

## ASSESSING THE PERCEPTION OF GENERATION Z TOWARDS GENDERLESS FASHION TO ACHIEVE SDG 05, GENDER EQUALITY

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** This study delves into Sustainable Development Goal 5 by analysing contemporary gender roles from the viewpoint of Gen Z's perceptions of genderless fashion. Fashion is a powerful tool that challenges conventions amidst societal shifts. SDG 5, focusing on gender equality, transcends legal frameworks, embracing cultural changes. As change agents, youth express unique perspectives on genderless fashion, reflecting evolving norms. The investigation explores how fashion challenges gender conventions, with youth contributing to perceiving genderless fashion, embodying changing cultural standards and fashion trends.

**Methodology:** Quantitative and qualitative research methods are utilised to gather, sort, and analyse data. The study was conducted based on consumers in the Colombo district by sending 300 online questionnaires, receiving 206 completed questionnaires, and conducting structured interviews with 9 trend-following consumers and 8 online store owners.

**Findings:** Findings showed the Sri Lankan young fashion consumer group's open-mindedness and interest in trying new unconventional trends. Understanding their perspectives unveils how fashion challenges ingrained gender preconceptions, acting as a catalyst for societal change.

**Implications:** The findings have identified the opportunities to navigate the dynamic crossroads of fashion, identity, and equality locally.

**Theoretical Contribution:** The unique blend of cultural and religious subtleties, unravelling acceptance of genderless fashion, and the ways of fostering SGD 05 are revealed in this study.

**Originality:** This is the first study investigating Generation Z's perception of genderless fashion to achieve SDG 05, gender equality in the local context. Fashion designers and policymakers will benefit from this study.

**Keywords:** genderless fashion, consumer perception, Z generation, sustainable goals, gender equality, culture

### 1. Introduction

The fashion outlook has shifted over history, being considered an aesthetic rather than a commercial product. As people become comfortable with self-expression, the need to limit fashion on gender boundaries is unimportant. Nowadays, individuals choose the products and brands by which they can define their self-perception

(Szczepaniak, 2015). This concept has moved into fashion and is known as the future of style because this statement is based on the research on global youth preference for gender-neutral fashion. (Herrmann, 2022; Segalov, 2020). However, research and investigations on this topic in the Sri Lankan fashion market are rare as opposed to how loved this trend is worldwide. Therefore, it is necessary to understand how much interest this global trend receives locally, more importantly from young consumers.

## 2. Literature Review

Fashion is a form of self-expression that stems from the basic human need for clothing. According to Akdemir (2018) and Edwards (2017), one's fashion symbolizes gender and other factors. In the past, garments preeminently signified social class. The higher one's social status, the more elaborate the outfits would become. During British King Charles I's reign, European aristocrats wore fancy garments. This included rich fabrics, decorated shoes, hats, and wigs regardless of gender (Peretz, 1994). Men and women wore lace as a fashionable accessory and wealth symbol (Hennessy, 2012). In the opinion of Arvanitidou (2013), fashion was not always stigmatized by gender. Until the 18th century, no strongly notable variations existed in how men and women dressed; both wore lengthy ornamented robes (Fig.1).



**Figure 1:** European noblewoman with her children all wearing similar clothing regardless of gender

(C. 1604-05)

<https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1600-1609/>

### Women's Independence and Fashion

Since 1850, trends of women's independence had begun to evolve in the United States, which allowed them to wear pants amidst criticism. Since 1920, pants for women started to be tolerated in sports and some limited activities such as cycling and horse riding (Sawyer, 1987). The feminine tuxedo by designer Yves Saint Laurent, made in 1966, gained popularity. Cinema stars like Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and Katharine Hepburn (Fig.2) wore trousers and suits. Still, they were protected by Hollywood glamour, and their trousers added an aura of mystery and exoticism to their style (Arnold, 2001).

### Gender Ambiguity and Androgynous Fashion

Hippie and Raver subculture fashion led a movement that attempted to mask gender distinctions by portraying equality for all and disguising sex identification. This helped mask gender distinctions by displaying equality for all and hiding sex identification. With the rise of gender ambiguity, Unisex and Androgynous fashion concepts

appeared. Both unisex and androgynous styles merge male and female bodies. Still, the clothes were predominantly masculine and focused on slender bodies. The issue with this is that denying the existence of different sexualities and body sizes disregards diversity and, therefore, ultimately ends in individual rights neglect (Arnold, 2001; Arvanitidou, 2013; Schor, 1987).



