

# A Study of Post-00s' Shaping of Clothing Gender Symbol Perceptions as Influenced by Social Media

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### Abstract:

With the rise of social media platforms, the traditional symbols of gender binary have been frequently challenged and subverted in the daily fashion choices of the Post 00s, with the emergence of a new trend of diversified gender expression and genderless fashion. This change not only reflects the gradual deconstruction of gender concepts, but also prompts more people to accept gender fluidity and express diverse gender identities through clothing through the dissemination of opinion leaders such as KOLs and KOCs. Based on collecting the history of the formation and evolution of gender symbols in clothing and collecting existing related research literature and analyzing it, this paper investigates how social media shapes the perception of gender symbols in clothing of Post-00s and the impact it has. It is found that the gender perception of the Post-90s is undergoing a profound change, and in the future, their gender expression will be more free and flexible, which will promote the development of the fashion industry and have a far-reaching impact on the gender culture of the society.

**Keywords:** social media;gender binary;gender symbols;fashion industry

## 1. Introduction

With the rise of social media, fashion culture around the world is undergoing unprecedented changes, especially in terms of gender perception. Clothing, as a social symbol, has long played an important role in gender expression. Yet traditional gender symbols have appeared relatively fixed over the past few decades, with designs, colors, and styles of men's and women's clothing often featuring a stark dichotomy, reflecting society's fixed expectations of gender.

With the development of the times, especially the growth of Generation Z (i.e. Post 00), the fluidity and diversity of gender symbols have begun to emerge gradually, and the gender meanings of clothing and its elements have changed as a result.

Social media platforms (e.g. Instagram, TikTok and Xiaohongshu) not only provide a space for fashion lovers to express and display their personal style, but also become an important channel for shaping, challenging and even subverting traditional gender sym-

bols. These platforms bring together a large number of fashion bloggers, celebrities, and user-generated content, allowing individuals to access fashion information while constantly revisiting and redefining gender symbols in clothing. Compared to previous generations, Generation Z is particularly adept at utilizing these platforms to explore non-traditional forms of gender expression and to break down binary gender boundaries through diverse fashion choices.

Against this backdrop, gender fluidity and fashion are intertwined and have become one of the most important issues in modern fashion. The popularity of gender-neutral styles and non-binary gender apparel not only reflects the changes in the social concept of gender, but also shows the inclusiveness of fashion in gender expression. These changes are particularly evident in the clothing choices and gender perceptions of Generation Z, who are constantly acquiring new trends through social media, while also engaging in the process of discussing and challenging traditional gender norms.

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of social media in shaping the symbolic perceptions of gender in clothing for Generation 00, and to analyze how they interact with fashion bloggers, celebrities, and user-generated content through social media, which in turn changes their understanding of gender. By further exploring gender fluidity and fashion trends, this study will reveal how Generation Z breaks down gender binaries in clothing, providing new perspectives and insights into future fashion trends.

## 2. Gender symbols in clothing

### 2.1 Definition

Gender symbols in clothing are cultural and social symbols that convey gender identity and gender roles through visual elements such as style, color, pattern, and texture of clothing, which often reflect historical and contemporary societal differences in behavioral, identity, and societal expectations for both genders[1].

From an early age, children begin to use cultural norms such as clothing to establish a mental categorization system for men and women, a process that is shaped not only by family upbringing, but also by multiple factors such as social media, toy advertisements, and peer interactions[2]. In their daily lives, boys and girls gradually develop their perceptions of gender roles through observation and imitation, and the colors, styles, and patterns of clothing become important symbols for them to distinguish between “male” and “female” identities. As they grow up, their reliance on these cultural norms increases, further reinforcing

gender stereotypes and solidifying their understanding of their own and others’ gender identities.

Men who are affected by gender stereotypes have a lower overall sense of well-being, and women who are affected by gender stereotypes are generally prone to sadness or despair, which often makes them feel “not good enough” or “needing to be better,” and the LGBT+ student population may even face more serious mental health problems. LGBT+ adolescent students may even face more serious mental health problems[3].

