



The Evolution of The Skirt in Men's Wardrobes

between 1980-2020



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This research project explores the transitions and changes in conceptions of masculinity in fashion, focusing on the adoption of the skirt in men's wardrobes. Since the 1980s, there has been an expansion of conventional boundaries in men's fashion, reflecting the influences of marginalised subcultures and popular culture, alongside a gradual shift in masculine ideals. From the perspective of the evolution of men's fashion, the male skirt is an identity statement that reflects major societal changes, emphasising a dialectic between traditional gender roles and new ideals of beauty. This transformation is further influenced by the growing influence of popular culture and the media's promotion of diversity.



In 2021, for the first time in modern fashion history, men's skirts are among the best-selling pieces of clothing, data from the Lyst Insights platform shows [1]. According to the Q2 report, the Thom Browne pleated skirt and the Fendi Baguette bag are on the 'hottest men's products list' [2]. The Lyst platform explains this consumer trend by the growing influence of gender-fluid fashion [3].

The platform's data does not detail the gender distribution of shoppers; therefore, it is not clear, the two menswear products to what extent were purchased by women and what proportion by men. But the Thom Browne brand consciously and very clearly separates its women's and men's products, stating that its ready-to-wear line complements its menswear line [4]. The brand upholds the dichotomy of the two sexes, but gender differences are appropriated between them. This diminishing but existing difference is supported in a subtle way: in the collections made for women, almost all the pieces have a roughly identical equivalent in the men's range.

Thom Browne's collections are androgynous in the sense that they do not ostentatiously emphasize the wearer's sexuality, but the products are made in the spirit of austere tailoring principles. By following classic principles of tailoring, the skirts produced for women contour the female body. Similarly, the menswear range is also made to emphasize the athletic shape of the male body, which implies a structural construction based on classical tailoring principles. That is why it cannot be ruled out, that the pleated men's skirt, which is on the top of the best-selling men's clothing pieces in the first part of 2021, was (also) purchased by male consumers.

The hypothesis of the growing popularity of the men's skirt is also supported by several articles published on *vogue.com*. Steff Yotka, for example, in the article 'It's Official: Men Are Shopping for Skirts More Than Ever Before' notes an identity movement that is building around men's skirt-wearing [5]. It's a phenomenon characteristic of big cities like Berlin, Paris, New York, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, Miami, Toron-

to, where acceptance of diversity is greater. At the consumer level, these men and 'non-binary individuals', [6] dress in skirts out of a desire to express their identity and beliefs but also dress in conformity with beauty ideals [7].

Personal and intimate experience is the most important aspect of wearing this garment, at least that's what Christian Allaire's article 'Ready to Try Out a Skirt? 5 Street Style Stars Share Their Favorite Spots' [8]. When asked why they opt for a skirt, most respondents had a personal factor as the primary reason, such as looking 'chic' in a skirt, feeling attractive and masculine, feeling stronger and more confident. Besides the flattering look of a man's body in a skirt, there are also practical factors: it is simple and comfortable. Many have chosen to wear a skirt to push personal boundaries, others, by dressing in this article of clothing, rebel against societal norms, others consider, that wearing a skirt is a sign of personal freedom [9].

There are men – public figures who express or publicly negotiate their gender identity by wearing skirts. For instance, the American actor Billy Porter has frequently attended pop cultural events attired in ball gowns. At the 2019 American Academy Film Awards, Billy Porter was attired in a gown designed by Christian Siriano, which incorporated elements of both masculine and feminine design. The upper portion of the attire was a close-fitting, waist-length jacket with austere tailoring reminiscent of tuxedo elements, complemented by a wide velvet dress [10].

In wearing this dress, Porter employed the garment as a medium for both self-expression and the articulation and negotiation of his gender identity in a public forum.

[...] I have something to say through clothes. My goal is to be a walking piece of political art every time I show up. To challenge expectations. What is masculinity? What does that mean? Women show up every day in pants, but the minute a man wears a dress, the seas part. [...] I'm not a drag queen, I'm a man in a dress.

Billy Porter quoted by Christian Allaire [11]

The number of men wearing skirts has increased, with prominent figures from the world of ce-

lebrity leading the way in challenging traditional social norms. This group includes renowned figures such as musician Kanye West, actor Jared Leto, fashion designer Marc Jacobs, and popular figures from Generation Z, namely Harry Styles [12] or Jaden Smith [13]. The presence of males attired in skirts and dresses has been observed to increase in frequency within advertising campaigns, fashion shows and international fashion magazines.

The record sales of skirts, in addition to the various marketing strategies employed by the fashion industry, demonstrate that during the first two decades of the 21st century, the masculine ideal and gender-related social concepts have experienced substantial transformation, a process that is still in progress. These changes are evident in the fashion industry, which serves as a conduit for self-expression and a barometer for societal shifts [14]. In order to provide a comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon, it is necessary to first examine the extent to which clothing serves as a medium for self-expression and the role it plays in shaping and expressing identity.

