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# Inclusive Designing with Gender Fluidity

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## **Abstract**

Building upon the author's previous works, on the dimensional modelling of gender identity, role-play, and personas, this discursive paper goes on to consider the concept of Inclusive Designing with Gender Fluidity. Gender Fluidity refers to ongoing perceptual and behavioural changes in individuals, where their performativity of gender may relate to changes in social context.

It is proposed that developing recognition of directions and degrees of gender fluidity, aided by visualisation tools like the gender fluidity cube, enable opportunities to be identified, explored, and possibly then to empower more inclusive responses to the needs and interactions of individuals. Through the vehicle of clothing design this conceptual project investigated how we might more inclusively approach the broader experiences of gender, and more specifically gender fluidity, through the development of a series of prompts and choices, for more effective investigation and consideration of gendered needs and designs, to support social innovation.

## **Keywords**

Gender, Fluidity, Performativity, Identity, Clothing, Design.

## **Introduction**

In the spirit of open-mindedness and inclusiveness, towards improving quality of life, designers will increasingly find themselves needed to engage in more ethically considered dialogue and development around the cultural taboos of: death; diseases; mental and physical impairments; environmental destruction; homelessness; bodily excretions; anti-social behaviours; human exploitation; sex; religion; and fear. To improve quality of life, designers must not shy away from these 'socially inappropriate' topics, but contribute their support to the development of new ways of seeing, thinking, and doing, to engage with these human challenges more effectively. Design research communities and practitioners have already made inroads into a few of these areas.

If we are to develop more inclusive perceptions and behaviours we need to be willing and able to question, and change, unhelpful personal and social constructs, such as: sport is masculine; housework is feminine; and gender is binary. Nevertheless, we may decide there are some broader and therefore more workable constructs like: power and aggression are masculine; care and socialising are feminine; and that each individual will have a mix of masculine and feminine traits and experiences. Developing new perspectives on life requires more appropriate ways of modelling the world and its complexities. Gribbin [1] described how scientists dealing with complex systems have been successful in developing our understanding of those systems though simple

models. These models allow basic theories to be tested, where the results then contribute to those models being deepened into more robust models. Though these models will not suit everyone's world-view, designers and researchers do work in this way, developing concepts to test out, applying feedback to create more workable design solutions and eventually new knowledge, products, processes or services. Simple models are often applied, in preference to complex models, in order to reduce cognitive effort in informing us about our day-to-day social and environmental contexts. However, it is argued that while our literacy of the world has increased over time through the creation, sharing, and revision of these constructs, certain overly simple models have remained unchanged and underdeveloped for centuries, becoming deeply embedded in our cultures and languages. It would seem that some elements of world-view and self-perception may actually be ingrained in the individual during initial personality development, (Dittmar [2]), and while these individuals may be able to 'intellectualise about what *could be*', their language may constrain their 'thinking about what *is accepted*'. Gender and identity are examples of complex systems, where individuals are influenced by cultural and contextual factors where some change is random noise while other change follows a complex order.

It was argued by Hilton [3] that it is apparent from gender and identity literature that the simplistic 'binary' model of male-female and masculine-feminine is constraining deeper thinking and engagement with the more complex nature of gender. Therefore, a dimensional model of gender identity was proposed with the axes of sex, sexuality and gender, in support of the three most commonly referenced elements of gender identity. Since publication of the earlier model it has continued to develop as the author sought to further rationalise and accommodate some deeper qualities of gender identity, identified through discussion around the initial model. The latest revision is illustrated in figure 1.

