Stitching together fashion dualities: Unveiling the influence of social norms and cultural values in fashion that redefines gender norms

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ABSTRACT

The concept of gender and its associated implications are undergoing constant change, blurring traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity as expressed through clothing. Many individuals are questioning the societal gender identities imposed upon them and reconsidering their choices in fashion. This presents a pivotal moment for the fashion industry to recognize and adapt to these shifting dynamics. This thesis explores how fashion label owners, designers and retailers who through their work defy the established gender norms are motivated by these current developments. Specifically, it explores how the changing social reality and cultural values have affected the social and economic impact of this type of fashion - leading to the question central to this thesis: *How do social norms and cultural values influence the social and economic impact of fashion that challenges traditional gender norms?*

The theoretical framework builds upon theory on the social nature of fashion, gender and their dynamics, consumers behavior based gender, the descriptions of fashion that challenges gender norms and the current market and future development of such a market. The research methods used was qualitative, using semi-structured interviews and grounded theory.

The respondents acknowledge the evolving landscape of gender and leveraging the social reach of fashion, express a desire to transform the identity of the fashion industry. This shift doesn't necessarily entails completely dismantling the concept of gender but rather creating a more inclusive fashion environment. Furthermore, there is a discernible market demand for increased gender fluidity in the fashion, primarily driven by Generation Z consumers. However, the extent to which this market will integrate into the mainstream fashion market still remains unclear. Additionally, the practices employed by these actors do not significantly differ from those in the mainstream fashion market.

KEYWORDS: fashion, gender, institutional isomorphism, consumer behaviour

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1. Introduction

"The times they are a-changin'." Our perception of what is "normal" is changing as a result of societal developments, and individuals are adapting as a consequence. The idea of gender as a social construction rather than a biological trait is becoming more complicated as societal institutions and norms are consistently questioned. The ultimate goal is to make the world a more inclusive place for individuals to express themselves however they choose, liberated from traditional expectations, behaviors and characteristics previously connected with one's gender identification.

Fashion constantly evolves to keep up with these developments as it constitutes a form of self-expression with social elements. But the connection between society and fashion is still complex, creating a chicken or egg situation which leaves open the question of whether social behaviors are a reflection of fashion trends or vice versa. This study focuses on the latter, examining the goals driving the fashion industry's efforts to stay relevant to the current social reality.

The inspiration for this research came from the observation of a rising trend toward gender-neutral clothing, which is corroborated by recent surveys that reveal that more than half of Generation Z customers have purchased fashion products that go against their biological gender identity. This fashion trend raises concerns about the future of the fashion industry and what will be deemed "normal" to wear. Given that the gender binary characterizes the mainstream fashion market, this shift provides both opportunities for growth and challenges to the traditional approaches of fashion suppliers.

Despite being niche, there is already an established market of fashion brands, designers and retailers who have embraced this movement, labeling their work as unisex, genderless, gender-neutral, or genderfluid, and defying traditional gender norms in their work. These professionals avoid categorizing their creations and collections as being worn by "men" or "women," and some of them even promote their products in unconventional ways, such as by presenting male models with apparel that is meant to be worn by women.

The intersection of gender and fashion has been studied in the past, particularly in relation to how biological gender affects attitudes and identities. These studies demonstrate how cultural norms can encourage stereotypical beliefs that may prevent people from expressing themselves freely. Clothing, as a fundamental aspect of our appearance, is one of the characteristics that society expects individuals to conform to based on their biological gender. Hence, males and females conform to certain clothing norms that align with their

perceived masculine and feminine characteristics, leading to different ways of self-presentation based on gender. While older research indicated that both genders tended to adhere to these norms, recent studies reveal that gender fluidity and the breaking of traditional norms are gaining prominence.

However, there is a gap in the literature regarding how the supply side of fashion is dealing with these changes. This study aims to address this gap by examining how fashion brand owners, designers and retailers are addressing this kind of fashion that breaks traditional gender norms and is created by the current social framework and cultural values. This inquiry leads to the following research question: How do social norms and cultural values influence the social and economic impact of fashion that challenges traditional gender norms? The aim is to investigate the motivations behind this phenomenon, the demand and the potential of this market. The sub-questions that will guide this analysis are as follows: 1) How do fashion suppliers understand and define fashion that challenges traditional gender fashion? 2) What factors influence the decision of fashion suppliers to produce fashion that challenges traditional gender norms? 3) What is the current market demand for fashion that challenges traditional gender norms and what is the potential future development of such a market? 4) What practices do fashion suppliers use to create and promote fashion products that challenge traditional gender fashion?

This thesis is structured into several chapters: a theoretical framework exploring the concepts guiding this research, a discussion of the research methods, a presentation of the results, and a discussion of the findings in relation to the research question and existing literature. Finally, the thesis concludes with a summary of the research implications and potential future directions.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Dynamics Between Gender and Fashion

Clothing serves as the primary means through which individuals shape and present their appearance, encompassing various elements such as shoes, hairstyles, accessories, and even cosmetics, which all contribute to the overall configuration of one's appearance. It is undoubtedly true that apparel acts as a powerful communication tool and has been the handiest solution to conveying social messages visually (Felshin, 1995). Indeed, garments wield significant influence over the formation of social identity, shaping the way individuals present themselves to society. While they have the functional character of providing both safety and practicality, they also make statements about social class, economic status, attitudes, as well as the desire to comply with social norms or deviate from them (Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013). When casually deciding on what to wear every day, individuals are typically influenced by historical and social factors, rather than conscious self-reflection. Additionally, individuals often seek recognition both as part of a team and as an individual personality (Dodd et al., 1998). In general, fashion mediates the negotiation of many identities, often through provocation of social expectations, as it is closely connected to the representation of the body. Despite just being considered a sign of social frivolity, fashion carries social significance since it works as a clear representation of society (Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013).

Like fashion, gender is a concept with significant societal implications. In contrast to being intrinsic, gender is characterized as being formed by society and culture and having a variety of social, cultural, and psychological components (Goulding & Saren, 2009). The concepts of masculinity and femininity are established based on what society expects from each gender. These two ideas share stereotypical attributes that are socially manufactured representations of gender based on social expectations rather than the innate traits of people (Lloyd & Duveen, 1993). As a result, when we talk about a person's gender features, we not only refer to their biological traits; but also their social nature, which has an impact on their social status (Bardey et al., 2020). From a critical perspective, the binary nature of gender has contributed to the expansion of a number of stereotypes, of acceptable identities, and to the imposition of expected behaviors. People who don't conform to these expressions and ways of being are therefore constrained and shunned (Rocha-Rodrigues, 2016).

The visual manifestation of gender identity, personality, and sexual orientation through fashion is directly related to gender construction (Kacen, 2000; Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013). There are unwritten norms concerning appropriate gender attire in society. As noted, clothing is defined by society for both men and women, and cultural norms and expectations are intimately related to appearance, particularly clothes, since it is the most significant representation of identity (Akdemir, 2018). Because it is mostly segregated along gender lines, Western fashion has always supported a largely binary gender structure (Clark & Rossi, 2020). Therefore, the issue of the interaction between gender and fashion is significant and depends on cultural norms and expectations. However, rather than merely reiterating these gender preconceptions, fashion may frequently be a force in the deconstruction of gender stereotypes by creating examples that contradict conventional standards and advocate for the abolition of gender labels (Clark & Rossi, 2020; Dai et al., 2022).

