

MASCULINITY TOXICITY

THE OTHER SIDE OF SEXISM

1.

CRITICAL RESEARCH: FASHION MARKETS AND CREATIVE
INDUSTRIES
PART 2- MARKET REPORT

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION BOYS WILL BE BOYS	1
2	MARKET ANALYSIS FREEDOM OF WARDROBE	5
3	QUESTIONS, AIMS AND OBJECTIVES IS GENDERLESS CLOTHING A NEW PHENOMENA? IS IT GENDER-NEUTRAL FASHION OR JUST MASCULINIZED CLOTHING FOR WOMEN?	9 11
4	CONCLUSIONS	15
5	REFERENCES	19
6	BIBLIOGRAPHY	22
7	LIST OF PICTURES	26
8	APPENDIX	28



BOYS

WILL

BE

BOYS

2.

'Don't, Jo; it's so boyish!'

'That's why I do it.'

'I detest rude, unladylike girls!'

'I hate affected, niminy-piminy chits!'

Alcott, 1868 p.4

Josephine March, probably the most outstanding character among the four protagonists from the novel *Little Women*, often gets scolded for not being ladylike and for having boyish manners. She whistles, uses 'such slang words' (Alcott, 1868 p.4), doesn't care much about personal grooming and is strongly opinionated.

The novel was written in the second half of the XIX century, but the characters and the dynamics between them are incredibly contemporary.

As one can observe from the short squabble that I quoted at the beginning of this research, even then there was a well-identified line between what was considered to be manlike and what, on the contrary, was socially recognized as ladylike.

If you were born a girl, then you are expected to talk, dress and behave in a certain way. If you were born a boy, you have to do the exact opposite.

The aforementioned dialogue allows the reader to trace a syllogism; Jo is called by her sister rude for doing something boyish. As a response, the tomboy refers to Amy as an 'affected chit'.

Boys are rude, girls are affected.

On an introspective level, it is interesting to assess that what Jo is doing in this scene - which, by the way, is whistling - isn't considered rude in its wholeness. Whistling itself isn't rude when boys do it, but it does get rude when girls walk around chirping.

To use a saying: boys will be boys.

Now, whistling is absolutely harmless, but the problem arises when men aren't held accountable for doing something wrong just because it's considered to be part of their identity.

Such an arbitrary justification hurts both sexes, but this is probably a consideration that men and women are still trying to wrap their heads around.

As I stated before, toxic masculinity is an expression that was once discussed only in women's studies classrooms (Salam, 2019), almost suggesting that females were the ones who first acknowledged the problem, or rather that, at the beginning, toxic masculinity was diagnosed as something that hurt exclusively women and not men in the first place. After all, the fish will be the last to discover water.

"A lot of men feel that they, personally, are being held responsible for everything that's macho and wrong in the world today: rape, wife-beating, war. They've been feeling very bad about themselves [...]" (Chapple and Talbot, 1990 p.195)

Such a statement reveals the truest nature of toxic masculinity: defensiveness as a reaction to feminism (Kimmel and Kaufman, 1995, p.41).

The members of the Mythopoetic Men's Movement, led by the writer Robert Bly, retreat themselves now and then in a sort of archaic, ancestral ceremony that will help them find their lost boyhood and recharge their manhood (Kimmel and Kaufman, 1995, p.35).

But as Kimmel and Kaufman are fast to underline,

"It is a retreat from the historical specificity of the present era, a retreat from political responsibilities to confront male excesses that daily manifest themselves on our streets, [...] excesses such as rape, violence, spouse abuse, gay bashing, high risk sexual behavior, drunk driving. It is a retreat to a highly selective anthropological world of rituals that reproduce men's cultural power over women and that are now used to facilitate a deeper nostalgic retreat to the lost world of innocent boyhood. It is thus a retreat from women, from adult men's responsibilities to embrace women's equality and

struggle against those obstacles that continue to lie in the path of gender equality." (Kimmel and Kaufman, 1995, p.41)

What astonishes is that when these men are asked to rethink their identities and to acknowledge that patriarchy is affecting them just as much as it has always affected women, they flee. Some of them run away because privileges - let's be honest - are hard to let go, but others dash off because those traits they are demanded to change, are the only ones they know.

Some of the answers that I got from my surveys betray an ill-concealed fear of facing the issues that feminism has raised.