**Figure 2:** Actress Katharine Hepburn in a pantsuit, 1952

<https://fashionista.com/2021/01/katharine-hepburn-casual-pant-suits>

### **Genderless, Gender Neutral, and Gender-Free**

Genderless apparel rejects traditional gender conventions and implies inclusivity (Anyanwu, 2021). The term "Genderless" is also closely knitted to terms "agender," "gender fluidity," "gender neutral" (**Fig.3**), "gender diversity," and "gender-free" (**Fig.3**), all of which allude to the state of not having a definite gender identification. (Kim et al., 2022). The gender-neutral concept has evolved in the new millennium. Non-binary models appear more on the runways and in fashion campaigns, and manufacturers sell genderless items to promote inclusivity and variety (Menkes, 2018; Herrmann, 2022).



**Figure 3:** Gender-neutral, Gender-Free clothing

<https://www.pacificplace.com.hk/en/entertainment/the-stylesheet/genderless-fashion-q2-2022>

### **A Genderless Outlook on Fashion**

The visual codes of fashion indicate social, sexual, or cultural messages purposefully or unwittingly (Gligorovska, 2011). Many people are happy that the clothing they choose to wear has a specific meaning. Some of them base their decisions about what to buy and wear on the meanings they believe these clothing to have (Barnard, 2002). The queer community has been a leading part of the fashion evolution, proudly expressing themselves despite social discrimination. They use fashion as a prominent method to convey their disregard for gender boundaries (Vänskä, 2014). Some blend styles that integrate masculinity, femininity, and androgyny fluidly (Reddy-Best & Goodin, 2020). When clothing items have different meanings, consumers combine brands to create unique looks (Preiholt, 2012). According to trend followers, genderless fashion allows the wearer to be individual and experimental, attracting consumer interest. This will enable people to explore their authentic selves, leading to individuality and creativity in their everyday work. (Gucci, 2019)

### **Genderless Fashion and Sustainability**

Genderless fashion has several aspects that align with sustainability. Gender-neutral fashion lines can reduce the amount of clothing produced separately for menswear and womenswear. It is also wearable by anyone regardless of gender without diminishing the stylish look, allowing space for self-expression and bringing a sense of gender equity. This idea is being adopted by brands like Gucci MX, Beyoncé's Ivy Park x Adidas collection, converse, etc (SynZenBe, 2021). Genderless fashion is also aligned with simplicity and quality. Therefore, the clothes are produced in ways that allow them to last longer. Many companies extend their dedication to environmentally friendly methods into their accessory lines, such as vegan bags. The notion of "buying fewer items but making thoughtful choices" aligns with sustainable fashion ideas. This also supports sustainability (Niche, 2023). Since less production of clothes leads to reduced waste, gender-neutral fashion can be helpful to maintain sustainability, allow the wearer to be comfortable in their skin, and maintain gender equity by reducing gender binary barriers.

### **Generation Z and the genderless approach**

The new consumer generation is leaning towards genderless fashion. Gentina (2022) states that Generation Z is more forward-thinking than previous generations. The industry is crossing gender lines to cater to this audience. Average product counts marketed as unisex or genderless have grown 500% in the USA and 325% in Europe since September 2020 (Herrmann, 2022). The genderless fashion consumer also prefers adding different elements to their personal looks. Colours like pink, black, white, and grey are loved. They favor dark and vibrant colors (Kim et al., 2022). According to Reddy-Best & Goodin (2020), consumers prefer to shop at a store that doesn't differentiate by gender. They would feel less anxious about shopping and benefit from a non-gendered store.

### **Genderless Fashion in Sri Lanka**

The genderless fashion trend suggests multiple socioeconomic types and a wide range of dress options for each form of society. However, conservative cultures focus on traditionalism, whereas members of liberal society are accepting of change (Kim et al., 2022). Communities with strict cultures reject genderless fashion, deeming it unsuitable owing to misconceptions about the concept (Ranathunga & Uralagamage, 2019) Sri Lanka is among these communities as well. However, the local fashion sector is expanding around Colombo and its suburbs (Khurana, 2015).

