

ANALYSIS

Time to go gender-neutral?

Labels marking products as male or female, and labels that are unisex, have both proved controversial for retailers – meaning the issue is important to consumers. **Grace Bowden** reports

John Lewis grabbed many headlines when it decided to remove the boys' and girls' tags from its kids' clothing – replacing them with 'boys & girls' or 'girls & boys' – last month.

The introduction of gender-neutral kidswear divided shoppers, who took to social media to applaud and rebuke Middle England's favourite department store in equal measures.

Even Piers Morgan got in on the act and tweeted "Britain is going officially bonkers" alongside coverage of the story.

John Lewis is not alone in doing away with gender tags. Selfridges launched a gender-neutral pop-up in its London flagship in 2015 and Target began removing gender-specific signage from its stores the same year. Last year, Zara launched an 'ungendered' clothing line.

Striking a chord

The move to gender neutrality has struck a chord with a lot of shoppers. A 12,000-strong survey across 32 countries by global media group Havas found that over half of consumers believe children should have a gender-neutral childhood, and UK respondents were among the most supportive of this.

The survey also found that 52% of female and 44% of male respondents said they did not believe in set genders, while GlobalData's latest report on the toys market found that 60% of customers prefer to buy toys that aren't specifically marketed at either gender.

Havas head of group insight Alison Tsang says: "Gender-neutral is a key trend and it will continue, so if retailers are seen to be responding to it in a positive and proactive way now, they will reap the rewards rather than coming to it too late."

That being said, Tsang stresses that a move to unisex or gender-neutral product will not ring

true for every retailer and could risk alienating shoppers, as evidenced by the furore around John Lewis' kidswear.

"The dangers are many for retailers acting on such hyped trends such as gender neutrality. The question brands need to ask themselves is how can [they] legitimately operate in this space while staying authentic," she says.

"I advise brands to put gender to one side and focus on core values instead. Brands such as Aesop and new retailer Arket feel very gender-neutral without trying to be.

"That's because a strong product with a clear identity, aesthetic and purpose will prevail; appealing to both men and women."

So how should retailers cater to shoppers' shifting expectations around gender?

For Tsang, a quick win is to be found through in-store and product signage.

"Retailers can respond to the desire for gender-neutral products in sophisticated and simple ways, such as marketing a section [as] kids' clothing, rather than boys' and girls'.

"The product itself is also critical though, and getting that right is not an overnight fix," she says.

Possible alienation

GlobalData's senior retail analyst Emily Stella warns that changing signage without careful consideration could



Clockwise: River Island's gender-neutral sleepwear, Superdrug's B. Make-up campaign, and John Lewis' kidswear