In question #6 I asked my survey participants to watch the ad We Believe: The Best Men Can Be by Gillette and to comment it. Although all of them stated that they did like the ad, some comments stood out.

On average everyone, girls and boys, appreciated the no-violence and it's-time-to-change-things messages that were delivered, but some male participants weren't completely happy with its plot and the way men were portrayed.

One of them said:

It was 80% fine, but really ham-handed. It's a bit icky when media insults the intelligence of the target audience.

Another disappointed boy stated:

I feel like it missed the mark, this is targeted towards certain male outliers but does not accurately represent the large majority of men and it pushes a dangerous narrative that men as a whole are the root of evil in the world rather than select individuals in power.

And, last but not least:

It blames people.

The ad shows men who help each other understand that they can be more than that, way more than the stereotype that social constructs had them to believe. Yet some of them felt that their intelligence was undermined and that it was just a way to deliberately attack them. Again, defensiveness.

What some of them failed to comprehend is that we actually need more campaigns that make an effort

to consciously adapt the portrayal of masculinity to allow for more nuance, flexibility and compassion (Safian-Demers, 2020, p.13).

Moreover, it's important to be aware that a lot of attributes that the common sense has always associated to masculinity are not innate but that, in fact, are historically and socially ordained (Sabo, p. 65).

That is why progress takes time and efforts. Personal change and institutional change are inextricably linked together, hence an individual - in this case, a man - who is willing to work on his true identity, one that has not been instilled by society, must be willing to change his institutional circumstances first (Sabo, p. 69).

But the change has, indeed started. The old perception of men and, consequently, of women, has become obsolete, and in some cases the two sexualities have also merged together, creating a grey area that is located exactly in between.

"It would seem we are living in an unprecedented period of gender upheaval, a time when traditional expectations of what constitutes men's and women's dress are being blended, blurred, even reimagined altogether." (Sanders, 2019).

In this scenario, gender-fluid fashion is an aesthetic tool that aims at disentangling the normative association between skirts and women, suits and men. (Sanders, 2019)



FREEDOM OF WARDROBE

“When you meet a human being, the first distinction you make is ‘male or female?’ and you are accustomed to make the distinction with unhesitating certainty.”

Freud, 1993

Bioethical¹ theories are deeply influencing the contemporary anthropological thought, especially when it comes to define sexed identities (Laurelle and Schmid, 2014).

The contraposition between sex and gender indicates that there’s a significant shift between a unitary vision of the sexual identity of individuals to a dualistic insight.

A unitary sexuality entails a defined psychic identity- masculinity or femininity -that develops in accordance with the person’s awareness of their sex. As soon as the individual understands they were born male or female, they start acting and behaving accordingly.

On the contrary, a dualistic sexuality is based on the conviction that there is a separation between the biological elements of sexual identity, in other words ‘sex’, and all the socially and culturally ordained roles and purposes, that is masculinity and femininity.

From this scenario, gender becomes an independent concept, a choice that the individual makes rather than something the individual was born with.

Gender studies suggest that masculine-feminine doesn’t necessarily always

¹ by bioethical one refers to ethics of medical and biological research

equals male-female, because everything that makes a man a man and a woman a woman, is the result of stereotypes and historical constructs.

Nowadays the vocabulary that revolves around gender and sexual identities is richer than ever, and includes a variety of new terms, such as non-binary, agender and gender fluid.

