

Dismantling and Deconstructing the Structured Gender Codes of Retail Spaces of South African Menswear Fashion

VIVENCE KALITANYI

*Department of Business Management, School of Management,
University of Johannesburg*

Abstract

A study was conducted in Johannesburg, South Africa, to explore and investigate the possibilities of designing spaces acting as a conduit in deconstructing and dismantling gender codes in retail spaces of South African menswear fashion. With a focus on sex and gender theorists' works such as Kaiser (2012), literature on gender, social semiotics, symbols and meanings was reviewed. The study adopted a deductive approach, and followed a qualitative methodological choice. Structured interviews as well as online questionnaire surveys were used to collect data, while coding and descriptive statistics were used to analyse and develop the data. The overall results implicate that participants from the interviews feel that right now, South Africa is ready for gender neutrality in retail spaces. Furthermore, the study confirmed that gender neutrality in fashion has a positive impact on the South African fashion industry. The study suggests further useful ideas on how retail spaces can identify their own evolutionary paths on gender divisions and non-binary fashion in South Africa. The study brings an original contribution, in the sense that gender neutral fashion articulations in South Africa haven't been fully explored, despite the fact that this has been trending around the world, yet retail spaces still follow gender divisions.

Keywords: *gender codes, retail spaces, non-binary fashion, menswear fashion, gender neutral, South Africa*

The study aims to discuss an alteration of fashion and how it can be seen outside of its gendered constructs (Sultana and Shahriar, 2017). As reported by Butler (1990), gender itself has been a topic under debate and it has been discussed quite extensively by geographers, scholars and feminist theorists. Efforts of complicating its naturalness of binary binds have been put in place since Butler wrote *Gender Trouble* in 1990. This prompted many to see gender outside of its constructs and how gender should move beyond the binary framings of normative and hegemonic gender identities (Johnston, 2015: 2). Yeodon (2016, p. 1) writes that non-binary gender identities have accumulated more social awareness and visibility in the public eye. As a result, major strides were taken toward deconstructing and destabilising gender.



Reis, Pereira, Jerónimo and Azeved (2018) report that unisex and less gendered clothing has been a trending phenomenon in recent studies and also in people's expression of their cultures. Similarly, many luxury fashion houses and design spaces such as Gucci and Louis Vuitton have been challenging gendered clothing labels and how clothing is unmarked and genderless. In South Africa, designers such as Roman Handt (2017) and Blunke (2019) have both expressed articulation of non-binary menswear fashion and also challenged structured hegemonic rules of fashioning the male body. Gender and fashion are both similar and intersect with each other, just like other subject positions, such as race, ethnicity, and class. Like gender, fashion involves navigating and negotiating through time and space, as a social process. Fashion only materializes through this process of the body (Kaiser, 2012, p. 1). Designers such as Roman Handt explore the social and cultural constructs of gender that appear natural and universal in South Africa.

In South Africa, retail sectors still uphold gender divisions and structured hegemonic gender codes of accessing and consuming fashion. Retail spaces would usually conform to keeping up with trends and acclimate to the changes that the market spaces move into (Hines & Bruce, 2012). This article provides the reader with a thick catalogue of knowledge that is necessary and could be of great impact on the study of fashion and gender in South Africa. More importantly, the study tries to create an awareness of the trend in the retail clothing industry, and suggest the possibilities of dismantling and deconstructing gender codes in retail spaces in menswear fashion. The next section presents a review of literature, followed by the methodology, as well as the discussion of the findings. It ends with recommendations and suggestions for future researches.

Key definitions

All definitions of key terms used in this article can be found in this section. All definitions were taken from *Merriam Webster* online dictionary. However, as mentioned by Cofir and Wood (2017), from the ancient world until now, “women were de-legitimised” in archival processes. This statement gives room to justify the almost inexistence of some feminist words in many dictionaries. Consequently, the current study mainly used *Merriam Webster* as well as Google Dictionary to provide definitions for some key words in the study.

- **Agendered** – A term used that is mainly translated as not having a gender, or ‘without gender’. This term can relate closely and can be defined along the lines of non-binary gender identities (www.merriam-webster.com/agender). Google dictionary define agender as a person who does not identify themselves as having a particular gender. However, Google Dictionary warns not to be mistaken by taking an agender person for a bisexual.
- **Intersectionality** – A term that is used to explain the interconnecting nature of social constructs and categorizations such as gender, race and sexuality. This term explains the overlapping and correlations between each group (www.merriam-webster.com/intersectionality). From a generic perspective, the concept of intersection refers to a point or line common to lines or surfaces that intersect. Additionally, intersection means “a point at which two or more things intersect, especially a road junction (Google Dictionary).
- **Africanness** – A term describing the quality of African descent and/or belonging to and native of Africa (www.merriam-webster.com/africanness).