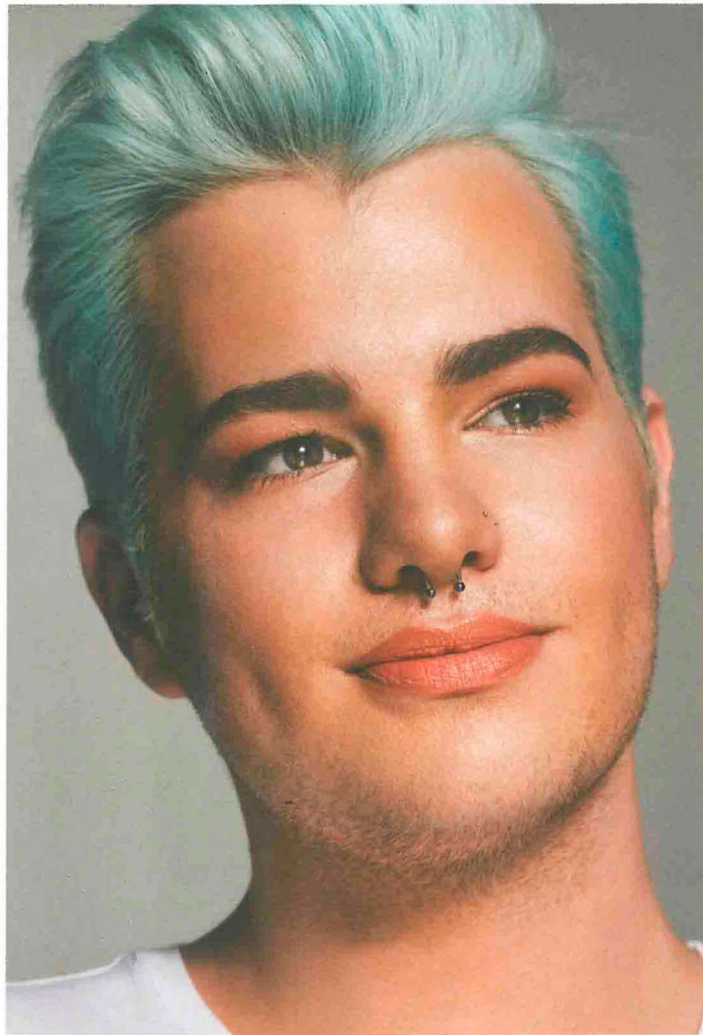


estrangle shoppers. "The difficulty for retailers is to execute a strategy that is gender fluid, but not go so far as to suggest the majority of children have some form of gender-identity issue," she says.

"For many parents with infants, a blurring of boys' and girls' clothing gives them greater choice. But as children approach puberty the division between boys' and girls' clothing becomes more marked and a swimming costume for children aged nine labelled as suitable for girls and boys becomes contentious."

Stella says John Lewis could have avoided this issue by removing gender labels altogether, a tactic that H&M-owned Arket has employed for its childrenswear.

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River Island sidestepped it when it teamed up with fashion designer Ashish for a 15-piece gender-neutral collection earlier this year.

Customer director Josie Cartridge says: "Gender-neutral has been on our radar as a trend for a while now. When we did the collaboration with Rihanna a few years ago, quite a lot of boys bought that product, and the rise of sports brands which can be worn by everybody and looser-fit denim all play into it.

"There have always been products that look great on men and women that we all want to buy, but it's become a hot topic because of the political environment and what's going on from a trend perspective – the two are intrinsically linked."

Cartridge says one way that the fashion retailer has integrated gender-neutral products has been through "dual displays" – male and female models wearing the same items – in its stores and online.

"It's not for everybody and there's still lots of women who want to dress in a very feminine way and vice versa," Cartridge stresses.

"We want River Island to be a place where you can shop to express your own style identity and to cater to a lot of different types of people. We see unisex products as a means of helping us do that."

Customer-driven

Another retailer that has embraced the gender-neutral trend is Superdrug. The retailer offers in-store beauty services, including manicures and brow-shaping, to anyone and recently used its first male model to promote its own-brand beauty range, B. Make-up.

Head of customer experience Gemma Mason says: "As well as looking at race and age we're

looking at gender and how we can ensure everyone feels comfortable shopping in our stores, and can find the products they need.

"Our customers have told us how much they appreciate us showing a wider range of experts and models on our marketing materials."

The kidswear sector

Childrenswear products, be they clothing or toys, seem to be the sector that is most primed for a gender-neutral transformation.

Indeed, Target's gender-neutral signage overhaul was brought in shortly after a shopper sent a tweet, which quickly went viral, of a sign in one of its stores that separated 'Building Sets' from 'Girls' Building Sets'.

This response rings true with the GlobalData research showing most shoppers would prefer to buy from retailers that don't separate their toys by gender.

"This shows that consumers are beginning to accept gender-neutral retailing in regards to toys, overlook gender stereotypes and encourage children to play with whichever toys they want to," says GlobalData retail analyst Fiona Paton.

However, Tsang says there are other retail sectors that, while less far down the track, will be disrupted by the gender-neutral trend in years to come. "The growing appetite for less gendered advertising has big implications for supermarkets and FMCG brands that have traditionally targeted mums, or other gendered spaces like the DIY market," she says.

Tsang adds that the reason that John Lewis has captured the attention of pundits and the public alike is that shops are social spaces where people with distinctly different values come together.

As such, retail will inevitably shape the cultural conversation about gender and it's therefore important for businesses to start thinking about how they want to respond to the issue.

"Retailers have a big part to play because customers have increasingly high expectations for businesses to take some civic responsibility in lots of areas and gender is one of those," says Tsang. "Retailers should be responding to this trend."

However, Cartridge takes a different stance and says that, for River Island, gender-neutral fashion was simply about responding to an existing customer need.

"As a fashion retailer, unisex clothing allows people to express themselves through their personal style and we are just responding to what we see consumers wanting – it's not a political issue for us," she says.

Whether you see gender neutrality as a way to take a stand on a cultural zeitgeist or a means of increasing market share by appealing to a wider demographic, it's a topic of increasing importance for today's shoppers.

Retailers should work out where they stand on the issue, or risk being left behind by their customers. **RW**