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Beyond the Binary: An Exploration of the Implications of Gender Binaries in Fashion and Choice
Taylor Hardin
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There is a pretty good chance that everyone reading this paper will have one thing in common: they are wearing clothes. Clothing serves a greater purpose than simply avoiding public nudity; clothing can say a lot about a person, and people can use their clothing to say a lot about themselves. But, what happens when someone’s choice in clothing tells a story that others do not want to hear, cannot understand, or refuse to respect? What if the ways in which a person chooses to dress contradict the ways in which they are perceived by others? In instances such as these, a person may feel that their gender identity is invalidated, simply because of the clothes they wear. Although we may not think about it, our clothing choices, and perceptions of others based on their clothing choices, are heavily influenced by internalized gender binaries perpetuated by gender norms. Gender binaries, gender norms, and gendered stereotypes can create expectations which govern people’s fashion choices. This can be especially harmful for those whose fashion choices do not fit into the stereotypical categories of “boy” or “girl,” “man” or “woman.” Because of laws which mandate clothing in the United States, everyone is subject to the harmful effects of gender binaries, norms, and stereotypes influencing their choices in fashion. Essentially, people do not have the freedom to choose how they want to dress independently of the influences of gender norms and gender binaries. Fashion freedom can be taken away as soon as someone walks into a gendered clothing store, decides to wear something which doesn’t quite align with outside perceptions of their gender identity, or dresses their daughter in blue and orange and lets their son wear a dress. This problem, this lack of autonomy, affects us all and, unless a change is made, it will continue to affect future generations’ relationship with clothing, choice, and gender.

There is a limited quantity of scholarship interrogating the topic of choice and gender binaries, but, nonetheless, pre-existing scholarship can help us understand the implications of gender binaries on choice. Paoletti (1949/2012) defines gender as “cultural differences between men and women, based on...biological differences...” (p. 1). Gender shapes the ways in which people are perceived by others. This is important to understand because the subconscious attribution of gender norms to people creates expectations surrounding the ways in which
different people should dress based on their gender. Gender norms are traditional roles associated with people based on their gender identity or society's perception of their gender identity. For instance, whenever you see a woman, you may subconsciously attribute her with cultural and societal gender norms for women; the same goes for men, nonbinary, and gender-queer people. Gender is directly correlated with fashion because clothing is used as the outward expression of one’s identity. If you saw that same woman wearing a tuxedo, you might attribute her with masculinity and label her as gender-queer or nonbinary because the idea of a woman in a tuxedo goes against traditional gender norms. As a result, the woman could be negatively affected by your projecting your ideas of gender norms onto her. For many people, like this imaginary woman, gender identity is heavily expressed through their clothing choices and interactions with clothing, dress, and fashion in general. Moreover, someone’s relationship with clothing may or may not align with their gender norms. However, because gender norms have helped create the idea that different genders should have their own relationship with fashion, gender binaries are imposed on fashion. Gender binaries refer to the stigma surrounding the idea that there are only two genders (biological male and female) which group people's behavior into traditional male/female cultural, traditional roles (Eisend & Rößner, 2022). Not all people identify as either male or female, and not all people dress within the boundaries of gender norms. Therefore, my work aims to bridge the gap between the pre-existing literature and findings related to gendered clothing in order to see where choice fits into the relationship between clothing and gender norms.

Understanding the definition of gender, gender norms, fashion, etc. are important to the understanding of this paper as a whole; therefore, a glossary is provided following the conclusion of this paper. These definitions help the reader understand my position on the topic of gendered fashion and my central argument which is that people living in the United States do not have complete autonomy over their clothing choices. I attest that this is largely because of the ways in which gender binaries shape the perception, production, and consumption of fashion in the United States. However, because of this topic being under researched, I advise further reading from scholars I have not included in this paper.

Historically, clothing trends have been shaped by the gendered perception of fashion, clothing, and dress. This can be seen when looking at the history of children’s clothing. This might sound strange, but, you think about it, doesn’t children’s fashion always try to imitate adult
fashion? According to Paoletti, this is exactly what happened in the late 1880s. By looking into the history of gendered fashion as it moved from Europe to the United States through the years 1880-2011, Paoletti (1949/2012) found that children’s clothing served primarily in transitioning more indifferent ideas about clothing to very opinionated, gendered ideas about clothing. Through her investigation, Paoletti (1987), found that, although we may think of clothing, especially children’s clothing, as customarily, historically, and traditionally, gendered this is not entirely the case. In the past, children were not subject to the gender roles they are today, and the majority were dressed in long, white, genderless dresses from birth until he or she could walk (Paoletti, 1987). These dresses were then replaced with shorter, looser dresses until the ages 2-3 when they were replaced with another dress or suits with short skirts until the child turned 6 (Paoletti, 1987). Around age 6 is when clothing began to differ between boys and girls, but all children’s dress from that time period would be associated with femininity and women’s wear today. In fact, children’s clothing did not start becoming gendered until the 1920s, despite the “rules” which govern adult fashion having been around and observed since the mid-1800s (Paoletti, 1987). There is not a known reason for the shift, but historical events such as the women’s liberation movement and the gay rights movement as well as political affiliations contributed to the movement towards gendered children’s clothing (Paoletti, 1949/2012). I hypothesize that these historical events led to a push for reiteration of gender norms in more conservative spaces, but more research is needed to fully understand why children’s clothing became gendered.

