

# Boys Like Pink & Girls Can Wear Blue: Shifting Paradigms in Fashion, Expression, & Gender Ideals

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## Abstract

Research suggests that themes of identity and gender have always been linked with fashion and expression. Historically, fashion was used to perpetuate stereotypes and stigmas to facilitate the power imbalances established through unfair gender stereotypes. There were clear fashion boundaries separating what was reserved for men and for women. However, we can track changes in the way that fashion has evolved to see how our ideologies about gender roles and identity have shifted (and vice versa). In so doing, we see how fashion has also been used by individuals to subvert and undermine certain gender stereotypes and stigmas. Taking stock of shifts such as these reveals clothes have begun to lose their strict “gendering” and how we continue to develop a freedom to express ourselves. These kinds of shifts further challenge the inequalities that still exist between genders today. And, this flexibility in expression comes with a preview of a society where individuals find themselves more equal. It reveals a budding society where we aren't bound or limited by outdated and narrow-minded views of harmful gender stereotypes and restrictive gendered fashion. And, it provides an opportunity for much-needed representation, validation, and growth in certain sociocultural aspects of our world.

Fashion and gender have always had an interdependent relationship, influenced by society's paradigms regarding gender norms, roles, and expressions. As a social phenomenon, fashion has long served as a means for individuals to outwardly declare and express their personal identity. Fashion often draws distinctions between genders, social groups, and communities. As a tool, fashion can either perpetuate certain gender stigmas and stereotypes, or protest and subvert them. As gender norms change, restrictions for fashion shift accordingly,

binary identities begin to fade, and fashion becomes more fluid. Such a changing phenomenon demonstrates the rise of a “paradigm shift” in our culture regarding the way we perceive gender expression, identity, and subsequent fashion standards. As we continue to move into themes of fluidity and androgyny, clothes have begun to lose their once strict gendering. Preexisting boundaries have become blurred as we continue to negotiate our understanding of gender and what is considered valid and acceptable.

Consequently, we can track the ongoing changes in gender ideologies throughout different eras with outward displays of fashion and create a sort of “fashion timeline.” Doing this allows us to make better sense of where we are in the paradigm shift we currently find ourselves in. While examining the belief systems that contributed to certain paradigms regarding gender roles and, by extension, dictated fashion boundaries, we are able to weigh the ramifications of these shifts, which proves useful in understanding where we have come from and where we might be headed.

Before forming a timeline of gendered fashion, we must first establish what factors constitute a paradigm shift. Thomas Kuhn, a philosopher of science, argued that paradigm shifts lead to changes in our systems of thinking which usher in scientific revolutions. His notion of a paradigm shift has since been taken up by cultural studies theorists who use his theorization as a basis for understanding deep cultural shifts. He argues in his work, “The Nature and Necessity of Scientific Revolutions” that changes are “inaugurated by a growing sense...that an existing paradigm has ceased to function adequately in the exploration of an aspect of nature to which the paradigm itself had previously led the way” (310). We see new ideas grow and theories develop which contradict the old ones and cannot be reconciled until we change the paradigms we use to explain the world around us.

Principally, Kuhn notes there are three types of phenomena which contribute to the nature of paradigm shifts. “The first consists of phenomena already well explained by existing paradigms” (313). This type will rarely challenge a paradigm enough to incite a shift, and belief systems will often go unquestioned until there is a need to develop systems further. Such a need leads to the second class of phenomena, “[which] consists of those whose nature is indicated by existing paradigms, but can be understood only through further articulation” (314). This type mainly consists of an understanding of phenomena that scientists are trying to build upon within an already developed paradigm, by the way of existing theory. In the sociocultural realm, this might look like an attempt to further understand an existing cultural practice, or better articulate the ways in which an established belief system regulates society. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn considers this process by which scientists proceed and rely on the continuation of a past set of methods or research tradition—a preexisting paradigm—as “Normal Science”.

