

Conceptualizing Gender Neutrality:
A Multimodal Research on the Portrayal and Perception of Gender Neutrality
by Fashion Brands and Consumers

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Abstract

Gender portrayals have always been affected by societal constructs, and vice versa. Advertising and fashion have historically assisted in further promoting and portraying social constructs, norms and stereotypes, especially in regards to gender identities and expressions. Previous studies have investigated binary gender portrayals and stereotypes found in advertising and fashion; however, non-binary identities have gotten little attention from the academia. In fact, gender neutrality has yet to be explored. The present study aimed to address the existing literature and also research the informational gap by exploring two closely related topics: 1) the representation of gender neutrality as constructed on Instagram and campaign photo shoots by gender neutral fashion brands and fashion brands that traditionally create separate lines for the binary genders; and 2) the perception of Gen Z and Millennial consumers regarding gender neutrality as presented by these fashion brands. A dual qualitative research approach was selected, which included multimodal critical discourse analysis of Instagram posts and thematic analysis of in-depth interviews. Results are interpreted with an understanding of the limitations: Fashion brands are found to portray gender neutrality by challenging traditional binary stereotypes through their fashion designs, models selected, photo shoot settings and advertising captions. Respectively, it is found that consumers perceived gender neutrality portrayed by these fashion brands as challenging social binary stereotypes, namely through the fashion designs and the models selected, verifying the overarching theme.

Keywords: Gender Neutrality, Advertising, Fashion, Consumer Perception,

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1. Introduction

In 2019, the fashion world was taken by surprise when the famous American actor and singer Billy Porter made a groundbreaking appearance in the Oscar ceremony wearing a black ball gown, challenging the status quo by blurring the usually distinct masculine and feminine fashion norms (Allaire, 2019; Syme, 2019). One year later, the famous British musician, Harry Styles, was the first ever solo male to be pictured in a Vogue cover, selecting to be photographed wearing a dress, another first for the famous fashion magazine. In the Vogue interview, Styles justified his fashion choice: “*there’s clothes for men and there’s clothes for women, once you remove any barriers, obviously you open up the arena in which you can play*” (Bowles, 2020). Many referenced these two iconic moments of modern pop culture as the official introduction of gender neutral expression in the recent history of the fashion world (Sicha, 2019; Nash, 2019; Krause, 2019; Elan, 2020; Ahlgrim, 2020; Yotka, 2020). Still, gender neutrality, commonly associated with terms such as *gender bending* or *gender blurring* fashion (Thomas, 2021; Garbarino, 2015; La Ferla, 2015), has always been present through the ages. The groundbreaking Vogue photo shoot of actress Marlene Dietrich wearing trousers in the 1930’s (Bass-Krueger, 2019), and the exhibition by fashion designer Elizabeth Hawes during the 1960’s portraying men wearing skirts (Woodard, 2017) are past landmarks of how fashion has always purposefully challenged the various gender binary portrayals through the ages by many times viewing garments as gender neutral articles.

Brands, media, celebrities and individuals are referring to gender neutrality when characterizing products, style, genders, and/or people; but the meaning of gender neutrality remains ambiguous. Dictionaries broadly define *gender neutrality* as a term used to describe people’s gender that is not influenced, characterized, or associated either as male or female (The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.; Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.; Oxford Dictionary, n.d.). *Gender* refers to the sociocultural constructs that are influenced not only by the physical and biological characteristics of an individual, but also by their personal identity and the cultural roles that are associated with each gender (Franklin, 2012). Gender encompasses not only the classic masculine and feminine binary, commonly known as cisgender males and females, but also non-binary forms such as gender neutrality (Bragg et al., 2018; Monro, 2019). Therefore, gender neutral can be described as a term that refers to

people that identify themselves either as male, female, or any other gender in the non-binary spectrum, where their gender identity shifts throughout their life, according to their preference, without being specified under only one gender (Savage, 2014). As Sanders (2019) explains in regards to gender neutrality, it is not an abolition of the binary genders (male and female), but rather an embrace towards the plethora of genders and their expression throughout the entire gender spectrum. Yet, gender neutrality, being such an abstract and unspecific term (Auster, 2016), has not been explained in a specific and definite manner. The increasing amount of individuals identifying outside the gender binary, such as gender neutral (Watson, 2021; Webb, 2021; Kenney, 2020; Maguire, 2020), indicate that clear meaning and definition should eventually be provided to these gender identifications, better understanding and acknowledging the gender spectrum.

Moreover, gender neutrality has started to become, in a small percentage, part of the current fashion and cosmetics world, and for many it is even considered the future of fashion (Commetric, 2019; Trendhunter, 2022). Especially in 2022, as seen in European and American fashion weeks, fashion trends are indicating that part of the industry is starting to move away from the binary dipole acting as the main categorization for products; while moving closer to more universal or genderless fashion lines (Baddia, 2022; Da Costa Branco, 2022; Lesavage, 2022; Esch, 2021; Kelly, 2021). As more consumers are confident in expressing their gender identities, especially the non-binary, the conversation within the business progresses, with brands adopting a more gender neutral branding (Watson, 2021). Stereotypical gender biased discourses and perceptions have started to shift slowly in the Western business world, especially in marketing and advertising, with the inclusion of gender neutrality as an important concept (Webb, 2021; Thomas, 2021; Kenney, 2020). This shift has affected not just magazines and celebrities, but also well-established companies which traditionally catered to the binary market of men's and women's products, now creating new gender neutral product lines. For example, brands such as *Ambercrombie & Fitch* (n.d.) launched a gender neutral clothing category; *Zac Posen* created a gender neutral engagement ring line (Simms, 2021) and even *BIC* (2022) created genderless razors and toiletries under their gender neutral line named "Made For You." It could be argued that brands are utilizing the 'trend' of gender neutrality as a means for profit making, nevertheless the benefits of this marketing strategy are

seen as far more important, tackling the binary stereotypes of the market as well as including more consumers and addressing their needs (Prokopets, 2022; Watson, 2021; Hammett, 2019). Additionally, there has been a plethora of new established gender neutral companies that have been expanding in the fashion and beauty market (Guerra, 2021; Kavilanz, 2021; Lesavage, 2022; Ulubay, 2022), creating and communicating genderless products.

These gender neutral fashion brands are focusing on attracting millennials and Gen Zs, addressing their communication specifically to them, as these younger generations are identifying more with non-binary identities, leading the way for gender inclusivity in societies (Kenney, 2020; Maguire, 2020; Webb, 2021). Commonly, advertising has utilized gender stereotypes and has affected consumer perception on gender roles and representations by depicting genders in very stereotypical manners (Stavrianea et al., 2021; Timke & O’Barr, 2017; Grau & Zotos, 2016). In Western markets, an emerging percentage of younger consumers, especially millennials and Gen Zs, are rejecting this gender stereotyping by more consciously supporting brands that promote gender inclusivity through their products and communication (Powers, 2019; Muth, 2018). Therefore, it is only natural that gender neutral fashion brands, and traditionally gender brands that create gender neutral fashion lines are targeting and addressing their communication towards these audiences.

This research aims to conceptualize gender neutrality by examining its visual portrayal as constructed by gender neutral fashion brands in their communication material. Additionally, this study will examine consumer perception of gender neutrality as portrayed by gender neutral fashion brands. The two research focuses aim to achieve a more complete understanding of gender neutral fashion, as created by fashion brands as well as perceived by their targeted audience. These concepts will be explored by the two following research questions:

R.Q. 1: How do fashion brands portray gender neutrality in their Instagram posts?

R.Q. 2: How do Gen Z and Millennial consumers perceive gender neutrality as presented by fashion brands on Instagram?

The research is an exploratory study for a very contemporary, yet under-researched topic (Timke & O’Barr, 2017; Grau & Zotos, 2016). Therefore, qualitative research was selected as the optimal method for an in-depth exploration, in order to gather rich and insightful information regarding the study’s topics (Schrier, 2014). In researching the two aforementioned questions, multimodal discourse analysis was applied, combining both visual analysis of branded content as well as in-depth interviews with consumers. Since this is a conceptual study, the data analysis was not based on previous research, but rather meaning was constructed through a data-driven approach, by combining the findings of both methodologies.

Additionally, it is important to note, that the focus of this study emphasizes on Western societies. Western societies are primarily considered countries that are part of Europe, Canada and the United States in contemporary social, cultural and economic discourses (Kurth, 2013). Nevertheless, gender neutral fashion is a worldwide trend, with important influence coming from Asian countries. Japan and Korea are considered to be pioneers of modern gender neutral fashion (Dong, 2021; Robertson, 2018; Menkes, 2015), with India also following in the same steps (Achrekar, 2021; Times of India, 2021; Vohra, 2021). Similarly, there has been a rise of gender neutral fashion brands established in Africa (Gbadamosi, 2019) and Australia (Sacks, 2022). Nevertheless, by taking into consideration the limited time and capacity restrictions of this study, the research will include only Western countries.

1.1 Scientific and Societal Relevance

Representation of genders, especially gender roles, through advertising and communication has been a focal point of the academia for several decades; however, the main focus was on the stereotypical representation of the binary genders, males and females, as presented through ad campaigns and the effect on consumer perception of gender roles (Akestam, 2021; Huhmann& Limbu, 2016; Grau & Zotos, 2016; Eisend, 2010; Bell & Milic, 2002; Schroeder & Borgerson, 1998; Goffman, 1979). Nonetheless, there is still limited research being conducted currently on the topic of gender neutrality and its portrayal through fashion and advertising. The closest sociological study, that has researched the concept of gender neutrality focused on a different scope, is regarding the meaning of the word *gender neutral* when used in news media (Saguy & Williams, 2019). Additionally, the most relevant

research regarding non-binary genders is the study conducted by Misslin (2020) on gender fluidity and how fashion editors, photographers and directors are enhancing the portrayal of fluidity within fashion photography. However even the limited aforementioned studies do not offer insight to the concept of gender neutrality and its portrayal through fashion. Gender neutral products and marketing are already prevalent, with the fashion industry leading the way (Prokopets, 2022; Watson, 2021) for navigating a more gender inclusive, or even genderless future. Therefore, it is important to focus and examine gender neutrality as it is currently seen in the fashion industry; an industry heavily affecting and affected by gender representation (Akdemir, 2018).

The societal relevance of this research is the effect of gender neutrality as an important trend, shifting the business world, especially in fashion and cosmetics (Prokopets, 2022; Watson, 2021; Hammett, 2019). As an extension advertising, marketing and communication strategies adapt to the needs of the gender inclusive market, creating new non-binary gender portrayals, such as gender neutrality (Middleton & Turnbull, 2021). Additionally, data shows that the younger generations, millennial and Gen Z, are a small percentage that is increasing, identifying themselves as non-binary genders, including gender neutral (Ipsos, 2021). Furthermore, millennials and Gen Zs are found to be more aware in their purchasing choices with the brands they support, choosing to purchase from brands that are advocating for social cause, such as non-binary representations (Powers, 019; Muth, 2018). Therefore, this exploratory research is an attempt to minimize the research and knowledge gap by constructing meaning and creating a visual identity to the abstract concept of gender neutrality as created both by brands and consumers. By acquiring further comprehension in this topic, better approached to create awareness and acceptance of non-binary gender expressions, such as gender neutrality, can be acquired on a business and communicational level.

1.2 Thesis Outline

The current section will provide a brief overview of the thesis chapters. The current thesis consists of four main chapters that include a: Theoretical Framework, Methodology, Results and Discussion, and Conclusion.

The study will begin with an analysis and examination of past and current literature on topics regarding gender identity, stereotyping, representation and portrayal. More specifically, within the Theoretical Framework the definitions of gender, binary and non-binary, birth-assigned sex, gender identification and gender expression will be examined. Furthermore, the social constructs of gender, as seen in Western societies, will be established. Additionally, the representation, portrayal and stereotyping of gender expressions will be explored, as constructed both in the advertising and the fashion industry.

The following chapter will present the Methodology regarding the research design of the study. The research includes two sub-studies, conducted with a combination of different methods: 1) a multimodal critical discourse analysis analyzing the branded Instagram posts through visual discourse analysis and thematic analysis; and 2) in-depth interviews examined through thematic analysis. The methodology will be segmented into two main sections for presenting the different qualitative research methods. The first section will explain the datasets that were included in the two sub-studies, along with the sampling method; while the second section will include a detailed description of the multimodal critical discourse analysis as well as the thematic analysis coding process. The chapter concludes with a short analysis on reflexivity, discussing the role of the researcher in the current study.

Following the Methodology, the Results and Discussion chapter will present the findings of both research methods. Similar to the previous, this chapter also will be segmented into two sections, presenting separately the results from the multimodal critical discourse analysis of the Instagram data and then from the in-depth interviews. The results will be presented by linking them to the theoretical findings. From the multimodal critical discourse analysis, one overarching theme ‘Challenging Gender Binary Stereotypes’ was identified, consisting of four main sub-themes, namely: 1. ‘Fashion Portrayal’; 2. ‘Model Portrayal’; 3. ‘Setting Selection’; and 4. ‘Role of Text’. Additionally, regarding the in-depth interviews, again the overarching theme identified was ‘Challenging Gender Binary Stereotypes’, consisting of two sub-themes: 1. ‘Fashion Portrayal’; and 2. ‘Model Portrayal’.

Lastly, the chapter Conclusion will address the research questions of this study, and how the research findings assist in answering them. Moreover, the

limitations of the study will be examined and recommendations for future research will be provided.

2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter explores existing literature on topics regarding gender and their portrayal through fashion and advertising. First the definition of gender and gender spectrum will be defined, providing informational background to the roots of non-binary genders, such as gender neutrality. In this section the concepts of gender identity and gender expression are addressed. Then, theories of gender expression as social constructs are defined, highlighting the influence of stereotypically social expectations on gender roles, identities and expressions. Furthermore, gender representation and gender stereotyping is evaluated through the lens of advertising. An analysis of past and current research on gender representation in advertising campaigns is studied, with an emphasis on the binary portrayal, since research on non-binary genders has yet to be conducted. Finally, the portrayal of gender through fashion is examined, with an emphasis on the shift of Western fashion challenging social stereotypes. The topics of unisex fashion, androgynous style, cross-dressing and gender ambiguity in models are reviewed as part of the fashion industry's actions for challenging binary norms.

2.1 Gender as a Social Construct

For decades, scholars and sociologists have highlighted the discrepancy in the use and understanding the terms *sex* and *gender* (Gould, 1977; Greenwood & Cassidy, 1990; Laner, 2000; Goymann & Brumm, 2018), using them interchangeably without comprehending the distinct meanings these terms have. The term *sex* refers to the biological and physical characteristics individuals are born with, classifying them in the binary reproductive system of males or females; with distinction criteria such as genitals, gonads, chromosomes and hormones (Kelly, 2016; Shorts et al., 2013). The term *gender* usually refers to social, behavioral and psychological characteristics individuals identify with (Pryzgoda & Chrisler, 2000; Franklin, 2012; Kelly, 2016). Even though one's gender might match one's sex, referring to the binary genders, also known as *cisgender* individuals, it is not the case for everyone. Gender identification may be distinct from the birth assigned sex, or even the sexual orientation of individuals because gender can be defined through a plethora of non-binary genders (Lips, 2020, p. 8; Burn, 2016; Lorber, 2000). Research indicates that an average of 2% of the global population identifies themselves as non-binary (Varella, 2022), with

the highest percentages being among Gen Zs and Millennials (Ipsos, 2021). Even though this percentage can be considered a small part of the global population, the numbers are expected to continue increasing in the future (Kenney, 2020) as individuals are becoming more comfortable with expressing their identity.

