#DeGenderFashion: A Visual Analysis of how Fashion is used to challenge Gender Norms and Heteronormative Expectations

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Abstract

The study aims to answer the question of whether fashion can communicate meaning, by addressing how creators on Instagram challenge dominant gender norms through fashion, with a focus on the activist movement of #DeGenderFashion. The research questions will be answered using fashion theory and gender theory as guiding points, with literature on social media activism, representations of gender, and cultural studies giving further insight into the dynamics of the movement. Data has been collected from the hashtag #DeGenderFashion, created by social media personality Alok Vaid-Menon in 2019, using the algorithmic function of Instagram to provide the most relevant posts for analysis. After applying a set of criteria to limit the data to create a coherent data set, a visual analysis with an interpretive paradigm and inductive approach was applied. One of the main findings is the influence of patriarchal systems on gender expression, with the movement being led by male and non-binary individuals. However, feminine and androgynous styles are most common, highlighting how non-female individuals strive to adopt feminine fashion into their wardrobes, and breaking the patriarchal stigma surrounding feminine styles. The results of the study further imply that gender specificity in object design is an outdated concept, with the styles featured in the data sample oftentimes combining elements from across the gender spectrum with each other, creating a new fluid visual identity. The study implies that gender specificity in fashion is an artificial concept, urging the fashion industry to become more inclusive by catering to a wider range of bodies.

Keywords: Fashion Theory, Gender Theory, Social Media Activism, Identity, Cultural Studies, Gender Norms
# Table of Contents

1. **Introduction** .................................................................................................................. 5  
   1.1. Background and Context of the Research ................................................................. 5  
   1.2. Introduction of the Research Object ........................................................................... 7  
   1.3. Research Questions ................................................................................................. 8  
2. **Literature Review** .......................................................................................................... 9  
   2.1. Social media activism ............................................................................................... 9  
   2.2. Fashion as Culture and Communication .................................................................. 11  
   2.3. Gender in Fashion ..................................................................................................... 12  
   2.4. Representation of Gender in the Media ..................................................................... 14  
3. **Theoretical Framework** ................................................................................................ 17  
   3.1. Fashion Theory ........................................................................................................... 17  
   3.2. Gender Theory .......................................................................................................... 19  
4. **Methodology** ................................................................................................................. 21  
   4.1. Visual Analysis ........................................................................................................... 21  
   4.2. Research Paradigm: Interpretivism ........................................................................... 23  
   4.3. Data Collection .......................................................................................................... 24  
   4.4. Data Analytical Framework ....................................................................................... 26  
5. **Reflections** ..................................................................................................................... 29  
   5.1. Ethics ........................................................................................................................ 29  
   5.2. Limitations .................................................................................................................. 29  
   5.3. Researcher Positionality ........................................................................................... 31  
6. **Results and Analysis** .................................................................................................... 32  
   6.1. Presentation of the Visual Analysis .......................................................................... 32  
   6.2. Identification, Analysis and Discussion of Themes .................................................. 32  
   6.2.1. Demographics ....................................................................................................... 33  
   6.2.2. Aesthetics .............................................................................................................. 35  
   6.2.3. Garments ............................................................................................................... 36  
   6.2.4. Appearance ........................................................................................................... 43  
   6.2.5. Gender and Identity Expression ............................................................................ 45
7. Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................ 48
   7.1. Conclusive discussion ........................................................................................................ 48
   7.2. Broader relevance ................................................................................................................ 49
   7.3. Future research agenda ........................................................................................................ 50
8. References ...................................................................................................................................... 51
9. Appendices ...................................................................................................................................... 58

List of Figures and Tables

Table 1: Demographic Data .................................................................................................................. 33
Table 2: Prevalence of Patterns ........................................................................................................... 35
Table 3: Colour Schemes ..................................................................................................................... 36
Table 4: Prevalence of different types of Bottomwear ......................................................................... 37
Table 5: Prevalence of different types of Top and Outerwear ............................................................... 39
Table 6: Prevalence of different types of Footwear ............................................................................ 40
Table 7: Prevalence of different types of Accessories ......................................................................... 41
Table 8: Prevalence of different types of Jewellery ............................................................................ 42
Table 9: Prevalence of Facial Hair ...................................................................................................... 43
Table 10: Prevalence of different types of Make Up .......................................................................... 44
Table 11: Emphasis of the Body through Silhouette of the Garment .................................................. 45
Table 12: Overall Appearance in terms of Gender and Identity Expression ....................................... 46

Figure 1: Gender Norms (Rose et al., 2012) .................................................................................... 58
Figure 2: Colourfulness (O’Leary, 2022) ......................................................................................... 59

Codebook ............................................................................................................................................. 60
1. Introduction

The current political and social environment is marked by increasing awareness and recognition of diverse gender identities and expressions, and a growing acceptance of queer theory as a framework for understanding gender and sexuality. In this context, discussions around de-gendering fashion have become increasingly relevant, as they reflect cultural shifts towards gender fluidity and the rejection of traditional gender norms and expectations. However, debates around gender, sexuality, and identity are highly polarized. While there is increasing acceptance of LGBTQ+ rights and visibility, significant cultural and political forces also seek to limit or roll back these gains, often under the guise of protecting traditional gender roles and values. The activism of the LGBTQ+ community, particularly in response to those political developments limiting their freedom and reversing essentially any progress, aims to challenge that. Activist movements, such as the #DeGenderFashion on Instagram, have become increasingly prevalent and successful, which is reflected in the growing recognition of the importance of creating inclusive and welcoming spaces for people of all gender identities and expressions.

A discourse around de-gendering fashion represents a challenge to entrenched cultural and social norms about gender and reflects the ongoing struggle to expand the boundaries of gender in contemporary society.

1.1. Background and Context of the Research

The research topic of this thesis derives from both media studies and cultural studies, potentially contributing to both current research conversations. Cultural theory can offer insight into how identities are built and embodied (Rojek, 2007), whereas the field of media studies offers insight into the aspects such as the representations of gender in mass media and the dynamics of the activist movement in relation to its platform and community.

The fashion industry is known to reflect cultural and social values, which has led it to typically cater to the gender binary (Akdemir, 2018). While movements towards genderless fashion are nowadays associated with the queer community (Gallant, 2023), this lack of
gender specificity in fashion is not a new concept at all but can be found throughout history (Entwistle, 2000). Until the 17th century, what was considered women’s and menswear was similar, both based on a tunic-style garment, and the clothing divide was based on class rather than gender (Bergoglio, 2021). Since then, over the centuries, differences in dress became more and more gendered, with people being classed into one out of two genders, male and female. This rigid classification involved rules, often protected by laws, such as cross-dressing laws, which stated that a person would have to wear a number of clothes as deemed appropriate for their gender, otherwise, legal prosecution was possible (Gallant, 2023). Over time, women have started to borrow and appropriate items from what was considered “menswear”, such as pants and pantsuits. These fashion choices have become normalized; however, the opposite is not true just yet (Entwistle, 2000). This suggests that menswear is what is considered the standard, which coincides with Simone de Beauvoir’s (1949) theory of the second sex, where women and the female body are described as “the other”.

Other historical events, such as the Stonewall riots in 1969, the rise of LGBTQ+ representation in pop culture in the 1970s, and the more recent legalization of same sex-marriage in various countries, have created new awareness around this topic. Artists such as David Bowie, Elton John and Freddy Mercury famously challenged the representation of gender through their looks in the 1970s. The exaggerated use of make-up and theatrical stage outfits, taking new and experimental approaches, visibly challenged masculine dressing norms (Weikle, 2022). However, a lack of freedom surrounding gender and gender equality prevails, evident through current political developments. The United Nations (UN) (2020) states gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls as a stand-alone goal in their sustainable development goals (SDG). The UN (2022) further argues that despite the progress that has been made over the last decades, further action has to happen in order to achieve gender equality by 2030.

Current public debates fuel the conversation about the representation of gender in society. In December 2020, the fashion magazine “Vogue” featured musician Harry Styles on the cover of the American edition. While he was the first cisgender man to be featured solo on the cover, what made the cover stand out most and created a controversy was the outfit he
was wearing. Mowat (2021) describes his outfit as “a blazer over a dress, combining a traditional menswear piece with a traditional womenswear piece” (p. 289). This reflects the rising popularity of genderless fashion, especially apparent in the spring/summer 2019 fashion season (Madsen, 2018). Vogue fashion critic Madsen (2018) describes the season as a step towards removing societal stigmas related to specific items of fashion, such as dresses and heels, which is happening in parallel to the current mainstream acceptance and normalisation of diverse gender identities. Madsen (2018) further describes the industry as taking a more determined step towards the removal of gender-specificity in fashion, with well-known fashion houses such as Louis Vuitton, Valentino, and Givenchy at the forefront (Madsen, 2018). This comes decades after designers such as Jean Paul Gaultier and Vivienne Westwood put men in skirts, previously referred to as “androgynous fashion”, paving the way for the societal stigma around gender in fashion to be broken down once and for all (Madsen, 2018).

This study aims to explore how fashion is used to resist and challenge dominant cultural norms surrounding the concept of gender. I will be analysing the various codes and signifiers used in queer fashion by conducting a visual analysis of the hashtag #DeGenderFashion, as well as the social and historical contexts in which they operate. This will give me a deeper understanding of how marginalized groups use fashion as self-expression to assert their identities and challenge dominant socio-cultural narratives.

1.2. Introduction of the Research Object

The hashtag #DeGenderFashion was first introduced by activist, artist, author, and social media personality Alok Vaid-Menon in 2019, calling for a de-gendering of the fashion and beauty industries (Yale University, 2021). The movement then gained significant attention when the creator was featured on The Man Enough Podcast (2021), explaining the background of the movement, and how it relates to the creator’s personal experiences. Vaid-Menon states that they started their experiments by challenging typical gender norms in the drag scene and found that the public was far more comfortable with this attire if it was in a performative or artistic context (The Man Enough Podcast, 2021). They thus aim to raise
awareness on an understanding of gender identity as a fluid concept that is unconstrained by societal expectations (Upadhye, 2022).

Vaid-Menon states that social media gave them a platform to cultivate a base outside of traditional venues (Bhandara, 2021), which has introduced them to others in the community who have empowered them to explore their own identity, which is why social media was chosen as the space for the movement #DeGenderFashion to happen. As of May 2nd 2023, about 26,300 posts by creators from all over the world have been published using the hashtag #DeGenderFashion.

