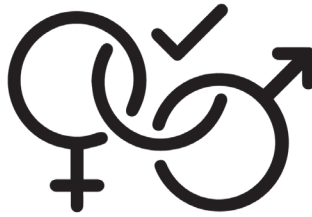


UNGENDERED



What's the Trend?

Shifting definitions of traditional gender roles are leading some to reject the notion of gender completely, while others aim to mask gender from products, experiences, and even their own identities.

Ten years ago I embarked on a mission to bring attention to the 40 stories of successful and pioneering women. It was called *The Personality Project* and it started my decade long fascination with studying the steady cultural shifts of gender.

In 2013, our Trend Report first introduced *Powered by Women* as a trend to describe the significance of this shift. A year later, we proposed *Anti-stereotyping* in response to the growing examples of how traditional gender roles in everything from parenting to corporate culture were evolving. In 2017 one of our most popular trends was *Fierce Femininity* – a term inspired by many examples of women taking back their voices and speaking up.

Together, this work illustrates a track record for defining trends that are changing one of the most fundamental elements of our culture – how we see and understand gender. This year our research has led us to the growing truth that gender itself is becoming a dated idea. To see how, a good place to start is with the research of one of the foremost thinkers on the topic of gender.

Why Testosterone is Overrated

A psychologist and professor at the University of Melbourne, Cordelia Fine first shook the world in 2010 when her second book *Delusions of Gender* challenged the assumption that men's and women's brains were inherently different.

The common theory that the brain is hardwired at birth with traits exclusive to one gender or another is usually explained by the effect of testosterone on the human brain. The assumption is that this hormone makes men better suited for some tasks and women better suited to others. Disputing that theory, Fine and many other prominent feminist researchers have branded this an unacceptable form of *neurosexism*.¹

In her new book, *Testosterone Rex: Myths of Sex, Science, and Society*, Fine breaks down common gender-based assumptions.²

Her ideas are so unconventional, there are some who read them as a personal attack on gender. Just six months after her book was first published, 47% of all the reviews on Amazon gave it just one star—an unusually high number that most likely reflects the polarized political response to her research rather than its inherent value.

Though the topic clearly makes many people uncomfortable and even angry, it is a symbol of the transformation occurring in how we understand, relate to, and discuss gender issues.

Gender Optional

In February 2017, around the same time that Fine was taking on her critics writing op-eds and doing interviews to promote *Testosterone Rex*, *National*

Geographic magazine devoted an entire issue to “the gender revolution.” The series of articles was turned into a documentary film about gender identity, produced and narrated by Katie Couric.

As Couric traveled the US to talk with scientists, psychologists, activists, authors, and families about gender, the series asked all kinds of questions that would have been unimaginable just a few decades ago: What is gender? What is intersex? How many gender classifications do we need?

None of those questions have a definitive answer. Even the words we can use to describe gender today are expanding: non-binary, genderless, nonconforming, gender fluid, trans, asexual, and polygender, to name a few.

Four years ago Facebook changed their gender dropdown option housed in each profile to allow for more than 50 gender identities. Just a few months later, the company expanded the list to 71 options. Less than a year after the original announcement, they decided to replace the options with an empty, fill-in-the-blank box to allow each user to define himself or herself as they please.

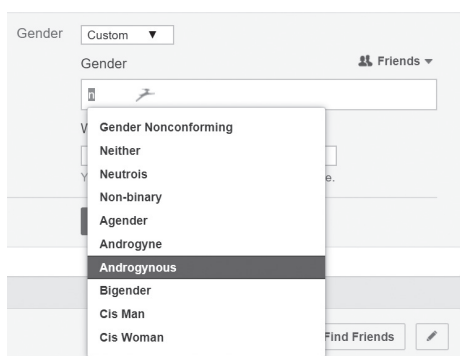


Photo: Gender options on Facebook.

Gender, at least on Facebook, has become as non-binary as you can imagine.

*“I think we’re seeing a new gender revolution.
It’s erased boxes and created gender infinity instead.”*

DIANE EHRENSAFT, Clinical Psychologist³

As a result, we are seeing a shift toward a safer, more inclusive and *Ungendered* way of thinking that is affecting everything from entertainment and products to marketing, recruiting and workplace practices.

The Third Gender ... and More!

