BLURRED LINES:
How Retail is Becoming Less Gendered, and Why You Should Care
It’s 2015 — and our nation is degenderizing.

Our futures are no longer dictated by the sex organs we’re born with. Girls can be anything they want to be, whether a professional rugby player, engineer, CEO of a startup, or President of the United States. Boys can be artists, dancers, full-time fathers, and nurses. A macho male Olympian can transition into a beautiful woman. A graceful female model can develop facial hair and big muscles. The boys-don’t-cry era is behind us, and gender and sexuality are no longer the black and white concepts they were years ago.

In American business, no area, with the exception of popular entertainment, is blurring the gender lines as quickly as retail. From clothing to footwear to technology, forward-thinking companies are enacting a less binary vision of how we shop, dress, and live — in response to an emerging consumer need. A genderless fashion market is developing. It’s far less saturated than its gendered counterpart, and it is rife with opportunity for new entrants.

This isn’t to say that all Americans everywhere are accepting of all sexual and gender choices. But as we’ve started to talk about it more, there has been an incredible shift in attitudes across the country. Americans, particularly the young adults known as Gen Y, are more accepting of the grey area in between.

In fact, Millennials are the most tolerant U.S. generation to date: half of the age group believes gender exists on a spectrum and shouldn’t be limited to male and female. So retailers and manufacturers with their eyes on this most valued of consumer demographics would be wise to start thinking of shoppers as more complex and varied. They’re more than just male or female.
Gender-neutral fashion: so hot right now

Time and again, women’s and men’s fashion have adopted elements from each other to rebel against gender norms and stereotypes. The result? Androgynous fashion trends that have waxed and waned over the past century.

In the 1920s, Coco Chanel borrowed the suited look from menswear and designed her iconic trousers and button-down suits for women, emblematic of the post-war woman trying to build a career in a male-dominated workplace.

John Lennon rocked high heels in the 60s, and so did David Bowie in the 70s.

In 1966, couturier Yves Saint Laurent designed “Le Smoking Jacket,” pioneering long, minimalist, and androgynous lines in women’s clothing. The design made any woman who wore it look unstoppable.

Though we might not see men and women wearing the same clothing on the street today, the high-fashion world has embraced this genderless trend with open arms. Countless haute couture fashion houses are blurring the lines between feminine and masculine and changing the conversation around gender. A handful of companies have created androgynous labels for women who wish to dress more masculine. Designers from Marc Jacobs, to Rag & Bone, to Giorgio Armani, and more have created clothing that straddles the gender gap. Some designers are even creating apparel intended for everyone, for wear by people identifying as any gender.

Here are some notable gender-neutral designers:

- Rad Hourani was the first fashion designer to market a unisex line in Paris in 2007. He aims to explore high fashion beyond gender with collections that nod at both masculinity and femininity by producing clothes that can be styled for both men and women.

Did you know . . .

The birth of gendered fashion

If you don’t live under a rock, you’re familiar with the iconic symbols for men and women that emblazon public restrooms. The skirt-adorned female stick figure and skirt-less male figure would lead us to believe that from the beginning of time, these have been the standard clothing assignments.

But when we trace back the history of what makes a dress feminine, or what makes the color blue masculine, it’s all pretty arbitrary.

In fact, men and women used to wear the same things — clothing was unisex. Men even wore skirts, heels, and pink.

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Led by Alessandro Michele, Gucci recently launched a menswear collection that challenged traditional gender lines with delicate lace and slouchy bows, exhibited by both men and women on the runway.

Though Miuccia Prada didn’t use the word “unisex” when designing her Spring 2015 Menswear line, she said it felt “instinctively right to translate the same idea for both genders.” The collection’s contours seemed to work for all models regardless of gender at the recent spring fashion show.

Though high-fashion creatives seem to get this idea of fashion independent of gender, haute couture is restricted to the select few who can afford it; retailers for the masses must create lines that will sell to the majority of customers. So the question remains — does the public buy into this vision?

Societal check-in

Are consumers across the board ready to accept this gender-neutral concept? If the public’s reaction to Jenner’s recent transition is any indication, then yes — but women (not surprisingly) are probably more game than men.

In an online survey conducted in May 2015, our partner CivicScience® asked 1,507 U.S. adults aged 18+ years if they considered it brave of Bruce Jenner to come out as a woman to Diane Sawyer.

Less than one-third of respondents answered yes to this question. But this stat reached 53 percent among the Millennial woman demographic. And Millennial women were 60 percent more likely than Millennial men to answer yes to this question.

So what does this mean for future generations?

Though older Boomers and Gen X consumers are less open-minded, younger, female Millennials are more accepting of a less-gendered world.

Do you think it was brave of Bruce Jenner to come out as a woman to Diane Sawyer?
% of people who said yes, by demographic segment

- Total U.S. Adults 18+: 31%
- Millennial Women 18 - 34: 53%
- Millennial Men 18 - 34: 33%
The high-fashion world is innovating around the gender dialogue. Research indicates Millennials are more progressive when it comes to concepts related to gender and sex. So which brands are taking risks and staying relevant in these changing times?

Did you know . . .

How pants came to be?

In ancient Western times, everyone wore long rectangles of draped fabric. By the time the Middle Ages rolled around, the tunic was born (men liked theirs short). At this time, differences in dress were defined by class rather than gender: elaborate, colorful, and fine-textured clothing was reserved for the wealthy, while the poor stuck to basic wool and linen.

Pants didn’t really come into fruition until the Renaissance, as a solution to men riding horses and covering up. Hose (worn under tunics) gradually evolved into breeches, pantaloons, and then trousers. It wasn’t until the Victorian era that a gender divide developed in dress. As women stuck to longer tunics and dressed bolder and more frivolously, men abandoned jewelry, bright colors, and fancy fabrics; they adopted a more practical, sober look.