### 2.2 Traditional gender symbols

#### 2.2.1 Elegance

Traditional clothing design distinguishes gender through style, cut and structure. Men’s clothing generally emphasizes functionality, simplicity, and a sense of strength, such as suits and military uniforms, which are often associated with power and the world of work; while women’s clothing usually highlights decorative, curvaceous features, such as skirts and corsets, which are meant to accentuate women’s physical characteristics and conform to gender expectations of gentleness and femininity[4].

Behind this design is a reflection of society’s solidified expectations of gender roles, whereby men are given more symbols associated with power, decision-making, and the public sphere, while women are more associated with tenderness, dependence, and private space. The simplicity and functionality of men’s clothing is often combined with a rational, professional image that emphasizes male dominance and action in society. For example, the structure of a suit emphasizes a sense of male physical strength through broad shoulder designs, waist lines and pants, symbolizing stability and authority. Military uniforms, on the other hand, convey the values of discipline, order and collectivism through their hard lines and uniform appearance, further reinforcing the association of men with social responsibility[5].

In contrast, women’s clothing is often designed to accentuate the beauty of the female body through softer cuts and trimming elements, highlighting the decorative, sensual, and emotional side of the body. By emphasizing the curves of the waist, breasts, and hips, garments such as skirts and corsets cater to traditional gender expectations that define women as feminine, elegant, and attractive. Such designs not only reinforce the role of women as objects to be viewed, but also limit women’s choices in the functionality of their clothing, often limiting their roles to the domestic, emotional, and decorative.

In addition, the high heels, intricate decorations, and impractical materials of women’s clothing further emphasized gender differences, suggesting a certain “limitation”

on women's movement and behavior. This difference in design has had a profound impact on society's understanding of gender identity, making gendered clothing symbols not only a part of fashion expression, but also an external symbol and internal construction of gender roles in society.

### **2.2.2 Color**

This gendered color symbol has not only influenced the design of children's clothing, but has also had a profound impact on adult fashion and culture. As the 20th century progressed, blue came to be seen as a color that symbolized calmness, strength, and authority for men, reinforcing the rationality and composure of masculinity. Pink, on the other hand, was associated with gentleness, dependence and emotionalism in femininity due to its soft, sweet qualities[6]. This symbol of gender dichotomy is further perpetuated in toys, interior decorations and even advertisements, forming a socialized framework of gender identity. In recent years, this gendered symbol of color has begun to be challenged as awareness of gender equality has increased. Many brands and designers have attempted to break with this tradition by blurring the gender lines between pink and blue by promoting gender-neutral designs. For example, pink is increasingly seen in men's fashion as a symbol of breaking stereotypes, reflecting a wider acceptance of gender fluidity. At the same time, blue is gradually being given a softer and more emotional symbolism, with women being able to express strength and confidence by wearing blue clothing, rather than just following traditional gender expectations.

This shift in color symbolism indicates that society's view of gender is evolving, and that fashion and color symbolism are becoming important tools in breaking down gender stereotypes. In the future, the role of color in gender symbolism may further develop and change as society becomes more accepting of diverse gender identities.

## **3. The role of social media**

Social media has had a profound impact on the cognitive shaping of the Post 00s (i.e., the younger generation born after 2000) in terms of gender symbols in clothing. This generation has grown up with the rapid development of the Internet and social media, and platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Xiaohongshu have become important ways for them to obtain fashion information, express themselves and interact with others. Social media has not only changed the way the Post 00s accept fashion, but is also redefining the expression of gender symbols in clothing.

## **3.1 Promoting new expressions of gender symbols in clothing**

### **3.1.1 Diversity of gender expression**

Diverse gender expression refers to the many ways in which individuals express their gender identity beyond traditional gender norms through appearance, behavior, language, and dress. Such expression breaks down the binary division of gender and recognizes and respects gender fluidity, non-binary gender, and the plurality of transgender individuals[7]. As society progresses and gender awareness increases, more and more people are choosing to present their gender identity in different ways, thus contributing to the diversification of gender expression.