In today's cultures, the *gender spectrum* has broadened up to include more than *cisgender*, binary individuals. In the meta-analysis conducted by Richards et al. (2016), there are several categorizations identified in dividing and describing non-binary genders: People identifying and incorporating elements of both binary genders are mostly known as *genderqueer* individuals. Additionally, people whose gender identity fluidly moves in between the gender spectrum may identify themselves as *gender fluid*, *pangender* or *bigender*. Finally, people who discard the binary genders and do not identify themselves under any of the given genders are referred as either *gender neutral*, *agender*, *genderless* or *non-gendered*. Moreover, *transgender* identification, where an individual's gender identity is of the opposite birth-assigned sex (American Psychological Association, 2015). The aforementioned gender identities, being the most prominent ones, collectively create the modern gender spectrum that Western societies identify and have partially accepted. In further clarifying gender terms, *gender identity* is used to describe the internal awareness of one's gender, while *gender expression* refers to the behavior and actions used by a person to socially and culturally communicate his/her/their gender, such as through fashion, cosmetics, language or hair styles (Matsuno & Budge, 2017).

While the terms *sex* and *gender* are commonly used to differentiate among males and females, they reflect different socially constructed characteristics: one in regards to biological and physical attributes, while the other to sociocultural traits. West and Zimmerman (1987) suggest that gender, mainly focusing on the binary, is something one 'does,' acting as a performative behavior that is constructed by society's expectations of how men and women should act. Gender performance is formed by each society's conventions and practices that have eventually assisted in creating stereotypes among genders (Street & Dardis, 2018; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). While sex is inherent, many times gender identity and expression is also imposed on people through societal expectations.

Gender stereotypes influence people's perceptions and expectations in regards to men's and women's attributes, preferences and needs, as well as reinforce behavior with which people treat men and women accordingly (Ellemers, 2018). Prentice and Carranza (2002) argue that these socially imposed gender stereotypes are found to be prevailing even now in an effort to maintain the status quo of the unequal role and power between men and women within societies. During the 1970's, Sandra Bem developed the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI), a pre-defined rating scale for researching the most prominent and desirable feminine and masculine characteristics among American societies (Auster, 2020). Her study indicated the most common stereotypical traits used by people to describe what is considered masculine and feminine. Men were commonly described among others as independent, athletic, assertive, strong, forceful, dominant, aggressive, and ambitious; women were described with words such as cheerful, shy, loyal, sympathetic, understanding and soft-spoken. Both lists of masculine and feminine characteristics were reflecting the stereotypical societal gender roles of that period. In an interesting meta-analysis conducted by Donnelly and Twenge (2017), by comparing researches performed after the 1990's using the BSRI, it was found that even though female participants scored slightly lower in those pre-set traditional feminine traits, men still viewed their masculine traits almost identically as they were defined in the 1970's. Such data reinforce the notion that socially constructed gender stereotypes are in majority prevailing up to date in Western societies.

Research indicates that gender stereotypical behavior is introduced during a person's infancy, through the environment (Wood et al., 2002). An infant's gender is presumed to be parallel to its birth-assigned sex, affecting the way society, starting from the parents, interacts with the child. The first steps in introducing a person to stereotypically socially accepted gender behavior is through the toys, room decoration, clothes and color schemes (Frassanito & Pettorini, 2008; Wood et al., 2002; Campenni, 1999). Additional research indicates that teens, influenced or even pressured by societal expectations, conform to stereotypical gender expressions in order belong and be accepted by peers (Saewyc, 2021). By socially nurturing gendered patterns in such early ages and throughout adulthood, gender stereotypes and furthermore gender inequality are persevering.

Nevertheless, in Western societies gender identity and expression has mainly been analyzed through the binary lenses of masculinity and femininity. The lack of visibility and awareness of non-binary gender expressions can imply that non-binary individuals are brought up in a society without role models to educate them on their identity (Losty & O'Connor, 2017). Additionally, non-binary individuals are often regarded inadequate, or outcasts in regards to society's feminine and masculine perception, many times facing consequences for failing to meet gender stereotypical physical and behavioral expectations (Hastie, 2016). Research indicates that non-binary individuals and individuals presenting in a non stereotypical binary appearance have experienced discrimination, marginalization and even violent victimization in their daily lives from their social environments (Kattari et al., 2020; Barbee & Schrock, 2019). These findings suggest that binary gender stereotypes are deeply rooted in Western societies, where any expression outside the binary categorization is commonly marginalized, many times in a weary or hostile manner. Hence, this is an indication that non-binary genders face minimum social support, mostly seen and treated as minorities.

2.2 Gender Representation in Advertising

Gender portrayal has been an important research theme and debate in social studies for decades, particularly since the women's liberation movement in the 1960's (Klatch, 2001). Through the decades, advertising has deliberately reinforced gender stereotypes via the depiction of distinct traits of masculinity and femininity (Patterson & Elliot, 2002). As a result, advertising has influenced gender identities and stereotypical associations that are perceived as social norms (Schroeder & Borgerson, 1998). The cultivation theory by Gebner (1998) further indicates that individuals are consistently influenced by their cultural surroundings, which is directly affected by marketing and advertising. Hence, the images broadcasted to consumers affect their awareness and consciousness of how they understand sociocultural norms. Advertising has evolved in promoting more than just a product or a service, but rather guides how consumers perceive the world (Ewen & Ewen, 1992). Thus, when advertising is a vehicle for reinforcing gender stereotypes, society's discourse on stereotypical gender roles is further strengthened.

There have been several different studies researching the social stereotypes reinforced through advertising in regards to genders, yet the emphasis has always been on the binary portrayal of masculinity and femininity. Hence, there is still a research gap in regards to the portrayal of non-binary genders in advertising, such as gender neutrality (Akestam et al, 2021; Eisend, 2018). Nevertheless, one of the most prominent studies conducted on binary gender representation in advertising was by Goffman (1979). In his research “Gender Advertising”, Goffman evaluated print advertisements of the time, identifying themes signifying the promotion of gender power display through the photographs. Goffman’s analysis revealed that women were repeatedly portrayed in a subordinate manner compared to men, emphasizing the social construct of male superiority over females (Bell & Milic, 2002). The main conclusion of Goffman’s analysis was the pattern identification of how advertising has indeed assisted in capitalizing gender stereotypes, making them subconsciously a reality for individuals.

Nevertheless, the gender stereotypes identified by Goffman can still be considered influential and effective in modern advertising. In a more recent research, Timke and O’Barr (2017) identified that gender stereotypes regarding masculine and feminine portrayals are still reinforced through advertising, addressing both adult consumers and adolescents. This indicated that gender roles and expectations are conditioned to individuals from an early age. More specifically, men were still pictured in stronger and more powerful positions while women were now portrayed mainly as objects of sexual desire. In the cases where women were seen in stronger positions, such as in athletic/sports campaigns, they extenuated their femininity with makeup, perfect hair and form fitting clothes. In cases of parental portrayals, advertising is still a medium for promoting traditional male/female roles within the family. Fathers were mainly pictured with sons teaching them active hobbies, while mothers were still seen as the emotional caregivers. Additionally, gendered colors were still prevailing, using pink and purple when addressing girls while blue for boys - even in products that could be considered gender neutral. These results may indicate that binary gender stereotypes are deeply rooted within society and the business world, with advertising still acting as a vital tool for furthering society’s norms and expectations. Nevertheless, there were some eventual changes in the binary characteristics since Goffman’s analysis in the 70’s. Some millennial male models

were described as *metrosexuals*, incorporating more feminine characteristics like the lack of body hair. Moreover, there have been cases of female empowerment with models ‘breaking’ the stereotypes by being more active and less passive challenging the stereotypes (Akestam et al., 2017; Timke & O’Barr, 2017). Furthermore, Timke and O’Barr (2017) claim that the most important finding was that adolescents and young adults are still groomed in seeing young female models overly sexualized and beautified, while young male models emphasizing their physical attractiveness, strength and accomplishments. Interestingly enough, a similar analysis by Grau and Zotos (2016) indicate that even though some details are being updated constantly from decade to decade, these gender stereotypes are still a constant part of advertising. Consequently, the analysis of dated and more recent research indicate that the binary gender stereotypes are still prevailing in a large percentage of advertisements, addressed to all ages, and are still promoting a socially constructed image of femininity and masculinity. Recent research indicated that advertisements targeting males were still promoting hegemonic masculinity, where men were portrayed as more social, independent and powerful; while advertisements targeting women were promoting feminine stereotypes, especially regarding the appearance and beauty of women (Aley & Thomas, 2021). Hence, it can be further suggested that advertising has and still is systematically enhancing and reinforcing societal binary gender roles and expectations through the portrayal of masculinity and femininity.

As aforementioned, advertising assisted in furthering binary beauty stereotypes. An important focal point in research has been the representation of stereotypical masculine and feminine beauty and appearance in advertising. Desired or stereotypical femininity is commonly associated in advertising with youthfulness, makeup, slender body type, sharp nose, plump lips, lush-long hair and fair skin; and female models mostly wearing high revealing clothes or being fully dressed in form fitting outfits, paired with heeled shoes, highlighting a sexual depiction and portraying women as beautiful objects of desire (Pounders, 2018; Rajendrah et al., 2017; Ricciardelli et al., 2010). Even though beauty standards are commonly linked with femininity and female portrayal, the promotion of beauty stereotypes through advertising was also in effect for males. Stereotypical, hegemonic masculinity portrayed through advertising indicates muscular bodies, shaved chest, short and slicked-back hair, shaved face or well-groomed facial hair; and male models mostly

wearing either business attire or sportswear, casual/skater/surfer wear (Frank, 2014; Ricciardelli et al., 2010). Nevertheless, in more recent years, consumer frustration with these chronic unattainable and unrealistic beauty standards has assisted in the incorporation of diversity in advertising, especially for fashion and cosmetics, with the introduction of race, body and beauty inclusivity (Pounders, 2018; Rajendrah et al., 2017). The most prominent movement that affected the representation of beauty standards in advertising is that of body positivity. This movement assisted in promoting the incorporation of more attainable and realistic representations of beauty standards and body sizes in advertising, urging many companies to adjust and include a wider range of both feminine and masculine portrayals in their communication (Lazuka et al., 2020; Pounders, 2018).

Most research has and still is focusing on the portrayal of the binary genders, while non-binary representation is found to still be understudied. Nevertheless, some recent studies highlighted a small percentage of advertisements that are moving away from traditional binary and heterosexual portrayals, incorporating more diversity in their communication. Timke and O'Barr (2017) highlight that there has been a slight increase of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) representation in Western advertisements. Advertisements mainly portray same sex couples where usually one is taking up the role of the masculine while the other of the feminine partner, aiming to make a connection to the stereotypical representation of genders even in lesbian/gay portrayals. They also claim that the few transgender models found in advertisements were mostly celebrities, as they are relatively easier accepted by the public and society (Timke & O'Barr, 2017). In short, even though depictions of traditional masculinity and femininity are slightly changing with the years, they are still prevailing in promoting gender stereotypes, both for binary and eventually non-binary genders (Timke & O'Barr, 2017; Grau & Zotos, 2016). A glimpse to the future might point to more non-binary gender expressions, including gender neutral, and LGBTQ+ expressions incorporated in advertising, mirroring the societal change that is ongoing in regards to gender and sexual identities and expressions (Akestam et al, 2021; Eisend, 2018).

2.3 Gender Representation in Fashion

Social and cultural expectations have affected individuals' gender expression, by stereotyping views and beliefs regarding how one should act according to their gender (Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013). Social standards are tied to the concept of what a man or a woman should be which is intimately connected to the expected appearance of genders. Clothing and fashion are considered the most essential medium of identity expression (Akdemir, 2018), including gender expression. As society's norms and standards change, fashion has to adapt in order to reflect and meet societal expectations (Akdemir, 2018). For thousands of years, fashion has been considered one of the most practical means of expressing "visually, silently, [and] continuously" social messages (Felshin, 1995); and gender expression being an important part of fashion, as clothes are shaping the appearance of gendered bodies when constructing an individual's social identity (Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013). While fashion for men and women has indeed changed and upgraded through the ages, with the inclusion of more acceptable options for both genders, modern society is still shaping fashion trends for men and women, with the gender barriers still being clearly visible (Reilly & Barry, 2020, p.7; Tennent, 2016; Entwistle 2015, p.179).

Nevertheless, with the changing attitudes in Western societies regarding non-binary gender acceptance, along with the popularization of non-binary individuals in the media, the contemporary fashion world, pioneered, adapted and addressed gender issues through the garments (Reilly & Barry, 2020, p.7-8). Fashion has disrupted and has adapted to the societal disruption of stereotypical gender expectations by incorporating gender blurring or gender bending techniques in an attempt to partially distant fashion from gender stereotypes. Gender blurring fashion is the combination or swapping of traditionally gendered fashion designs and styles, creating garments that are not fitting the socially acceptable image of binary genders (Prosser, 2016). Such gender blurring fashion styles and trends that have been around for years can be seen in unisex, androgynous and cross-dressing fashion (Reilly & Barry, 2020, p. 8; McKeage et al., 2015). Gender neutral fashion could thus be considered the future of gender blurring fashion.

2.3.1 Unisex Fashion

The term *unisex* has been used by fashion companies, but not only, in describing consumer goods that are addressed to both binary genders; companies

create products that do not disregard the binary, but instead acknowledge it by offering solutions that are suitable for both men and women (Bardley et al., 2020; McKeage et al., 2015). Unisex first appeared during the 1960's with the hippies' movement and regained popularity in the 1980's and 1990's within the rave scene, where people attempted through fashion to hide society's gender distinctions and portray sexual and gender equality (Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013). Since then, unisex fashion has become an accepted and popular fashion style, with many brands including unisex lines within their collections, as an alternative genderless option to the usually gendered clothes (Reilly & Barry, 2020, p. 14). Hence, in unisex collections, fashion brands exclude the gender labels so men and women can wear the same garments and styles (Bardley et al., 2020). Until now, unisex fashion can be considered one of the most acceptable and successful expressions of gender blurring social fashion statements.

The garments that are commonly considered unisex include jeans, t-shirts, sweaters, sweatshirts, sweatpants, and chino trousers (McKeage et al., 2015), clothes that in Western societies could be also found under gendered fashion, carried both in traditional men's and women's wear. Furthermore, unisex fashion has also been characterized as casual wear (Lindley, 2020) since garments under this category are usually leisure or athletic clothes. Nevertheless, unisex fashion has also been referring to oversized or relaxed fit since unisex clothes need to be suitable for gendered bodies that come in diverse shapes and sizes (Bradley et al., 2020; Lindley, 2020). Additionally, fashion brands creating unisex garments select colors that are deemed unisex, equally preferred by males and females, mainly black, white, blue, red, silver, gray, brown or gold (Babolhavaeji et al., 2015). However, in Paoletti's (2015, p. 6) analysis on unisex fashion, it was highlighted that the unisex trend has mostly helped in making women's wear more masculine, but not the opposite, since the efforts to feminize menswear was unsuccessful as females are the prime consumers of unisex fashion (Chrisman-Campbell, 2015). In light of current societal changes, with the inclusion of the entire gender spectrum not just in identities but also in fashion, some claim that the term unisex is the reflection of an outdated binary concept (Madsen, 2018; La Rose, 2016), where gender neutrality might become the new evolution in genderless fashion.

2.3.2 Androgynous Style and Cross-Dressing

Androgynous and cross-dressing are two fashion styles that have historically been related to gender blurring and gender bending fashion, since both styles are mixing or interchanging traditionally binary garments, as a means of challenging the binary (Flanagan, 2016; Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013). Both these fashion styles are precursors of unisex fashion, as they were styles adopted early on by individuals challenging the social binary stereotypes (Boag, 2011).