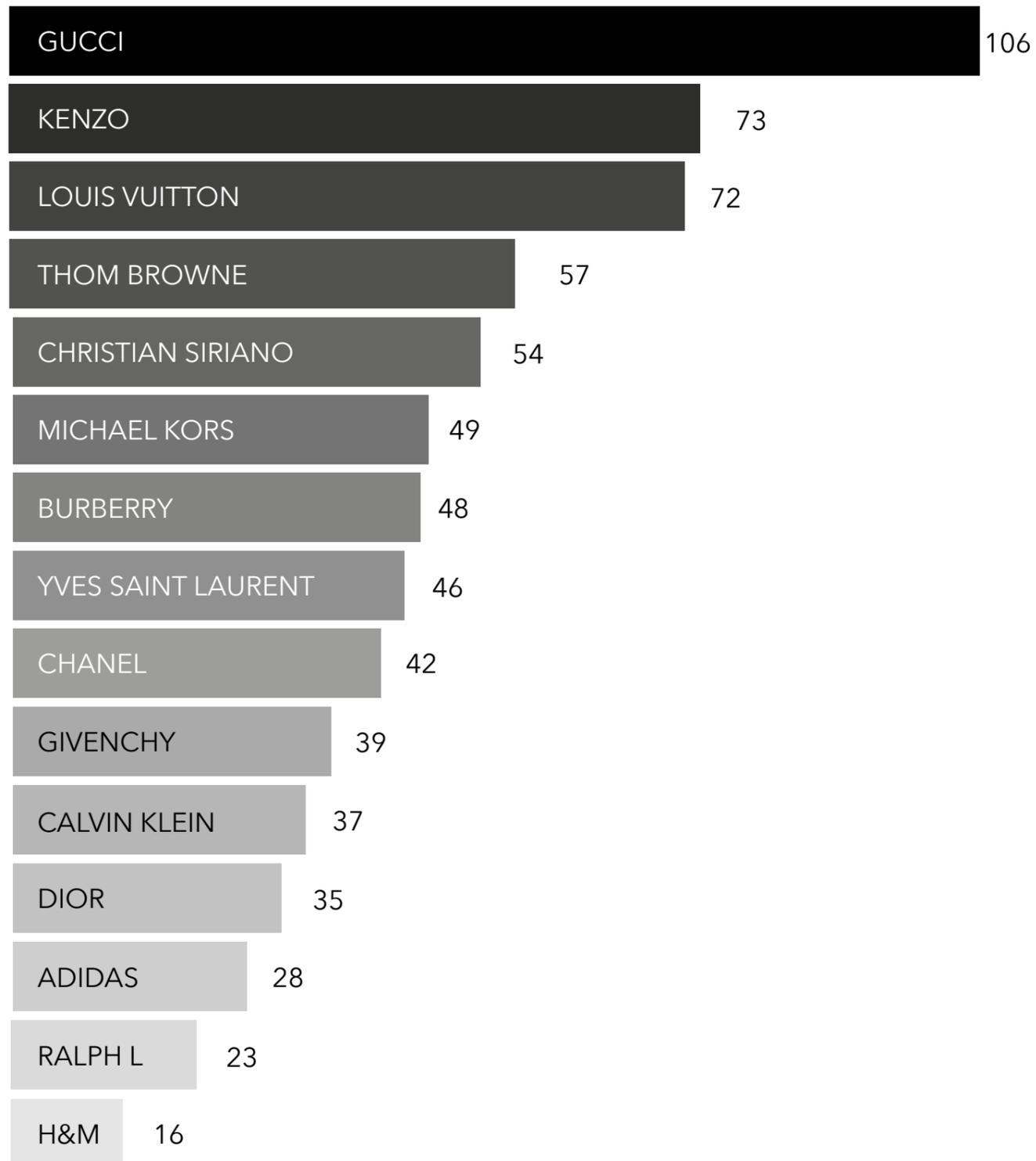
Some people identify as a mix of both sexes, and usually like to be referred to with they/them pronouns; Others feel like they don’t belong to any gender at all (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2018).

This fluidity is translated into fashion through gender-neutral and unisex clothing. The world is witnessing the celebration of androgyny and hermaphroditism, and, more importantly, a major freedom of self-expression.

The latest runways portrait an unparalleled ambiguity and revolutionary gender-less outfits; this new nonbinary fashion is concerning luxury brands as well as mass market companies, quickening the process of normalization of gender identities (Madsen, 2018).

From October 2018 to last August, Commetric focused on the media conversation around gender-neutral fashion to analyze the role of brands and their importance in this context. From the study it is clear how luxury houses are actually more prominent in this market.

COMPANIES IN THE GENDER-NEUTRAL FASHION COVERAGE BY NUMBER OF MENTIONS



Christina Zervanos, head of PR at The Phluid Project, a fashion brand that only sells gender-fluid clothing, gives an overview of how the perception of sexuality is now changing:

“Statistics show 38 percent of Gen Z-ers ‘strongly agreed’ that gender no longer defines a person as much as it used to, and 27 percent of millennials felt the same way. These generations are the future of retail, accounting for \$143 billion in spending in the next four years.” (Alnuweiri, 2018).





IS GENDERLESS CLOTHING

A NEW PHENOMENA?

Contrary to what one might think, genderless clothing wasn't born yesterday.

The political situation that characterized the 1960's and 1970's created the perfect fertile ground for sexual revolutions and the dismantling of stereotypes. The fashion industry was fast to pick up from the feminist and gay movements' claims and demands (Paoletti, 2015).