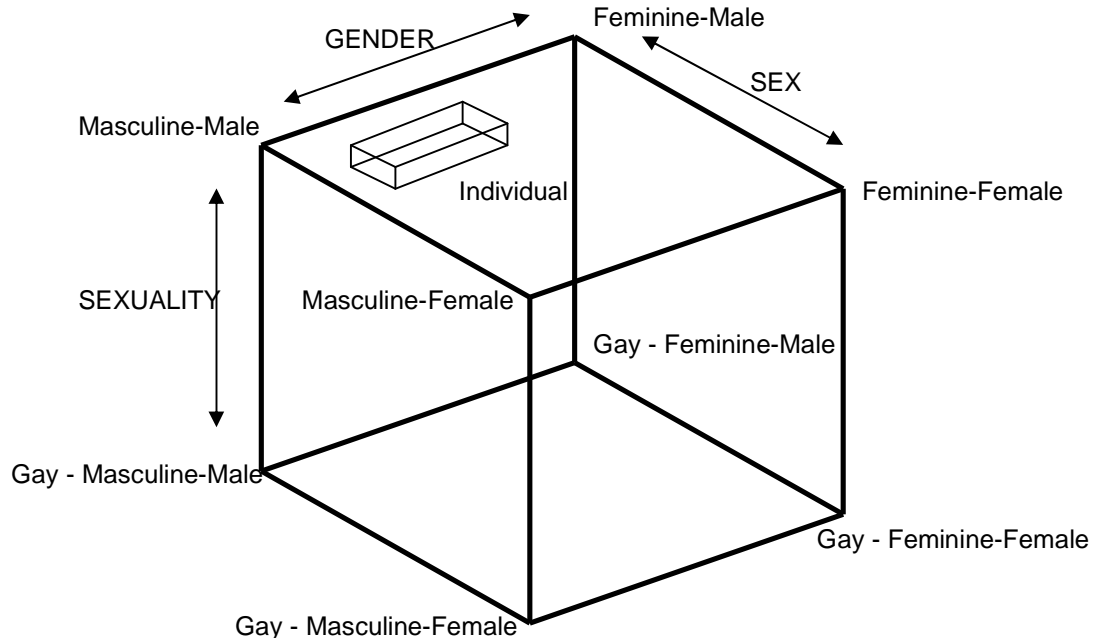


Figure 1: Gender Fluidity Cube

The 'individual' may now be described within the dimensional volume as a smaller volume, rather than the previously proposed positional point. Individuals are expected to experience a sense of range on the axes not a clearly defined point.

O'Keefe [4] previously proposed that sex, gender and sexuality are fluid concepts. This means that over time and across contexts the ranges on these axes, and therefore the identity volume, proportions, and position, may change. This model allows those changes to be recorded, registering individual's gender fluidity experiences of products and services or changes in social context.

The author's model also enables recognition that there may be personality determinants in the definition of an individual's volume. Some may feel 'philic', attracted toward the extremes, while others might feel 'phobic', being repelled from the extremes. Some individuals may even be philic on one dimension while phobic on another. A further challenge on the sex dimension was the need to relate to body image issues, (Grogan [5]; Dittmar [2]), in addition to physical definition of the body form. It is suggested that some individuals, possibly those who are philic and empathic, will perform a level of mimicry, conscious or non-conscious, as they seek to engage with changes in social or environmental context. It is proposed that such individuals might be classed as more 'fluid' in nature, and typically their identity volume might be larger and more frequently change proportion and position, than more set and possibly phobic individuals.

Moving this developed concept into the present investigation, the purpose of the author's work was to develop and share new ways of seeing, thinking, and doing, so that more considered and inclusive design may be possible. It is proposed that in a developing society, and as part of responsible design practices and social innovation, greater understanding of gender would need to be gained if we are to respond appropriately to the opportunities of understanding and change.

## Context

Gender, as one of the three themes and axes of the Gender Fluidity Cube, is not a given in the way that genetic code is, but may be a learned or chosen social behaviour, an active performance or performativity (Butler [6]). This context dependent performativity could be said to be a political issue, in that it is a key component of how we live, but not necessarily how we would desire to live, for our Subjective Well-Being, (Dittmar [2]).

For a variety of reasons, many people may be happy with the status quo, experiencing no need for, or interest in, change because it is not perceived to involve them. Some individuals would actually seek to maintain the status quo, because of anxieties over the experience of ambiguity in the early stages of acknowledging difference and change. It is suggested that this would be an experience common to many other equality and inclusion concerns. Two key factors of influence are proposed to be: *social constructs*, the belief systems of a culture; and *social innovation*, the opportunity for change enabling individuals and social groups to explore new qualities of life and well-being through more accommodating products and services.

Consumerism has encouraged a desire for change and diversity, developing the belief that the *new* may lead to a better quality of life, (Dittmar [2]). In acquiring these products or engaging these services we may explore and develop our selves, and may seek to display our possessions or behaviours as messages of change of status or identity. The desirability of the new is *suggested* by the media, but for some this can lead to the experience of Self-Discrepancy (Higgins [7]), for not attaining their 'Ideal'. It is proposed here, that products and services which touch on the dynamics of social constructs like gender will experience greater success through an incremental as opposed to a radical approach to social innovation. However, a significant number of individuals continue to carry a value perception that feminine attributes are in some way

second rate, and that this perception is so strong that attempts to change it seem doomed to only short-term success. (Suthrell [8]).

