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Why fashion matters: the evolution and significance of androgynous fashion from the 1970s to today.

Fashion, beyond its surface definition, stands as a means for reflecting the intricate tapestry of culture, societal values, historical context and individual identities. It exceeds fabric and stitches as it illustrates a language through expression, challenging norms and forming an identity. At its core, fashion is a force constantly evolving to reflect the subjects of its time. Within the world of fashion expression, the concept of androgynous fashion materialises as a powerful symbol of defiance against traditional gender norms and a celebration of diversity. Reilly (2020) explains androgynous fashion as rather than holding an adaptable understanding of gender, participants' dress motivations and aesthetics were located in the complex web of the intersectional identities that co-constituted their embodiments and experiences.

Androgynous fashion, once ostracised in the rebellious age of the 1970s, has now emerged not just as a fashion trend but as a powerful instrument for inclusivity and acceptance. It has not only defied societal norms but also empowered individuals to define their own gender identities, marking a significant shift in the fashion landscape.

This essay discusses the key concepts of identity and community, specifically gender identity and subcultures, to determine the profound importance of androgynous fashion, tracing its evolution from the experimentation of the 1970s to its mainstream acceptance in the present day. By analysing academic text from Ross, Connell, Reilly and Bowstead, we can examine the historical context, subculture influences, and societal impact of androgynous fashion, and we can gain a deeper understanding of why fashion matters beyond the surface, reflecting the complexity of our world.

We choose to identify with a particular group of people that personally reflects us as individuals. Identity is often communicated through clothing and fashion in many ways. The clothes we wear on a day-to-day basis act as a tool for self-expression, allowing us to communicate our identity and values. The way we dress can signify a particular

subculture in which we identify. Style in subculture goes against nature and interrupts the process of normalisation. Fashion plays a vital role in expressing one's gender identity and challenging traditional gender values. The link between androgynous fashion and one's identity is evident when a particular person communicates their identity through this type of dress. Androgynous fashion allows individuals to represent their gender identity authentically.

Androgynous fashion has been explored at one point in almost everyone's lives; for me, it is about using it as a means of rebellion against the limitations put in place by the small bubble in which I grew up. Although my act of rebellion was small, mixing masculine clothing into my feminine clothing, borrowing my father's clothes or wearing the same outfits as my boyfriend, it still struck me and shaped how I view fashion. For most, androgynous fashion is about rebellion, challenging traditional gender norms and embracing a style that blurs the lines between masculine and feminine aesthetics.

Androgynous fashion is about taking what is typically characterised as masculine and feminine clothing and blurring the lines between the two to create a whole new category of clothing. The concept of either is inherently relational. Connell (2020) states that 'Masculinity' does not exist except in contrast with 'femininity'. Femininity and masculinity are considered opposites or binaries within many societies. They are defined in relation to each other, where traits associated with femininity: nurturing, emotionality and softness are contrasted with masculinity: strength, assertiveness and independence.

Discussing androgynous fashion from the 1970s onwards in relation to the importance of fashion would not be possible without acknowledging the historical context of the 1960s. The 1960s saw a surge in opposition to social and political norms, leading to a radical cultural shift in a period of passionate activism, rebellion, and cultural revolution. The Civil Rights Movement maintained its momentum throughout the 60s and laid the foundation for the growth of the Black Power Movement with groups such as the Black Panther Party, the Black Women's United Front, and the Nation of Islam, who called for the dismantling of white power structures. At the time, the U.S. feminist movement developed a similar approach to radicalism modelled by Black Power. Many feminists rejected the liberal approach of Betty Friedan's feminism and focused on sexual and emotional liberation. Women would show more skin as a means of reclaiming their sexuality. Many men and women who opposed the U.S. government turned to the hippie subculture,

embodying free love and sexual liberation through attitude and fashion. Men and women opted for bright colours, loose fabric and long hair, which illustrated that men and women were starting to resemble each other.

The 1970s saw the growth of androgynous fashion as a form of rebellion against customary gender standards. Influential figures like David Bowie and brands like Yves Saint Laurent challenged traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity through fashion, blurring the lines between genders. Bowie challenged the way that people view gender norms by obscuring the boundaries between masculinity and femininity through his clothing, makeup and hairstyles. Bowie's wardrobe encompassed a mixture of traditionally masculine and feminine clothing. Figure 1 shows Bowie wearing a tight-fitting, colourful jumpsuit with red platform boots; this outfit illustrates how Bowie disrupted the boundaries between masculine and feminine clothing.

