



**PULLING AT THE THREADS OF FLUIDITY:
ASPIRATIONS FOR NON-GENDERED AND RACE-NEUTRAL
FASHION IN 69'S NON-DEMOGRAPHIC DESIGN**

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Abstract

In the past few years, several fashion brands have attempted the creation of non-demographic clothes to fit everyone regardless of gender, race, class, and body shape. Such a utopian design has the possibility to intervene in the cultural politics of identity by creating clothes that allow the wearer to adjust the garments to their body and identity; and yet has the likelihood to perpetuate racism, sexism, and ableism, especially in the marketing of the fashion brands. Although it appears democratic, this design is problematic within a gender-specific aesthetic it promotes as universal and within its representation of racial diversity because it establishes the dominance of one culturally-specific aesthetic over the others. Coming from a position that non-demographic design reproduces hegemonic narratives of the dominant fashion, I analyze the designs of the Los Angeles clothing brand “69” by discussing their designs displayed at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) *69: Déjà Vu* exhibition (2018), as well as photographs of 69 clothes from their social media marketing sites.

Keywords: non-demographic design, fashion, 69 brand, identity, genderless, race-neutral

Pulling at the Threads of Fluidity: Aspirations for Non-Gendered and Race-Neutral Fashion in 69's Non-Demographic Design

The contemporary concept of *non-demographic design* refers to a specific approach to designing clothes that dismisses basic demographic principles of clothing production and marketing such as attention to gender, race, class, age, and body shape stratifications, and makes designs fluid and changeable. Today, there are several projects working to develop such designs.¹ For example, the London-based Art School (est. 2016) is a non-binary clothing label that primarily focuses on queer identity and communicating queerness through luxury fashion design. In their approach, they deconstruct traits and attributes of binary gender design to offer a wide range of gender markers between the two poles. Somewhat similarly, the Phluid Project (est. 2018) is a Manhattan-based store that positions itself as the “world’s first gender-neutral store” (Street, 2018, para. 1). They sell clothes from many well-known brands like Dr. Martens, Oak, Gypsy Sport, and Soulland, but curate only those designs that correspond with the store’s concept: to be gender-free. Although non-demographic design practices are emerging globally within a variety of different markets, I am particularly interested in looking at the Los Angeles fashion brand “69” (Stolerman, 2019). In comparison with other non-demographic brands, 69 makes a particularly ambitious claim: it aims to make its design suitable for people of different genders, races, ethnicities, classes, ages, body shapes, occupations, and other demographic divisions by offering neutral forms.

¹ Gender-fluid fashion is not a new phenomenon (see Kuga, 2018). For several years, such designers as Rick Owens, Eckhaus Latta, Rad Hourani, and Telfar have created clothes that resist a binary gender model. Also, global mass market brands including Zara and H&M have experimented with creating small collections of gender-fluid clothing. However, their practices are supplementary to the main design concepts of those companies without the pretention to become a central aesthetic.

The brand was established in 2012 by anonymous individual(s)² with the goal to create clothes that would fit *everybody* and to demolish gender and other demographic markers typical of most garments (Satran, 2017). The 69 brand makes a germane case study in non-demographic fashion for a few reasons. First, their work marks the most holistic approach yet in attempting to eliminate demographics as a guiding principle of fashion design and marketing. Second, 69 is an important component of the Los Angeles fashion scene—one of the main centers of development of non-demographic aesthetics—and is gaining notice within the leading fashion magazines such as *Vogue* and *i-D*, suggesting that the work of 69’s designers may be indicative of the directions of the fashion industry as a whole (Hahn, 2018; Satran, 2017).

The brand intends to intervene in the cultural politics of identity by creating outfits that, ideally, give the wearer the option to adjust the clothes to their unique identity needs. The designers hope to achieve a non-demographic effect through the replacement of demographic standards of clothing production, such as a binary gender division, with genderless cutting patterns that deconstruct gender-defined clothes into non-gender specific ones. They promote loose and overly large clothing forms of certain colors and fabrics as neutral, believing that such designs are suitable for everyone. However, in the following, I explain how the brand’s methods of clothing production may contribute to the development of discriminatory design that marginalizes representatives of target demographics of gender, race, ethnicity, social class, and body shape even in a so-called “democratic” design process.

Toward these arguments, I analyze 69’s designs as displayed at the Museum of Contemporary Art’s “69: Déjà Vu” exhibition in Los Angeles (August - October, 2018), as well as photographs of their clothes from their website (www.sixty-nine.us) and social media (Instagram and Facebook). I discuss these examples from four angles.