2.2 Consumer Behaviour in the Context of Gender

Since the fashion market is still dominated by the gender binary, individuals are likely to develop different behaviors based on gender when it comes to purchasing fashion. Older studies have suggested that people tend to dress in accordance with their gender identity and adhere to these social attitudes (Crane, 2012; Palan, 2001). This is described by Bem (1981) as the gender schema theory, which contends that people develop and show traits, attitudes, and behaviors that are consistent with their gender roles. Based on these roles, in the study of Woodruffe-Burton (1998) men have been described as "hunters", and women as "gatherers". Accordingly, when it comes to fashion shopping, men prefer to spend less time and effort on it, whereas women tend to invest more into looking for clothes, evaluating them, and visiting more stores. For that reason, fashion retailers and brands are forced to adopt different managerial perspectives when addressing individuals of different genders (Gupta & Gentry, 2016).

It has also been demonstrated that, when it comes to dressing up, men, in particular, are more concerned with being authentic to themselves and with practicality than with feeling special or making a statement with their appearance (Van Der Laan & Velthuis, 2016). In addition to conforming to their social roles, males' perspectives on fashion can be influenced by various other factors. Because they worry about deviating from their traditional role as a "protector", many men are reluctant to adopt a greater interest in taking care of their appearance and following fashion trends (Gentry et al., 2012). Another issue is their sexual

orientation, as heterosexual men may be concerned that such behavior threatens their masculinity and might be interpreted as a homosexual sign (Gupta & Gentry, 2016). Men are even more wary of "unisex" clothing because they believe it to be more feminine and lacking in elements from both genders, according to a study by Bardey et al. (2020).

Nevertheless, a few recent studies have found a slight shift in the way that men behave as consumers. The concept of masculinity has been revived as men have started to consume fashion more actively (Koksal, 2013) and are now buying products to keep up with trends (AlMutawa, 2015). This change can be detected largely depending on the age and generation. Men between the ages of 18 and 35 are more fashion-conscious than older men; most of them are starting to support unisex clothing and become more open to the idea of gender equality in clothing (Dai et al., 2022). However, this attitude does not necessarily represent the views of the majority of the male population. Therefore, even though there are changes in how men perceive fashion purchases, they may not completely step out of their gender norms. Overall, a man is less likely to be interested in fashion the more he has invested in his gender identity (Gould & Stern, 1989). This emphasizes a direct link between man's traditional gender identity and his disinterest in fashion.

On the other hand, female shoppers are thought to make up the majority of individuals that consume fashion, which is why earlier research on consumer behavior has tended to focus on them and suggests that they are more closely associated with shopping than the opposite gender (Zeithaml, 1985; Miller, 1998; Mitchell and Walsh, 2004; Catterall et al., 2005). These studies have demonstrated how women are generally more interested in fashion, as expected by their societal roles. Therefore, it has been simpler for them to be more open to attempting new things as a result of society's higher acceptance of what they are wearing.

As noted, age and generation are important aspects that affect how an individual views fashion. The concept of the gender binary in terms of fashion buying is gradually evolving for younger generations. The data indicate that younger customers are showing an increase in desire for genderless/gender-neutral items. Consumers from Generation Z in particular are responsible for this shift in the mainstream market. This is partly because in the majority of Gen Z consumers, the idea that individuals shouldn't be defined or constrained by their gender prevails (Elan, 2020). Furthermore, according to surveys, 56% of them have started shopping outside their designated gendered area (Marci, 2020), and searches for the term "genderless fashion" among them has increased by 52% (Lyst, 2019). Given that Generation Z consumers will account for the largest part of purchasing power in the next few years, their attitudes

toward fashion trends are critical to the direction of the fashion market. Furthermore, a compelling argument is being made for the expansion of this market through the increased acceptability of unisex fashion among people between the ages of 18 and 35 (Dai et al., 2022).

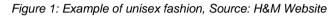## 2.3 Defining Unisex, Androgynous and Genderless Fashion

Since there is a growing interest in defying established gender norms in clothing and appearance, it is necessary to look more closely at the types of fashion that promote this movement. The concepts of "unisex," "genderless," and "androgynous" fashion, as they are described in the literature, will be explored in this part, along with some redefines and issues they carry. By understanding the evolving landscape of gender expression in fashion, we can gain insight into the motivations behind the adoption of these alternative approaches.

2.3.1 Unisex Fashion

Unisex clothing, defined as garments that both males and females can wear, has been present for decades, with Levis's jeans being a famous and timeless example. Unisex clothing has been used to refer to clothing designed for male bodies exhibiting feminine signifiers, and vice versa, with females, for example, being dressed in traditionally male silhouettes (Bardey et al., 2020; Oetojo, 2017). For practical purposes, this style uses mostly oversized silhouettes because unisex clothing has to fit both the male and female physical frame (Sherman, 2014). At the core of unisex fashion is clothing that is culturally and physically appropriate for both genders. Because most customers still have a strong attachment to their gender roles, "unisex" fashion is still a niche market and has not entered the mainstream (Xu, 2022).

The concept of unisex clothing may present several practical and conceptual limitations. The main challenge with "unisex" apparel is trying to accommodate various body types. Although there are already considerable variations in the dimensions and sizes of individuals of the same sex, it has been stated that it is considerably harder to design clothing that would fit both genders (Bardey et al., 2020). Moreover, the notions of masculinity and femininity can vary among (sub)cultures. What is deemed feminine in one may be perfectly acceptable for a man to wear in another, and vice versa. Therefore, based on Bardey et al. (2020), a piece of clothing's gender is determined by cultural and social standards, and giving it a name just serves to reinforce that perception. Contradicting the idea of equality, unisex clothing generally has a masculine look (Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013) and attracts the

interest of women more than that of men (Paoletti, 2015). Additionally, rejecting the recognition of many identities and the presence of diverse sexualities overstresses diversity (Arnold, 2001) and might result in the elimination of individual rights (it is strong so maybe mention he is saying it) (Schord, 1987).

Figure 1: Example of unisex fashion, Source: H&M Website

2.3.2 Androgynous Fashion

Androgynous fashion is a trend that seeks to blur gender boundaries by unifying male and female aesthetics into one style. The idea of truly androgynous clothing combines the strengths of both men's and women's clothing, eliminating their respective disadvantages (Dai et al., 2022). However, this style is challenging since it requires a thin, youthful, and boyish figure, which excludes the majority of men and women (Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013). This study does not touch upon the themes of androgynous fashion since it lacks a clear definition in the existing literature and its characteristics make it seem more like a subcategory than a fashion style itself.

2.3.3 Genderless Fashion

Genderless fashion refers to a contemporary movement within the fashion industry that seeks to blur traditional gender roles and eliminate gender labels and has started to become popular

among consumers (Bernard, 2018; Kerpen, 2019; Segalov, 2020). According to Dai et al., (2022), genderless fashion has developed into a means of spreading awareness of gender equality and the value of staying true to oneself. The idea behind it is to develop products that reflect people's personalities from a neutral perspective, independent of gender (Kim et al., 2022). The fashion revolutionaries behind this trend aim to eliminate the binary boundaries between masculinity and femininity and establish a culture where people can express themselves freely without being restricted by conventional gender norms.

It becomes clear that although genderless fashion is often associated with unisex clothing, the former is distinct from the latter. Genderless fashion relies on neutral clothing pieces that reject historical and cultural stereotypes, whereas unisex clothing is designed to fit and flatter both male and female bodies and is often associated with basic models from men's wardrobes.