Although the idea is not well-established, the country has developed its own endogenous fashion consumer market. Many local designers are creating apparel in a genderless style. Figure 8 depicts a collection by a local brand where the garments have no specific masculine or feminine qualities. The models themselves do not show strongly gendered auras along with the styling. Figures 9 and 10 show the same local designer garment worn by masculine-presenting and feminine-presenting models, respectively. The garment does not look gender specific and does not enhance or reduce the masculinity or femininity of the models. It is a beautiful and stylish garment on both of them nonetheless. In Sri Lanka, women are more likely to be accepted for wearing genderless attire than men because men wearing feminine silhouettes are socially regarded as sacrilegious or derogatory. However,

due to the adaptation of Western culture, the younger generation may accept it. (Ranathunga & Uralagamage, 2019)



**Figure 4**

Fashion collection by Local Brand E

<https://www.life.lk/article/fa>



**Figure 5**

One shoulder top worn by a masculine presenting model from local brand

<https://www.shoppr.lk/new/7650-onali-silva-one-shoulder-top->

### **Purpose and Objective of the Study**

This study aims to understand the perception of Sri Lankan youth towards genderless fashion.

The study's objectives are

- To identify the interest levels of the Sri Lankan youth generation towards genderless fashion
- To understand the attitude of the Sri Lankan youth generation toward this trend.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This study employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches. A quantitative approach was chosen since statistical data collection and analysis were required to increase accuracy (Goertzen, 2017). A qualitative approach was chosen since the study variables require thorough investigation (Creswell, 1998) Primary and secondary sources were used to compile this report. Market research and structured interviews were done on eight Sri Lankan clothing brands to observe the characteristics of local Genderless fashion trends (**Appendix 2**). An online questionnaire was distributed to a random sample of 300 people between the ages of 18 and 35 who reside in Greater Colombo and Suburban areas; this sample was chosen because Colombo district citizens are more exposed to fashion due to the commercial capital's concentration of retail clothing stores.

206 out of 300 people responded to the questionnaire.

The questionnaire had four stages. The first stage consisted of asking for consent from the consumer due to the possibly controversial research topic. The second stage had questions about consumer style and impression of genderless fashion. The 3rd stage started by briefly describing the genderless fashion concept and continued by

asking for their thoughts on following it. Only the respondents who currently follow the trend proceeded to the 4th stage, which consisted of their inspiration for following the concept and opinions on the current local trend establishment level. The respondents who followed the trend were contacted to participate in an interview on their experience related to genderless fashion. The interviews were done with nine people who agreed to participate through phone calls, and the responses were recorded and organized for the data analysis stage (**Appendix 2**).

Secondary sources were used to conduct a thorough literature evaluation of the research topic. Online market research was conducted on Sri Lankan clothing brands related to genderless fashion. Numerous research articles, published reports, scholarly reviewed journals, books, online news articles, and social media posts were used to gather information. As this study focuses on one of the most relevant fashion trends in the world, the data collected had to be acquired from updated sources. The results of the questionnaire were assessed concerning the found literature, allowing for the progress of a thorough analysis.

**Table 1: Product categories and features of selected local Genderless fashion brands**

| Product category   | Unique features  |
|--|--|
| <b>Brand A</b><br>Occasional wear, Resort wear, Jacket, jewellery        | Geometric prints, vibrant colours, comfortable material, Fringe, shoulder padding, Beads, eye-like shapes  |
| <b>Brand B</b><br>Top, Shrug cardigan, Bralette, Vest, sweater, Crop top | Floral motif, pastel colours, see-through knit   |
| <b>Brand C</b><br>Blazer, Shrug cardigan, Skirt                          | Vibrant colours, gold floral embroidery, stripes, wrap-around features   |
| <b>Brand D</b><br>Tank top, Shirt, Trousers, Vest, Shorts, Suit          | Upcycled, wool Knit, dégradé, neutral and vibrant colours, embroidery, multi- tone colour, crinkled, jacquard  |
| <b>Brand E</b><br>Dress, Shirt, Footwear, Bags                           | Upcycled, nature based colour tones and prints, simple silhouettes, geometric prints, multi functional, reversible, adjustable   |
| <b>Brand F</b><br>Shirt, Dress, jacket                                   | Sheer material, floral motif, dark neutral colours, beadwork, upcycled, Embroidery, zipper   |
| <b>Brand G</b><br>Sarong, Top, Shirt, Jacket                             | White, Dark and vibrant colours, waist cord, pockets, satin material, decorative buttons, high neck button collars, Long silhouette, traditional design motif embroidery and print |
| <b>Brand H</b><br>Dress, Saree, Jumpsuit, Shirt, Blazer                  | Batik design, pastel/dark/ vibrant colours, beadwork   |