Of all the elements that surround human beings, clothing has the closest connection with the human body. This intimate relationship with the body and the individual's self gives rise to socio-identity meanings, with clothing serving as a medium to express a specific image of the physical body, of the individual's self-consciousness and of his social being [15]. In all cases, when individuals interact with society, they do so with the conscious or unconscious intention of making a favourable impression, according to Goffman. The aim of this endeavour is to present the character they wish to project to the community [16]. In this conscious impression management, Valerie Steele identifies an intention on the part of the individual to present an idealised version of themselves, one that optimally demonstrates their qualities and social position or role [17].

The significance of clothing in the context of self-representation is a multifaceted phenomenon that has been a subject of considerable academic interest. The manner in which clothing is chosen and worn can serve as a medium for conveying, accentuating, or even contradicting an individual's intentions. This style of appearance emerged from the confluence of two factors: the desire for self-expression and the roles of the individual as interpreted within societal frameworks. It functions as an identity portrait, reflecting the

individual's expectations, desires, fears, and cultural preferences or characteristics of their identity [18]. The sartorial choices of individuals such as Billy Porter serve as a testament to the notion that attire can function as a medium for making an ideological 'statement' [19] thereby transforming the clothing style of the 'ideal self' [20] into a public manifestation through which an individual expresses and negotiates their social status, gender identity, and affiliation to a specific social group or class.

In the field of fashion, social identity is characterised by a perpetual state of flux, precipitated by the dichotomy between innovation and convention, masculinity and femininity, revelation and concealment, conformity and rebellion. This dynamic reflects the polarisation of social roles and generational differences [21]. In the attire of Billy Porter, for instance, there is a tension between his gender identity and the conservative norms of the Hollywood movie industry, as well as between the desire to flaunt his identity and the need to conform to the expectations of the entertainment industry. This tension is exemplified in the structure of the coat, which juxtaposes formal menswear elements, such as the tuxedo jacket, white shirt and black bow tie, with feminine ones, including the flared, tight-fitting gala dress, thereby intersecting femininity and masculinity [22]. These 'visual metaphors', where opposing principles clash, generate ambivalence in fashion and clothing. The psychological tensions engendered by these antagonisms play a pivotal role in the formation of identity [23].

Throughout history, clothing has been imbued with symbolic or conventional meanings. In Western culture, the establishment of gender roles, a process that reached its zenith in the 19th century, endowed the skirt with symbolic meanings denoting femininity and women's more or less defined roles. Conversely, trousers, which were introduced by Charles the Great into men's clothing, became the symbol of active and aggressive masculinity, representing 'male control'. The introduc-

tion of trousers to the attire of the nobility in the royal courts of Europe resulted in a stylistic differentiation, with skirts and trousers acquiring distinct symbolic meanings [24]. The wearing of trousers by either sex was prohibited, being associated with perversion and lack of sexual credibility. Historically, there have been periods when trousers were also forbidden for men; in classical times, both Greek and Roman cultures associated trousers with barbarism. In Rome, individuals observed for wearing such attire faced retribution [25].

Historically, from the mid-19th century onwards, the wearing of trousers by women was often viewed as immoral, however, by the early 20th century, they had become associated with sports and leisure activities. During the 1960s, the adoption of trousers by women was indicative of an emancipation from the constraints of patriarchal society, as well as representing youth and sexual freedom. In the 1970s, trousers came to symbolise the pursuit of equal rights for women and men, or at least the aspiration thereof. However, as the 21st century began, the significance of women's trousers underwent a transformation, leading to their adoption as a mundane convention and a uniform for everyday activities [26].

The medium of clothing has been demonstrated to possess the capacity to serve as a conduit for reflecting social tensions and offering critiques of political events. The most evident illustrations of this phenomenon are evident in the domains of subcultural movements and fashion collections, wherein designers are presented with the opportunity to articulate their perspectives on issues that are of consequence to or have an impact on society. The visual manifestation of cultural systems and meanings, fashion trends serve as a barometer for the evolution of mentalities and cultural systems. The way we present ourselves is indicative of a world view and a value system that is essential for comprehending the environment and the period. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge the role of societal demand for novelty in shaping these expressions.

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The visual need for a new image is a constant, which emphasizes an opposition to whatever the old look was. [...] The need for a new image only becomes a serious issue within society when it is interpreted as a challenge to social conventions that are beginning to be contested in other ways as well [27].

An important event in recent fashion history exemplifies the relationship between the novelty of fashion and social change: in 1984, the first skirts worn by men were presented at the Paris and London fall fashion weeks. This development was preceded by a similar initiative in 19831 by fashion designer Stephen Sprouse. However, it was only after the 1984 shows that the fashion press began to perceive this as a new fashion phenomenon.

In the autumn collections of 1984, several young designers, including the designer of Body Map and Jean Paul Gaultier, presented collections that challenged traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity in clothing. Notably, John Duka, a fashion journalist for The New York Times, observed that '[...] even at Chanel, a man appeared in a Chanel suit. However, he was not wearing a skirt' [29]. This jacket, a symbol of the emancipated woman, presented on a male model, has multiple meanings, due to the simultaneous coexistence of different aspects, such as the feminine jacket worn by a man in the collection of a fashion house with a tradition. It challenges fixed, stable ideas, challenging changing perceptions of beauty, ideals and status processes [30].