- **Cis Gender** – A person who personally identifies and correlates with their assigned birth sex (www.merriam-webster.com/cisgendered). Similarly, Google dictionary refers to Cis Gender as a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Contextualising gender

According to Kaiser (2012) gender is a process that is done by the body on a systematic and routine basis. A separation between sex (male vs. female) and gender (masculinity vs. femininity) has been established by various feminist theorists to distinguish between the two. The feminist theorists such as Mari (2022) determined that sex is linked to biology and gender is of social constructs, by elaborating that gender is advocated socially and culturally represented. Becoming discernibly gendered in your body takes the complex involvement of coding systems with colours and other fashioned bodies (Kaiser, 2012, p.121-128). The author goes further and state that gender is not only about who people are, but rather about how people perform gender. Gender is always under construction, socially and culturally speaking. This performance of gender depends on how it is embodied and practised through culture and the discourses that occur. Butler (1990) refers to the exchange between gender and interpretation as performativity (Kaiser, 2012, p. 123). Other authors (Linstead & Pullen, 2006) add that linguistic and social performances are created through appropriating gender as performativity (Linstead & Pullen, 2006, p. 3).

In the 1980s, it was propagated to parents that pink was viewed as more of a masculine and robust colour while blue was regarded as the more modest and toned down colour, therefore blue became appropriated to girls and pink being taken for boys. Since then, both colours became an institutionalized norm, in an essentialist rule of gender coding (Kaiser, 2012, p. 121). This is indeed correct, as Paoletti (2012) states, gender coding systems were not practised up until the 1930s. The idea of pink-is-for-girls and blue-is-for-boys came after, and the coding system was deeply anchored and became neutral to people, a phenomenon that is described by the concept of *habitus*—a set of dispositions/ habits being ingrained into a person (Bourdieu, 2009). The baby boom generation (1946 - 1964) was among the first to take gender coding systems more seriously for infants (Paoletti, 2012). The systematic routine of coding infant babies preludes to society creating "binary binds". Binary binds are created through gender discourses that occur in the current time and space (Paoletti, 2012).

Children begin to adapt and learn these gender distinctions before they enter school. Pink and blue colour choices act as determining factors in the gender that a child is assigned, even in infancy when the child isn't able to comprehend meanings attached to such symbols. These rules apply in adult clothing due to long-standing cultural patterns that have been practised for decades (Paoletti, 1987). In the 1900s gender ambiguity in the U.S baby clothing market was tolerated for children. Boys and girls wore dresses and became shorter as they grew. A case study on Sienna's style-fashion-dress for kids details how gender coding systems can take on a nuanced position. The study details how even the trim of the collar or shape of sleeves can determine the gender of clothing (Kaiser, 2012, p. 121).

Feminist theorists such as Kaiser (2012) directed his critique toward fixed universal "binary binds". In Kaiser's view, these hypothetical binds promote essentialist channels of

being and add limitations to life choices. Furthermore, feminists have also queried binary oppositions that sort gender into euro-modern perceptions and contexts. Feminist theory recalls gender not being fixed and is not a neutral concept. It is disrupted by power relations in culture and society. The larger objective feminists seek to complicate is the hierarchy and binary oppositions altogether (Kaiser, 2012, p. 129). Just as feminist theory seeks to complicate gender binary oppositions, genderqueer theory, at present, suggests unbalanced binary oppositions such as heterosexuality versus homosexuality. An example of complicating hegemonic ways of appearing can be seen by drag queens and drag kings in the gay community (Kaiser, 2012, p. 130-3). Refer to *Figure 1*. According to Evans and Thornton (1986), various symbols and practices of femininity such as wearing make-up or putting on a bra were rejected by some feminists. The belief was that these traditional and exclusive symbols and activities were seen as trapping femininity into traditional hegemonic roles (Kaiser, 2012, p. 11).



Figure 1. Anka Shayne, a well-known drag queen, is a stunning example of Denver's best *drag talent*.

Social semiotics, symbols and meanings

Social semiotics is the study and analysis of popular culture and the people who engage with the phenomenon. Social semiotics depicts popular culture as a skeleton of social and cultural facts in a systematic pool of differences. Its main focus or genres of mass culture include films, TV programs, and social media (Vox, 2018). The study focuses on the behaviour of society in mass culture, how people behave, socially and culturally. In a video about creating fear symbols, it explains that there was no universal method of communicating to people that danger is present.

Linking gender and social semiotics, Bakhtiari and Saadat (2025) postulate that gender representation has been done through both verbal and visual modes, though research has shown that visual mode has superficially focused on how each gender appears in different roles rather than how both gender are represented. The authors go further to say that “gender stereotypes have long been studied as a prevalent source of ideologies”. They provide an example of linguistic texts that can include sex ideologies, visuals lend themselves even more to stereotyping gender identities. The above arguments are supported by Goffman (1979), when he denied that images displayed in various marketing tools are not pure reflections of the reality about gender roles. Goffman rather attributed the responsibilities of parents to men and those of children to women in an attempt to characterise the relation men-women in visual

advertisements and proceeded to describe that relation in terms of size, feminine touch, function ranking, reutilisation of subordination, and licensed withdrawal. Sadly, according to Bathiari and Saadat, Gofmman’s findings revealed that the advertisements did not depict women as they were in the real world.

Environmental health engineer Baldwin (1966) and Dow Chemicals created a symbol that was meant to be memorable, but meaningless. Ultimately the final decision was the symbol that is seen in *Figure 2*. This symbol was successful in simple ways that strategically conjured associations and meanings. This biohazard symbol became a universal symbol that conveyed all types of danger (Vox, 2018). The same can be said about gender symbols and their associated meanings. An example of these symbols can be seen in *Figure 3*. The symbols and their associations date back to the beginning of civilization. Linnaeus (1751) was the first to use these symbols and used these symbols to denote between males and females in a biological context (Whistler, 2017). These symbols have been utilized as a fundamental tool in creating structured binary oppositions and differentiation between both female and male subjects (Whistler, 2017).