Regarding *androgyny*, the term originates from the combination of the two Greek words for man and woman. Androgyny converts the notion of gender mixing, describing anything that possesses both masculine and feminine characteristics (McKeage et al., 2015). Specifically in fashion, the term androgynous style is used to describe the merging of male and female fashion into a single unity, eliminating gender stereotypes (Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013). Additionally, androgynous style has been characterized as one of the most important fashion statements that have challenged the masculine and feminine social stereotypes by “violating the rules and mixing them” (Reilly, 2014, p. 7) and creating a “gender ambiguous aesthetic” (Reilly & Barry, 2020, p.122).The androgynous style gained popularity during the 1920’s, with the adoption of the men’s trousers in women’s wear, and ever since it became accepted in the West, enabling diversity in gender representation (Saha et al., 2021; McKeage et al., 2015). Especially after the 1980’s, the androgynous style was adopted by several celebrities, such as David Bowie, Boy George and Grace Jones, making a public fashion statement in furthering the concept of challenging gender norms (Reilly & Barry, 2020, p. 88). The androgynous style can be described as mixing what is traditionally considered men’s and women’s designs, fabrics, and beauty: a garment with both feminine lace and masculine leather fabrics; an outfit with a man’s blazer with a woman’s skirt; a man with long hair and a woman with short hair (Reilly, 2014, p. 7).

Furthermore, cross-dressing was found to be directly linked with androgynous style, as they were both similar styles that promoted social gender reform through fashion (Felshin, 1995). The word *cross-dressing* is used to describe the crossing of the sociocultural divides for binary gendered fashion (Flanagan, 2016). More specifically, cross-dressing refers to wearing clothes not belonging to one’s birth-assigned sex (Gilbert, 2014), linking the term directly to the discourse of binary genders and the incorrect misuse of the words *gender* and *sex*. Even though cross-

dressing was initially associated with theater performance, in modern societies it is seen as a fashion choice for men to dress entirely in women's wear and vice versa, outside the intention of performing (Reilly & Barry, 2020, p. 132; Barlanstein, 1996). However in western societies, cross-dressing as a styling choice has been deemed by the majority as an inappropriate, complex and many time immoral fashion statement as it directly challenges and defies social stereotypes (Flanagan, 2016). In more recent years, several fashion companies and celebrities have embraced cross-dressing as a fashion and social statement about gender stereotypes, creating advertising material with mostly men wearing stereotypically considered women's clothes (Hunt, 2016). Both cross-dressing and androgynous styles are linked fashion choices in addressing the "unstable nature of identity" (Felshin, 1995) by directly challenging the gender binary biases and norms of the fashion industry and society.

2.3.3 Gender Ambiguous Models

The fashion industry has been a pivotal point for promoting non-traditional gender representations, not just through garment designs, such as unisex, androgyny and cross-dressing; but also through the models companies use. In several occasions, fashion brands select to collaborate with models whose gender is uncertain according to the stereotypical binary gender characteristics. Such non-traditional models can be described as *gender ambiguous*. Gender ambiguity refers to individuals or usually gendered items whose gender presentation is unclear (Nicholas, 2019). Usually for fashion models, gender ambiguity refers to the mixing of both stereotypical feminine and masculine characteristics in appearance, aiming to seamlessly achieve an ambiguous look where gender cannot be distinguished (Reilly & Barry, 2020, p. 122). The selection of gender ambiguous models, in combination with usually gender blurring fashion designs and styles, can be deemed as a synergetic attempt for fashion brands to confront social stereotypes both for gender and gendered fashion. Fashion designers, Jean Paul Gaultier being one of the gender blurring pioneers, are selecting gender ambiguous models for showcasing their garments (Reilly & Barry, 2020, p. 143; Allwood, 2018), acting as an extension of the genderless fashion concept, from the garments to the models showcasing them.

2.4 Conclusion

The present study aims to provide insight on gender and gender representation in modern, Western societies. The research focused on the current definition on gender and how gender portrayal is constructed through the advertising and fashion industry. Even though the gender spectrum was found to include more than the traditional binary of men and women, stereotypes are still present, with the binary being considered the predominantly accepted genders. It further identified that advertising in the past has and is still implanting stereotypical binary gender portrayals, furthering the social stereotypes that dictate the acceptable masculine and feminine characteristics. The literature review highlighted the stereotypical masculine and feminine characteristics promoted through advertising that were used as a benchmark for the current study. Interestingly, non-binary gender portrayals have slowly started to be presented through advertising; nevertheless, they are very limited. Gender neutrality was found to be a topic that has not been studied, or explicitly presented in advertising. Furthermore, the portrayal of gender through fashion was examined, with an emphasis on gender bending fashion. Fashion was found to be a catalyst for challenging gender binary stereotypes, by creating and portraying nontraditional gender expressions. The most important fashion styles found to disrupt the social dichotomy of the binary were unisex fashion, androgyny, cross-dressing and gender ambiguity in models and garments. Hence, these categories identified under the fashion industry's gender representation have assisted for the current research. Since gender neutrality is currently an understudied social phenomenon, the aforementioned research will aid in creating a collaborative theoretical framework for evaluating the visualization and perception of gender neutrality.

3. Methodology

The following chapter reports the research designs and methodology applied in answering the two research questions set for this study. The chapter is segmented in two main sections, analyzing the two different sub-studies: the study of the Instagram posts and the in-depth interviews.

This study attempts to explore and better understand gender neutral fashion through its portrayal by fashion brands. To systematically explore in-depth social phenomena and concepts, qualitative research is deemed as the most appropriate research method (Schreier, 2014, p. 170-171; Machin & Mayr, 2012; p.4). In the first section, the method of data collection of the two samples is examined, as well as the sampling criteria and characteristics of the dataset and interviewees. In the second section, the process of data analysis is examined, providing a description and reasoning for the selected methodology, the research process, the ethical implications and the credibility of the processes.

3.1 Methods of Data Collection

The following section includes the analysis of the two different datasets examined in the study, as well as the sampling method used to select both the Instagram posts by fashion brands and the participants for the interviews

3.1.1. Instagram Posts and Campaign Photo Shoots

To answer the first research question, a selection of branded material by fashion brands promoting gender neutral fashion needed to be collected. The dataset gathered from Instagram and campaign photo shoots consisted a total of 35 visual material created by gender neutral fashion brands and traditionally binary gendered brands that created gender neutral fashion lines. Initially, 30 Instagram posts were selected for the study from three different gender neutral fashion brands, examining 10 Instagram posts per brand. Five additional images were selected from five different traditionally gendered fashion brands, from their advertising campaigns to promote gender neutral fashion lines they created. Data from traditionally gendered fashion brands was included in the sample since gender neutral fashion is a trend incorporated and adopted within the product lines of many existing, non-gender neutral, brands (Watson, 2021). The common denominator in selecting the material was specifically

the promotion for gender neutral fashion. The sampling method used to collect the dataset was purposive sampling, a form of non-probability sampling, where the researcher purposely selects data according to the requirements of the study (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004, p.884). Due to the limited time and capacity restrictions of the specific study, not all gender neutral fashion brands could be included in the research; therefore, specific selection criteria were included to identify the appropriate dataset.

As aforementioned, the data selection was determined through specific inclusion criteria. First, the selection of gender neutral fashion brands or traditionally binary gendered brands have released gender neutral fashion lines. For the gender neutral fashion brands, the requirement was to clearly state on the official website or their Instagram profile that they indeed create gender neutral fashion. For the traditionally binary fashion brands, it was found that within their websites and social media the brand did not state or publish information regarding gender neutrality. Therefore, a separate research in digital magazine articles was conducted to identify brands and campaigns that were marketed as gender neutral. Thus, for the 5 binary gendered fashion brands, the data included were not Instagram posts, but campaign photo shoots promoting their gender neutral lines. Second, in order to examine the most contemporary portrayal of gender neutrality, the most recent Instagram posts published by gender neutral fashion brands were selected. Third, the Instagram posts and campaign photo shoots needed to picture models wearing clothing, as the study focused specifically on the visualization of gender neutrality in fashion. From the Instagram profiles, when image posts were in carousel format, a series of images grouped together and published on the platform as a slide show within a single post (Demeku, 2022), only one image was selected from the group. This selection was made because carousel posts commonly picture images from the same fashion shoots. Fourth, all of the brands selected needed to be based and addressed to Western societies. Western societies, in contemporary social, cultural and economic discourses, are mainly considered countries that are part of Europe, Canada and the United States (Kurth, 2013). In the current study, all 7 brands selected are based and operate within Europe and the United States. This final criterion was set due to the study's limited capacity for inclusion of a wider dataset.

As previously mentioned, the 30 branded posts were all found through Instagram. The specific social media platform was selected above others as it is

considered the most successful medium for digital fashion marketing (Carbone, 2021; Facebook IQ, 2017). It was decided that three gender neutral fashion brands would be selected, in order to analyze 10 different Instagram posts from each brand. By analyzing more images from fewer brands, better qualitative understanding and saturation would be achieved. To select the specific three brands, a research in digital fashion magazines, such as *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Marie Claire*, was conducted. The magazine research focused on articles regarding gender neutral fashion brands, genderless fashion and the gender neutral fashion trend. From the articles a plethora of suggested brands emerged, on which the previously mentioned selection criteria were implemented. By researching the brand websites and Instagram, it was identified which brands were based within Europe and the United States, as well as which stated “gender neutral fashion” within their brand description. Even though the articles provided multiple brand options, not many stated in their official platforms the term “gender neutrality” narrowing down the brand selection. The first brand selected was *One DNA*, considered one of the most prominent gender neutral fashion brands of the market. It is a New York based brand, being stocklisted in major department and digital stores in the United States and Europe (OneDNA, 2022; Grobe, 2019). The second brand selected was *Official Rebrand*, a gender neutral fashion brand created in Berlin and New York (Sanders, 2018). Finally, the third gender neutral fashion brand selected in the dataset was *Tanner Fletcher*. A brand based in New York based brand. The brand targets the United States and European market, being stocklisted in several physical and digital stores (Criales-Unzueta, 2022; Tanner Fletcher, 2022).

Similarly, for the 5 campaign photo shoots from traditionally binary gendered fashion brands, a second research in digital fashion magazines was applied. From the research, several articles presented brands that had launched at least one gender neutral fashion line. Again the sampling criteria were applied in selecting brands that are based in Europe and the United States. After researching their Instagram pages, and identifying that the campaigns were not published on Instagram, the specific gender neutral campaign photo shoots as presented in the fashion articles were selected (Searle, 2022; Chan, 2021; Russo, 2020; Colon, 2016; Fashion Publication, 2016). The first fashion brand selected was *Zara*, the Spanish-based fast fashion global empire, which in 2016 launched a gender neutral collection named

“Ungendered” providing for the first time gender-inclusive garments (Heller, 2017; De Klerk, 2016), not following the brand’s usual binary categorization. Furthermore, the second brand selected was *Pangaia*, a sustainable fashion brand based in London and New York. During 2021, the brand launched a gender neutral denim fashion line inspired by the Levi’s 90’s unisex style (Blancher, 2021; BOF Team, 2019). The third brand selected was *Louboutin*, a French based brand, operating in Europe, the United States and Asia. This higher end brand mostly creates shoes, bags and fashion accessories under binary categorization, but in 2022 it launched a gender neutral capsule collection named “Our Angels” (Searle, 2022). The fourth brand selected was the Italian denim brand *Diesel*. The brand launched in 2016 their winter collection which included several gender neutral garments in an attempt to connect with their millennial consumers, creating print and out-of-home ad campaigns for promoting the gender neutral line (Hughes, 2017; Fashion Publication, 2016). Finally, the fifth brand selected was *Gucci*, an Italian fashion brand, considered one of the most recognizable brand globally (Highsnobiety, n.d.). In 2020 the brand launched its first gender neutral line named “Gucci MX”, with the mission to minimize the gender divide by offering genderless garments (Russo, 2020). Appendix A contains a table providing an overview of the entire dataset included in the study.

3.1.2. In-depth Interviews

The second research question of this study requires the research of “deep” and personal information from consumers in order to gain knowledge on their personal perspective and perception regarding the portrayal of gender neutrality through fashion brands. In-depth interviews were deemed as the most appropriate research method, as it is used for collecting information that concerns personal opinions on sociocultural values, beliefs, perspective and ideologies (Johnson, 2001, p.104). Therefore, in-depth interviews are a favorable method for meaning-making and identification of important themes through the exploration of personal experiences (Flick et al., 2004, p.255). As this research aims to explore consumer personal opinion about their perception of gender neutrality, semi-structured interviews were specifically selected, as they allow the researcher to adapt, explore, review and probe deeper, according to the specific responses of each interviewee (Brinkmann, 2020).

For the in-depth interviews, specific dataset needed to be identified and collected. The sample consisted of 5 participants, who as the research question indicates were part of the millennial or Gen Z demographic. In the theoretical framework, it was identified that gender neutral fashion aims to communicate and attract millennials and Gen Zs, as the generations that are identifying more with non-binary genders and are consciously supporting gender inclusive brands (Webb, 2021; Kenney, 2020; Maguire, 2020; Powers, 2019; Muth, 2018). Therefore, the first inclusion criterion for participants was to be between the ages 18 to 41. Since this research revolves around the representation of gender neutrality by Western fashion brands, participants had to either be from Europe or the United States. The third criterion was for the participants to be fluent in English since the interviews were conducted only in English. Finally, the last criterion was to include a selection of participants whose gender identification was within the entire gender spectrum.

By evaluating the limited time and resources for the current study, purposive sampling was selected. Purposive sampling is a form of non-probability, qualitative sampling where participants are deliberately found by seeking specific characteristics that fit the scope of the research (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004, p.886). The specific type of purposive sampling used for this study was snowball sampling, which allows the researcher to sample among social networks, initially to a participant who in turn will recommend acquaintances suitable to participate in the study (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004, p.1044). Thus, an acquaintance fitting the sampling criteria was contacted via the social media Instagram, to participate in the interview and to further suggest additional possible participants. This process was initiated before the interviews were conducted, to select all 5 participants suitable for the interviews. When possible participants were referred, they were contacted through social media platforms, such as Instagram or WhatsApp, in order to arrange an appointment and provide them with the consent form (see Appendix C). Only the necessary information about the research was provided in the consent form. The five participant profiles included in the sample are identified below:

	Age	Nationality	Residency	Gender Identification
Dora	33	Greek & American	Italy	Female
Nick	23	Greek	Ireland	Male
Sarah	30	Dutch	The Netherlands	Transgender Female
Anna	23	Portuguese	Portugal	Female
Alex	39	Greek	United Kingdom	Gender Fluid

Table 1: Participants' information (pseudonym, age, nationality, residency and gender identification)

As mentioned previously, five semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted. The interview duration lasted for approximately one hour, with the shortest being 54 minutes and the longest 90 minutes. Since all participants were located in several different countries, all interviews were conducted online via the video calling service of the *Zoom* platform. Even though with remote interviews making a connection and building rapport can be difficult (Krouwel et al., 2019), the participants regarded the researcher as a familiar figure, due to the snowball sampling from common networks, which made them feel more comfortable. Furthermore, the interviews were more casual and since participants were in their own space, they felt more comfortable; these factors coupled with their anonymity assisted in order to help them engage more in such sensitive matters as gender perception.

For the semi-structured interviews, an interview guide with topics and open-ended questions was created. The interview guide was designed in relation to Gubrium's and Holstein's (2001, p. 111) methodology guide for in-depth interviews. All interviews began with an introduction of the researcher and the research purpose as well as a question for permission to audio record. The interviewees were then asked to introduce themselves and were asked two to three icebreaker questions to build rapport and connection (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). Three opening questions were asked, in order to gain insight about the interviewees' gender expression as well as their knowledge about non-binary genders and specifically gender neutrality. Then, there were several additional questions regarding their personal knowledge on gender neutral fashion and their perception of the visualization of gender neutrality. The aforementioned questions were all considered transitions for preparing the interviewees to view and evaluate the probe materials that followed. The key element and purpose of the interviews were for the interviewees to evaluate the images that

promoted gender neutral fashion and to identify common themes. The interview guide can be found in Appendix D. As discussed previously, gender neutrality is an ambiguous and complex topic; therefore, the researcher's/interviewer's ability to deviate from the structured questions and probe deeper was key to understand participant answers (Brinkmann, 2020). Thus, the interviewer asked follow-up questions for further elaboration on the responses to gain further relevant information to the study.