There will be times, however, when further research does not render certain phenomena compatible to a theory or belief system. Such marks the classification of the third type of phenomenon—the emergence of anomalies “...whose characteristic feature is their stubborn refusal to be assimilated to existing paradigms” (*The Structure* 97). Paradigm shifts may occur from a variety of circumstances, but only when these anomalies are significant enough to undermine the preexisting paradigm and prompt what Kuhn classifies as a “Model Crisis” [1]—because the attempts to resolve said anomalies by way of the old paradigm have consistently failed. It is in this step of the “Kuhn Cycle” where the actual paradigm shift starts. “All crises begin with the blurring of a paradigm and the consequent loosening of the rules for ‘normal’ research” (*The Structure* 84). Ideas that challenge the existing paradigm start to develop, and several competing theories will emerge, until the shift is complete, and a new paradigm has been implemented, redefining the views of the field, its research methods, and larger goals.

Now, it is important to recognize that paradigm shifts are often lengthy and gradual processes, requiring a significant level of change at a fundamental level. It often takes scientists a considerable amount of time before they finally concede their paradigm cannot grant them a solution to the prolonged anomalies before them (*The Structure* 77). Only then, can “revolution” begin. This is especially true of socio-cultural revolutions.

The purpose of this work, then, is to apply Kuhn’s theory of paradigm shifts—originally utilized to make sense of scientific revolutions—to cultural movements. Granted, one article cannot touch on every complex multiplicity that factors into a sociocultural paradigm shift, which are fairly seismic and lead society along a prolonged path of development. When dealing with human culture and existence, systems are far more complex, and it takes much longer for a paradigm shift—which requires massive change on a fundamental level—to become an accepted part of a culture.

Because this thing that Kuhn calls a paradigm shift happens in a cycle, it is difficult to determine with pinpoint accuracy where we are situated in the cycle. To a certain degree, we often will not recognize we are in the paradigm shift until after it has happened—you can only know its presence by the effects it creates. During this period of transition, “there will be a large but never complete overlap between problems that can be solved by the old and by the new paradigm” (*The Structure* 85). And, until its effects are quantifiable in some way, shape, or form, it will be difficult to measure current circumstances. Such is a reality of the chaotic “back and forth” between paradigms in the “Model Crisis” step. Thus, the only way we can understand what is going on in the “here and now” is by looking back at where we have come from. The ways in which fashion has changed provides us a way to look back at where we came from and serves to track our changing perceptions of gender.

If we situate Kuhn's work into the context of gender and fashion, we can understand the cultural revolution as a reflection of how we acknowledge the concepts of gender and identity. This cultural revolution is one such example of a paradigm shift. To debrief this shift in its entirety would take volumes, which is why this work focuses solely on fashion. By its nature, fashion is subject to gradual development over a period of time. Subsequently, this work does not discuss the gradual evolution of fashion, but rather the watershed moments that reflect a revolutionary shift of how we understand gender. The fashion changes that reflect the revolutionary shift manifest as "anomalies"—as opposed to mere fashion trends happening naturally—which challenge the preexisting gender paradigm during the Model Crisis.

Although a perfunctory examination of fashion trends in the public realm seems at first unremarkable, mapping the changes in fashion choices helps us reveal the underlying mechanisms and belief systems which structures certain aspects of our culture. In fact, Patrik Aspers and Frédéric Godart qualify in their work "Sociology of Fashion: Order and Change" that characteristically, "fashion lies at the crossroads of several core subject matters, including collective and personal identity dynamics ...social distinction, and imitation mechanisms" (172). In these circumstances, fashion is more than a collection of threads, patterns, and fabrics. Instead, fashion serves as a medium for our identification—a declaratory act of expression—in both the artistic and political sense. For decades fashion has continued to be influenced by factors related to our social order—especially when it comes to gender and gender politics. Many philosophers and sociologists have long considered how gender influences, and is influenced by, fashion—beyond simple "clothing and dress." Sociologist Georg Simmel, for example, has argued that "gender is—at least partially—made through fashion" (Aspers and Godart 180). Gender roles, which have been perpetuated by our social order, have long dictated codes of fashion and boundaries regarding what was reserved for men and for women. Because of this, fashion serves as "a powerful authority of cultural norms and symbols that shape[s] and mold[s] gender differences" (Aspers and Godart 184).

