

Stand Out from the Crowd! Sparkling Online Consumer Curiosity for Gender-Neutral Fashion Apparel

Meg Michelsen

Longwood University, USA

César Zamudio

Virginia Commonwealth University, USA

Yiru Wang

Central Connecticut State University, USA

Abstract

Despite the growing popularity of gender-neutral fashion, particularly among Gen Z consumers, little is known about how to effectively display gender-neutral items on fashion retailers' existing websites. Our research explores how displaying gender-neutral apparel online can trigger curiosity, which may encourage purchases. Through mixed research methods, we investigate how Gen Z consumers perceive gender-neutral fashion and assess which display mode (presenting gender-neutral items stand-alone or cross-listed across gender sections) is most effective in sparking curiosity in online fashion apparel stores. We also consider how consumer gender shapes consumers' curiosity. Based on these findings, we provide concrete recommendations on how to display gender-neutral apparel online.

Introduction

With the dawn of the 2020s, *Vogue* magazine boldly proclaimed that “the future of retail is genderless.”¹ And consumers followed suit. The global gender-neutral clothing market is set for substantial growth, with a forecasted market size of \$209 billion by 2031 from its current size of \$98 billion.² In the U.S., as younger generations (particularly Gen Z consumers) embrace the idea of gender fluidity, gender-neutral fashion, a symbol of

inclusion and diversity, has grown in popularity, with 85% of Gen Z consumers considering shopping for more gender-fluid clothing and 52% of them having already purchased clothing outside their gender identity.^{3,4} In response, fashion brands, from high-end (e.g., Stella McCartney) to fast fashion (e.g., Zara, Uniqlo), have already launched gender-neutral lines (see examples in Figure 1), and gender-neutral brands such as BODE and Telfar – the latter’s slogan being “*it’s not for you, it’s for everyone*” – have taken the fashion industry by storm.⁵

Figure 1. Examples of Gender-Neutral Apparel from Different Brands

Stella McCartney



Uniqlo



Source: *Stella McCartney* and *Uniqlo* websites.

Unlike traditionally gendered fashion, gender-neutral fashion generally adopts neutral colors, straight cuts, and simple styles lacking decoration.^{6,7,8} Therefore, a key challenge for fashion retailers is how to effectively integrate gender-neutral clothing into their existing collections of gendered apparel when displaying them. To this end, retailers have adopted different initiatives. In-store, some boutiques mix men’s, women’s and gender-neutral sections on the same floor.^{9,10} Online, some have created standalone unisex sections as part of capsule collections (e.g., Gucci’s MX collection) while others cross-list gender-neutral items (e.g., EYTYS may list the same item in both menswear and womenswear sections).

While gender-neutral fashion has gained some research attention, little is known about how Gen Z consumers, the major target market for gender-neutral clothing in the United States, perceive the gender-neutral style.^{11,12} Do they conceptualize this style in the same way as fashion designers and marketers? How does the gender-neutral style look like from their perspective? We shed light on these questions by interviewing Gen Z consumers, and follow up with an experiment, establishing new insights on

how to display gender-neutral apparel online. This is valuable because, unlike offline stores, which can mix sections throughout their floors, fashion retailers' websites cannot display items all at once; instead, they must either create a new gender-neutral section or cross-list gender-neutral items within existing (e.g., men's and women's) sections, which we refer to as *display modes*. As such, how to display gender-neutral apparel is not merely a cosmetic change on fashion brands' websites; rather, it is a consequential design choice guiding consumers' navigation for information search, an important task during the online shopping journey.¹³

What is the gender-neutral fashion style?

