

Original Article

Out of the Closet: Implementation of Gender-Neutral Uniform Concerning the History of the LGBTQIA+ Community of India

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Received: 05 March 2022

Revised: 23 April 2022

Accepted: 29 April 2022

Published: 30 April 2022

Abstract - Gender-neutral uniforms provide students with a productive work environment by improving their performance in a physical and academic setup. Unlike the current school uniforms, a gender-neutral uniform disrupts gender inequalities and focuses on aspirational and sartorial freedoms. When educational institutions start enabling inequalities, inclusiveness fades away. School administrations, lingering in the haze of 'what ought to be,' still prefer the segregation of uniforms based on sex. Instead of following the idea of gender-neutral uniforms, they tend to follow that of "sex-based uniforms." The practice of this mindset comes with several repercussions, such as promoting a discriminatory attitude and limited productivity. A uniform cannot restrict the limitless potential of students based on such prejudice. A uniform must be designed equally for all students regardless of age, gender, sex, race, and creed, thus shifting the focus from an individual's gender identity to their comfort.

Keywords - Historical, Sociological, Gender-neutral, Gender identity, Sartorial and Productive.

I. Introduction

Indian society often thinks of people as mere male and female categories, assuming that the person's gender aligns with their sex. From conception, society makes it necessary for people to be labeled, resulting in a fixated mania centered around the anatomy (sex) (Florian, 2019).

Individuals who choose to express themselves in a way beyond society's binary are often told to fix themselves. Self-expression aligns with what is considered "acceptable" (Gazzola, Pavionne, Pezzetti, Grechi, 2020). This heavily illustrates this obsession with gender conformity, which can profoundly impact the future of the youth and their ability to feel accepted.

When the sex of a newborn is announced, the gender norms associated are then forced upon the infants. One such gender norm is formed heavily based on clothing. Robust words such as "masculine" or "feminine" are associated with apparel, often neglecting the comfort of the individual (Cohen-Woods, 2019).

Many high schoolers living in India, who do not adhere to the gender binary, have often faced heavy dysphoria, limiting themselves under pressure to conform to a particular sex (Roots of Gender-queer Identity through Consumption, 2015). This leads people to experience a fair share of ambiguity and pressure. Unconventional, inclusive, and gender-neutral clothing aids in creating an atmosphere of equity and helps people safely explore their gender identity

without being bound to the shackles of gender norms (Johnson, 2017).

A truly *uniform* would formulate this level of androgyny and help the growing youth (ages 16-20) to set a playing field where apparel is not separated under sex.

2. Methodology

The present study analyzes the physical, psychological, and social impact of introducing gender-neutral clothing in educational institutions. An integrated, qualitative approach is utilized to observe and examine a psychologically developing topic from the perspective of the developing youth (ages 16-20). This research study explores the historical aspects of the relationship between the queer community and apparel.

Looking at apparel through the lens of the gendered binary of society, this research hopes to cultivate a broader social outlook for the gender-neutral movement by creating more inclusive and gender-neutral apparel for educational setups.

2.1. Research Aim

The present study analyses the effects of the implementation of gender-neutral clothing in educational institutions concerning India's history of the LGBTQIA+ community.



2.2. Research Design

A descriptive, experimental research design is followed as a relationship is established about the impact of introducing gender-neutral clothing in educational institutions. A descriptive design method is curated by gathering, analyzing, and presenting the collected data.

2.3. Consent and Ethical Issues

Informed consent was taken from the participating respondents. It was effectively established that their participation was voluntary, anonymous, and for academic purposes only. No identifiers, such as names or pictures, were disclosed in the article or while conducting the study. Ethical guidelines of research were followed.

2.4. Sample

Responses were administered to 23 participants aged 16 to 20 years old, spanning several urban areas such as Delhi NCR, Mumbai, and Bangalore. 7 of the respondents identified as female, 4 as gender-queer folks, and 12 as males.