Figure 2. Biohazard symbol created by Dow Chemical in 1960, provided by Florence Inferno.

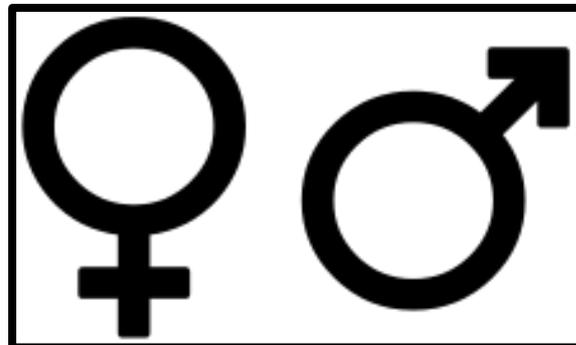


Figure 3. Gender symbols representing gender. The left represents female Venus and the right represents Mars, which is male.

Bakhtiari and Saadat (2025: 25) post a picture of a man standing at two meters away from his wife and a young daughter waiving at him, as he seemed to be leaving to work. The interpretation of the image is that women seem to belong at home. On the following page (p. 26), another picture portrays a man and a woman laughing, while the woman puts her hand on her mouth. The picture is interpreted as if shyness belongs to women.

Derrida (1966), the French philosopher, wrote an essay titled "Structure, Sign, and Plays in the Discourse of the Human Sciences". The essay exposes structuralism and its complex ideas of communicating meaning, and how humans are not securely anchored to meaning. Structuralism refers to words relating to reality through linguistic practices. Words and symbols have no meaning but the meanings attached to them. The only way meaning and linguistic actions link to words is due to the English language creating a structure to the word. Derrida (1966) writes that structuralism is understood and applied by generating meaning and creating fundamental structures that allow things to occur. Derrida (1966) exposes contradictions in structuralism by arguing that the main logic behind it, is that language is not fixed or anchored to reality.

Fundamental structures are desired and found. These fundamental structures create fixed entrenched origins that create meaning. This logic limits flexibility and free interpretation

of reality. The retail spaces can be classified as following structuralism and the rules in consumption. Structuralism creates desires to find fundamental structures in everyday life which provides a fixed point of a structure. Derrida (1966) argues how this contradiction can be blurred only by accepting the logic of not having structures to create meaning.

Gender non-conforming fashion articulation

The discourses of hegemonic dichotomies (perceptive that man/women dichotomy is the natural state) came with methods inspired to challenge hegemonic masculinity. Cheng (1999) defines hegemonic masculinity as a practice that legitimise men’s dominant position in a society. The characteristics of that domination are aggressiveness, competitiveness, athletic prowess, stoicism, and control. However, Cheng maintains that this aggressiveness is an important aspect of cementing the hegemonic masculinity because it is way of proving the hegemonic masculinity through aggressiveness or even violent behaviour towards what is regarded “feminine”, such as women, homosexuals, and nerds.

Pluralizing masculinities to allow for ambiguous modes of articulation with gender was one of those methods (Kaiser, 2012). The author goes on to report that the Zoot Suit and the La Sape Movements in Congo were two very important statements of complicating hegemonic masculinity. These two movements showed agitation toward hegemonic boundaries of becoming and dressing (Kaiser, 2012, p. 137). *Figures 4 and 5* give an example of the Zoot Suit and the La Sape movement. Individuals in the La Sape movement were also known as Sapeurs. The movements expressed intersectionalities with sex, gender, and ethnicity. They housed multiple masculinities interlinked and intertwined in one body.



Figure 4. Example of the La Sape Movement in Brazzaville, Congo. A group of Sapeurs modelling their looks and individual interpretation of style-fashion-dress.



Figure 5. A scene that was taken from the fashion film *Lonely Cowboy* by Maxime Thysen. The scene showcases Blünkes’ 2019 collection.

Thomas (2003) stated that these movements should be seen as an articulation of rebellion and reluctance toward colonial ambivalence (Kaiser, 2012, pp. 141-2). The movements were evident in creating panic, anxiety and cultural discourse throughout hegemonic times. Furthermore, these movements were inspired by going against euro-modernity (perspective according to which, modernity emerged from Europe and expanded throughout the world) and hegemonic masculinities in their act of renouncing ornamentation from menswear. Tensions ensued all due to the Zoot Suit. The hegemonic business suit of the late 1940s was said to be inspired by the Zoot Suit. Its appearance was more of a toned-down version of it (Kaiser, 2012, p.139-142).

Critical theorist Foucault (1977) stipulates that adopting gender and sexuality in a Möbius Strip way can avoid the pitfalls of universal binary oppositions being created and propagated to society (Kaiser, 2012). The 18th century "Mollies" in London was another approach to dismantling hegemonic masculinities through fashion. This was a secretive male sexual subculture formed to create freedom of expression and articulation. Mollies wore all types of elaborate and feminine clothing such as milkmaid outfits and shepherdess costumes. The purpose behind this was to promote their desire to dress up, to cultivate communities within the subculture, promote identity through sexuality and to advocate for non-hegemonic possibilities of becoming gendered (Kaiser, 2012, p.152).