The gender-neutral fashion style emphasizes designs that neglect masculinity and femininity, creating a neutral perspective without a clear gender identity (e.g., a turtleneck sweater and jogging suits).¹⁴ In the U.S., this style was popular during the 1960s-1970s, attributed to societal and feminist activism that challenged stereotypical perceptions of gender.¹⁵ Recently, gender-neutral fashion has resurfaced as a major trend, driven by Gen Z consumers who embrace greater gender fluidity.¹⁶ The growing popularity of the gender-neutral fashion style has resulted in various product categories typically considered female-oriented (e.g., beauty cosmetics, fragrances, and fashion items such as summer jewelry and bags) now being highly associated with gender neutrality with men's jewelry, for instance, embraced by personalities such as Mark Zuckerberg, followed by guides for "skeptical men" on how to incorporate these accessories into their wardrobes.^{17,18}

Importantly, fashion designers and consumers approach gender-neutral fashion clothing differently: while designers focus on the social context underlying this fashion style, consumers mainly evaluate a gender-neutral product's aesthetic style.¹⁹ Although consumers' reactions to gender-neutral fashion clothing are documented, how this fashion style is defined by Gen Z, the most attractive target market for this style, remains unclear. Therefore, we conducted a qualitative study, interviewing Gen Z consumers to understand their perceptions of the gender-neutral fashion style in the United States.

How do Gen Z consumers perceive the gender-neutral fashion style?

We interviewed fourteen heterosexual, Gen Z fashion lovers (6 men and 8 women) who ranged in age from 18 to 35, and who scored at or above-average in a fashion consciousness test.²⁰ They represented different racial groups (7% Multiracial or Biracial, 7% Asian or Pacific Islander, 14% Black or

African American, 76% white or Caucasian). Each interview was conducted online and lasted approximately half an hour. The interviews started with a casual chat about the participant's observations on gender-neutral fashion. Then, participants were presented with six images of clothing items (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Gender-neutral clothing items



Note: Item 1 is from *W Concept*, item 2 is from *Fear of God*, item 3 is from *EYTYS*, item 4 is from *W Concept*, item 5 is from *EYTYS*, and item 6 is from *Uniqlo*.

The images were drawn from various fashion apparel websites, either explicitly labeled as gender-neutral on the brands' websites (e.g., Uniqlo) or sold exclusively as gender-neutral items (e.g., EYTYS). Participants were informed that these items were actual products, but the brand names and the fact that they were labeled as gender-neutral by marketers were not disclosed. After observing the six items, participants first discussed whether they perceived each item as gender-neutral and why, and then they expressed whether, and why, they would purchase each item for themselves.

The first major finding is that Gen Z consumers identified three key features they used to classify a clothing item as gender-neutral (see Table 1 for selected comments from the participants about typical features they relied on for identification). These features included neutral colors, straight cuts, and minimal or plain decoration, consistent with what fashion designers offer.^{21,22}

Table 1. Selected participants' comments on gender-neutral clothing

Identified Key Feature	Selected Participants' Comments
Neutral Colors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don't see anything that suggests this is for a specific gender. Black is a pretty neutral color. (Item 1, C.K., male, 21-year-old). • The neutral color I think is fitting for both genders. I feel it can be worn with other colors too, like any skin color, so I think it's good for both genders. (Item 2, S.S., female, 21-year-old). • I can see men and women both wear it. It is a summer-time shirt, very nice, simple color. (Item 5, J.W., female, 21-year-old)
Straight Cuts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is the fit. It looks oversized and comfy. Even females wear baggy hoodies all the time now, with gym pants and stuff like that. (Item 2, Z.S., male, 33-year-old) • It is like an oversized shirt. Just the design, looks unisex. It is not masculine or feminine at all. (Item 4, A.K., male, 22-year-old) • It's cut for male, but shoulders are kind of more female, and then the cut straight down is kind of more male. I think it's a nice niche for both genders. (Item 2, Z.S., male, 33-year-old)
Design Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is just a basic graphic t-shirt, simple design, nothing associated with one gender stood out for me. (Item 1, K.M., male, 21-year-old) • I believe this is a turtleneck. I love turtleneck. Women wear turtleneck and they look as good as I do when I wear them. (Item 3, C.K., male, 21-year-old) • It is just very basic. Everyone has that in their wardrobe in black or white, just for any setting. (Item 6, Z.K., female, 20-year-old)

Takeaway #1: In agreement with fashion designers and marketers, Gen Z consumers associate the gender-neutral style with clothing that is appropriate for any gender. They identify three key features of this style: neutral colors, loose cuts, and simple designs.

