



## **AN INVESTIGATIVE STUDY OF THE ANDROGYNOUS FASHION CONCEPT AND ITS IMPACT ON THE SRI LANKAN FASHION MARKET**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Androgynous fashion is a concept prevailing among gender stereotypes by combining masculine and feminine identity together as a fusion. With the acceptance of gender expressions, postmodern western cultures are likely to show flexibility towards androgyny. The concept has been there since the 1920's and has emerged occasionally throughout the history of fashion. Recently, the trend has taken over the world fashion industry by making fashion genderless. This present research was aimed to investigate the androgynous fashion concept and find out the possibility to create a market segment in Sri Lanka. Information from primary and secondary sources has been gathered. A questionnaire was distributed among a random sample of 100 young male and females in Sri Lanka in the age range of 16 – 30 in order to study the impact of the androgynous trend and awareness about the style among Sri Lankan fashion consumers. Secondary data were gathered by referring books, journals, reports and fashion publications. It can be suggested that Sri Lankan fashion consumers follow androgynous fashion without having a clear awareness of it. Also, it was revealed that women are more likely to accept the concept than men who are still very gender oriented about fashion.*

**Key words:** Fashion, Androgynous, Gender, Culture, Sri Lanka.

### **1. Introduction**

#### **What is Androgynous Fashion?**

*“What is the most beautiful in virile men is something feminine, what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine” (Glogorovska, 2011).*

As stated in the Oxford dictionary the term Androgynous derives from a Greek term which refers to a combination of male and female features. Androgynous fashion tends to eliminate the gender identities and seeks to merge both in one body avoiding gender stereotypes (Crepax, 2017).



**Figure 1 -**  
Androgynous outfit  
by Vincent Dillio|  
Gayletter magazine  
2016



**Figure 2 -**  
Androgynous outfit by  
Alexandre Vuthier  
Spring 2017 RTW



**Figure 3 -**  
“Blurred lines”  
Androgyny style fashion  
editorial Vogue-May-  
2015

In the first photograph the male model is pictured wearing a dusty pink sleeveless dress with a detailed turtleneck which gives more of a feminine look. Even though the footwear is pink it has added a manly look to the model. In the second figure, the female model is wearing a masculine black suit with a bow tie. Even the model's pose is masculine, but the gold heels give a feminine touch. In the last picture, both models have their identities in terms of hair and makeup. The female model's feminine look is emphasized even though she is wearing masculine baggy pants and an oversized cardigan. Even though the male model is wearing a normal shirt style, the embroidered details and the pant styling has added feminine features. It is seen that all models have neither a feminine nor a masculine look. It is a combination which does not have a specific identity. This is the Androgynous Fashion look which has gone mainstream in the world fashion industry.

Fashion has always been challenged by gender norms. With the acceptance of metamorphosed gender expressions, currently we live in an age of androgyny which has become the magical portion of the fashion industry (Gligorovska, 2011). As Diana Crane states, fashion indicates social class and gender, and maintained the social norms and cultural boundaries (Crane, D. 2012). Mark Twain once said, “clothes make the man” (Johnson, 1927). That indicates that fashion has been the manipulator of gender identities. Fashion has changed the ideal gender characteristics by simply converting masculine into feminine, feminine into masculine or a fusion of both (Marcangeli, 2015). Hood-Williams (1996) cites Oakley as “Clearly fashion metamorphose the gender norms that's why Oakley mentioned that gender identity is not fixed, it is in the process of making”. As a result, Androgynous fashion has been aroused throughout history and now it has become a trend for the past few years.

Androgyny has two approaches as psychological and physical. Having a fusion of both gender body features can be identified as the physical look of androgyny. As

philosopher Judith Butler says, culture norms construct gender rather than science (Johansson, 2017). The psychological and biological approach may construct the physical appearance and the way we dress but it is not always the case. Leading expert in androgyny Dr Lee Warren explains that there is a false impression about women's androgyny look. Androgynous followers are not always from the LGBT community (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender). Today, women avoid dressing up and follow the androgynous look because it's less time consuming and more comfortable. This is why it has become a trend worldwide. In spite of being compelled to perform a gender role in society, people today avoid gender boundaries and determine their own identity (Johansson, 2017).