When Asia Kate Dillon was cast as Taylor Mason on the Showtime original series *Billions*, one of the earliest scenes in the show was particularly true to life. In the scene, Dillon—a self-identified non-binary actor—walks into the office of hedgefund manager Bobby Axelrod and says to him, “These are my pronouns.” Those pronouns —*them* and *they*—describe how Taylor (and Dillon in real life) prefer to be called, instead of the traditional, gendered pronouns *he* and *she*.

The scene introduced the concept of non-binary gender to a mainstream audience, and has been so successful that it brought along with it an unexpected problem for Dillon: how to submit a nomination for the gender-based Emmy awards for their performance. Ultimately, they chose Best Actor because it felt less gendered.

Seeing characters like this on television matters because it humanizes the *Ungendered*.

While this might still seem like a fringe idea, there are signs that a more mainstream acceptance for this often-misunderstood group is growing across the world. For example, several US states, including California, New York, and Oregon have passed legislation allowing individuals to select a gender-neutral choice of X (this is actually the letter used instead of M or F) on their driver’s licenses and ID cards.

Internationally, Australia is generally credited as the first country to allow a gender-neutral option to be selected on national passports or ID cards and has since been joined by a growing list of just under 10 countries (so far), including Germany, Canada, and India, that also allow for a third gender option.⁴

For the digital world, there is even an ungendered emoji option. Created by Google employee and designer Paul Hunt, who is gay, a series of genderless emojis were approved by the Unicode Consortium (the little-known nonprofit based in Silicon Valley that is responsible for standardizing emojis worldwide).



Photo: Ungendered emoji

For many years gender was the ultimate binary choice, with a few exceptions. It was a statement to be made about yourself and a fundamental element of your identity, no matter how you chose to describe it. Today, gender has become a question to be explored.

Pink Legos and Genderfluid Fashion

The role of gender shaping our children has become a widely debated topic among those who make products for kids. Many have created more gender-neutral packaging. Retail stores have stopped using separate “boy” and “girl” aisles for toys in stores.⁵

And then there is the unique case of Lego. The Lego Friends line was originally designed primarily for girls after years of research on the different ways that girls and boys play. Despite their research-driven approach, the 2012 product launch was met with near universal criticism; one writer even describing the line as having “a color palette so sugary you can almost feel it rotting your teeth.”⁶ The problem was not Lego’s research or even the popular Lego Friends product line, but rather that the brand seemed to fall into the same trap as many manufacturers of clothing or toys did: they made a pink product and tried to sell it to girls.



Photo: Lego Friends Packaging

The fashion industry has perhaps pushed this trend the furthest. Earlier this year, UK retailer John Lewis announced that it would be removing gender-specific labels from clothing. Target had already removed gender-based signage from its stores, and in anticipation of the back-to-school season in the fall of 2017, the retailer partnered with global kids brand Toca Boca to launch a gender-neutral kids’ clothing collection.

In fashion, one of the first brands to test the *Ungendered* idea was Zara, which created a line of unisex clothing (which happened to be called

Ungendered) in March 2016. Unfortunately, the line was a flop mostly because it consisted of plain-looking sweatpants and t-shirts: two clothing options that seemed fairly gender neutral anyway.

In the year since, Ungendered fashion has far surpassed lazily rebranded sweatpants. *T Magazine*, the New York Times' style publication, featured a cover story with women wearing suits and traditionally male clothing in August 2017. Calvin Klein's Raf Simons has been credited with breaking convention by putting men and women in the same runway show and promoting an idea of gender fluidity.

Nasty Boys In Nigeria

When speaking about gender, it can be easy to focus on issues like gender equality, which tend to center on discussions about how to improve salaries, representation, agency, or opportunities for women. The flip side of the *Ungendered* trend is the corresponding shift in how we are starting to view masculinity.

Nigerian-born Richard Akuson, former fashion editor of *Cosmopolitan Nigeria*, is one voice leading this charge. In Africa's most populous country and in its largest economy, every detail of his newest publication seems designed to make some people uncomfortable ... starting with its name: *A Nasty Boy*.

In a recent interview, Akuson shared:

*The stories and visuals we create and share are laced with the quiet voices of the world we imagine where people do not have to feel different because of how they dress or who they are attracted to. Being a man is a diverse thing. Masculinity can and should be inclusive. I want the world to recognize that holding our boys and men to a singular definition is not fair. It alienates those who don't fit the definition, and that is incredibly emotionally damaging.*⁷

Early on, *A Nasty Boy* has provided a platform for designers who have an uneasy role in a country like Nigeria, where homosexuality has been

criminalized. Its goal, though, is not to enact political or policy change, necessarily, but rather to change the way their readers see the world by breaking down stereotypes about gender.