2.5. Tools Used

A questionnaire was curated (15 total questions: 2 open-ended, 13 determinant choices) to find pertinent information, which later helped formulate themes within the research study. The questionnaire consists of questions such as "How would you react if you saw one of your male friends wearing bold makeup?" and "On a scale of 1-5, how important is comfort to you in terms of your clothing?".

2.6. Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire formulated was then circulated to an audience of 23 participants aged 16 to 20 years old, spanning several urban areas such as Delhi NCR, Mumbai, and Bangalore. The data gathered was analyzed and categorized to review the impact of gender-neutral clothing in educational institutions. A thematic analysis was conducted to examine the data obtained from the questionnaire administered to people (ages 16-20). First, the responses were critically reviewed to ensure familiarity with the data. The decoding of the data was then performed by categorizing the responses into themes. The purpose of using this type of study was to analyze multiple perspectives and delve into the experiences of each responder.

2.7. Thematic Analysis

Table 1. Thematic analysis of responses

Theme	Explanation of the Theme	Reference Quote
Facing Gender Stereotypes	This theme reflects the number of people persuaded to follow gender stereotypes.	Q. Have you ever heard/been persuaded to get rid of body hair based on your gender? For example, "Ladkiya aise baalon ke saath achhi nahi lagti." More than 58% of people responded in the affirmative.
Androgyny	Depicts the outlook of respondents towards the adoption of androgyny.	Q. What does the term androgynous mean to you? Response Example: I am unfamiliar with the term but will read up on the topic after filling out the survey.
Knowledge of the historical representation of the queer community	This theme represents the mythological depictions of the queer community and the knowledge people possess about this area of study.	Q. Have you ever heard of the mythological character, Shikhandi (from the Mahabharata)? 56% of the respondents responded in the negative.
Support towards the LGBTQIA+ community	Delineates the respondents' support towards the people belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community.	Q. What are your opinions on the decriminalization of the LGBTQIA+ community? Response Example: Being a part of the community, I hope constitutional decriminalization also leads to social acceptance. Other than that, it is completely essential to validate every identity and let people coexist in harmony.
Rejecting Gender Norms	This theme outlines the breaking of stereotypes laid in society.	Q. How would you react to a person breaking gender norms (in terms of clothing)? For example, Your friend was to wear a particular type of clothing that is not usually conforming to the stereotypical dressing of their gender.

		Approx. 84% of the respondents chose, "I believe that it is their choice what they wear and what makes them feel comfortable."
Significance of comfort in apparel	Depicts the importance of comfort in the clothing one chooses to wear.	Q. On a scale of 1-5, how important is a comfort to you in terms of your clothing? 100% of the respondents claimed to regard it as extremely important (chose 4 or 5 on the scale).
Gender-neutral clothing and inclusivity	Support towards implementation of gender-neutral clothing, particularly in educational institutions.	Q. On a scale of 1-5, how supportive are you of gender-neutral clothing? 84% of the respondents claimed to support its implementation (chose 3 or 4 on the scale).

3. Results and Discussion

This study analyses the physical, psychological and social relationship between apparel and gender identity and the implementation of gender-neutral uniforms in educational institutions. This objective was fulfilled by identifying broader themes within the responses from the questionnaire. This led to defining the study's themes and curating the skeleton of the research.

3.1. Gender and Sex

The term gender identity refers to an individual's concept about their gender and how they feel inside. It is deeply personal and typically self-identified. Gender identity differs from sexual identity and is unrelated to an individual's sexual orientation. The gender with which a person identifies may not match the sex they were assigned at birth (Goel, 2012).

3.2. Historical and Mythological Representations of the LGBTQIA+ Community

In a society that lays out a normative binary for its people, often ridiculing the LGBTQIA+ community, it is led to the suggestion that queer identities seem to be a "growing trend ."Thus, they believed their existence was merely a contemporary phenomenon (Goel, 2012).