First, using Saguy and Williams’s (2019) analysis of the term *gender neutrality* and Amy Farrell’s (2011) theorization of fatness and the fat body in

feminist fat studies, I analyze the characteristics of 69’s design that function to resist demographic codes, primarily gender and body size. I discuss the characteristics in relation to whether the brand’s goals are achieved in disrupting the borders of normality of privileged gender and body shape identities, and how well their methods facilitate an active expression and construction of identity through their garments.

Second, I explore the performative capacities of the body in 69’s clothes to reveal the body’s ability to perform itself in conversation with a garment. I argue from a queer theoretical lens developed by sociologist of fashion Elizabeth Wissinger (2016) that, though the brand attempts to create designs for the wearer to express fluid gender identities, the garments also restrict self-identities by 69’s strong visuality and performativity of clothing forms. Moreover, John Bell’s (2008) perception model of performance explains that 69’s clothing-body relationship suppresses the body’s performative capacities and impedes the process of expression through the clothes.

Third, I examine 69’s attempt to achieve universality in their design. Through Mace’s (1997) concept of *universal design* and Halberstam’s (1998) queer theoretical perspective on masculinity, I show how 69’s design is problematic in its application to specific racial, ethnic, and social class groups and in terms of a gender-specific aesthetic the brand utilizes to achieve universalization. I discuss how their design strategies suggest the dominance of particular cultural and gender aesthetics even within their inclusive practice.

Finally, building on analysis from Ludwig’s (2016) feminist reading of inclusive tactics of neoliberalism and Hall’s (1996) cultural analysis of appropriation of racial and ethnic forms, I discuss 69’s privileged position on the hierarchical map of the fashion industry, which, as I explore, raises questions of the brand’s potential to become a real force for achieving social equality and inclusivity in clothing design.

69’s Non-Demographic Design: Resisting Demographic Codes

69 is committed to the goal of creating clothes that fit “everybody” by simultaneously blurring and accentuating a variety of identity markers. As the brand defined its concept in its manifesto, “69 is an all inclusive denim lifestyle

² One of the components of 69’s branding is the anonymity of its designer(s). By keeping anonymous, the author/s offer their consumers an opportunity for an individual way to read the brand and their designs without the inscription of the author’s name

brand based in Los Angeles, California. 69 is timeless and classic yet made in our present and meant for the future. Most of our inventory is produced within a 6 mile radius of DTLA.” (Sixty-nine, 2012, para. 1). The brand creates clothes that invite wearers to perform and reemphasize their own identities by adding something to a garment and/or changing the way the garment is worn.

There are several strategies that 69 uses to let the body dominate in the clothing-body relationship. The brand tends to create monolithic forms, in which the whole unit is made of one piece of fabric with a minimum number of seams. Such an item is usually made in one color, and any extra details such as buttons or zippers are visually hidden or intentionally revealed as one of a few necessary form-defining elements (Figure 1). The designer(s) almost never use graphics on the clothes with an occasional exception for the brand’s logo on t-shirts (Figure 2). Such a minimalistic approach to constructing an outfit suggests the garment can be worn by a range of body configurations.



Figure 1. This denim “One Piece” reflects 69’s design concept and approach: it is made of denim, has a monolithic and monochrome form, does not have a regular size scale and, therefore, as the brand assumes, fits different body’s configurations. Permission granted by the Sixty-nine (69) brand.



Figure 2. On the figure, we see 69’s designs—white T-shirt on the left and green-blue One Piece on the right. Due to their exaggerated sizes, they attract the most of the observer’s attention in this clothing-body union. The observer perceives the wearer through the clothing items rather than through the union of the body and clothes. Such a structure impedes performative and expressive possibilities of the body. Permission granted by the Sixty-nine (69) brand.

The brand uses certain types of fabrics including denim, canvas, stockinet, and other materials, which they believe are neutral enough to obscure different ethnic and ideological backgrounds in the construction of their designs. Sixty-nine associates these fabrics with such characteristics as simplicity, durability, and universality which, they suggest, make the garments not just physically, but also aesthetically timeless.