One of the most popular trends from our annual trend report last year was *Fierce Femininity*—a term created to describe the growing fierceness of how women were being depicted in everything from Hollywood films to household products. The wildly popular *Wonder Woman* film starring fierce actress Gal Gadot (who also spent two years in the Israeli Defense Forces) is one example. Brawny paper towels symbolically replacing their rugged, flannel-wearing lumberjack icon “Brawny Man” with a similarly dressed and equally tough “Brawny Woman” is another.



Photo: Brawny packaging for #Strengthhasnogender campaign.

Over the past year, men have also experienced an evolution when it comes to their expected roles in society, particularly regarding what it means to be a nurturing father. According to the “Making Dads Present” study recently released by Saatchi & Saatchi advertising agency, three in four millennial dads are resentful that advertisers and marketers are out of touch with them and their contributions to family life.

While traditional representations of stay-at-work dads portray them as out of touch or domestic screw-ups, a new generation of dads has become much more engaged and capable when it comes to domestic matters. The Saatchi & Saatchi report goes on to share that most dads (84%) say they are

confident with their parenting abilities, and the majority (85%) believe they know more than people give them credit for.⁸

Advertisers are starting to take notice. Barbie dolls are increasingly marketed to dads along with kids. The UK-based Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) has not only banned ads that portray women as expert domestic cleaners, but also ads that reinforce stereotypes, such as men who are incapable of washing the dishes.

Rise of Anonymity

In addition to the challenging of gender stereotypes is the rise of anonymity as a way to mask gender in situations where revealing it may encourage unfair treatment, prejudice, or judgment in the workplace.

Over the past year, our team has been tracking a dramatic growth in technology platforms and solutions aimed at solving the problem of gender bias at work. Platforms like Blendoor, Nottx, and GapJumpers all offer some type of blind hiring technology to allow recruiters to protect themselves from unintentional gender bias when screening applicants for jobs.

In 2016, the Canadian government made a commitment to testing a name-blind hiring policy. In Argentina, the Buenos Aires-based team at Wunderman advertising agency built a browser plugin called “No Gender Profiles” to allow HR and hiring professionals to mask people’s names and genders when visiting their LinkedIn profile pages.

One of the most advanced platforms in this space is Interviewing.io, which offers a suite of tools that add more anonymity and equity to the hiring process. The site also offers practice interview tools for applicants and real-time voice-masking technology to use *during* interviews.

Why It Matters

Perhaps no other trend in this book confronts something that feels so fundamental to our culture as gender. Remembering to refer to people with a third pronoun is difficult, as is reimagining the role of gender in one’s own

identity. It is also tempting to dismiss this trend as only important for those who work with young people. *Ungendered* is not a trend about youth.

Ungendered matters because it challenges us to rethink long-held assumptions and see the world with more empathetic and understanding eyes. In addition, it is causing companies to reevaluate how they talk and market to consumers, design products, and sell them. We are finding a growing number of our clients are focusing their attention in hiring for more diversity, encouraging more inclusivity in their workplace cultures, and contending with the difficulty of doing this in a multi-generational workforce where there are traditions, mindsets and people who are resistant to change.

In the future, we believe the most successful companies will find new ways to create inclusive training, transformational experiences to drive more workplace empathy, and stop needlessly gendering items or using stereotypical messaging. Instead, they will treat people simply as people, and attract new audiences (and employees) in the process that were previously hard to spot when limited by a more gendered point of view.

How to Use This Trend

- ✓ **Conduct an Ungendered audit.** The first step in putting this trend into action within any organization is an honest assessment of current materials and policies to see where an *Ungendered* approach could help expand or contract your market, or better engage your employees. The best audits will review a variety of variables, including color choice, language and context, channel bias, and implied assumptions and gender-bias in product purchase or use.
- ✓ **Experiment for gender sensitivity.** Different industries and audiences will have different levels of care required when considering how gender biases apply to customers and employees. The right balance for a fashion brand may be different than what's required for an automobile manufacturer, but every industry will need to find their ideal calibration. Using gender-view task teams, asking for feedback more proactively and conducting test marketing or PR campaigns are just

a few of the methods which can help to understand how to put the *Ungendered* trend into action.