### **Problem identification and Objectives**

The Androgyny concept is gaining control over the world fashion industry by juxtaposing traditional norms. The acceptance of the style depends on the people's attitudes and the way they perceive it. Communities which are not much exposed to gender expressions and have strict cultures avoid accepting the style, considering it to be inappropriate due to the lack of awareness of the true meaning of the concept. In the new Androgyny era, what the world is witnessing is not the same concept that it was before. It has become something beyond lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT). Notably, there is a small number of research articles available in the context of Asia comparing it to Western cultures. Hardly any can be found in the context of Sri Lankan fashion. Even though the concept has not been rooted yet in Sri Lanka, there is a probability of having an endogenous fashion consumer market. Due to the adaptation to western culture, especially the young generation will possibly be interested in accepting the concept. Therefore, the research has two objectives as follows,

- Study the Androgynous image and explore how the male and female image are being merged (Understanding the visual image of the concept)
- Explore possibilities in determining a selected customer group in the context of Sri Lanka.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **Historical Approach to Androgynous Fashion**

Androgyny concept has gained popularity by reappearing from time to time with the unisex style in the 1960's, punk movement in 1979 to the 1980's, and representing androgynous models in advertising campaigns in the 1990's (Gligorovska, 2011). The evolution of androgynous fashion starts back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Back then there were no significant differences in clothing between men and women. Both genders wore similar attires like long decorated costumes with laces, velvet, silks along with decorated shoes and accessories. Rosa (2013) cites Vinken (2005) "He not only eroticizes his body" but also positions himself within the context of pure feminine. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Dandy was introduced to the city of London by Brummell. The style was modern and elegant and had a feminine

touch (Barnes, T. D., & Beaulieu, E. 2014). Then there was a rise of women's independence. Trousers showcased women's power. In the 1920s, androgynous styles with masculine looks became a prominent feature in women's fashion. Androgynous style in the 1920s is known as the Garçonne look (boy-like girl look) which reflected the new generation after the suffragette movement. This popularity of the style in the 1920s is confirmed when Coco Chanel provided women an option to wear pants with a masculine silhouette.



**Figure 4:** Coco Chanel, Katharine Hepburn, and Marlene Dietrich in Chanel pants in the 1920's

Skirt-pants entered the fashion in the 1930's; Hollywood celebrities like actress Marlene Dietrich shocked public opinion when she appeared in a men's suit with a hat in an androgynous style from the movie *Morocco* 1930's. Gay characters entry became common with the Film Noir in 1930. From 1940 to 1960 many Hollywood movies were written more or less androgynously attired queer types. The movie Hitchcock's *Psycho* 1960 is an example (Crepax, 2017). The movie "Rebecca" 1940 and "Benerstein" 1995 is drawn between lesbianism and ambiguity. It is signified from the clothing. In 1966, Yves Saint Laurent modified the tuxedo to a female version. It was a perfect masculine style expressing the aggressive role of women.

Completely blurring the boundaries between genders, Prince and Grace Jones teamed up on stage in the 1980s. Prince had more of a feminine style with slender pants and glittery outfits while Grace Jones expressed an aggressive feminist image which was more of a masculine look. Women's androgyny style did not gain the same amount of acceptance as men's. But in the 1970's, feminists often adopted the androgynous style by wearing flat shoes and baggy pants (Blackman & Perry, 1990). After the 1970s, gay people mostly entered into creative industries and increasing number of independent music and film festivals publicly addressed the issues of homophobia (de Villiers, N. 2007). Female androgyny turned mainstream during the 1990's in terms of commodity lesbianism and problematic democratic assimilation of non-normative sexualities into dominant discourse (Shaver, P. R., Papalia, D., Clark, C. L., Koski, L. R., Tidwell, M. C., & Nalbhone, D. 1996). Even though

the Androgynous fashion has been announced as a new fashion trend, by digging into the past it turns out that the style has emerged and been in practice since the 18<sup>th</sup> century and is still developing.