Another principle characteristic is the color palette, which the brand predominantly limits to such colors as pale pink, light blue, and beige.³ The brand sees these colors as secondary to the body, believing that these colors do not obscure the body under them, and thus, fit everyone. However, their use of color underlies and complicates the neutrality of 69’s designs. Although pale pink and beige might obscure the body if these are similar in color to people’s skin, these colors’ abilities to be demographically neutral are questionable. In order for beige

³ This is the color palette that the brand used until 2018, approximately. In more recent designs, 69 uses a broader range of colors.

to obscure the body the brand should provide garments of a range of shades that would match various skin colors of all the possible wearers. Neutralization of pink and blue is even more complicated because these colors have strong cultural meanings today as gender signifiers—pink for women, blue for men (Paoletti, 2012, 2015)—and thus, they are not socially neutral.

The brand's concept of inclusivity is based on the belief that the certain combination of design characteristics—monolithic forms, use of specific fabrics and colors in designs—makes the clothes neutral and capable of *flattening* social diversity via such forms; while at the same time, this neutrality is meant to *accentuate* diversity by inviting people to express themselves through adjusting an individual fit with various accessories for unique statements.

For example, in Figure 1, one can see two models wearing the same clothing item—*One Piece* (Sixty-nine, 2012). This monolithic unit is made of one piece of monochrome fabric with few seams, two pockets, and a central button closure. This garment is reflective of the ideas of neutrality and universality that the brand's designer(s) develop. It supposedly does not have noticeable gender, age, or class markers, and due to its fluid and loose form, allows the wearer to wear it in different ways with changes in the silhouette. If, for instance, one adds a waist belt to the outfit, the silhouette drastically changes from a baggy rectangle to an A-line, depending on the body configurations of the wearer. Or, if the wearer tightens the upper part of the garment on the waistline, like one of the models does, then the *One Piece*'s significance in the outfit ensemble changes from being a massive central element to becoming one of the elements competing with the white top. The garment enables the wearer to move between diverse silhouettes suitable for their identity demonstrating the garment's adaptability in contrast to prescriptive demographic design. Through such forms the brand aims to reconsider the relationship between clothing and the wearer; and reduces the primary mode through which gender is embedded in clothing as a binary understanding of women's and men's culturally defined silhouettes.

Sixty-nine associates neutrality of clothes with equality and inclusion. Assuming that neutral clothes open a variety of reading possibilities not necessarily attached to specific demographics, 69 defines neutrality as a gateway to the creation of inclusive clothes. Neutrality, for the brand, means that clothing

is or tends to be free of demographic markers inscribed in garments. For example, they assume that a neutral t-shirt (Figure 2) does not have cutting patterns that correspond either to male or female body configurations; it supposedly does not have a color palette that clearly has an association with a particular culture; it is believed, according to 69, to not have a reference to a social class; and it has a fluid form to fit wearers of different identities and body shapes.

However, neutrality of 69's design is not neutral but a conditioned and constructed category defined through the brand's emphasis on their particular non-demographic approach to design. Neutrality is conditioned—first, by the opposition to the fashion industry's canons such as a demographic production of clothes and a creation of clothes as a ready-to-wear identity with 69's brand of non-demographic fashion. Second, it is conditioned by an ideology of the brand to design clothing to fit everybody regardless of gender, ethnic, race, and class identities. It is 69's belief that certain colors, types of fabrics, and monolithic forms do not have a specific demographic meaning inscribed in them.

One of the key demographics 69 addresses in design is gender. To look at how the brand constructs gender neutrality, I apply Saguy and Williams' (2019) analysis of the use of the term *gender neutral* in the US national newspapers from 1970 to 2018. They define three distinct ways of framing the term gender neutral: *degender* (completely diminishes gender relevance), *androgyny* (mixes binary gender characteristics), and *gender inclusivity* (recognizes gender diversity). According to their analysis, an understanding of the term gender neutral in the US evolved from degendering in the 1970s (with a focus on an equality between women and men and without a recognition of an all gender spectrum) to the 2010s reframing of gender neutral to refer to gender inclusion, which recognizes multiple gender identities.

Similarly, one can trace the move from ideas of degendering toward gender inclusivity in fashion.⁴ Today, non-demographic design declares to create an inclusive space in clothes to recognize a variety of gender identities.

⁴ La Ferla (2015) describes non-demographic aesthetics as a trend in high fashion that periodically appears and disappears in fashion. The author mentions some earlier manifestations of the aesthetics in the late 1960s and early 1970s that tend to remake gender through *androgyny* and gender elimination in fashionable looks. Recent examples of unisex fashion speak toward gender inclusivity. For more information about unisex fashion and gender trends, see Paoletti (2015).