However, when the mythological epics of our ancient civilization are studied, it is realized how these tales can reject gender norms, with the differences between queer gods and goddesses seen as a symbol of power and beauty (Booneiam, Florian, 2019). These myths prove that queer people have always existed, and the amplification of their stories is not a modern concept. Gender in Hindu mythology was largely fluid, with Gods such as Brahma manifesting all genders simultaneously or having no gender at all (Srinivasan, Chandrasekaran). This fluidity of gender was also a major aspect of their epics, which were poetic verses written to portray moral ideas.

The well-known epic of Shikhandi was referred to in the questionnaire. With 57% (approx.) of respondents unaware of the mythological character, it is clear how queer history is buried under the burden of conforming to the "normal ."For the LGBTQIA+ community in India, these stories are not just parts of Indian history but a reminder to celebrate and embrace such diverse identities (Institute of Medicine, 2011). This celebration of the prominent past of queer existence is what will lead to their present social acceptance.

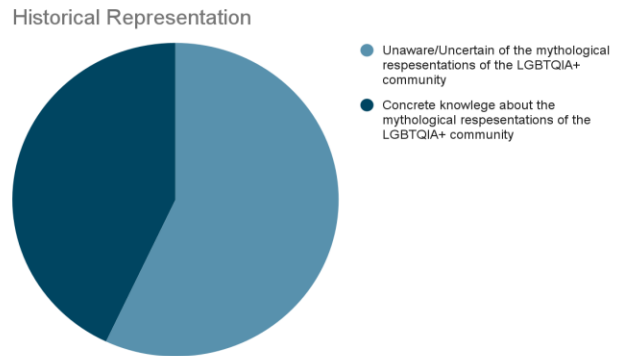


Fig. 1 Percentage-based depiction of responses based on their knowledge about mythological epics.

3.3. Decriminalisation of the LGBTQIA+ Community

The constitutional legalization of the LGBTQIA+ community (specifically Section 377) was a necessary and positively embraced change that led the community in India closer to acceptance. Still far from absolute and unconditional social inclusion from the public psyche, the community still grapples with the daily injustices they have to face.

A community subjected to centuries of hostility, crime, and exclusion deserves to be respected and provided redressal for the ostracism faced for centuries (Waites, 2010). This decriminalization is not a culmination of decades of fights against an inhumane law but a new beginning for the community. It is clear that despite this change, society, the

laws, and the lawmakers are still prejudiced and hostile toward the queer community in several ways (Johnson, 2017). This suggests that though the constitutional groundwork has been laid, society has failed to keep up with the recent developments as the community's people are still denied equal treatment and basic respect (Divan, Vivek, 2016).

With 100% of respondents supporting the decriminalization of LGBTQIA+ identities, there still exist many who question this community's legitimacy and deny basic rights. Thus, the battle for equality continues as the community is swarmed with numerous challenges.

3.4. Gender and its Stereotypes

A gender stereotype is a generalized view of the attributes that ought to be possessed by the respective genders. For example, women should remove body hair as it is unhygienic, or men are supposed to be physically strong. This practice of stereotyping may cause people to make assumptions or even establish expectations from a certain gender (Divan, 2016).

Societal pressures upon the need to be labeled as "masculine" or "feminine" result in this fixated obsession surrounding the presumptions one creates. This distorted facade of "what ought to be" begins from the moment of conception, significantly influencing how people are expected to conduct themselves in society (Gazzola, Pavione, Pezzeti, Grechi, 2020). Rejection of these norms has consequences for all genders, with the transgressions often met by hostile and negative reactions. This burden to conform to norms associated with gender is often faced by a fair share of society (Johnson, 2017).

More than 56% of the respondents have been subjected and persuaded to follow these gender norms, of whom 68% were women and gender-queer folks. This creates an environment where people cannot express themselves under the ideals of a heavily gendered society. Breaking and rejecting these norms will aid the growing youth in embracing and portraying their true identity and gaining a sense of self-expression.