The diversity of gender expression has gained greater social acceptance in recent years, especially among the adolescent and young adult population. Research has shown that gender-diverse expressions are particularly pronounced in the adolescent and young adult population, with a gradual increase in transgender and non-binary gender self-identification. The related path of gender diversity demonstrates the complexity of different gender identities, sexual attractions and gender behaviors, reflecting that gender expression is not a single process, but evolves dynamically as individuals grow up and social contexts change[8].

### **3.1.2 KOLs and KOCs influence the popularity of genderless fashion**

Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) and Key Opinion Consumers (KOCs) on social media are highly influential among the Post 00s. Transgender, non-binary and other gender-bending fashion bloggers share their daily outfits and fashion attitudes through social media, further expanding the influence of gender-fluid fashion. By following these fashion bloggers, the Post-'00s are able to be exposed to fashion concepts that are very different from those of previous dominant cultures, and are gradually accepting and experimenting with clothing choices that break the inherent symbols of gender.

As industry opinion leaders, KOLs usually have deep professional backgrounds and large fan bases in the fields of fashion, design and beauty. They are able to guide the trend of genderless fashion through their influence. For example, famous fashion bloggers, designers and celebrity KOLs will show genderless outfits on social media, breaking the traditional gender framework and attracting a large number of followers to follow suit. Because KOLs have extensive media exposure and industry resources, they are able to make genderless fashion quickly gain the attention of the public and gradually move from niche culture into the mainstream fashion scene.

For example, KOLs like Harry Styles, as a well-known musician and fashion icon, have challenged traditional notions of gender by appearing in public wearing genderless

clothing, and have contributed to the popularization of genderless fashion worldwide[9].



NEW YORK, NEW YORK - OCTOBER 30: Harry Styles performs onstage at Harry Styles "Harryween" Fancy Dress Party at Madison Square Garden on October 30, 2021 in New York City. (Photo by Theo Wargo/Getty Images for HS) Theo Wargo

**Fig. 1 Harry Styles (VOGUE TAIWAN)**

As an opinion leader among ordinary consumers, KOC's influence is mainly reflected in real product experience and consumer community interaction. Their recommendations are closer to daily life, so that genderless fashion is not only found in high-end shows and celebrities, but also in the daily choices of ordinary consumers, and KOCs have lowered the threshold of the trend by sharing their real genderless fashion experiences, so that more consumers can understand and accept the concept of genderless fashion.

Through platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Instagram, KOC show how they use genderless fashion in their daily lives, sharing tips and brand recommendations, influencing more ordinary consumers to choose gender-neutral clothing.

Korean Instagram blogger leeyeajeans is one of those gender-neutral fashion bloggers. As a woman, she often appears on social media as a handsome teenager, leading her followers into the trend of gender-neutral fashion, which makes netizens exclaim, "So girls can dress like this, too".



**Fig. 2 leeyeajeans (Instagram@leeyeajeans)**

KOLs lead the way in genderless fashion by posting high-quality content through fashion blockbusters, brand collaborations and social platforms. They deliver the brand's genderless fashion philosophy to a wider audience, especially on social media through topics that ignite discussion.

KOCs' community influence, on the other hand, brings brands closer to consumers through a more everyday and intimate approach. When it comes to purchasing decisions, many consumers are more likely to trust KOC's real-life experience sharing, especially with regard to matching suggestions and actual wearing experience of genderless clothing.

KOLs and KOCs promote the popularity of genderless fashion in different ways. KOLs are responsible for setting trends and raising public awareness of genderless fashion, while KOCs make genderless fashion a part of life through interaction with everyday consumers, ultimately promoting the realization of gender equality and diverse expression in fashion.

### 3.2 Decentralization of content creation

The construction of traditional fashion has long been influenced by big brands, designers and mainstream fashion magazines, and these dominant forces usually follow the design concept of gender dichotomy. For example, men's and women's clothing have fixed style classifications. Men's clothing is often characterized by clean lines and single colors, highlighting men's rigidity and sense of strength, while women's clothing tends to emphasize curves, softness, and richness of color to express women's softness and gentleness[10]. This gender division of labor is not only reflected in fashion design, but also in fashion communication and aesthetic standards. Mainstream fashion media and brands continue to reinforce this binary gender framework through advertisements, magazine covers, fashion weeks, and other channels, shaping the public's understanding of fashion.