Figure 2: Example of genderless fashion, Source: Veggie-Collection by Lianne Janssen

The expressions "agender," "gender fluidity," "gender-neutral," "gender diversity," and "gender-free" are often used interchangeably with the term "genderless" (Robinson, 2019). This illustrates that defining genderless fashion is not a straightforward task. This is partly due to the fact that our sense of gender has historically been constructed based on binary characteristics centered on ideas of biological sex and does not fit into any established format causing discomfort (Luna & Barros, 2019). Additionally, the concept of genderless

fashion evokes several attitudes that contradict its main principle. The concept of genderless clothing is typically connected with males dressing in ways that are more typical of women's attire or with the mingling of gender stereotypes found in people whose biological sex is frequently unclear (Luna & Barros, 2019). As a result, the term "genderless" could be seen as paradoxical because it acknowledges the existence of norms even when acting in opposition to them.

The confusion in the existing literature around these terms is an opportunity for further research. Part of this study is to clarify these definitions through discussion with actors from the field that specialize in this kind of fashion.

2.4 The Current Market for Fashion that challenges gender norms

Several scholarly studies have investigated the emerging growth of fashion that is challenging the gender norms in the market and its future development (Akdemir, 2018; Luna & Barros, 2019; Bardey et al., 2020; Clark and Rossi, 2020; Kim et al., 2022; Dai et al., 2022). This trend has already gathered attention and has been adopted, either on a large or small scale, by many fashion brands and designers. Fashion designers such as Tom Ford, luxury brands including Prada and Gucci, and even high-street brands such as ASOS and H&M, have embraced in the past unisex fashion and applied it to their designs and products (Clark and Rossi, 2020). Moreover, the use of more color palettes and different forms indicates a slight shift toward greater acceptance of this trend (Akdemir, 2018). Fashion runway shows which are an ideal platform for designers to introduce new concepts to the audience have also presented unisex or gender-neutral pieces, or mixed both sexes in one show (Abnett, 2016). Moreover, popular culture and celebrities play a significant role in promoting and creating these new trends (Rinallo & Golfetto, 2006). As a result, consumer perceptions are influenced, leading them to adopt and follow these trends. A representative example is the public appearances of two influential figures in pop culture, Harry Styles and Timothée Chalamet, with looks that go against the traditional idea of male clothing (Elan, 2020).

Figure 3: Harry Styles in the Met Gala 2019,
Source: Theo Wargo / WireImage

It should be noted that there has been a growing number of fashion designers and brands who have specifically embraced the terms "genderless", "gender-neutral" and "unisex" to define their collections or underlie the philosophy of their work. These fashion suppliers have adopted practices that defy the conventional distinctions between men and women, evident in their digital and physical stores as well as the clothing they produce.

Except for these rare cases of fashion actors incorporating innovative practices in traditional norms, the fashion market for challenging traditional gender norms is, as mentioned before, still considered niche (Xu, 2022). The fashion industry is still perceived through a binary lens that utilizes opposite terms such as man/woman, male/female, and blue/pink in order to separate departments, sectors, and dressers (Luna & Barros, 2019). This binary opposition is used as a function of the marketing strategy by professionals in the field (Lamb, Hair, & McDaniel, 2004). For instance, embracing feminine and masculine gender stereotypes could be considered a successful strategy in advertising(Rocha-Rodrigues, 2016).

2.5 Future Developments for Fashion that challenges gender norms

The views of the existing scholarly articles regarding the emergence and the future of this phenomenon vary and sometimes differ from each other. According to the study of Dai et al., (2022) clothing is no longer a social symbol and customers today are increasingly concerned with their own growth, following their own tastes, and seeking originality, all of which will contribute to the expansion of genderless apparel in the future. Other studies support this

hypothesis, stating that this trend is also observed in the perfume and cosmetics sector where individuals are looking to stand out regardless of gender division (Kim et al., 2022). It is acknowledged that challenging gender norms in fashion is part of a larger sociological and cultural process rather than merely a fashion moment, indicating that those in favor of it do not want to abolish gender but rather strive to redefine it (Clark & Rossi, 2020). In contrast to the aforementioned viewpoint, Akdemir (2018) states that these fashion innovators truly want to eliminate the labels of femininity and masculinity and blur this line based on the notion that garments have no gender.

It is still intriguing to speculate on how these developments would occur in the fashion industry. Butler (2004) argues that the norms we adhere to are preset, and that we always behave in accordance with them, even if we strive to replace them. Therefore, it is difficult to achieve a genuinely genderless fashion, since our conception of gender is still founded on a binary idea. This is best illustrated by the media's promotion of genderless fashion which, despite its intentions, can unintentionally perpetuate gender stereotypes rather than driving meaningful change (Luna & Baros, 2019).

2.6 Institutional Isomorphism

As social and institutional norms continue to shift towards greater acceptance of gender diversity, fashion firms are faced with the challenge of adapting their products and marketing strategies to meet the consumers' changing demands. The concept of institutional isomorphism, as proposed by DiMaggio & Powell (1983), might provide a useful framework for understanding how fashion firms respond to these changing norms.

Institutional isomorphism refers to the process by which organizations conform to prevailing norms and expectations in order to gain legitimacy and maintain social acceptance (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In the context of fashion, this means that firms are likely to adopt products and marketing strategies that challenge traditional gender norms in response to changing social norms as a way to legitimize their products and appeal to a wider audience.

However, the process of institutional isomorphism is not always straightforward or immediate. Fashion firms may encounter resistance from internal stakeholders who have traditional ideas about gender roles, or from external stakeholders, such as customers, who may not yet be entirely open to these types of products. Therefore, as businesses strive to strike a balance between the requirement for credibility and the danger of losing current customers or partners, the acceptance and spread of fashion that challenges gender norms may

be slow. Furthermore, it may be difficult to pinpoint the factors that affect the actors who decide to employ this approach. This would require setting aside other motivations, such as pursuing personal interests or generating profit, from their impulse to adapt to this shifting reality.

In general, the growing demand for fashion that challenges gender norms among younger consumers suggests that fashion firms that fail to adapt may fall behind their competitors. By understanding the process of institutional isomorphism and the factors that influence its adoption, fashion firms can better position themselves to meet the changing demands of consumers and remain competitive in an evolving market.

2.7 Expectations

Informed by previous studies some expectations can be formed regarding the effect of social norms and cultural values on the economic and social aspects of suppliers that promote fashion and challenge gender norms. The most important ones for the research could be that: 1. Fashion suppliers recognize the social aspects of fashion and gender and, together with the current state of society and their personal cultural values, play a crucial role in driving the adoption of fashion that challenges the traditional gender norms. Other expectations, based on the literature could include: 2. A large growing demand from younger consumers for fashion that challenges traditional gender norms, 3. Different interpretations and definitions regarding the terms that describe fashion that challenges traditional gender norms, 4. Male consumers are starting to grow acceptance towards breaking their traditional gender role, 5. Fashion that challenges gender norms will become a part of the mainstream market in the future.

3. Methodology

Due to the lack of literature regarding the perspective of fashion suppliers that challenge traditional gender norms with their work, this research is designed as an exploratory study to provide insights into the topic. This chapter explains how this research was conducted. It begins with the research aim before outlining the research design and methods and explaining the reasons that led to it. Following that, the topic of sampling is covered, along with details on the criteria and procedures for choosing respondents, and the methodology for data analysis is reviewed. Last, limitations and ethical issues are covered.

3.1 Research Aim

A qualitative approach that focuses on understanding fashion that challenges gender norms and its economic and social aspects are well suited to the exploratory nature of the study that is presented here. The research question of this research is formulated as follows:

How do social norms and cultural values influence the social and economic impact of fashion that challenges traditional gender norms?