Gender norms and Stereotypes

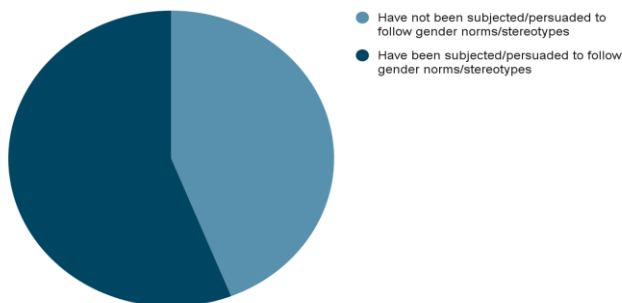


Fig. 2 Segregation of responses (percentage-based) based on gender norms and stereotypes

3.5. Androgyny

The term androgyny embraces the idea of rejecting the gender norms of society and having any characteristics, whether "masculine" or "feminine." Even in contemporary times, the idea of gender is more of a social construct than a personal choice (Gazzola, Pavione, Pezzeti, Grechi, 2020).

Upon revisiting gender roles, the influence of societal pressure is clear, with certain cultures expecting women to be nurturing and kind to men to be assertive and strong. However, social constructs do not farewell. As these expectations are eradicated, the youth raises a ripple of change to mold a society that does not believe in conforming to such presumptions instead of forming their own identity (Cohen-Woods, 2019). Early signs of rebellious androgynous fashion existed in England and France, which slowly gathered steam when women felt their attire limited their ability to perform daily activities.

This is a reminder of how boxing individuals into the ideals of a certain gender only curtails their mental and physical growth. It depicts how all aspects of society must go beyond the gender of an individual instead of the comfort of their own identity.

"It (androgyny) feels like comfort to me, a ground where I don't have to conform to what is the "male" or "female" of our society."

(Anon., Highschooler)

3.6. Breaking Gender Norms and Rejecting Stereotypes

The society describes gender roles as norms that the community people should follow. Gender roles persist in many facets of life and the world due to society's idea about a person's worth and placement under the influence of traditional gender segregation (Goel, 2012). But, when one's beliefs reject conventional notions about the significance of gender in society, it produces a major shift in the subliminal segregations created. There exists a wider horizon now, as the youth allows room for growth. The idea that gender exists only in 0's and 1's eliminates any possibility for explorations beyond these predefined ideals. With the change and development of the thinking of persons from different cultures and places, individuals are starting to adopt broad-minded and inclusive thinking. The evolution of all people in every field, regardless of societal notions, has been a commanding factor in eradicating any gender biases one may have (Cohen-Woods, 2019).

With almost 96% of respondents supporting those who choose to take part in relieving themselves from such presumptions about their identity, people still remain unsupportive. When unconditional social acceptance is given, the challenges of this long-standing gender binary will budge.

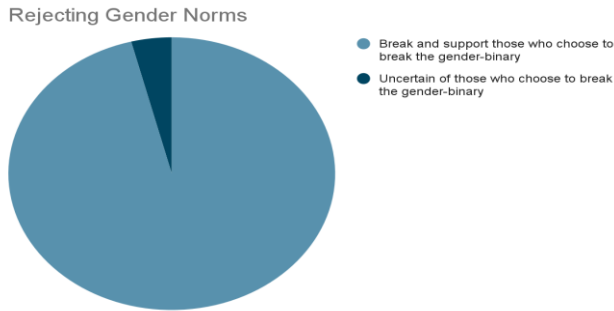


Fig. 3 Depiction of responses on the eradication of gender norms and stereotypes

3.7. Comfort in Apparel and Uniform

Comfort in one's choice of apparel has always been one of the key contributors to a consumer's desirability of a product. Though the requirements of consumers evolve along with trends and the environment, it is imperative to meet the requirements and expectations one has in regard to the clothing chosen (Kankanamge, Dinesha, 2014).