1.3. Research Questions

This thesis focuses on how fashion can be used to challenge dominant gender norms. This is achieved by conducting a visual analysis of the content published under the #DeGenderFashion on Instagram. The research questions focus first on the expression of individual identity, by asking:

**RQ 1**: How is fashion used to express gender identities within #DeGenderFashion?

**RQ 2**: How does this expression of gender identity have the potential of challenging societal norms of gender?

Later, the common themes within the movement towards de-gendering fashion are identified and analysed, offering an insight into the trends in queer fashion. This also allows for the particular elements of fashion that are used to challenge gender norms to be identified and uncovering the roles of these elements in queer fashion and activism.

**RQ 3**: What are common themes in the hashtag #DeGenderFashion?
2. Literature Review

2.1. Social media activism

The relevance of my data sample, originating from social media, is explained by the potential of social media to be used for activism and its role in creating social change. A review of literature dealing with social media activism enables the contextualization of the Instagram movement #DeGenderFashion as well as identifying its importance in society. Social media activism has emerged as a significant force in social and political movements, enabled by the increasing pervasiveness of social media platforms in contemporary society (Murthy, 2018).

One of the key characteristics of social media activism is its ability to connect geographically dispersed individuals, facilitating the formation of virtual communities (Murthy, 2018) united by shared goals or causes. Milan (2015) describes social media as a connective infrastructure that enables the networked individual to engage and contribute to activism. This connectivity can overcome traditional barriers to participation, such as geographical distance, making “knowledge sharing much more transparent and accessible” (Murthy, 2018: 2). Milan (2015) argues that the networked structure of social media enables collective action to become centralized, which may empower individuals to escape traditional hierarchical structures (Murthy, 2018). Social media further plays “a role in helping develop and maintain a sense of community in large activist organizations” (Murthy, 2018: 2) which can be a motivator for individuals to take a more active, participatory role in these platforms (Murthy, 2018).

The accelerated spread of information and ideas in social media (Jenkins et al., 2016), as compared to traditional media, allows movements to gain visibility and reach a broader audience. Jenkins et al. (2016) emphasize the concept of spreadability in the digital age, where content can be easily shared, remixed, and repurposed by users, thus amplifying the message of activism. Hashtags, for instance, have become a powerful tool for organizing and categorizing online content related to specific causes, and function as mobilizing symbols, creating a sense of collective identity in which individual actors are bound together (Milan, 2015).
Moreover, Social media activism allows marginalized groups (Vänskä, 2014), such as the LGBTQ+ community, to challenge dominant narratives and present alternative perspectives, as is the case within #DeGenderFashion. Digital platforms such as Instagram provide a space for individuals who have historically been excluded from mainstream discourse to have their voices heard (Vänskä, 2014), which may evoke empathy and foster understanding among a wider audience (Gallant, 2023). The #DeGenderFashion on Instagram is an example for that, as it offers a virtual space for the queer community to express themselves freely and to share their content with a global audience.

Despite its transformative potential, social media activism faces critiques and limitations. One prominent critique is the notion of "slacktivism" or "clicktivism" (Kleut et al., 2018), which suggests that online participation may not translate into meaningful offline action. This refers to the idea that liking, sharing, or retweeting posts on social media can create a false sense of engagement without necessarily leading to tangible change (Kleut et al., 2018). While this has been observed in movements such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, these movements are also examples of successful offline action and change (Kleut et al., 2018). Another limitation of social media activism is its susceptibility to algorithmic biases and echo chambers. Algorithms employed by social media platforms often reinforce users' existing beliefs and preferences, creating filter bubbles that limit exposure to diverse perspectives (Jang et al., 2018). According to Milan (2015), these algorithmic functions of social media platforms can hinder the potential for meaningful dialogue and collective action. Social media platforms foster their hierarchies and privilege certain voices (Murthy, 2018), of which the algorithmic sorting of posts on Instagram is one example (Mosseri, 2021). Kleut et al. (2018) further describe social media as a “sphere of self-publication for instant gratification” (p. 3), where everyone is enabled a voice, which may lead to noise inhibiting the “clarity of a movement’s message” (Murthy, 2018: 2).

It is important to acknowledge that the impact of social media activism is context-dependent and varies across different socio-political environments. Tufekci (2017) highlights the importance of considering the individual dynamics of each specific movement. Factors such as the political climate, social structures, and digital technologies
can influence the effectiveness of social media activism according to its context (Tufekci, 2017).

The overarching power of social media to “mobilize people that share similar interests, giving them space to start an immediate discussion” allows for “new forms of political and social connection” (Kleut et al., 2018: 14), and is what makes it a popular outlet for especially marginalized communities to express themselves (Vänskä, 2014).

### 2.2. Fashion as Culture and Communication

Edgerton and Roberts (2014) describe culture as a “tool kit of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct strategies of action” (p. 196), and shapes its populations’ perceptions, norms, values, and rituals. Fashion is an integral part of a culture, reflecting and shaping societal values, norms, and identities (Entwistle, 2000), which encompasses a wide range of practices, beliefs, and rituals that are embedded in society (Rojek, 2007). This interaction of fashion with culture “is a crucial feature in the production of masculinity and femininity: it turns nature into culture, layering cultural meanings on the body” (Entwistle, 2000: 143). These layers of cultural meaning are in return mistaken as natural, due to their proximity to the body, and, due to their significance, can even “come to stand for sexual difference in the absence of a body” (Entwistle, 2000: 141).

Fashion is culturally specific, as “the formal data embodied in objects are (...) of value as cultural evidence” (Prown, 1980: 197). Davis (2017) emphasizes that fashion is a form of cultural expression that helps individuals define and negotiate their identities, playing a crucial role in the construction of personal and collective identities, which allows individuals to align themselves with specific subcultures or social groups. Lurie (1981) further suggests that fashion and dress can be compared to a language, with a set of grammar and vocabulary comparable to the properties of a spoken language. The fundamental human need to communicate, as well as the “human propensity to communicate through symbols” (Entwistle, 2000: 66), offers an anthropological explanatory framework. According to Lurie (1981), factors such as social identity can be
communicated through the selection of specific garments and styles signalling belonging to a social group or subculture and its associated values. This includes cultural codes that are carried within clothing, which results in associations with meanings or connotations. Social status and power can be communicated through specific styles and labels, with military uniforms being an example of distinctive garments worn by groups to assert power (Entwistle, 2000). However, deliberately deviating from dominant fashion trends or adopting alternative styles allows individuals to differentiate themselves from a community (Rojek, 2007), challenge norms, or make political statements.

Entwistle (2000) examines how fashion practices are shaped by broader cultural ideas and ideals of the body, arguing that fashion is a medium for cultural discourses about gender, beauty, and identity to be communicated through clothing and style choices. Rojek (2007) argues that fashion choices reflect an individual's desire to align with certain social groups or subcultures.

2.3. Gender in Fashion

While the fashion industry has changed significantly in recent years, presenting itself with a “new sense of fluidity and freedom” (Akdemir, 2018: 262), differences in gender in the fashion industry can be observed. Until the 19th century, there were few gender differences in fashion, as “male and female fashions were closely allied in style” (Wright, 2018: 276).

A study conducted by Rose et al. (2012) analysed patterns of self-presentation of males and females on Facebook, finding that “Males tended to have short hair and were more likely to wear such clothing items as suits, shirts, jeans, baggy shorts, ties, and hats” (p. 599), whereas “females tended to have longer hair and wear tighter clothing (i.e., skirts, jeans, dresses, tops), as well as makeup, high heels, jewelry, etc.” (p. 599). Fashion history offers an insight into the associations that we have of certain items with a certain gender. These associations serve to draw attention to the sex of the wearer, allowing the audience to judge the binary sex at first glance, based on appearance (Entwistle, 2000). As stated by Entwistle (2000), “clothing is one of the most immediate and effective examples of how bodies are
“gendered” (p. 141), creating expectations of what men and women are “supposed to wear”. These expectations, stereotypes and norms start early, with babies being dressed in certain colours, pink for girls and blue for boys, as well as styles, to differentiate them when a distinction based on physical features is difficult (Entwistle, 2000). This reinforces the idea of gender being taught yet naturalized due to the close associations of sex and gender at birth (Butler, 1993). The assumption of appearance lining up with a person’s gender is however entirely socially and historically constructed, with gender expression and appearance becoming more fluid.

Wright (2018) argues that “meaning is subject to stereotyping, which results in the perpetuation of particular perspectives” (p. 275). By naming the stiletto heel as a symbol of femininity as an example of gender specificity in object design, Wright (2018) argues that gender specificity in object design can be observed commonly. Further research has focused on the meaning of colour in gender and fashion, as colour can be used to enhance a person’s appearance (Kodzoman, 2019). Kodzoman (2019) describes the notion that contemporary colour associations and their symbolic meanings stem from laws in medieval Europe which “defined those who could wear certain colors, the amount of color allowed and when the color could be worn” (p. 2), which has caused specific colours to develop a deep cultural symbolic meaning. The colours red and purple which “were restricted to the ruling class” (Entwistle, 2000: 88) during the Middle Ages provide an example of this phenomenon, with purple still being a colour that is associated with elegance and royalty (Barrell, 2019).

Recent fashion theory has associated bright, vibrant colours with femininity, and dark, neutral colours with masculinity. Gallant (2023) describes that “men dress typically in plain, mundane looking clothing, attempting to ascribe to society’s ideas of masculinity” (p. 51), with Miller (2004) providing an example with the finding that men tend to wear darker colours in comparison to women (p. 546). Women, on the other hand, are found to typically dress “in more light colours (...) attempting to ascribe to the ideals of femininity” (Gallant, 2023: 51). However, a difficulty in predicting preferred colours was identified, as “human vision and perception contributes to how a color appears to the individual” (Kodzoman, 2019: 91), with the perception of colour being an individual and fluid concept. This led to
the conclusion that the aesthetics of colour is context-dependent, as “colour provokes different responses according to various situations” (Kodzoman, 2019: 2).

A community described by Entwistle (2000) as “transvestites”, being individuals who “masquerade in the clothing of the opposite sex” (p. 144), has gained visibility in the 1970s with the practice of cross-dressing. Second-wave feminism and the rising influence of pop culture have enabled an environment where this became possible (Entwistle, 2000). The practice of cross-dressing challenges the gender binary, essentially “producing a crisis in the traditional binary division of male and female, masculine and feminine” (Entwistle, 2000: 177) as one of the most important aspects of the practice. Cross-dressing is found to “expose(s) the arbitrary nature of the conventions” (Entwistle, 2000: 176), further drawing attention to the artificiality of appearances.