The second key finding is that choosing a fashion clothing item was strongly driven by the specific design of the item itself, with individual preferences largely influencing the intention to purchase a particular item, even though all participants approved of the gender-neutral style and agreed that people of any gender could wear the six items presented. For example, a 20-year-old female participant commented on item 1: "I like the green, but I don't like the green and the grey together. I don't want to say it is too busy, but it is just not appealing to me for some reason." Another 30-year-old female participant would not buy item 3 because of the "different strips in different directions", even though she "liked the colors and the cut." A low preference for certain graphic designs (item 1; J.W., female, 21-year-old) or for the crochet style (item 5; C. W., female, 22-year-old), and associating certain items with work uniforms (item 6; A. K., male, 22-year-old) were also reasons to reject the items. It is difficult to summarize any common patterns due to how varied participants' preferences for different items were. In short, a

consumer might acknowledge they like the gender-neutral style, yet not be interested in buying a specific item.²³

Takeaway #2: While Gen Z consumers are enthusiastic about the gender-neutral fashion style, such enthusiasm does not always directly translate to purchase intent. Many personal factors also influence the purchase decision for a specific gender-neutral piece.

Beyond intention/identity: curiosity can boost unisex fashion online retailing sales

Building on the findings that preferences alone do not guarantee a purchase in fashion retailing, we instead focused on the drivers of purchase intentions. Among these, curiosity is paramount.²⁴ Although consumers' innate curiosity is important, in the context of fashion, the key is to activate *situational* curiosity by strategically placing products in such a way that curiosity is triggered, paving the way for browsing and purchases.^{25, 26}

Psychologically, curiosity is often sparked when individuals realize a knowledge gap between their existing knowledge or expectations and the new information they encounter, particularly when they encounter unfamiliar, inconsistent, or ambiguous stimuli. For instance, in a museum exhibition, a novel or complex object that is contradictory to others usually makes consumers aware of their knowledge gap, resulting in a desire or a passion for knowledge.²⁷ Thus, curiosity, initially sparked by an appetite for closing a knowledge gap, evolves into a cognitive and emotional need for information. Consequently, curious individuals are motivated to engage in in-depth exploratory behaviors, such as searching for missing information about the stimulus in question, paying increased attention to it, and valuing it more highly.^{28,29} Given the potential benefits resulted from curiosity, how can online retailers trigger curiosity for gender-neutral apparel?

How can online fashion retailers spark curiosity?

As curiosity stems from incongruities between a stimulus and its environment, unusual, novel, and surprising stimuli would be most likely to spark curiosity; in other words, they are *salient*. Salience is "the conspicuity of a stimulus relative to its surrounding items".³⁰ A stimulus becomes salient because of its inherent features or properties that stand out from its surroundings. In marketing, salient stimuli have been operationalized in different ways: as a product, as the physical attributes of a product, as elements of an advertising execution (e.g., the font, size, color, etc.), as a brand name, and so on.^{31,32} Salience positively impacts consumer awareness, consumer choice, brand and product recall, and product evaluation.³³⁻³⁷

Given our focus on gender-neutral apparel in online retailing, we are interested in understanding the role of visual salience when consumers visit a fashion retailer website to browse and select apparel items. Upon visiting a fashion retailer website, consumers typically first need to select between the men's and women's sections and expect to view menswear or womenswear in each section. Several items are presented simultaneously as consumers browse. With none presented in isolation, all items form a context. In men's sections, the context is typically defined by dominant masculine design features (e.g., dark colors, thick and heavy fabric, few patterns, etc.) across most items, connoting the male gender. Contrarily, women's sections present opposite features such as bright colors, thin and smooth fabric, and colorful or flamboyant patterns, implying a context of femininity and the female gender.³⁸ Gender-neutral apparel neglects the differences between male and female.³⁹ In practice, the same gender-neutral clothing item can be worn by either a man or a woman. Since the design diminishes gender characteristics as much as possible, gender-neutral clothing items are neither highly masculine nor highly feminine.