In certain circumstances, fashion was used to shape and sustain certain stereotypes that resulted from preconceived differences in gender roles. Early studies of fashion were first articulated in terms of class and gender distinction. Leora Auslander, in her work, "Deploying Material Culture to Write the History of Gender and Sexuality: The Example of Clothing and Textiles", recounts some fashion trends used as a way to distinguish between men, women, and class. First and foremost, however, it is important to note that the history of "gendered" clothing begins without such a distinction. In fact, history shows that in periods "...with no pretense of political, legal, or social gender equality, clothing styles equally highlighted male legs, buttocks, and genitalia, [in the same way it highlighted] female breasts [and sexuality]" (Auslander 168). This

all began to change around the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In fact, during the mid-eighteenth century—a period known as the great masculine renunciation(Bourke)—men’s fashion reserved “...somber colors, minimal decoration, fabrics without sheen, and body obscuring forms” (Auslander 165). The idea behind this change in clothing held that differences between men, in power, were to be diminished, and those among men and women, who were subservient, were to be heavily distinguished (Auslander 165-166).

This shift in wardrobe occurred out of the budding belief that men, and no women, were to govern, and that they should be dressed in plain or “useful” clothing. “Useful” clothing reflected the “useful” man—the working man in power. “The advent of the suit for example,” Auslander writes, “both marked and helped to create a change in the definition of masculinity” (157). Because of this shift in gender ideals, the right to wear pants became a key struggle for women moving forward. Gender struggles of this nature soon became very prominent in society. Early fashion advertisements and perceived social etiquette set out strict gender norms dictating what clothing was appropriate for men and what was allowed for women. As explained in Simmel’s analysis of gender, early fashion such as this put forth “...two opposing forces in society: unity (inclusion) and difference (exclusion)” (Aspers and Godart 179). Men, through the latter half of the eighteenth century, now dressed to signify “usefulness” and inclusion, while women had to dress in a way which labeled them as excluded. Clothes thus became a tool to classify bodies, which in turn both defined and sustained differences in gender roles, and the subsequent power imbalances that arose throughout the nineteenth century and well into the early twentieth.

But, if we continue tracking the change in gender ideology, a trend of anomalous fashion emerges. As times changed and our understanding of the gender paradigm developed—particularly those beliefs associated with binaries and dichotomies—the resulting sociocultural beliefs, or paradigms regarding “typical” gender norms and roles also shifted. During the latter half of the twentieth century, the concept of “gender” as a whole, per Shelley Budgeon, was also “deployed to great effect in dismantling perceived differences between men and women” (317). When the increased dialectic of “gender” took off, it was seen by many as a tactic to challenge those long-held, unequal social relations and began permeating revolutionary shifts throughout the country. Fashion reflected that change. Beginning as early as the 1930s, we see pants and trousers becoming more regularly incorporated into women’s clothing. As Lisa Santandrea explains in an interview with HuffPost, pants became increasingly used “as a symbol of freedom that women hadn’t had before” (Bruculier).