The sub-questions that underline this question are the following:

How do fashion suppliers understand and define fashion that challenges traditional gender fashion?
What factors influence the decision of fashion suppliers to produce fashion that challenges traditional gender norms?
What is the current market demand for fashion that challenges traditional gender norms and what is the potential future development of such a market?
What practices do fashion suppliers use to create and promote fashion products that challenge traditional gender fashion?

3.2 Research Design

The study strategy should align with the aims that are suggested by these questions in order to provide answers (Bryman, 2012). Semi-structured online interviews were conducted with fashion designers, retailers and brand owners who have already adopted practices that

challenge the gender norms in their collections or stores. With the use of a flexible guideline that was applied to each circumstance and person individually, the interviews were in-depth discussions covering the same topics with all participants. The topics were: 1. The social and cultural extensions of their work and their understanding of challenging the gender norms, 2. The factors that influence their decisions 3. The current demand and the future of a fashion market that challenges the gender norms, and 4. The practices that they use that differentiate them from the mainstream fashion market. In order to get the maximum information from each person and their experiences and to maintain an open and friendly dialogue, questions were modified in terms of order and/or phrasing (Byrne, 2004).

3.3 Research Methods

The research methodologies used in this thesis are qualitative, which means that only qualitative information was collected and analyzed during the whole procedure. Qualitative research is the most appropriate study style since this thesis seeks to illuminate the subjective experiences of persons present at the incident as well as their decision-making, which is influenced by their beliefs and values (Bryman,2012).

Since the nature of the research is exploratory and open-ended, Grounded Theory is a valid research method that involves the collection and analysis of data (Bryman,2012). The grounded theory could be a useful methodological tool for exploring the underlying social and economic processes that shape the production of fashion products that challenge gender norms. This approach is particularly well-suited to the study of this topic, as it is a relatively new and evolving phenomenon that is not yet fully understood as it was already stated in the theoretical framework. By using grounded theory, this study can gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of fashion suppliers in relation to their decisions to adopt these practices and their views on this phenomenon.

3.4 Sampling Methods

For this study, representative sampling is needed, where the sample as closely as possible reflects the population as if it were a microcosm of the wider population (Bryman, 2012). That is why the sampling method used in this study is purposive sampling, also known as judgmental sampling. This technique involves selecting participants who are knowledgeable and experienced in the area of interest and can provide valuable insights into the research

questions (Bryman, 2012). In this case, the sample will consist of fashion designers, retailers and brand owners who produce fashion that challenges traditional gender norms.

To identify potential participants, a combination of snowball and convenience sampling techniques was used. The snowball technique involves asking participants to suggest other individuals who may be willing to participate in the study. The convenience technique involves selecting participants who are readily available and willing to participate in the study.

To ensure the sample represents a diverse range of experiences and perspectives, efforts were made to include participants from different regions, ethnicities, and gender identities. Fashion designers, retailers, and brand owners were selected as the more representative parts of the fashion supply chain for the topic of the research. These fashion stakeholders are key players in the production, marketing, and distribution of fashion products. As such, they possess valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of the emerging market fashion that challenges gender norms. Moreover, designers, retailers, and brand owners are often at the forefront of fashion trends, making them important actors in shaping and defining the cultural norms and expectations surrounding fashion. By focusing on these three groups, this study's aim is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the social norms and cultural values that influence the production of fashion that challenges gender norms. It was intentionally decided to include a researcher, who is an expert in the field and this topic, among the participants in order to get even more insight, particularly in the areas regarding the sociological elements and the definitions of the study.

All participants were provided with an informed consent form outlining the purpose of the study, their rights as participants, and the confidentiality of their responses. Participants were also assured that their participation is voluntary, and they can withdraw at any time without penalty.

3.5 Data collection

The selection of participants and their contact information was obtained through a systematic search using the Google search engine with the keywords "genderless/gender-neutral/unisex fashion, Netherlands". The inclusion criteria were based on the characteristics that matched the description of these types of fashion, as documented in the existing literature. Specifically, participants were selected based on their non-traditional approach to labeling their work according to gender norms or using the traditional gender binary of separating their

collections into "Man" and "Woman". Moreover, most of the participants displayed their products in ways that challenged the traditional social representation of gender.

Fashion designers, retailers, and brand owners were contacted through email or Instagram direct messaging. The recruitment process was challenging, as only a small number of participants responded. This can be attributed to the high workload of most participants, who were either freelancers or small retailers. Furthermore, the market for this type of fashion is still niche, which limited the availability of a representative sample size for the study. Notably, labels, retailers, and designers with a bigger appeal and share in the market were excluded from the study, as they are more challenging to approach. In order to be represented, the rest of the participants were asked to share their opinion about fashion producers with a bigger appeal in the market. The initial intention of the research was to focus on fashion suppliers that are active in the Dutch market. However, because of the small number of professionals who specialize in a fashion that meets the criteria of this research, more fashion suppliers from across Europe were reached to participate. In the study, fashion designers, retailers, and brand owners from the fashion markets across Europe, including Germany and France took part. Below there are a table and descriptions that provide an overview of the profile of each participant in order to make clear the criteria based on which they were all chosen. The collection of the data was made by conducting semi-structured interviews with all the responders which took place either online or in person. Seven of the meetings took place online via the Zoom meeting platform, two of them happened in person and were recorded and transcribed through the Otter.ai tool, while Responder 3, because of his busy schedule shared a document with his answers after the question guide was sent to him.

Table 1: Overview of interview participants

	Profession	Age ratio	Location	Biological Gender
Respondent 1	Designer/Brand Owner	25-35	Rotterdam	Male
Respondent 2	Designer/Retailer/Brand Owner	40-50	Paris	Male
Respondent 3	Retailer	-	Berlin	Male
Respondent 4	Designer	30-40	Berlin	Male
Respondent 5	Designer/Brand Owner	25-35	Rotterdam	Male

Respondent 6	Designer/Brand Owner	25-35	Dusseldorf	Male
Respondent 7	Designer	20	Amsterdam	Male
Respondent 8	Designer/Researcher	40-50	Amsterdam	Female
Repsondent 9	Designer/Retailers	30	Rotterdam	Female
Respondent 10	Fashion Design Researcher	30-40	Rotterdam	Female

- Respondent 1 is a fashion designer and brand owner who owns his own studio in Rotterdam and his work has evolved into celebrating queerness, exploring gender fluidity, and embracing genderless fashion.
- Respondent 2 is a fashion designer, retailer, and owner of his own brand who had a studio in Rotterdam. Currently, he has moved to France where he runs his own stores with products from his brand which defines as "Unisex" and "Gender-Inclusive".
- Respondent 3 is a fashion retailer who took over the Berlin-located store and brand from another fashion designer that creates and sells products defined as "Unisex".
- Respondent 4 is a Berlin-based fashion designer who has preferred to use the term "For Humans" than separating his collection into "Man" and "Female".
- Respondent 5 is a fashion designer who has located his studio in the city of Rotterdam and through his work he opposites to the traditional gender norms and instead trying to embrace the personality of his costumers.
- Respondent 6 is a fashion designer and the owner of his own label based in Dusseldorf, Germany which stands for "gender-neutral" clothes.
- Respondent 7 is a fashion designer based in Amsterdam who throughout his first collections has incorporated the themes of "gender fluidity".
- Respondent 8 is a fashion designer and researcher based in Amsterdam, whose work presents a fashion system that offers a new perspective on clothing and embrace the expression of identity with much more fluidity.
- Respondent 9 is a fashion designer who challenged the notion of what is "normal" for a person to wear based on gender through her designs. She now owns a store in Rotterdam where there is no clear distriction between "men's" and "women's" clothing.

