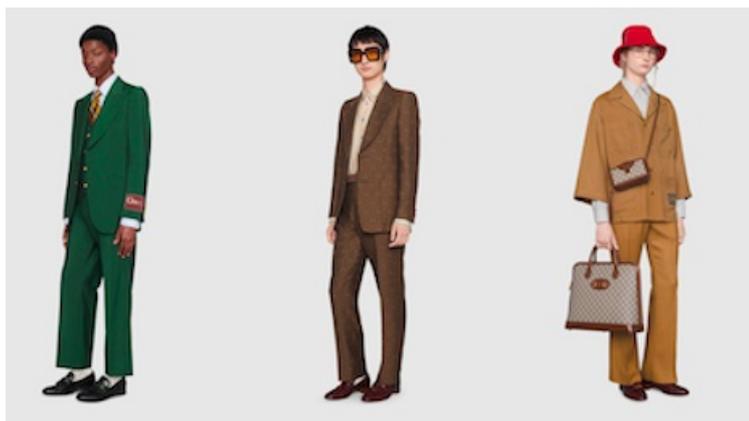


APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

## Gender-free fashion: retail's new age of self expression

November 11, 2021



*Gucci MX was a gender-free collection of selected pieces from the brand's pre-fall and fall/winter 2020 collections. Image credit: Gucci*

By NORA HOWE

Younger generations are increasingly more willing to break away from traditional gender norms when it comes to dressing and accessorizing, shopping across gender lines and encouraging inclusivity in fashion.

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When it comes to both product design and retail experience, beauty and apparel brands are shifting away from the gender binary to foster a more inclusive environment and appeal to this fluid generation of consumers. During a session at the *Vogue Business* and Google virtual summit "[The Way Forward](#)" on Nov. 10, fashion leaders suggested legacy brands remodel their businesses through category-free and size-inclusive merchandising, gender-free culture in retail spaces and by supporting the LGBTQ+ community.

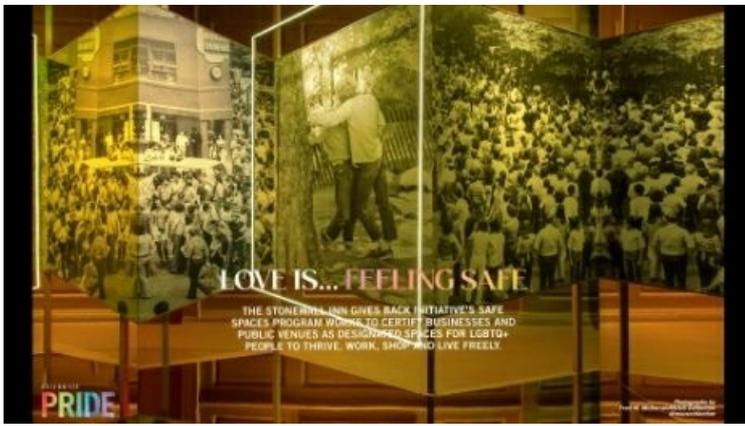
"There is a broader audience out there, which is all humans, all genders," said Rob Garrett Smith, CEO of [The Phluid Project](#). "These folks are rejecting preconceived expectations of what a male- or female-bodied person looks like."

### Breaking the mold

Gen Z consumers especially are keen on avoiding categorization when it comes to fashion and beauty, and their influence within this space has put the issue of gender conformity at the forefront of fashion discourse.

While many designers today are releasing gender fluid collections, such as the MX collection designed by Gucci creative director Alessandro Michele released last year ([see story](#)), there are still a number of issues related to how these items are brought to consumers.

Beyond the merchandising, curating a gender fluid retail space is an important piece of fostering an inclusive fashion environment. Retailers should consider removing gendered fitting rooms and gendered sections, as well as contemplate who is in the space.



*During Pride month this year, the Saks Fifth Avenue flagship store dedicated its six center windows to a partnership with the Stonewall Inn Give Back Initiative. Image courtesy of Saks Fifth Avenue*

"The clothes are important, of course, because they create the environment and challenge people to not think about the meaning of an item and simply pick it up because they like it, but it is also about the people that are in that space," said Ida Petersson, menswear and womenswear buying director at **Browns**.

