

UNISEX FASHION: exploring the barriers that prevent marginal practices from becoming mainstream

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Abstract

The incessant pursuit of novelty has recently seen some fashion brands develop unisex clothing lines. Unisex fashion does not make any strong associations with masculinity or femininity. As such, it can be worn by both men and women without communicating any specific gender identity. The emergence and development of unisex fashion challenges traditional gender norms because it allows men and women to wear similar or identical clothing, which may blur conventional gender boundaries and hierarchies. As such, it has the potential to reduce gender inequalities in society. However, only a small number of fashion designers and fashion brands have entered the unisex fashion market, making only limited forays. Therefore, unisex fashion is still a niche market in the fashion industry, and one which seems to be more appealing to female consumers and marginalised groups (such as the LGBTQ+ community) rather than mainstream consumers (particularly those identifying as male). More research is needed to explore the barriers that prevent unisex fashion from becoming mainstream and gender-diverse market. This research is in the developmental stage and seeks to adopt a qualitative approach to identify and analyse what kinds of barriers discourage consumers, especially male consumers, from accepting unisex fashion and allowing the market to become mainstream. The study also aims to address the link between society, culture, gender and fashion development, particularly focusing on the perceptions of millennials and Generation Z. In doing so, this research will develop theories of market mainstreaming, market development, and market system dynamics. Due to the privacy of individual gender identity and the social controversy of unisex fashion itself, the current research may not only help to inform the marketing strategy for the growth of unisex fashion brands and better understand the male consumers, but also contribute to the development of gender-neutral markets and gender-equal societies.

1. Introduction

Men's clothing became colourful after the Peacock Revolution in the 1960s (Pearson, 2020). More recently, we have seen the emergence of “metrosexual” in Europe (heterosexual men care about appearance and fashion) (Pearson, 2020) and “little fresh meat” in China (men with androgynous, effeminate and elvish features) (Chitrakoen, 2019). This indicates social changes are occurring and that men may be more open to unisex fashion. Unisex fashion is clothing that can be worn by both men and women without any specific gender feature (Oetojo, 2017). However, although unisex clothing attempts to embrace universalism, it seems to attract the interest of women more than men (Paoletti, 2015). Women are more willing to dress in a gender-neutral way in society (Sherman, 2014). Furthermore, unisex clothing caters to the fashion needs of marginalised groups due to its inclusivity (White, 2019). Research indicates that men would prefer not to deviate from conventional gender norms through their clothing practices (Sherman, 2014). Therefore, deep-rooted gender norms in society and culture make it difficult for unisex fashion to be accepted by the majority of fashion consumers, especially male consumers, which has prevented it from developing into a mainstream market to some extent (Sherman, 2014). Yet, existing literature tends to focus on the awareness of unisex fashion (Vasan et al., 2017), or more generally on the tension and triggers of mainstream market development (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2016). What is lacking is an understanding of the gendered barriers to mainstreaming in a market like unisex fashion. The present study aims to fill this gap in the literature by exploring the barriers that prevent unisex fashion from becoming a mainstream market, particularly the gendered barriers to mainstreaming that discourage male consumers from adopting unisex fashion.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Unisex Fashion

Unisex is usually described as “androgynous”, “agender”, “gender-neutral” and “genderless” (Bardey et al., 2020, p.2). It consists of clothing that is suitable to be worn by both genders (Oetojo, 2016). In the 1960s, the counterculture revolution, initiated by young Americans seeking a new way of life and expressing a new distinctive identity, officially put unisex fashion on the stage of history (Hill, 2018). Meanwhile, unisex fashion is also considered to be related to subculture, as the themes of youth subculture in the 1960s were androgyny and gender-blurring (Goulding et al., 2004). At present, the blurring of fashion styles among men and women seems to be on-trend (Abnett, 2016). Fashion designers (e.g. Hedi Slimane and Tom Ford), luxury fashion brands (e.g. Prada, Gucci and Jil Sander) and high-street fashion brands (e.g. ASOS, H&M and John Lewis) have embraced unisex fashion and applied it to their design and products (Saner, 2017; Jasman, 2018; Clark and Rossi, 2020). These all demonstrate that unisex fashion is gradually coming into the public insights and attracting more and more attention.