To display gender-neutral clothes on a fashion apparel website, there are two approaches.

- *Create a standalone "gender-neutral" section.* The visual salience of gender-neutral apparel will not spark consumer curiosity in this approach. When all gender-neutral items are grouped together, they may appear similar in style, making it difficult for any particular item to stand out. Moreover, this approach introduces a structural change to the website design that can significantly alter consumer's information-searching process. Instead of a habitual choice between men's and women's sections, consumers now need to first decide whether to browse the men's, women's, and gender-neutral sections, and could result in potential confusion and eventual disengagement with the website.
- *Cross-list gender-neutral items in both men's and women's sections.* The visual salience of gender-neutral apparel will effectively spark consumer curiosity. When consumers browse items in either of the men's or women's sections, gender-neutral items stand out as different from other highly masculine or feminine pieces, creating a sense of surprise.⁴⁰ Due to their incongruity with the context, gender-neutral items become salient and elicit curiosity, drawing consumers' involuntary attention and a pressing need for more information about these items.^{41,42} Importantly, this display mode does not alter consumer's search behavior, as the available choices remain between the men's and women's sections.

Which display mode triggers stronger consumer curiosity?

Although, generally, the cross-listing display mode for gender-neutral items is likely to spark stronger curiosity, how this process unfolds is not so straightforward, as it depends on consumer gender. Recall that gender-neutral clothing items usually adopt a design suitable for both genders by using neutral colors, straight cut, and hardly any decorative patterns or details. This design prominently differentiates gender-neutral clothes from women's clothes that are usually more colorful and include more decorative details. As such, when gender-neutral clothes are presented with other feminine items, they will be perceived as more salient and unique; what's more, women usually place a great emphasis on how unique a retailer's assortment is.⁴³ Thus, women will find cross-listed gender-neutral items unique and surprising, sparking more curiosity than when presented with other gender-neutral items. Contrarily, the gender-neutral design diverges from men's clothes to a lesser extent because men's wear is generally simple and plain; thus, men will exhibit the same extent of curiosity regardless of how gender-neutral clothes are presented. We conducted two studies to more directly test which mode would result in stronger consumer curiosity.

The goal of the first study was to gain information on consumers' perception of various apparel items to build credible examples of the display modes we sought to study. Eighteen images of clothing tops (i.e., shirts and blouses) were selected from Saks Fifth Avenue (a department store) website. They were listed under either the men's or the women's section, and all featured various tones of blue since this color is widely accepted by both genders.⁴⁴ Since clothing category and color were identical, these apparel pieces only varied on key fashion design elements that broadly fit into three categories: 1) feminine items with tight-fitting forms, soft fabric (e.g., silk and lace), and decorative detailing (e.g., ribbons, ruffle, embroidery); 2) masculine items with a clear Y- or H- silhouette, thick fabric, and no pattern or basic patterns (e.g., stripes and plaid); and 3) gender neutral items that did not include the aforementioned typical masculine or feminine design features.

In an online research platform, one hundred participants between 18-35 years (Gen Z consumers) viewed nine clothing items, randomly selected from the set of eighteen. For each item, participants indicated their perceptions of its femininity or masculinity, how much they liked each, and how expensive they thought each item was.⁴⁵ Finally, participants reported their own sense of fashion, gender, and age.⁴⁶

This preliminary study allowed us to use the reported perceptions to classify each of the eighteen items into three clothing categories: feminine, gender-neutral, and masculine. Combining items from these different

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categories, we constructed three sets that closely resembled the online display modes we sought to investigate (see Figure 3).