As gender neutrality and its visualization are still considered an abstract concept, the use of probe materials was employed. The visual material picturing gender neutral fashion facilitated the conversation to become more specific and tangible. Visual probe material is commonly used in qualitative research as a means of stimulating conversation and gaining explicit responses regarding the specific material that is researched in a study (Chrzanwska, 2002, p. 120). The probe materials used were 8 images from this study's visual discourse analysis dataset. There were 6 Instagram posts, two from each gender neutral fashion brand, and two additional campaign photo shoots from two of the traditionally binary gendered brands. These images were chosen randomly, and kept constant for all 5 interviews. Furthermore, the probe materials were the core of the interview, as participants were asked to describe each image and further explain what elements they consider gender neutral. Throughout the entire process, several probe questions were asked in order to gain better understanding of their perception as well as assist them in rephrasing concepts and descriptions they found challenging. The probe materials used can be found in Appendix E.

3.2 Method of Data Analysis

After the collection of both datasets, two sub-studies were conducted. The following section includes the analysis of the two different datasets. The first sub-study, examining the visual data collected from fashion brands were analyzed using multimodal critical discourse analysis, including visual discourse analysis and thematic analysis. The second sub-study examined in-depth interviews using thematic analysis.

3.2.1. Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis with Thematic Analysis

The first research question examined within this study was: *How do fashion brands portray gender neutrality in their Instagram posts?* This research question requires the examination of visual communication created by fashion brands for Instagram use. Instagram posts include both images and promotional texts, also known as post captions; therefore, multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) was selected, specifically as presented by Machin & Mayr (2012), as they include visual discourse analysis as part of textual critical discourse analysis that is most common. The specific research method was used to assist in the meaning-making process of examining visual media communication with an emphasis on textual and visual semiotic modes (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p.30). Among academics and analysts, examining the meaning created through the combination of written and visual language is of high interest (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 1); in other words, they integrate the meaning of spoken/written language but also visual communication. In addition, MCDA was selected as a method since it analyzes text and visual communication as integrated and understood through sociocultural practices and norms (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p.4). As previously mentioned in the theoretical framework, there is a lack of academic research and theories in studying gender neutrality; therefore in this study, meaning is created, interpreted and critically evaluated through the discourses of gender representation as constructed in comparison to the examined binary gender social norms and stereotypes. Hence for analyzing the Instagram posts and campaign photo shoots created by fashion brands, MCDA was conducted with elements of two qualitative research methods: visual discourse analysis and thematic analysis.

Visual discourse analysis (VDA) was deemed an appropriate method as it not only examines how communication expresses certain ideas, but it also allows the researcher to critically question and evaluate the results, going beyond what is commonly assumed and finding the deeper meaning of the discourses (Machin & Mayr, 2012). The aim of this research was to identify and construct common themes that fashion brands have used when portraying gender neutrality through their communicational material. In conducting the VDA on the selected dataset, the process suggested by Machin and Mayr (2012) was used. The process indicates the analysis of the Instagram posts in three distinct steps: identifying denotations, connotations and intertextuality. For identifying the denotations of the images, all visible concepts and

characteristics were descriptively noted. These characteristics were a detailed analysis of all visible elements of each image, regarding the clothes, models, posture, poses, expressions, color, objects and props, setting and salience. These denotations were the instrument to identify the deeper meaning, ideas and concepts the brands connote (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p.49-50). Subsequently, the connotations of the images were also examined.

Machin and Mayr (2012) highlight the connotation analysis is the process of critically evaluating and meaning-making in regard to the attributes, settings and salience of the images. The first connotation evaluated was the image attributes of all the objects within an image. Each object is considered to represent a specific discourse the brand communicates (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p.51). In the specific research the main objects evaluated were the actual clothes in regard to design, fit, style, color and gender identification. Additionally, models were analyzed as attributes, seeing the model selection as a vessel for the brands to communicate further gender neutrality. The models' makeup, hair, physical appearance, body shape, and presumable sex identification were also evaluated. Through the garments and the models, certain discourses were identified that fashion brands employed for portraying gender neutrality through their creations and communication.

The second connotation studied was the images settings, as this too can communicate general values and ideas by brands (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 52). Discourses can be derived from elements such as background, lighting and prop material present in an image. From the current analysis of the dataset, it was found that the majority of the images did not focus on elaborate background setting or a plethora of prop materials, as most of the images were taken within studios. Nevertheless, even the absence of materials and the neutrality of the background can be defined as purposeful discourse for portraying gender neutrality. Furthermore, the third connotation mentioned was salience. Salience is the intentional foregrounding of certain features in order to project a specific symbolic value to the image (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 54). The main categories proposed for examining salience are: potent cultural symbols, attribute sizes, color, tone and focus, foregrounding and/or overlapping elements. These connotations are considered to carry the most important symbolic meaning of an image. Since analyzing Instagram posts and campaign photo shoots, a plethora of data had text accompanying the images either found as Instagram

post captions by the gender neutral fashion brands or promotional text on the campaign photo shoots by the traditionally binary fashion brands. 31 out of the 35 images within the dataset were accompanied by text; therefore, intertextuality was also examined. The texts used by the fashion brands in publishing the Instagram posts were examined to provide a more in-depth interpretation to the written portrayal of gender neutrality. Through intertextuality, meaning was interpreted and evaluated by the researcher's cultural, literal and social understanding (Hall et al., 2013).

In studying the results of the visual analysis, thematic analysis was used, aiming to identify and report common patterns found in the results (Braun and Clarke, 2006). More specifically, in addition to the multimodal visual discourse analysis proposed by Machin and Mayr (2012), themes were established by using thematic analysis as presented by Braun and Clarke (2008). Since theoretical frameworks for gender neutral depictions are unavailable, thematic analysis was chosen as a data-driven approach, creating themes derived from the data itself (Braun & Clarke, 2008). The first two phases of thematic analysis were identified as familiarization by reviewing the dataset and creating the initial codes by combining relevant data features (Braun & Clarke, 2008). These steps were already conducted as part of the visual discourse analysis; thus the connotations from the dataset were used as open codes. These codes contained the initial list of information deriving from the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In the next step, the open codes were examined and grouped in new categories, sub-themes according to common concepts and relative patterns. Since the portrayal of gender neutrality is currently a relatively unexplored topic, there were no pre-conducted studies providing a theoretical framework and reconstructed themes for the analysis. Consequently, a combination of inductive and deductive approach was selected. The inductive thematic approach was used to create the initial data-driven sub-themes, where themes and meaning was created from the data itself. Nevertheless, in order to understand how the information could be properly coded, the themes were compared to the literature findings of the previous chapter. Literature aided in defining what is socially classified as feminine and masculine fashion (Pounders, 2018; Rajendrah et al., 2017; Frank, 2014; Ricciardelli et al., 2010) as well as what styles are considered non-traditional binary, such as unisex, androgyny and cross-dressing (Reilly & Barry, 2020; McKeage et al., 2015; Babolhavaeji et al.,

2015; Reilly, 2014). Similarly, the examination of traditional physical and beauty traits, as well as model representations associated with the binary stereotypes (Timke & O'Barr, 2017; Milic, 2002) assisted in further coding the data in regards societal depictions of gender. This resulted in comparing gender neutrality to traditionally gender binary portrayals in society, advertising and fashion. Similarly, gender neutral fashion was compared to gender blurring fashion styles that were previously identified as unisex, androgynous, cross-dressing and ambiguous

The final step was the creation of themes by grouping similar sub-themes together. These themes were the defined codes that create overarching themes found within the dataset that can answer the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The collective knowledge examined in the previous chapter and theoretical framework was used as a guideline. The themes derived from the analysis can be found in Appendix B.

3.2.2. Thematic Analysis

The second research question examined in the current study was: *How do Gen Z and Millennial consumers perceive gender neutrality as presented by fashion brands on Instagram?* As aforementioned, to answer this question, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 5 participants. After the completion of the interviews, the materials were transcribed verbatim with the use of the digital platform Descript. The transcribed raw data was then analyzed with the use of thematic analysis, as analyzed by Braun and Clarke (2008). Thematic analysis was selected as this inductive approach used to create and identify themes deriving from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2008) since theoretical frameworks regarding gender neutral portrayals is unavailable. Since there were no previous theories analyzing the portrayal of gender neutrality, thematic analysis was creating combining: a) a deductive approach by creating themes from the data itself, and b) an inductive approach of interpreting the themes by comparison to the binary stereotypes identified from previous research. Thematic analysis is a systematic yet flexible research method, where the analysis process is outlined through six steps, nevertheless, the use of a specific theory for creating codes is not necessary (Braun & Clarke, 2008).

The first step when conducting the thematic analysis of this study was the familiarization of the researcher with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2008). This process

began with the transcription of the interviews and the constant reading and examination of them before the coding began. The knowledge gained from the research previously conducted for the visual material of this study, assisted in having a clearer understanding and deeper immersing into the data. During this initial phase, notes were made on the actual interview transcripts, mapping out some preliminary coding ideas. These notes assisted in creating the initial codes derived from the data, which is considered the second step of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2008). These codes included all information regarding the most interesting and relevant information from the data itself. The initial codes included some direct quotes from the transcripts, which were then translated into sub-themes, grouping similar quotes and meanings together. The analysis was specifically dependent on the responses regarding the probe materials during the interviews.

Furthermore, all sub-themes were then compared to the literature examined in the theoretical framework of the study regarding the representation of binary and non-binary genders via advertising and fashion. More specifically, the literature assisted to identify and understand what is socially categorized as feminine and masculine fashion or garments (Pounders, 2018; Rajendrah et al., 2017; Frank, 2014; Ricciardelli et al., 2010) as well as what are the characteristics of the existing gender blurring fashion styles of unisex, androgyny and cross-dressing (Reilly & Barry, 2020; McKeage et al., 2015; Babolhavaeji et al., 2015; Reilly, 2014). Additionally, physical attributes, beauty characteristics and model poses that were coded under binary categorization, as mentioned in the interviews, were comparable to the findings found in literature about the stereotypical representations of femininity and masculinity in advertising (Timke & O'Barr, 2017; Bell & Milic, 2002). From this analysis, the sub-themes were found to be categorized as unisex clothing, androgynous or cross-dressing style, as well as gender ambiguity of models and binary looking models with beauty styling associated with the opposite binary gender.

The third step of the process was to group the sub-themes into main themes, according to similarity (Braun & Clarke, 2008). From the analysis of the aforementioned sub-themes, there were two main themes identified as fashion portrayal including and model portrayal. These themes and their descriptions assisted in generating the overarching themes found through the interviews. During the process the themes were constantly evaluated and revised accordingly. The detailed

explanation of the themes is presented in the next chapter. The complete thematic analysis of the interviews can be found in Appendix F.

3.3 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the process of the researcher's awareness and acknowledgement of his/her role as an important factor of the research process (Symon & Cassell, 2012, p. 72), contributing to the transparency of the study. For this study, it was necessary to consider the researcher's background. The researcher is a Millennial female, of Greek and American nationality and upbringing. Her own personal gender identity is female, which is within the binary; nevertheless, she has always had close relationships with a plethora of non-binary gender people. Furthermore, the researcher has an extensive professional experience both in advertising and marketing. Finally, the researcher has co-founded a gender neutral fashion brand based in Greece and the Netherlands. The aforementioned information assisted the researcher in being adequately aware of the concept of gender neutrality as well as its relation to fashion.

4. Results & Discussion

In this chapter the results of the study are analyzed. As aforementioned, the study consisted of a dual research method, aiming to identify common themes and patterns emerging between brand portrayal and consumer perception of gender neutral fashion. Due to the fact that the interviews' probe materials were part of the visual analysis' dataset, some of the themes were found to be overlapping. Initially the themes identified from the brands' Instagram and campaign photo shoots will be analyzed, followed by the themes emerging from the consumer interviews. This sequence of results determines whether the themes identified through the branded content correspond to the interviewees' perception when consuming the specific branded content, creating connections between the two sub-studies.

4.1. Fashion Brands' Portrayal of Gender Neutrality

The analysis of the Instagram and campaign material provided a wide range of results. The images were analyzed and grouped into several codes which eventually pointed towards one main overarching theme: *Challenging the Binary Stereotypes*, meaning that these fashion brands were creating fashion images that opposed to the traditional binary portrayals used commonly in advertising. The codes and the theme were all constructed in relation to the stereotypically accepted binary representations that were examined in the theoretical framework, in an attempt to relate the representation of gender neutrality versus the gendered social constructs that currently exist. Four main thematic categories will be examined, which in combination construct the overarching theme. These themes are fashion portrayal, model portrayal, setting selection and the role of the text. The first theme, *fashion portrayal*, consists of codes that reference to the fashion styles, associated with the industry's opposition to binary stereotypes that are known as unisex fashion, androgynous style and cross-dressing. The second theme regarding the *model portrayal* analyzes the main codes identified as binary looking models with characteristics associated stereotypically with the opposite birth-assigned sex, as well as gender ambiguous models. The third theme presents the findings derived from the analysis of the dataset's *setting selection*, where the codes were identified as neutral background, social visibility as well as an individual example as juxtaposing the binary genders. Setting selection was identified as separate theme, since according to Machin & Mayr (2012, p. 52) settings

communicate values, concepts and messages, adding to the themes of the image. Therefore, setting was identified as an important element used by brands when promoting gender neutrality through their branded images. Finally, the codes deriving from the *role of the text* are presented, where the selected language of Instagram captions and the titles of the ad campaigns were evaluated as absence of gender description and also gender neutral characterization. It was found that the content created by fashion brands for portraying gender neutrality through their advertising material, either being Instagram posts and/or campaign photo shoots were all eventually assisting in one common theme: gender neutral fashion is challenging the gender binary stereotypes by blurring masculinity and femininity while enhancing gender ambiguous or gender undefined representations.

4.1.1. Fashion Portrayal

As mentioned previously, the content regarding the fashion portrayal by gender neutral fashion brands included two sub-themes. The first is *unisex fashion*, which as examined previously, was a social statement turned to an established fashion style, where binary fashion burrs together, creating genderless garments that are addressed to both binary and non-binary people (Bardley et al., 2020; Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013). The second sub-theme identified is *androgynous style and cross-dressing*. These two linked fashion styles have been defined as the epitome of fashion activism' as both have been challenging and defying the binary stereotypes by mixing or swapping traditionally gendered fashion (Reilly & Barry, 2020; Flanagan, 2016; Reilly, 2014). This is actually achieved by either combining masculine and feminine garments into one outfit, or having binary looking models wearing clothes stereotypically categorized as the opposite birth-assigned sex. Hence, brands creating gender neutral fashion, by employing the already established styles of androgyny and cross-dressing, that were initially created as a mean of challenging society's and the fashion industry's gender stereotypes, are themselves furthering the discourse and stating their stance in abolish socially accepted gender portrayals.

The first sub-theme concerning unisex fashion can be clearly illustrated through the two following figures, Figure 1 and 2 from the dataset:



Figure 1. @onedna.earth (Instagram, 2022)



Figure 2. Zara (Colon, 2016)

As aforementioned, unisex garments consist of casual, athletic and leisure wear, usually jeans and sweatshirt/sweatpants, with relaxed or oversized fit (Lindley, 2020; Bradley et al., 2020; McKeage et al., 2015). It is visible through the figures above that brands selected portray gender neutral fashion by creating garments that are already considered unisex. Additionally, these brands made their garments in mostly genderless colors, such as blue and gray, a technique adopted early on by the unisex fashion style which addressed both male and female consumers (Badolhavaeji et al., 2015). These choices could indicate that gender neutral fashion is a new form of what society knew as unisex until now. It is interesting to note that in both figures the fashion brands selected to portray unisex garments with two models that could be described traditionally feminine and masculine, mainly based on their visible physical characteristics. As an example, both presumed female models are pictured with long hair, while the presumed male models have either well-groomed short hair or facial hair. This could further enhance the discourse that gender neutral fashion is addressed not only to gender neutral individuals, but also to people of all gender identifications and expressions.