Choice in apparel is not only driven by factors such as textile or physical aesthetics but also by psychological judgment. This changes a society's cultural definition of clothing concerning different genders and allows apparel to be a concept of comfort, not a stereotype (Cohen-Woods, 2019). Gender-specific attire enhances the expectations of gender-specific behavior, and though subtle, parents often redirect their children's dressing style to fit into something that is more "socially acceptable," even if they feel uncomfortable. The most liberal and accepting parents may feel threatened by their child not conforming to what is "appropriate." Gender is a socially constructed phenomenon; not all aspire to the same ideals for men and women, but a constant in this equation of apparel is comfort (Booneiam, Florian, 2019).

With 100% of respondents regarding comfort as an extremely important aspect of their clothing, it is observed how this finding critically rejects the cultural ideals of clothing and focuses more on how one feels about *their* choice of clothing. Not on how people react.

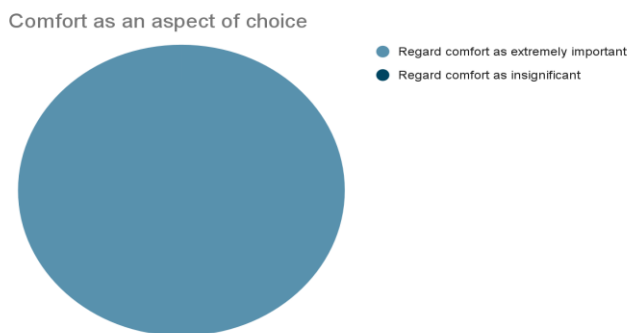


Fig. 4 Importance of comfort in a choice of apparel

3.8. Gender-neutral Clothing as a Symbol of Inclusivity

Gender-neutral clothing, a symbol of inclusivity and diversity, is becoming a more mainstream concept due to the broader spectrum of the cast and represented genders. New and existing apparel houses are making strides to be more diverse and progressive in inclusive clothing.

Several brands adopt a genderless distinction and see it as a less restrictive fashion. For example, Rad Hourani was one of the first to establish a unisex label and began developing his line after holding an art exhibition for neutral clothing and pushing boundaries with garments that provide scope to dress comfortably and creating pieces that any person can wear blurs the lines of gender roles created in our society (Cohen-Woods, 2019). As more brands emerge with inclusive clothing, the conversation about making clothing comfort-centric continues (The Roots of gender-queer identity through consumption, 2015).

Fashion always creates and cultivates a broader social outlook, and for the gender-neutral movement, the same seems to be true, with 91% of respondents supporting gender-neutral clothing. Apparel serves as a vehicle for commentary and critique, which will lead to the dismantling of the rigid rules governing gender. Gender-neutral clothing is not a contemporary trend, and it has existed just as long as there have been gender norms to reject.

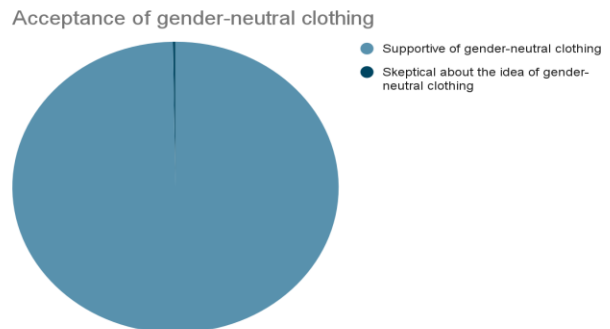


Fig. 5 Percent-based support for gender-neutral clothing

4. Implications of the Study

The present study aimed to establish whether specific uniform options for girls and boys are acceptable and identify what further changes may be beneficial to ensure full and fair choice for students within the educational system in India. Inclusivity and equality are important aspects of creating a gender-neutral educational environment. Ascribing gender roles does nothing but injustice by placing a fence on the potential of many merely based on their gender. We begin to expect them to perform within the limits imposed.