Because of the change during the 19th century in which children’s clothing became gendered, and consequently reflective of adult dress, the days where babies are all dressed the same, regardless of their sex, are largely in the past (Paoletti 1949/2012). The implications of this cultural shift, from genderless to gendered children’s clothing affected all of fashion from the 1920s on because children began being raised in households where men and women dressed differently and distinctively; child’s clothing mimicked this change. As a result, children grew up with gendered clothing ideals subconsciously ingrained in their minds, and generations after them have continued to dress largely based on their respective gender norms (Paoletti, 1949/2012). The effects of this can be seen in the fashion industry today (think of onesies which read “Daddy’s Girl” or “Momma’s Boy” (Paoletti, 1949/2012) and help explain the collective loss of autonomy for our fashion choices. What is reiterated by the media, pushed by companies,
and perpetuated by advertisement becomes “normal” to us. In the case of clothing, gendered clothing has become the norm and continues dominating the fashion industry today.

Another aspect of fashion, color, plays into the gender binaries which shape perceptions of fashion and limit fashion freedom, because colors themselves have become gendered. For example, many people associate the color pink with girls and/or femininity and the color blue with boys and/or masculinity (Hurlbert & Ling, 2007). This is due to historical ideas about gendered color dating back to Nazi Germany which pushed the association of pink with femininity in the 1930s (Paoletti & Kregloh, 1989). Additionally, post WWII, men’s uniforms were almost exclusively blue. Thus, blue became associated with masculinity and, from the 1940s onward, pink and blue set the standard for gendered colors (Frassanito & Pettorini, 2008). Despite the idea that there are sex differences between color preferences is debunked by a survey conducted by Hurlbert & Ling (2007) who found that the correlation between sexes and color preference is not strong at all. Yet, largely because of gender norms, the idea that color can be gendered remains. The idea of gendered color is reiterated in our society by the fashion industry who uses gender norms to its advantage.

The fashion industry seeks to use gendered colors to appeal to different types of people, betting on the fact that girls and women will buy more colorful, smaller, tighter clothing, and boys and men will buy baggier, more neutral clothing. Additionally, personal experience shows that the children’s sections of clothing stores are heavily gendered. Oftentimes, the “girl’s” clothing section contains “feminine” colors such as pink and purple while the “boy’s” section contains “masculine” colors such as blue, red, and green. This not only limits the fashion freedom from parents or children who might not want to adhere to gendered fashion norms, but it contributes to gender stereotyping and the subconscious gendering of fashion in people’s minds.

For example, a mother may struggle to decide whether to let her daughter wear looser, more comfortable, and more modest “boy’s” clothing or adhere to gender norms and dress her daughter in smaller, tighter, uncomfortable “girl’s” clothing to avoid questioning, teasing, and bullying at school. In an effort to spare her daughter from inappropriate questions about her gender identity, the mother subconsciously reinforces gender norms, and her daughter learns that clothing choices need to be made with one’s gender identity in mind. In situations such as these, whenever we adhere to fashion norms, specifically gendered ones, we are reiterating the stereotypes which perpetuate gender norms in fashion for generations to come.
The children’s section of clothing stores isn’t the only place where gendered clothing shows up. In almost every department or retail store I have been in, all of the clothing being sold is marketed towards a specific gender. Some stores such as Macy’s even have entire floors dedicated to “men’s” and “women’s” clothing. Because my gender identity and biological sex both align, I am privileged enough to feel comfortable shopping in the ‘Women’s Clothing’ section at pretty much any store. Not everyone shares this privilege, though, and some people may feel very uncomfortable shopping in gendered clothing sections. Some feel uncomfortable shopping for the clothing itself if the clothes they like defy the norms of their gender identity. However, it isn’t always the gendering of the clothing store which creates discomfort but the ways in which gender norms dictate people’s shopping habits.

