

Harris Reed: gender fluidity for the fashion conscious

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Harris Reed, fashion's gender-fluid breakout star whose celebrity-worn designs have earned him a cult following, is shaping the future of fashion with disruptive offerings catering to the LGBTQIA+ community. How are designers like Reed driving inclusivity and challenging industry standards?

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LOCATIONS:
UNITED STATES

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FASHION AND STYLE



EXPERTS

Rob Garrett Smith

Shawn Grain Carter

HIGHLIGHTS

- 01** Harris Reed's designs reject stereotypical gender norms as they relate to masculinity and femininity
- 02** Gender-fluid fashion appeals to LGBTQIA+ and non-binary consumers who don't see themselves reflected in clothing's gender binary
- 03** Gen Zers are accelerating inclusion and gender acceptance through social media and increasing purchasing power

DATA

- **1.2 million** LGBTQIA+ people in the US identify as non-binary
- **51%** of American consumers enjoy brands that explore gender-fluid fashion
- **86%** of consumers worldwide expect CEOs to speak out on societal issues

SCOPE

British-American fashion designer Harris Reed is best known for pushing the boundaries of gendered clothing. Thanks to his cutting-edge designs that rethink gender fluidity, Reed became a breakout star in the fashion industry in 2020, the same year he graduated from renowned art college Central Saint Martins. With caged skirts, retro flares, exaggerated hats, and an affinity for frills and lace, Reed's designs confront stereotypes and gendered expectations.

Reed's subversive approach propelled him into the spotlight, making him the go-to designer for celebrities like Harry Styles and Solange Knowles. "I fight for the beauty of fluidity," he said in an interview with Vogue. "I fight for a more opulent and accepting world." [1] Driven by his core value of gender inclusion, he takes inspiration from social and political issues he cares about and uses fashion to spark conversations on worldwide injustices. The designer has also developed a gender-fluid jewelry collection with Missoma and created MAC Cosmetics' first genderless make-up line. In doing so, he's expanding the possibilities of self-expression across the full gender spectrum into the fashion, beauty, and accessories markets.

Reed's brand is value-driven, which appeals to socially conscious young consumers – 72% of Gen Zers and 70% of Yers say they make purchases based on their personal, social, and environmental values and principles. [2] Reed's commitment to sustainability is the reason he hasn't yet expanded into retail stores, focusing instead on upcycling material for high-fashion lines. He's achieved notable brand awareness through social media, where conversations on gender acceptance are gaining traction; #genderfluid videos on TikTok have over 5.2 billion views. With progressive

ideas around gender fluidity achieving momentum, how can brands meet consumer preferences and values in an authentic way that empowers minority communities?



Reed's designs help to amplify conversations around gender inclusion

Harris Reed (2022)

CONTEXT

GENDER FLUIDITY IN CLOTHING

With 51% of American consumers enjoying brands that explore gender-fluid fashion, more people are prioritizing self-expression and challenging the traditional dichotomy between male and female garments. [3] Online fashion searches that include agender-related keywords rose by 33% in 2021, a number that can be partly attributed to pop culture. Celebrities like Lil Nas X have popularised the idea of men in skirts, and after Dan Levy's character in Schitt's Creek got married in a skirt in 2020, searches for wedding skirts spiked by 26%. [4] With half of Gen Zers believing that the gender binary is outdated, brands like TomboyX, Human Nation, Les Girls Les Boys, and Wildfang are degendering clothing to meet demand. [5]