In addition to making thoughtful hiring decisions, retailers should also be mindful of the sort of events and activations that happen within the shopping space.

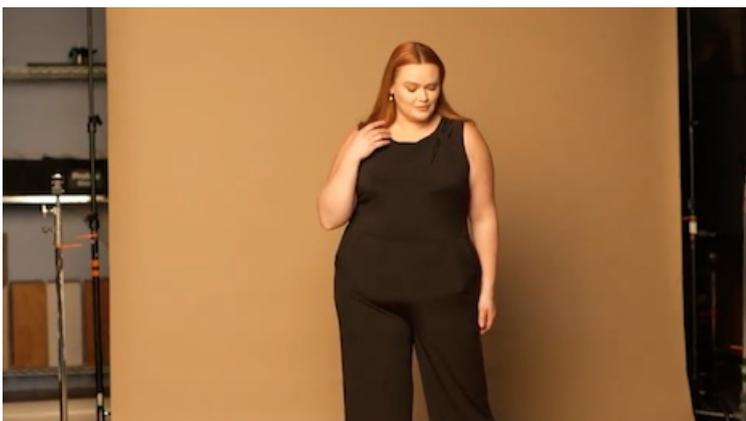
While younger consumers are spearheading the movement, gender-free does not mean only satisfying younger consumers' needs. Brands and retailers should expand gender-free fashion throughout their spaces, as there are ways to maintain clear categories and navigation without assigning gender classifications.

"You don't want to make it harder to shop by removing signage that's navigational or helpful, but there is a lot that can be done which does not impact the ease of shopping," said Molly Taylor, chief merchant at **Saks Off 5th**. "Do we need to say women's dresses or can we just say dresses?"

"There are seemingly small things that we can do to remove gender from our shopping environments without alienating all customers."

To this end, Saks Off 5th will remove all gendered department signs, as well as make all fitting- and restrooms gender free, by the second quarter of 2022.

Intersected with the gender-free product movement is size-inclusivity, which has long been an obstacle for legacy fashion brands that still make clothing with certain bodies in mind. It is crucial that retailers extend size offerings and encourage their brand partners to be more inclusive with product design.



*In 2020, New York-based fashion designer Jason Wu collaborated with QVC to create a size-inclusive collection. Image credit: QVC*

"No body is the same, regardless of whether you are born female or born male," Mr. Smith said. "One of the biggest flaws in gender neutral clothing when it launched five years ago was that it was shapeless and colorless."

"We have found that it's really important to go up to five XL, our customers let us know that, and we like to play with shapes and silhouettes," he said. "We also try to be inclusive and representative when it comes to our campaign models in gender, body size, race and ability."

Giving back

Beyond remodeling their businesses to be more inclusive in terms of gender, brands and retailers should also collaborate with and support the LGBTQ+ community.

In January, French luxury conglomerate Kering's Americas division was named one of the best places to work, according to the Human Rights Campaign Foundation's annual assessment of LGBTQ workplace equality.

Kering Americas received a score of 100 on the foundation's 2021 Corporate Equality Index (CEI). Corporations are evaluated in several categories, including non-discrimination policies, employment benefits, organizational competency around LGBTQ diversity and inclusion.

The luxury company joined more than 760 U.S.-based companies that earned top scores in the CEI. Fifty-seven percent of CEI-rated businesses, including Kering, have global operations and advance LGBTQ inclusion abroad ([see story](#)).

In the absence of live parades during the COVID-19 pandemic last year, resale platform Vestiaire Collective celebrated Pride with a charity campaign featuring the company's own LGBTQ+ community.

Some of Vestiaire's top sellers and its own employees rummaged through their wardrobes to sell pieces from Balenciaga, Gucci, Fendi, Yves Saint Laurent and Tom Ford.

All of Vestiaire's commissions from the sale of those pieces went toward the Marsha P Johnson Institute, a U.S. charity supporting the African American transgender community, and Stonewall, a U.K. charity supporting LGBTQ+ policies ([see story](#)).

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