One reason for the greater success of the incremental approach might be our need for *recognition* as socially viable beings (Butler [6]), and the language by which we 'recognize'. In order to communicate and engage with change, each culture is constrained by its language. A message perceived to be clear at one time, or in one culture, may hold little or no meaning in another, but without some foundation for communication we cannot move forward effectively.

To serve the possible needs of communicating gender fluidity, we may require products and services that reflect changes relatively quickly, 'I care' or 'this situation is making me aggressive', enabling recognition and reducing potential anxiety. The most important personal media for communicating change is our clothing, so this investigation considered how clothing might support the communication of gender fluidity, in terms of choice of garment, how we might choose to wear it, and how we might experience it. This included the concept of gender adjustable ensembles. See figure 2.

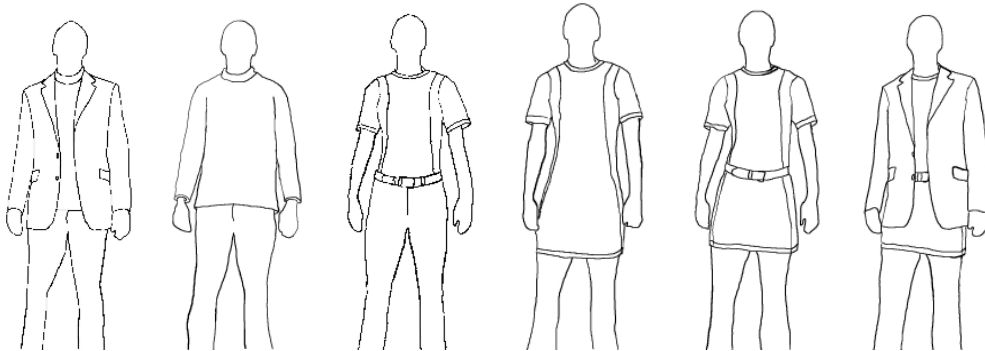


Figure 2: Gender adjustable ensembles

Men's wear is a useful vehicle for discussing change, because it still has nowhere near the freedom of expression of women's wear. This paper does not seek to evidence the existence of a market for the gender fluid, though it is believed that the Internet could prove to be the largest marketplace, (Slater [9]).

The conceptual role-play and persona process described in this paper is not proposed as something that must be engaged with physically as a design process to accomplish effective gendered design work, but that this approach did serve to develop some useful perceptual prompts. Designers may now choose only to use the perceptual prompts to move their thinking forwards. It should also be noted that the purpose of this investigation was not to propose example garments as marketable designs, but instead to use these concepts to aid engagement with the consideration of meaning and value within the process of designing *with*, as opposed to *for*, gender fluid experiences.

## Method

It is generally acknowledged in the social sciences that in addition to the ethical considerations when investigating topics like sex, sexuality and gender, it is challenging to get reliable data from respondents because much of this subject area is considered taboo in many cultures. Even when participants appear to be cooperating they may be unable to fully disclose and discuss their personal context. It is acknowledged that the nature of this taboo can even deter self-exploration, which means that some individuals

will find they are unable to engage with a role-play approach to research and design, for example to experience garment fit and function.

The author decided that since this stage of the investigation would remain conceptual it would be more effective to explore the clothing aspects personally, to consider, develop and reflect upon their relevance and value through his own perspectives, to inform possible future developments with others.

Table 1: Concept clothing design considerations

a. Opportunities for clothing to express gender fluidity in the present day: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Capable of relatively rapid change, or short period use.</li> <li>2. Capable of moving between perceived masculine and feminine cues.</li> <li>3. Concepts which might work with accompanying garments.</li> <li>4. Concepts appropriate for business or casual wear.</li> </ol>
b. Development, prototyping and testing of a number of garment concepts, to explore: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Recognition</li> <li>2. Practicality</li> <li>3. Sensorial Aspects</li> <li>4. Expression Cues</li> </ol>
c. Sample garments displayed to elicit questionnaire responses.
d. Opportunistic discussions with a number of openly gender fluid individuals.

These considerations were to lead to a review and discussion of how the findings further informed understanding of support for expression of gender fluidity.