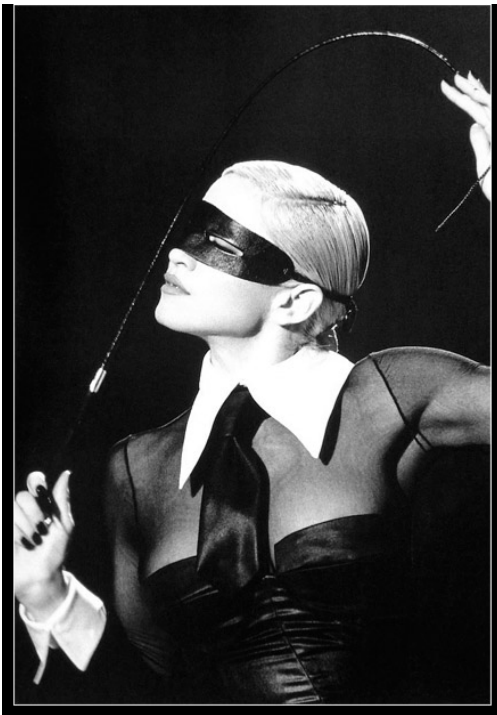


**FIGURE 1**

He motivated fans to embrace their unique identities and reject societal pressures, inspiring a generation of artists, musicians, and fashion designers to explore gender ambiguity and creativity through clothing. His androgynous style symbolised rebellion and freedom during a time of social change, paving the way for greater acceptance of gender-fluid fashion. Yves Saint Laurent also transformed fashion during this time, reconstructing what it meant to dress like a man or a woman. After the iconic Le Smoking tuxedo of the 1960s, Saint Laurent had a profound cultural impact that sparked controversy in the fashion world. The tuxedo symbolised a shift to more fluid and progressive views of gender and clothing. Saint Laurent's exploration of androgynous fashion in the 1970s laid the foundation for future designers to continue pushing the boundaries of gendered dressing.

To examine the effect of androgynous fashion in the 1980s, it is essential to examine the significance of subcultures and how they affected gender-fluid clothing during this time. Youth cultures embodied self-expression and rebellion against conformity. Ross (2013)

explains that the notion of an original subculture depends on its opponent, conformity. An authentic subculture speaks against inauthentic, mass-produced mainstream culture. Certain youth cultures, such as punk, embraced androgynous fashion and challenged traditional gender roles. This rejection of gender norms was evident in the adoption of unisex clothing, hairstyles, and makeup, signalling a broader cultural movement toward gender fluidity and non-binary identities. During the 1980s, punk was characterised by a DIY ethos that encouraged expression through creativity. Many people in this subculture would shop in both male and female sections in thrift stores to maximise what they could create. Androgyny in punk was a philosophy of non-conformity and rejection of the mainstream. Punks rejected traditional societal standards and advocated the freedom of self-expression and acceptance of diverse identities.



**FIGURE 2**

The 1990s embraced androgynous fashion with grunge and alternative rock influencing a unisex fashion. Helmut Lang and Jil Sander embraced minimal style, offering gender-fluid clothing to a broader market. Kurt Cobain and Madonna experimented with gender-bending looks and challenged conventional ideas of masculinity and femininity. Lang's designs feature gender-neutral garments that are appealing to men and women. Lang used clean lines and tailored cuts to defy traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity. His clothing was defined by minimalism and versatility, allowing for binary gender interpretation. The brand also introduced unisex clothing that blurred the lines between traditional menswear and womenswear.

Lang offered a range of clothing that catered to a diverse market. Like Lang, Jil Sander embodied a unisex manner of design that can be interpreted per individual. Sander's androgynous fashion contested conventional gender norms by offering clothing that can be worn by any gender identity. Her minimalist designs emphasised individuality and self-expression. Music was essential in defining androgynous fashion for individuals in the 1990s. Madonna's provocative and bold style incorporated an androgynous intent. She frequently wore tuxedos and suits paired with lingerie and high heels to challenge the traditional gender boundaries put in place by society. Her iconic 'Erotica' era adopted a

dominatrix aesthetic, incorporating leather and latex to blur the lines between masculine power and feminine sensuality. Figure 2 shows Madonna in a sheer and leather top with a tie, mask, and whip. By embracing this androgynous style, she encouraged fans to embrace their identities regardless of societal norms.