The interplay between fashion and gender is quite an important collaboration. Being visibly gendered can only happen through *articulation* - an expression of one's interpretation of where and when they find themselves in time and space. Embodiment is only possible through this process. Cultural theorist Chomsky (1986) uses the metaphor of the Möbius strip (named after Augustus Möbius) to describe the convergence of twos between time, space and gender. This logic creates a perspective of seeing two sides as one continuous surface. *Figure 6* provides an example of a Möbius strip. Fashion is fixated with gender and its influence on redefining gender boundaries. Fashion systematically continues to toy with gender and continuously deconstructs it (Entwistle, 2015, p.141-180 and Wilson, 1985: 117).



Figure 6. An example of the Möbius Strip, named after Augustus Möbius. This illustrates how the convergence of twos manifests and materialises.

In recent years, footwear has gradually evolved and transformed from appearing as running shoes to shoes rather more for everyday wear. Brands such as Balenciaga, Converse and the collaboration that Adidas has done with Kanye West on the Yeezy Boost collection, have

released shoes of athleisure aesthetics. These brands have incorporated comfort and affordability in their shoes but have also included a crucial aspect to the shoes (Twigg, 2018). This aspect is being gender-neutrality. The exceptions of women to be dressed in a certain way to appeal to men have changed and become obscure. High heels are no longer required or seen as a necessity for women to wear. This has inspired a shift in women prioritising comfort in footwear. High fashion labels have become accustomed to comfortable footwear and realizing the growing market and revenue on them. This is due to the evolution of the professional lives of society. Before fashion, trainers were known for being seen on sports fields and the streets. Trainers such the tennis shoes, named after the icon Stan Smiths, have been catapulted to ubiquitous high fashion items. Fashion labels have been able to incorporate gender non-conformity through footwear. Certain styles such as the Balenciaga sock shoe and Kanye Wests' Yeezy boosts have been seen on men and women. These styles present an absence of gender divisions through their aesthetics of neutrality (Twigg, 2018).

A footwear brand known as "Irregular Choices" is known for creating collections filled with glitter, pastel colours and traditional feminine aesthetics such as flowers and dolls. However, they do not classify themselves as a girl's label. They have positioned themselves as a brand that caters for all kids without thinking from a gender perspective. The stance that the label has taken, signifies the trending movement of removing gender stereotypes out of the children's industry of fashion. Stereotypes that have defined for decades the way a fashion item is designed and distributed has started to fall away (Clack, 2018).

It is imperative for this shift of less gendered clothing in kids wear to be done due to the shift in perspective regarding gender. According to a survey done by Mintel, U.S., parents with kids of 12 years of age and below are not bothered by gender and support the trend of gender-neutrality in children's fashion. According to Paoletti (2012), gender divisions came about due to manufacturers creating methods to increase sales. This method introduced gender segmentation in kids' products by persuading parents to purchase twice as many items. This also prompted mothers to determine the sex of the baby before birth to make sure they purchase, what they regard as appropriate items for the gender of the baby (Clack, 2018).

The prominence of hegemonic gender articulation

Rosaldo (1974) posits that a cross-cultural perspective depicts male activities to be more important than female activities. This creates a discourse that causes inequality in the gender playing field. This created the attachment of male bodies in the position of the gazing subject and females being fixed into the sex-object position (Kaiser, 2012, p.129). Euro-modernity placed gender in fixed binary terms for fashion and articulation. Gender and fashion were organized in the opinion that fashion belongs to femininity. This demarcation of gender and fashion was due to hegemonic masculine discourse. Feminists of the 1900's debated the extent to which fashion and beauty systematically fix women and femininity in traditional roles.

Beward (1999) stated that the renunciation of masculinity and ornamentation from fashion was not sudden, but planned and calculated. Unmarking masculinity included less discernible clothing and style-fashion-dress. This meant that the fashioning of the body was not to be apparent. Such power relations to gender and fashion were present and aid in determining the gender hierarchy in culture and society (Kaiser, 2012, p.11 &126). By the 19th century, the only frameworks available for gender and sexuality were based on universal binary beliefs. This meant that either they had to conform to heteronormative gender roles, or they

weren't recognized (Kaiser, 2012, p.152). Heteronormativity is the concept that heterosexuality is the preferred or normal mode of sexual orientation. It assumes the gender binary and that sexual and marital relations are most fitting between people of opposite sex.

Foucault (1972) mentions that the discourses of culture in time have paved understandings of different subject positions such as gender in a historic and institutionalized process (Kaiser, 2012, p. 21). Individuals representing themselves in a momentary sense allow the becoming of who they are. Ultimately this links to fashioning the body (Kaiser, 2012 and Tulloch, 2010). Due to hegemonic power relations, it is seen as irrational for masculine power to appropriate female power. However, the borrowing of masculine power from feminine power was seen as more logical and acceptable. MtF (Male-to-Female) cross-dressing is more likely to cause anxiety among hegemonic spaces rather than FtM (Female-to-Male) cross-dressing (Kaiser, 2012, p. 133). Johnston (2015, p. 10) agrees in saying that methods that unsettle the hegemonic boundaries between man, women, gay and straight sexual identities can be seen through the borrowing of feminine power.