#### 4. Data Analysis

After the market research and interviews on eight Sri Lankan design brands that support genderless fashion, the following information in Table1 and Table 2 was compiled.

**Table 2: Characteristics of selected local Genderless fashion**

|  |
|--|
| Characteristics  |
| <b>Clothing type</b><br>shirts, outer layers, loose pants, tank tops, shorts, jumpsuits  |
| <b>Silhouette type</b><br>Loose fitted, shape that neither enhance nor diminish body shape, skin exposure  |
| <b>Fabric type</b><br>Sheer, knitted, cotton mixed, crochet  |
| <b>Prints and Embellishments</b><br>Screen printing, Knit embellishments, beads, batik, fabric layers, ruffles, fringe, embroidery, bows, unfinished knit ends |
| <b>Colours</b><br>Bold, vibrant, metallic, and black with few pastel colours   |
| <b>Accessories</b><br>Earrings, necklaces, tying strings   |
| <b>Styling</b><br>Vibrant makeup   |

The clothing brands that followed genderless fashion did not have a specific clothing style frame. Still, the overall unisex garments by the Sri Lankan brands are eccentric and expressive. The clothes aren't specified as unisex but can be adapted into that style.

There were 15 questions in the questionnaire (**Appendix 1**) regarding the consumer perception of Genderless fashion. The significant findings of the research are explained below:

Out of the participants, 48.5% were in the age group 18-25 years, while 41.3% were in the age group 26-30 years. 10.2% of the participants were above 30 years old. 51.5% of the participants were female and 46.6% were male. 3% of the participants identified as non-binary, and only one respondent preferred not to state their gender. The majority of the respondents preferred casual style, while some respondents preferred chic and bold fashion styles. A minority of 1.5% of respondents preferred a sporty look. As for fashion inspirations, 81.1% of respondents were influenced by their friends and peers' style choices, and social media and influencers influenced 77.7%. Celebrities, popular culture, and online reviews/ fashion blogs inspired an average number of respondents. A small number of 25.2% of respondents were inspired by the style choices of their family members. Of the participants, 44.2% preferred medium-fit silhouettes, while 32.5% chose baggy/loose-fit silhouettes. 23.3% of the participants

preferred tight-fitting silhouettes. According to the data, a majority of 56.3% of total participants preferred dark neutral clothing, while a minority of 30.6% chose warm coloured clothing. An average number of respondents selected cool, light neutral, and pastel-coloured clothing. Of the respondents, 92.7% of the consumers value comfort, while 85.4% value quality. 85% and 80.6% of the respondents look for fashionable quality and colour respectively. A close percentage of 71.8% and 71.4% of consumers check for the material and practicality of the garment in that order. 67% of the respondents claim to seek the durability of the garments they purchase.

58.7% of the consumers have heard of “genderless fashion” and claim to know the meaning. 40.3% of the consumers have heard the term before yet are unfamiliar with the meaning. Only 1% of the consumers were unfamiliar with the term itself. 67.5% of the consumers responded with “Unisex fashion,” while 47.1% responded with ‘Styling outfits regardless of gender’ when asked what “genderless fashion” means. 42.2% of consumers responded, “Wearing clothes traditionally worn by different genders.” Of the respondents, 91.7% picked T-shirts, while 70.9% chose Hoodies when asked to select clothing that struck as ‘genderless. Button-up shirts and Jeans were chosen by 51.9% and 56.3% of the respondents, respectively. Only 39.8% of the respondents picked Blazers. Figure 26 illustrates the opinions on Genderless fashion being a good concept.