However, the rise of social media has changed this situation, especially with the explosive growth of user-generated content (UGC), which has empowered ordinary individuals to express their own views on fashion. Social platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Weibo have enabled people to stop passively accepting traditional fashion standards and instead can actively create and share their own style. This process has highlighted the diversity of gender expression, and the concepts of gender fluidity and de-gendered fashion are gradually being accepted by more people.

For example, the #DeGenderFashion hashtag, started by social media maven Alok Vaid-Menon, has gained traction as a movement to encourage the de-gendering of fashion. The movement allows creators to use fashion as a tool to express their identity and challenge societal expectations of gender[11]. As these individuals share their personal experiences and styles, they inspire a global audience to rethink traditional notions of masculinity and femininity.

The collective power of social media activism provides a virtual space for these marginalized voices to be heard and for a wider audience to be exposed to more fluid and inclusive gender identities.



Fig. 3 Alok Vaid-Menon

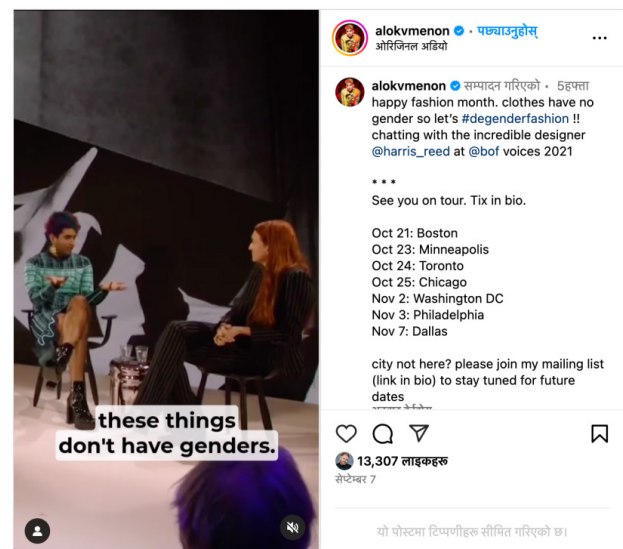


Fig. 3 Alok Vaid-Menon responds to launching #degenderfashion on Instagram

Groups such as trans bloggers and non-binary genders use social media to be able to freely display their personal styles that are not bound by traditional fashion frame-

works. For example, they combine elements of traditional “men’s” and “women’s” clothing in their outfits, breaking down gender boundaries and conveying a more open and diverse gender perspective to their audience through visual impact and everyday displays. This kind of user-generated content breaks the limitations of traditional gender symbols, making fashion an important carrier for expressing identity and personality, rather than just a tool for fulfilling gender norms[12].

At the same time, this kind of fashion expression led by ordinary people has gradually permeated global fashion trends. Transgender models and fashion opinion leaders in the LGBT+ community are even influencing the design strategies of big brands. For example, some big brands have started to launch gender-neutral fashion collections (gender-neutral collections), reducing gender segmentation and displaying more gender-fluid images in their advertisements, catering to and promoting the social call for gender inclusion.

User-generated content on social media platforms not only breaks the monopoly of the traditional fashion industry, but also deconstructs the traditional gender binary through diverse gender expression. This shift towards neutral and fluid fashion is not only limited to individuals on social media, but has also influenced wider fashion trends. Many designers and brands are now incorporating unisex elements into their collections, and retailers are rethinking the traditional division of men and women. Additionally, the use of technology such as virtual fitting and artificial intelligence-assisted clothing personalization has further democratized fashion, allowing consumers to experiment with styles outside of traditional gender boundaries[13]. Fashion has moved from its original gender labeling and fixation to a more flexible and diverse expression, truly becoming a field that everyone can participate in and define.