Non-demographic designers reject the *degender* approach for vanishing gender categories due to their recognition that an *androgyny* approach is too exclusive for the non-binary gender spectrum. However, although 69 works toward gender inclusion, its design, I posit, does not achieve gender inclusivity. The neutrality of the clothes, which they envision to be a uniform for people of different genders, problematizes inclusive capacities of designs because they tend to completely remove the borders of genders, restricting options for gender expressions via such forms. By creating clothes that cover diversity of bodies and identities with the same forms, 69 degenders rather than creates gender inclusive clothes.

Besides the color palette, monolithic forms, and a choice of fabrics that 69 defines as characteristic of inclusive clothes, there is another central feature—fluidity of clothing forms. The brand's design builds on the idea of movement and change. Their clothes are not stable formations but exist within contextual structures of the wearer's identity construction, that is, they develop their meanings through the conversation with the wearer's body and self as well as with the surrounding environment. In conventional fashion design there is nothing to add or reduce, because everything is perfectly organized and balanced in prescribed clothing ensembles. In contrast, 69 utilizes an open composition approach, where individuals are invited to add, reduce, or change the garments to adjust them to their body size and gender identity.

The brand proposes that there are numerous ways to add external elements and adapt 69's outfits. Besides the change of the clothing form, as I discussed using examples in Figure 1, the wearer can add various accessories to the outfits such as different types of bags, scarves, belts, headwear, footwear, jewelry, make-up, tattoos, and piercing. The brand proposes that these accessories and additions of various combinations of different colors, styles, and materials, as well as different cultural and social meanings, complete the empty forms of their clothes and, together with the clothes, help the wearer create a unique and individual image. Sixty-nine suggests that neutrality of their design allows for such additions of different styles and aesthetics that representatives of diverse gender, ethnic, class, and body shape identities use or may use to express themselves. However, this suggestion implies that besides clothes, the wearer needs accessories for self-expression, and that these accessories should be affordable for a wide range

of consumers for 69's clothes to be inclusive. Furthermore, the wearer should be able to adjust the clothing, that is, to have a sense of fashion and taste to feel comfortable in creating their individual image. The process of adjustment of 69's outfits requires certain abilities and skills, which undermines a principle of equity and inclusion of their clothes depending on whether the wearer has fashion skills and can afford to accessorize the outfit.

Contemporary discourses on identity fluidity and relationality in gender and queer theories (Halberstam, 2017; Jones, 2012) as well as in fashion studies (Entwistle, 2000), argue that identity is a fluid formation within a relational system of different social, cultural, and personal contexts. People need ways to intervene in the established cultural identity codes, such as gender, to constitute their changing and fluctuating identities. In the context of gender fluidity discourses, 69's approach to design clothes as a changeable and fluid design seems promising and illuminating in terms of the clothes' inclusive capacities. The clothes provide the wearer a fluid design for identity construction because the clothes do not have a stable meaning incorporated in the design and have a loose and fluid structure. The brand encourages the wearer to adjust their outfits by adorning *grotesquely* large clothes and adapting them for various situations, by belting, decorating, accessorizing, as well as performing in their outfits with their walking style, gesticulation, voice characteristics, and other bodily and personal traits.

Literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) describes grotesque clothing forms through an opposition to the "classical body," which he defines as "an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body" (p. 320). According to Bakhtin (1984), the grotesque body, in contrast to the classical body, is heterogeneous, constantly changing, and is always in question. The 69 designers create grotesque forms by making their clothes extremely large, with garments that significantly exceed a common sense "fitting" of the contours of the body (see Figure 2). The socially defined *grotesque body* that wears 69 garments help to denaturalize what the fashion industry defines as a *classical body*.

Grotesquely large forms and non-sized clothes (items do not have a size mark at all or have a two-size scale) are 69's approach to change cultural stigmatization of fatness and the fat body, which the fashion industry utilizes via standardized body-size scale and promoted ideal of a thin body as a "beautiful

body.” Amy Farrell (2011) argues that fatness is a marker of social status that intersects with class, gender, and ethnicity and, along with these identity markers, fatness serves as a hierarchical tool for power establishment and marginalization. As Farrell (2011) posits, the fat body is a stigmatized body and in need to be freed of that stigma. Farrell’s theorization of fatness shows that the 69 brand follows the dominant logic of trying to free the fat body from being, literally, seen as fat. Although the extremely large clothing provides the wearer with an opportunity to change the form to fit their body, such clothes hide the body under the garment, which 69 suggests helps to diminish stigmatizing people because of their body shape. Sixty-nine’s clothes do not let *any* type of body to be expressed, instead they camouflage different body types under ample fabric, maintaining the established cultural understanding of the “beautiful” and “not beautiful” body. Such a method of hiding the body devalues differences in gender expression and prioritizes homogeneity. It does not solve the problem of the stigmatized body; even worse, it keeps such a body hidden from public view.