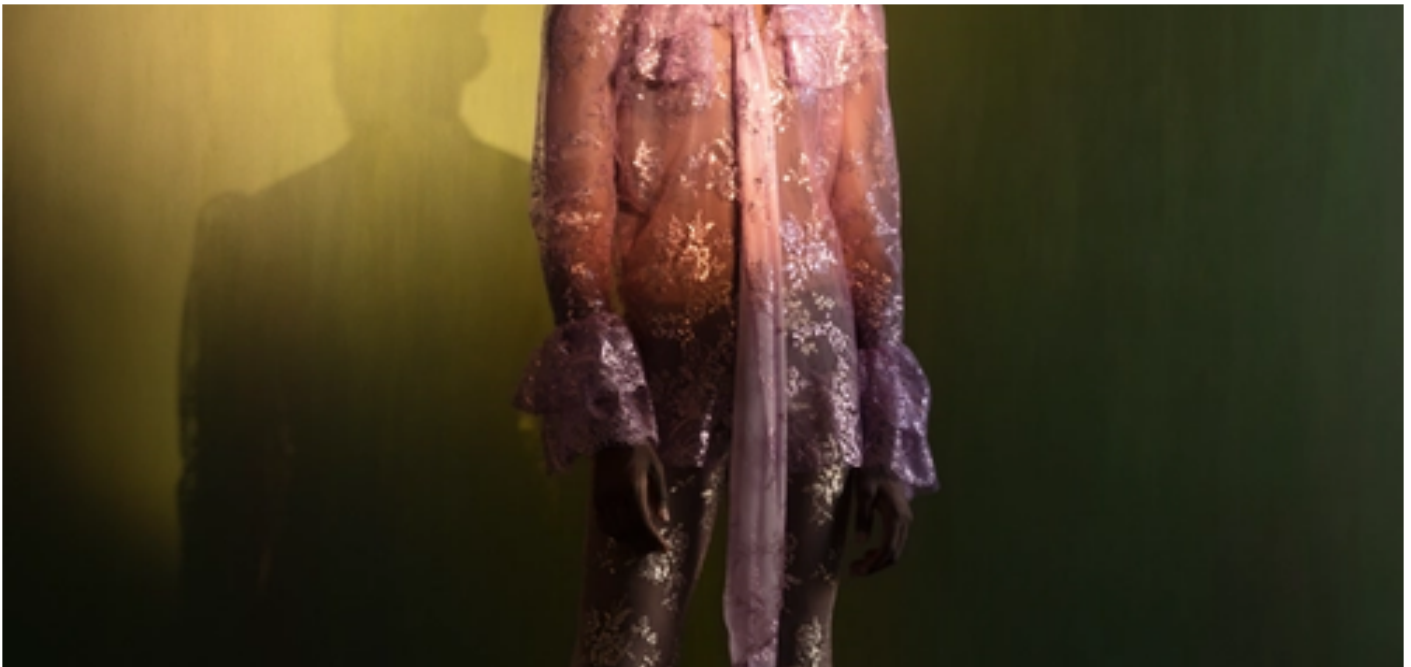
LGBTQIA+ INCLUSION IN FASHION

For the LGBTQIA+ community, representation across race, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status in fashion are essential. "Representation is the most important tool in the fight against hate," says Reed, who combats discrimination by advocating for diversity among all of his collaborators, from models to the production crew. [6] "If we don't have diversity, the outcome won't represent the world as a whole and we aren't contributing to society in a meaningful manner," he added in a later interview. [7] However, 78% of advertisers and 31% of agencies agree that it's highly challenging to adequately represent the LGBTQIA+ community because it's 'complicated and has many nuances'. [8] With LGBTQIA+ individuals making up approximately 4.5% of the US population and accounting for around \$1 trillion of

the country's disposable income, brands are increasingly looking for ways to overcome these challenges and barriers to true representation. [9]

CLOTHES THAT DELIVER A MESSAGE

Shoppers are demanding that brands tackle issues around social injustice – 86% of consumers worldwide expect CEOs to speak out on societal issues and 78% of Gen Yers feel companies have a social responsibility to make the world a better place. [10][11] "It's just as much about social influencing as it is about fashion," says founder of The Phluid Project, Rob Garrett Smith. [12] Harris Reed's outlook and designs communicate values and champion LGBTQIA+ rights, an active stance on social issues that other designers are also following. For example, Aurora James' 15 Percent Pledge asks retailers to buy 15% of their stock from Black-owned businesses. These equity-oriented brand values are answering increasing calls and expectations from consumers, with socially-conscious fashion particularly important for Gen Zers. "If you're not environmentally responsible, culturally aware, racially sensitive, empowering genders and those with disabilities, and looking to address historical grievances, they're not going to vote for your brand with their wallet," says professor at the Fashion Institute of Technology, Shawn Grain Carter. [13]



85% of Gen Zers want more diverse representation in advertising

Harris Reed (2019)

INSIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

NEW FASHIONABLE REALITIES

According to Carter, brands need to pay attention to the gender-fluid movement to meet Gen Zer consumer demands. "Fashion is an expression of [Gen Zer's] identity and what their individuality stands for in terms of how they're communicating cultural references," she says. "So now the industry, which is run by Boomers, has to address it if they're going to stay relevant." [13] Brands can cater to new fashionable realities that celebrate diversity and individual self-expression by degendering products. Labels like Nicopanda, Gypsy Sport, and Loverboy are pushing genderless

clothing, while Harry Styles' make-up brand Pleasing is challenging gendered expectations in the cosmetics industry. With 1.2 million LGBTQIA+ people in the US identifying as non-binary, access to garments that resonate with their gender identity and align with their values will lead to increased engagement. [14]

CREATIVITY VIA NEW PERSPECTIVES

Working with LGBTQIA+ communities helps to amplify conversations around gender inclusion. Reed uses his partnerships to advance LGBTQIA+ inclusion; he described his Met Gala collaboration with Dolce & Gabbana as a "very big moment to make a next chapter for them," after the fashion house was publically boycotted by Sir Elton John in 2015 for its founders' views against gay adoption. [15] Other brands like The Phluid Project are also doing this; expanding to offer inclusion training for businesses and financially supporting LGBTQIA+-led community organizations. "Phluid itself is a gender-free fashion brand, but it's also grounded in community, activism, and education," says Smith. [12] With 85% of Gen Zers wanting more diverse representation in advertising and 87% signaling they would actively support such companies, aligning offerings with new creative perspectives can meet people's increasing desire for brand activism. [16]

CONSCIOUS CAMPAIGNS

As 60% of US consumers agree companies must act on their diversity and inclusion claims or risk being perceived as exploitative and opportunistic, brands can advance inclusion through socially responsible ads and conscious campaigns. [17] This approach provides underrepresented voices with a seat at the table, challenges outdated industry standards, and can help brands maintain cultural relevance. "Relevance is everything in a quick fashion cycle," says Carter. [13] As such, diverse leadership can help avert tone-deaf marketing that can damage brand reputation. This is particularly important among Gen Zers, 75% of whom say they would end relationships with companies that run campaigns perceived as macho, racist, or homophobic. [11] For his part, Reed proves his commitment to LGBTQIA+ activism by using his platform to assist organizations that support gender-nonconforming youth, like UK-based Mermaids. Authentic and radical inclusion is also demonstrated by Black Owned Everything, a marketplace and media culture hub for Black creators founded on notions of inclusivity and diversity.

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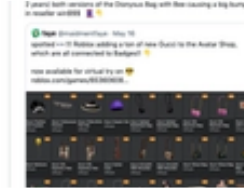
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