Social media has played a crucial role in amplifying the diverse voices of the fashion industry, allowing traditional gender norms to be constantly questioned and reshaped, resulting in a more inclusive and dynamic landscape.

## **4. Social media redefines traditional gender symbols**

While social media provides a wide space for diverse gender expression, it also continues to reinforce traditional gender symbols to some extent.

### **4.1 Algorithmic Preferences and the Reproduction of Mainstream Fashion Symbols**

Recommendation algorithms on social media platforms

generally tend to push content that attracts the attention of large-scale audiences[14]. This has led to the continued dominance of mainstream fashion aesthetics, particularly images that conform to traditional gender norms. For example, fashion content widely distributed on Instagram, TikTok and Xiaohongshu continues to be dominated by images of idealized “perfect body” women and masculine men. Such symbolic aesthetics reinforce the traditional gender binary that positions women as needing to display softness, curves, and sensuality, while men are positioned as symbols of strength, simplicity, and toughness.

This preference of algorithms allows traditional gender images with broad appeal to gain more exposure, while content that challenges traditional gender norms often needs to be disseminated through larger communities or individuals to gain equal visibility. This phenomenon allows for the reproduction and consolidation of dominant fashion symbols even in the context of thriving diverse expressions.

### **4.2 Micro-innovation and Personalized Expression**

Nonetheless, the post-00s on social media continue to express individualized style and aesthetic needs through micro-innovations within traditional gender symbols. Micro-innovation refers to users presenting individuality by making subtle changes or incorporating other elements while following the mainstream fashion framework. For example, a male user may add feminine elements to a traditionally masculine outfit, such as wearing jewelry, choosing clothing with lace designs, or adopting softer colors. Female users, on the other hand, will use oversized men’s clothing, functional style or street style to break the traditional “soft” image and show a more neutral or powerful self-expression.

This kind of micro-innovation reflects the tolerance and adaptation of the post-00s to traditional gender symbols, and they do not completely reject the mainstream aesthetic and gender expression framework, but express themselves through personalized elements on this basis. This phenomenon not only shows the creativity of the younger generation in fashion, but also reflects the trend of gradual acceptance of the diversity and fluidity of gender identity.

### **4.3 Community and subculture promotion**

In addition to the innovative expression of individuals, certain subcultural communities on social media are driving micro-innovations in traditional gender symbols. For example, non-binary genders and transgender people take to platforms such as TikTok or Instagram to showcase styles of dressing differently from traditional gender roles

through fashion content and influence their audience. Such community activities make gender less of a binary categorization and more of a more fluid and diverse form of personal expression[15].

#### 5. Conclusion

With the widespread use of social media, Post 00s are becoming the backbone of breaking gender stereotypes. through these platforms, Generation Z breaks through the boundaries of traditional gender concepts and embraces genderless fashion and gender fluidity; through the diversity of fashion and gender expression, they challenge the definition of traditional binary gender symbols. This is not only reflected in their daily dressing choices, but also in their re-examination and reflection on gender roles in society.

Social media, as a decentralized platform, allows them to reach out to people of different cultural backgrounds and identities and draw inspiration from them for a more open and inclusive attitude towards gender expression. More and more Post 00s are choosing to wear gender-neutral clothing as a way to express their dissatisfaction with and challenge gender stereotypes. They follow and emulate fashion bloggers on social media who break gender boundaries through their outfits, thus contributing to the popularity of genderless fashion. Social media provides them with a platform where they can not only express their gender identity, but also participate in public discussions about gender and fashion.

By analyzing the impact of social media on the perception of gender symbols in post-00 clothing, it can be found that the gender perception of this generation is undergoing a profound change. They are exposed to diversified gender expressions through social media and gradually get rid of the traditional gender stereotypes. Genderless fashion, gender fluidity and diverse gender expressions are becoming more and more important in their fashion choices, and have become an important tool for them to recognize and shape gender symbols.

In the future, as society continues to increase its acceptance of multiple genders, the gender expression of the Post 00s in fashion will become freer and more flexible. This will not only promote the development of the fashion industry, but also have a profound impact on the gender culture of society.

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