The turn of the new century saw an increase in androgyny. Fashion brands like Dior Homme and Saint Laurent incorporated androgynous elements into their collections, making the androgynous style more reachable for a wider audience trying to define their gender identity. Hedi Slimane created a model for masculine design that significantly impacted menswear. Slimane made feminine menswear popular and inspired many designers to keep a feminine aesthetic when designing for a male audience. Bowstead (2021) argues that in the intervention of the language of gender, Slimane had "a desire to disrupt, challenge, and destabilise essentialist and heteronormative models of gender." Slimane's androgynous fashion embodied a subversive attitude that captured a younger audience by embracing a sense of non-conformity that allowed them to express their identity and explore beyond traditional gender binaries through clothes. Slimane's stylistic approach and aesthetic of slim lines, sharp angles, fitted tailoring and womenswear fabrics took inspiration from the silhouettes of the 1970s. His designs contributed to a cultural shift towards more inclusivity in androgynous expressions in fashion.

In 2010, the growth of the LGBTQ+ communities led to a significant moment for androgynous fashion. Alessandro Michele for Gucci and Harry Styles played a significant role in the continuation of the rise of androgynous fashion. Alessandro Michele used maximalism fashion as a means to advocate for gender fluidity and androgyny in dress. Gucci RTW Fall 2015 set the tone for how Michele would approach his role at Gucci by sending female and male models down the runway. The models were not characterised by their genders but by their androgynous looks. Michele loves androgyny and ambiguity; he found beauty in the in-between. Harry Styles and Michele have a muse-like friendship that often creates debate on gender identity and androgyny. Their looks for the 2019 Met Gala, picture in Figure 3, embody their approach to androgynous fashion. Michele is wearing metallic pink trousers and a



**FIGURE 3**

matching blouse with prominent shoulders and bows, while Styles is wearing a see-through blouse, trousers, and heels. Alessandro Michele's technique of creating androgynous fashion has had a powerful impact on the fashion industry, redefining clothing for a new generation. His inclusive vision challenges traditions and inspires designers to welcome creativity and inclusivity.

The evolution and significance of androgynous fashion encapsulate the relationship between fashion, identities and communities over the past decades. It represents a shift in societal attitudes toward gender identity and self-expression. From the rebellion against tradition in the 1970s to a more contemporary embrace as a symbol of inclusivity, androgynous fashion has challenged the binaries of masculine and feminine fashion.

In conclusion, the evolution of androgynous fashion over the decades exemplifies far more than a mere trend in clothing; it represents a profound shift in societal attitudes towards gender identity and self-expression. From its roots in rebellion against traditional gender norms in the 1970s to its contemporary embrace as a symbol of inclusivity and diversity, androgynous fashion has continuously challenged the binaries of masculinity and femininity. Through these decades, icons like David Bowie, Madonna and Yves Saint Laurent and the influence of subcultures pioneered a movement of gender identity and androgyny by blurring the lines between genders and empowering individuals to embrace their identity. Helmut Lang and Jill Sander introduced minimalism as a means to embrace gender-neutral style, widening the accessibility of androgynous fashion. In more recent times, Alessandro Michele and Harry Styles have played essential roles in mainstreaming androgynous fashion, making it more accessible to the broader population by advocating for runways and red carpets to incorporate this style. Their maximalist choices in style push the fashion industry towards a greater acceptance of diverse gender identities.

Androgynous fashion, therefore, is a visual language that communicates through clothing, reflecting the complex intersections of community and identity. Androgynous fashion illustrates why fashion matters beyond its surface. It signifies the freedom to express one's identity, challenge societal norms and reflect cultural shifts. Ultimately, fashion is essential as it serves as a mirror of our society by reflecting and shaping our understanding of gender, identity and community.

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Images:

Figure 1: Ziggy Stardust Photo (1972) Available at: <https://www.vogue.fr/fashion/fashion-inspiration/diaporama/fashion-evolution-david-bowie-style-from-mod-to-glam-rock/24737> (Accessed: 12 May 2024)

Figure 2: Madonna (2010) Madonna - Erotica (Official Video) [HD]. 2010. Available at: YouTube (Accessed: 12 May 2024).

Figure 3: Alessandro Michele and Harry Styles attend The 2019 Met Gala Celebrating Camp (2019) Available at: <https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/harry-styles-met-gala-outfit-details> (Accessed: 12 May 2024)