Agender clothing was a tangible reaction to the strict gender stereotyping of 1950's and to the roles that were imposed to men and women during World War II (Chrisman-Campbell, 2015).

"Designers from Paris to Hollywood imagined a future of equality and androgyny. The unisex movement affected all ages, with adult fashions trickling down to school-aged children and clothing for infants. Between 1965 and 1975, girls and women began wearing pants to school; boys enjoyed a brief peacock revolution, sporting bold colors and patterns; and legal battles were fought over hair style and length." (Paoletti, 2015)

Paris is the city where it all started. Important designers such as Pierre Cardin, Andre Courreges, and Paco Rabanne gave life to patterns, silhouettes and fabrics that did not allow for any gender association (Chrisman-Campbell, 2015).

Interestingly, although unisex fashion was meant to crush boundaries between clothes for men and for women, often it provoked antithetical reactions.

"Part of the appeal of adult unisex fashion was the sexy contrast between the wearer and the clothes, which actually called attention to the male or female body." (Paoletti, 2015)



IS IT GENDER- NEUTRAL FASHION...

...OR JUST MASCULINIZED CLOTHING FOR WOMEN?

An important aspect to underline is that usually genderless clothing takes the form of a masculinization of female clothing, rather than the feminization of men's wardrobe, although nowadays some male celebrities- Billy Porter and Harry style, to mention a couple of them -are actually glamorously stepping on red carpets with dresses, skirts and heels.

The entire spring/summer 2019 fashion season exuded ambiguity and the willingness to annihilate gender stereotypes.

Fashion designer Nicholas Ghesquière talking about his fashion show stated:

"There was a clear ambiguity, but that was the idea. Sometimes people think when a woman dresses like a man it gives her power, but you can be very vulnerable when you're wearing a suit as a woman." (Christian-Madsen, 2018)

Clothes were not the only gender-neutral element of the show;

"As it turned out, the first of the three models was a Canadian trans man named Krow, while the second, Jessica Espinosa from Mexico, identifies as female but goes by 'Jay.' The third of the 'men's' looks was modeled by Alyssa, a young woman from Paris." (Christian-Madsen, 2018)

The latest runway shows were organized as a combination of both menswear and womenswear, and fast-fashion labels have recently begun to release un-gendered lines promoted by hiring models of both sexes wearing the same clothes (Commetric, 2019).

Finland won the title of 'pioneer of unisex shopping' when its largest department store opened a gender neutral floor. The section is called "One Way" and is located right in the middle, between womenswear and menswear (Lieber, 2018).

Selfridges followed by: in 2015 the English department store gave life to Agender, a concept space organized across three stories and that promoted a genderless shopping experience (selfridges.com).

But, again, in both cases the idea of 'gender-neutral clothing' was nothing but menswear made available for women to buy.

"Popular culture, however, remains resistant to the idea of a "man in a dress," outside of selected New York runways. As late as 2012, a TV sitcom on a major network—the swiftly cancelled Work It!—played the idea of men in women's clothing for laughs. [...] These comedic tropes [...] both speak to our society's deep-seated transphobia and our dangerous masculinity panic." (Lang, 2016)

The show business is definitely more daring, and it is now showcasing a significant shift and change in the men's wardrobe. Actors and singers are redefining virility and the hyper-masculinity star that society, with time, has forged.

Haider Ackermann and other fashion designers have lately been delivering the image of a man that is not looking for extravaganza nor eccentricity, but for a wearable translation of his freed identity.

The happiest marriage of our generation is the one between actor Timothée Chalamet and fashion. The 24-year-old's slender, androgynous figure offers itself as a white canvas to designers, who brilliantly paint it with unmatched elegance and measured exuberance. The actor likes to play with clothes, to experiment and to subvert social conception of menswear.

There is no pattern, nor fabric, nor colors that he has not tested out, which makes every Chalamet's red carpet long-awaited and talked-about. The pearl-grey belted Haider Ackermann suit that the actor wore at the Venice film festival was just the pinnacle of a series of outfits that guaranteed him a seat among the young celebrities who are redefining the concept of masculinity.

"He's sensitive, honest, thoughtful, polite, goofy, and self-aware. He's in touch with his feminine side, and he smiles. A lot.", writes Roisin Lanigan, i-D editor, when describing

Timothée Chalamet.

