



THE FUTURE

IS FLUID

Bold, boundary-breaking, binary-busting looks are currently taking the spotlight. But degendered fashion is more than just a fad, promoting inclusivity and tackling toxic masculinity one dress at a time, writes Kathryn Madden

**O**f all the world-changing, heart-breaking and rage-inducing moments of 2020, it was a dress that sent the internet into meltdown. Pop icon Harry Styles appeared on the cover of a magazine wearing a Gucci gown – a ruffled periwinkle number paired with a cropped tuxedo jacket – and sparked headlines, hero worship and hatred alike. Many applauded his bold statement and flouting of gender norms; others declared that a cisgender, straight white man didn't deserve to spearhead this cultural conversation; and conservative commentators wept for the patriarchy (“Bring back manly men,” tweeted far-right American pundit Candace Owens). Styles responded by draping himself in feminine frills, feather boas and strings of pearls at every photo opportunity thenceforth. “I think what’s exciting about right now is you can wear what you like,” he later told a reporter. “It doesn’t have to be X or Y. Those lines are becoming more and more blurred.”

Gender-fluid dressing – breaking the boundaries between clothing tradi-

tionally worn by women and men – is nothing new. In Ancient Greece and Rome, everybody wore togas and tunics. In the 1970s and '80s, performers such as David Bowie, Mick Jagger, Annie Lennox and Grace Jones experimented with gender-bending style; and minority communities – Black, queer, trans and Latinx – have long dressed outside the box, laying the groundwork for today’s movement.

But while Styles’ femme foray wasn’t the first, it was – as he himself once sang – a sign of the times. In 2020, London Fashion Week went gender-neutral, merging womenswear and menswear into one single showcase. Recent Louis Vuitton collections have seen countless men on the catwalk wearing kilts, dresses and skirts. The house’s late artistic director of menswear, Virgil Abloh, simply described it as a “human approach” to dressing.

Meanwhile, Marc Jacobs’ Heaven collection was designed for “girls who are boys and boys who are girls [and] those who are neither”. Stella McCartney launched a genderless line called Shared, and Gucci created MX, a gender-free section on its website featuring non-binary models. It was an inspired move by creative director Alessandro Michele; according to the global shopping platform Lyst, searches for gender-neutral and agender-related keywords increased by 33 per cent in the first half of 2021.

Often, the runway reflects real life, and this rapid rise of non-binary fashion into the mainstream coincides



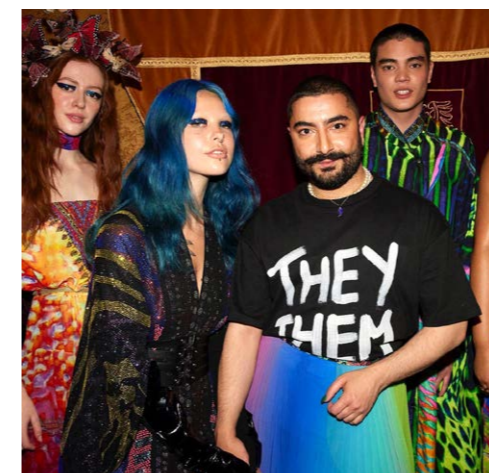
with a wider discussion about identity and expression. Namely, what does gender even mean? “While sex is biologically determined at birth, gender is something that’s socially and culturally constructed,” explains Dr Alexandra Sherlock, lecturer in fashion theory at RMIT University. “It’s something that we learn. There’s nothing natural or essential about gender.”

Instead, the term refers to how an individual feels and identifies. That might be as a man, as a woman or as non-binary: somewhere on the spectrum in between. It may be fixed or fluid, and it’s separate from sexuality.

Deni Todorovič, activist, creative director and co-host of the *What Are You Wearing* podcast, knew they were gay from the age of four. “I was attracted to people with penises,” says the 33-year-old. “I came out when I was 19. I always knew I wasn’t a boy; I never knew what that really meant though. I have an innate feminine energy and there was definitely a moment in my adolescence when I thought, ‘Ohhhh, do you want to be a girl?’ But that never felt right to me either because I’m happy in my body.”