The Body *and* Clothes or the Body *in* Clothes: 69’s Design and Identity Performativity

The relationship that 69 develops between the body and clothes is ambiguous. On the one hand, the brand wants clothing to merge with the body through the neutrality of clothing while letting the body dominate the clothes. On the other hand, due to the grotesquely large sizes of their forms, 69 separates the body from the clothes. The ambiguity lies in a type of unity that the brand constructs between them: it is unclear if the body and clothes form a structure where the body dominates the clothes by establishing meaning over outfits, or if they form a structure where the body and clothes are two equivalent units whose meanings compete with one another.

According to Elizabeth Wissinger (2016), a contemporary sociologist of fashion studies, modern fashion scholarship holds that clothes are inseparable from the body. Clothes and the body form a union that transmit an identity of the wearer. This view formed under the influence of gender theory in the 1990s, particularly Judith Butler’s concept of gender and identity performativity (Wissinger, 2016). The application of Butler’s concept removes the line between the body and clothes; as Wissinger (2016) explains, “by showing us how the naked body is already

clothed, Butler’s work carved a path for clothing to become a part of the study of identity construction and embodiment” (p. 295). In relation to Wissinger’s argument, I ask: what is the relationship between the body and clothes that the brand develops? Can one remove the line between the body and 69’s clothes? How does the clothing-body relationship in 69’s design affect performative abilities of both components? How does 69 construct the space for the body to express itself? And how does performativity of each of the two, the body and the clothing article, interact with the other?

The 69 brand makes the clothes as separate units that cover the body through the exaggerated sizes of their clothes instead of merging the two into one performative unit. Their garments seem excessive or complimentary rather than mandatory (following the body’s lines and creating a defensive shell for it), and, therefore, the body that wears 69’s clothes is the body *and* clothes rather than the body *in* clothes. The difference lays in a mechanism of perception of such a union. When viewing 69’s grotesque garments on the body, the garment is visible first, and the body second. As such, perception of the body occurs through the perception of clothes, not the opposite.

To a certain degree, this is a performance *with* clothes. John Bell (2008), a theater historian, discusses theatrical puppet performances with material objects and the objects’ performative capacities as autonomous items as well as on their amalgamation with the human body. According to Bell’s (2008) perception model of performance with puppets, puppet performers reveal themselves through the object, and the spectator also reads the performer through the object: Performer → Object ← Spectator. When my analysis applies this scheme to the clothing-body relationship, I can observe a similar dynamic: the wearers reveal themselves through the clothes, and observers read the wearers also through the clothes, the wearer → 69’s clothes ← the observer. If the key or final media in this scheme is clothes, then what space for expression does the body have?

Such a point of view reveals a problematic aspect of 69’s design in which their clothes, due to their dominant visibility, compete with the body and, therefore, impede the body’s process of expression through the clothes. It is difficult to say how much of self the body delivers through such forms of clothing, and if the body’s expressive opportunities in 69 outfits are stronger or weaker than those in

regular clothes. It seems that they are limited by the performativity and dominant visuality of 69's exaggerated garments.

For example, Figure 2 depicts two models in 69's clothes—white “T-shirt” on the left and green-blue “One Piece” on the right. Both items have exaggerated sizes and can fit different bodies' configurations. The photographs in Figure 2 may also signal that the garments hide something underneath, like another layer of clothes. The clothes attract more attention than their wearers due to their remarkable visuality and camouflaging capacities, and the clothes dominate the clothing-body structures.

Because of the visual dominance of the clothing over the body, the brand's aim to make clothing fully adjustable for the body's identity seems unlikely to be fully implemented. However, this does not mean that 69's design is ineffective for tactics of identity constitution through clothes. Judith Butler (1990) points out that alongside the body's conscious search for self-expression, there is an unconscious search for self-performativity: the body constantly experiences uncontrolled impulses to transcend its boundaries rather than simply choosing to act consciously. For Butler, the body inevitably faces a conflict between itself and clothing it wears because of the tendency of clothes to subject the body to normative codes incorporated in their design. To prevent the body from the possible conflict, the design might provide, as 69 does, fluid forms that give the body a safety zone for changing and adjusting—a zone where the body can exceed the boundaries of assumed normality without coming into conflict with clothes.