● Respondent 10 is a design researcher and critical (fashion) practitioner who has conducted a study in the city of Rotterdam between the dynamics of fashion and gender.

3.6 Methods of Data Analysis

The first approach to data analysis was based on open coding which derives codes from the content of interviews through the software Atlas TI. Because of the small amount of codes that were derived from the sayings of the responders, due to their preference to not use so certain terms, a more practical approach was necessary. For that reason, after transcribing the interviews using the Otter.ai tool and auto-transcribing from the Zoom Meeting platform, I re-read the transcriptions and selected the relevant and non-relevant information based on what helped answer the research and sub-questions. This was made more efficient with the use of the tool Delve which I used to group together the relevant parts of the interviews based on the themes and codes that I created using the literature. The important segments were then divided into four main themes, following the sub-questions, which were "Social Aspects", "Factors of Influence", "Demand Side", and "Practises". Subsegments were then given labels that specified which codes related to which quote. Although I made an effort to limit this by breaking segments up into smaller parts, it is vital to keep in mind that one segment might belong to numerous themes. The significance of each code was then internally assessed based on the literature. Additionally, it was discovered that several codes conflicted with one another.

3.7 Limitations

There are various limitations to this study. First of all, qualitative research is often challenging to reproduce because of the various social settings and study conditions, as stated by Bryman (2012).

The choice of participants is the study's key challenge and also its greatest limitation. The choice of interview subjects has a big impact on the outcomes of qualitative research based on interviews, like this one. Despite reaching out to 44 people, ten of them responded and accepted to have an interview with me. Therefore, this study's sample size also constitutes a restriction. It is challenging to accurately represent the complete diversity of all the actors that participate in the fashion supply chain with a sample size of just 10. Given the existing small number of fashion suppliers involved in this niche market of products that

challenge gender norms, this response rate cannot be seen as a failure, but it did limit the internal validity of this thesis.

The characteristics of the sample are another significant limitation. As previously stated, this study focuses on fashion designers, retailers, and label owners as a representative subset of the fashion supply chain. The final responders of the study were all activated on a small scale. This is because actors with a wider range in the fashion market were considerably difficult to reach. However, in an effort to incorporate them as well, the respondents who took part in this survey were asked to share their views on them. Therefore, there is a limitation in drawing conclusions regarding the field of fashion as a whole by only this small sample. Additionally, taking into mind the significance of identification and legitimacy, it's possible that respondents will react in a way that presents themselves or their organization in a way that is viewed as more favorable. Finally, as this study aims to fill in more gaps in the existing research on this issue from the supply side of the fashion business, the decision to exclude consumers from the sample was deliberate.

The geographical area in which the actors operate was another significant limitation. Despite earlier attempts to limit emphasis to the Dutch market, the study had to be expanded to include other fashion markets across Europe due to the existing small number of fashion actors that expertise in the specific theme of the study. This limits the study's ability to express a particular viewpoint on a single country, but it raises its generalizability to other nations and offers a more holistic viewpoint. That does not, however, imply that the sample is still representative of non-Western cultures, as will be discussed later in the results.

To the best of my knowledge and skill, my theoretical framework is a description of current literature. I can only hope that I have done the writers cited justice. Transparency has also been a core principle of this thesis. I made an effort to achieve it by speaking clearly and mindfully, as well as by being open and honest with interviewers and my supervisor.

Although it is difficult to be completely objective, I have tried to keep my subjectivity in control by being conscious of it. The position I have as the researcher, having my personal preferences in fashion, is the last and most personal concern. My involvement and interest in the fashion industry, particularly this sort of style that is the subject of the study, may make me less neutral in my assessment of the situation. My own attraction for clothing that defies conventional gender norms may have biased me in favor of some of the problems being explored. However, the fact that I am aware of it, encourages me to maintain objectivity toward every respondent and base my finding only on their sayings.

3.8 Ethics

Ethics must be a major consideration throughout the whole study process. The responders' anonymity is a significant consideration. Interviewees are identified here by numbers to preserve their identities. They could have been hesitant to give all of their identities because the subjects of this study are highly sensitive and can easily extend further into subjects unrelated to the investigation. Additionally, all respondents were asked in advance if they felt comfortable having their responses recorded and transcribed for use as findings. Additionally, I've kept track of every interview and meeting I've had over the previous several months so that the research can be properly examined and analyzed. As a result, my method can be followed step-by-step.

4. Findings

4.1 Introduction

This section presents the primary conclusions of the interviews with nine professional actors in the sector and one expert, a researcher on the field. To detect any specific correspondences or discrepancies and to obtain fresh insights into the topic, the major findings are organized and examined in comparison with the existing theory.

The findings touch upon topics directly related to the research question and related sub-questions. The structure of this section follows the order that was roughly maintained during the interviews, starting with the social extensions of fashion and gender and defining the terms that are used to describe fashion that challenges traditional gender norms. After this, an examination of the factors that influence these actors to engage with such practices is laid out, which is followed by the uninvestigated market demand of this field, its future potential, and the practices that its suppliers use. Analyzing these topics allows for a deeper investigation into how social norms and cultural values influence the social and economic impact of this market. Since the subquestions that lead to my research question efficiently outline the sequence of the interview questions, I opted to use them in order to guide the structure of this chapter.

4.2 Social Aspects

How do fashion suppliers understand and define fashion that challenges traditional gender fashion?

In order to further explore the concepts of the research, the earlier part of the investigation focused on understanding the overall perspectives of the responders on the topics of fashion, gender, and their relation. Related to this, efforts were made to define terms commonly used to describe fashion that challenges gender norms, such as "genderless", "gender-neutral", and "unisex" and their meanings.

All respondents acknowledged the social nature of fashion and expressed a preference for incorporating this aspect into their work. They shared how it is a useful tool for communicating social messages as it was also described in the research of Felshin (2015). Several respondents emphasized how fashion serves as a reflection of society, which is in line with the study of Arvanitidou and Gasouka (2013), and that designers need to be updated on what is happening in current realities. For example, respondent 7 mentioned the importance of

being "on the edge of what's next" in order to stay relevant. Respondent 6 stated that fashion encompasses more than just fabric and carries significant social meaning in his creative process. Respondent 1 chose fashion as his medium to address social issues because for him it is a way of communication and the biggest visual indicator of one's identity. In general, phrases like "designing for humans", "being open", "based on personality" and "self-expression" were used to emphasize the social value inherent in their work. The terms "humans" and "personality" were mentioned to describe the features of genderless fashion, showing a clear correlation with the study by Kim et al. (2022). Respondent 9 distinguished clearly between the role that fashion played as a communication tool in the previous years and the present. She observed that, in contrast to the past decades, when many subcultures used clothing as a means of protest, today's fashion is more about self-expression than necessary social commentary. The expert also recognized some key social characteristics in clothing as visual communicators of someone's character, independent of verbal expression.

Fashion and gender are "inextricably linked"(Respondent 10) since clothing is considered a fundamental indicator of one's biological gender, as was also suggested in the research of Kacen (2000) and Arvanitidou et al.(2013). However, despite this connection, all the respondents argued that they find the concept of gender irrelevant when creating their work. They considered gender to be less "interesting"(Respondent 3) and "important" (Respondent 4) when designing, as it can hinder their creative process.