The former magazine stylist has long used fashion as a form of expression, first stepping into a pair of sky-high heels at a “gay house party” in Sydney a few years ago. “I felt like a superhero, like Beyoncé,” they recall. “But I realised that it was only acceptable at night. I couldn’t wear a heel to brunch on Saturday because people would be like, what are you doing?”

When Australia went into lockdown



David Bowie in 1973; Deni Todorovič (above); and Harry Styles with Alessandro Michele in 2019 (top right).





in early 2020, Todorovič started dabbling more in feminine fashion, protected at home from the harsh eyes of the world. British pop star Sam Smith had recently come out as non-binary, and a lightbulb suddenly flicked on. “I thought, ‘This is how I’ve felt since I was three or four,’ I just never knew what to call it,” recalls Todorovič. “Once you have the language to say, ‘This is how I feel, this is who I am,’ it’s so affirming. I changed my pronouns [to they/them] and suddenly I could perfectly articulate how I’ve always felt.”

The term “non-binary” was officially added to the Collins Dictionary in late 2019, and in 2021 it was introduced to the national census, meaning statistics on non-binary Australians are still unavailable. An estimated 1.2 million Americans identify as non-binary, although the figure could be much higher. Gender nonconforming people have existed since the beginning of time – Joan of Arc in 15th-century France, and Australia’s First Nations Sistersgirls and Brotherboys, who are part of the longest living trans cultures on earth – yet many individuals are only now finding the words to express themselves.

Todorovič identifies as trans non-binary (by definition, a person is trans if their gender identity doesn’t match their birth sex). “I don’t really conform to or subscribe to any gender,” they say. “On any given day I’m both feminine and masculine and neither. It sits somewhere in between.”

A Serbian Australian who grew up in Geelong, Victoria, Todorovič spent their childhood in church, gazing at women’s dresses while feeling stifled in a three-piece suit. So, for their best friend’s wedding in November – the first they’d attended since coming out as non-binary – they wore a striking green gown. “I showed up as I am in this gorgeous dress and it was so well received,” they say. “I felt supported and loved. No one treated me differently. I was drinking beers with the guys and dancing with the girls. It was beautiful. That dress empowered me.”

Beyond the beauty and freedom, though, Todorovič deals with trauma and trolling: from getting kicked out of men’s bathrooms to receiving disgusting comments online. But with more than 62,000 Instagram followers (@stylebydeni) and a natural bent for activism, Todorovič will keep flying the flag for fashion inclusivity: “If I have to receive the slurs so that another little trans Deni sitting in Geelong or

Toowoomba doesn’t have to go through that one day, then that’s fine.”

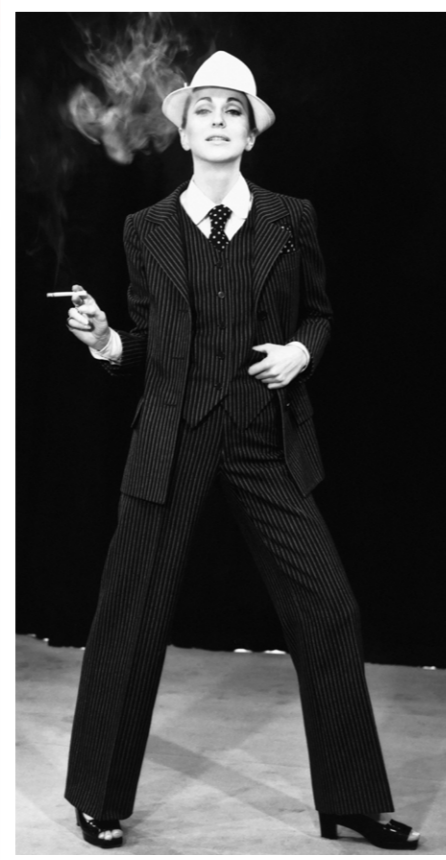
In 1968, Nan Kempner arrived at a ritzy New York restaurant, Le Côte Basque, wearing a tuxedo. When the socialite was refused entry – because women’s trousers didn’t meet the dress code – she defiantly slipped off her pants and wore the blazer as a minidress. The tuxedo in question, Yves Saint Laurent’s Le Smoking, would go on to become one of the most iconic garments in history, and today the suit is a womenswear staple (often worn with heels, which were also created for men, first worn by male soldiers in the 10th century).