Indeed, these kinds of subversive fashion demonstrations only continued to increase and become normalized as part of cultural liberation movements. Betty Luther Hillman reveals in her work that during the 1960s and 1970s, “gender presentation was a central source of political and cultural contention

across the United States. Activists and cultural critics of all sorts grappled with what it meant to ‘look like’ a man or a woman and what roles dress and gender presentation ought to play in their cultural politics” (180-181). In this contention, we see perhaps the clearest connection linking fashion as an outward manifestation of changing gender norms. Numerous social and cultural movements during these time periods came marked with distinct styles of dress and codes of fashion—denoting changing ideologies and cultural practices. For example, “the Beatles inspired teenage boys to grow their hair long, and the hippies grew their hair even longer; black men and women sported afros to signify Black Power; feminists removed their bras and scorned makeup and high heels; youth wore blue jeans, floral prints, and ruffled shirts to mark the rise of unisex fashion trends” (Hillman 157). In all of these cases, the shift away from previously held paradigms about acceptable gender norms correlated with an increasing rise in anomalous fashions trends that rejected them.

Similarly, many current cultural movements have championed a more fluid kind of fashion. What was once criticized and mocked has become increasingly normalized as unisex fashion touts a freedom of expression for all individuals, regardless of gender, class, race, or other positionality. Take the theme of the 2019 Met Gala—Camp [2]: Notes on Fashion—which challenged influencers and celebrities to traverse the boundaries of fashion and dress in ways that would have been historically unthinkable. Most used it as an opportunity to subvert traditional gendered fashions. From three-piece suits and matching high heels to androgynous-style wardrobe and makeup, the night saw a plethora of gender-bending sensations—including the notable examples of Billy Porter’s “Tuxedo Gown” and Michael Urie’s split dress/suit ensemble.

Yet another, more recent display of subversive fashion is found in the 2020 December issue of *Vogue*, where Harry Styles, the first man to ever grace the magazine cover solo, wore what has been considered traditionally as women’s clothing. *Vogue*’s magazine cover garnered quite a different reaction from the rejective backlash we have seen in the past, eliciting a mostly [3] exultant reaction for the singer from fans, fellow celebrities, and public figures alike. As unisex fashion has become more mainstream and widespread, gender-bending clothes and dress like the above examples have only increased, becoming symbols which Hillman claims “explicitly challenge[s] the cultural norms of gender” (176). Looking at these examples in a wholistic sense, we see how in the same way clothes were historically used to classify bodies and perpetuate stereotypes, genderless fashion has long been used to validate a larger spectrum of identities and changing beliefs.

These changes in popular culture concerning fashion and expression demonstrate the ever-increasing development of sociocultural paradigms related to gender issues. Changes in sociocultural attitudes in the past decades have risen and fallen, but that which remains constant is the clear correlation between types

of fashion and related cultural beliefs regarding gender and identity. Certain styles may be defined as masculine or feminine, but these diverging movements have shown that fashion is in no way fixed or static. As Auslander writes: “a form of clothing may be defined as exclusively masculine at one historical moment and then be adopted by women [or vice versa], changing meaning as it changes users” (168). Accordingly, if we are to stay ahead of this paradigm shift, we must recognize that it is appropriate for fashion to be fluid in the same way gender expression can be fluid. As mentioned previously, it is nearly impossible to pin down the evolution of this paradigm while it is ongoing. However, from the movements we have started to map and observe, we are clearly in the middle of a Model Crisis, in which there is a campaign for the normalization of “fluid fashion” and expression in everyday society. Take the word of fashion editorials, ranging from *British GQ* to *The New York Times*, to *The Atlantic* and more, touting the same thing: genderfluid clothing is on the rise because of a marked shift in the way people choose to dress and express themselves, stemming from a desire to break down the barriers of outdated gender norms and stereotypes (Mauoi; Ferla; Chrisman-Campbell).

History has shown us that these demonstrations are about more than “just clothes”—remember the ways in which dictated codes of dress were used to unjustly exclude and distinguish between gender, race, class, and other positionalities. These practices resulted from perceived societal norms which have a past littered with intolerance and inequality. Consider the individuals who were made to feel ostracized or alienated throughout history for not conforming to themes of oppression and/or exclusion. Or those who received backlash and consequence for the methods of cultural subversion they used to push back against unjust norms and restrictions. For individuals who opted to experiment with types of dress and style, those long-held paradigms and expectations created blatant barriers and cultural conflicts that closed the door to their opportunities and equality. Those who were unable to fit into the box set forth by society had to fight to exist...and to survive. And yet, for the memories of those pioneers, current shifts in ideology offer a promising contrast to some of the darker themes of the past.