The influence of societal norms on individuals' perceptions based on their biological gender was also acknowledged in the discussions. Their view on how gender incorporates many cultural and societal elements agrees with the study conducted by Goulding and Saren (2009). Respondent 8 explicitly regarded gender as a "social construct" in which characteristics are created by society. Respondents 2 and 5 shared the view that an individual's personality should not be determined by their biological gender, stating that it should be obvious that this is an unnecessary connection. They argued that what someone is wearing should not be indicative of their gender, and vice versa. To illustrate the diverse interpretations of fashion, respondent 1 provided examples of how clothing holds different meanings in various cultures, as described in the study by Bardey et al. (2020). However, respondent 4 proposed that a reconstruction of how gender is perceived does not correlate with the complete eradication of gender from society.

Defining the terms "genderless", "gender-neutral", and "unisex" fashion proved to be the most challenging aspect of the investigation. As expected, these concepts appeared to be

ambiguous among the interviewees. Although most respondents accepted these terms to describe their work, it was evident that none of them chose to incorporate them explicitly in their branding or marketing process. Respondent 5, for instance, expressed reluctance to use the term "gender-neutral" prominently, as it felt like a promotional tool, and preferred not to label their collection based on gender. Similarly, respondents 4 and 8 regarded the use of such labels as an unnecessary promotion strategy. Three participants also rejected the notion of describing this type of fashion as a "term" or "trend," while respondent 1 characterized it as "time-dependent." Among all the participants, the only attempt to provide a definition was respondent 1 who described unisex, as "oversize men's clothes" in neutral colors with minimal female elements, aligning with the description that was given in the studies of Arvanitidou et al.(2013) and Sherman (2014)

The expert gave the most unique opinion in defining and describing the aforementioned terms. She expressed opposition to the usage of the term "genderless" to characterize this fashion style, as it implies a universal fit that does not align with reality. Even fashion suppliers who defy traditional gender norms unintentionally acknowledge the existence of gender, even if it is socially constructed, and consciously choose to challenge it, aligning with Bulter's (2004) theory. Furthermore, the expert clarified the misconception surrounding the concept of unisex. Typically, unisex fashion caters to men who incorporate feminine elements into their style and does not encompass the reverse. Consequently, it fails to adequately encapsulate the complete breaking of gender norms, agreeing with the statements of Arvanitidou et al. (2013). Instead, the expert advocated for the term "gender fluid" as the most appropriate descriptor for this phenomenon. "Genderfluid" deconstructs society's established notion of gender while acknowledging its existence, aligning with the research of Clark and Rossi (2020).

In conclusion, this section provides insights into the participants' perspectives on fashion, gender, and their relationship. It highlights their inclination towards fashion as a social medium, reflecting and communicating societal values and identities. By and large, the participants expressed a disregard for traditional gender norms in their creative process and recognized the shifting societal perceptions of gender. The section also explored the challenges in defining terms like "genderless," "gender-neutral," and "unisex," while emphasizing the importance of the term "gender fluid" in describing this progressive movement. Overall, this section sets the stage to continue the examination of how these

concepts shape the participants' work, demonstrating their commitment to aligning fashion with the evolving realities of society.

4.3 Influential factors

What factors influence the decision of fashion suppliers to produce fashion that challenges traditional gender fashion?

In order to comprehend the impact of social norms and cultural values on fashion suppliers challenging traditional gender norms, a deeper investigation into their drivers and motivations is necessary. The primary driving force for all respondents is the desire to satisfy customers who feel excluded from the mainstream fashion market. Six of them expressed a commitment to cultivating a more inclusive environment and fostering a sense of community where individuals can freely express themselves. Respondent 6 mentioned:

"I really help other people who don't feel accepted somehow or looking for a community where they can just ...be accepted for who you are for what you like"

Terms such as "self-expression," "inclusivity," and "diversity" were used by the respondents to underscore their motivations. Respondent 2, for instance, states his aim is to empower individuals who are shy or reserved, while Respondent 1 focuses on producing affordable clothing for the drag queen community, highlighting the need for a more diverse fashion scene. Respondent 5, who revolves around celebrating individual personalities, asserts that diversity should already be a fundamental aspect rather than a mere option.

Different perspectives emerged regarding the interviewees' approach to breaking the existing social norms. Respondent 8, the youngest among them, exhibits a more revolutionary profile, driven by curiosity to challenge the status quo and explore new concepts. Conversely, respondent 1 prefers to focus on their work rather than actively opposing social norms, considering it a more effortless approach. Respondent 2 shares a similar perspective, stating that it is acceptable for someone to adhere to the gender binary, indicating that a complete revolution is not necessarily his objective. In general, respondents' views on challenging gender norms appear to be more in line with Clark and Rossi's (2020) study, which suggests that this is an attempt to redefine gender, than with Akderim's (2018) argument that it's an effort to eliminate all gender labels.

In addition to personal motivations, some respondents also express their views on mainstream fashion brands that incorporate themes of breaking gender norms. Six of them mentioned being familiar with labels that commercialize this concept for profit rather than genuine beliefs. Two respondents drew a parallel to the commodification of sustainability, raising concerns about using social issues to promote products. Respondent 4 even coined the term "gender-washing" to describe this phenomenon. However, despite being aware of this exploitation, the respondents appeared unfazed by it. Although it might diminish the value of the message behind their work respondent 1, along with the researcher, considers it an unavoidable trade-off that unintentionally raises awareness about these matters.

This chapter explored the drivers and factors motivating respondents to embrace fashion that challenges traditional gender norms. Their motivations center around engaging with consumers who feel marginalized by mainstream fashion. The lack of mentioning profit as a motivation for their work and the fact that they even chose to bring up the moral issues raised by the exploitation of other brands reinforce the claim that they are all deeply committed to the value of their work.

Ultimately, the current state of society influences these individuals, which highlights their alignment with evolving gender roles and changing social norms. By examining the respondents' references to society and their incorporation of cultural values into their work, a clear parallel can be drawn with the theory in DiMaggio and Powell's study (1983). The respondents' focus on societal context and cultural values demonstrates their recognition of the evolving landscape and the need to address the demands of contemporary consumers. Although these actors adapt to the changing reality to remain relevant, the true motives behind their actions may be difficult to ascertain.

4.4 Market Demand

What is the current market demand for fashion that challenges traditional gender norms and what is the potential future development of such a market?

The current market demand for fashion that challenges gender norms and its potential future development are explored in this chapter, shedding light on the economic aspect of this phenomenon. All respondents acknowledged the existing demand for that type of style and products and recognized a growing movement toward more gender fluidity in the fashion market. They emphasized the influence of the younger generation, geographical location, and gender-based consumer behavior in shaping this demand.

The significance of Generation Z consumers, who actively seek gender-fluid options in their style choices, became apparent throughout the discussions. All respondents acknowledged the strong presence of this generation as leaders in promoting gender fluidity in clothing and accessory products, proving the same outcome as Marci (2020) and Kim et al. (2022). This preference is rooted in the shifting perceptions of gender among young individuals who prioritize self-expression and reject societal constructs that characterise gender. The expert stated that they "don't care about what is wrong or right in terms of gender construction" while respondent 8, the only participant who belongs to this age ratio, referred to his generation as the "more forward one" and to add to his words he mentioned:

"we…see the world much clearer, and I think we want to push the boundaries….and fashion and gender as a construct of society even further and break it apart".

