

Why the terms Unisex and Gender Neutral are not fit for purpose in contemporary clothing and fashion design.

The word unisex when applied to clothing, very simply describes clothing that both men and women can wear interchangeably, such as jeans and t-shirts. This term seems to have been adopted by fashion and clothing companies to suggest that they make clothing that can be worn by anyone. Yet, the fixed nature of sex is both contestable and regularly contested, and the term is hardly used in any other forum - is there still room for this term in clothing and fashion which seems anachronistic?

The original concept of unisex clothing was created in 1968 by Rudi Gernreich, who created a series of garments, such as trousers and tops that women and men could wear interchangeably¹. But according to those in the fashion industry, was a short-lived trend. Closer examination of images of these kinds of clothes reveals that they were suitable only for extremely slender female models, embodied by models such as Twiggy and Jean Shrimpton in the 1960's. Arguably, this suggests that clothing of this nature was suitable only for men and women who had the figures of men.

The terms sex and gender are social constructions, and are now considered much more dynamic, yet clothing, and fashions of clothing remains remarkably static. While women have adopted clothing traditionally associated with men, such as trousers, jackets and shirts, the same is not commonly true for men². The term 'gender neutral' might now have replaced 'unisex' and refers to clothing that both men and women can wear. Yet what this usually means in practice is larger clothing that women can adopt as a fashion statement, as they are commonly oversized, such as the French company Vetements³. This reinforces the idea that male clothing for women seems more acceptable and appears to be 'gender neutral' rather than the other way around. On the high street, the terms 'boyfriend' when used to describe a cut of denim jeans or other trousers for women, is not uncommon, and this use of the word appears to be a marketing ploy. Conversely, men are discouraged from wearing trousers or jeans that have female overtones, such as Barack Obama who was criticized for wearing 'Mom Jeans' in 2008⁴.

Given that the terms sex and gender have been found to be too restrictive when applied to people, perhaps now there is an opportunity to stop the false limitation of these terms when applied to designing garments, and to simply refer to them as 'clothing'.

¹ Paolotti, J. B 2015 Sex and Unisex: Fashion, Feminism and the Sexual Revolution, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

² Morgan, A 2019 Why Shouldn't Men Wear Skirts? <https://theconversation.com/why-shouldnt-men-wear-skirts-112623>, March, 14th 2019.

³ <http://vetementswebsite.com/>

⁴ Singer, M 2016 The Genius of Obama's Mom Jeans, <https://www.vogue.com/article/president-barack-obama-mom-jeans>, Vogue December 17, 2016.