97.1% of the questionnaire respondents believe ‘genderless fashion’ is a good concept, while only 2.9% disagree. 16.5% of the respondents are currently following the concept. 59.7% are not currently pursuing the idea but are willing to do so in the future. 23.8% also do not now follow the concept and are uninterested in following the idea in the future. Responses of those currently following the genderless fashion concept were studied next. 88.2% of the respondents were influenced by popular culture, and 79.4% by celebrities. Online reviews/blogs and social media/influencers inspired 73.5% and 58.8% of the respondents, respectively. Their friends and peers encouraged 29.4% of the respondents. Their family members inspired a small number of respondents, 5.9%. 52.9% of the consumers who responded to this questionnaire believe that the genderless fashion trend is not well-established in Sri Lanka. In comparison, 47.1% believe the trend is only established within a certain community. None of the respondents believe the country's genderless fashion trend is well-established. On a scale of 5, where the lowest end indicates ‘not open at all,’ and the highest end indicates ‘very open,’ 41.2% of the respondents picked 2, and 38.2% picked 3. Numbers 1 and 4 were picked by 5.9% and 11.8% of respondents.

According to the interviews with Followers of Genderless fashion (**Appendix 2**), They were mostly inspired by social media, pop culture, celebrities, fashion articles, and blogs to follow this trend. Many interviewees prefer oversized, bright-colored garments along with matching accessories. Most respondents feel they can be themselves after following the trend and think it was a freeing experience. Every respondent believes the current opinion about genderless fashion in the country is mostly negative. According to them, this is the lack of awareness of the trend. Even the people closest to them mostly had neutral to negative opinions until they understood the interviewee's point of view. Some interviewees had a negative first impression of the trend until they understood it. This confirms the questionnaire results since many participants were unaware of the trend yet grew to accept it after learning more about it. One respondent said that if given more awareness opportunities to the general public, would grow more open-minded and accepting. All the respondents who follow the trend keep up with the global trends and are very open-minded.

## **Results**

This study suggests that genderless fashion is above average among young Sri Lankan consumers. However, many consumers are unfamiliar with its meaning and mistakenly believe that wearing clothing of other genders or unisex fashion constitutes genderless fashion. They thought the trend was good and expressed interest in following it after learning its meaning through the questionnaire. The interviews showed that many people initially give a



neutral to negative response due to misunderstanding the trend. This makes it clear that the unawareness of the trend is holding consumers back from following it. The study also helped discover local Genderless fashion followers. They became interested in the trend through popular culture, online reviews, fashion blogs, and celebrities.

The genderless fashion trend is currently not well-established in the country. Some questionnaire respondents believe the trend is established within a small community only. These trend followers think that the general youth of the country are open to genderless fashion only to a moderate extent. It supports similar research findings that gender-neutral fashion exists in Sri Lanka without politically correct term usage. It has become a restriction, particularly among men, who believe the style is unsuitable, as the nation has a highly cherished culture and little exposure to gender expressions. (Ranathunga & Uralagamage, 2019)

Many genderless fashion followers receive support from their peers after understanding the thoughts behind following this trend. Multiple interviewees explained how they feel more like themselves and free due to this trend, letting them express their true inner selves boundlessly. It is a good idea to give knowledge to the consumer on this concept should it spread further in the Colombo district area. This may differ in the other provinces as their opinions on genderless fashion may vary, and there is no conclusive way to find out other than through further research.

## **5. Conclusion**

Genderless Fashion is a concept where people dress in any garment they prefer without regard for the socially constructed gender norms regardless of gender and sexual orientation. A person who follows this concept would wear outfits that aren't labelled as "masculine" or "feminine" but rather free from limits. It is a movement built into what it is today, following much history and evolution. Pioneers of this movement who fought against gender stereotypes have faced much criticism from society's less open-minded, conventional thinkers.

Genderless Fashion has been establishing itself on a large scale in the fashion industry as a popular global trend. It is gaining support from young consumers worldwide. But this concept goes against old-fashioned ideals and is bound to face criticism and hostile reactions in a country as conservative as Sri Lanka. But the younger generation of the country is comparatively more open-minded. This study revealed a young Sri Lankan consumer group that follows the genderless fashion trend. Those who don't follow the concept show willingness to do so in the future upon learning its meaning. This positive outcome shows that more consumers will be interested in the trend after increased awareness.

