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Gender neutrality trend in today's contemporary fashion: A sociological ornamentation

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Abstract

Fashion denotes a way beyond simply wearing clothes. It is associated with words like trending, styling and elegance, choice of clothing, wearable, and comfort. It is not just clothing but includes jewelry, makeup, hair styling, cosmetics, etc. Often, the fashion world is divided into two different categories essentially when it comes to the perspective of gender, namely, female fashion and male fashion. Whether it is the question of the type of clothes, clothing styles and colour, jewelry style, clothing styles, hairstyles, and makeup, there is a boundary in the line that prevails between masculine and feminist irrespective of caste, class, and community. Even in fashion, society has set distinguishing norms for the two genders, namely, male and female.

The rapid growth of the fashion industry in contemporary Indian society is due to digitalization, social media, and globalization. Fashion is changeable according to time, place, and purpose. With the development and change in society, the inclination to fashion trends is now advancing. There has now been visual gender neutrality in the fashion society. Today, the trends in unisex fashion have been increasing continuously among the present generation. The objective of this study is to explore the extent of prevailing gender neutrality in the fashion world of today's contemporary Indian society.

This study is qualitative. The researcher extracted secondary data from published articles, posts on websites, social media platforms, online magazines, and shopping sites, and primary data through participant observations and informal interaction with customers and shop owners while visiting the shopping malls and markets.

Gender meaning is a social construction that distinguishes between males and females in terms of responsibility and roles. This distinction has a conspicuous impact on overall fashion trends between males and females. Now, post-modern contemporary Indian society is accepting the gender neutrality trending in today's fashion world.

Keywords: Fashion, gender neutrality, unisex, trending, social media, society

Introduction

What do we understand about fashion? Fashion includes clothing, jewelry, makeup, hairstyles, and accessories. Fashion is a part of society, and its trend is changeable over time. Broadly, the fashion is a social phenomenon. On an individual level, fashion is a part of one's self-expression and social identity specific to a context according to gender, choice, time and place, and culture in society. Fashion is a term that denotes clothing and dressing, ornamentation, attire, makeup, and adornment. Over the period, the consequent change in fashion trends brings about socio-cultural influence in society. It is the utmost reality that fashion and gender are closely associated and have an emotional connection to each other due to societal distinctions between two genders, namely, male and female.

Sociological perspective of Fashion

The sociologist George Simmel (1997) ^[7] pointed out that fashion is not merely a clothing pattern and style, but is a process of propelling modern life that constructs the psycho-social development of a modern person. He stated that fashion is a type of social horizon point where individual goals clash with those of the group and where novel and innovative forms of aesthetic and behavioural expression question the stability and conservatism of social conventions. Fashion is always a way of expressing the self-identity of an individual. Fashion is the socio-cultural identity and expression of the individual members of a society, and thus is a part of a society.

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Eventually, an individual being a part of society must face certain societal judgments and require it to be socially acceptable. Moreover, men and women are differentiated from each other according to the distribution of specific gender roles and positions in society. Since time immemorial, the basis of individual fashion was socially acceptable on a distinguished boundary line created in the name of masculine and feminine categories. Therefore, fashion responds to social norms and represents it as well. For instance, the emphasis on the dressing pattern of women was usually to be soft, pretty, and delicate. In contrast, men's dresses symbolize social power, responsibility, and darkness. Specific discriminations between men and women in fashion include dress pattern, colour, style, makeup, hairstyle, and adorning jewelry. Nevertheless, the dressing colours meant for women are pink and red, while blue and black are meant colours for males in general. The pink colour is emphasized as a soft and graceful colour suitable for women because women are commonly gentle compared to men. In contrast, blue is a dark colour considered more masculine and applicable to men. The same goes for hairstyle. For instance, women usually keep long hair, whereas men used to keep short hair in most cases. In common, both men and women adorn jewelry. In India, Rajas and Maharajas used to wear lots of jewelry ornaments to show their rich and dominant status apart from their power status. With time, there has been a big difference in wearing jewelry for men and women. Men have specific and very selective jewelry options, and they used to wear less, which is more masculine. Women have multiple choices and prefer to wear jewelry that can make them more femininely beautiful. Overall, society used to determine the dress pattern, colour of dresses, and jewelry pattern according to its social values, norms, and prohibitions.

Society made the borderline between the binary concept of feminine and masculine in fashion and made the rules to follow to get societal acceptance. This tradition has been going on for ages. In India, the male is usually socialized in a patriarchal society to become a powerful and muscular figure. Consequently, the clothing pattern of men is in such a way that would influence their personality. Men are supposed to dress in such a way that would show their masculinity impression.