### **Androgyny as a Thriving Trend in the World of Fashion**

Fashion intermediaries like movies, celebrities, fashion publications and bloggers have taken a prominent role in promoting the trend to the people (Crepax, 2017). The bond between film and fashion is huge and intertwined. Celebrities can be classified as the main influencers in fashion. For example, the influence on new androgyny from Sandra Bullock's character in the award-winning movie "Gravity" and Gal Godot's character in "Wonder Women" are massive. On the other end, Jaden Smith's fashion has made a huge impact on his parallel generation. Louis Vuitton's S/S 16 campaign went viral on media because of Jaden's appearance. He was dressed in a skirt and a mesh looking top with a fringed hem and a leather jacket on it. The creative director of the brand, Mr. Ghesquiere, argued that men wearing skirts cannot be criticized because it is the same for the women who started wearing men's tuxedos long ago (Ripley, 2018). New Androgyny is being labeled frequently in fashion publications using various names like "Mannish", "Tomboyish", "Tomboyish Chic", "Borrowed from man", "Girl meets boy" (Crepax, 2017). Those articles teach people how to dress according to the concept of androgyny. Once, Vogue, published in September in 2011, suggested that women wear androgynous coats without inserting arms, which will look like the coat was draped by her man and will give a sensual and feminine appearance. Today, fusion of men's and women's wear on fashion ramps has become a common event which was started by Prada in 2010 but it was practiced by Paul Gautier and Alexander McQueen long before. More of the other brands stepped in recently. J.W Anderson, Balenciaga, Tom Ford are some of them. Ami and Saint Sernin both were formally men's brands and now they have started doing masculine women's wear. All new brands show less gender specificity. They try to give both genders the freedom of choice. As a result we can see mens outfits in the women's wear section in stores as well as in websites.

### **Shape of the Androgynous Fashion**

Androgynous fashion basically has two different looks; Female masculinity and Male femininity (Freeman, C. 2001). Female masculinity is where females wear clothing with more of men's aesthetics such as girls wearing a sharp tailored suit with a masculine silhouette. This adaptation of men's wear indicates women's empowerment and the idea of gender equality. Coco Chanel and Alexander McQueen are two designers who expressed feminism through the designs to show the woman power. McQueen once stated that "I want to empower women". When you see a woman wearing McQueen, there's a certain harshness to the clothes that makes her look powerful" (Marcangeli, 2015). Male femininity is where men wear clothes with feminine features, such as skirts, body hugging silhouettes, and fancy

fabrics. Pink and floral are the most significant features that could add a feminine look on anything.



**Figure 5:** Female Masculinity  
Model in a masculine attire designed by Alexandar McQueen (spring 2016)







**Figure 6:** Male Feminity  
Model in feminine outfit (Balenciaga –Paris fashion week FW 18/19)





Design items which show or communicate significance of Androgynous concept are shown below. The first chart classifies female masculinity in a variety of dress items which was published on Pinterest and Instagram websites, shown in Table 1, and the other (Table 2) shows the male feminity concept in design.

**Table 1:** Basic items in a women’s androgynous wardrobe

Female Masculinty

Keywords - Loosy fit/capes and hoods/collared/button down/blazer suit/drop crotch/ boyfriend cuts/ tomboyish			
<i>Tops</i>			
			
Basic white shirt	Hoods	Large sweater	A vest

**Table 2:** Basic items in a women’s androgynous wardrobe

Male Femininity			
Keywords - Loosy fit/capes and hoods/ tanks/cardigans/satin and silk/floral /lace/ dresses/prints/ kilts and flares			
<b>Tops and overalls</b>			
			
Lace tops	Silk and Satin	Flouncy Tops	Floral blazers

**Androgynous Fashion Characteristics in Sri Lankan Fashion Market**

The local fashion industry has been rapidly developing around Colombo and the suburbs in Sri Lanka. Androgynous fashion has always spun around the concept of women adapting to the masculine fashion. It is due to global women’s empowerment and the greater development in the state of women in society (Khurana, S. 2015). In Sri Lanka also, women being career oriented and the encouragement from society helped them to move on from traditional clothing. Accordingly, the acceptance of women wearing masculine attire is higher than men wearing feminine clothes. The real reason behind this is that men wearing feminine silhouettes is considered as homosexual or a sacrilege to the culture. But recently the Androgynous image has been staged up at several fashion related events by local designers.