Since then, genderless fashion has gained in popularity and become a more accepted practice in society. A study conducted by Kim et al. (2022) has found that media content surrounding the term “genderless fashion” doubled between 2019 and 2020. This study identified millennials and Gen-Z as “the leading groups of trends and consumption” (Kim et al., 2022: 4) due to their access to social media, as “consumers began to self-define and express their gender identity and discuss it through social media channels” (p. 13).

2.4. Representation of Gender in the Media

Referring to Butler’s (1990) theory of performativity, the development and use of social media since the 1990s has sparked researchers’ “interest to see how gender is performed” (Rose et al., 2012: 588) in these virtual spaces. Research conducted on the Swedish LGBTQ+ community found that “when the participants could not break the normativity and power structures around them, they made separatist spaces for themselves and others like them” (McDonald & McDonald, 2017: 76).

Social media allowing people to communicate with larger audiences (Murthy, 2018) has given them the ability to express and consume otherwise stigmatized views more freely, as the “increased reach of social media platforms has led humans to rightly question what was
earlier believed about traditional gender roles and gender identity” (Jairath & Daima, 2021: 1646). The researchers Jairath and Daima (2021) describe this ability to discuss stigmatized values as having led to a “growing popularity and normalization” (p. 1645), which has further resulted in a continuously growing number of people exploring and expressing their gender identities online through tools such as beauty, makeup, and fashion.

Furthermore, social media provides the opportunity for impression management, as described by Rose et al. (2012), where a user can manage the impression that others have of them consciously, even going so far as to change physical attributes such as race and sex in their online persona. This has allowed people to express their gender identities with the “freedom of presenting a physical self that might differ from the one they present or perform in everyday life or from socially defined expectations” (Rose et al., 2012: 590). On the contrary, digital formats have also offered a chance for cultural and mass media normative versions of the individual, specifically those related to gender to be replicated (Rose et al., 2012), further reinforcing traditional values. Within virtual environments, “physical identity markers are not apparent and, as a result, the self is more fluid and changeable” (Rose et al. 2012: 594), allowing users to shape their gender expression. In the early 2000s, this led to a phenomenon of “gender swapping”, where people reinvented themselves for the sake of their online appearances (Rose et al., 2012).

Within social media, users have “the ability to select or specifically change or display particular points of interest, the users can greatly affect the impression made of them” (Rose et al., 2012: 595). This selective self-presentation can be observed widely across social media, but especially in online dating networks, where this tool is used to people’s advantage, to appear more desirable (Rose et al., 2012). Rose et al. (2012) further emphasize that these self-representations are often based on stereotypical gender roles. The presentation of stereotypical gender roles based on appearances and behaviours can be found across mass media, such as television, video games, and advertising, which, alongside social institutions such as family, constantly reinforces them (Jairath & Daima, 2021). Several studies were conducted researching how men and women are portrayed in mass media. Social media representations of unrealistic standards, such as the “thin ideal” (Rose et al., 2012: 589), cause audiences to compare themselves to their idols. Especially
women have started to compare themselves to the perceived ideals that are represented in the media and tried to replicate these, with body image issues, low self-esteem, and heightened levels of body dysmorphia having been reported as consequences of this phenomenon (Laughter et al., 2023). Recent movements in social media have called for more authenticity and realism to fight these unrealistic standards (Brodsky, 2022), especially those concerning beauty and body image, but also gender roles.

Due to social media opening an opportunity for everyone to express themselves to a wider audience, content creators are holding the power of influencing their audiences. An example of this in relation to gender expression is described by Jairath and Daima (2021), who write that “through their content and social media presence, male makeup artists and beauty gurus have inspired audiences to express their gender and self-identity through the physical aesthetics of makeup creativity” (p. 1645).
3. Theoretical Framework

The main theories used in this research are fashion theory and gender theory, with fashion theory enabling the exploration of how people use fashion to express their identities, while gender theory explains how these identities and the norms in which they operate are created.

3.1. Fashion Theory

Fashion Theory serves to explore the cultural, social, and psychological aspects of fashion and clothing, with Barnard (2018) describing fashion theory as a tool to understand the role of fashion in society. This includes how people use fashion to express their identities and the impact of fashion on the creation and reinforcement of cultural and social norms.

A distinction between the concepts of “fashion” and “dress” allows for a more nuanced understanding of the complex interplay of fashion and society. Fashion focuses on the “historically and geographically specific system” (Entwistle, 2000: 44), and the meaning of fashion as a social and cultural phenomenon. Dress on the other hand refers to the act of covering oneself with clothing and aesthetic adornments such as jewellery (Entwistle, 2000). Dress is a more individual and personal expression of style, encompassing personal choices, preferences, and how individuals present themselves through clothing. Fashion theory examines collective trends, influences, and social and cultural dynamics, whereas the concept of dress emphasises individual agency, self-expression, and the embodied experience of clothing within the fashion system (Entwistle, 2000).

Fashion theory recognizes that clothing and style are not individual choices rooted in socially constructed phenomena. Fashion trends and aesthetic preferences are influenced by cultural, historical, political, and economic factors, “respond(ing) to social and political changes” (Entwistle, 2000: 63). Lurie (1981) describes fashion as a language that communicates social messages, explained anthropologically by the fundamental need for humans to communicate (Entwistle, 2000: 66). Barnard (2020) describes meaning in fashion as being based on associative linkages, as it is “the interaction between the
individual’s cultural values and beliefs (...) and the item of fashion or clothing that generate the meaning of that item” (p. 203).

This includes the exploration of how clothing and style contribute to the construction of personal and collective identities. Fashion choices can reflect one's cultural background, social status, subcultural affiliations, and individual preferences (Rojek, 2007). Clothing becomes a tool for self-expression, enabling individuals to communicate their identities and seek belonging or differentiation within social groups “achieve selected values of recognition and exclusion” (Rojek, 2007: 78), showing that fashion is further intertwined with power dynamics and social hierarchies. So far, the fashion industry has predominantly serviced the binary understanding of gender (Madsen, 2018), limiting gender performativity to the set of consumers catered for by the fashion industry. Within the industry, a divide is created not only in gender but also in social class (Barthes, 2010). Consumer culture plays a significant role in the realm of fashion, shaping the production, consumption, and meanings attached to clothing and style. Barthes (2010) highlights how fashion thrives within a consumerist society, driven by the constant pursuit of novelty and the desire for individual expression. Fashion serves as a medium through which individuals participate in consumer culture, seeking to fulﬁl their desires for identity construction and social belonging. This allows for fashion to become a tool for resistance and subversion, as subcultural groups appropriate and reinterpret mainstream fashion to challenge dominant power structures (Rojek, 2007).

The relationship between fashion and gender is a central focus in fashion theory. Gender theory emphasizes that gender is performative and constructed through social practices, which include clothing and style choices. Fashion provides a platform for individuals to express identities in relation to gender, conforming to or challenging societal expectations of what has traditionally been defined as “femininity” and “masculinity” (Entwistle, 2000). Fashion trends are argued to reﬂect popular cultural notions as a response to current developments (Entwistle, 2000), which holds the potential of either reinforcing the traditional binary gender norms, but also highlighting the potential for gender boundaries to be blurred through androgynous or gender-neutral fashion.
Gender theory has undergone significant transformations over the years, challenging conventional understandings of gender as a fixed and inherent characteristic, asserting that gender is not a natural or innate attribute but is constructed and reinforced through cultural and social processes (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988). Researchers in this field describe a distinction between “sex” being the “physiological differences and biological reproduction”, while “gender is to do with culture, meaningful behavioural differences and cultural reproduction of identities” (Barnard, 2018: 261).

Rojek (2007) identifies two main approaches to the body from a cultural studies perspective, describing gender as being embodied in terms of habitus. Habitus refers to a learned “system of durable, transposable, cognitive schemata or structures of perception, conception and action” (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014: 195), shaping people’s behaviours, preferences, and dispositions. The acquisition of habitus through social interaction makes it an internalized concept, conforming the appearance of the body to its culture, and the rituals of coding and representation related to it (Rojek, 2007). This appearance includes the way we dress, with fashion being a tool to express identity and perform culture, achieving recognition and belonging within a community or culture. However, Bourdieu (1984) argues that the body can be organized in a way to communicate distinction, referring to non-conformity to what is considered “normal” behaviours in a culture. In this way, fashion can be used to distinguish the self from the culture one is born into, challenging the internalized norms and values of culture within oneself (Bourdieu, 1984). This can be observed within gender expression, as dominant cultural norms of gender roles may limit the individual’s expression of their gender, which is why the internal process of “acculturation” is necessary to identify these restrictive norms (Rojek, 2007).

The attributive approach, as one of the main approaches to the body in cultural studies (Rojek, 2007), recognises the body in relation to authoritative systems while also acknowledging levels of voluntarism in human action. Performativity on the other hand argues that “individuals perform to the requirements of systems of cultural authority that precede their existence” (Rojek, 2007: 77). This approach questions the agency of the human body and argues that it always performs according to the dictates of power (Rojek,
Butler’s (1990) theory of performativity expands on the performative approach, emphasizing the notion that gender is not an essential or biological attribute, but a series of repetitive behaviours, actions, and expressions that individuals engage in to conform to societal expectations of femininity or masculinity. This means that gender is not an intrinsic possession, but rather the act of performing gender by external expectations, recognizing that individuals may perform their gender differently in various situations or cultural contexts, and that gendered identities can evolve and change over time (Butler, 1990). Consequently, this performative aspect of gender also allows for the possibility of subversion and resistance, as individuals can challenge and disrupt dominant gender norms through acts of non-conformity (Butler, 2004). By consciously deviating from the expected behaviours and expressions, individuals can highlight the constructed nature of gender and question the stability and legitimacy of established gender norms. Fashion can be a tool to perform gender, with the adoption of gender-ambiguous clothing styles and the subversion of traditional gender roles offering examples for resistance.

One of the social contexts in which gender is performed can be defined as “patriarchy” (Davis, 2017), a system that is described by the Cambridge Dictionary (2021) as the social organization in which men hold primary power and authority, resulting in the subordination of women and non-binary individuals. De Beauvoir (1949) employs the concept of women as “the other”, referring to the idea that men are considered the norm, while women are seen as the deviation from this norm, placing them in a subordinate position in society throughout history. West and Zimmerman (1987) describe the allocation of power and resources in domestic, economic, and political settings, as social consequences of gender that traditionally put women at a disadvantage in comparison to men. This social constructionist perspective challenges the notion of a binary understanding of gender, recognizing the existence of diverse gender identities and expressions independent from biological sex (De Beauvoir, 1949).