In Indian history, there were rigid and strict gender categories in clothing. Even that, a few interesting cases of wearing clothes by both genders had been common prevailed in the past. For example, the clothing piece, a long tunic, known as *Angrakhas* was popular and worn by both men and women during the Mughal dynasty period in India. In Gujarat, wearing of sleeves peplum top type known as *Kediyu* was common for both genders traditionally. After the arrival of British colonials, they brought the Western concept of masculinity and femininity imposed on Indian society, and that overshadowed traditional Indian attire as well. In the present Indian fashion scenario, gender neutrality and fluidity are evident in customary and Western attires.

Ann-Mari Sellaerberg (2015) ^[6] described 'Fashion' from a Sociological perspective as a simple sociological definition of fashion as 'being first with the latest.' Its underlying principle is revealed in the link between the modus derivatives and the term 'modern,' with its original meaning

of 'now' or 'for today.' Entwistle (2000) ^[2] elaborates on the function of fashion as a social system that encodes how the body outfit is exposed and what message it conveys and signifies.

In sociology, gender is a socially constructed term that mainly focuses on distinguishing gender roles between masculine roles and feminine roles. Ann Oakley (1972) ^[3], a Feminist and Sociologist, introduced the terms 'sex' and 'gender' from a sociological point of view, and differentiated 'Sex' into the biological division into men and women and 'Gender' to the parallel and socially unequal division into femininity and masculinity. Distinguished gender roles can be seen everywhere in all aspects of life in each society of the nations. Fashion is not exceptional from these masculine and feminist stereotypes.

However, the concept of gender neutrality has taken an influencing shape in today's post-modern society. The idea of gender-neutral clothes denounces the absolute distinction between the two gender categories that has given rise to non-binary or genderless individuals a chance to 'perform' their own identity. Gender neutrality has emerged in the fashion Industry in today's India.

Theoretical framework

The basis of this study is the concepts of gender neutrality, and change in the line of the deterministic theory of social change. The concept of gender neutrality emphasizes whether there is equal treatment and no discrimination between men and women and any person who belongs to any other legal gender. The deterministic theory of social change states that forces may be either natural or social or both, which usually brings about the changes and circumstances that determine the course of social changes (Theories on Social Change, 2021) ^[8]. In this context, the concept of gender neutrality is applied to exemplify the course of change as a trend in the fashion world of today's contemporary society.

For instance, in the situation of individuals in terms of career choice, aspiration, decision-making for self, and even in making decisions on family-oriented issues, traveling, jobs, education, and social, we can see the influence of gender neutrality in this contemporary post-modern society. Gender neutrality signifies the avoidance of discrimination in terms of societal gender and biological sex. There are many simultaneous factors behind the popularity of gender neutrality, like an increase in literacy and education, development of new technology, innovations, policies, and planning, more prevailing opportunities irrespective of gender and sex, increase in competition in every field, modernization, and post-modernization, diversification in career and jobs, social changes, increase in aspiration, developments in different sectors, demands of more innovations and increase in skills and ideas. All these concomitantly have brought about the essential changes in today's post-modern society. Therefore, the inquisitive purpose of this study was to accentuate by delineating the trend of gender neutrality in a fashion that prevails in today's contemporary society.

Objective

The main objective of this study is to bring to light the extent of prevailing gender neutrality in the fashion world in today's contemporary Indian society.

Research Questions

The following are the research questions drawn from the objective.

1. Is there any concept of gender neutrality in the fashion trend of today's contemporary society?
2. What is the extent of the trend of gender neutrality-unisex in fashion in today's society?
3. What are the reasons behind the rise of the gender neutrality trend in today's fashion?
4. What is the extent of social acceptance, change, and challenges in fashion trends of today's contemporary society?

Materials and Methods

This study is mainly descriptive and based on qualitative methods, like observation and face-to-face interaction. The researcher extracted data from secondary sources such as articles, posts from social media platforms, the internet, online magazines, and different online shopping sites, and primary data through participant observation and informal interaction with 30 respondents from the age group 18-40 years during visits to shopping malls and marketplaces located in Delhi, Kolkata, and Siliguri in 2023.

Discussion

Gender Neutrality Trend in Today's Fashion-Unisex

In the past, Gender Neutrality in India did not prevail in fashion, and a conspicuous boundary line in fashion scenarios vis-à-vis dressing patterns between males and females was evident. In contrast, 'in recent years, the divider of the typical gender binary has slowly been destroyed, and the idea of pushing the boundaries of the gender-free system through fashion has become a conventional theme within the fashion industry' (Bestari, 2020) ^[1]. At present, the prevailing gender neutrality has become the globally growing trend that has broken the traditional and customary gender norms to an extent in the fashion world. The case of gender neutrality is observable in the fashion of unisex clothing that now prevails in today's Indian society. The term 'Unisex' was used in the 1960s but the appearance of unisex clothing was in the late nineteenth century as a part of Victorian dress reform (Wikipedia 2024) ^[9]. Unisex fashion trend indicates the pattern of dresses suitable and wearable by both genders and are observable in clothing patterns and hairstyles. However, the unisex fashion has become a significant trend among the youngsters in today's post-modern society. Overall, 'Silhouettes apart, prints, colours, and materials are also becoming increasingly unisex (Pitandy, 2023) ^[4].

