

# *Packaging Design of Objects from a Gendered Cultural Perspective*

**Rui Huang**

*The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH3 9DF, United Kingdom*

**Keywords:** Gender culture; gender performativity; packaging design; genderless design

**Abstract:** As living standards continue to rise today, design is becoming more prevalent, especially in packaging design, which is closely related to everyday objects and most directly in contact with people. With the advent of gender theories, objects are also an important part of the shaping of gender, and designers have been using gender design to reflect gender differences for a long time, but in recent years, gender diversity has emerged in addition to gender masculine and gender feminine, and in response to these situations, designers need to consider the needs of individuals and improve the packaging design of objects under the influence of gender culture. This paper focuses on gender culture and the current state of packaging design to predict how packaging design will develop in the future under the influence of gender culture, explains the basic concept of gender, analyses the history and future trends of gender culture, and identifies the causes of gender problems by analyzing the social context in which they exist. It critiques some of the current gender-stereotypical packagings. The paper also analyses the impact of good gender packaging on society by citing the current prevalence of de-gendered packaging.

## **1. Introduction**

Gender, a fundamental characteristic of a person. In recent years, the dialogue between genders has been the focus of attention in the news media. Due to cultural differences in gender, there are also different views in society. In everyday life, many social media are involved in the discussion of gender issues, we can find gender issues reflected in all aspects of life, integrated into people's clothing, food and housing, design works influenced by various gender cultures are also emerging, as individuals in society, we are in direct contact with products. The packaging is the medium through which the product conveys its message and is one of the main ways of communicating gender culture.

## **2. Gender culture and packaging design**

### **2.1 Basic concepts of gender**

Gender, as a fundamental human attribute, determines the role that each person plays in society, and there are significant differences between genders in terms of physical size, emotions and so on. Gender is closely related to human development and is an attribute that humans themselves cannot ignore. In fact, gender has two meanings, one is the physiological gender - sex, i.e. the most basic of

the two sexes distinguished by different physiological structures. The second is gender, which is an acquired gender, formed by social backgrounds, cultural differences and other acquired factors. This gender is pluralistic and is not simply a binary gender [1].

## 2.2 The history and future trends of gender culture

Gender culture has always been a part of human civilization. Initially matrilineal clan societies [2] at the stage of female worship, as civilization developed, men gradually began to dominate, forming a long-standing patriarchal society. Such a long period of gender culture has formed some stereotypical ways of thinking that men are superior to women, leading to a male perspective in many fields, after the feminist movement [3], which began to call for gender equality, believing that it is necessary to stand in the female perspective thinking, and with the development of medicine and psychology, there is now a greater focus on diversity between individuals. It is more preached to analyze from the perspective of minority gender groups, such as transgender groups, which are more sensitive and therefore it is necessary to think from their point of view.

In terms of current gender trends, in the future, a gender-free social situation may be achieved. In society nowadays, although gender is still a clear dichotomy, gender has a great influence on our daily lives. At a very young age, children are passed on the idea that. For example, girls' newborn clothes are usually pink, while boys are blue, girls are gentler, boys have to protect girls, etc. This is the transmission of social ideas about gender, ideas that are shaped by society for a long time. However, society has now gradually blurred this concept, for example, many countries have started to build gender-free toilets, these initiatives have solved some of the problems of unequal distribution due to differences between men and women. So a gender-free society is very likely to be achieved in the future. However, we still have a long way to go before we can achieve a gender-free society, as the gender binary is, after all, deeply entrenched in our society.

As society becomes free of gender, or perhaps more genders, the boundaries of gender become increasingly blurred. There may not only be male and female genders, but there may be more transgender, asexual, multigender, etc. As a result, when the social structure reaches a genderless state, there will be a change in the structure of facilities, clothing and some shops, there will be more tolerance in society. In terms of work, there will be no gender differences in work, it will be a matter of personal choice and will be less restrictive. The definition of the individual would depend more on the behaviour of the individual. In fact, this lowering of gender boundaries would reduce some of the pressures on society. More prominence will be given to individual choice and more freedom for each individual.

## 2.3 The relationship between gender identity and object design

Gender culture is something that has always accompanied the development of human beings, and at different stages of society, gender culture changes constantly. In the past, the concern for gender culture was mostly for women, but looking to the future, a truly equal gender culture is not only a concern for women, but also a concern for diverse genders. In design, the packaging of goods is directly linked to individual consumption, influencing individual preferences through different shapes and colors.