Unisex fashion was known for creating loose fitting garments, suitable to fit both men and women without emphasizing their gendered bodies, by hiding the physical characteristics that can distinguish a person's birth assigned sex (Bradley et al., 2020; Lindley, 2020). As seen in Figure 3, gender neutral fashion is further following in the steps of unisex fashion with creating oversized and loose fitting clothes as well.



Figure 3. @official_rebrand (Instagram, 2022)

Following the unisex style of oversized clothing, the brands were found to follow closely in this direction, creating garments that did not highlight, extenuate or show the physical characteristics of the people wearing them. It can be deduced that by concealing people's gendered physical characteristics, gender neutral fashion promotes garments, categorized as genderless or non-binary, without foregrounding any physical reminder of gender identification. In the context of hiding the gendered body, the concept of gender dysphoria might arise, referring to the distress that results when one's gender identity does not correlate to their biological sex (Galupo et al., 2021). Even though gender dysphoria is found to be a very small percentage in the global population, it is closely linked to non-binary identities (Hull, 2022). Gender dysphoria was commonly identified in transgender individuals, recent research indicates that dysphoria is experienced by people identifying with several other non-binary expressions (Galupo et al., 2021). A common practice for easing gender dysphoria is the concealment of one's gendered physical characteristics through garments. Hence, it might be suggested that gender neutral fashion is further selecting the use of unisex oversized garments in order to assist individuals of all gender identifications to feel that gender neutral garments are suitable for them. Unisex fashion was created in an attempt to deconstruct masculine and feminine binary stereotypes; and it was noticeable through the research that gender neutral fashion can be considered an attempt to further challenge the binary while including the non-binary. This is achieved by avoiding any kind of binary categorization in regards to

the garments, while offering fashion options that are already worn by binary and non-binary individuals.

Following the unisex style used by fashion brands, the second sub-theme identified for the portrayal of gender neutrality through fashion was the use of androgynous and cross-dressing styles. In many images it was noticed that gender neutral fashion bears similarities with the aforementioned fashion styles of androgyny and cross-dressing. These two styles are usually linked together as they both were initiated as social statements for challenging binary stereotypes in fashion and society (Felshin, 1995). Androgynous style mixes together both traditionally women's and men's wear, while cross-dressing refers to wearing garments stereotypically associated with the opposite birth-assigned sex (Gilbert, 2014; Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013). The following images from the dataset, Figure 4 and 5, better illustrate elements that were deemed androgynous or cross-dressing:



Figure 4. @onedna.earth (Instagram, 2022) *Figure 5.* @tanner.fletcher (Instagram, 2021)

Fashion brands were coded to portray gender neutrality by creating outfits which according to social stereotypes be deemed as androgynous or cross-dressing. High heels, as seen in figure 4, or a short skirt, as seen in figure 5, are commonly considered in modern society as women's wear (Reilley, 2014). By styling stereotypically gendered fashion on models that seemingly look traditionally masculine (Frank, 2014; Ricciardelli et al., 2020), fashion brands seem to be

influenced by and adopt elements of the androgynous and cross-dressing fashion styles. Androgynous and cross-dressing fashions were attempting to break binary gender stereotypes in fashion and society, allowing individuals to embody a more gender ambiguous style (Flanagan, 2016; Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013). Thus, this discourse can be reflected in the visual representation of gender neutrality by fashion brands. These brands selected to portray gender neutral fashion as a blurred combination of traditionally masculine and feminine elements, addressing gender representation issues by defying the social stereotypes.

These three pre-existing fashion styles employed to portray gender neutral fashion have been challenging the Western society's dominant stereotypes of binary gender normativity, years before gender neutral fashion emerged in popularity. Thus, gender neutral fashion brands selected to capitalize on these styles' existing momentum and incorporate them within the newer fashion of gender neutrality, aim to further resist and challenge the socially exerted binary gender stereotypes.

4.1.2. Model Portrayal

The second theme, model portrayal, consists of two sub-themes: *binary looking models with characteristics associated stereotypically with the opposite birth-assigned sex*; and *gender ambiguous models*. These sub-themes will be analyzed further, providing a deeper understanding of how gender neutral fashion brands use models in their images to further challenge traditional stereotypes and include non-binary portrayals in their representations.

The most common portrayal of models in the images promoting gender neutral fashion was the use of presumably male and female models, as identified by their physical characteristics of their birth-assigned sex, that were styled or had characteristics stereotypically associated with the opposite binary gender. In identifying and coding the presumed sex of the models and the gendered characteristics, the identified stereotypical gender characteristics as represented through advertising, examined in the theoretical framework, were used. Socially constructed stereotypes for acceptable masculine and feminine characteristics have affected the way advertising portrays genders (Timke & O'Barr, 2017). While advertising has assisted in reinforcing gender stereotypes for masculinity and femininity by incorporating them in most communicational campaigns to date, brands

promoting gender neutral fashion have opposed to this practice by downplaying the models' gendered characteristics and appearance. The following example, Figure 6, will help to demonstrate the concept:



Figure 6. @official_rebrand (Instagram, 2022)

Through society's influence on advertising, masculinity has been commonly and stereotypically associated with shaved, or well-groomed bearded men with short hair and muscular bodies (Frank, 2014; Ricciardelli et al., 2010). Even though until the 1980's male models were pictured with their natural body hair, the last 30 years, with the introduction of metrosexual masculinity, several male models were noticed to be rid of body hair, adapting a more modern, polished look (Timke & O'Barr, 2017). Although male fashion models have been styled in makeup and long hair in the recent past, it was usually associated with high fashion styling (Miller, 2013, p. 341). Traditionally, the characteristics of long hair and makeup have mainly been associated as a stereotypical feminine characteristic (Pounders, 2018; Rajendrah et al., 2017; Miller, 2013, p. 341; Ricciardelli et al., 2010). Nevertheless, as seen in Figure 6, fashion brands portraying gender neutrality selected to enhance the model's physical, presumed birth-assigned masculinity by selecting and capturing the model's chest hair, only to contrast the masculinity with styling the model in traditionally feminine pink makeup and long hair. In the example in Figure 6, the feminized male model further enhances the brand's binary gender defiance by dressing the model in clothes and accessories that are not commonly considered masculine. The lace trim in the

tank top worn by the model has been characterized traditionally as a feminine fabric used in women's wear (Reilly, 2014, p. 7). Additionally, the choker necklace, traditionally considered a feminine accessory (Garber, 2016), could be considered a reference of the trend adopted by non-binary transgender individuals, that transitioned from males to females. In recent years, transgender individuals have worn choker necklaces since it is ideal for disguising the Adam's apple, a physical trait of birth-assigned males (Street, 2016). These artful stylistic choices further intensified the brand's criticism of the binary norms and portrayed its embrace of the entire spectrum of gender identities and expressions. Similarly, in several other examples within the dataset, models that were coded as females, based on their visible feminine physical characteristics, were downplaying their femininity with more traditionally masculine styling. The entirety of coded female models was pictured with no visible makeup, and in many occasions either had short hair, or long hair that was gelled back in a bun, resembling men's short and slicked-back hair (Ricciardelli et al., 2010).

These findings suggested that fashion brands purposefully selected to downplay the models' visibly gendered physical appearance by foregrounding characteristics that are socially stereotyped and associated with the opposite binary gender. Through the mixing of both masculine and feminine characteristics in the models' appearance, gender neutral fashion brands translated the concept of gender blurring fashion not just through their garments' designs but also through the models wearing them. Thus, gender neutrality is enhanced through a gender blurring model styling that is not fitting the socially accepted image of binary gender representation.

Furthermore, in several images within the dataset models were coded as gender ambiguous, meaning that their birth-assigned sex could not be identified through their physical characteristics. As Reilly and Barry (2012) explained, gender ambiguity refers to the individuals whose gender cannot be distinguished by any physical characteristic. Gender ambiguous models have commonly been used in presenting gender blurring fashion, as a collaborative confrontation of the social gender stereotypes (Reilly & Barry, 2012). Models within the dataset were coded as gender ambiguous when the models' physical characteristics could not be categorized as masculine or feminine according biological and/or socially stereotypical binary gender characteristics.



Figure 7. @official_rebrand (Instagram, 2022)

As seen in Figure 7, the model selected has no distinct characteristics indicating an identification with either, or both, of the binary genders. The use of short hair, a traditionally masculine characteristic (Frank, 2014; Ricciardelli et al., 2010), that is dyed pink, a stereotypically feminine color (Timke & O’Barr, 2017), might be an additional highlight to the ambiguity of the model. In combination with the gender ambiguous garment the model is wearing, which can be coded both as a long shirt or a short dress, the fashion brands achieved to create a visual representation of gender neutrality, where any type of gendering, specifically binary, cannot be labeled. Similar to the dictionary definition of gender neutrality, where individuals or items cannot be associated either as male or female (The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.; Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.; Oxford Dictionary, n.d.), fashion brands have achieved to represent this definition of binary dissassociation not only through their garments, but also through the models they select to photograph. The portrayal of the models’ and garments’ ambiguity, is a reminder that gender neutrality is a fashion style that opposes to gender categorization and challenges the traditional binary stereotypes.

Both sub-themes regarding the typers of models and their psysical and styling characteristics that were used by fashion brands when portraying gender neutral garments state the brands’ effort to defy the gender binary. The combination of both non traditionally biray fashion style and model appearance demonstrate that gender neutrality is portrayed by brands as a fashion statement challenging social constructs and creating a new gender norm where binary labels do not apply.

4.1.3. Setting Selection

The settings of the photographs were carefully examined, as brands can communicate values and ideas through image settings (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p.52). The majority of the images in the dataset were taken in photography studios, picturing models against a very *neutral background*, meaning that they either white, light grey or beige, and were mostly bare, with no additional objects or props. The lack of any binary gender association, in regards to colors and props, further enhanced the distancing from binary categorization of the images, creating a gender neutral canvas for the garments and models to be pictured. In the cases that props were included in an image, usually a chair or a light fixture, again items of neutral colors, mostly white or earth toned. The color selection of the backgrounds could relate to the colors that unisex fashion has always used (Babolhavaeiji et al., 2015), being practically genderless, or gender neutral since they cannot be categorized either as masculine or feminine colors. Such an example can be seen below image (Figure 8) uploaded on Instagram by a gender neutral fashion brand. In this example, both the background and the chair, used as a prop for the model to pose, were white or light grey. The neutrality of the background surrounding the models creates a neutral space, with the absence of any item, color or setting that could be labeled as stereotypically masculine or feminine, male or female. Additionally, in the cases where the fashion garments were coded as unisex, and the models were either gender ambiguous or had gender blurred appearance; the neutral background further assisted the fashion brands to achieve a genderless. Hence, this neutrality is possibly acting as a conceptual extension of the clothes' and genders' neutrality.



Figure 8. @onedna.earth (Instagram, 2022)

Apart from the neutral background used in these fashion photoshoots, several images from the dataset pictured models in urban environments. The images that were part of outdoor photography were coded under the sub-theme *social visibility*. Research indicates that non-binary individuals and individuals presenting in a non-stereotypical binary appearance have for many years been scrutinized, marginalized and victimized within their societies for visibly deviating from the male and female norms (Kattari et al., 2020; Barbee & Schrock, 2019; Hastie, 2016). Additionally, media portrayal of non-binary gender individuals in advertising are still found to be an underrepresented minority, with the lack of sufficient and equal depictions of gender identities and expressions other than the binary (Timke & O'Barr, 2017; Grau & Zotos, 2016). Thus, it can be assumed that fashion brands which selected to portray gender neutrality in outdoor, urban locations may aim to enhance visibility and acceptance of non-binary expressions and appearance, as an opposition to their underrepresentation within society.



Figure 9. Gucci (Russo, 2020)



Figure 10. @official_rebrand (Instagram, 2022)

As examined in the examples from the dataset, Figure 9 and 10, models are pictured outdoors dressed in gender neutral fashion. The example on the left, Figure 9, is picturing a street view with a gender ambiguous coded model, due to their indistinguishable physical characteristics that do not indicate either of the binary genders (Reilly & Barry, 2012), that is styled androgynously in a combination of traditionally and masculine and feminine fashion (Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013). Similarly, the example on the right, Figure 10, is picturing a model dancing on a building's terrace. The model was coded as male, based on their visibly physical appearance, that is wearing stereotypically feminine accessories and jewelry, as well as posing in a non-traditionally masculine manner (Pounders, 2018; Timke & O'Barr, 2017; Ricciardelli et al., 2010). Fashion brands picturing non stereotypical representations of fashion and individuals' appearance in outdoor urban locations are identified as using their platforms not just to promote their products, but it may also indicate that they are making a social statement. Fashion brands are promoting gender neutral fashion by creating visual material aiming to raise awareness and visibility for the inclusion of non-binary and nontraditional appearances within the deeply rooted and strict binary division of the western societies.

The final setting selection identified within the dataset was an individual example (Figure 11) where the setting of the image was distinct from the usual genderless, natural backgrounds, or the outdoors mentioned previously. This image

alone was coded as *juxtaposing the binary genders* through the setting, picturing a presumed binary model in an environment with elements, props and colors associated with the opposite binary gender.



Figure 11. @official_rebrand (Instagram, 2022)

In the specific image the fashion brand pictured a model that was presumed as male gendered, based on the physical trait of facial hair, which is predominantly present in biological males. Facial hair is traditionally categorized in society's norms as a masculine characteristic (Frank, 2014; Ricciardelli et al., 2010). The model is pictured in what looks like a living room, sitting on a couch. In the background, on the wall right behind the model's head there is an art piece, a hanging sculpture made from a plethora of different heeled shoes, all painted white. The specific art piece has a highly feminine concept, due to the fact that heeled shoes are stereotypically associated with femininity and women's wear (Pounders, 2018; Rajendrah et al., 2017; Ricciardelli et al., 2010), something that would not be usually paired as a prop with a typically masculine male model. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of femininity and masculinity is enhanced by the fashion items the male model is style with. The pink shirt and details on the jean trousers can be considered an additional purposeful fashion choice by the brand, since the color pink is stereotypically categorized as feminine (Timke & O'Barr, 2017). Additionally, the brand selected to style the male model with a trucker hat, usually worn by males, that has the phrase 'it girl' printed on it. The phrase itself is quite intriguing since it references a saying commonly used by women to describe women. The combination of a visibly male gendered model,

surrounded and styled with several elements that are considered stereotypically feminine or female inspired intensify the brand's attempt to defy traditional binary visual representation. This strong contrast signals the fashion brand's intend to play and blur masculinity and femininity in the pursuit of creating a gender blurred portrayal of gender neutrality. This may further signify that the fashion brand's, Official Rebrand, interpretation of gender neutral portrayal is visualized by challenging binary stereotypes, combining and juxtaposing masculinity and femininity through all the elements of the image, such as the model, the garments and the prints, as well as the surrounding background.

4.1.4. Role of the Text

Within the analysis of text, only the 30 Instagram posts and one of the campaign photo shoots were coded from the dataset. The 4 remaining campaign photo shoots from traditionally gendered fashion brands, since the data was collected from article promotions of the campaigns, did not have any text accompanying the images. The two sub-themes created while evaluating intertextuality were the *absence of gender description* and *gender neutral characterization*.