What makes everything interesting and worth-analyzing is the confidence with which he owns this just mentioned feminine side. "I want to say you can be whatever you want to be. There isn't a specific notion, or jean size, or muscle shirt, or affectation, or eyebrow raise, or dissolution, or drug use that you have to take part in to be masculine." (Lanigan: 2018).

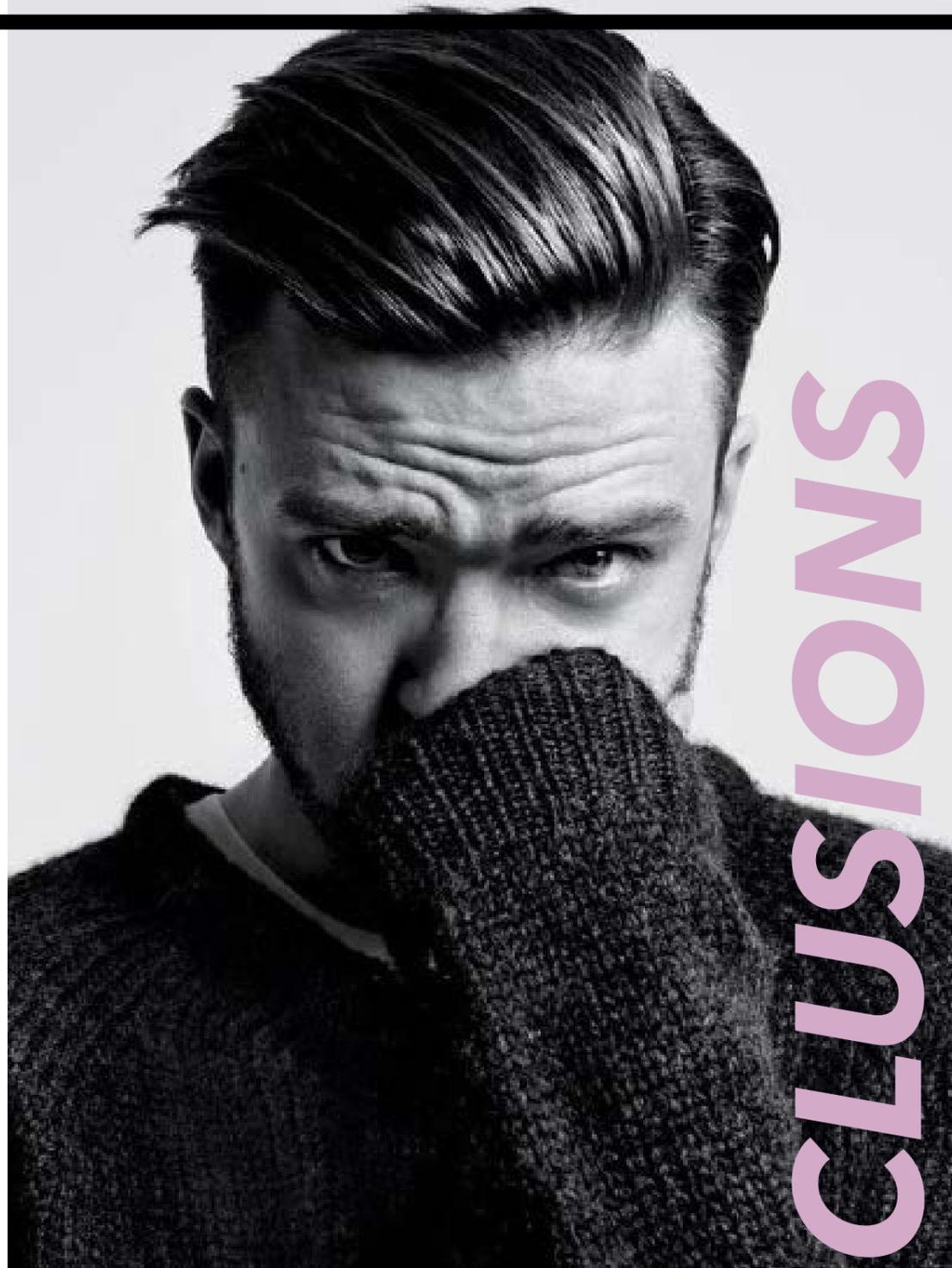
There isn't a single way to be a man, there isn't a specific wardrobe to have to be a man. There shouldn't be the necessity to prove others that you're, indeed, a man.