Among the many theories of gender, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity links the design of objects to gender, having pointed out that gender is free-flowing, with individuals playing or imitating a certain gender, and through this non-repetitive playing or imitation, shaping themselves into the subjects of that gender through social shaping and personal choice[4]. Thus, the individual's choice of objects is also powerful evidence for determining gender identity. Baudrillard argues that with the establishment of a consumer society, the use value of objects gradually falls away and the

meaning of their symbolic value becomes central to consumption. In an era of consumerism, where consumer goods are an important component of people's daily lives and purchases have become the primary means by which individuals shape their gender identity [5], the design of the packaging is closely linked to gender identity.

Designers play an important role in this field. Designers need to position themselves according to individual gender differences in order to determine the attributes of object design. As a student of visual design [6], focusing on the relationship between objects, gender identity and design is a necessary step in exploring gender design [7].

### 3. The current state of packaging design under the influence of gender culture

The influence of gender culture has been implicitly incorporated into our lives, and different problems can arise due to the influence of social culture. In the following section, the reasons for the current situation are sought by analyzing the current state of packaging in a gender culture.

#### 3.1 Stereotypes in packaging design

Most of the traditional gender packaging emerged because of the limited number of consumers, and if a clear division of the applicable population can attract the consumer interest of a certain gender, but in recent years, packaging design has followed the change of gender patterns have gradually produced changes. In the development of human society, people unconsciously categorise various things, often using curves to represent women and straight lines to represent men, thus creating long-standing stereotypes [8].

The traditional stereotypes are still present in consumer products and designers take elements from male and female physiological characteristics and create products that are exclusively male or exclusively female, which makes the gender binary stereotype constantly stressed, a vicious circle. In life, this is reflected in the fact that some goods are divided into analogies based on their shape and color, for example, girls prefer pink and boys prefer blue [9]. This is a classic example of gender stereotyping.



Figure 1: The packaging for children's milk

This packaging for children's milk. From the surface of the packaging, we can see that the boys in the picture are all doing different kinds of sports, while the girl in the picture is wearing a short skirt to cheer them on (Figure 1). It may be possible to see this image in everyday life, but by using it as the milk packaging that children often come into contact with, it is indirectly telling children that girls are playing the role of cheerleaders, which undoubtedly increases the gender stereotype.

But as time goes on, we will find that more and more boys will actually prefer pink or have long hair, and girls may prefer dark blue, and these preferences then reflect the social gender of the person, which may be diametrically opposed to the biological gender. Therefore, these contemporary design styles that act as guides are design field shortcomings, for example, little girls should like pink objects. Objects are carriers of gender culture and this existing stereotypical style packaging, when purchased, reinforces the stereotype of a person and is a negative trend.

However, with the increase in those whose psychological gender is the opposite of their social gender, more and more unisex styles are emerging, that is designs where the gender orientation cannot be directly discerned in the packaging features, or where the gender is directly removed from the packaging [10].

### 3.2 Gender blindness in packaging design

In addition to some gender stereotypes in packaging, there is also the phenomenon of gender blindness, for example, in the consumer market, women as the main consumer, many are mainly feminine packaging, pay more attention to the needs of female consumers, perfume packaging or cosmetics packaging are also mostly female colour prominent. At the same time, many male consumer groups are ignored.

Moreover, in the last century, the image of women has been blinded by the fact that in some design works of the past, the female identity was viewed from a male perspective, objectifying the female image and turning it into a symbol. For example, the image of a woman on some packaging representing a successful life is from a male perspective, completely ignoring the female perspective. Of course, this phenomenon does not only exist between men and women. In most designs about gender, it is often straightforward to ignore gender-blurred people. Transgender people, for example, often find it difficult to find clothing that fits and is loved, a result of long-standing gender patterns. It is rare that we see pieces designed specifically for specific genders, which are the very people that are ignored. Because of their numerical disadvantage, they are often categorised as male or female. Some people or even designers are indifferent to these categories of gender outright or even deliberately omit them. The complete failure to see the world from the perspective of these people is precisely the phenomenon of gender blindness. Designers should stand in neutral territory for their designs, fabrics and style in the first place will allow consumers to be generous and show that they don't have to worry about the gender of their clothes and be true to themselves.

### 3.3 Analysis of the causes of the current situation

There are a number of factors that contribute to this current state of design. I will divide them into three categories of analysis. Firstly, there are physiological differences, although people can be of different genders, the physiological gender is still predominantly male and female, even though there are some populations that change their gender through technological means. However, due to the large population base, the main atmosphere is still male physiology and female physiology, especially before the development of technology, some gender characteristics are specific to one gender, for example, the packaging of female products is mainly female characteristics.

Secondly, there are psychological differences. The psychological gender of each individual has nothing to do with physical organs, and as technology and medicine progress, more psychological

genders will be classified, and each gender perceives things differently. Some people with a more feminine psychological gender will be more likely to feel anxious than those with a more masculine psychological gender, so the consumer products they choose may be more likely to give them a sense of security.