But even as pant-wearing men became the norm at the turn of the 20th century, mothers still dressed their children (male or female) in white dresses for easy cleanup and bleaching.

Keeping up with genderless wearables

We’re living in an age of personalization. While there is certainly a place for fashion brands that target particular genders, body types, and more, that market is already saturated. Rather than designing clothes for men or clothes for women, what if brands just kept things simple and created one line for everyone? Which brands are creating apparel, footwear, and accessory product models that work for all people?

NPD Account Manager Joe Hasek has been following this trend closely and doesn’t paint a very promising picture: “There’s been this phenomenon in high fashion for several years now — particularly on the runways. But we’ve yet to see a meaningful trickle-down into any of the typical apparel channels.” There are some exceptions, though. Joe points to the rise in athleisure and athletic-inspired apparel as pushing this universality trend forward.

The comparatively genderless nature of some types of athletic apparel gives brands like The North Face and Patagonia an advantage on this front. A hoodie is a hoodie, and a beanie is a beanie, and we often see men and women sporting the same classic fleeces from these brands.

American Apparel produces cotton basics that by nature are pretty gender neutral. The retailer recently marketed a unisex line with clothing items intended for wear by both men and women.
(The retailer's marketing techniques toward men vs. women differed drastically and created consumer backlash.)

With the explosion of lululemon and the rise of activewear, many designers are tapping into the high-end activewear market. A new Canadian designer to the scene, Willis Chan, is approaching this gold mine with a genderless design sense. He's producing unisex “High Athletic” fashion — high fashion with an athletic and techwear element.

**Did you know . . .**

**Boys once wore pink?**

In the mid-19th century, pastel pink and blue were added to the formerly all-white baby palette. Around 1918, a department store proclaimed that pink was for boys, and blue for girls—as pink was considered a stronger color, and blue more delicate. In the 1940s, this color assignment was swapped in response to manufacturer and retailer color interpretations. So this blue/boy pink/girl association was happenstance.

NPD Sports Industry Analyst Matt Powell points to the footwear category as offering some options for everyone: “Though they’re not marketed as ‘asexual’, there are shoes that were once strictly men’s shoes that have become gender neutral.” Converse and Vans are prime examples; it’s hard to walk down the street without seeing someone sporting a pair. Their websites have sections for men, women, and kids. They also allow visitors to click on any classic shoe model and view men’s and women’s sizing in one drop-down menu. Toms, Sperry, and Birkenstock also produce footwear that has gained popularly across genders. Though these brands do offer gender-specific sizes, colors and designs, their classic designs are marketed to everyone and have achieved a widespread appeal.

At the same time, there are new boutique brands specifically marketing asexual footwear. Sneaker brand Eytys co-founder explains that he never has a gender in mind during his design process. Footwear designer Nik Kacy launched her business on Kickstarter and now sells “luxury, gender-neutral footwear and accessories.”

There’s been a lot of talk in the press about the rise of the man bag, but there are also designers designing bags to appeal to all genders. At the recent Independent Handbag Designer Awards, there was an award category for The Stand Out & Look Great Work Bag (Unisex). British designer Jennifer Hamley won for her sleek and sexy bag design that appealed to both men and women.

Fashion products for either gender might have the greatest application in the wearable technology market of smartwatches and activity trackers. Aside from personalization of color bands, Fitbit markets the same tracker to both sexes. The Apple Watch focuses its marketing on its functional capabilities and is not offered in men’s or women’s versions, though it too allows for band/case personalization.

Gender usage research for activity trackers and smartwatches shows smartwatch users skew male, and fitness trackers users skew female. Though this affects how tech brands Apple and Fitbit target their marketing efforts, at the end of the day they’re marketing the same product to men and women.
Retail therapy

What's a girl to do when she physically looks “like a woman” and dresses “like a man?” If she shops on the men's floor of a department store, does she change in the men's room? Or does she carry her stacks of clothes up and down escalators to try on her items in the women's section? There is a business opportunity for retailers who create a comfort zone for people who don't want to subscribe to one category.


London-based concept shop Dover Street Market was one of the first to pass up traditional gender-segmented floors in favor of store organization by brand, allowing customers to shop men's and women's collections simultaneously.

Perhaps most notably, the London-based department store Selfridges took it one step further by transcending the notions of “his” or “hers.” After the retailer noticed many of its female customers shopping the menswear floor and male customers buying women's ready-to-wear and accessories items, the retailer launched its Agender pop-up shop. The department store eliminated the divide between men's and women's clothing by displaying five lines of non-gender clothing from more than 40 brands, across three floors, with both men's and women's bathrooms on each floor.

More than just a fashion

As the public discussion around gender becomes increasingly sensitive and complex, so does the need for a shopping experience independent of gender. Progressive designers like Rad Hourani, Coco Chanel, and Marc Jacobs have tapped into this niche market, along with a group of fashion-forward retailers.

With a growing Millennial segment that finds sex and gender less relevant to their shopping, it seems time for mainstream retailers and brands to participate in the dialogue by offering more options. Because this genderless approach toward fashion is proving to be more than just a passing fashion — it's a trend.

Did you know . . .

High heels were originally masculine?

Whoever said high heels were feminine? Heeled footwear originally emerged in Persia to help men stay upright in their stirrups while on horseback. As this trend traveled to Western Europe in the 17th century, aristocrats began to use the heels' height to supplement their stature and communicate their status; the higher the heel, the greater the social rank. Women adopted high heels in the 1630s, and men consequently stopped wearing them during the Enlightenment. Considering heels to be effeminate, men switched gears to practical, less elaborate footwear.

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