As pointed out by White (n.d.), gender-neutral and non-binary gender identities are a subculture/subcultures that is/are deviant according to the standards of society. These titles include transgender, agendered (without gender), non-binary, unisex and genderqueer. This can refer to people who identify as a combination of behaviours such as men and women, neither man nor women or an individual that rejects heteronormative hegemonic and static ideas held on gender identities (PFLAG, 2019).

In the view of Mouton (2001, p. 195) and Bailey (1987, p. 95), many subcultures are not visible, this presents it impractical for this study to take on routine sampling. Many participants of certain subcultures are not visible or identifiable. An individual's gender cannot be presumed by physical attributes. This would be gender and sexual stereotyping (OHCHR, 2013). It is prohibited to gender stereotype as it undermines fundamental freedom and the enjoyment of human rights. A gender stereotype is an overgeneralised view or opinion about attributes and characteristics performed and possessed by women and men. Gender stereotyping is the act of participation in ascribing specific attributes or characteristics by reason for them to belong in that specific social group or gender (OHCHR, 2013).

Overview on gender issues in South Africa

With the ascent to freedom, the South African government adopted a system of living by democratic values. These includes the principles of human dignity, equality and social justice. The South African Bill of Rights provides a range of protected categories of people, which includes age, gender and sexual orientation. Indeed, Section 9 of the Constitution, forbids anybody, any institution to *“unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth”* (Bill of Rights, RSA, 1996).

Notwithstanding these values being integral part of the South African constitution, women and other minorities (such as gays and lesbians) are still far from enjoying the benefits of those values. Numerous researches such as that of Nel and Judge (2008) indicate that homophobic victimisation is an endemic in the country. In their current study, Reygan, Henderson and Khan (2022) show that the discrimination of Lesbian, gay, bisexual and

transgender (LGTB) remains a major issue in the South Africa because the society is still predominantly patriarchal.

Below are horrifying stories that highlight the plight of LGBTs in South Africa as collected by Reygan *et al* (2022):

Diane, a mixed-race “lesbian woman from Johannesburg articulated her refusal to become invisible as an older lesbian woman”:

“Well, for me of course it’s intersectional. I’m black, I’m a woman, I’m disabled, I’m a lesbian, shit I’m vegetarian!...So, I don’t feel invisible. I insist on aging not being invisible because If I’m invisible I am causing great disservice to everyone else who comes after me with the same set of intersections”.

Terrence, a mixed-race gay man from Johannesburg spoke to the violence experienced by LGBT people in South Africa on the basis of their class (living in a township), race (being black) and LGBT identity:

“I was in Soweto (a township in Johannesburg) last week to bury Lerato, and it was just horrible how they murdered this woman. I mean she was sitting and drinking with friends of hers: so called friends. At 1 o’clock they left the tavern and these guys just turned on her like beasts and smashed her face in, unrecognisable, for no apparent reason. That’s why I say there are these pockets in society [of open mindedness] but for the vast majority of LGBTQI people in the townships it’s another story”.

The same as Diane, Terrence also confirms LGBT’s hassles of being visible in South African communities during the apartheid and after. The following are his words:

“I mean the question for me about invisibility and it takes me back to my childhood, to the communities I grew up in. I vowed that I would be visible and that my voice would always be heard because it is a very painful experience growing up gay in a black and coloured (mix-race) community. There is prejudice on all sides and I think growing old I vowed that I’m not going to be invisible and whatever resource I can equip myself with that will make my voice heard, that’s what I’m going to do”.

In Cape Town, South Africa’s second largest city, the plight of LGBT is no different from Johannesburg, the largest one. Cindy spoke about LGBT marginalisation in the community and the resulting consequences. The following are her words:

”A lot of LGBT people now in our coloured community are going that way: suicide. You go into the coloured neighbourhood and you find this one dead and you say what happened? They killed themselves: they couldn’t take the pressure... it becomes lonely, you are alone.”

The above paragraphs highlight both the struggles and the resilience of LGBT in South Africa. In his study, Currier (2011) stresses the resilience of LGBT in Southern Africa when he reports that in Namibia and South Africa, LGBT activists “have developed a cultural strategy for

decolonising antigay laws. They have framed anti-sodomy laws as evidence of continuity of colonialism in the present". The framework they propose, goes against some of government's colonial-era laws such as anti-sodomy laws. There is a hope that things can look better in the future, especially that a continental African LGBT organisation has been established. This body has initiated a dialogue and consultations between themselves to push further the decolonisation project that was started by the liberation movements.

METHODOLOGY

Design

The research design selected for this study was an exploratory design. Exploratory research designs mainly correlate with qualitative research approaches in order to find ideas and perception (Malhotra, 2010) and (Sultana & Shahriar, 2017). Semi-structured interviews and self-administered questionnaire were used as data collection instruments in this study, while data coding as well as descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data. The present research deals with an emphasis on words and theories rather than the quantification of data (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 31).

Population, sample and sampling technique

As stipulated by Persaud, Devonish and Persaud (2019), the objective of qualitative study is to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon. In this regard, researcher needs to take into account the data saturation, type of qualitative research and similar researches when deciding on a sample size. For the purpose of the current study, attempt at obtaining heterogeneous samples has been done to deliver as much information and data as possible. This included selecting designers in the South African fashion industry that deal with gender neutrality and non-conformity through fashion.