Queer theory, as a sub-section of gender theory, expands on gender theory to include how gender identities operate beyond the binary framework, questioning the assumptions of heteronormativity and the strict binary understanding of gender (Halberstam, 1997). Halberstam (1997) argues that social, cultural, and political forces shape individuals'
experiences and expressions of identity in terms of their sexuality and gender. The way that society has been structured acknowledges only the ideas of masculinity and femininity as the moral choices, with those not conforming to the binary structure facing “risks of discrimination, loss of employment, public harassment, and (heightened) violence” (Butler, 2004: 9). Internalizing male and female as the only options for identity may lead to “poor mental health and a lack of self-expression” (Gallant, 2023: 53), producing an environment of oppression. Gender roles are known to be manifested through culture and interaction as a result of factors such as biology and socialization (Rose et al., 2012), focusing on the behavioural aspects of being a “man” or a “woman” (see Fig. 1). The behaviours that are associated with men and women “are viewed as cultural markers that indicate norms of social interaction” (Rose et al., 2012: 591). This research concluded that masculinity “often implies strength, ambition, and independence, whereas femininity implies physical attractiveness, reverence, and sentimentality” (Rose et al., 2012: 593). Activist movements such as feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and the #DeGenderFashion as the research object of this thesis, are grounded in gender theory, working towards dismantling oppressive norms and systems and promoting equal access to resources.

4. Methodology

Qualitative research describes social life, presenting the context and meanings of events and scenes that are relevant to those involved in them in close detail (Taylor et al., 1998). It is based on descriptive data, such as participant observations, interviews, or photography. Photography especially lends insight into how the people that take those photos view themselves and others (Taylor et al., 1998), making it an interesting medium to study.

4.1. Visual Analysis

Studies have shown how we live in an increasingly visual culture, where images dominate our communication, with Rose (2014) describing mass culture as hyper-visual. Features such as emojis, memes, and the possibility of image sharing through instant messaging
services, as well as social media as a new medium for communication have influenced the ways we communicate (Bu Zhong, 2022). Instagram is a social media platform based on the sharing of visuals and has a great impact on the ways we share, but also understand and interpret meaning (Caliandro & Graham, 2020). In this study, a visual analysis will focus on the voice of the research subject (Packard, 2008), establishing “positions from which it becomes possible for participants to speak” (Buckingham, 2009: 635). This is an important factor considering I am researching a marginalized community (Vänskä, 2014), which has experienced a lot of discrimination throughout history, and in recent years. The study analyses how the research subjects choose to present themselves visually, which allows for an interpretation of the visuals in the context of a movement aiming at de-gendering fashion. As stated by Buckingham (2009), “the method should follow the object” (p. 634), which is why I will be applying visual methods to research and interpret the data provided.

As the “significance of the photos is seen to rest on what is pictured, not how it is pictured” (Rose, 2014: 30), I will focus mainly on the visual elements of the outfits and the meanings of those, rather than the context of the production of the individual image. Even though demographic data, such as data reflecting audience engagement, could give interesting insights into the efficacy of social media activism (Kleut et al., 2018), these factors do not play a direct role in the creation of a visual narrative, which is why I will largely leave them out. Reflecting on the aim of a visual analysis, Blaikie and Priest (2017) describe that a qualitative content analysis intends to provide meaning rather than measures and numbers such as user engagement statistics.

Visual analysis is based on the descriptive features of an image (Barthes, 2010), analysing visual material critically and systematically. Kyngäs (2020) describes inductive content analysis as an appropriate tool for analysing qualitative data, as it “is performed to create concepts, categories and themes” (p. 14). The descriptions of the visual material that is used in this study allow for conclusions to be “grounded in data, as the researcher starts from observing regular patterns in data and works from those to develop empirical generalisations” (Bazeley, 2013: 46) that can then be tested on the remaining images in the data sample. The themes will emerge from the data sample by addressing the narratives and meanings behind every individual picture (Kyngäs, 2020). While an inductive approach is
applied to the analysis to avoid bias, it cannot be fully objective since a researcher’s “pre-existing knowledge and theoretical concepts will always influence what (can be) see(n) in the data” (Espedal et al., 2022: 156). Due to qualitative studies making use of interpretive and constructivist forms of enquiry with a subjective view of reality, a balance between subjectivity and objectivity in answering the research questions is necessary for the researcher to maintain (Espedal et al., 2022).

4.2. Research Paradigm: Interpretivism

Social media has become increasingly popular over the years, and while “society's use, production and transmission of visual forms of communication have grown, the application of visual research methods has also become increasingly widespread throughout the social sciences” (Knoblauch, 2008: 1). Since I’m conducting a visual analysis to make sense of my findings, and to find out about the way individuals create meaning through fashion, the interpretive paradigm is most suitable. An interpretive paradigm acknowledges the importance of understanding social phenomena from the perspective of the individuals involved and acknowledges that reality is constructed through social interaction and communication (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). This approach can be useful for studying subcultures and their fashion choices, as it allows for an exploration of the meanings and interpretations that the members of my chosen research group ascribe to their fashion choices. The study aims to examine the chosen images for their themes and the symbols they evoke in the context of self- and gender expression,

While interpretivism is the main paradigm used for this study, it does include certain elements of empiricism and positivism (Barnard, 2020: 8) in the framework used for the data analysis. The analytical method, consisting of three parts as explained below, emphasises observation and description (Steele, 1998) in the first part of the analysis, which can be related to empiricism. The third part, creating hypotheses in the form of patterns and themes that are emerging from the visual analysis could be argued to be related to positivism, which emphasizes a “split between facts and hypotheses” (Barnard, 2020: 8).
4.3. Data Collection

Following a method suggested by Murray et al. (2022), I have collected the top posts under the hashtag #DeGenderFashion for the data sample, which are used to conduct a visual analysis. These posts are pushed and “sorted by Instagram's proprietary algorithm” (Murray et al., 2022: 13), and thus represent the most relevant content in terms of the type of content, the creator, and overall popularity (Mosseri, 2021).

Instagram uses a variety of algorithms, classifiers, and processes to personalize the user experience with different qualities depending on the functions of the different parts of the platform (Mosseri, 2021). The explore section specifically aims to show content that’s recommended to the user, based on a set of signals. These signals include information about the post itself, looking at the popularity of a creator’s post based on modes of user engagement, classified by Kleut et al. (2018) as small acts of audience engagement, such as liking, commenting, and sharing. The signals further include the general user activity of the creator, how much a creator posts and how many people have interacted with the account over the past weeks (Mosseri, 2021). While the algorithmic quality of Instagram also considers information such as the viewer’s interaction history and activity, this influence was largely avoided by accessing the images more anonymously.

I have accessed the platform from a mobile device, using an account that was created for research purposes only. The idea is that a designated new account does not have a previous user history, thus user data connected to it, reducing the influence on the algorithm. When accessing the platform from a web browser, it only suggests 9 posts as the “top posts”, from a mobile device however it shows an infinite section of top posts, allowing for a greater data sample size. An impact on the algorithm was also avoided by using a mobile device that has not previously been linked to an Instagram account. However, Instagram aims to prevent the creation of fully anonymous accounts, to ensure safe use of the platform (Meta, 2022), with a certain amount of personal data being collected upon creating an account. This personal data was collected during the registration and included the full name and birth date.
The establishment of criteria is essential to the research question, as the focus is on the use of the #DeGenderFashion as a social movement. Implementing a criterion that the post must be published by a personal account rather than a business account, and consisting of original content, ensures that the focus of the thesis remains on the social and political aspect of de-gendering fashion rather than fashion as a business. It further ensures that the posts are relevant to the research objective and that the findings of each analysis can be related to each other. This comparability of posts is ensured by the criteria that the post must be photographic, and a full body shot of the person in the image for every element of fashion to be visible, which allows for a holistic analysis of the fashion choices. The specific sample selection criteria are:

- **a)** The account in question must be a personal account and cannot be business oriented.
- **b)** The post must consist of imagery in the form of photography.
  - a. Posts consisting of text or featuring a large amount of text will be disregarded.
  - b. Videos will also be disregarded for better comparativeness of the data.
- **c)** The post must consist of original content.
  - a. No reposts.
  - b. The person in the picture must be the owner of the account.
  - c. In case there is more than 1 person in the photo, only the account owner’s outfit will be analysed.
  - d. Collaboratively shared posts that feature the account owner in the photo are considered for analysis under the requirement that the person in the picture is the same as the one that initiated the post (can be determined by who wrote the caption).
- **d)** Only full-body shots will be considered, as every aspect of the outfit is visible, which is necessary to gain a holistic image.
  - a. Should the cover image in a post consisting of several slides not be a full body image, yet there is a full body image later in the slides, the full body image will be analysed. Should this not be the case the post will be discarded as not all aspects are visible.
The post cannot have a commercial motive (e.g., giveaways, business advertisements, ...).

Ensuring that the person pictures in the post is also the account owner, and not a repost of another post, ensures that the image was published with the intention of being included in the #DeGenderFashion movement, and that the choice of fashion pictures ascribes to their interpretation of de-gendered fashion. This also holds the function of consent, ensuring that the person pictured in the image made the deliberate decision to publish their photograph under this hashtag, and avoids the potential misuse of external content for the purpose of the #DeGenderFashion.

All empirical data was collected at a randomly chosen point in time during the thesis writing process on April 14th, 2023 at 14:00. The use of the algorithmic function of Instagram eliminates the need for a designated time of data collection, as the algorithm chooses the most relevant posts from the complete collection of posts published under #DeGenderFashion. This method of data collection intends for the results of the data analysis to be largely the same regardless of the timing of data collection.

4.4. Data Analytical Framework

I will be applying an analytical framework as described by Steele (1998), however originally coined by Prown (1980), to the data to analyse it systematically and critically. Visual analysis is mainly concerned with the internal evidence of a data sample, consisting of three parts: description, deduction, and speculation. In the first step of the method, the description, the researcher is only concerned with objectively “recording the internal evidence of the object itself” (Steele, 1998: 329), to prevent subjective assumptions and conclusions to influence the analysis (Steele, 1998). Factors such as the physical dimensions of the object, including the material, shape, form, colour, and texture; as well as any overt representations in the form of design or motifs are recorded in this section (Steele, 1998). The consideration of how much detail is included in the analytical process is important in this part, as too little detail may cause significant factors to be overlooked,
whereas too much detail “causes a loss of focus on the object as a whole” (Steele, 1998: 329).