## The Concepts

A general look at clothing suggested that there are a number of garment types worn by both men and women, but because of choice of fabric, structure, detailing, and how they are worn, they may be perceived masculine, feminine, or neutral. These are further categorised by language, e.g. shirt, blouse, T-shirt.

To make a shirt appear to be a blouse, it might simply need decorative caps fitting over the buttons, provided the material and colour supported such transformation. However, to make a blouse appear to be a shirt might prove more challenging because of the manufactured structure. Alternatively a row of buttons and holes on both sides of a shirt front would enable the 'buttons left for girls'-'buttons right for boys' *rule* to be played with. Neckline would also seem to hold some cues for gender, which might suggest opportunity for replaceable necklines. There are already trousers which convert to shorts, and jackets with removable sleeves, so modifiable neckline might not be too radical a concept. We may take this zipper concept further, to convert trousers into skirting or vice versa. However, there would be a need to resolve the question of comfort, accepting that it may be easier just to swap to a skirt, or put a skirt on over trousers. Alternatively, we might reconsider what a zip needs to be, as a flexible re-sealable interface between two surfaces.

Length of shirt might be used, in the way that shirt-tails may be worn in or out of the trousers, but for this to provide more feminine cues than normal shirt tails it was proposed that they would have to be notably longer to provide a skirting cue such as a long T-shirt might. However, cut and length would have to be comfortable enough to tuck into the trousers when desired, so would be unlikely to extend much below the crotch, without the use of a split hem. Another opportunity is to use material that is a different colour on each side and deal with the seaming in such a way that it is a reversible

garment. Different colour or pattern might be used to display masculine or feminine qualities in keeping with the wearer's experience of self in context. The final opportunity considered was of 'occasional' wear, involving clothes which would only be intended for short period use like party/evening garments. The key elements of expression might involve choice of fabric, colour, pattern, and cut. The concept of cut and detailing in, for example, dresses for men, acknowledging the lack of breasts and different physical body-image might be constructed to appear less feminine if required.

The more interesting concepts generated by the author were constructed and tested as prototypes to gain a deeper understanding of their merits and feasibility for creating changes in perceptions and expression of gender fluidity.

## Concept Testing

A number of concept garments were prototyped, to enable the author to better understand the physical and emotional aspects these garments facilitated. Two pairs of garments were then selected for display in the School of Design to enable fashion staff and students, and the broader design community to offer feedback by way of a questionnaire. See figure 3.



Figure 3: Two casual wear concepts (left), and two occasional wear concepts (right)

The first pair of garment concepts represented casual wear, while the second pair represented occasional wear. In summary, it was noted that there were some opposing opinions from the sample group, regarding the values and messages held by these four garment concepts. Research involving range of emotional responses to materials, (Hilton [10]), found similar variation in responses. Regardless of the construction quality, the majority found the concepts acceptable, while a minority read and responded *negatively* to the intentionally *transgressive* ideas, possibly experiencing some phobic response to the ambiguity. Overall, the general response to the researcher's somewhat more masculine selection and cut of materials, colours and textures, was still to read these garments as feminine. Few participants related the garments to male or indeed gender fluid use; such was their strength of categorisation.

The author describes in the following sections his experiences and reflections on using a role-play approach to testing these prototypes. First person is used so that the accounts are not misunderstood as objective generalisations but subjective user-experiences.

## Recognition

An immediate reaction I have to any garment detailing which is unfamiliar, is to categorise it as feminine, even though I *know* it is unhelpful to prejudge. It is as if I identified that I possess a perceptual algorithm that states 'If I have not seen a garment or detail worn by a masculine individual, then it is a feminine garment'. This lacks logic, but I believe this prejudging error to be shared by others and propose that it is part of the *recognition* process. Butler [6] uses the term recognition in the context of social alienation, which can lead to dehumanisation and possible acts of violence against non-conformers if opportunities to understand are not taken. However, my use of the term has been to build upon this, broadening it to adopt an internalising perspective, to include the context of self and the perceptions of 'Me-ness' (Schultz-Kleine *et al* [11]), or 'This is me - This is not me', when considering new clothes, or when dressing, regardless of gender. For example, I have come to recognise that for whatever reason, most pattern print, for example on shirts, is just not me.

On further reflection, it is proposed that the sense of *recognition* might also relate to 'this is what my partner might wear', or 'this is what some of my social group would wear.' So the meaning of the clothing could be argued to go beyond 'this clothing belongs to me' to 'I belong with this person/these people'.