The minimum requirement for the designer's participant was the recognition of gender-neutral articulations done in the design spaces they are in. Fashion buyers in South African fashion retail spaces were also focused on.

Selection profile criteria

The sample profile for this study has included various designers in the South African fashion industry. South African design spaces and labels have been keeping up with the trending topic of gender neutrality. Many have introduced gender-fluid designs for product offerings and editorial purposes (Gallagher, 2018). Among the population of designers that work with gender-neutrality, designers such as Roman Handt, Luke Radloff for Uni-Form and Nao Serati are among the individuals chosen that participated in the interviews.

Buyers for retail spaces was also an aspect that was looked at. The spaces have to keep up with trends and acclimate to the changes that the market spaces move into. Having a clear understanding of how they decipher and interpret consumer-driven trends and demands could hold the methods that help transcend logic of gender into the workplace and everyday life of the consumer. The researcher interviewed the head buyers for the departments found in retail spaces. These departments included kids-wear, menswear and womenswear from Polo SA. Polo SA is a luxury retail brand that caters to children, men, and women. Polo SA has a unisex range for kids being released in their retail spaces.

Sampling technique

The reason for this study not to take on routine and systematic sampling techniques is because this study follows the principles of purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is used widely in qualitative research. It consists of identifying and selecting rich cases in service of delivering the most effective data for the study. This included selecting relevant individuals that are essentially knowledgeable about the fashion industry and the phenomenon of gender neutrality and its influence on people and trends. This technique has been collaborated by Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan & Hoagwood, (015). Methods of selecting cases is more effective, as determining a sample that represents the entire population for gender neutrality is not possible and random selection would not aid the research in any way either.

Data collection method

Bless, Higson-Smith and Kagee (2006) write that the construction of an appropriate and accurate research instrument is of absolute necessity. The authors go on to say that in most social sciences, the individuals being studied are conscious of this fact and react to the stimuli, which are the questions put to them, and provide answers. For the purpose of the current study, interviews with people knowledgeable in the topic were used to collect data. This process ensured acquiring more in-depth knowledge from participants. Interviews were conducted with the designers who work with gender neutrality and also with retail spaces. The questions of data collection aimed at meeting the objective of the study. The interviews conducted were recorded through an audio recording device and responses were transcribed thereafter. The conversations and responses of each interview participant were processed manually by the researcher.

An open-ended, online social survey was also used in this study. The survey was a self-completion and open-ended survey for participants to answer freely and openly. A textual analysis of the results collected from the survey has also been conducted and has also provided the results in the format of visual graphs. The reason for this study to take on the current data collection methods is due to other methods such as focus groups not being able to be representative of the entire population of gender neutral and non-binary gender identities. In fact, as reported by Basch (1987), studies that deal with routine sampling techniques and designed methods of gaining a representative population are not necessary in qualitative research.

Data analysis

Henderson (2015) defines data analysis as of the description, classification and interconnection of phenomena with the researcher's concepts. The process start with a description of the phenomenon, before the researcher interpret and explain the data. For the current study, the data analysis method that was used for this study is qualitative data coding technique. Due to the volume of the data and research involved in the study, the method of qualitative coding helped in identifying and underlining themes and patterns in the data. This was helpful to determine social understanding of gender neutrality and how it can transcend to hegemonic retail spaces in South Africa. This was also to identify practices and themes that are used in design spaces and compare those practices with the ones of retail spaces. This method analysed and identified rich information from designers in the design spaces of South Africa.

As reported by Bless, Higson-Smith and Kagee (2006), data analysis is conducted to detect consistent patterns within the data. For instance, when a research discovers that a second

variable was given a higher score, this fact allows them to conclude that the two variables are related in a certain way.

The interviews conducted with the designers ultimately led to gaining knowledge about the perceptions of gender neutrality in the South African fashion industry. It also helped in suggesting the possibilities of dismantling hegemonic gender codes in retail spaces. The interviews conducted with South African retail buyers provided knowledge about how dismantling gender codes and gender divisions in the retail space is possible.

The online public survey helped in gaining knowledge and information about the South African public and how they see gender neutrality in retail spaces. Understanding all of this data by observing and finding themes and correlating opinions helped in understanding the nature of the present research conducted. The data was categorised and paired with the two main points of analysis, namely the current and the future state of gender neutrality in South Africa.

Results presentation and analysis

Results from the structured interviews

The current state of gender neutrality in South Africa

In the opening pages of the data analysed, the results and data collected discovered 4 main findings that will be discussed under here. The results discussed focus on the responses collected through the structured interview process and also the responses gained from the online public survey. These interviews were conducted with specific individuals from retail and design spaces. There was a total of 6 individuals who participated in the interview part. These interviews were then recorded through a recording device, there after they were manually analysed and transcribed by the researcher. The online survey was conducted using a software called “Google Forms” and was a self-completion questionnaire. The survey curated a total of 24 responses from the public.

There were two main areas of analysis that were followed when transcribing the data, these being:

- 1) The current perception of the state of gender neutrality in the South African fashion industry;**
- 2) The future of gender neutrality in the South African fashion industry.**

The data was categorised in those two areas to answer the primary and secondary research questions of the present research dissertation. Each main area gives a result that correlates with the data collected from the online public survey. The data that were collected hold interesting and insightful results. The first area of discussion found that the current state of gender neutrality in South Africa is evident, but lacks the spark to reach a desired level. The responses captured reveal three main points of findings:

- Each individual reveals that gender and sexuality are both inherently taught to people;
- South African retail spaces are still following and adopting hegemonic and heteronormative methods of viewing fashion;
- South African retail spaces are still able to dismantle these constructs and perceptions.