**Figure 7:** Monsoon wedding-bridal editorial/Cosmopolitan Sri Lanka May, 2018

The above feature for Cosmopolitan Sri Lanka was a bridal editorial and the androgynous suit was designed by “Olive Couture”, the local designer brand. “Lovi” is also another brand which plays around with the silhouette of sarongs and it gives a very androgynous appearance to the female wearers as shown in Figure 8. Recently, the bridal designer, Ramani Fernando, showcased a tuxedo bride at the “Movenpick Weddings Fair” held at Movenpick hotel in August as shown in Figure 9. Fashion designer Kasun Gunawardana, who calls himself an androgynous fashion lover, showed a resort wear collection in 2015 at the Colombo Fashion Week Resort. Even the retail fashion showrooms (Kelly Felder, GFlock, Zigma Jones) have similar casual silhouettes in their recent collections.



**Figure 8:** Masculine design by Lovi Sarongs



**Figure 9:** Tuxedo bride by Ramani Fernando



**Figure 10:** Design for CFW resort 2015 by Kasun Gunawardana

Even though Androgynous fashion has become popular among people in the Colombo area; the characteristics between the original androgynous concept and the Sri Lankan context are not much explored and analyzed yet. Therefore, a questionnaire was distributed among customers in order to find out the awareness they have which also guided us to extract the unique characteristics of the Androgynous look based on the Sri Lankan context.

### 3 Methodology

The research was carried out through both quantitative and qualitative methods. Information from primary and secondary sources has been gathered. As for the primary research, an online survey was conducted to gather data. The random sampling method was selected to gather information. “A random sample is one which is so drawn that the researcher, from all pertinent points of view has no reason to believe a bias will result” (Goode & Hatt 1952:214). The sample was not chosen on an accidental basis. Two separate questionnaires were distributed among 100 male and females in the age group of 16 – 30 who live in Colombo and the suburbs as this population is more open to the fashion, because most fashion outlets are located in Colombo. Some questions were structured and some semi-structured and descriptive. Images of selected fashions were shown to capture the



sudden impression from the fashion. The aim of the structured approach is to ensure that each interview is presented with exactly the same questions in the same order (Phellas , Bloch, & Seale,2011). Semi-structured interviews were selected as the method for data collection because that helps to investigate the situation in detail and obtain rich descriptions from the participants regarding their consumer perception about Androgynous fashion (Yin, 2003). Relevant secondary sources were referred to in order to carry out a detailed literature review containing important information on the research area. Many research articles, theses, books, and fashion publications were referred to and filtered for the most relevant data. The study is about the current and most sought-after trend in the world. Therefore, fresh and recent data needed to be gathered through different sources. Research findings from the survey were compared with the literature, enabled in forwarding a logical analysis.

#### **4 Results, Analysis and Discussion**

The data which was gathered through the survey of questionnaires were analyzed and reviewed in order to assess fashion consciousness and interest among the young generation, awareness of the term “Androgynous” and its existence in fashion, observing the impression about the Androgynous style among participants, the tendency of choosing Androgynous fashion over other outfit looks, the experience of buying from stores of the opposite gender and reasons to try out the androgynous look of the local consumers.

First, we studied fashion consciousness and interest among the young generation among the sample group of respondents. It showed that women try out new styles which was (62%) and specially the age range of 21 -24 which was 35%. Men have shown an equal result for the first two options which was 40% and the highest percentage is again from the age range of 21-24 which was 24%. Only 11% and 20% of men and women were not concerned about fashion looks. The overall evaluation reveals that the younger generation in Sri Lanka is the most fashion-conscious generation. Awareness of the term “Androgynous” and its existence in fashion was analyzed and the result showed that 62% of females who belong to 21-24 age group responded that they have solid awareness.

