

# Gender Stereotype and Influencers' Role in Genderless Fashion

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to investigate the role of gender segmentation in the fashion industry through the generations, particularly among the Millennials and Z Generation. Although, in fact, it has been stated that the perception of gender roles and gender stereotypes are less strong for these generations, contributions regarding the fashion sector are still few. For this purpose, focus groups were conducted with young Italian fashion consumers who contributed to a discussion on gender stereotype in fashion, genderless fashion, and the role of Instagram influencers in the genderless fashion. Research is currently ongoing, but results are expected in line with Laughlin (2016) who affirmed that these generations are less sensitive to gender segmentation and with De Veirman (De Veirman et al., 2017) to the extent that influencers can raise awareness much more than other forms of persuasion. This study provides a guidance for scholars about consumer perception of genderless fashion and current findings provide brand managers and advertising practitioners with empirical data about the role of social media influencers in genderless fashion and Instagram marketing.

**Keywords:** genderless, genderless fashion, fashion marketing, influencers marketing, brand management.

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## 1. Introduction

Fashion and gender representation have always been linked by a close relationship as clothes have been used throughout the ages as a communication tool to impart information about oneself. However, in recent years we have observed certain transformations in terms of gender, in society as well as in fashion. Indeed, identity is perceived in an increasingly less binary way and the fashion industry has begun to adapt to this to such an extent as to start a process of deconstruction of gender stereotypes, dedicating collections to genderless or integrating gender fluid garments in their offer. This paper aims to investigate the role of gender segmentation in the fashion industry through the Millennials and Generation Z and to explore the role that Instagram influencers and celebrities play in the process of deconstructing stereotypes and creating consensus around genderless fashion.

Prior research has stated that the perception of gender roles and gender stereotypes is less strong for these generations (Laughlin, 2016) but at the same time they are the ones who have pushed the most towards this social change (Coggiola and Coste-Manière, 2021) and are most influenced by social media, especially by Instagram, in making impulse purchases (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021).

The above considerations give rise to our research propositions, which are:

- RP1: Millennials and Generation Z do not have gender stereotypes;
- RP2: Choosing their clothing style Millennials and Generation Z are not gender sensitive;
- RP3: Influencers/celebrities induce a positive perception of a genderless collection;
- RP4: Product posts of influencers/celebrities are more effective than fashion brands in inducing a purchase of a genderless garment.

For this purpose, a qualitative research approach was used. The case considers Italian fashion consumers born between 1989-2001 with the aim to examine the new generations' perception regarding gender stereotypes and gender-neutral fashion (validating RP1 and RP2) and to explore if Instagram influencers/celebrities have a positive impact on the perception of the genderless collection and in the purchase intention of Millennials and Generation Z (validating RP3 and RP4). More specifically semi-structured focus groups were conducted. The attendees of two separate sessions were eleven students from bachelor or master's degree programs. The schedule consisted of six semi-structured questions, followed by a general participant discussion and to capture true answers, participants were shown images of fashion brand accounts or influencers and celebrities accounts with genderless garments.

The first question asking to express agreement/disagreement with respect to statements on gender equality was used to set up the conversation and at the same time explore the position of the participants on the general gender issue and gender stereotypes (Stavrianea et al., 2021). Regarding this first issue all the participants

expressed absolute agreement, showing that they do not have gender stereotypes related to work or personal environment. In the next set of questions regarding gender issue in fashion, participants were asked what they wanted to express through the style of clothing (Entwistle, 2015), how they wanted to see themselves in terms of clothing style (Barnard, 2014), how they wanted to appear in the eyes of others (Lamb & Kallal, 1992) and which items they wore most frequently (Workman & Caldwell, 2007).

Most of the responses about the expression of themselves through the clothing style were “expression of a status”, “sensuality”, “emotions”, “elegance”, “personality”, “sportiness”. Defining their clothing style, answers included: “trendy”, “classic”, “casual”, “sporty”, “feminine and masculine at the same time”; while regarding appearance in the eyes of others, most were disinterested, except those who had defined their style as elegant or sporty, who said they also wanted to be perceived as such. Inside the scripts there are quotes like:

*“I would like to communicate to others the expression of myself, I am very sporty in life so I would like it to be noticed.” (Participant K);*

*“I look at quality, I reduce fast fashion purchases, I even prefer second-hand or vintage purchases, therefore elegant ... also based on quality. I haven't much wondered how I should look” (Participant I);*

*“I have elements of femininity and masculinity in my style, I would like to be seen this way.” (Participant H);*

The most worn item of clothing is unquestionably jeans (6 participants), followed by the hoodie (3 participants) and shirts (2 participants).

Subsequently with reference to the set of questions on genderless fashion perception and influencers ‘role, it was asked if and possibly why an influencer or a celebrity increases the propensity to buy products of the brand they are promoting (Chetoui, et al., 2020; Hu et al., 2020; Casalò et al., 2020) and if and why they interacted more easily through likes and comments with an Instagram account of a fashion brand or with that of a celebrity or influencer (Nandagiri & Philip, 2018).