And here comes the most fascinating part: the long-overdue dissociation between what is considered to be the real notion of masculinity and sexual orientation.

A man dressed in more feminine or gender-fluid garments is assumed to be gay when, in fact, that isn't always necessarily the case.

"The mainstream acceptance of gender fluidity faces a huge roadblock in toxic masculinity. If a certain famous hashtag suggests that our definitions of manhood are fragile, they're also treated as inviolably rigid, while femininity is allowed to be negotiable and mutable. [...] Female fluidity certainly has its attendant stigma, but it's light-years ahead of where men are on the issue." (Lang, 2016)





CONCLUSIONS

Gender therapist Dr Christella Antoni insists on the importance of the coexistence of all genders. The never-seen-before phenomena and rise of genderless clothing should not determine the end of male fashion and female fashion.

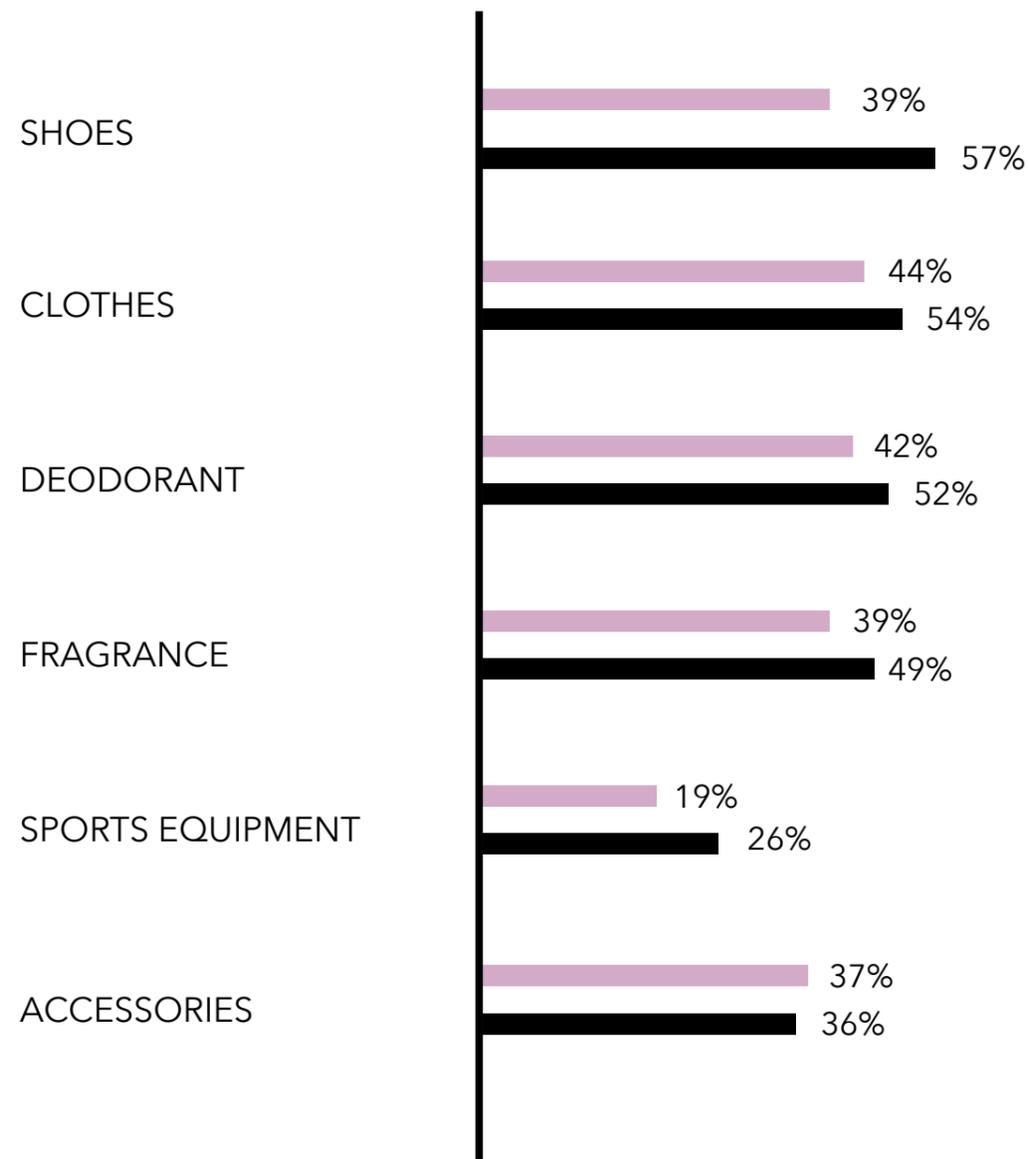
“There is advantage to having clothes available that our more gender-neutral but this doesn’t mean they should totally replace clothes for girls and clothes for boys. In an ideal world gender-neutral clothes should exist alongside clothes for girls and clothes for boys.” (Petter, 2017)