The textual analysis of the data suggests that the current state of gender neutrality in South Africa is still a work in progress. Currently South African retail spaces still follow hegemonic and outdated methods of viewing and distributing fashion. This is supported by the responses that gender itself is something that is inherently taught through culture and society. Culture and society create structures and meanings to language and symbols based on old and outdated mind-sets. The responses that were collected mirror the statements made above. However, the participants feel that South Africa is changing and ready for gender neutrality. Also, the findings suggest that South Africa is on its way to deconstruct and dismantle gender divisions in retail spaces.

The results suggest further that these systematic methods are generational. Older generations are ultimately the contributing factor in still keeping with these methods. Younger generations are exposed to more, and allow room for questioning the things that society has simply accepted. Outdated and hegemonic methods are slowly coming to an end, and this is a result of generations passing on and newer generations creating new ways of existing in the changing times of society. The results also mirror the information gathered in the literature review. Kaiser (2012) writes that gender coding systems have existed for decades. This exposes structuralism (Derrida, 1966) in the inner workings of society. Derrida argues that society structures meaning to languages and symbols.

These fundamental structures create fixed entrenched origins that create meaning. South Africa's slow progression and paused development is evident in the culture (Mathe, 2019). The younger generations are starting to change this and are deconstructing and dismantling these beliefs systems. Older generations are not able to be taught different perspectives, due to these being so heavily entrenched in their lives. They do not know any other perspectives but the ones that society has presented.

The results captured from the online public survey support the findings curated from the structured interviews. Both data collection methods have been used to answer the research questions in the present research dissertation.

The future of gender neutrality in South Africa

The second area of analysis was the future of gender neutrality in the South African fashion industry. The responses captured reveal 3 main points of findings:

- The South African fashion industry is changing and newer generations of designers are creating new and progressive methods of dismantling hegemonic and heteronormative methods of gender representation and fashion;
- Collaborating design spaces and retail spaces will ultimately offer new ways of catering for and focusing on the consumer;
- Gender neutrality as a trend can ultimately be used to dismantle hegemonic gender codes.

The responses gathered from the structured interviews as well as the online survey reveal that South Africa is progressing. The responses show positive signs of South Africa being able to move past the societal constructs that have been taught systematically (Kaiser, 2012). The second was that collaborating retail spaces and design spaces will ultimately hold new methods of creating progressive and forward thinking fashion. Participants from both design spaces and

retail spaces feel very positive about the collaboration of design spaces and retail spaces. There has been limited attention being given to the relationship between retail and design spaces (Crewe, 2015). Collaborating these two spaces will offer ways of understanding how worlds represent themselves, as it is also reflective of broader social and cultural concerns (Crewe, 2015). The recoded responses show an agreement to the information in the literature review. This will also attempt to fill the gap in literature on the relationship between retail and design spaces. Creating safe spaces that cater for the new and changing market can result in retail spaces not needing to keep up these methods.

Lastly, the results show positive responses to retail spaces adopting the trend into the South African market. The responses indicate that following the trend will not bring any negative implications in its corporate culture. Instead, the trend reveals an opportunity for retail spaces to benefit financially, economically and culturally. It is good for retail spaces to adopt and take on new and current trends. This is how businesses stay relevant in the industry (Hines & Bruce, 2012). Ultimately trends are set and driven by the consumer and the changing environment around them, as strong social and cultural semiotic affiliations are discerned through fashion trends (Jackson, 2012, p.170 - 171). The results obtained correlate with the information found in the literature review. The data presented in the previous section as well as the findings report in this section have attempted to answer the primary and secondary research questions of the paper.

Results from anonymous online public survey

Demographic variables

The online public questionnaire surveyed the social variables of participants who participated. In the beginning stage of the questionnaire age, gender, race, level of education and employment status were among the results that were collected. Table 1 below provides a summary of the data procured for these variables by the participants.

Concerning the gender, 67% of the participants were male, while 33% were female. On the variable of age, the majority of the participants (45.8%) were in the age category of 26-30, followed by the age category of 20-25 which scored 37.5% of the participants. In terms of racial distribution of the participants, the majority of participants were blacks (Africans) - 83.3%, followed by whites (12.2%), while both Indians and coloured together scored a participation rate of 4.1%.

Concerning the educational level of the participants, 50% of them have an undergraduate degree, while 25% have a postgraduate degree, comparing to 20.8% who have a diploma. Lastly, 4.1% have only a high school qualification. On the variable of employment status, 45.8% of the participants are employed. 37.5% are self-employed while 16.6% are unemployed.

1. Perceptions about the current state of gender neutrality in the South African fashion industry.

The online questionnaire further examined the public perceptions about the current state of gender neutrality in the South African fashion industry. After an analysis of the results and data collected, the findings show that 30.4% strongly agree and 26.1% of the total responses feel and agree that gender is something that is inherently taught. 26.1% of responses remained neutral and 13 % disagree while 5% strongly disagree. 79.2% of responses agree with the stance

on South Africa still following hegemonic and heteronormative views on gender. 16.7% remained neutral while 4.9% disagreed.