Previous studies suggest that consumers are very exposed to celebrity Instagram marketing, even more than traditional marketing channels (Masuda et al., 2022) and this is especially true for social media users belonging to generation Z (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Participants recognized the influence of influencers on the purchase, giving them credibility and expertise (5 participants), and towards whom they have a feeling of congruence (3); someone stated not to the point of making an impulsive purchase (2) and one of the participants declared “less than previously” (Participant A) attributing this change of habit to the pandemic and to a new attention to sustainability.

Despite the literature on the new generations and their propension to create relations with influencers (Pate and Adams, 2013) and the emerging role of the influencer in the purchasing process, they all declared a greater propensity for interacting with fashion brand accounts (mostly luxury and sports brands) both to find information and to connect with the online store. Delving into quotations someone affirmed that “the brand can be an influencer itself” (Participant F) and about the brand account “thanks to the store function, with re-link to the product, it can facilitate an impulsive purchase, if the price is affordable, you buy it directly” (Participant I).

After images from Instagram posts with genderless fashion garments were shown, a spontaneous conversation arose around the posts of the influencers who overshadowed those of the brands. Trying to investigate the motivation, some of the participants attributed it to the predominant colors in the images, they associated a greyness and a monotonousness to the theme of neutrality which, however, does not stimulate visually; others to the identification of the brand as a catalyst for profits while they recognized celebrities and influencers as having a role of sensitizers, but only if credible and respected.

*“Maybe because the focus is on neutrality ... the genderless line as named has a background that does not represent any color.” (Participant F)*

*“It is necessary to understand if the goal of companies is to sell their product to people who do not find themselves in the body in which they were born or if they have a greater, more human goal, that is to get out of the canons of men's and women's fashion.” (Participant A)*

Another aspect that emerged was related to the idea of freedom that was seen more in the posts of influencers and celebrities, probably because knowing the personality of the subject, the choice of the genderless garment was more authentic and spontaneous also because it was subject to criticism.

*"I saw an ideal of freedom more in the photos of influencers than of brands, I don't know why."*  
(Participant K)

*[Answering participant K] "Perhaps because brands do it solely for profit rather than to pursue a real ideal; as happens for greenwashing".* (Participant I)

*"Clothing is a way of expressing oneself... I think that this revolution is a way of dressing based on freedom, if we think at the beginning of the 1900s or even earlier, women's and men's fashion were strictly divided, a woman could not dress in a jacket, trousers and tie, she couldn't do it, it was really discriminated against, now it can be done, influencers normalize this thing to extend genderless fashion, it's a very positive thing, because everyone is able to express themselves without constraints."* (Participant I)

Most of the attendees said that the images shown featured different items of clothing they would buy and most of the products they indicated were worn by influencers and celebrities (7 participants).

**Table 1:** Participants' purchase interest

Tailleur worn by Clara Del Vigne (influencer)	n.3 participants
Tailleur worn by Madame (influencer)	n.2 participants
Dress worn by Achille Lauro (influencer)	n.1 participant
Some garments of Maneskin's outfit (influencer)	n.1 participant
Riley Studio' salopette (brand)	n.1 participant
Riley Studio' shirts (brand)	n.1 participant
Gucci's trousers (brand)	n.1 participant
Stella McCartney's trousers (brand)	n.1 participant

Source: The authors

Research is currently ongoing, however from preliminary findings, results show that the new generations are less sensitive to gender segmentation in line with Laughlin (2016) and RP1 and RP2 were confirmed, as also RP3 and RP4, in line with De Veirman (De Veirman et al., 2017) who affirmed that influencers could raise awareness much more than other forms of persuasion. However, a surprising finding, not aligned with the previous literature, is one concerning the greater propensity of 'interaction with the account of a brand rather than an influencer's, which on the one hand confirms that users use Instagram mostly to search for information, while on the other hand it questions the sense of community that should develop around the influencers.

In the process of deconstruction of gender stereotypes, the influencer has a more significant role, and creates greater consensus of a brand since it is perceived as more authentic, because it is felt to be congruent (Chetioui et al., 2020) and with which more empathy and identification is established (Hu et al., 2020), that is, it is subject to criticism like each of us.

*"The others talked about it? many years ago, [...], if you bought clothes in a department store that did not conform to your gender, you were seen as strange, but if I like it and I'm free to do it, why not."* (Participant. G)

The contribution of this study is twofold: it contributes to the limited research regarding the stereotypic perceptions of the new generations providing a guidance to scholars about their perception of genderless fashion and providing brand managers and advertising practitioners empirical data about the role of Instagram influencers and celebrities in fashion and genderless issue.

The themes that emerged spontaneously such as sustainability and second-hand fashion demonstrate a new sensitivity and attention on the part of the new generations which cannot be neglected.

The fashion houses that should involve congruent influencers and celebrities in their promotional campaigns as they are better known than the models and generate a feeling of greater authenticity, spontaneity, and congruence. On the other hand, influencers should try to establish more interactions with the community and wear and promote clothes and brands linked to their real inclinations and interests.

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