Putting images into language through description eliminates the uncertainty of the meanings that an image carries, giving the researcher a sense of authority over how the data sample is perceived by the reader of the research. Barthes (2010) argues that “language adds knowledge to the image” (p. 13), emphasising the didactic function of the description. Furthermore, the researcher can single out certain elements to stress their value, using the order of the language to direct the reader’s perception of the image in question (Barthes, 2010).

The first step of the analysis is thus a general description of the components of the outfit, such as the specific items, silhouettes, and colours:

   a) **Image content**: What is seen in the individual image?

In the second step, described by Steele (1998) as deduction, the researcher starts “interpreting the interaction between the object and the perceiver” (p. 329), assessing the function of the object in question, and how this function is achieved. This step allows the researcher to become aware of cultural biases, testing any pre-existing external knowledge that could be deducted from the object itself. In this step, initial comparison to other objects “more-or-less like it” (Steele, 1998: 329) allows for an assessment of whether the object is a typical example of its kind. In the case of the research questions of this study, this step sets the prerequisites for identifying themes, as the images in the data sample can be compared to each other.

In this study, I will look through the notes taken of each individual analysis and focus on the identification of common themes. Writing out these themes allows me to create a codebook by which I will then identify these themes across the data sample:

   b) **Thematic Analysis**: Comparing the content analyses to each other.

   c) **Image Trends**: What trends can be observed based on the themes? Are any articles of clothing or styles dominant?
Lastly, during the “speculation” step of the analysis, the researcher creates questions and hypotheses based on the findings of the object analysis, which can be tested against external evidence (Steele, 1998: 331). In the context of this study about de-gendering fashion, this step allows for patterns and themes to emerge from the data sample. These themes can then be tested against external evidence such as cultural attitudes on gender, and literature on fashion and gender theory, allowing for a conclusion on how fashion is used to challenge gender norms in this specific case. Steele (1998) further suggests analysing the “functions performed by the artefact in its culture” (p. 331) in this section, with culture referring to both the physical and ideological environment in which the movement #DeGenderFashion is located. This allows the researcher to place the data sample/analysis within the broader cultural perceptions of sexuality and gender.

I will look at the meanings that these themes convey according to theory, as well as the overall narrative (Rogers, 2021) the fashion that is portrayed in the image creates:

- **d) Image Associations**: How would the articles of clothing be traditionally classified into gender categories?
- **e) Narrative**: What narrative does the outfit create?
5. Reflections

5.1. Ethics

Considering the data that I’m analysing is openly accessible, as it has been shared to a social network from public profiles, there are not many ethical limitations to the study. Researchers in the social sciences have not come to a consensus on how far social media is a public space (Silverman, 2014: 158). Silverman (2014) however suggests a “fair game – public domain” position, referring to the idea that “archived material on the internet is publicly available and therefore participant consent is not necessary” (p. 158).

Because LGBTQ+ communities are marginalized, and often vulnerable communities, with increased exposure to stigmatization and hate crimes, it is very important to be mindful of using neutral language, not to make assumptions, and not let any personal bias influence the analysis. I do also have to ensure that my research represents the community accurately and respectfully. This also includes recognizing the diversity within the community, which was done by selecting a randomized data sampling method, as it is most likely to give me a relevant and accurate depiction of the broader community.

In addition to the content that’s being analysed being openly accessible, not naming the creators in my analysis eliminates the need for obtaining informed consent. Apart from the individual photographs, only the data that can be extracted from the creators’ biographical sections of their Instagram profiles is considered for the analysis. This also means the identity of the individuals will not be revealed, and the accounts will be referred to by numbers, where needed.

5.2. Limitations

Picking only the top posts can be influenced by previous user history, as the Instagram algorithm works in ways where it suggests content that a person is most likely to interact with (Mosseri, 2021) may become a limitation if not executed carefully. When creating an account, the platform’s registration guidelines prevent full anonymity (Meta, 2022), posing a risk that the algorithm is influenced by the demographic details that are linked to the new
account. Even though necessary precautions, such as using a device that has not previously been linked to an Instagram account, have been taken and providing as little identifying data as possible, this posed a challenge during the data sampling process as the data collection had to happen concurrently and could not be replicated. Full anonymity could be achieved by accessing the platform from a private web browser without being logged into an account, however, this method would limit the visible content to 9 images and is thus not suitable in this case.

I do have to be somewhat mindful of the cultural context, which I have not addressed in this study in detail, as that may matter in what is perceived as “genderless fashion”. In other countries, skirts may be worn by men traditionally, so it does become important to mention the user’s country of origin and cultural background to establish in what way they are breaking a gender norm, and if they are doing so at all.

In the analysis section, even though I’m referring to “x number of accounts typically features x item”, these conclusions are fragile, considering I have a varying number of images per account (between one and seven). Only the accounts from which a larger number of images are being analysed can lead to any conclusion on what’s “typical”. A small number of posts may not be representative of the overall content of an account.

As becomes apparent in the analysis, climate played a role in the presentation of outfits, as winter wear such as coats, boots, hats, and gloves were featured frequently. This suggests that the findings may slightly differ across seasons. However, the data collection method being the algorithmic function rather than collecting data that was published at a specific point in time, allows for the time of posting to only be one factor in determining the relevance of the posts, and for more diverse posts (in terms of time) to be featured in the research. The algorithmic function including the date of posting within a variety of other factors by which posts are considered most relevant thus only poses a minor limitation and is further explained by the algorithmic qualities.
5.3. Researcher Positionality

Considering visual analysis and an interpretive paradigm does not allow for the research to be fully objective, researcher positionality and bias play a role. A visual analysis requires the researcher to get immersed in the data for the themes to be generated from that data (Espedal et al., 2022: 155). This necessity of immersion highlights the potential for researcher bias to influence the outcome of the analysis, which is why self-reflection and the awareness of own beliefs and experiences are important. Only when a researcher is fully aware of their own bias, which can be uncovered through a thorough research in the field (Steele, 1998), the data can be addressed objectively. Steele (1998) describes how the awareness of one’s own cultural biases may be used to fuel the creative work that takes place during the later stages of the analysis. The researcher may then “participate in the situation of understanding social conventions”, playing “by the rules of the given tradition” (Espedal et al., 2022: 175).
6. Results and Analysis

6.1. Presentation of the Visual Analysis

All data was collected on April 14th, 2023, at 14:00. After applying this set of criteria to my initial data sample consisting of 100 individual posts shared by 45 different accounts, a sample of 46 posts that were shared by 16 different accounts qualified for further analysis. A large number of posts were eliminated from the data sample due to their business affiliation, with 23 out of the initial 100 posts either coming from a business page directly or featuring some kind of business motive such as giveaways or advertisements, emphasizing the notion of fashion as consumerism (Barthes, 2010).

By grouping the themes that emerged from the data sample according to fashion theory, they can be categorized into Demographics, Aesthetics, Garment Types, Appearance, and Gender and Identity Expression. These categories align with the core principles and concepts studied within fashion theory. This order of analysis aims to provide a logical progression, starting with foundational elements and gradually moving towards more complex and abstract concepts related to fashion and gender expression.

6.2. Identification, Analysis and Discussion of Themes

The prevalence of themes will be visualized using tables that indicate the theme that is being referred to, the number of photos (out of 46) that this specific element can be observed in, and the number of accounts (out of 16) that typically feature the theme in question. This allows for a more accurate indication of the frequency of a specific element, as some of the accounts featured in the overall data sample have more images than others, and the semiotic codes across images stemming from the same account are largely similar. The tables visualizing the themes thus follow this structure:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme of theme</th>
<th>Definition or example description</th>
<th>X Photos (out of 46)</th>
<th>X Accounts (out of 16)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td></td>
<td>X (number) of photos that feature the theme in question</td>
<td>X (number) of accounts that typically feature the theme in question</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.2.1. Demographics

Starting with demographics provides a foundational understanding of the accounts and posts that are published in connection to the movement that is being studied. This allows for the context of the analysis to be established and highlights the potential for demographic factors to influence or interact with the other categories of analysis.

Basic demographic data was collected based on the biographic section on the Instagram profiles of the accounts that are featured in the data sample. However, to protect the creator’s anonymity, no identifying data will be used, and the account names will be referred to by numbers only (e.g., “account 1”). Only using demographic data that is specified in the biography at the head of each profile also prevents for researcher bias to influence the accuracy, as assumptions about someone’s identity are avoided. Considering the research topic focuses on a hashtag rather than specific creators, no other posts that were published by the featured accounts are considered in the analysis at any point. The identification of “being German” was carried out using the semiotic codes of the images featured in the data sample, and then tested against the biographic data, the language of the captions, or the locations tagged in the posts.

The demographic data that was collected includes gender identity, as this can give additional insight into the background and the meaning of the fashion choices. Out of the total 16 accounts represented in the data sample, three did not specify a gender identity or pronouns. Of the remaining 13 accounts that specified a gender identity either by naming it directly or indicating preferred pronouns, 8 identified as non-binary, and 5 identified as male (see Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>X Accounts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonbinary</td>
<td>Includes identification as genderfluid, they/ them pronouns</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>He/ Him pronouns</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>Nationality or Residing in Germany</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
According to Butler (1980), gender is not a fixed or innate characteristic but rather a social construct that is continually performed and enacted through repeated acts and behaviours. Nonbinary individuals reject the traditional binary categorizations of male and female and challenge the notion that gender is a stable and predetermined attribute. By doing this, they actively engage in performative acts that disrupt established gender norms, creating space for a more fluid and diverse understanding of gender. Reimagining the possibilities of gender expression highlights the inherent performativity and constructed nature of gender.

In this data sample, no female-identifying individuals are represented, which indicates that the movement is being led by male and nonbinary individuals. Using a somewhat randomized data sampling method by following the algorithmic functions of Instagram reinforces this finding, as no external influences were determining the gender identities represented in the data sample, other than the algorithmic function of Instagram considering male and nonbinary content as “most relevant” in this context, which would reinforce the findings of my analysis. This correlates with research about women commonly adopting “what was characteristically male clothing” (Owyong, 2009: 206). This may be related to previous mental associations of female clothing with traditional gender roles, which would “situate the person in a subordinate role” (Owyong, 2009: 206) due to femininity being seen as “the other” in traditional gender ideology (De Beauvoir, 1949). Stereotypes and biases, internal to the wearer and externally reinforced by society may thus hinder this exploration. Because of that, non-female identifying people now seem to be at the forefront of challenging gender norms, aiming to achieve this same kind of normalization.