Creating Clothes for “Everybody”: The Limits of “Universal” Design

The 69 brand suggests that their design approach is beneficial for society because of its democratic and social orientation toward all people (Sixty-nine, 2012; Satran, 2017). They ambitiously state that their clothes are universal, that is, equally suitable for everybody (Sixty-nine, 2012). However, what 69 refers to as universal design is problematic in the ways in which it is applied to specific racial, ethnic, and social class groups and in terms of a gender-specific aesthetic they utilize to achieve universalization.

The U.S. architect Ronald Mace introduced the term *universal design* in the 1980s, although the concept came from earlier periods (Wolfgang &

Smith, 2011). According to Mace, universal design of objects, architecture, and environments should enable people with different abilities to function equally and independently in social life (Wolfgang & Smith, 2011). Universal design goals are to (a) have environments that can be used by as many people as possible, (b) provide or contribute to social inclusion, and (c) prevent discrimination. Designs by 69 aspire to be inclusive of diverse body sizes and gender identities. The brand aims to develop design methods that would modify the ways by which gender and body size demographics are incorporated in design to expand limits of these categories as utilized in the fashion industry.

However, there is one difference between Mace's universal designs and 69's notions of universal designs. While universal design searches for methods that are more inclusive than existing ones, not necessarily claiming for all-inclusion, the 69 brand tries to find one design solution that would fit 100% of the population. In such measures and beliefs, there are always some people who are marginalized and oppressed by universal approaches.

Gender

The method 69 uses to build universal forms is based on their idea of neutrality of clothes that give the wearer space to adapt clothes to their body and identity. However, this neutrality as a tool for universalization reflects a hierarchical order of the fashion industry that privileges men's gender and male masculinity. According to Susan Kaiser (2012) and Jack Halberstam (1998) male masculinity in White Euro-American culture is assumed to be “neutral” and “natural.” Sixty-nine's idea of neutral clothes ignores that their clothing designs reinforce male masculinity developed and maintained in white Euro-American culture and fashion for centuries (Kaiser, 2012). The brand's ideas of a minimal wardrobe of several “stable” or one-style items also associates with a cultural definition of White men's wardrobe.

Women's gender is constructed through “frivolous change, colorful details, unnecessary flounces, and superficiality” in women's fashion products (Kaiser, 2012, p. 125). Meanwhile, for men and male masculinity there are certain types of clothes—less changeable with seasons, more aesthetically stable, and generally monotonic—that seem to be outside of the frivolous, artificial, and

rapidly changeable fashion of women (Kaiser, 2012). And therefore, an application of neutrality as a universal aesthetic to fit everybody suppresses diverse aesthetics and extends men's power and patriarchy over others. The potentially oppressive aspects of the brand's design are reinforced through the way the garments hide wearers' bodies, suggesting that some bodies—especially marginalized bodies --should to be hidden.

Ethnicity

Another problematic aspect of 69's neutrality is that their clothes have some culturally-specific characteristics that the brand presents as universal. While navigating through the brand's website, I noticed the appropriation of such culturally-specific forms or references to them like the Japanese kimono, Mexican bell-skirt, and Eastern European shirt located among well-known United States fashions such as baseball caps and t-shirts. The common stylistic threads that unite all these diverse items are a minimalistic aesthetic, a limited color palette, and sturdy fabrics.

The dominant fabric of the brand is denim, which they use almost in each outfit they create. Denim appears to be the main construction material of 69's designs. Moreover, the brand deliberately uses the fabric when designing items such as traditional clothes from different cultures; this method is their approach to transform specific traditional forms to what they propose are universal forms. This is done with the Japanese kimono and Mexican skirt, among other culturally-specific articles (see Figure 3). The main problem with such a method lies in denim's signaling of culturally specific meanings.



Figure 3. This is an example of one of the 69's outfits that has a reference to Japanese kimono. It has kimono-like loose forms with wide sleeves and floor-length. This form does not completely imitate the silhouette of the kimono, which is a garment generally with a belt. However, the garment references the kimono form in an untightened state to fit different body shapes. Permission granted by the Sixty-nine (69) brand.

What the brand calls universal turns out to be, in fact, quite particular. Denim has extensive history and symbolic meaning in fashion in certain geographic and cultural locations associated mainly with U.S. culture. The United States promoted denim during several decades in the 20th century. Initially denim was associated with clothing worn by laborers and representatives of low socioeconomic classes in the country. Eventually, the fabric, in the form of denim jeans, became considered stylish for all genders and culturally-appropriate for most occasions when famous U.S. fashion houses began extensively using it in their designs. One example is Calvin Klein's denim collections of the 1990s.

