

Deconstructing Gender: The Impact of Gendered Clothing Labels on Male Identifying Gen Z Consumers' Clothing Choices

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Traditionally, the fashion industry has relied on the gender binary, specifically “men’s” and “women’s,” to segment the market broadly. This can be explained by the social identity theory, which states that people tend to conform to the norms of their gender groups to create a positive social identity (Tajfel, 1982). However, for Generation Z (henceforth Gen Z), gender is a fluid term (Katz, Ogilvie, Shaw, & Woodhead, 2021). As an increasing number of Gen Z consumers continue to express their gender fluid beliefs and opinions, they expect to express the same through their choice of clothing (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Research indicates that the continued use of gendered labels to describe and segment clothes in retail spaces could be limiting consumers in Gen Z in their clothing choices (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Particularly men are impacted by gender-related labels, as women have been dipping into traditionally masculine styling choices for decades, while men have been confined to a narrow styling scope (Akdemir, 2018; Bardey, Achumba-Wöllenstein, & Chiu; 2020). Therefore, this study was conducted to empirically understand how Gen Z male identifying consumers perceive gender related labels (such as men’s, women’s, unisex, or no label) on items of clothing and how they form opinions about the clothing item through their intent to buy.

Gen Z makes up the largest percentage of our population standing at 25% with a purchasing power of \$360 billion (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Schneider & Lee, 2022). Studies show that Gen Z consumers view brands as an extension of who they are, so they value authenticity in brands and expect brands to listen to their wants (Wunderman Thompson Intelligence, 2020; Cheung, Davis, & Heukaeufer, 2017). It is clear within Gen Z consumers that the matters of gender equality and gender inclusivity are of high importance (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Katz et al., 2022; Parker & Igielnik, 2020). Heteronormative labeling practices, such as labeling clothes as “men’s” or “women’s,” may imply to the consumer that the brand does not hold these issues in high regard, and therefore that the brand does not share the same values as them. Since Gen Z views the brands that they shop at as extensions of themselves, feeling that the brand isn’t aligned to their values could negatively impact their intent to buy from the brand. Therefore, it was hypothesized that **(H1)** gender labels on clothing items impact Gen Z male identifying consumers’ intent to buy the clothing item. Further, a person’s gender identity impacts how they dress, as they want to feel safe and accepted in their social groups (Noh, Li, Martin, & Purpura, 2015). For this study, participants’ self-assessment of their own traditional femininity and masculinity (TMF) was used, as male identifying individuals who view themselves as entirely adhering to masculine characteristics may choose clothes differently than those who more closely align with feminine characteristics. Therefore, it was hypothesized that **(H2)** individual’s TMF moderates the impact of clothing gender labels on male identifying consumers’ intent to buy.

An online 4 (gender label: men's/women's/unisex/ no label) X 2 (traditional masculinity/femininity) X 4 (clothing: T-shirt, bomber jacket, sweater, sweatshirt) between-subjects online experiment was designed. TMF was the measured variable, while gender labels and clothing were manipulated. A sample of 310 male identifying Gen Z individuals from across the United States were recruited. Participants answered questions related to demography, and TMF. Then, they were randomly exposed to one version of the stimuli designed as screenshots of a clothing site, with one gender-related label (men's/ women's/ unisex/ no label). Each participant was exposed to all four clothing items (bomber jacket/ sweatshirt/ sweater/ T-shirt), yet only one randomly selected gender label per garment. After each clothing item, the participants indicated their intent to buy the item of clothing. Participants were divided into 2 groups for TMF: low TMF or more masculine (mean = 1.60, $SD = 0.57$, $n = 152$) and high TMF or more feminine (mean = 4.57, $SD = 1.32$, $n = 158$) ($t = -51.78$, $p < 0.001$).

Results of ANOVA indicated that there was a statistically significant main effect of gender labels on intent to buy [$F(3, 1208) = 16.05$, $p < 0.001$], supporting H1. Participants had the highest intent to buy when there was no gender label (mean = 4.59, $SD = 1.69$), followed by unisex (mean = 3.68, $SD = 1.69$), then the men's (mean = 4.16, $SD = 1.84$), and lowest for women's (mean = 3.68, $SD = 1.88$). There was significant interaction effect of gender labels X TMF on intent to buy [$F(1, 1208) = 3.35$, $p = 0.02$], supporting H2. Post hoc analyses revealed that for more masculine identifying participants, when exposed to a clothing item labeled as "men's," more masculine identifying participants had slightly lower intent to buy (mean = 4.08, $SD = 1.88$) than more feminine identifying participants (mean = 4.24, $SD = 1.81$). Similar patterns were observed for clothing with no label or those labeled as "unisex". When exposed to a clothing item with no gender label, more masculine identifying participants had very similar intent to buy (mean = 4.54, $SD = 1.73$) compared to more feminine identifying participants (mean = 4.64, $SD = 1.65$). When exposed to a clothing item labeled "unisex," more masculine identifying participants had slightly lower intent to buy (mean = 4.23, $SD = 1.74$) than more feminine identifying participants (mean = 4.52, $SD = 1.58$). When exposed to a clothing item labeled "women's," more masculine identifying participants had substantially lower intent to buy (mean = 3.24, $SD = 1.84$) than more feminine identifying participants (mean = 4.06, $SD = 1.85$).

Since this finding diverges significantly from prior research that states that consumers are most likely to make clothing choices that are in accordance to their gender identity, the implications of these results on fashion brands with the target customer of male identifying Gen Z consumers are significant (Bakewell, 2006; Gould & Stern, 1989; Palan, 2001). In the context of social identity theory, this research shows that wearing clothing with a unisex label or no gender label is now an accepted norm within male identifying Gen Z individuals (Tajfel, 1982). A shift to genderless labeling practices in fashion brands could prove to be beneficial to brands as well as consumers, whose preference to buy genderless clothing is currently only being met by a handful of fashion brands. With the men's fashion industry growing at twice the rate as women's, now is the time to invest in the preferences of these consumers, to maximize their intention to buy from a brand (Barry & Martin, 2015).

This research also has significant implications for the advancement of gender equality. While men are still not eager to wear a clothing item with a women's label, these study results show that the rigidity of the masculine ideal is becoming softer and less defined in this young

generation. It is in the best interest of the fashion industry to end the systematic pressure for men to perform hegemonic masculinity that is projected through marketing, advertisements, the clothing options available for men, and more. The stigma against femininity that this practice has perpetuated has resulted in lower intentions to buy in male identifying consumers who identify as more masculine, due to the idea that consuming is a feminine activity (Song, 2023).

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