Finally, everyone has different aesthetic differences, aesthetic differences are different from psychological differences and are influenced not only by individual factors, but also by social trends and culture, with each person's different ethnicity, background and beliefs contributing to different aesthetics. For example, some people are naturally attracted to delicate objects, while others find rough things more attractive. Also, with the influence of culture, some people prefer Japanese style while others prefer English style.

#### **4. The development trend of product packaging in the perspective of gender culture**

Good packaging design needs to be more open to conscious thought in the context of gender culture. We have seen a variety of packaging designs in our daily lives that convey a wide range of messages and cultures. Presenting the best ideas of gender culture through packaging design is one of the most powerful communication techniques we can use. But how to use packaging to communicate the right ideas and to promote the concept of gender equality through visual imagery is a priority for designers. As mentioned above, in the future, a gender-free society is possible. Therefore, gender-free packaging is the cornerstone for the realization of a gender-free society. Through analysis, gender-free style packaging, gender-inclusive style packaging, as well as packaging that focuses on the concept of the product itself and on individual colors are all excellent styles for communicating relevant concepts.

##### **4.1. Gender-free style packaging design**

In recent years, people's lives are becoming more and more complicated, and the fast-paced life makes more people pursue simplicity. With the development of minimalism, a simple design style has become prevalent - the "genderless" style. It has gradually taken over the consumer market of young people, from clothing design to merchandising. This unisex style blurs the boundaries of gender, reducing the representation of gender preferences in the products and not dividing the specifications according to any gender. The products are packaged to suit people of all ages, sizes and professions, using design subtractions to open up to different genders and widen the gender audience. In recent years, a number of similar brands have emerged, notably the brand MUJI, which is dominated by the packaging style of the MUJI range, especially for cosmetics. With its simple lines and colors, cosmetics are originally more feminine in style, but in this style of packaging, what is displayed is more like a unisex identity, with no connection to the uniqueness of a particular gender, and it is this 'genderless' style that has been successful in effectively predicting the future direction of packaging development in gender culture.

##### **4.2. Gender-inclusive packaging design**

Gender-inclusive practices include the inclusion of each gender. In particular, inclusive language, inclusive behaviour and visual presentation. It is also very common in our daily lives, even in some details. For example, the word "everyone" instead of addressing ladies and gentlemen. Such details respect each gender, which is increasingly valued in the design of contemporary society. It is particularly important that this gender inclusivity is reflected in the products with which we come into daily contact.

Under the previous binary gender model, it was difficult for the male gender to coexist with the



female gender. The understanding of gender was also mostly limited to the masculine gender and the feminine gender, and they were opposed to each other. Therefore, masculine and feminine features on objects were mutually exclusive.

For example, the definition of workwear in traditional terms. It is a type of masculine characteristic. However, with the development of gender culture, this so-called masculine element can also be combined with feminine products. For example, the Mr. Green series of packaging (Figure 2), for example, combines male styling with household cleaning tools. For the most part, people think of women as being more associated with household cleaning. This design, however, does not use our stereotypical image of women, yet is not exclusively for men. This playful design also demonstrates gender inclusiveness.



Figure 2: The Mr. Green series of packaging (2021 Bronze medal entry in the 2021 Pentawards).



Figure 3: Goji Berry and Rice Milk Series

As society becomes more civilized, the gender differences between men and women are becoming smaller and smaller. The long-advocated concept of gender equality has been implemented in many ways. Especially after the female revolution, the status of women has risen and stereotypes of women have gradually faded. As a result, there are now more and more "unisex" products. In particular, socialization has led to the perception of gender as more than just male and female, and there are more and more people in the younger generation whose biological gender does not coincide with their social gender. Under the influence of the future gender culture, the trend in product packaging design should be more focused on the idea that one wants to convey, independent of gender design. Goji Berry and Rice Milk Series (Figure 3), for example, combines the idea of rice and skincare products

to create a product with a rice bag as the outer packaging. The minimalist rice packaging looks suitable for any group of people. And people only have to distinguish the products in terms of the size of the packaging, reflecting the wide range of people they are addressing, and the rice bag packaging is straightforward in highlighting the ingredients and philosophy of the product.