The statistics obtained from the survey corroborate the information in the literature review. Firstly, Mathe (2019) writes that in South Africa the structured constructs are evident in African culture and that African fashion has been overtaken by Eurocentric and colonial influences. Ultimately these constructs and perceptions have been entrenched into society and culture since birth (Kaiser, 2012). Both gender and fashion are systematically and inherently practiced, with heteronormativity, and deeply anchored coding systems. The results obtained from the online survey back these statements up with the majority of the population is in agreement. Another interesting outcome is that 62.5% of participants say that the manner in which they dress is influenced by the gender they identify with. 25% of the participants remain neutral and 12.5% disagree with this stance.

Interestingly enough, the data collected reveals that 87.5% of participants have purchased and/or worn clothing items that do not follow their assigned gender, while 12.5% have said no. These figures express how the South African public is ready for gender neutrality in fashion. People are already experimenting and exploring fashion outside of the gender constructs and divisions.

2. Perceptions about the future of gender neutrality in the South African fashion industry

The online questionnaire further examined the participants' perceptions about the future of gender neutrality in the South African fashion industry. After an analysis of the responses, the findings were that 60.9% said yes to retail spaces being able to dismantle their gender divisions. 17.4% remained neutral and 21.7% disagreed. Another variable examined was whether retail spaces would face negative implications, should gender neutrality dismantle gender divisions. The results were 39.1% agreed, 43.5% disagreed and 17.4% strongly disagreed. A majority of the participant pool disagrees, which suggests that retail spaces wouldn't suffer, instead the shift can be seen to be beneficial to the market.

Another interesting aspect is that 56.5% of responses said that they definitely would be open to exploring gender neutrality. 30.4% said they probably would, 8.7% said they definitely wouldn't. To add, 52.2% of participants agree on other South African citizens being open to exploring gender neutrality. The results presented above show signs of positivity in the willingness of the participants. These results support the stance on South Africa slowly progressing. The results also show a positive reaction on to retail spaces being able to deconstruct their gender divisions. These results also show that retail spaces may not face negative implications should they follow with the trend.

A survey required the participants to answer all questions in the questionnaire, which means the questionnaire had to be completed to its entirety. An analysis of the total responses for each question suggests that some participants prefer filling out multiple choice questions rather than open ended questions asking for further information. A few of the questionnaires collected show participants did not complete certain questions and leaving them blank. Some participants did not take the survey seriously which also limits the researcher in acquiring accurate results from the online survey.

Limitations on the sampling population

Another critical pitfall found with regard to the pool of participants for this study was the lack of opinions and perceptions from individuals who identify themselves as gender neutral and non-binary. This would have been helpful in gaining their thoughts and opinions on how to dismantle gender divisions in the fashion industry. Devising methods in trying to reach this community would be useful, as it limits the research in gaining additional information.

Limitations on data analysis

Using an online software for transcribing and analysing the data collected from the face-to-face interviews was beneficial to the study given the time constraint. However, manually transcribing the data from audio recorded devices was found to be tedious and extremely time consuming. Using software could save time and gain a more accurate result.

Limitations on pilot testing

One issue found in the online survey as well as the structured interviews is the use of language. The researcher found that many participants who participated in either the online survey or the interviews were unsure or not aware of the meaning of certain words and phrases used. Many have had to research and look up definitions for words such as hegemonic and cis-gender in order to gain context and clarity of the question. This presents missing or incomplete data usually, because the questions are unclear or unfamiliar to the participant. Pilot testing may also lead to a more accurate and well-structured format for conducting interviews and surveys. This helps with the order of questions asked and also make it easier for the researcher to analyse the data collected.

Conclusions

This section discussed and analysed the collected data. The opening section focused on the structured interviews from retail and design spaces. This section has included an analysis of two main aspects, the first being the perceptions of the current state of gender neutrality in the retail spaces of South Africa, and the second being the future of gender neutrality in South Africa. Both aspects have formed a base of analysis for the data collected. The structured interviews were recorded using an audio recorder. Thereafter, the data collected was transcribed and analysed. The survey was done using a software called “Google Forms” and was self-completion. The survey curated a total of 24 responses. The results captured from the online public survey support the findings curated from the structured interviews. Both data collection methods were used with an aim to achieve the objectives of the current study.

Recommendations

This study identified a few concluding recommendations while conducting research. Firstly, South Africa is slowly reaching that point of normalising gender neutrality. Dismantling and deconstructing the gender codes will be possible through the younger generations of designers. Secondly, teaching newer and progressive thinking methods of gender would allow the achievement of gender neutrality.

Directions for future research

Gender neutral fashion communications in the South African fashion industry are relatively new and have slowly been emerging as time progresses. This study could be among the first to investigate and explore the possibilities of dismantling and deconstructing hegemonic and heteronormative methods of fashion. However, as the trend progresses more into society and culture, further studies can be conducted to truly understand how this trend can help businesses in the fashion market achieve stability and sustainability in gender neutrality. The present research has opened new paths and ventures for researchers to explore in-depth the true impact of the gender neutrality movement on different aspects of corporate culture, marketing strategies and branding.

Finally, the current study only focused on retail menswear fashion. Future research could involve retail women’s fashion as well.

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