have seen many social norms questioned which ultimately made room for acceptance and created modified social norms.

Taking all the research into consideration this final paragraph will answer the main research question ‘How will gender-neutrality affect the meaning of garment?’

Gender-neutrality, even though it is in its early phase of acceptance is already influencing the meaning of garments. Influential groups in fashion (designers, celebrities, magazines, department stores and social media) are already introducing gender-neutrality to the mass consumer. We are moving from the early adaptor phase into the phase of introducing mass consumers to gender-neutrality. However, even though influential people are introducing gender-neutrality, the ‘less powerful’ group (mass consumer) will determine whether the new idea will be fully adopted. The results from the survey show that gender is currently dealing with old and new values that both have an influence which effect the Western society. So, to conclude, as meanings of clothing change throughout time we as a Western society are moving towards a society where acceptance of all gender constructions will be reflected in clothing. In what time frame this will happen is hard to say but it is inevitable that fashion companies and consumers will have to get used to the fact that clothing will not merely be based on the traditional binary system as we know it but will reflect all forms of gender expression. Gender-neutrality will create an opportunity for clothes to move away from what is considered as masculine or feminine and create a neutral expression that is equal to all and not based on a persons’ gender.
The research for this thesis only focuses on gender-neutrality, further research can be done on other gender constructions and how they would affect the symbolism of garments. The survey that was conducted for this research focused only on silhouettes. However, it would be interesting to research what the outcome would be when more variables such as texture and colour play a factor in the decision making.


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