Reilly & Barry (2020) argue that gender expression and fashion go hand-in-hand. This translates into gendered relationships with fashion between women, men, and everyone inbetween. Gupta & Gentry (2016) add to this by offering the idea that hegemonic gender norms often dictate the ways in which men and women shop for clothing and participate in fashion trends. This means that women, who are seen as more inclined to shop for and be interested in clothing, are given the responsibility to purchase clothing for their families. Men, on the otherhand, are not. Thus, gender norms have a major influence on people’s relationship with fashion, and this can cause harm for people who want to participate in fashion but lack the freedom to do so without pushback. Paoletti (1949/2012), elaborates on this by stating that, “Fashion participation is very much a matter of gender. [Typically], women are expected to be aware of fashion, and they buy most of the clothing, not only for themselves but also for men and children” (p. 9). The gender binaries which associate women and the production and consumption of clothing have strengthened this stigma and “…solidified the “natural” conclusion that clothing and fashion [are] feminine…” (Reilly & Barry, 2020, pp. 6-7). In a similar manner, traditional masculinity governs the ways in which men, as well as women, interact with fashion. According to findings from a survey looking at the “…situational construction of male and female identities...when shopping for fashion products...,” (Gupta & Gentry, 2016), gender norms would suggest that men are supposed to have minimum, urgent interaction with fashion (Gupta & Gentry, 2016). According to Gupta & Gentry (2016), “by adopting...urgent buying behaviors, men are able to complete the shopping process in the shortest possible time...and communicate that they are neither too careful nor sloppy about their appearance.” Therefore, the idea of traditional masculinity is maintained and the individual is not perceived to make fashion
choices in the same way a woman would (Gupta & Gentry, 2016). I believe that the work of both Paoletti (1949/2012) and Gupta & Gentry (2016) come together to emphasize the impact that gender binaries have had on people’s relationship with fashion. It can be difficult to go against these gendered expectations and make fashion choices which go against the norm whenever your gender identity could be questioned. Sometimes, the safer option is to preserve your gender identity and succumb to a more limited choice in clothing.

Seeing that the shopping experience in and of itself is a gendered experience and that colors can be a contributing factor towards gendered fashion, it's not surprising that the ways in which people choose to wear their clothing is also a gendered experience. Unfortunately, it’s not uncommon to have your gender identity questioned when the clothes you wear do not fit the societal expectations placed on the biological sexes. Instead of taking the time to get to know someone or asking someone their preferred pronouns, assumptions are made by internal biases largely determined by how someone chooses to present themself through dress. According to Reilly & Barry (2020), this is “[b]ecause dress is the most visible tool to validate the male/female and masculine/feminine binary” (p. 11). Despite all of this, I believe that what has been socially constructed can be reformed. So, I agree with the authors when they state that dress can be used as “... the perfect tool to disrupt and transform it” (Reilly & Barry, 2020, p. 11).

If dress can be used to create harmful, constrictive, gender binaries in fashion, why can’t it be used to oppose them? In order for fashion to become a weapon against the implications of gendered fashion, people must be made aware of their lack of fashion freedom. They must know that the lack of autonomy in our clothing choices are a result of subconscious gendering of fashion in our minds. A transformation and disruption are needed, but gendered fashion has deep, centuries long roots which won’t give easily. If a change is to be made, it must be made through collective action. In order to regain control over our fashion freedom, we must begin to un-gender fashion. This can be done by advocating to rid the fashion industry of the gender binaries which place barriers on people’s fashion freedom. Advocation can happen through social media outreach, boycotting gendered fashion brands, or even educating those around you about the negative effects of gender binaries on fashion. No matter how you identify, everyone deserves to have the freedom to choose how to express themselves through clothing. If we work together, we can create a world in which everyone can wear what they want without having to adhere to gender norms or navigate gender binaries. Then, we will truly have fashion freedom in the United States.
Glossary

Adult/Adulthood- for the purposes of this paper—adulthood refers to ages 18+.

Children/Childhood- for the purposes of this paper—childhood refers to ages 0-7. Fashion- for the purposes of this paper—fashion refers to the outward expression of one’s identity, beliefs, and values though clothing.

Gender- “cultural differences between men and women, based on the biological difference between men and women” (Paoletti, 1949/2012, p. 1); “…distinctions in role, appearance, and behavior that are cultural in origin, but stemming from an individual’s sex (masculinity and femininity)” (Paoletti 1949/2012, p. 1).

Gender Binaries- for the purposes of this paper—gender binaries refer to the stigma surrounding the idea that there are only two genders (biological male and female) which group people’s behavior into traditional male/female cultural, traditional roles (Eisend & Rößner, 2022).

Gendered Clothing- clothing which fits into gender binaries; clothing designed or marketed to fit into categories of boy, girl, man, or woman.

Gender Norms- for the purposes of this paper—gender norms refer to the traditional roles associated with people based on their gender or society’s perception of their gender.

Gender Stereotypes- cultural assumptions about a person based on gender norms and the gender binary; assumptions based on assumed roles of masculine and feminine people which align with their biological sex.

Sex- “…biological...[male, female]” (Paoletti, 1949/2012, p.1)
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