2.2 Mainstream Market and Unisex Fashion

New markets emerge to meet the unsatisfied demand of consumers in existing markets (Scaraboto and Fisher, 2013). As the new market is initially small and maybe culturally stigmatised, it hopes to develop and expand to become a mainstream market that is legitimate and culturally recognised and accepted by the majority of mainstream consumers (Humphreys, 2010; Wang et al., 2020). Existing studies demonstrate that market actors (human and non-human) such as producers (Wang et al., 2020), entrepreneurs (Schouten et al., 2016), social media, celebrities (McKeown and Shearer, 2019) and so forth are likely to promote or hinder market development to varying degrees (Ertekin and Atik, 2020). Notably, consumers play an essential role in affecting market changes (Schouten et al., 2016). Despite being around since the eighteenth century and developing all the time (Ranathunga and Uralagamage, 2019), unisex fashion has yet to become mainstream (Chen, 2011). Moreover, millennials and Generation Z, who grew up with the Internet and social media, are more likely to discover, access and own fluid and non-binary concepts of gender (Diamond, 2020). For millennials, gender fluidity is introduced as a new concept of gender expression (Green and McClland, 2019). Both genders enjoy shopping and fashion consumption (Nellikunnel et al., 2015). For Generation Z, consumption is a way of expressing their identity and the pursuit of moral truth (Francis and Hoefel, 2018). Research suggests that Generation Z agree that people should not be defined and limited by their gender (Elan, 2020). It is for these reasons that the present study will focus on millennials and Generation Z as the main target groups.

2.3 Gender and Unisex Fashion

Gender is a complex concept, usually accompanied by social, cultural and psychological meanings, and defined as being constructed by culture and society (Goulding and Saren, 2009). Fashion is considered to be closely related to the construction of gender, and people tend to visually express their gender identity and personality to the world through fashion consumption (Kacen, 2000). Fashion also reflects and supports gender fluidity and gender identity (Clark and Rossi, 2020). Research shows that in the past, women tended to spend a lot of time and money paying attention to fashion while men did not (Patterson and Elliott, 2002). Nowadays, the traditional social roles of men and women and people's perceptions of gender roles have changed through economic and sociocultural development (Shin and Koh, 2020). Men now purchase fashion products to follow trend, re-establishing the concept of masculinity (Al-Mutawa, 2015). Sandro (2020) states that fashion blurs the apparent boundaries between masculinity and femininity, acting as a political mediator between structural changes in society and the associated discriminatory resistance. However, the concept of unisex fashion embraces gender binary, which may lead to some gender controversies (Sherman, 2014; McKeage et al., 2015). The main controversy is that the gender fluidity of unisex fashion can cause people to question their gender identity, especially for male consumers (Sherman, 2014). Hence, gender is considered as a possible barrier for preventing unisex fashion from becoming a mainstream market in this study.

2.4 Male Consumer and Fashion Consumption

Most research in the consumer culture area, especially in the field of fashion consumption, focuses on female consumers rather than male consumers (Bakewell et al., 2006; Gupta and Gentry, 2016; Branchik and Chowdhury, 2017), due to the fact that fashion consumption is traditionally regarded as feminine behaviour (Bakewell et al., 2006; Ourahmoune, 2016). However, with cultural and social developments, as well as the feminist movement, men have recently taken more interest in fashion consumption (Koksal, 2013). Furthermore, in post-modern society, consumption is the main means of constructing identity and is equally important for men and women (Koksal, 2013). Men have now started focusing more on their bodies and expressing their individuality by changing external conditions, for instance, plastic surgery and make-up (Workman and Cho, 2012), which drives the emergence of new concepts of masculinity – metrosexual in western culture and androgyny in eastern culture (Chitrakorn, 2019; Pearson, 2020). The men's fashion market has grown faster than the women's segment in recent years, with male consumers becoming as passionate about fashion as female consumers, making them a target for fashion brands (Amed, 2012; Statista, 2021). Nevertheless, research suggests that male consumers, particularly heterosexual men, are worried that fashion consumption challenges traditional gender norms of masculinity (Gupta and Gentry, 2016). This is because traditional male gender norms consist of hegemonic masculinity, with menswear often dull and infused with meanings of power and authority (Twigg, 2018). Fashion consumption can easily be perceived by men as a sign of homosexuality (Gupta and Gentry, 2016).