The U.S. fashion designers denoted differences of denim's meaning for different socioeconomic classes and genders (Little, 2007). Further U.S. influence has made denim an important characteristic of capitalistic mainstream fashion.⁵

Sixty-nine's approach to address racial and ethnic diversity in design positions U.S. design choices as dominant over the others even as the brand claims to avoid such markers. The use of denim as a tool for universalization alongside the appropriation of culturally-specific forms is an approach controlling the diversity of racial and ethnic aesthetics by the incorporation of a well-known U.S. symbol. Therefore, 69's desire to represent all ethnic and racial diversity is impossible. Nevertheless, I do not mean to imply that the brand uses denim purposely to establish control or dominance over diversity. However, their use of denim in ethnic forms might contribute to the creation and promotion of a mechanism of oppression in non-demographic design.

Socioeconomic Class

The 69 brand's method to make clothes classless is based on a few design principles that, presumably, eliminate class borders aesthetically and partly economically. First, they suggest that denim is a fabric that different classes can relate to due to the fabric's historical association with a low socioeconomic class in U.S. culture (Little, 2007) and its significance in the U.S. high fashion (McClendon, 2016). So, the consumers of different social classes may consider the fabric attractive and meaningful for their socioeconomic backgrounds. Second, the brand offers cutting patterns that they suppose change a common understanding of a clothing fit to the body. By designing overly large clothes that do not fit anyone specific but are adjustable to various body types, 69 abolishes the idea of a perfect fit manifested in fine tailoring traditions of high fashion as one of the key characteristic that distinguishes elite fashion from other fashions (Shaeffer, 2011). Third, the brand promotes a concept of a small wardrobe, expecting their clothes to serve for many seasons, and the consumers only need a few items that they can adjust for different social events. Thus, in total, the designers expect the consumer to spend less money on such durable clothes than they would spend consuming disposable fast fashion products.

⁵ For the history of denim and jeans in the USA, see Little (2007).

Although the idea of a few-item-wardrobe composed of clothes that are adaptable for different occasions may seem credible, it raises questions regarding the prices for most 69's garments, aesthetic specificities of the brand's design as a classless product, and the cost of possible accessories and additions that are necessary for the expression of one's identity. The assertion that 69's design is classless seems to be an odd assertion given their prices that apparently only those of upper middle class and higher could afford; for example, \$100 for the T-shirt (see Figure 2) and \$350-450 for *One Piece* (see Figures 1 and 2). The prices of their clothes are signaling of high fashion production rather than mass market-oriented marketing. The price for the T-shirt—simply cut and free of expensive decoration and materials—is too high to be considered class-inclusive. For example, it may sound absurd for a mass-market consumer to pay \$100 for a t-shirt that they need to adjust to their body to find an individual fit. For the same price one can buy a well-fitting outfit—a t-shirt, shirt, dress, or something else—that they can simply put the clothes on and appear to have a complete outfit.

Regarding the brand's choice of fabrics, they claim to use high quality materials that presumably will serve for many years (Sixty-nine, 2012). However, denim, canvas, and stockinet will hardly survive years of regular wearing and washing without losing their visual qualities. Weekly care for the garments requires ample labor to save the clothes' quality and visual characteristics, such as ironing, cleaning, and proper storage, that not many consumers are able to do. The brand's assumption that such great long-lasting durability justify high prices of their designs is thus questionable. Besides the prices for the designs, the cost for accessories may significantly vary, signaling the wearer's socioeconomic status based on the prices. Even if one assumes that 69's clothes are classless in design aesthetics, the accessories that one brings to outfits will most probably signal the wearer's status. Therefore, the design principles the brand applies to make their clothes classless are reduced by the high prices of their designs and possible accessories, and because of this, their clothes are not inclusive of all classes.

Conclusion: Brand Privilege

Stuart Hall (1996) argues that a popular interest in diversity is nothing more than appropriation of diversity by dominant culture. This appropriation is often in pursuit of certain fashion trends, related to the use of various

cultural markers in clothes: for example, Egyptian paintings used as graphics on Eurocentric-styled dresses or a combination of Indian jewelry with White-centric clothing. Gundula Ludwig (2016) adds a neoliberal market frame to Hall's argument. By looking at the flexibilization of the apparatus of sexuality in Berlin, Germany, she shows that pluralization of sexual politics was made for commercial benefits rather than for bringing democratization and equality to marginalized groups. Both authors argue that such cultural appropriation and apparent flexibilization of politics toward inclusivity are an extension of the hegemony of dominant cultural politics and neoliberal market rather than attempts to intervene into or improve upon those politics. The problem is that when including diverse subjects in market-oriented networks, neoliberalism subjects them to a dominant ideology of normality. As Ludwig (2016) concludes, such democratic aspirations are a way to control diversity by keeping it in borders of hegemonic normality.