Given that the fashion market predominantly adheres to the gender binary, differences in consumer behavior based on biological gender continue to persist. Respondent 9 recognized a distinct difference between male and female consumers, noting that male consumers tend to be more attached and devoted to one brand while female consumers are more demanding and invest more time in market research. Previous studies have highlighted how male fashion consumers show the least inclination in stepping outside their gender role. Men's role in this shift remains the most resistant to change, as many still prioritize societal expectations and fear potential judgment regarding their appearance and social roles. These concerns, as also indicated in the study of Gupta and Gentry (2016), are often linked to anxieties about sexuality and conformity to traditional gender norms.

However, all respondents in our discussions have noticed a recent shift in male attitudes toward fashion, indicating a growing openness and willingness to embrace new styles, which aligns with the finding of Dai et al. (2022). It is important to note that this shift varies among consumers based on their age, leading us to question the relevance of older studies that portray men as more attached to gender roles and whether they can be considered outdated.

The role of celebrities and popular culture figures in promoting gender fluidity in fashion was also acknowledged by the respondents. This finding is consistent with the observations made by Rinallo and Golfetto (2006) and Elan (2020), who also noted the impact of celebrities and popular culture figures in promoting gender fluidity in fashion.

During our discussions, a previously unexplored topic emerged relating to the role of geographical location in shaping consumer behavior and responses to the current changes in fashion. While our focus revolved around challenging gender norms, it became apparent that these discussions were based on Western Culture standards, as indicated by the expert's perspective. Notably, six respondents emphasized the significance of their geographical locations in shaping the way consumers perceive their work. Participants who have experience in major European capitals, such as Paris, Berlin and London, observed greater open-mindedness among consumers towards embracing this new reality. By contrast, respondents based in smaller cities described their audiences as more conservative, exhibiting a reluctance to embrace such clothing styles compared to their counterparts in larger urban centers.

According to the participants, the face of the fashion market is expected to undergo a transformation incorporating more genderfluid elements in the future, as anticipated by Dai et al. (2022) and Kim et al. (2022). However, there is a divergence of opinions among them regarding the extent of this change. Despite the desire of the participants to see these genderfluid fashion practices flourish in the future, their adoption by the mainstream market is still uncertain. Respondent 4 passionately described the expansion of gender fluidity in fashion as a personal "dream," envisioning its increasing normalization over time. Respondent 2 also highlighted the creative intrigue that might motivate more designers to incorporate these practices. It is important to note that the emergence of gender fluidity in the fashion market does not entail the elimination of clothing that embodies masculine and feminine characteristics, contrary to the study of Akderim (2018). Respondent 2 emphasized this point by stating:

"I think it's interesting to include the unisex as an option but… I'm really okay with the idea that some designers still want to keep this binary".

Throughout the discussion, the role of society emerged as a crucial factor in shaping the acceptance and success of this type of fashion. Respondents emphasized that greater inclusivity in the fashion market with regard to gender could only be achieved through broader acceptance from society at large. They recognized that while progress has been made, societal norms and perceptions still play a significant role in determining the future development and mainstream adoption of gender-neutral fashion. These viewpoints are in

agreement with the findings presented by Clark and Rossi (2022), which underscore the broader cultural and sociological processes at play.

In conclusion, this section examined the market demand for fashion that defies gender norms and its potential for future development. The discussions highlighted the influence of Generation Z, geographical location, and consumer behavior based on gender. The respondents expressed a desire for embracing more gender-fluid practices while acknowledging the continued impact of societal norms and expectations. They recognized the importance of societal acceptance and emphasized that broader inclusivity is a crucial factor for the future success and widespread adoption of gender-neutral fashion.

4.5 Practices
What practices do fashion suppliers use to create and promote fashion products that challenge traditional gender fashion?

Exploring the practices employed by fashion suppliers to create and promote fashion products that challenge traditional gender fashion, revealed interesting insights. Considering the niche status of the market for these styles, it was intriguing to investigate whether the respondents needed to adopt specific practices to align with the mainstream industry. The primary focus of the inquiry revolved around promotional strategies and practical considerations, such as sizing and fitting processes.

Overall, the respondents expressed a preference for following their own paths rather than conforming to mainstream market norms. They remained committed to pursuing their purpose without being influenced by external factors. However, respondent 2 highlighted the challenge of promoting unisex fashion online, finding it more difficult to convey the concept to customers compared to in-store interactions. Interestingly, the retailers interviewed expressed a shared preference for blending all their products together without distinguishing between male and female sections. Respondent 1 made an insightful observation, noting that even when demonstrating products on mannequins, the mannequins themselves still embody a biological gender, further complicating matters.

As the only participant who has experience as both a store owner and a designer, respondent 9 made an interesting observation about the differences between the two specialties. She acknowledged that when designing clothing, you have a lot more freedom to disregard gender. On the other hand, it is much more difficult when the commercial aspect is

present and you must demonstrate the products in a store where you are closer to the customers.

The issues of sizing and fitting also surfaced as potential challenges. Educating customers about non-traditional size systems that accommodate diverse body types was deemed necessary. Three of the respondents mentioned designing oversize clothing to cater to a broader spectrum of body shapes. Additionally, designers 1 and 5 proposed the future use of stretch fabrics to create garments that could adapt to a wider range of body types. Several respondents also underlined their inclination to use innovative sizing methods, such as replacing conventional size terms with colors (respondent 2). It is worth noting that the responders drew attention to the fact that the issue of sizing and fitting is already significant in the existing fashion market when attempting to represent diverse body shapes. Therefore, attempting to represent both genders' body types in a single clothing line, won't be a much bigger issue, contrary to the assertions made by Bardey et al. (2020).

In summary, fashion suppliers embracing this type of fashion and challenging traditional gender norms often rely on their own unique approaches rather than conform to mainstream practices. They encounter promotional challenges and must address the issue of sizing and fitting, striving to educate consumers about non-traditional size systems and accommodating a diverse range of body types.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

5.1 Conclusion

This research provides valuable insights into the concept of challenging traditional gender norms in fashion by exploring the influence of social and cultural norms on its production and socioeconomic impact. It explores the motives and drives of fashion suppliers who engage in such practices, while also investigates the market demand, potential future developments and prevailing practices in this niche market.

The findings of the research were obtained through 10 semi-structured interviews conducted with industry actors and researchers who have previously explored the concept of challenging gender norms in their work. During the interviews, it became clear that in order to understand individuals' experiences, understanding their emotions is key. This insight made the research methodology even more suitable because qualitative semi-structured interviews provide participants with the freedom and space to narrate their stories freely and communicate their feelings through subtler ways like word choice, intonation, and facial expression. The results of these discussions in some cases align with the existing literature, while in others contribute new findings for future research.

This thesis focuses on both sociological and economic aspects. From a sociological perspective, the study investigates the perceptions of fashion suppliers regarding the social elements of fashion and gender. The findings of this study are in accordance with those of Arvanitidou and Gasouka (2013) and Felshin (2015), suggesting that fashion presents social characteristics and can be considered a reflection of society. The interviewees agreed that it serves as a social medium that reflects and communicates societal values and identities. Moreover, as was also described in the research of Kacen (2000) and Arvanitidou and Gasouka (2013), they acknowledge the social influence that shapes gender and reject traditional gender labels in their work, highlighting a shifting understanding of gender and a desire to break any social norms associated with it.

The attempt to define the terminology that is used to refer to fashion that defies gender norms was challenging, as mentioned in the primary expectations, and various interpretations have emerged. The fundamental problem with labeling this phenomenon was that, in line with Butler's study (2004), the concept of gender cannot be undone, even when there is a preference to go against the established gender standards. This study suggests using the term "genderfluid" to describe fashion that challenges traditional gender norms, as it deconstructs

societal notions of gender while acknowledging its existence. This definition leans more toward the description given by Clark and Rossi (2020) than the one provided in the study by Akderim (2018).