- *Set 1* reflects a gender-neutral-only display mode, containing four gender-neutral items with no significant difference in the femininity/masculinity perception.
- *Set 2* represents a cross-listing display mode of gender-neutral items for a women's section, including one gender-neutral item (i.e., a Western shirt from Set 1) and other three highly feminine items.
- *Set 3* imitated a cross-listing display mode of gender-neutral items for a men's section, including the same gender-neutral item (i.e., a Western shirt from Set 1) and other three highly masculine items.

Figure 3. Clothing sets that represent different display modes of gender-neutral items



Note: The Western shirt (rightmost shirt) is the gender-neutral item included in all the sets and is the focal item for comparison in the following main experiment. Within each set, the four items were equal in consumer preference and price perception.

Next, in the second study, one hundred and fourteen women were recruited and randomly assigned to view either Set 1 (gender-neutral-only display mode) or Set 2 (cross-listing display mode for women), and one

hundred thirty-four men were recruited and randomly assigned to view either Set 1 (gender-neutral-only display mode) or Set 3 (cross-listing display mode for men). Note that since Set 1 was the gender-neutral-only display mode, the same set was assigned to both female and male participants. See study design summary in Table 2.

Table 2. Study Design

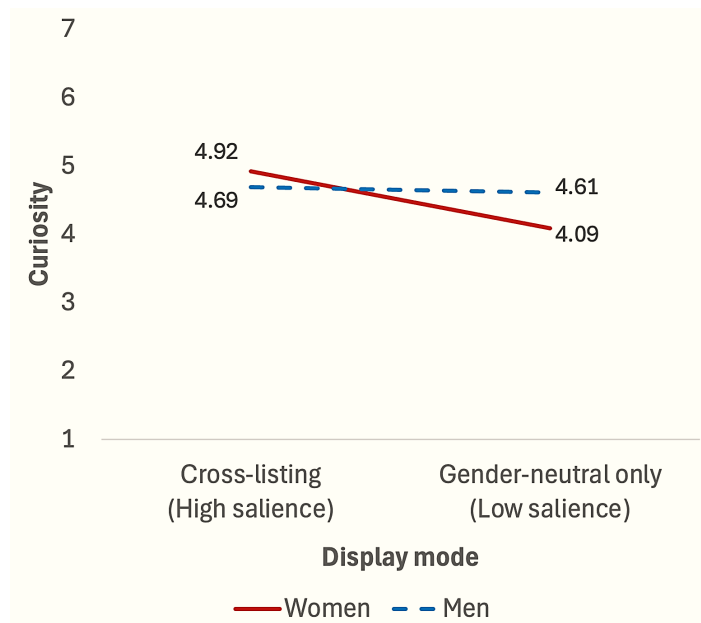
		Display mode	
		Gender-neutral-only (low salience)	Cross-listing (high salience)
Participant Gender	Female	Set 1	Set 2
	Male	Set 1	Set 3

After participants were exposed to their assigned set, they first viewed all items together, then one at a time. Participants reported their curiosity about each item (“this shirt makes me curious,” and “this shirt keeps my attention”).⁴⁷ Participants subsequently reported their fashion consciousness and age. Finally, to check whether the gender-neutral item (i.e., the Western shirt) stood out more in Sets 2 and 3 than in Set 1, the four items, as a set, were presented one last time, with the Western shirt highlighted, and participants were asked to rate the extent to which the Western shirt was similar to or different from the other three items as a whole.

Women perceived the Western shirt (gender-neutral item) as more distinct in the cross-listing display mode (Set 2) than in the gender-neutral-only display mode (Set 1). Consequently, as Figure 4 shows, women were more curious about the Western shirt when it was cross-listed (Set 2) with other three feminine items than when displayed among other gender-neutral items (Set 1). Interestingly, while men also perceived the Western shirt as more different when cross-listed (Set 3), men exhibited the same curiosity for it, regardless of display mode (see Figure 4).

Takeaway #3: Consumer gender and display mode are two key factors that fashion brands should consider when promoting gender-neutral clothing items on their websites. For women, the cross-listing display mode (presenting gender-neutral items with other feminine items) sparks the most curiosity, whereas men are equally curious whether an item is cross-listed or displayed with other gender-neutral items.