In relation to 69's design, the questions that such a view raises are: how does cultural hegemony operate in the context of 69's production? And: is 69's non-demographic design an attempt to reconstruct a clothing medium toward real diversity, or it is a manifestation of hierarchical fashion hegemony and dominant cultural politics of identity coding? The fact that the 69 brand is a product of dominant White Euro-American fashion that tends to include diverse subjects in the fashion network casts some doubt on its true democratic aspirations and possibilities and can become an obstacle for its promotion of non-demographic design principles in a long-term perspective. If it is just a temporary trend, it does not significantly differ from similar trends that periodically appear in catwalks of high fashion (Kaiser, 2012; La Ferla, 2015) and is an appropriation of marginalized aesthetics with purpose of commercial benefits and new fashion experiences.

A privileged position of 69 on the hierarchical map of the fashion industry significantly reinforces the brand's abilities to become mainstream fashion and contribute to the promotion of hegemonic aspects of its design to the mass industry's production. Today, the brand's fame is rapidly growing in the fashion world, mainly in the U.S. and Western Europe—locations that have long been dominant centers of the fashion industry. Big Fashion praises the brand for being a possible precursor for the next step in its own development and, therefore, has

supported the brand's promotion.⁶ However, even if non-demographic design becomes a leading principle of clothing production, it is unclear what such design brings to society. The continuation of hegemonic tendencies of dominant fashion I have discussed undermines inclusivity and flexibilization of fashion. Therefore, the movement of the industry toward non-demographic design such as 69's design is a point of concern.

By investigating how 69's clothes accommodate the wearer's identity construction and identity changeability, I argue that several methods of 69's non-demographic design contribute or may contribute to the development of discriminatory design that in some aspects marginalizes diversity among gender, race, ethnicity, social class, and body shape demographics. As so, the capability of 69's design to bring inclusion and equality via clothes is questionable. The brand declares to intervene in the politics of identity coding and become a critical medium for the construction of gender-, race-, and class-neutral environments. However, exaggerated sizes of garments prevent 69 from making the wearer a dominant power in the clothing-body relationship. In this union, clothing is granted an authority that partly disrupts the body's performativity and the wearer's self-expression, impeding the process of identity construction.

The neutrality of their clothes, which the brand presents as universal, problematizes inclusive capacities of their designs further. This neutrality tends to completely vanish the borders of genders, restricting options for gender expressions for everybody, and is especially harmful for marginalized identities, whose gender first needs to be recognized and for those whose gender constitutions are based on existing binary codes, such as binary trans people.

The brand's methods of transformation of traditional garments to universal designs made in denim—a culturally specific and deeply symbolic fabric—and prioritizing of aesthetics of men's fashion and male masculinity reveal the dominating tendencies of White Euro-American and men's aesthetics rather than fully actualizing social justice or equality through the design.

⁶ Since 2014, articles and interviews with 69 have appeared in such fashion venues as *Vogue* (Hahn, 2018), *i-D* (Satran, 2017), *Vice* (Bellizzi, 2014), as well as *The New York Times* (Zara, 2018). The brand periodically presents designs in New York (one of the fashion world capitals) as a special guest.

Finally, the brand's pricing policy reduces capacities of their clothes to be inclusive. Their prices are signaling of high fashion production, which means their clothes are not for everybody in a socio-economic dimension.

Based on my analysis, the term "non-demographic design," in application to the 69's production, is an oxymoron. Apparently, the brand has a specific demographic audience: upper middle-class queer and non-binary identified people, and predominantly youth. Their attempt to appeal to the most consumers possible does not reduce their demographic targeting, as we see, and, therefore, the goal of being non-demographic is not achievable.

Finally, the privileged position of 69 as a U.S. company shows that non-demographic design might be just a temporary trend produced by the dictating and hierarchical fashion industry rather than a radical change in clothing design. The brand has an explicit relationship with the industry's production by directly opposing several key principles; because of this, the industry may drive the non-demographic design to become either a durable design choice or a seasonal trend. However, in both cases, 69's non-demographic design may unintentionally promote several oppressive and marginalizing characteristics of clothes hidden under the brand's socially-oriented ideology.

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