In the analysis of the Instagram posts that were selected among three different gender neutral fashion brands, it was noticed that the post captions did not mention any specific information regarding gender neutrality and gender neutral fashion. The totality of the captions was unrelated to gender neutrality, mostly mentioning the types of clothes shown in the image (Figure 12), collections launched (Figure 13), or generic descriptions about the images (Figure 14). The *absence of gender description* about gender neutrality might indicate that these fashion brands treat gender neutrality as a typical or normal expression that does not need to be labeled by gender characterizations; most Instagram posts promoting binary gendered garments do not mention descriptions regarding gender labels. This may indicate that fashion brands that identify as gender neutral brands are distancing themselves from any gender categorization, similar to the definition of gender neutrality as an opposition and separation from the binary.

Even though most of the images within the dataset did not have any textual reference to gender neutrality, it is important to mention that two out of the three gender neutral fashion brands did not use any hashtags related to gender neutrality.

The only exception is the brand Tanner Fletcher’s posts which included in a long list of hashtags the hashtag ‘genderless fashion’ (Figure 12). This was evaluated to be the only form of *gender neutral characterization* found within the Instagram posts. The selection to use this specific hashtag indicates that the fashion brand reinforces the parallel between gender neutrality and genderless expressions; both being terms describing the distancing from binary stereotypes and labels.

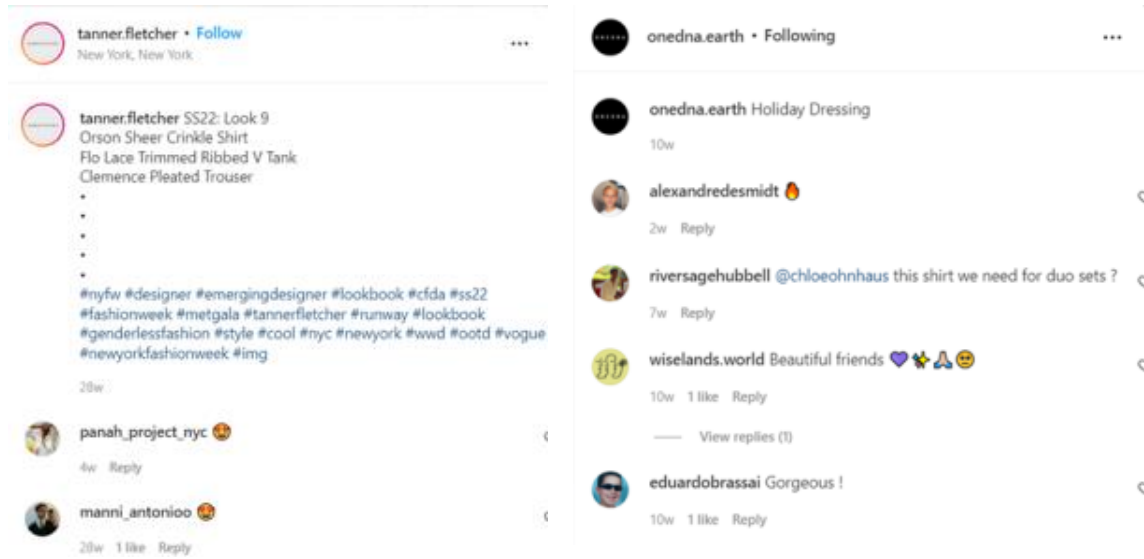


Figure 12. @tanner.fletcher (Instagram, 2021) Figure 13. @onedna.earth (Instagram, 2022)

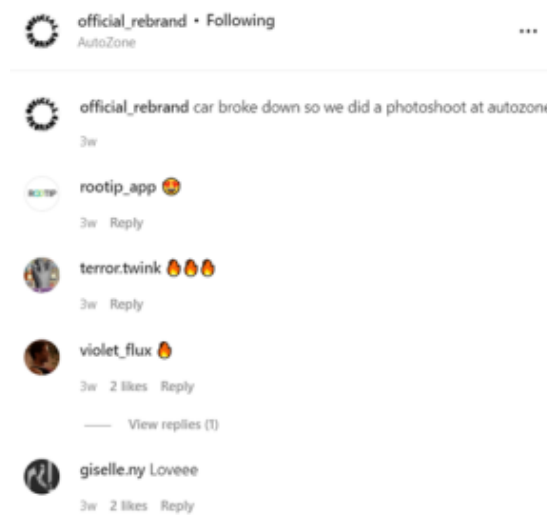


Figure 14. @official.rebrand (Instagram, 2022)

Similarly, the campaigns photo shoots of the five traditionally binary brands did not have any text included, other than the exception of Diesel’s ad which had the phrase ‘this ad is gender neutral’ on the side of the photograph (Figure 15). The text selection, with the phrase ‘gender neutral’ describing the ‘ad’, is indicating that

gender neutrality is facilitated in the visual as an integrated portrayal of consisting of multiple different elements. Within the ad, gender neutrality is describing the fashion garments coded as unisex based on color, fit and design style. Additionally, it describes the models as being genderless or gender ambiguous. The combination of neutral and non-stereotypically binary fashion, models, setting and text further enhances the brand's visualization of gender neutrality by removing binary gender labels that are commonly portrayed in fashion and advertising as an extension of society's stereotypes. This may indicate that the brand is challenging the stereotypically binary categorization that advertising and fashion have set, by bluntly stating in written format their disengagement from the binary.



Figure 15. Diesel (Fashion Publication, 2016)

4.2. Consumer Perception of Gender Neutrality

Following the completion of the multimodal critical discourse analysis of branded visual material for promoting gender neutral fashion, in-depth interviews were conducted. The aim of these interviews was to research how Millennial and Gen Z consumers perceive gender neutrality as presented by fashion brands. For achieving this insight, interviewees were presented with 8 images, brand material that were part of the visual analysis dataset, used as probe material. Interviewees elaborated on the visual representation of gender neutral fashion by these brands, illustrating how they perceive the conceptualization of gender neutrality through the material. Following the completion of the interviews, the information gathered were further analyzed, identifying main themes that demonstrating the common patterns of gender neutral

portrayal and visualization. In the following chapter, Conclusion, these results are compared to the identified themes of gender neutral portrayal by fashion brands examined in the previous section. The overarching theme derived from the thematic analysis was that gender neutrality is portrayed through *challenging traditional gender binary stereotypes*. The main sub-themes, assisting in the meaning making of the overarching theme, were: fashion portrayal and model portrayal. The first sub-theme of *fashion portrayal* consists of the codes unisex clothing and styling, androgynous and cross-dressing style. Consequently, the second sub-theme regarding the *model portrayal* was derived from the codes: blurring and combining stereotypically binary characteristics and gender ambiguity. These sub-themes will be further analyzed further in the chapter.

In the context of familiarity with gender neutrality and gender neutral fashion, several introductory questions were asked in order to understand the participant perception of gender neutrality and their own definition of the term. When asked about their awareness of gender neutrality, the participants were all knowledgeable of gender neutrality as a gender identity. Yet, all five of the participants expressed hesitation in defining gender neutrality since they felt that there is no proper definition for it; something that mirrors the research findings, where gender neutrality is still considered an abstract and unspecified term (Auster, 2016). Interestingly, it was noticed through their responses that all participants, either identifying as binary or non-binary, were unsure of the meaning of gender neutrality. This signifies that the limited representation of non-binary genders, such as gender neutrality, has indeed assisted in society's disregard to the expressions of the gender spectrum that do not fall under the stereotypical binary (Losty & O'Connor, 2017; Timke & O'Barr, 2017). Nevertheless, this might also signify that the popularization of similar, yet not clearly defined gender constructs, including gender neutrality, may have created confusion in society's distinction between the constructs' meanings.

Before viewing the probe material, when participants were asked to define gender neutrality in their own words, four out of the five participants indicated that the specific gender identity and expression should be distanced from any binary gender stereotyping and categorization. In their own words, gender neutrality means "*breaking the (binary) stereotype*" (Nick), not putting "*gender neutral people in a*

box” (Alex). For example, some of the participants mentioned the following regarding the definition of gender neutrality:

1. “...being gender neutral is not having anything attached to your gender. So you don't have any preconceived notions of what you're supposed to be.” (Amanda)
2. “...not being of one or the other gender, I guess. Like being completely gender neutral, or maybe not even being... in between. Like completely... not identifying something by gender.” (Alex)

As stated in the aforementioned remarks, the words highlighted as: “*not having anything attached*”, “*don't have any preconceived notions*” and “*not identifying something by gender*” carry the most meaning in the participants' perception of gender portrayal. These notions could relate to gender neutrality's challenge of binary stereotypes, by not following what society indicates. Even though the initial perception of the participants regarding gender neutrality was its disassociation with the binary, further in the interview they used binary language to anchor gender neutrality in comparison to traditional gender expressions and characteristics. This indicates further that binary norms are instilled even in younger generations and/or in non-binary individuals, as a result society's push for binary norms (Losty & O'Connor, 2017; Timke & O'Barr, 2017). Hence, within the analysis of the interviews the use of binary language will be present as used by interviewees.

4.2.1. Fashion Portrayal

From the analysis of the responses concerning the probe material from the visual dataset, the first theme, assisting in creating the overarching theme, was the perception of gender neutrality as constructed by the brands' fashion portrayal, which consists of two sub-themes. The first sub-theme was the portrayal of gender neutrality through *unisex fashion*. As previously discussed, unisex fashion evolved from a societal statement to a well-established fashion trend in which binary gendered fashion was challenged by creating genderless apparel for both men and women (Bardley et al., 2020; Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013). The second sub-theme identified was the representation of gender neutrality through *androgynous and cross-dressing styles*. These two fashion styles have historically been transcending binary stereotyped by mixing both masculine and feminine garments together, or reversing

conventionally gendered apparel worn by the opposite binary gender (Reilly & Barry, 2020; Flanagan, 2016; Reilly, 2014).

The first theme identified by all five participants was the unisex style used by these specific gender neutral fashion brands. Interestingly, this finding was found to be in agreement with the results from the visual analysis of the branded content, regarding the portrayal of gender neutrality through the creation of unisex fashion that is universal for all genders. All brands presented were found to have elements of unisex fashion, namely picturing oversized fit, neutral colors and traditionally perceived unisex pieces (sweatpants, hoodies, jackets, jean trousers and sweaters) that could also be worn by any individual regardless of their gender identity. To better illustrate the responses supporting the concept of unisex fashion, some example quotes are presented as following:

1. *“It’s pretty much the same kind of oversized, athletic wear kind of, that just fits everyone. So in my mind it’s still linked to the unisex word.”* (Dora, for the brand One DNA)
2. *“I thought this is unisex... I think something, maybe something that is unisex is also gender neutral...”* (Nick, for the brand Zara)
3. *“I’d see both (genders) wearing. It’s just very neutral, general sweater...”* (Sarah, for the brand Tanner Fletcher)
4. *“I would definitely say that both of them would easily be defined as being more gender neutral, cause... at first glance I could never say that this has to belong to like one of the two main genders.”* (Amanda, for the brand Official Rebrand)

From the literature analysis, it was identified that unisex fashion is considered one of the most accepted and well-know gender blurring styles (Reilly & Barry, 2020, p. 8; McKeage et al., 2015). The specific fashion style has achieved to create a ‘neutral’ space within fashion and society where genderless clothing, in regards to the binary, is accepted and not criticized (Bardley et al., 2020; McKeage et al., 2015; Prosser, 2016). Thus, when participants mentioned specifically that the fashion portrayed *“just fits everyone”* (Dora); *“could never say that this has to belong to like one of the two main genders”* (Amanda); or *“unisex is also gender neutral”* (Nick), they directly link gender neutrality to the portrayal unisex fashion, meaning that the

clothes presented in the images were deemed as genderless, appropriate for all both binary and non-binary individuals. Hence, it can be suggested that consumers were seeing gender neutral fashion as an extension of unisex fashion, where both fashions are distant from any gender categorization, especially the socially accepted binary.

Furthermore, the second theme identified was that gender neutral fashion is portrayed through androgynous and cross-dressing styles. Participants mentioned that the combination of feminine and masculine characteristics in the design and styling of the garments stood out in most of the probe material images. Through the literature examination, it was defined that in fashion the mash-up of stereotypically masculine and feminine garments, fabrics, fits and designs are associated with the androgynous style (McKeage et al. 2015; Reilly, 2014, p. 7; Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013). To better illustrate this finding, some example quotes will be examined, as stated by several interviewees when explaining the combination of masculinity and femininity seen in these brands. Dora (for the brand One DNA) stated that *“So that's like for me, an interesting, um, combination that it's something that's traditionally considered as a masculine, um, fabric to have the pinstripe, but it's in this cut that's kind of feminine.”* In the specific case, the interviewee was describing a pair of trousers, associating its pin striped fabric to fabrics used mostly for men’s tailored suits; while comparing the trouser’s cut to the feminine “balloon” style. Through the responses from all five participants, it was visible that they had preconceived notions of what is feminine and masculine fashion, which intensifies the discourse that fashion and advertising have and still are conveying society’s binary stereotypes. Similarly, Alex (for the brand Gucci) mentioned *“this could be easily regarded as a, like a mash up... You throw in a dress and a pair of trousers and suddenly you're gender neutral, like it's just a mash up.”* With this quote the participant perfectly explained that within our society garments are indeed associated and defined by their style as men’s or women’s wear; but at the same time gender neutrality is *“just like that,”* easily portrayed by simply combining stereotypically masculine and feminine garments. Furthermore, Amanda mentioned (for the brand One DNA) that *“the heel is the thing that sets it apart from the usual... because it's not very usual to see a man in heels.”* Again it is understood that heeled shoes are stereotypically associated with females (Pounders, 2018; Rajendrah et al., 2017; Ricciardelli et al., 2010); and men, as the model in the image was described by the interviewee, wearing heels is something ‘unusual’ for society’s

standards. Thus, these fashion brands were found that they portray gender neutrality by capitalizing and furthering the androgynous style, aiming to challenge the binary archetypes that are still existing in the consumers' perception.

As aforementioned, cross-dressing was identified by participants as one of the styles used by fashion brands when portraying gender neutrality. Many of the interviewees mentioned cross-dressing as “*gender reversal*”, indicating that participants categorized both garments and models as belonging to one of the binary genders; where brands styled presumably male models with presumably women's wear, and vice versa. Moreover, two participants, Amanda and Alex, related the portrayal of cross-dressing to individuals doing “*drag*” or “*being performer(s)*.” In performing arts, drag performers were usually male impersonators who cross-dress and portray female characters (Baker, 1994, p.17). This indicates that cross-dressing is still seen as a discriminated fashion expression, not being socially accepted as a fashion style, only with the exception of performing (Reilly & Barry, 2020; p. 132; Flanagan, 2016). Even though the drag scene has recently gained popularity through mass media, with television shows such as “*RuPaul's Drag Race*”, it is still stigmatized as a marginalized within society type of performance and fashion (McCormack & Wignall; 2021). Additionally, both Amanda and Alex used the term “*androgynous*” when describing the gender reversal of masculinity and femininity in the brand fashion and styling. This indicates that gender neutrality is associated with the androgynous style, a well-established fashion style, in the perception of consumers. These findings further enhance that social stereotypes exist, with consumers gendering the images they viewed according to the binary. Moreover, both androgynous and cross-dressing styles were identified by participants as styles incorporated when brands portray and visualize gender neutral fashion.

4.2.2. Model Portrayal

By conducting the thematic analysis the second theme identified through the responses regarding the probe material, was the portrayal of models in gender neutral fashion. Models were categorized in two sub-themes: *mixing stereotypically binary characteristics* in beauty and styling and *gender ambiguous models*. Through the interview process, participant responses hinted that the socially constructed norms for gender portrayal are still in force, something that correlates with the findings of the

theoretical framework (Ellemers, 2018; Patterson & Elliot, 2002; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). The comparison to what is socially acceptable as masculine or feminine was mentioned in several occasions within the interviews.