### 4.3. Labelling to personalised packaging design

Genderless design is actually at odds with the prevailing stereotypical gender roles of the contemporary era. The gender roles and rules that society imposes on individuals actually limit the development of individual gender identities for a large proportion of the population. Therefore, good design is more about self-expression and restoring the original purpose of design. To reveal one's own attitudes through consumption, to reposition oneself and to get rid of one's own labels. The series, called Choose Love Packages (Figure 4), is straightforward and reveals the different characters in the images. They are not the traditional male and female romance, but exist in different ages, genders and classes. Some of them kiss, some embrace. In this number of packages, the colours are distinct and there is no pattern defining each one. The physiological male can also use a warm red and the physiological female can also show a calm blue. Colourful colours reveal colourful individuals.

This reflects the distinctive character of the different gender identities [11], and this series of packaging designs is not only a reflection of the strong individuality of different gender identities, but also an expression of acceptance and tolerance of each gender identity.



Figure 4: The series of Choose Love Packages

## 5. Conclusion

All in all, gender culture has been with us for millennia. Under the influence of this long period of time, packaging design under gender culture currently has a lot of negative status quo. These hidden perceptions and prejudices in our lives are something that designers need to analyse and fight against. Helping individuals to shape diverse gender identities and to better delineate the gender attribution of goods greatly facilitates life and promotes social development.

In my opinion, future trends in packaging should look more correctly at the differences between genders; gender is not binary and one gender is not mainstream. Packaging that looks at products from a multi-gender perspective and targets a diversity of genders. And, more emphasis should be placed on the concept of the product itself, less on the design from the perspective of one gender, less on the mainstreaming of one gender and more on gender equality. This de-gendered design reflects the openness of society. Young people are paying more attention to their own unique individuality.

We believe that this research and improvement in design from a gender and cultural perspective is actually very important. This is because the design of consumer goods packaging by designers is in direct contact with people of different ages and genders. The right and good design in these daily lives can be a guide to what people think. Moreover, these data provide different groups of people with the opportunity to perceive packaging design from a gender perspective. These products, which are closely linked to everyday life, can better help different groups of people to reflect on and construct their own gender identity. The gender confidence of some gender minority groups has been enhanced. The designer's exploration of gender and the improvements made can warn consumers of the importance of gender inclusion. It promotes gender equality more, reduces prejudice and stereotypes of differences between genders, and contributes to the perception and shaping of gender. It will allow society to be more tolerant of diverse gender groups in the future.

## References

- [1] Thorne N, Kam-Tuck Yip A, Bouman W P, et al. *The terminology of identities between, outside and beyond the gender binary—A systematic review [J]. International Journal of Transgenderism*, 2019, 20(2–3): 138–154. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2019.1640654>.
- [2] Mutolib A, Yonariza Y, Mahdi M, et al. *Gender Inequality and the Oppression of Women within Minangkabau Matrilineal Society: A Case Study of the Management of Ulayat Forest Land in Nagari Bonjol, Dharmasraya District, West Sumatra Province, Indonesia [J]. Asian Women*, 2016, 32(3): 23–49.
- [3] Beckwith K. *Beyond compare? Women's movements in comparative perspective [J]. European Journal of Political Research*, 2000, 37(4): 431–468. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.00521>.
- [4] Meyerhoff M. *Gender performativity*, in *The International Encyclopedia of Human Sexuality [J]. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd*, 2014: 1–4. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118896877.wbiehs178>.
- [5] Norris T H A, Jean B. *Pedagogy in the Consumer Society [J]. Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 2006, 25(6): 457–477. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-006-0014-z>.
- [6] Ritnamkam S, Sahachaisaeree N. *Package Design Determining Young Purchasers 'Buying Decision: A Cosmetic Packaging Case Study on Gender Distinction [J]. Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2012, 38: 373–379. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.03.359>.
- [7] Petersson M M. *Gender by Design: Performativity and Consumer Packaging [J]. Design and Culture*, 2018, 10(3): 337–358. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2018.1516437>.
- [8] Skrypnek B J, Snyder M. *On the self-perpetuating nature of stereotypes about women and men [J]. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 1982, 18(3): 277–291. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031\(82\)90054-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031(82)90054-3).
- [9] Souza R R, Depianti J R B, Bubadu é R M, et al. *For Boys Or Girls? Gender Cultural Representations In Toy Packaging [J]. Texto & Contexto - Enfermagem*, 2021, 30: e20190391. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1590/1980-265X-TCE-2019-0391>.
- [10] Kim J, Lee Y. *Expressive characteristics of genderless style appeared in contemporary women's fashion [J]. The Research Journal of the Costume Culture*, 2016, 24(6): 903–919. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7741/rjcc.2016.24.6.903>.
- [11] Olbrich S, Trauth E M, Niedermann F, et al. *Inclusive design in IS: Why diversity matters [J]. Communications of the Association for Information Systems [Preprint]*. 2015. Available at: <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/103370> (Accessed: 3 May 2023).