I created a number of prototype garments out of different materials, to try on at home, and experienced self-discrepancy. However, spending evenings wearing these prototypes I found I did come to recognise myself in some of them, but most definitely not all. It is proposed that part of the perception problem in designing for gender fluidity is that the process is not about designing women's or men's wear, but designing to express identity, and state of mind, inclusively enabling individuality to be expressed and recognised. On reflection, this might suggest the need for extended self-education for individuals to become more familiar with congruent modes of expression.

Following some informal interviews of gender fluid individuals, it was clear that there is a diversity of needs and desires. Some may be appalled if they are mistakenly categorised as the opposite sex because of the way they choose to dress, because fluidity is not exclusively a conscious behaviour, while others do consciously decide whether they want to perform as a man or a woman when they start their day.

Designers should also acknowledge that in some cases, if the 'persona' created by a product or service is strong enough, some individuals may experience a sense of change of identity to fit, (Dittmar [2]). So, garments might be argued to function as more than a media of identity communication, as their influence could be considered as also facilitating disguise or acting as agents of change. During this investigation while I did not feel any increase in femininity at first, perceiving myself to be in experimenter mode, I did begin to feel more feminine over time as I settled with those garments that I came to recognise a degree of me-ness with, as a Heterosexual-Feminine-Male. However, the expression of femininity as a male does not have to mean cross-dressing behaviours, it may simply be the holding of feminist attitudes of caring and inclusion.

## Practicality

The experience of this broadly experimental approach to prototype testing enabled some *simple*, and to everyday users *obvious* no doubt, observation to be documented:

- Tight skirting might feel 'protective', but constrains the gait.
- Long skirting gets under the feet when sitting, and when ascending stairs.



- Depending on fabric, garments that are tucked into trousers may become creased, possibly influencing the desire to just leave them in their outer mode, or make a detail of the creasing.
- A garment may cause what are seen as gendered behaviours.

On review of a lot of these experiences, it became apparent that a lot of what I had taken to be natural feminine body language was in fact a result of constraints and influences of the garments. I concluded that some garments are being worn more for how they look, than how they feel or perform, because practicality cannot be a priority. It would seem to me that there are no obvious practical advantages to wearing a skirt or dress, which is possibly why many women, these days, choose to wear trousers. The purposes of wearing a dress could be: to signal or celebrate confidence with femininity; because it is socially believed to be attractive; and because women are 'allowed', usually without negative consequence. There are some gendered differences in perception and experience in shopping for clothes. Dittmar [2] describes common perceptions of men shopping with practicality in mind, while for women it is about engaging with the search and purchase experience. A stereotypical masculine perception, 'ownership' and 'dominance', may support a belief that women are seen as dressing in order to attract male attention, or that they dress-down to deter their attraction. However, the majority of women describe dressing as being for themselves as individuals, wanting to express their femininity, as is the case with publicly cross-dressing males. (Garber [12]).

## Sensorial Aspects

Appearance is important in terms of what message the garment is attempting to transmit, but its success depends on whether the audience receiving the message recognise it and take its intended meaning. Meaning has to relate to past experience, yet if there is insufficient or ill-informed experience, the message becomes ambiguous and possibly misinterpreted. Choice of fabric is clearly important, for example in how it reacts to light, reflective may suggest glamour, where as dull may suggest utility. Social perceptions are continuously changing, and in terms of colour messages, especially in relation to pastels, they are presently changing their previous feminine connotations, while dark colours are still giving the impression, in Western culture, of dominance.

The drape of the fabric may also be important, where rigidity can be read as masculine while fluidity and clinginess can be read a feminine. Feel is important, and how it changes in context with task and temperature. Again it is down to the individual. Hilton [10] described an experiment in emotional response reliability to a range of materials, where it was found that almost every material was someone's most favoured whilst also someone else's least favoured. I found the sensation of skirting significantly different to trousers in the way the material moved over the skin, and in fact noted that skirting is less likely to chafe than trousers when sitting or moving.

To a lesser degree, sound can be important to some people in positive and negative ways, relating to context. Similarly the qualities of smell may carry sensory meaning. An important aspect of the sensorial is how it makes the wearer feel physically and psychologically: comfortable, secure, powerful, etc, within context, so that their experience and behaviour is congruent with their gender identity.