Fashion communicates images, identities, social status, culture, beliefs and values. Therefore, it was aimed to observe the impression of people about androgynous fashion. In order to capture true responses, images of androgynous fashion were shown to the people. The result showed that women (89%) positively responded to the style. However, male respondents (64%) disliked the style. Further, the collected data was analyzed to detect the most interested age category. It was found that the females between 16-24 are the people most interested in androgynous fashion. The least interest was shown among women aged between 25-30.

The tendency of choosing androgynous fashion over other outfit looks was analyzed through questions which were structured by attaching three images for each category asking the preferred order of fashion outfits. Images were selected in a scale of increasing the androgynous style from a normal outfit. Most of the women (55%) preferred a dress for a casual day. The second most preferred look was the extreme andro look with a considerable percentage (35%) as the 1st preference and 43% as their second preference. Almost all men (93%) preferred the masculine casual look as their first preference. But the second outfit with a long top, which had an average androgynous look, was chosen by 60% showing the highest percentage for the second preference. Remarkably, the most preferred look for an official event by women is a straight cut pant and a tailored blazer, with a percentage of 62%. The feminine outfit had 37% as first preference votes, which is almost half the percentage for the blazer look. 74% of women preferred the extreme androgynous look of a tailored suit. Men showed an opposing result with 74% of people voting towards a more masculine look as their first preference and 79% choosing an androgynous style as the last preference. Freeman, R., & McElhinny, B. (1996) say that "There's less possibility of men adopting feminine identity as boys face more negative consequences than girls who adopt masculine styles".

Shopping from departments of the opposite gender for products is very common in the androgynous concept. Elle magazine has stated that designer perfumes encourage women to try out products from the men's section and experience new fragrances. The research showed that all men and women shop from opposite gender departments by showing the highest votes. 67% of women and 55% of men have answered saying "Yes".

A majority of women (about 56%) have stated that androgynous fashion "looks fun and comfortable". By choosing straight pants and the blazer look as the most preferred outfit, it revealed that women are more likely to dress androgynously for work than for casual outings. From overall responses, it is evident that Sri Lankan women are more open towards new concepts and have positive attitudes towards changes in fashion. Men seems to be more hesitant to try out the concept with just about 14%. According to the discussed data, it shows that women are already aware about the style and willing to follow the trend while men are still reluctant to step in. The significant age range of interested people is 16-24. The reason behind the higher interest among the younger age group (16-24) can be suggested as their exposure to the social media. They are the generation Z who are also known as digital natives and the most forward-thinking people. Generation Z is classified as the group which has the highest social media usage. They are also more open minded than millennials. They tend to accept new ideas and try out new experiences without hesitating.

## **5 Conclusion and Implications**

It was revealed that the androgynous fashion look already exists in Sri Lanka even though the term “androgyny” is not popular yet. As a country which has a highly valued culture and less exposure towards gender expressions, it has become a limitation, especially among men, who think the style is inappropriate. However, the results from the data analysis specifically showed that Sri Lankan women are more interested than men in the Androgynous style. The highest preference for the androgynous look was shown for office attire which expresses that women prefer the masculine look at the workplace to show the woman’s power and independence, which have been communicated through androgynous attire since the early days. Yet Sri Lankan men have not been exposed much to the trend and they have the mindset that trying the feminine look is inappropriate. They seem to be very gender oriented about selecting clothes. It is seen that awareness of the Androgynous concept is low among Sri Lankan fashion consumers. In order to demonstrate the awareness, local designers should step up and do more collections showing the concept as the interest group is clear from the research. It is recommended to do further research on generation Z in Sri Lanka to identify different characteristics and their infographics. This can be an initial platform for androgynous fashion startups targeting generation Zs with a clearer idea. This will be the point of entry to a new fashion era in Sri Lanka.

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