Existing research has primarily focused on a western context, with a lack of research on the Chinese context (Zheng, 2015; Kuo et al., 2021). Unisex fashion has been on the rise in China in recent years, with the gender fluidity of fashion being sought after by China's young generation (Luo, 2019; Luo 2021). Searches for genderless clothing on the Tmall shopping site surged by 150% (Mollard, 2020), and unisex fashion was one of the top 10 lifestyle trends keywords on Little Red Book in 2020 (Luo, 2021).

Furthermore, "little fresh meat", a unique and new concept of masculinity in China, is widely accepted by fashion brands (Chitrakorn, 2019). However, gender stereotype has always been a huge problem in China, and even in modern China some traditional gender norms still exist in daily life (Zhao, 2020). In particular, effeminate men, the popular androgynous male identity of "little fresh meat", are considered by some people to be a threat to the nation-state (Wen, 2021; Song, 2021). Nevertheless, many young Chinese netizens believe that this androgynous image reflects aesthetic diversity and represents social progress, and that masculinity should not be judged solely from the perspective of appearance (Wen, 2021). The young celebrities labelled as "little fresh meat" are particularly popular among China's young generation and are influencing Chinese male consumers to become more involved in fashion consumption (Song, 2021; Luo, 2021). Even so, Chinese male consumers are still under more pressure to try and adopt unisex fashion practices than female consumers (Luo, 2021).

Therefore, this study hopes to draw more attention to unisex fashion and market mainstreaming by focusing on the barriers to unisex fashion's development, as well as adding to paucity of literature concerning male fashion consumption. The current research is in a developmental

stage and will build on institutional theory to work towards an understanding of the barriers preventing unisex fashion from becoming mainstream. As such, it will make theoretical contributions to market mainstreaming, market development and market change. Institutional theory means the various actions that actors take to shape and change the institutional environment (Scott, 2013). Institutional theory emphasises that social norms, cultural understanding and shared expectations are the key sources of institution's structures, outcomes and actions (David et al., 2019). Institutional theory considers all actors that can influence the market and consumers, and the legitimacy of market development (Slimane et al., 2019). This makes it an appropriate lens to use to help researchers understand and explain the development of the unisex fashion market and its existing ambiguous gender controversy from social and cultural perspectives.

3. Methods

The initial plan is to adopt a qualitative approach to explore the barriers that prevent unisex fashion from becoming mainstream. Qualitative semi-structured interviews will be used to invite male fashion consumers who have not adopted unisex fashion to deeply understand why male consumers are reluctant to embrace unisex fashion and how market actors produce barriers to prevent male consumers from accepting unisex fashion. Millennials and GenerationZ tend to consume across gender lines (Anyanwu, 2020) and are more willing to accept genderfluidity (Gosling, 2018) and will therefore be the participants for the present study. Given the popularity of unisex fashion in China in recent years (Luo, 2021), the current research has chosen China as the target country. Therefore, the target groups are millennials and GenerationZ male consumers in China. The snowball sampling is planned to be used to reach approximately 30 participants for qualitative interviews (Morse, 2000) or until saturation point is reached. Discourse analysis will be adopted to analyse qualitative data and computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) such as Nvivo will be applied to help and manage data (Saunders et al., 2009).

4. Conclusion and Future Development

Focusing on the role of gender in market mainstreaming, this research will contribute to the marketing theories of market change, market-shaping, market dynamics and new market emergence. It will also develop the application of institutional theory to fashion marketing, exploring how gender logic in institutional environment guides fashion market actors to affect market change. Managerially, this research will help fashion marketers and retailers better understand male consumers in the fashion industry, which remains under-researched. Fashion companies and unisex fashion brands can develop and adjust their marketing strategies to facilitate the development and expansion of unisex fashion. Socially, researching unisex fashion will raise awareness of gender equality and gender diversity in culture and society.

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