I know what you are thinking, here comes another article about gender-neutrality. A word that is so happening that you just cannot get away from in your day-to-day life. Each day you start your morning with the same routine; you get up, drink a cup of coffee, with your sleepy head you get dressed, get on your bike and cycle to the train station. Every morning you take the same train, at the same time. You awkwardly smile at the people who you recognize from every other morning. Once the train arrives everyone starts moving to get as close as possible to the door. Eventually you are in, cramped with too many people in one small space. While there is no space left, you see people starting to move, you wonder what is going on. Then, suddenly the conductor is standing in front of you and with a big smile says to you ‘good morning dear passenger’. You silently smile back. The conductor walks away, and at that moment you realize he called you ‘passenger’ instead of ‘sir’. You think to yourself, ‘oh well it’s not like my morning is any different than any other day. Slowly, gender-neutrality is being introduced to the mass market, and with this, come changes, they might seem small but let me tell you why they are important.

Amsterdam, The Netherlands - Western society is so used to classify individuals according to the binary gender system (either male or female) that we consider the gender norms that come with this to be so normal. It therefore 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. This is currently happening in society as gender differences are blurring. Boys and girls are wearing unisex clothing, fathers are staying home to take care of their children and men and women are getting the same education and jobs.

Even in societal and political issues we see that the traditional idea of gender is being dismantled. Governments are publishing gender-neutral language guides; National railways are addressing their passengers without gender specific terms and Scandinavian countries do not separate bathrooms on the basis of gender. These are all indications that our society is moving towards a culture that does not define individuals by gender and its norms. This is where gender-neutrality comes in. Gender-neutrality is not about ignoring the existence of males and females but not letting your gender limit you in your choices and expressions. The word represents a change in our society, where we no longer will categorize individuals based on their genitals.

Many individuals find it hard to understand and/or accept gender-neutrality. This is because, we are currently in a period of change where old values of the traditional binary system still exist and is evident in our day-to-day life and new values are still developing. We see this also reflected in the fashion industry and its consumers. In a study conducted by fashion graduate Syra Mistry, it became apparent that people who sometimes wear clothing that is typically associated with the opposite gender, still associate certain shapes to be stereotypically masculine or feminine. Such as, cargo pants and straight shirts are considered masculine and flared jeans and fitted shirts are considered to be worn by women. This shows that old values and norms still exist when assigning certain styles to males or females, even with individuals who are open-minded towards wearing clothing from the opposite gender.

In our society, certain clothes are seen as appropriate for a specific gender, and what is considered appropriate is culturally based. Fashion is experimenting with the idea of gender not being the primary factor of choice in clothing which allows individuals to choose items based on personal preferences rather than what society expects them to wear.

Designers create clothing that is not specifically for men or women. With gender-neutrality the role of gender plays less of an importance in selecting a piece of clothing, therefore gender-neutrality will change the way we select our clothing.

Even though we are in the early phase of acceptance, gender-neutrality is already influencing the meaning of garments. Influential groups in fashion (designers, celebrities, magazines and social media) are introducing gender-neutrality to the mass consumer. As fashion has always been closely linked to what is happening in society and vice versa, acceptance of all gender constructions will be reflected in clothing. Next to this, fashion has always been used as a tool for individuals to explore the boundaries of what is considered appropriate. For example, the androgynous business dress of the 1980s. Women started wearing business suits even though at that time it was considered typically masculine attire. Now, it is considered normal for women to wear business suits. This indicates that there is room for modification and variation.

As our society is moving towards acceptance of all gender constructions 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 identity. Gender-neutrality will create an opportunity for clothes to neglect what is seen as masculine or feminine and create a neutral expression that is considered equal to all and not based on a person’s gender. So, for those who voted gender-neutrality as most annoying word of 2017, it will only become more part of our vocabulary in the future.

Syra Mistry, January 2018