Considering my own German-ness, I was more conscientious of the semiotic codes presented by German accounts, and these codes do contribute to the research to an extent. Out of the 16 accounts, four were stated to be based in Germany. This is a disproportionately large amount given Instagram is a global platform, and the movement originated in the US. The prevalence of German accounts made me wonder whether my background did influence the algorithmic sorting of content, with Instagram suggesting posts I am more likely to connect with, as suggested by the algorithmic functions (Mosseri, 2021). Alternatively, the fact could be explained by Germany, and especially Berlin as a cultural metropolis (Müller, n.d.), being known to be very liberal when it comes to fashion. Creators
face less stigmatization and discrimination in certain geographic locations due to the prevalent cultural norms, allowing them to express their identities online more openly, resulting in more content being published.

### 6.2.2. Aesthetics

This category explores the visual elements of fashion, specifically pattern and colour, which are fundamental to fashion design and aesthetics.

**Pattern**: Pattern can be observed as a dominant theme across photos, with all photos that feature at least one item that is patterned counting into this category. Out of the 46 photos that were analysed, 34 photos feature any type of pattern, besides the below mentioned including lace (2), knit (4), pinstripe (2), and political or cultural motif (3). Out of these patterns, botanical patterns are the most popular, with 13 photos featuring at least one item with a botanical pattern. 11 of the 16 accounts that were analysed typically feature patterns, with a few more accounts featuring elements of a pattern at singular instances (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Prevalence of Patterns**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>X Photos</th>
<th>X Accounts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pattern</td>
<td>Overall existence of (any) pattern on at least one item of clothing</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botanical Pattern</td>
<td>“[account 6, image 1] features a short white skirt with a colourful tropical floral pattern”</td>
<td>13 (out of 34)</td>
<td>3 (out of 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plaid (Checkered)</td>
<td>“[account 1, image 1] features a knee-length dark plaid skirt, resembling a kilt”</td>
<td>6 (out of 34)</td>
<td>2 (out of 11)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Colour**: Colour has been found to influence how people are perceived, both in terms of attractiveness and symbolic meaning (Kodzoman, 2019). Due to the aforementioned fact that colour is a matter of individual perception and provokes different responses depending on the context (Kodzoman, 2019), this analysis will focus on the prevalence of vibrant and neutral colours as overarching categories (see Table 3).
Table 3: Colour Schemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>X Photos</th>
<th>X Accounts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vibrant Colours</td>
<td>e.g., yellows, reds, pinks, ... (&quot;artificial&quot; and neon colours)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral/ Muted Colours</td>
<td>Includes dark or neutral colours, e.g., black, and dark blue; but also naturally occurring colours such as browns</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

O’Leary (2022) describes colourfulness as “how vibrant or neutral (close to grey) a color looks” (see Fig. 2), a system that has been developed to be perceptually accurate. Using this definition, vibrant colours here refer to bright, saturated colours, whereas the neutral and muted colour category encompasses dark, muted, and colours commonly occurring in nature.

Colour, as well as pattern, play a significant role in signalling and reinforcing gendered norms and expectations. Traditional gendered fashion often associates certain colours and patterns with masculinity or femininity, perpetuating a binary understanding. Butler’s theory of performativity explores the performative potential of colour and pattern, viewing colour and pattern as tools of expression. The intentional selection of colour and pattern in fashion allows for individuals to actively engage in the expression of their gender identity, and to challenge norms of masculinity and femininity by using colour in unconventional or subversive ways.

No dominant colour systems were observed in the data sample, with there being an even split of vibrant and muted colours across photos and accounts. The lack of correlation between colour and gender identity in the data sample challenges the understanding of what colours are “supposed” to be worn according to traditions.

6.2.3. Garments

Building upon the understanding of aesthetics, analysing different garment types, including top wear, bottom wear, footwear, accessories, and jewellery, provides further insight into the practice of constructing a gendered identity through fashion. The category of
“garments” is defined according to the concepts of “dress” and “adornment” as functional acts in fashion (Entwistle, 2000). The separation of “dress” from the broader fashion system allows for a deeper examination of how specific garments contribute to self-expression, social identity, and cultural meanings. This category thus examines the tangible aspects of fashion and the role of various garments in shaping the personal style and identity.

Fashion, like gender, is a social construct that is performed and embodied through various choices and expressions (Rojek, 2007). Butlers (1980) notion of performativity includes the “role of fashion in producing and stylizing gendered bodies” (Wissinger, 2016: 287), as individuals can manipulate their appearance to conform to or challenge established gender identities and norms. By consciously selecting clothing and accessories, individuals engage in a performative act that communicates their identity, challenges gender stereotypes, or even subverts established conventions. In this way, fashion serves as both a reflection and a medium through which the performative nature of gender can be expressed and (de)constructed.

**Bottom wear:** In the category of “bottom wear”, referring to dresses, skirts and pants, an even split can be observed across items. However, when categorizing dresses and skirts together as being “feminine” items (Goodin et al., 2011), their prevalence dominates over pants (see Table 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>X Photos</th>
<th>X Accounts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dress</td>
<td>“[account 7, image 3] features a short, tight-fitting grey dress”</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skirt</td>
<td>“[account 1, image 1] features a knee-length dark plaid skirt, resembling a kilt”</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pants</td>
<td>“[account 2, image 3] features yellow wide-leg pants with front pleats, so long they reach to the floor”</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pantyhose</td>
<td><em>for both functional or aesthetic reasons, sheer or coloured</em></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While dresses are full-body items, covering both the upper and the lower halves, the design of a dress featuring a skirt typically emphasizes the lower body (Owyong, 2009), which is why I am categorizing it as bottom wear in this instance. This emphasis of the shape of the body traditionally associates skirts and dresses with femininity and female sexuality (Goodin et al., 2011). In popular literature, girls and women are often described as wearing dresses (Sciurba, 2016), which holds a risk of “perpetuat(ing) negative overgeneralizations about what it means to be and identify as female” (p. 287). Owyong (2009) emphasizes skirts as characteristically female clothing, describing them as “clothes that exude feminine appeal” (p. 202).

In this study, the use of dresses and skirts by individuals who do not identify as female counters this overgeneralization by normalizing dresses for every gender identity and physical body. In general, this data sample shows that in the case of bottom wear, female-associated elements seem to be preferred within the movement of de-gendering fashion.

Pantyhose has both a functional and an aesthetic element to them, as they can be used for warmth, but also to make legs appear smoother. While pantyhose, also referred to as “tights”, are commonly defined as lingerie (Fields, 2007), I will be including them in this section of “bottom wear” as it concerns the legs. Lingerie is an inherent expression of sexuality (Fields, 2007), with female bodies in particular commonly being sexualized in the patriarchal system of gender roles (Davis, 2017). The use of pantyhose as a visible element of lingerie in this data sample communicates and normalizes sexuality in all gender identities, fighting heteronormativity and the understanding of sexuality being purely procreative (Butler, 1990).

**Top and Outerwear:** In terms of top wear, the only garment with a recurrent appearance across photos and accounts were collared shirts, with dress shirts, as commonly worn with suits and in professional settings, forming the majority (see Table 5). Outerwear of any kind (functional and decorative) was featured in more than half of the posts that were analysed, and in some cases covered the entirety of the upper body, making the choice of shirt not visible to the researcher.
Table 5: Prevalence of different types of Top and Outerwear

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>X Photos</th>
<th>X Accounts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collared shirt</td>
<td>e.g., dress shirts and polo shirts</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turtleneck</td>
<td>“[account 4, image 1] features a dark red turtleneck layered underneath an oversized red sweatshirt”</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional Outerwear</td>
<td>Functional, worn on top of the outfit due to the climate, e.g., Coat, Jacket, …</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Decorative” Outerwear</td>
<td>Decorative, as a part of the outfit, e.g., Blazer, cardigan, …</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Collared shirts, and dress shirts in particular, are typically worn by and associated with men in professional or business settings due to the deep-rooted patriarchal structure of society (Entwistle, 2000). These associations are not inherent to the clothing items themselves but are socially constructed and maintained through performative acts (Butler, 1980).

Out of the 17 images featuring a collared shirt, 12 also feature either a skirt or high heels as a traditionally feminine element, making up a majority. In this context, the collared shirt communicates masculinity and authority, while standing in direct opposition with other elements of the outfit that are considered feminine. Butler's theory of performativity recognizes the potential for subversion and resistance through fashion, with individuals disrupting traditional gender norms by engaging in performative acts that oppose societal expectations. This includes wearing clothing traditionally associated with the opposite gender, based on the gender binary, or combining styles that blur gender boundaries.

Outerwear and the layering of garments was a popular choice, for which at least a partial correlation with the timing of the data collection can be assumed, as outerwear is considered a necessity in colder climates.

Footwear: An even distribution can be observed in the category of footwear, a division between heeled and flat shoes. 9 of the accounts that were observed typically feature heels, whereas 7 of the accounts typically feature flat shoes according to the data sample (see Table 6).
Overall, boots both with and without heels were a popular choice, which may be influenced by external factors such as weather, as mentioned above. It is important to mention that in some of the photos in the data sample no shoes were worn, or the shoes were not visible due to being covered by the bottom wear. Previous research has focused on gender in object design, with Wright (2018) emphasizing high heels as an example of gender associations, being considered an exclusively female item. Focussing on the Stiletto heel, Wright (2018) explains the reasons for the associations with femininity as being rooted in post-war fashion history, as the Stiletto heel was created as a counter to utilitarian fashion during the second world war. The shoe was considered to express a sense of femininity, indicating passivity and subservience due to its fragility and impracticality (Wright, 2018). Furthermore, gracefulness was associated with the tailored shape of the shoe following the natural line of the foot, being slim-fitting, and lightweight. Other representations of the stiletto heel include modernity, youth, and sexuality (Wright, 2018). In history, a girl’s first pair of heels was purchased as a “signal of puberty and onset of sexual maturity” (Wright, 2018: 282), which alongside the exaggeration of gender attributes communicates overt sexuality. According to Butler (1980), wearing high heels, as an object with deep-rooted feminine associations, is a way for individuals to engage in performing gender. The exaggeration of physical attributes associated with wearing high heels, such as the elongation of the legs, can be argued to be performative acts that reinforce traditional gender norms of femininity and the role of women by communicating overt sexuality. However, this also opens the potential for high heels to become a tool to resist gender norms if worn by any other gender identity, which is something that can be observed in the data sample used for this analysis.