Understanding the driving forces behind these fashion suppliers' actions required an in-depth examination of their interactions with social realities as well as their recognition of the cultural value inherent in their work. These factors encompassed their engagement with consumers who feel marginalized by the mainstream fashion market and their considerations of ethical implications related to the exploitation of social issues by other brands. The respondents' statements further support a link between social reality and their efforts to express their cultural beliefs and values in their work. As anticipated, these factors emerged as their main motivators for defying traditional gender norms. By gathering sufficient evidence on how these actors' work is affected by these factors, this study supports the theory of Institutional Isomorphism developed by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). Relating this theory to the research, fashion suppliers choose to challenge gender norms as a means of aligning with evolving social norms in their work.

The second part of the study delves into the economic aspects of this market, including market demand, future developments, and practices. The findings validate earlier expectations derived from existing surveys. There is an existing and growing market demand for fashion that challenges traditional gender norms, largely driven by Generation Z consumers, as supported by the studies of Kim et al. (2022) and Marci (2020). This shift reflects a significant transformation in societal norms surrounding the concept of gender.

Male and female consumer behavior differs significantly as a result of the gender binary supported by the majority of the fashion industry. Traditionally, men have been more concerned with being attached to their societal expectations regarding fashion and their appearance. However, as was expected, the respondents in this study recognize a shift among men towards a growing openness and willingness to embrace new styles, as was also evidenced in the study of Dai et al. (2022). Consequently, this study calls into question previous research on men's attachment to their social profile in fashion, suggesting the need to update and reevaluate these studies, which may no longer accurately represent the current landscape in fashion. This deviation can be attributed, in part, to the exclusion of younger generations from previous research.

Geographical location and societal acceptance are also influential factors shaping the experience of gender fluidity in fashion. Consumers residing in larger capitals tend to be more

open-minded and accepting of breaking gender norms in clothing, in contrast to those in smaller cities. Additionally, the fashion industry will only become more inclusive if accompanied by a parallel shift in societal acceptance.

Although the part of the fashion market that challenges traditional gender norms remains niche, there is potential for its expansion. The initial expectations of this study supported that the emergence of genderfluidity is more likely to develop in the future fashion market. However, the final results prove that the extent to which this new reality will expand and integrate into the mainstream fashion market remains uncertain and calls for further investigation. Without considering whether it would enter the mainstream market, the respondents supported that this phenomenon will continue to grow in the future, supporting the predictions of Dai et al. (2022) and Kim et al. (2022). Additionally, issues like product demonstration, sizing and fitting processes were addressed by the respondents as challenges that the fashion industry is already familiar with, suggesting that they may not necessarily exacerbate the existing problems.

From both sociological and managerial perspectives, this research contributes to existing literature. Sociologically, it highlights how fashion suppliers perceive their work as having social extensions, adapt to the changing social reality and incorporate it into their work. From a managerial standpoint, the findings provide motivation for fashion brands, designers, and retailers to incorporate gender fluidity in their collections and production, considering the existing demand and potential future growth of fashion that challenges gender norms. Furthermore, the evolving role of male fashion consumers presents further useful insights as well as opportunities for the industry to adapt and adjust in the future.

5.2 Discussion

The results of this investigation present several limitations that should be acknowledged for the sake of credibility and future research. Firstly, the sample size of this study was relatively small, with only 10 participants. Although efforts were made to include differentiation in terms of scale, scope, and geographical locations, it is necessary to recognize that the findings may not be fully generalizable to the entire population of fashion suppliers that challenge the gender norms in Europe due to the limited sample size.

Another limitation concerns the credibility of the respondents who participated in the investigation. It is important to consider that all of them were professionals already engaged or familiar with the topic of challenging gender norms in their work. As a result, their views

may not fully capture the diverse range of perspectives within the larger population of fashion suppliers, who likely hold different opinions or may not be fully aware of the topic. Future research could explore the perceptions of fashion suppliers in general to gain a broader understanding of how they perceive the matter of challenging traditional gender norms.

Additionally, this study acknowledges a lack of diversity in the sample, particularly in terms of gender. Despite interviewing distinctively different actors, the respondents were predominantly males. This choice resulted from a combination of low response rates and time constraints during the research process. However, it is regrettable that greater efforts were not made to include female participants who have also engaged with the themes of the study. It is worth considering whether the underrepresentation of women in the sample suggests a broader issue of female representation in the production side of the fashion industry or a potential lack of interest among women in engaging with the theme of challenging gender norms through their work.

Future research on this subject could shift focus to the demand side of fashion that challenges traditional gender norms by analyzing the perspectives and attitudes of consumers, particularly younger generations. Employing a more quantitative approach could yield valuable insights in this regard. Additionally, narrowing the research focus to specific concepts rather than adopting a broad approach may facilitate more targeted and in-depth findings. Moreover, it would be beneficial to conduct specialized studies in specific countries in one specific country or expand the research to nations outside of Western culture. A comparative research approach could provide interesting insights into the way cultural variations and factors influencing the acceptance of gender fluidity in the fashion market differ nationally. Exploring the role of geographical locations and societal acceptance as influential factors in the emergence of greater gender fluidity in the fashion market also warrants further investigation and can be incorporated into future research.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

Topic	Questions
Introduction:	Could you please introduce yourself and your background in the fashion industry?
Definitions	- How do you perceive gender through fashion, and how has this perception changed over time, is there a relation between the two? - Does it matter to you when you are producing fashion? Are you separating your line in men's and women's collections? - How do you define genderless/gender-neutral fashion and how does this definition influence your business practices? What are the differences between the terms?
Social Aspects	In your opinion, are there also social aspects, and what role can fashion play in challenging traditional gender norms and promoting inclusivity?

	- Do you believe that the rise of genderless fashion indicates a broader cultural shift towards greater acceptance and diversity? - Is it a way for you to communicate your values? - Do you think some brands may use it to take advantage of it?
Demand	- When you first decided to label your brand as genderless, did you recognize an existing demand from consumers for this type of style? - Do you see the genderless fashion market expanding in the future, or will it remain niche? - Are you still experiencing a difference between men and women when they consume fashion? - Do you differentiate these kinds of clothing as more artistic and not for the public?
Practises	<u>Marketing</u>: Since the mainstream fashion market is still defined by the gender binary, have you faced any issues when it comes to promoting your products?

	- <u>Creation</u>: Is the creative process of genderless fashion products different from the traditional one? - How have you managed the sizing and fitting in genderless fashion design? - How have you approached the issue of arranging and displaying clothing in-store, given the traditional male/female divisions?

Contract template

Dear ---------,

My name is George Mademlis, a graduate student in Cultural Economics and Entrepreneurship at Erasmus University, and I am conducting a research project on the topic of fashion, gender, and the concept of genderless fashion. As part of my research, I am conducting interviews with individuals who have knowledge and experience in the fashion industry and have incorporated in their work gender as a social concept.

I am writing to invite you to participate in this research by agreeing to an interview with me. The discussion will last approximately 45-60 minutes, preferably conducted via an online meeting. Your participation in this research would be greatly appreciated and will contribute to a better understanding of the topic.

Your responses will be kept strictly confidential and only used for academic purposes. No personal information will be shared with anyone.

If you agree to participate, please let me know your availability, and we can arrange a time and date for the interview that suits you. Please feel free to contact me if you have any

questions or concerns regarding the study. Thank you for considering this request, and I hope to hear from you soon, have a nice day!

Kind regards,

George Mademlis.