This research was conducted in the Colombo district, including the city and the suburbs. The situation in other parts of the country might be different. This study will be more effective with follow-ups considering other areas of the country and age groups. More in-depth research on consumer thoughts and opinions on the trend will be helpful for further study.

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## Appendix - 1

### QUESTIONNAIRE

This survey includes questions regarding one's gender and preferences. If you would like to continue, please select "I agree".

- I agree
- I disagree

[Continue to the questionnaire upon getting consent]

What is your age?

- 18-25
- 26-30

- Older than 30

What gender do you identify as?

- Female
- Male
- Non-Binary
- Other
- Rather not Say

How would you describe your fashion style?

- Casual (Tshirts, Jeans, simple shirts/blouses etc)
- Chic (Dress Shirts, Tailored pants, Jackets etc)
- Bold (Bright garments with bright colours and prints etc)
- Sporty (Hoodies, Tracksuits/Pants, Synthetic/Wet look t shirts etc)
- Other

What factors do you believe inspires your personal style?

- Social Media and influencers
- Friends and Peers' style choices
- Family members' style choices
- Celebrities
- Popular Culture (Movies, Television Shows, Music etc)
- Online Reviews/ Fashion blogs
- Other

What type of silhouette do you prefer to wear?

- Baggy/Loose fitting
- Medium fit
- Tight fitting

What kind of colours do you prefer in clothing?

- Dark neutral
- Light
- Warm
- Cool
- Pastel
- Other

When you buy clothes, what do you look for other than the price?

- Colour
- Comfort
- Quality
- Material
- Durability
- Fashionable/Trendy quality

- Practicality
- Other

Have you heard of the term "Genderless fashion" before?

- Yes
- Yes, but I'm unfamiliar with the meaning
- No

When you hear the term genderless fashion, what comes to mind? (checkbox selection)

- Unisex fashion concept
- Styling outfits regardless of gender
- Wearing clothes traditionally worn by different gender
- Other

What kind of clothes strike you as genderless?

- Button-Up shirts
- Blazer
- Hoodie
- T-shirt
- Jeans
- Other

Genderless Fashion is a concept where people dress in any garment they would prefer without regard for the socially constructed gender norms regardless of their gender and sexual orientation. A person who follows this concept would wear outfits that aren't labelled as "masculine" or "feminine" but rather free from limits.

Do you think genderless fashion is a good concept?

- Yes
- No

What are your thoughts on following the Genderless Fashion concept?

- I am currently Following the concept
- I am not currently following the concept, but I would like to do so in the future
- I am not currently following the concept and I would prefer not to do so in the future

If the first answer is selected, continue to the next section. Otherwise end the questionnaire.

What factors inspired you to follow a genderless style?

- Social Media and influencers
- Friends and Peers' style choices
- Family members' style choices
- Celebrities
- Popular Culture (Movies, Television Shows, Music etc)
- Online Reviews/ Fashion blogs
- Other

What are your thoughts on the existing genderless fashion trend in Sri Lanka?

- Very well established trend
- Established within a certain community only
- Not much established
- Other

On a scale of 5, how much do you think the current Sri Lankan youth is open to a concept which discusses fashion that disregards one's gender?

1-(not open at all)

5-(Very open)

## **Appendix - 2**

### **Interview questions with online store owners**

- What product categories are available in your brand?
- What kind of silhouette types are available in your brand?
- What type of fabrics does your brand have used to develop the products?
- What kind of colours are predominantly used in your brand?
- What are the unique features available in your brand?(Construction, colours, embellishments, silhouettes, accessories and styling etc.)

### **Interview questions with genderless fashion followers**

- How do you define genderless fashion?
- How did you learn about genderless fashion?
- What was your initial impression on genderless fashion?
- What factor(s) influenced/inspired you to follow genderless fashion?
- What kind of items of clothing do you feel like wearing when following genderless fashion?
- What is your current opinion on genderless fashion?
- What did you feel after following the genderless fashion trend?
- What kind of response did you receive from your peers/people around you when you started following genderless fashion?
- What is your opinion on genderless fashion awareness in Sri Lanka?
- Do you know other people besides you who follow genderless fashion?