Furthermore, the function of the heel adding height to the wearer has also been argued to break traditional female gender roles, asserting dominance and liberation rather than subordination due to the modification of physique (Wright, 2018). This factor is particularly

### Table 6: Prevalence of different types of Footwear

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>X Photos</th>
<th>X Accounts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heeled Shoes</td>
<td>Includes platform heels (6), stilettos (7), heeled boots (8), ...</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flat Shoes</td>
<td>Includes sneakers (7), boots (11) and sandals (1)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
interesting in the context of this study, as the use of heels in non-female identifying individuals, as observed in the data sample, continues the narrative of broken gender norms in contemporary society. The representation of sexuality through the high heel can be interpreted as an attempt at destigmatizing sexuality in queer communities.

**Accessories and Jewellery:** A variety of accessories was represented across the data sample, with purses, belts, headwear, and glasses being able to be observed across the data sample (see Table 7). However, the theme glasses will not be further analysed, as 15 out of the 18 pairs of glasses observed across the data sample were optical, blurring the line between being a medical necessity rather than an accessory. The headwear is made up of functional and decorative hats, as well as culturally influenced headpieces such as a turban.

**Table 7: Prevalence of different types of Accessories (Garments)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>X Photos</th>
<th>X Accounts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>General accessories, including those that are not separately listed below: sunglasses, gloves, and scarves.</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purse</td>
<td>“[account 8, image 1] features a small light pink purse with a button-tufting pattern featuring gold details (buttons), and a short handle”</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6 (out of 12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belt</td>
<td>Both functional and decorative</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2 (out of 12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headwear</td>
<td>Hats (functional or decorative) or other (traditional) head accessories e.g., turban</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Furthermore, jewellery could be observed as a common theme across photos, with the number of photos in which jewellery was observed standing in relation to the number of accounts typically featuring this element. Necklaces and Earrings were the most commonly observed jewellery alongside bracelets and rings (see Table 8). Other jewellery that was observed, however, could not be identified as a theme includes an anklet (1), broches (4, all within the same account), and hairclips (3 photos posted by 2 different accounts).
Table 8: Prevalence of different types of Jewellery

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>X Photos</th>
<th>X Accounts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall Jewellery</td>
<td>General jewellery, across categories</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Necklace</td>
<td>“[account 2, image 1] features a short silver chain necklace”</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3 (out of 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bracelet</td>
<td>“[account 10, image 1] features a turquoise pearl bracelet”</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3 (out of 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earrings</td>
<td>“[account 5, image 1] features long, dangling red earrings resembling rose petals”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4 (out of 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ring</td>
<td><em>Both symbolic (wedding ring) and decorative</em></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3 (out of 7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even though jewellery in general is featured in a majority of the photos, it is not featured as frequently within an account as other elements of fashion are. This emphasizes its role as being a fashionable accessory that can be added on rather than having a practical function of covering the body (Entwistle, 2000).

Accessories and jewellery can both be classified as “adornment”, defined by Entwistle (2000) as the “aesthetic aspects of altering the body” (p. 43), which emphasises the individual agency in the fashion system. The individual agency that is associated with adornment (Entwistle, 2000) and the attributive approach to the body (Rojek, 2007) can be used to distinguish the self from the culture one is born into, challenging the internalized norms and values of culture within oneself (Rojek, 2007). Society often associates certain types of jewellery and accessories, such as necklaces, earrings, and purses, with specific gender identities and expressions. By wearing jewellery and accessories that align with the gendered norms and expectations of a culture, individuals engage in performative acts that signal their belonging and adherence to a culture. On the contrary, by consciously choosing to adorn the body in a way that disrupts the gender norms and associations of a culture, jewellery and accessories can be used as a tool for distinction. This is a particularly significant aspect in the queer community, as they have previously found themselves having to conform to the binary system, restricting their freedom of self-expression, as they would otherwise have to fear stigmatization and exclusion from society (Butler, 2004).
6.2.4. Appearance

Moving on to appearance, especially personal grooming, allows for an exploration of the practices and choices individuals make in terms of facial hair and makeup. Making appearance a separate category acknowledges how personal grooming practices contribute to self-presentation and the impact they may have on individual identity or societal expectations.

**Facial Hair:** Facial hair, consisting of beards as well as the hair on the head, either naturally or in the form of wigs, can be observed commonly, with more than half of the photos featuring a beard (see Table 9).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>X Photos</th>
<th>X Accounts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beard</td>
<td>“[account 1, image 1] features a long grey beard”</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long hair</td>
<td><em>Hair on the head, at least shoulder length, can be natural or a wig, visible (not covered by a hat)</em></td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The photos showed a high prevalence of beards, which Barber (2001) classifies within the fashion system as beards contribute to the communication of identity. Mowat (2021: 293) writes that facial hair, including beards, is considered a sign of masculinity, describing that even “though hair might be something that naturally grows on bodies, this use of face-work reminds us that the cultivation of hair on the face (as much as hair over the whole body) is implicitly gendered” (p. 293).

The prevalence of beards in my data sample correlates interestingly with the prevalence of other characteristically female items such as dresses and heels, as described in the previous sections. These elements possess a deep-rooted gender association, which directly clash with each other through their combination, challenging the norms for both masculinity and femininity in terms of appearance.

**Makeup:** The use of makeup, and the associated “female vanity” (Jairath & Daima, 2021) has been a frequently discussed topic in queer fashion and gender studies, as it holds the
power to emphasize or conceal physical features the same way fashion does. Makeup was not a commonly featured theme in the data sample (see Table 10).

**Table 10: Prevalence of different types of Makeup**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>X Photos</th>
<th>X Accounts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eye Makeup</td>
<td>Including eyeshadow, eyeliner, and lashes, e.g., “[account 2, image 1] features pink eyeshadow to match the colour of the dress”</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lipstick</td>
<td>“[account 7, image 2] features a pinkish red lipstick”</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nail Polish</td>
<td>“[account 7, image 2] features medium-length navy blue nails”</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Makeup holds the power of visually changing the shape of the face, and how it is perceived, making it a powerful tool in the expression of the self. It can also work as an accessory, adding to the outfit, even elevating it. By applying makeup in non-conforming or unconventional ways, individuals engage in performative acts that can disrupt traditional gender expectations and binary frameworks.

Pop culture is found to have normalized the use of makeup by non-female individuals, originally led by artists such as David Bowie and Adam Lambert, and further popularized by modern artists such as Billy Porter and Harry Styles (Jairath & Daima, 2021). Bowie's ability to transform himself and inhabit various personas demonstrates the idea that identity is not fixed but a continual performance, resonating with Butler's theory of performativity. The wider reach of pop culture through social media is found to be corresponding with a growth in the male grooming industry, which has grown significantly from 2017 to 2023, including cosmetics like foundations, concealers and more (Jairath & Daima, 2021). While these findings refer to male cosmetics, it does show an increasing inclusivity in the cosmetic and beauty industry, which portrays a step towards the de-stigmatization of the use of makeup by non-females.
6.2.5. Gender and Identity Expression

Finally, discussing gender and identity expression builds upon the previous categories and explores the broader implications of fashion choices. This category focuses on the concepts of androgyny and overall appearance, as well as the emphasis of the body due to the shape of the garments, examining how these factors contribute to the expression of gender identity through fashion.

**Emphasis of the body:** Most of the outfits analysed within the data sample are found to be more loose fitting, and more modest, covering up the body through the shape of the garment. Out of the 46 outfits that were analysed, 38 were found to be more modest, with 11 accounts typically featuring modest looks (see Table 11).

**Table 11:** Emphasis of the Body through Silhouette of the Garment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>X Photos</th>
<th>X Accounts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tight Fitting</td>
<td><em>Tight silhouette emphasizing the shape of the body</em></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loose Fitting</td>
<td><em>Loose silhouette covering the shape of the body</em></td>
<td>36</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modest</td>
<td><em>More closed up/ covered, e.g., through the high neck, long sleeves, long bottoms, ...</em></td>
<td>38</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revealing</td>
<td><em>Emphasis on exposed physical features due to the silhouette of the garment, e.g., leg slits, chest/ cleavage, sheer fabric, ...</em></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This finding of prevailing modesty can be partially attributed to the timing of the research and the data collection, as this happened in the middle of April when the weather was still a little bit colder in most countries represented in the data sample/global north. This same “theory” can be used to explain the prevalence of pantyhose, due to its functional element of keeping the wearer warm. This finding emphasizes the role of the data’s demographic elements, as certain demographic factors such as the location and the date of posting can offer an additional analytical angle to the findings. Another factor explaining the preferred modesty is the physical body image in relation to gender identity. Loose-fitting clothes offer the ability to conceal parts of the body, allowing the wearer to modify their physical
appearance (Frith & Gleeson, 2008), which can help avoid body dysmorphia as a common disorder observed in the queer community (Gill, 2015). On the other hand, tight-fitting and revealing clothes offer to emphasize and accentuate elements of the body.

**Overall appearance:** Even though several account owners identified as male, only one account presented as masculine in terms of fashion choices. An overall more feminine or androgynous appearance is most commonly observed. This is evaluated by the semiotic codes that are traditionally associated with femininity, such as long hair, vibrant colours, or sexualized styles due to their revealing or form-fitting shape (see Table 12).

**Table 12: Overall Appearance in terms of Gender Expression**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>X Photos</th>
<th>X Accounts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Masculine</td>
<td>Overall appearance, based on traditional gender norms (literature), e.g., beards, loose fit, neutral/dark colours, ...</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminine</td>
<td>Overall appearance, based on traditional gender norms (literature), e.g., dresses, skirts, floral patterns, high heels, ...</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Androgyny</td>
<td>No clear gender association to the overall outfit, based on traditional gender norms, e.g., “unisex fashion”, mixing of gendered elements</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Masculine and feminine appearances are not fixed or essential traits, but rather socially constructed norms that individuals embody through their choices and expressions. These appearances are performative in nature, as individuals consciously or unconsciously conform to or challenge societal expectations of what is considered masculine or feminine. Butler’s (1980) notion of performativity encourages us to critically examine and challenge the normative expectations associated with masculine and feminine appearances, allowing for greater freedom and self-determination in how individuals present themselves.

Androgyny is a deliberate performance that challenges societal expectations and norms regarding gendered appearance. Through clothing choices, hairstyles, and self-presentation, androgyny in fashion blurs the lines between masculine and feminine, highlighting the
performative nature of gender. In this context, androgyny relates to outfits that either do not possess any specific gender association, such as unisex fashion, or a combination of different gendered elements into one outfit, with the latter being the most common. The use of a masculine-associated top such as a suit attire in combination with a feminine-associated bottom, such as a miniskirt and stiletto heels were typical for these “mixed” styles. The deliberate combination of gendered styles emphasizes the superficial nature of the association of fashion with gender, challenging gender norms in fashion. Feminine overall appearances are more common than masculine overall appearances, which correlates with the patriarchal governance where femininity is seen as subordinate (Davis, 2017), making the wearer of feminine clothes appear weaker. Activism in this area is thus more necessary.