Today, makeup is just not for girls or only for male celebrities, but in common for both genders. For instance, the boys are now using makeup in their daily life. Unisex clothing, unisex salons, and unisex jewelry are not new words we find nowadays. It can be seen in the streets and has a significant influence over the younger generation specifically in Gen-Z. In the past, gender neutrality prevailed in the American culture. For instance, girls used to wear jeans and blazers that were commonly more boyish in appearance. Initially, its influences were confined to celebrities and some civilians. Later, over time, such fashion trends spread widely and globally among people. Such clothing trends today have become day-to-day wearing among the people of society irrespective of community, caste, and class.

The fashion trend of celebrities always communicates a strong statement in the fashion industry. Besides, the fashion trends among celebrities have a strong influence on the lives of people and their fashion as well. Celebrities at present adorn and wear unisex clothes such as jeans or hoodies. The unisex dress pattern of celebrities largely influences the young generation of present-day society. In this context, the people of the young generation like and choose several fashion trends and attire of K-pop. Moreover, fashion statements made by both male and female K-pop celebrities and artists influence the young people of the present-day generation. Unisex attire and adornment of many artists have become an ongoing trend among their fans and now have been at large among young people in post-modern society.

In India, the street fashion trends, for instance, shopping on the street by the people in large marketing areas where affordable recent fashion trend items are available, and such market areas used to become a significant congregation place for many people daily at a time. Sarojini Nagar Market in New Delhi is one of the well-known street markets and shopping places where Unisex clothing is available on a large scale. It is observed that people usually purchase Unisex clothing from this market according to the day-to-day fashion trends.

Trends like oversized T-shirts are common unisex fashion trends found among youngsters. The traditional way of dressing in India is now changing with new unisex clothing. Today, the borderline between female and male clothing is increasingly fading and declining among young Indians. Such a trend of fading prevails in the case of online shopping sites besides the marketplaces where unisex clothing is available and preferred by youngsters as observed in the review section of these sites. During the visit to some shopping markets and malls, the interaction was done with male young purchasers to know about their dress colour preferences. Most of them have found viewing that they like either pinkish colour or colour nearby reddish or black. Besides, some depend on and select the dress items based on the quality of clothing and recent styles of clothing patterns. Women purchasers prefer Western dresses. On asked the reason behind their choices, they explained how Western dresses are more comfortable and convenient for their use and wearing apart from their cheap prices than Salwar suits or Sarees.

Even in the cases of hairstyle, they like and choose to get red or pink highlights in their hair. There is no specific gender-wise colour boundary in today's society that defines either feminine or masculine in society. Above all, gender neutrality today has become a significant trend in the Indian Fashion World.

Reasons behind the rise of gender neutrality trend in today's fashion

Overall, the day-to-day fashion trends in social media, peer groups, family, socialization, influences of celebrities, fashion influencers, celebration, cultural influences, tradition, and modernity have a wider impact on the popularity of a specific trend in the fashion world. In this context, the availability and access to a variety of fashionable clothing, ornamentation, and makeup as well as financial affordability are also the influencing factors behind the popularity of a particular fashion trend. The following

might be the reasons behind gender neutrality in today's fashion world.

Influence of Social Media

Social media today has an immense influence on people's daily lives, and that too among the younger generation. Everyone uses social media in their daily lives. Fashion trends on social media play a huge contributing role as one of the factors in spreading day-to-day fashion style and attire among the people of a society. Most of the younger people opined that they used to be influenced by celebrities, fashion influencers, You Tubers, and Hashtag trends on social media. Such influences are common and ongoing trends among them. Social media has always been the promotional platform for fashion. So, fashion, social media, and day-to-day trends are somehow concomitantly interrelated to each other. At present, the entire fashion trend and its influences on people have been through social media.

Exposure and Openness

Gender norms have broken to an extent in the fashion world because of its perpetuated immense exposure to the fashion world in the country and globally, besides the diversity in fashion and its inclusivity, as well as the growing openness in accepting the fashion trends by the people of a society.