Clothes have no gender: they’re just fabric threaded with cultural meaning. But what’s significant about the current moment is that while “androgynous” or “unisex” styling has typically equated to women dressing like men (in sharp suits or shapeless streetwear) that’s now being flipped on its head.

On the red carpet, actor Billy Porter and non-binary *Queer Eye* host



Todorovič frocks up; Harry Styles in 2021 (top); and a woman models YSL’s Le Smoking suit in 1967 (right).



“TO SEE MASC-PRESENTING PEOPLE IN FEMININE CLOTHING IS INCREDIBLY POWERFUL”  
– Deni Todorovič



Cara Delevingne. CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Lil Nas X; Billy Porter; Pete Davidson; Jonathan Van Ness; and Ruby Rose.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY INSTAGRAM/STYLEBYDENI; GETTY IMAGES.

Jonathan Van Ness have led the way in subverting gender norms, turning up in ballooning ball gowns and racy, sheer skirts. Lil Nas X, a queer Black man, is shaking up the hip-hop scene in beaded bodysuits and hot-pink cowboy boots, while rapper Kid Cudi wore a white, floral dress on *Saturday Night Live*. Even hetero lothario Pete Davidson, he who inspired “Big Dick Energy”, wore a tunic to the 2021 Met Gala.

“To see masc-presenting people in typically feminine clothing is incredibly powerful,” says Todorovič of the criticism aimed at heterosexual, cisgender men playing with feminine codes. “I have no problems with Harry Styles being a public figure deconstructing masculinity. Yes he’s cis and he might be het, we don’t really know ... With every revolution there has to be someone [at the forefront], and sadly that’s often a powerful white man. But I’d rather someone than no-one.”

Broadening the idea of what it means to be a man – via fashion, in this instance – could even help break the cycle of toxic masculinity. “In the West, our conception of masculinity is very narrow,” says fashion lecturer Sang Thai, Sherlock’s colleague at RMIT. In Asian cultures, he continues, there’s a long and rich tradition of men wearing skirts, and these cultures often adopt a more nuanced view of gender, rather than our rigid, polarised and often damaging binaries.

But as gender-fluid fashion takes hold, authenticity will be the greatest challenge. “The industry has to engage

with this in a genuine and meaningful way,” says Sherlock. “As with [any minority identity or community], you shouldn’t [just] design for them or take inspiration from them. There needs to be opportunities for trans and gender-diverse/non-conforming people to represent themselves – to be included in that story, to be employed and to be in positions of power.”

Whacking a rainbow on a pair of sneakers for Pride Week or advertising a frock for men isn’t enough if a brand isn’t doing the work behind the scenes. “Does the company have queer employees? Do they have safety guards for trans employees?” asks Todorovič, adding that, in Australia, transgender youth aged 14-25 are 15 times more likely to attempt suicide than the general population. “Are they working with and donating to queer charities? If not, they’re just capitalising off a minority, and that’s not nice.”

Todorovič points to gender-fluid British-American designer Harris Reed as a leader in the space, but says that locally they shop everywhere from Camilla to Kmart. They’d like to see separate menswear and womenswear sections eradicated in stores, and to “degender fashion at every touchpoint”.

Perhaps Generation Z will lead this binary-busting charge. According to one study, half of that cohort (aged 10 to 25) believe that the gender binary is outdated. “It’s important to remember that there’ll always be binaries and they’re still part of the same gender spectrum,” notes Sherlock. “But my Gen-Z students give me hope. They’re thinking about ways they can use fashion for positive social and cultural change, as opposed to reproducing the conventions that have gone before.”

Today, Todorovič feels energised to live a life beyond the binary, in “the space in between”, as they like to call it. “For me, degendering fashion is not about erasing another person’s identity, it’s about pulling up a seat at the table so there’s room for all of us. You have to get dressed every day, so why shouldn’t it be fun for everyone?”

Right now, they’re wearing basketball shorts, a Bonds chesty and sneakers, but tonight they’ll throw on a floaty dress and chunky heels. Tomorrow it could either be tailored trousers or a tulle tutu skirt. “Some people might find that confusing but that’s OK,” they say. “It’s how I feel, it’s who I am.”

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