The appearance of unisex fashion in the data sample is interesting and, according to the literature, almost stands in contradiction to the movement for de-gendering fashion. Unisex fashion emphasizes neutral design, deliberately counteracting the gender binary by making the clothes as neutral as possible. The interpretation of androgyny coinciding with the trend of “unisex fashion” (Madsen, 2018) that has been dominating the industry for a few years now, stands in opposition to the movement of gender-less fashion which aims to blur the lines of masculinity and femininity and allows for any body to wear any item. In genderless fashion, no new clothing must be produced, but rather the one that we already have to be destigmatized and produced in a wider set of sizes for it to be more inclusive.
7. Conclusion

7.1. Conclusive discussion

Subcultures commonly use the practice of wearing certain styles, garments, and accessories to differentiate themselves from cultural norms (Rojek, 2007), with this study of the social media movement #DeGenderFashion offering an insight into the practice of challenging dominant cultural norms. Social media allows for individuals to shape and communicate their identities, offering a digital “stage” for these performative acts to take place. Users can strategically choose the content they share, the language they use, and the communities they engage with, all of which contribute to the creation and reinforcement of their online personas. Through curated profiles, posts, and interactions, users perform in a way that they can control the way in which they are perceived.

The most obvious result of this study is related to the demographic finding of no female-identifying individuals being represented in the data sample, as well as the overall appearance of feminine or masculine. The broader societal acceptance of women adopting masculine styles, such as pants and pantsuits, into their wardrobes offers an explanation for these findings. While women still often face stigma, their activism, and especially the progress of the second wave of feminism has massively contributed to their rights. Men on the other hand are holding onto gender norms of having to be masculine, strong, and hardworking to provide for a partner or family, and these roles are still commonly reinforced through pop culture, as anything else would be seen as “failure”. Because of this, the movement is led by non-female-identifying individuals, to achieve this same social acceptance.

The deep-rooted identification of women as “the other” (De Beauvoir, 1949) and the longstanding patriarchal system continues to minimize the role of the woman in contemporary society, apparent through phenomena such as the gender pay gap, which may leave “traditional” men hesitant to being associated with femininity through their fashion choices and can be interpreted as being seen as a fear of degradation from the previous privilege. This shows that even though gender norms have previously been challenged, the underlying roles have remained the same, with the gender binary remaining the dominant
system. The queer community is now aiming to touch this issue at the root, deconstructing gender identity, roles, and norms.

Different styles emphasize the role of clothing in concealing, accentuating, and even modifying the body to counteract body image issues as a common phenomenon in queer communities (Frith & Gleeson, 2008). Modest or loose-fitting silhouettes allow for the body to be concealed, altering how a person is perceived. This finding, as well as the use of outerwear, raises the factor of different cultures and geographical locations being of significance. Modest looks and outerwear as a common theme may be argued to serve an additional functional purpose of keeping the wearer warm, which emphasizes the impact of climates on fashion choices.

Rather than adhering to traditional gender norms, the individuals represented in the data sample of the #DeGenderfashion movement create a new, fluid identity, combining feminine and masculine elements, and appropriating them into their styles communicating their unique gender expressions. This correlates with the limitless nature of gender as an open spectrum, moving away from the gender binary in which two genders stand in opposition. The combination of opposing elements, such as masculinity and femininity, or functionality and aesthetics, is what defined “fashion” in this study.

### 7.2. Broader relevance

This research is both and equally contributing to the fields of media studies and cultural studies. Besides contributing to ongoing research conversations and debates around issues of identity and gender in contemporary society, the thesis would contribute to our understanding of the role that fashion plays in shaping and challenging cultural norms and expectations surrounding gender. Previous research, such as Butler’s (1990) theory of performativity has not addressed the role of social media in creating a space for marginalized groups to express themselves and share meaning, which is a gap this thesis is trying to address. It provides insight into the ways in which fashion can be used as a tool for social and cultural critique, which can be useful to fashion designers and brands, giving
them a theoretical basis for more inclusive practice. As suggested by Vaid-Menon (The Man Enough Podcast, 2021), genderless fashion does not have to be a new thing at all and does not call for new inventions in fashion to be made, but rather for existing fashion to become more inclusive of all bodies, especially in terms of sizing.

7.3. Future research agenda

It would be interesting to research this topic from a cultural perspective, focusing on a geographic region, and taking specific cultural norms into account. As mentioned previously, this research is conducted from a Western perspective, using Eurocentric fashion history and traditions to identify gender norms. In other countries, such as India, as described by Vaid-Menon, men traditionally wear skirts which would clash with the identification of skirts as a feminine object in this research. This approach would also address the impact of climate on fashion choices, as modest looks may be interpreted as an indicator of cold weather. In future research, some demographic data would thus be more necessary, to fill the gaps left by this thesis. In further research, I would address these cultural factors and assess fashion in relation to socio-political and demographic contexts.

Another approach to this could be to conduct longitudinal research or collect posts that are evenly spread through a period of time, which would give further insight into common themes in genderless fashion, as choices of garments typically vary across seasons depending on the weather. Similarly, the data collection method could be used in a way that the content posted in a social or politically significant timeframe, such as during an election, would be analysed. This research would give further insight into how fashion responds to the socio-political environment as suggested by Entwistle (2000).
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https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/shedding-more-light-on-how-instagram-works

https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12539


https://doi.org/10.1002/lsm.23598


9. Appendices

Fig. 1: Stereotypes in masculine and feminine behaviour according to Rose et al. (2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculine Traits</th>
<th>Feminine Traits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adventurous</td>
<td>Affectionate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active**</td>
<td>Attractive**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>Curious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autocratic</td>
<td>Dependent**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courageous</td>
<td>Dreamy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daring</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant**</td>
<td>Fearful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enterprising</td>
<td>Gentle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forceful</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent**</td>
<td>Sensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressive</td>
<td>Sentimental**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robust</td>
<td>Sexy**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rude</td>
<td>Soft-hearted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe</td>
<td>Submissive**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stern</td>
<td>Superstitious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Weak</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The traits are alphabetized. **The trait was used in the present study.
Fig. 2: Perceptually accurate system to determine “Colourfulness” (O’Leary (2022))

In the early 1900s, MassArt professor Albert Munsell created the perceptually accurate color system. Source by SharkD, derivative work of Datumizer® CC BY-SA 3.0 license
## Codebook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>X Photos</th>
<th>X Accounts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demographics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonbinary</td>
<td>Includes identification as genderfluid, they/ them pronouns</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>He/ Him pronouns</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>Nationality or Residing in Germany</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aesthetics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pattern</td>
<td>Overall existence of (any) pattern on at least one item of clothing</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botanical Pattern</td>
<td>“[account 6, image 1] features a short white skirt with a colourful tropical floral pattern”</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plaid (Checkered)</td>
<td>“[account 1, image 1] features a knee-length dark plaid skirt, resembling a kilt”</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vibrant Colours</td>
<td>e.g., yellows, reds, pinks, … (“artificial” and neon colours)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral/ Muted Colours</td>
<td>Includes dark or neutral colours, e.g., black, and dark blue; but also, naturally occurring colours such as browns</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Garments</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dress</td>
<td>“[account 7, image 3] features a short, tight-fitting grey dress”</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skirt</td>
<td>“[account 1, image 1] features a knee-length dark plaid skirt, resembling a kilt”</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pants</td>
<td>“[account 2, image 3] features yellow wide-leg pants with front pleats, so long they reach to the floor”</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pantyhose</td>
<td>for both functional or aesthetic reasons, sheer or coloured</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collared shirt</td>
<td>e.g., dress shirts and polo shirts</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turtleneck</td>
<td>“[account 4, image 1] features a dark red turtleneck layered underneath an oversized red sweatshirt”</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Examples</td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional Outerwear</td>
<td><em>Functional, worn on top of the outfit due to the climate, e.g., Coat, Jacket, ...</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decorative Outerwear</td>
<td><em>Decorative, as a part of the outfit, e.g., Blazer, cardigan, ...</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heeled Shoes</td>
<td><em>e.g., platform heels (6), stilettos (7), heeled boots (8), ...</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flat Shoes</td>
<td><em>e.g., sneakers (7), boots (11) and sandals (1)</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Accessories</td>
<td><em>General accessories, including those that are not separately listed below: sunglasses, gloves, and scarves.</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purse</td>
<td><em>“[account 8, image 1] features a small light pink purse with a button-tufting pattern featuring gold details (buttons), and a short handle”</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belt</td>
<td><em>Both functional and decorative</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headwear</td>
<td><em>Hats (functional or decorative) or other (traditional) head accessories e.g., turban</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Jewellery</td>
<td><em>General jewellery, across categories</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Necklace</td>
<td><em>“[account 2, image 1] features a short silver chain necklace”</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bracelet</td>
<td><em>“[account 10, image 1] features a turquoise pearl bracelet”</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earrings</td>
<td><em>“[account 5, image 1] features long, dangling red earrings resembling rose petals”</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ring</td>
<td><em>Both symbolic (wedding ring) and decorative</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beard</td>
<td><em>“[account 1, image 1] features a long grey beard”</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long hair</td>
<td><em>Hair on the head, at least shoulder length, can be natural or a wig, visible (not covered by a hat)</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eye Makeup</td>
<td><em>Including eyeshadow, eyeliner, and lashes, e.g., “[account 2, image 1]</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
features pink eyeshadow to match the colour of the dress”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lipstick</th>
<th>“[account 7, image 2] features a pink-ish red lipstick”</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nail Polish</td>
<td>“[account 7, image 2] features medium-length navy blue nails”</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Gender/ Identity Expression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tight Fitting</th>
<th>Tight silhouette emphasizing the shape of the body</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loose Fitting</td>
<td>Loose silhouette covering the shape of the body</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modest</td>
<td>More closed up/ covered, e.g., through the high neck, long sleeves, long bottoms, ...</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revealing</td>
<td>Emphasis on exposed physical features due to the silhouette of the garment, e.g., leg slits, chest/ cleavage, sheer fabric, ...</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculine</td>
<td>Overall appearance, based on traditional gender norms (literature), e.g., beards, loose fit, neutral/ dark colours, ...</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminine</td>
<td>Overall appearance, based on traditional gender norms (literature), e.g., dresses, skirts, floral patterns, high heels, ...</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Androgyny</td>
<td>No clear gender association to the overall outfit, based on traditional gender norms, e.g., “unisex fashion”, mixing of gendered elements</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>