There are several instances of unfair treatment of students in educational institutions. The uniform or dress code is among the most prominent aspects of school life,

where gender roles are heavily imposed. White boys have comparatively lesser restraints placed upon them, and girls are often expected to dress in a "less provocative" manner. Students often feel that uniformity fails to appear in educational institutions, proving that an inclusive environment is just as important as inclusive education. A truly uniform environment ensures that every pupil feels a sense of belonging and knows they are not bound to any restrictions, which is why such prejudices must be eliminated.

It remains quite common for uniform requirements to differ between genders, resulting in uniforms that can be restrictive, particularly for girls. Many schools in India require girls to wear skirts or dresses, with no shorts or trousers option for girls within their everyday uniform choices. Such restrictions can be problematic, as indicated by emerging research in physical activity engagement. Skirts and dresses have other practical impacts significant in everyday schooling activities. They are inherently more restrictive relative to shorts and trousers, with certain postures, positions, and activities not able to be easily performed. Even with tights, the shape of the individual's legs is displayed, regardless of the child's preference. Some people consider their legs to be "too fat" or "too thin," and children facing body image challenges are given no opportunity to cover up if they would prefer.

While school uniform policy may appear relatively acceptable, it does have the potential to fuel gender inequality. Regardless of a student's gender, the uniform should be flexible and allow the right of choice. This includes the choice of clothing that allows for freedom of movement, level of comfort, safety, and consideration of climatic factors.

It is important to improve physical activity among children, and limiting access to shorts and trousers/pants options may impact children's longer-term well-being and health, particularly girls. We extend this investigation to include the quality of the implementation of gender-neutral uniforms, the choices children engage in within particular schools and the well-being of the children involved.

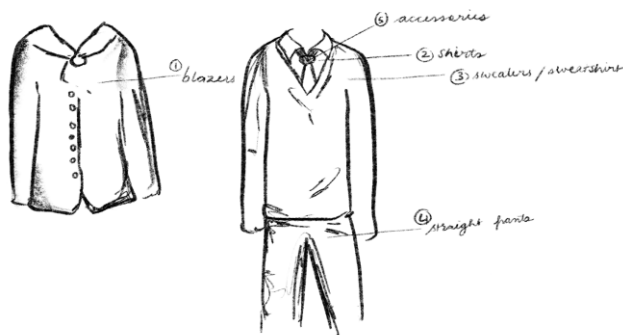


Fig. 6 Sample design of gender-neutral uniforms

Table 2. Sample design breakdown

1	Blazers: Unisex Fit
2	Shirts
3	Sweaters/Sweatshirts: Season based
4	Straight fit pants
5	Other accessories

5. Conclusion

Before creating a uniform dressing system in educational institutions, the authorities must make the designs fair and consistent. All students must be kept under the same standards. Rules against sexually provocative clothing, for example, must be equally enforced by students of all genders.

When students are subjected to repeated policing, it often leads to a disruption in the environment of educational institutions. According to the general idea, this disturbance is caused by those who do not follow gender norms, when in fact, it is the very idea of gender segregation that causes it (5).

This idea often adversely affects the psychological and social well-being of students. To strip our society of such biased treatment, a gender-neutral environment must exist. Unfair practices should be dismantled, and all educational institutions should foster an inclusive attitude.

This prejudice can be uprooted through the constructive changes made in uniform and their inclusivity, thus inculcating a sense of true integration. Gender stereotypes should not be reinforced through uniforms. The students must be allowed to clothe themselves according to their comfort, not their gender identity. Thus, the apparel should be favorable to the student's education.

Acknowledgement

This comprehensive analysis would not have been successful without the aid and guidance of those who motivated and wholeheartedly supported me throughout the process. I am incredibly grateful for my counselors - Pushan Dasgupta and Dr. Manali Dogra.

I would like to appreciate the contributions of all the respondents who took the time to fill out the surveys, and I hope all my sincere efforts and knowledge are reflected in the pursuit of this project.

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