According to the participants, fashion brands were found to mix stereotypically binary characteristics in the models' appearance, with presumably female models looking more masculine and presumed male models looking more feminine. Characteristics such as long or dyed hair and makeup were described by participants as feminine; while short hair, facial hair or lack of makeup were defined as masculine. It is important to note that similar binary categorizations were identified through the literature as what is stereotypically promoted through advertising as feminine and masculine beauty (Pounders, 2018; Rajendrah et al., 2017; Frank, 2014; Ricciardelli et al., 2010). Some indicative statements from the interview transcripts can highlight better this finding:

1. *“I really liked the makeup and like the contrast with the hairy chest. I think it creates a beautiful contrast.”* (Amanda, for the brand Official Rebrand)
2. *“I guess it would be, again like the contrast and the expression uh. You don't see traditional, like male model, you know, short hair, clean cut and everything. You see longer hair, or more fancy, or like a dyed hair in different color. You see makeup. So you're immediately assuming that, uh, this is definitely something out of the norm.”* (Alex, for the brand Official Rebrand)
3. *“The more female person do the more male pose and style the more male with a more female pose.”* (Sarah, for the brand One DNA images)

As indicated, participants categorized the beauty styling and even the poses according to social binary stereotypes, in an attempt to explain the contrast of male presenting models wearing makeup; or even binary presenting models pictured in poses that are usually portrayed by models of the opposite binary gender. Literature indicated that society, especially through advertising, reinforced physical characteristics of males and females; as well as stereotyping the poses in which male and female models are usually presented (Timke & O'Barr, 2017; Grau & Zotos, 2016; Bell & Milic, 2002; Ewen & Ewen, 1992; Goffman, 1979). Through the responses, participants indicated that this challenge of the binary stereotypes by fashion brands, enhance gender neutrality's portrayal as *“a beautiful contrast”*

(Amanda) that is “*out of the norm*” (Alex). This indicates that consumers, even within these younger generations, have preconceived notions about how men and women are expected to look like; where anything deviating from the stereotypical binary is seen as unusual. Therefore, it can be suggested that fashion brands deliberately select to portray gender neutrality by using unusual, non-traditional models, as a means of challenging the stereotypes that do exist in consumer perception.

Moreover, the second sub-theme regarding the model portrayal, identified from the analysis of responses from the probe material, was the gender ambiguity of the models. Gender ambiguous models, with unclear binary gender characteristics have been used in gender blurring fashion, aiming to distance the model and the garments worn by it from stereotypical binary associations (Reilly & Barry 2020; Nicholas, 2019; Allwood, 2018). All five participants identified the portrayal of gender ambiguity, mentioning in several occasions that they had difficulty determining the gender of the models pictured; yet, as Sarah mentioned, the ambiguity of the models “*makes it (the photograph/result) gender neutral;*” while Alex expressed that these models do not “*have to be defined by a gender or anything, which fits the clothing and the concept.*” Both statements indicate that in the perception of consumers the ambiguity of the model’s gender, being unable to categorize them as female or male, assists in creating a visual representation of gender neutrality through fashion. It can be further suggested that gender neutrality is achieved by distancing not just garment stereotypes, but also beauty stereotypes, creating a complete visual identity that cannot be specified by genders. This discourse bares similarities with the description of gender neutrality as an expression that is not specified under one gender (Savage, 2014).

Similarly, further findings enhance the aforementioned discourse; one participant mentioned that gender neutral fashion brands enhanced the concept of ambiguity through the model’s beauty styling. More specifically, Dora mentioned: “*their haircuts also, um, kind of keeps you wondering if, if you're thinking in binary, whether this person is male or female, because there's elements of it, um, that are quite feminine. So like the color and the cut is kind of feminine, but also it's reminiscent of eighties mullets, which men had.*” In this example, the statement was in further supporting the model’s ambiguous physical characteristics, by highlighting the brand’s intentional hair styling to further enhance the model’s ambiguity. Hair has

been found to be a medium for gender expression, both in binary and non-binary genders (Matsuno & Budge, 2017); nevertheless, within Western societies hair styles have been stereotypically classified as either masculine or feminine (Pounders, 2018; Timke & O'Barr, 2017; Rajendrah et al., 2017; Ricciardelli et al., 2010). Hence, it could be argued that gender neutral fashion brands enhance their rejection to binary stereotypes by picturing models with non-traditional appearance, as a form of visualizing gender neutrality through their communicational material.

5. Conclusion

This final chapter will conclude the study by summarizing the current findings and discussing their implications. Initially, in this section the two research questions will be addressed, providing an answered based on the research findings. The two research questions examined were: 1. *How do fashion brands portray gender neutrality in their Instagram posts?* and 2. *How do Gen Z and Millennial consumers perceive gender neutrality as presented fashion brands on Instagram?* In continuation, the study's limitations will be presented, as well as recommendations for future research. The scope of the present study was to explore the relatively understudied field of gender neutrality in fashion. In order to answer the questions, two sub-studies were applied: 1) multimodal critical discourse analysis with elements of thematic analysis, examining the visual portrayal of gender neutrality as constructed by fashion brands on Instagram and campaign photo shoots, and 2) thematic analysis on in-depth interviews conducted, aiming to identify how millennial and Gen Z consumers perceive gender neutrality as portrayed by the aforementioned fashion brands.

In studying the first sub-question, regarding the portrayal of gender neutrality through fashion brands, a visual discourse analysis was conducted, investigating 30 Instagram posts by gender neutral fashion brands, and 5 campaign photo shoots from gender neutral fashion lines created by brands which traditionally produce separate lines for women and men. The research indicated that brands have used similar tactics and patters when portraying gender neutrality through their fashion designs, models selection, photo shoot setting and advertising copy/text. The overarching theme of all four elements was found to be that fashion brands portray gender neutrality by challenging binary gender stereotypes as constructed within Western societies. Gender neutral fashion, was found to draw inspiration from existing fashion styles that are commonly associated with non-traditional binary representations. More specifically, the content included a plethora of garments characterized as unisex, a fashion style created to hide society's gender distinction by creating genderless clothes suitable initially for both men and women (Bardley et al., 2020; McKeage et al., 2015; Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013). Gender neutral fashion has been characterized as the evolution of unisex style (Madsen, 2018; La Rose, 2016), something that could be further indicated through the findings of this study.

Additionally, gender neutral fashion style was found to portray elements of androgynous and cross-dressing styles; both of which are styles related to fashion movements that historically have opposed to the binary stereotypes by either mixing traditionally gendered clothes into one outfit, or entirely wearing garments that are stereotypically categorized for the opposite binary gender (Reilly & Barry, 2020; Flanagan, 2016; McKeage et al., 2015; Arvabitudou & Gasouka, 2013). Hence, it can be suggested that fashion brands, by taking inspiration from these fashion movements, aim to further associate gender neutral fashion with the cause of challenging the binary stereotypes. Furthermore, regarding the model portrayal indicated that fashion brands select to use binary looking models with characteristics associated stereotypically with the opposite birth-assigned sex, as well as gender ambiguous models. Both characteristics assisted in portraying gender neutrality as anything but binary, blurring the stereotypical association and distinction between masculine and feminine beauty (Reilly & Barry, 2020).

Moreover, through the analysis of theory it was found that an image's setting many times conveys meaning, communication further the values and ideas presented in the image (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 52). Within the data the setting selection of the photo shoots was found to further enhance gender neutrality. The most common settings were found to be neutral, with almost bare backgrounds, mainly using colors that are deemed genderless (Babolhavaeiji et al., 2015), assisting in not gender characterizing the setting of the image. Nevertheless, in one distinct example the setting assisted in juxtaposing the binary genders by combining a very feminine background with a visibly masculine, further challenging the stereotypes.

Additionally, fashion brands selected to enhance gender neutrality's social visibility by outdoor photo shoots. This finding can be translated as an attempt to further enhance visibility and inclusion of non-binary gender expressions, such as gender neutrality, in societies that currently marginalize and criticize non-binary expressions (Katari et al., 2020; Barbee & Schrock, 2019; Hastie, 2016). Finally, text included in the Instagram post and the campaign photo shoots indicated that fashion brands essentially do not emphasize gender neutrality by stating it directly or indirectly within their captions. The absence of any gender reference can relate to gender neutrality's definition as a gender identity and expression that is unspecified and distant from gender categorization (Savage, 2014), opposing to society's need to

gender label everything (Ellemers, 2018; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). In few cases, brands were found to either state the words *genderless* or *gender neutral*, emphasizing further through the text the visual portrayal of gender neutrality.

In order to research the second sub-question, in respect to how Gen Z and Millennial consumers perceive gender neutrality as portrayed by fashion brands, five semi structured in-depth interviews were conducted. The participants during the interview were presented with probe material from the visual discourse analysis dataset in order to examine their perception about gender neutral portrayals. According to the findings of this study, the responses indicated two very similar elements with those determined through the visual discourse analysis. The most predominant portrayal identified by the interviews was in regards to the fashion portrayal of gender neutrality. The participants highlighted the similarity of gender neutral fashion to that of unisex fashion. As the participants clarified, unisex aesthetics were achieved by creating unisex designs, fits and styling that can address all identities and expression of the gender spectrum. Participants stated that unisex fashion, in their opinion, being practically genderless fashion, by default is gender neutral. This could relate with the literature, stating that unisex is a word/concept constructed by and reflecting an outdated binary concept, where gender neutrality will eventually become the evolution of gender neutral fashion (Madsen, 2018; La Rose, 2016). Similarly, participants indicated that fashion brands created androgynous and cross-dressing styles, fitting to gender neutrality, as all fashion styles challenge the traditional binary expectations (Reilly & Barry, 2020; McKeage et al., 2015; Arvabitudou & Gasouka, 2013).

Participants argued that the model selection of brands were also significant for portraying gender neutrality. Again, this reflects to the findings of the visual discourse analysis, where model selection was identified as one of the elements in constructing a gender neutral visual identity. All participants noticed the combination of feminine and masculine beauty and styling. As aforementioned, the molding of the traditional binary gendered characteristics can assist brands in enhancing the neutrality of their fashion by challenging stereotypical binary portrayals that dictate how men and women are expected to look (Timke & O'Barr, 2017). Moreover, participants identified portrayal of gender neutrality via gender ambiguity. Ambiguity was perceived through the use of models whose gender was not distinguishable from their

physical appearance; something they claimed was unusual but fitting to the concept of gender neutrality. This finding further enhanced that fashion brands have assisted in creating a gender neutral portrayal, where the social constructs of gender labeling do not apply.

Through the entire research process it was identified that several concepts regarding non-binary gender expressions were still remaining undefined. Gender neutrality, as found through the literature review, still has an abstract definition (Auster, 2016); something that was reinforced by the interview responses as well. The millennial and Gen Z participants, being the generations who are more conscious about gender expressions (Ipsos, 2021; Powers, 2019; Muth, 2018), were found to struggle in describing gender neutrality, reinforcing that this gender expression lacks clear definition. This could presumably be a social issue emerging from the plethora of non-binary genders that have recently gained more visibility. In many gender expressions it is found that the definitions are overlapping, without clear distinctions (Richards et al., 2016), something that also translated to the participants confusion about gender neutrality's definition.

In conclusion, the analysis of both visual discourse analysis and in-depth interviews contributed in consistent, comparable and almost identical results. Gender neutral fashion brands portray gender neutrality by challenging the stereotypical gender associations that Western societies have historically constructed, especially through advertising and fashion. It was further identified, that Gen Z and Millennial consumers identify the portrayal of gender neutral fashion as an opposition to what is deemed socially acceptable and expected.

5.1. Limitations

When conducting a research, focusing on an unexplored subject such as gender neutrality and its portrayal, there are limitations emerging from the minimal availability on prior studies and theories. The most prominent limitation throughout the research was the lack of non-binary descriptors, since binary stereotypical language was used in the analysis, furthering the existing gender-binary approach.

By analyzing 35 branded images and interviewing five participants, this study could be considered an introductory study, acting as a pilot for future research

addressing non-binary gender portrayals in society. The research addresses gender neutrality as portrayed by Western fashion brands; nevertheless, it would be suggested that further research regarding gender neutral portrayals in other cultures and societies would be conducted as Western and Eastern fashion portrayals has many differences (Yang, 2019). Thus, it would assist in further enhancing the knowledge about non-binary portrayals.

Furthermore, regarding the in-depth interviews, it can be argued that the number of interviews is a small scale that might not be representative in a larger scale. Therefore, in the future both qualitative and quantitative research could be conducted in further understanding the perception of consumers regarding gender neutral portrayals. Even though the participants represented several gender expressions, both binary and non-binary, the lack of a gender neutral participant needs to be noted. It would be important to examine their personal expression of gender neutrality, as well as their perception on gender neutral fashion, as it directly relates to their own gender identity. Such study would offer rich insight on gender neutral identity and expression, which has yet to be achieved. Similarly, the participants interviewed were all Europeans, limiting the diversity of the results.

Future research should study further the portrayal of gender neutral fashion, as there have been a plethora of fashion brands that have introduced gender neutral lines in the western markets. Moreover, a comparative analysis of gender neutral and stereotypical binary gender representation through fashion would be of importance for furthering the academic knowledge on communication and gender studies.

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7. Appendices

7.1. Appendix A: List of Data Set for Visual Analysis

	Fashion Brand	Year of Publication	Platform	Link
1	One DNA	2022	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CaSZ5y5uk4W/
2	One DNA	2022	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CaIKzqpuREV/
3	One DNA	2022	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CZZu6FZuk8m/
4	One DNA	2022	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CZXz5CcAoAm/
5	One DNA	2022	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CZVQ8PXgxeS/
6	One DNA	2022	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CYZh_Cau1PH/
7	One DNA	2021	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CYFD-Z9uIUW/
8	One DNA	2021	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CX87yTuu8y1/
9	One DNA	2021	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CX3yAPBgX6/
10	One DNA	2021	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CX1Sc89uCLp/
11	Official Rebrand	2022	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cau2baFumNE/
12	Official Rebrand	2022	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/Caicfu0lu0A/
13	Official Rebrand	2022	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CaVId51li3v/
14	Official Rebrand	2022	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CaP_h98pX-m/
15	Official Rebrand	2022	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CaLAnB2Fvt5/
16	Official Rebrand	2022	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CZz3gnXITUJ/
17	Official Rebrand	2022	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CZubFUSFOS_/
18	Official Rebrand	2022	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CZh2OcMFSTX/
19	Official Rebrand	2022	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CYwfxjLnsV/
20	Official Rebrand	2021	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CXeUthsFemP/
21	Tanner Fletcher	2021	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CYfPzL5Ohmi/
22	Tanner Fletcher	2021	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CTxI7U5L3EA/
23	Tanner Fletcher	2021	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CT0GNLGLPq/
24	Tanner Fletcher	2021	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CT2rRpvrrds/
25	Tanner Fletcher	2021	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CT4-C1ILzTo/
26	Tanner Fletcher	2021	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CT7tBotruAI/

27	Tanner Fletcher	2021	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CUDYTFwLAVJ/
28	Tanner Fletcher	2021	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CUNSJJa3LU6-/
29	Tanner Fletcher	2021	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CUP8KqWATDf/
30	Tanner Fletcher	2021	Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CUYL_dYLPQY/
31	Louboutin	2022	Gotham Mag	https://gothammag.com/christian-louboutin-genderless-our-angels-boots-bags
32	Pangaina	2021	Vogue	https://www.vogue.co.uk/fashion/article/pangaia-sustainable-denim
33	Zara	2016	Refinery29	https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/2016/03/105331/zara-genderless-clothing-line-2016
34	Diesel	2016	Fashion Publication	https://fashionpublication.wordpress.com/2016/04/28/genderless-fashion-in-the-media/
35	Gucci	2020	Teen Vogue	https://www.teenvogue.com/story/gucci-genderless-shopping-section-gucci-mx