Figure 4. Display mode and consumer gender jointly impact curiosity about the gender-neutral item



What's next for fashion managers?

This article provides several key insights for managers to capitalize on Gen Z's embrace of the gender-neutral fashion style. Regarding clothing design, our findings reveal that Gen Z consumers' conceptualization of the gender-neutral fashion style aligns with the design philosophy of fashion designers and brands. Both converge on the preeminence of neutral, understated colors, straight lines, and minimal decorations. Hence, fashion managers should expect these consumers to embrace newer releases labeled as gender-neutral, as long as the brand's designs adhere to the above features consumers expect.

Our results provide actionable recommendations for managers seeking to effectively showcase and promote gender-neutral clothing items online. In general, cross-listing without any website changes is recommended as it is particularly effective and beneficial for women, relative to a gender-neutral-only section. This approach appeals to consumers who might be interested in exploring gender-neutral clothing but are hesitant to do so due to gender stereotypes. Now as they browse their familiar section, they would encounter gender-neutral styles in a subtle manner, seamlessly sparking curiosity. Avoiding structural changes in website design is good news for the bottom line since, for many retailers, carving additional website space dedicated to a gender-neutral section requires professional web design, which might be costly and may not yield any benefit based on our findings.

Furthermore, retaining the traditional men's and women's sections ensures that consumers' routine search behavior on apparel websites is preserved. Conversely, adding a standalone gender-neutral section would alter the navigation structure of the website, resulting in consumers needing to modify their habitual search patterns, with the site being judged as less user-friendly and subsequently lowering consumer engagement and trust.⁴⁸⁻

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Amidst the turbulent landscape fashion managers compete in, one thing's for sure: Gen Z will continue challenging gender norms in their consumption habits.⁵² With their penchant for inclusivity and self-expression, many Gen Z consumers are abandoning traditional gendered product categories and celebrating experimentation. Coupled with their substantial buying power, valued at over \$143 billion, Gen Z is already reshaping the fashion landscape.⁵³ Accordingly, this generational shift change must be reflected not only on runways, by combining womenswear and menswear, or by casting more gender non-conforming models, but also in fashion retailers' online store displays. Sparking curiosity through carefully considered website design, as our interviews and experiments show, is the key to unlock Gen Z's market potential for gender-neutral fashion apparel.

Authors

Meg Michelsen (Ph.D., Kent State University) is an Associate Professor of Marketing in the College of Business and Economics at Longwood University. Her research interests include sensory marketing, fashion marketing, and AI in advertising and consumer services. She has published articles on these topics in journals such as Journal of Advertising, Journal of Services Marketing, Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, Journal of Product & Brand Management, among others. Her teaching interests include consumer behavior, international marketing, and strategic marketing management.
email: michelsenm@longwood.edu

César Zamudio (Ph.D., Management Science (Marketing), The University of Texas at Dallas) is an expert in marketing analytics and empirical modeling at Virginia Commonwealth University. Zamudio's research has been honored by the Marketing Science Institute through its Clayton Dissertation Proposal (Honorable mention, 2011), Ideas Challenge (Winner, 2011) and grants (2013, 2021). His research articles have been published in leading journals such as Strategic Management Journal, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Journal of Business Venturing and International Journal of Research in Marketing. Zamudio currently serves in the Editorial Board of the Journal of Family Business Strategy and the Journal of Global Fashion Marketing. Prior to his academic career, Zamudio was founder and CMO of a promotional products distributor.

email: zamudiomc@vcu.edu

Yiru Wang (Ph.D., Kent State University) is currently an Associate Professor of Marketing at Central Connecticut State University. Her research interests center on platform economy, including online word-of-mouth, user-platform interactions, and the sharing economy. She has published articles in such journals as *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, *International Journal of Information Management*, *Journal of Advertising Research*, and *Public Health*.

email: yw@ccsu.edu

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