As we grow and discover new information, long-held theories can change—many times for the better. This, in turn, shifts the paradigms that structure our world, and our “ways of being” assimilate this new information in a way that reflects the societal progress. The campaign for freedom of expression, regardless of race, class, gender, or sexuality, reflects the steady shift in our understanding of identity politics and acceptable means of expression. From what is now understood about gender, our fashion practices have begun to reject the binary which previously dictated social order and distributed power along gender lines. If gender is indeed a social construct, then it does not matter what men and women are “supposed” to do, what men and women want to do, and ultimately,

what men and women choose to do. Fundamentally, these campaigns advocate for a recognition and validation of the spectrum of identities that have existed throughout humanity.

Compared to previous decades, our current fashion trends and practices speak to the substantial ground this movement has gained, but the work is far from over. The visibility of continued gender differences complicates the ways that gender ideals organize social relations. In her work, Auslander informed us that “from the mid-twentieth century onwards, despite the rising claim for gender equality, clothing has continued to be designed to obscure masculine attributes and highlight the feminine as it did in the nineteenth century” (168). If these ideas—which purport that men and women are fundamentally different—are to be challenged, the ideology that structures people’s perceptions must be shifted, which can be an arduous process. While the boundaries of gendered fashion have started to blur, there are still clear delineations between which style is “supposed” to be reserved for men and women. Part of this resistance results from institutions continuing to cling to outdated stereotypes and norms, producing negative consequences for individuals who opt to play with themes of gender and dress. And, as is indicative of a Model Crisis, there is also a difficulty to articulate and balance the competing theories which have emerged in response to this paradigm shift: Do we consider this movement to be genderfluid? Androgynous? Do we focus on one specific aspect of fashion or several? Is it a fight for inclusion? A “new normal?” What of those who want to remain in a gendered wardrobe? Is there a way to retire outdated fashion classifications? Should we stop gendering clothes in their entirety? Until we can answer these questions, our preexisting paradigm will fight until the bitter end of the Model Crisis.

Regardless, the growth we have witnessed is to be celebrated. Currently, individuals no longer have as high of a risk of backlash if they want to experiment with their personal expression and style. Thus, individuals are less likely to feel rejected or reprimanded for experimenting with their own distinct identity. This paradigm shift, then, is more than just a change in gender ideology or fashion boundaries. It is an evolution of the ties between style, expression, and personal identity. It is a precursor of a society where all have an explicit freedom to preserve and proclaim their identities in whatever style or fashion correlates to their own identity. It is the promise that they will have an undeniable liberty to dress themselves in whatever way that they want, whatever way that they feel, and whatever way fits them best—without fear of consequence. Fashion trends will always come and go, but the implications of anomalous fashion movements will last forever, bringing with them a new era of tolerance, validation, and acceptance that is long overdue.



1. I wish to acknowledge that there is also a “Model Drift” step, which lies between “Normal Science” and “Model Crisis.” This step emerges when a preexisting paradigm begins to lose a general efficacy in succeeding to deal with incoming phenomena. For the scope of this paper, however, it has been intentionally omitted so as to not overly complicate the context of content to follow.

2. As discussed by Susan Sontag in her formative 1964 essay “Notes on Camp”: “the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration...”

3. While Harry Styles received praise from an overwhelming majority, there was still a sizeable backlash against his decision to grace the cover in a ball gown and other non-conforming dress, sparking debate among the public—which reveals succinctly the contention between anomal(ies) and a dying paradigm.

## Convergence Rhetoric

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