7.2 Appendix B: Visual Discourse Analysis Themes

	Category	Sub-category	Definition
Visual	Fashion Portrayal	Unisex Fashion	-Use of unisex clothes that could be worn equally by men and women. -Clothes with unisex colors. -Oversized or baggy clothes hiding the gendered body.
		Androgynous Style & Cross-Dressing	-Outfits with androgynous clothes or styling. -Styling choices that could be considered cross-dressing
	Model Portrayal	Binary models with characteristics associated stereotypically with opposite birth-assigned sex	- Male/Female models downplaying their masculinity/femininity with more feminine/masculine beauty, in terms of hair, makeup, poses, facial expression.
		Gender Ambiguous Models	-Models with ambiguous gender, undetermined from their physical characteristics (body shape and the facial structure).
	Setting Selection	Neutral Background	-Studio photography with neutral/unisex colors in setting background. -Minimal or none prop materials.
		Social Visibility	-Images picturing models within an urban environment, outdoors in the city.
		Juxtaposing the Binary Genders	-Binary gendered model pictured in a room with decorations associated with the opposite binary gender.
Textual	Role of Text	Absence of gender description	-Instagram captions unrelated to gender labels or descriptions / irrelevant information in regards to gender (clothes, collection and generic description)
		Gender Neutral Characterization	-Instagram or ad captions relating to gender neutrality, including Instagram hashtags

7.3 Appendix C: Interview Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project Title and version	How do Gen Z and Millennial consumers perceive gender neutrality as presented by gender neutral fashion brands on Instagram?
Name of Principal Investigator	Joanna Kappatou
Name of Organization	Conducted for the Erasmus University of Rotterdam, Netherlands.
Purpose of the Study	You are invited to participate in this research about the visualization of gender neutrality through fashion. The purpose of this study is to identify how gender neutrality is portrayed by fashion brands in their advertising visual material.
Procedures	<p>Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed and audio recorded. The interview is expected to last approximately 60 minutes and it will be conducted via video call on the platform Zoom. You will be asked questions about gender identities and expression, as well as asked to analyze some visual material. The research is academic, and the responses you will give will be provided to the university.</p> <p>You must be between the ages 18 and 41 and be from and/or living within Europe or the United states. You must be comfortable to be interviewed in English.</p>
Potential and anticipated Risks and Discomforts	There are no obvious physical, legal or economic risks associated with participating in this study. Since the subject of gender identification and expression is a deeply personal and sensitive matter, some level of discomfort might be induced. For this reason the participant's names will be kept anonymous. During the interview, if at any point you feel uncomfortable and not wish to respond to a question, the question can and will be skipped. Your participation is voluntary and you are free to discontinue your participation at any time.
Potential Benefits	Participation in this study does not guarantee any beneficial results.
Sharing the results	These results are strictly confidential and will be shared only in the context of a university study conducted in Erasmus University of Rotterdam.

<p>Confidentiality</p>	<p>Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. No personally identifiable information will be reported in any research product. Moreover, only a restricted number of trained research staff from the university will have access to your responses. Within these restrictions, results of this study will be made available to you upon request.</p> <p>As indicated above, this research project involves making audio recordings of interviews with you. Transcribed segments from the audio recordings may be used in published forms (e.g., journal articles and book chapters). In the case of publication, as in the study itself, pseudonyms will be used.</p>
<p>Compensation</p>	<p>There will be no compensation available for this research.</p>
<p>Right to Withdraw and Questions</p>	<p>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalised or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.</p> <p>If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report any issue related to the research, please contact the researcher: 599899ik@student.eur.nl</p>
<p>Statement of Consent</p>	<p>Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree that you will participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.</p> <p>If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.</p>
<p>Audio recording (if applicable)</p>	<p>I consent to have my interview audio recorded</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> no</p>

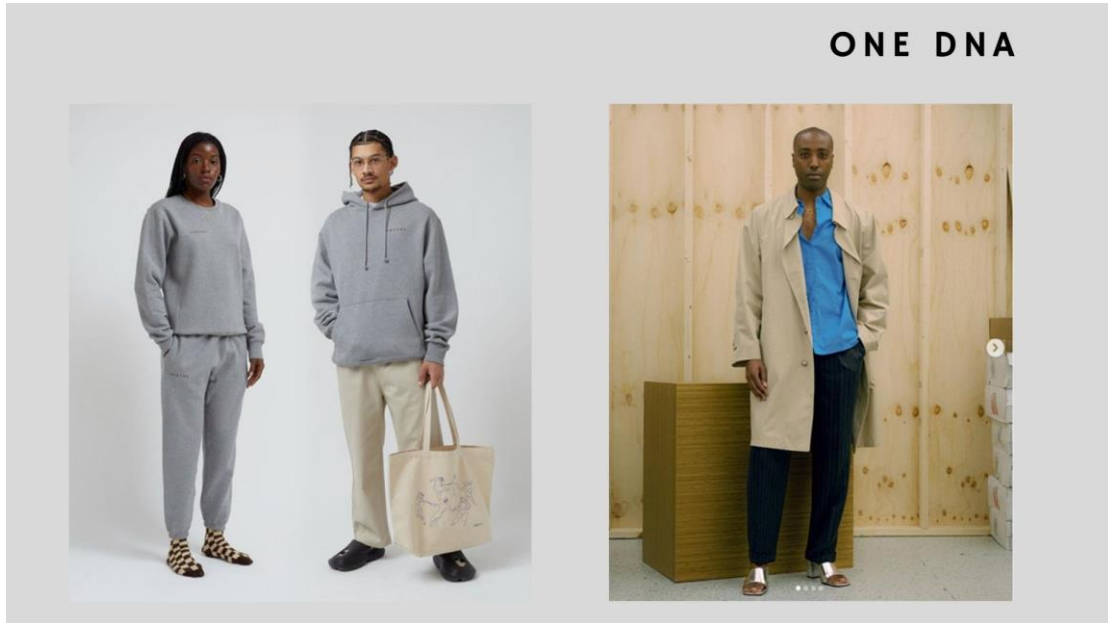
Secondary use (if applicable)	I consent to have the anonymised data be used for secondary analysis <input type="checkbox"/> yes <input type="checkbox"/> no	
Signature and Date	NAME PARTICIPANT	NAME PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR
	SIGNATURE	SIGNATURE
	DATE	DATE

7.4 Appendix D: Interview Topic Guide

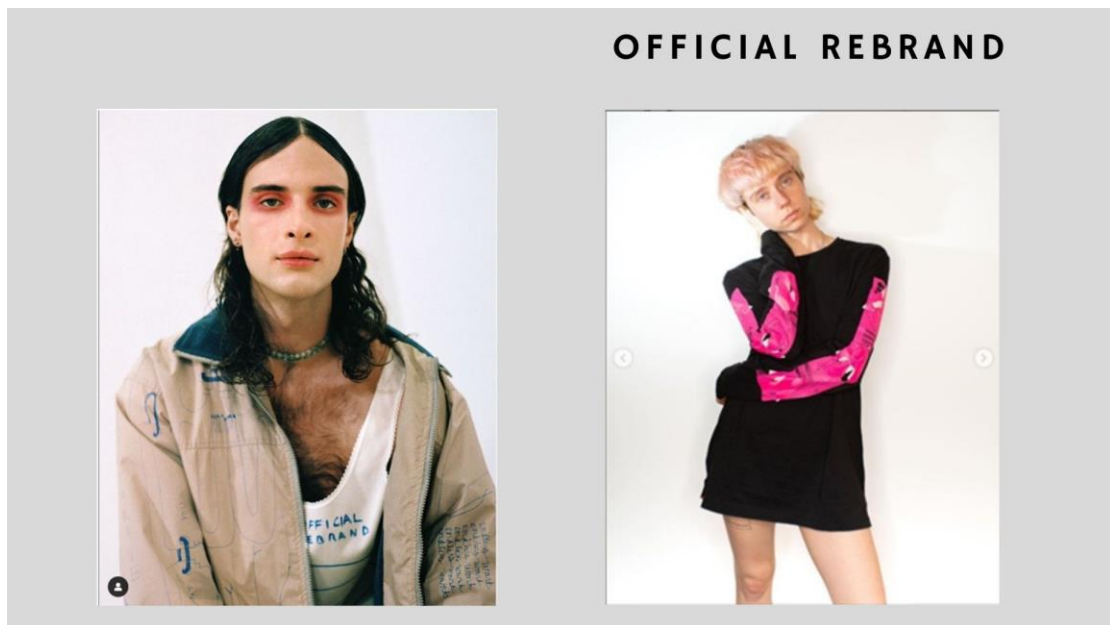
- Introduction
 - Brief introduction of myself and explanation of the study
 - Review informed consent and remind participants their rights
 - Ask participants their preferred pronouns
 - Ask permission for audio recording
- Ice breaker questions
 - Ask participant about him/her/their self
 - Small talk regarding an interesting information they provided
- Discuss the interviewee's opinion on gender expression
 - How would you describe your gender?
 - Does your gender affect your style? If yes, how?
 - How does your gender influence the fashion brands you purchase from?
- Discuss the interviewee's knowledge of gender neutrality
 - Have you heard of the term 'gender neutrality'? Do you know what it means?
 - How would you define gender neutrality in your own words?
 - What do you think gender neutrality looks like?
- Discuss the interviewee's knowledge of gender-neutral fashion
 - Do you know any specific gender neutral fashion brand? If yes, which one(s)?
 - Do you know any other brand that created a gender neutral line? If yes, which one(s)?
 - What do you think gender neutral clothing looks like? OR What do you understand/imagine/visualize by the phrase "gender neutral clothing"?
 - How would you imagine a gender neutral person/model would look like? (beauty, fashion, style)
- Material Probes
 - Can you describe the image?
 - What do you notice in these images?
 - If the participant brings up "gender neutral" → What makes you say this? OR What makes something 'gender-neutral'?

7.5 Appendix E: Interview Probe Material

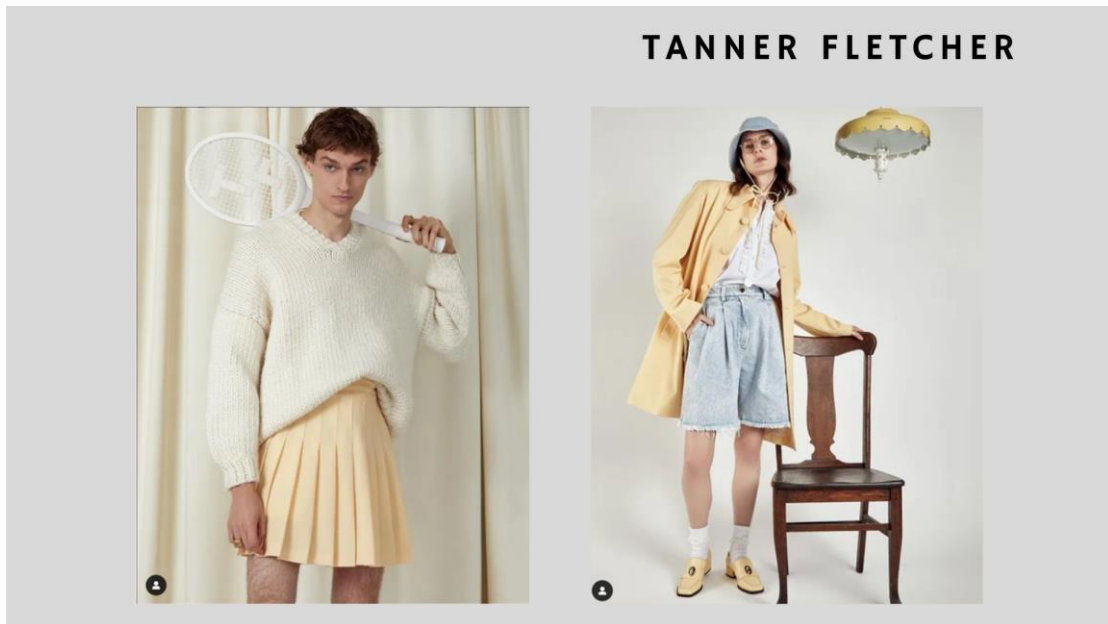
Slide 1



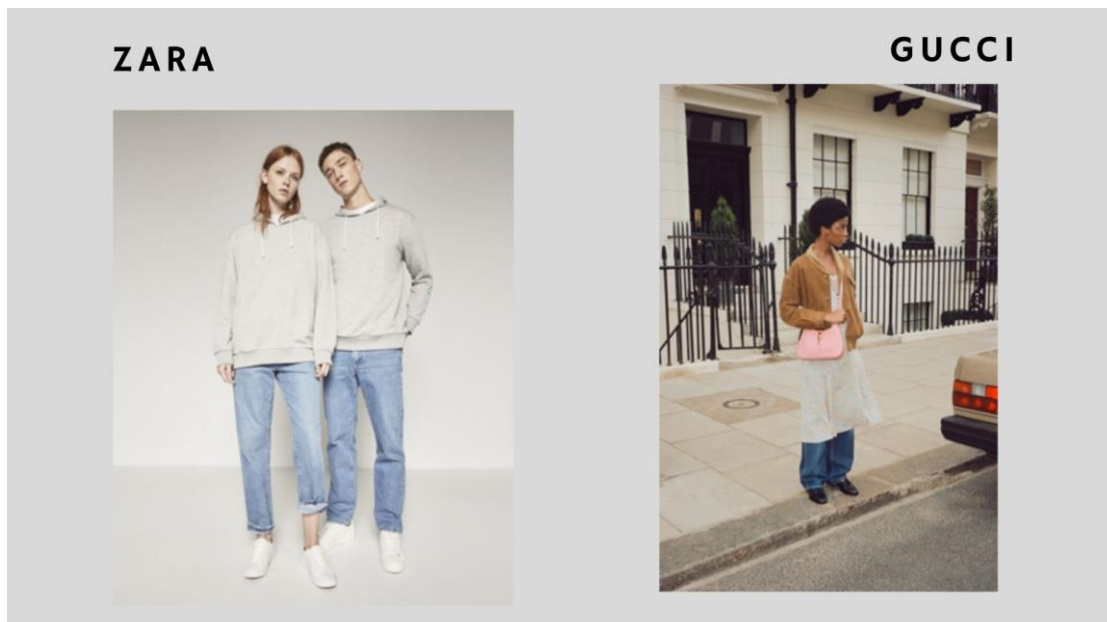
Slide 2



Slide 3



Slide 4



7.6 Appendix F: In-depth Interviews Themes

	Category	Sub-category	Definition
Coding responses regarding the probe material			
Challenging Binary Gender Stereotypical Portrayal	Fashion Portrayal	Unisex Clothes & Style	-Unisex clothing (design, fit, color) and styling -Identical (or almost identical) outfits worn by two models -Ambiguous fashion garments
		Androgynous Style & Cross-Dressing	-Gender reversal fashion (cross-dressing) -Mixing feminine and masculine clothes (androgynous style)
	Model Portrayal	Blurring & Combining stereotypically binary characteristics	-Mixing feminine and masculine beauty and styling (hair, makeup)
		Gender Ambiguous Models	-Model's gender cannot be distinguished from their physical appearance
Coding responses regarding the introductory questions			
	Perception about Gender Neutrality	In between the binary	-Identifying both as male and female at times
		Disassociation from binary categorization	-Uncategorized by gender (Feel however they want)
	Perception & Expectations about Gender Neutral Fashion	Mixing elements of both masculine & feminine fashion	-Combining clothes that are considered men's and women's wear
		Models mixing both masculine & feminine beauty & styling	-Combining hair, makeup, styling that are considered man's and women's
		Universal fashion for every gender	-Clothes that are not binary labeled, suitable for all gender expressions
		Unisex clothing (plain, basics, oversized, hiding body shape)	-Oversized, basic, casual wear that fits the unisex style
		Size inclusivity	-Clothes availability in multiple sizes, fitting all gendered bodies