## Expression Cues

It is proposed that self-discrepancy may occur for a period with any change in clothing. If everything was acceptable to all, then the marketplace would appear to lack meaning or

any sense of trend direction. The way the individual wears the garment with the ensemble of accompanying clothes and accessories, adds further cues. For example wearing a belt round the waist, resting on the hips but not holding anything up, acknowledges the individual has a waist, and is presently read as a feminine behaviour. Nevertheless, there are men who should be proud of their fitness, and if the individual is wearing a long garment a belt can help break up the extended form.

More blatant cues involve body language, such as posture and movement, beyond those encouraged by the garments, and in some cases pleasure may be experienced by some individuals in the exaggerated enactment of social stereotypes. However, cues transmitted are not the same as messages received. Some people would still be anticipated to read the image of a man in a dress as homosexual looking to attract other men, even though the majority of homosexual men might have their interest stirred more by men in suits. Most homosexual men seek masculine attention and share a rather masculine trait of promiscuity. According to Garber [12], it is only 'drag queen' gays, who more confidently enact 'fantasy' female roles, to lure males. This general misunderstanding of intended message could relate to the impulse of some to categorise the unfamiliar as 'other' in order to decide how best to proceed with a 'situation'. Sadly, these categorisations of 'other' can result in avoidance of engagement in conversation and a loss of what might have been an enlightening discussion. A number of investigations (Garber [12]) have indicated that men who wear women's clothing are mostly heterosexual. The author suggests that because these individuals make an effort to keep their activities quiet, to avoid potential for negative reception, the social perception is taking longer to adjust the way it reads the cues. Nevertheless, as a rule of thumb for more expressive individuals; where a greater number of feminine expression cues are transmitted via a garment, the more strongly feminine it will be received, and that if this makes the male individual's appearance a radical one, the longer it may take to gain wider recognition and acceptance.

During this investigation I experienced no fluidity across my sexuality or sex dimensions, only in the performativity of my gender. However, it seems possible that bisexuals might feel or trigger change in the sexuality dimension of gender identity by the responses they get from others to their mode of communication of identity.

## Discussion

It is argued here that intentions to discuss and promote gender inclusivity are challenged by the constraints of the language by which we refer to behaviours. Many so called 'masculine' or 'feminine' behaviours and abilities, with the exception of a number of biological functions, should not be labelled as such. Labelling simplifies our world-view understanding, enabling decisions to be made more quickly, but may constrain our perceptions and development of more effective understandings. However, it is recognised, (Suthrell [8]), that while many transsexuals would prefer their bodies to be 'corrected' to the opposite sex, many transvestites particularly like making the choice to be female or male at certain times.

The dilemma is in successfully enabling the perception of masculine and feminine gender qualities to be understood as separate to male and female sex. Connell [13] said masculinity is not a concept held by all cultures, nevertheless, presently there is a general desire to maintain a level of polarity, to avoid the perceived greyness of unisex propositions, (Suthrell [8]). In discussions about men expressing femininity, a key visual consideration in Western culture would seem to be the significance of body hair. Body hair is not seen to be attractive to the majority of people. It is often viewed as a bodily

attribute to be hidden or removed. A man with body hair in a dress is therefore not read as a woman, but as overtly ambiguous.

It was considered that designers might develop clothing that could be used to enable change of expression and behaviour to varying degrees, figure.2, bearing in mind that gradual familiarity and acceptance of dress for expressions of gender fluidity may also affect the meaning of such clothing. In taking a role-play approach to gender fluidity design, it is not suggested that the designer will come to fully appreciate and understand the diversity of another individual's experiences, but that this process could enable new ways of questioning and thinking about individual's needs and the market opportunities.

In conclusion of this conceptual investigation, the recommendations were that the design process should include: 'recognition', 'practicality', 'sensorial' and 'expression' considerations, possibly enhancing engagement and understanding through role-play.

It is proposed that the individual's desire to change appearance, in keeping with their experiences, would initially be for personal emotional recognition of change of context or mood, before any practical social benefit. Further research needs to be carried out to investigate reception, interpretation, and benefits.

Presently, there is no evidence to contest the findings of Suthrell [8], that clothing practicality and the social 'need' to read masculine attributes as a higher status than feminine attributes, negatively influences the social acceptability of a feminised male appearance in the West. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the process of considering a dimensional model of gender, in addition to designs' role in supporting gendered needs in products and services, will begin to inform a more responsible design practice; and in conjunction with a more responsible media, to facilitate greater inclusion of gender diversity and fluidity through social innovation.

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