For a curious instance, in the past, the profession of makeup male artist was looked down upon in society as it was not socially acceptable. But it is now a common scenario that many males have also chosen makeup as a profession and have been pursuing a career as a 'makeup artist. A few male influencers have been creating makeup videos and uploading them on their YouTube channels, Instagram, and other platforms. People also like such videos and comment on their views and appreciation of such videos. In the past, people had some specific mindsets that were more conservative and closed. In comparison, people are now always ready to explore more and more and are not afraid of trying new things, as well as the same goes for fashion.

Role of LGBTQ Community

The LGBTQ community is now getting recognition all over the world and also receiving acceptance in society. Many fashion celebrities, fashion designers, and modellers are taking courage and inspiration from the LGBTQ community. The boundary line between male and female fashion has now somehow faded because of also the influence of the LGBTQ community. Unlike mainstream fashion, the LGBTQ community chooses clothing to express their feelings and identity (Saha and Baraik, 2021) ^[5]. Their unique style even influences fashion industries in a bunk. Many persons from the LGBTQ community are becoming fashion or makeup influencers or showcasing on YouTube. They are exploring their talent and identity freely on social media platforms.

Economic Reasons

In the case of India, where the middle and poor classes are more in percentage, Western fashion became more convenient particularly among women because of lower-cost than traditional attire. Indian clothes can be costlier for reasons like fabric, handmade or machine-made, designs, time consumption, place, and more. For women like men, today's women prefer Western dresses for daily use.

Urge for more Innovation and Experiments mainly upon New Generations

Present-day new generations are now mostly keen to explore new things, have creative and innovative ideas, and have the impulse to try new things and bring about innovative ideas in daily life. New generations are breaking the traditional fashion norms and conservativeness that prevailed in the past and bringing creative ideas into the fashion industry in today's post-modern society.

Globalization and Trends - Brand Culture

Globalization has made it possible to bring the world together in terms of economy, marketing, culture, and politics. Globalization has created opportunities for people who can directly plug into a new world through the usages of ever-growing digital communications. Culturally, globalization has brought people together globally through music, movies, sports, and fashion.

Brand culture has been getting way bigger at present. The present-day younger generation loves to shop from top influential brands, namely, H&M, Zara, Puma, Adidas, Louis Vuitton, Dior, and many more. It has become a substantial trend among young people. These brands promote unisex fashion.

Social acceptance-change and challenge

Social acceptance denotes welcoming change and diversity in others. In most cases, people now have the feelings and tendency to attempt to look and act like others to fit in society in general.

In modern and post-modern society, women are challenging the traditional mentality, social norms, and gender-related boundaries in the case of dresses in the fashion world. Unlike in past decades, women are more comfortable wearing Western dresses in social gatherings, events, workplaces, and for daily use purposes. In today's society, modern men are using makeup tools and techniques for beautification and also adorn feminine dresses confidently without worrying about social norms and validation.

Exposition, exploration, and openness have helped people to accept the change and new progress in their lives. In India, people have the trend of welcoming unisex fashion openly in post-modern society. Interestingly, people used to criticize gender neutrality in the past, but now there has been a trend of accepting the growing gender neutrality in fashion. For instance, Indian women are now wearing and adorned with sherwani as a fusion, and men are wearing long skirts or long Anarkali kurtis. For reference, we can observe famous singer cum YouTuber Lily Singh wearing a Sherwani on one of her modeling shoots (Reference from Instagram). Besides, the actor Ranveer Singh played a role in one of his recent movies wearing an Anarkali suit (Reference from the movie: Rocky and Rani Ki Prem Kahani). People are not just accepting this but also appreciating the way of changing in the Indian fashion Industry and adopting gender neutrality fashion. Commonly, Indian citizens are also adopting gender neutrality in their daily dressing fashion. For instance, females wear and adorn with more masculine styles, whereas males are more like feminine styles, which has become a significant trend among young people.

Indian society is trying to accustom to this trend of change. Despite this, assimilation of gender neutrality and the disappearance of gender-biased clothing is still challenging

where social customs and norms exist because of diversity in terms of cultures, population, religion, and traditions. Young Indians of today are to date mainly facing the problem of social validation.

Conclusion

Gender meaning is a social construction that distinguishes between males and females in terms of responsibility and roles. Overall, such a type of distinguishment also has conspicuous effects on overall fashion trends between males and females in the past. But now, this post-modern contemporary Indian society has been accepting gender neutrality-cum-unisex trending in today's fashion world.

Recommendation

In this study, the researcher collected data from secondary sources, such as articles, posts from social media platforms, the internet, online magazines, different online shopping sites, and observations and instant interactions with customers and shop owners during visits to shopping malls and marketplaces. The researcher has attempted to raise the issue of gender neutrality that has gradually prevailed in today's post-modern society. Therefore, this study recommends in-depth research on the societal perspectives of gender neutrality in today's fashion trend that prevailed in post-modern society.

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