In 2016 the Innovation Group conducted a survey of people from Generation Z aged 13-20 and Millennials aged 21-34, to study their attitudes toward gender and sexuality.

At the statement “I always buy products that are geared specifically toward my own gender, rather than non-gendered products when it comes to..” In all the categories- except accessories -the targeted members of the Gen Z were more open to buy products that weren’t specifically created for their gender than their Millennial counterparts.

PRODUCTS VS GENDER

"I always buy products that are geared specifically toward my own gender, rather than non-gendered products, when it comes to..."



Total respondents Gen Z, 13-20 ● 300 Millennials, 21-34 ● 300

The newest generations are demanding coexistence, inclusivity and acceptance. Just like there isn't only one way to be a man, which is why it would be more correct to talk about masculinities rather than masculinity, nor a single way to be a woman, a-gendered clothing shouldn't be a weapon with which fashion will kill gendered garments.



6.



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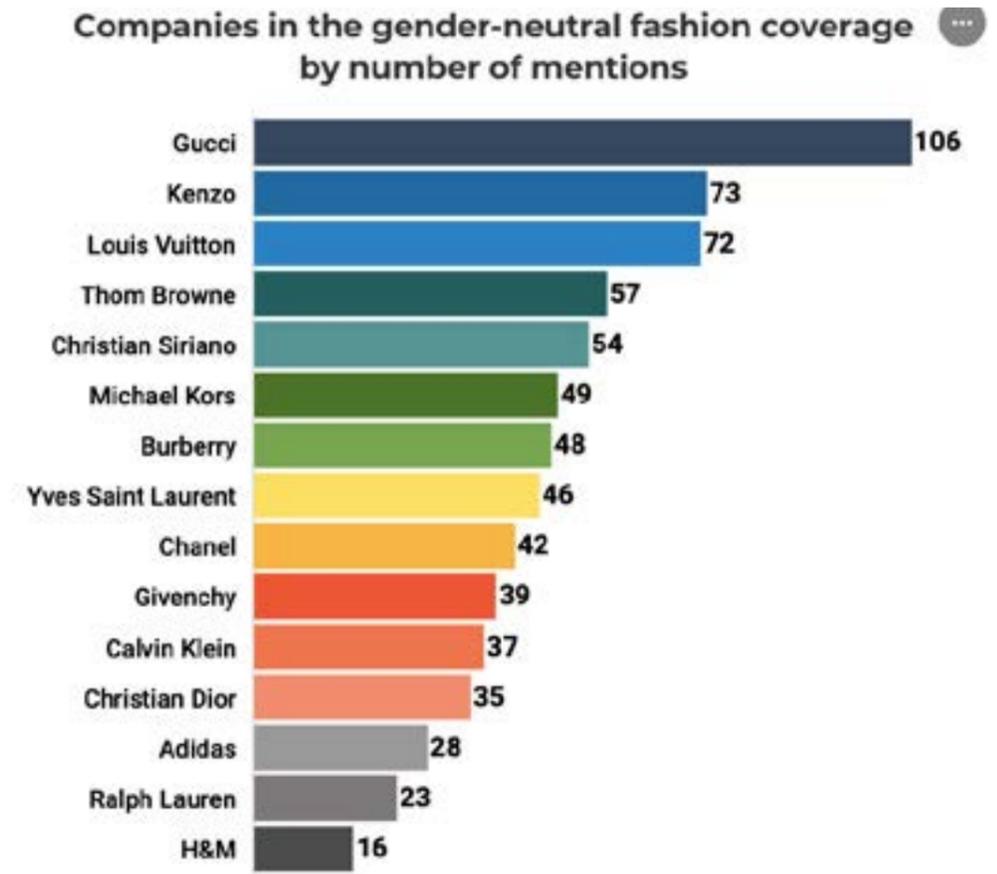


APPENDIX

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a.



b.