The Chanel fashion house's initiative in 1984 can be interpreted as an opening towards bridging gender differences. In the early years of the 20th century, the fashion house was distinguished by its subversion of classical conceptions of clothing and sexuality. In the 1950s, Chanel pioneered a new approach to gender expression in menswear by reinterpreting traditional elements of men's attire. The iconic daytime ensemble, a reinterpretation of the men's jacket, comprised a cardigan jacket, a slightly flared, knee-length skirt, and low-heeled shoes. The outfit's simplicity and in-

formality have traditionally been associated with youth, while the Chanel brand has been associated with the liberation of feminine fashion [31].

Among the collections presented in autumn 1984, Gaultier's was the most contested due to its

transgression of Western dress norms. His design transcended conventional gender norms, evoking a state of ambiguity in terms of gender identity [32]. The collection comprised conventionally feminine pieces and clothing elements. 'Some of the male models wore plaid skirts and open-toed platform basketball sneakers. Other outfits pushed the phenomenon to its limits, with men wearing sarongs and tank tops or see-through harem pants' [33]. This initiative was unwelcome in an era of conservative values.

Gaultier's stylistic proposals have been treated with either reluctance or disapproval. In John Duka's reportage, women's resistance is evident. Vogue editor Polly Mellen recognizes the attractiveness of the skirt worn by men, but feels the timing is inappropriate to introduce the piece. The Times fashion critic Bernadine Morris has interpreted the style initiatives as a plot against women, while many buyers have deemed the skirt worn by men unacceptable or irrelevant. These women who occupied prominent positions within the fashion establishment as arbiters of taste or gatekeepers [34], predominantly opted for suits and attire that conveyed feminist messages, a choice that was influenced by their personal convictions [35].

These women's costumes, the legacy of the 1970s, were designed to convey the impression that women were equal partners with men, they suggested women's desire for acceptance and power in a social order previously reserved exclusively for men. The feminist movements of the 1970s made it possible for high-educated women pursuing careers in business and various professions to occupy top positions, a prerogative previously exclusive to men. As women entered the labour market, traditional gender roles shifted, requiring a reinterpretation of traditional dress [36].

According to the historical division of gender roles (male vs. female), rooted in early 19th century conceptions of industrial society, '[the division of gender roles] essentially equates maleness with occupation, breadwinning, authority, and the exercise of instrumental capacities, and femaleness with sexual allure, domesticity, child rearing, subordinate status, and expressive display [37]. The social categorisation of genders, as evidenced by the Western dress code, was predicated on gender-based social roles. Consequently, any alteration in gender roles gave rise to a concomitant reinterpretation of the prevailing dress traditions [38].

The fact that the gatekeepers mentioned in John Duca's article were able to wear garments 'borrowed' from men's clothing underscores the disproportionate nature of the practice of appropriating styles from the opposite sex. It also emphasizes how deeply the ideal of masculinity was rooted in modernist values. Whereas bourgeois society in the 1800s associated the custom of borrowing the clothing insignia of the opposite sex with the decadent values of the aristocracy and given that women's dress symbolized the subordinate role of women in society, such sartorial borrowing would have jeopardized the position and social status of the bourgeois male. Consequently, the practice of appropriating items of clothing from the opposite sex's wardrobe became a one-sided custom, practised exclusively by women, who incorporated masculine and status symbols of masculinity into their own attire [39].

In the history of modern, post-industrial fashion, several factors have prevented the skirt from becoming a staple in men's wardrobes. However, the second decade of the 21st century shows a greater openness to diversity. In the four decades that have elapsed since Jean-Paul Gaultier's proposals, social and aesthetic values have changed, gender role differences have narrowed, dress codes have relaxed, and the fashion system has changed significantly.

In 1984, although the phenomenon was new to top fashion events, men in skirts were not an impossible sight on the streets of major cities. In Paris, for example, fashion designer Issey Miy-

ake's three assistants frequently dressed in miniskirts [40]. However, Diana Crane's research indicates that until the late 1990s, the adoption of women's attire by men was uncommon within societal norms. In France, where 63% of the population exhibited a favourable attitude towards homosexuality, only 5-10% of the male population adopted women's attire. In the United States the proportion was even lower, with only one fifth of the American population showing tolerance towards homosexuality [41].

Diana Crane observes that since the 1980s, luxury fashion and avant-garde menswear have reflected the aesthetics of marginalized groups and pop culture, rather than dominant cultural norms [42]. Concurrently, during the 1970s and 1980s, a shift in the masculine ideal was observed, albeit limited in scope and not representative of the majority.

The 'New Man' promoted by fashion and media is perceived as more androgynous than traditional masculine ideals, and this shift is regarded as an 'evolutionary leap from John Wayne to Alan Alda' [43].

The 'New Man', a phenomenon that has emerged within the context of major American cultural centres, is characterised by several distinct features. Firstly, he is typically unmarried or single. Secondly, he occupies a position of relative affluence within the upper-middle class bracket. Thirdly, he engages in healthy lifestyle practices, participating in sports and demonstrating a conscious consumption of fashion and cultural products. This archetype is distinguished by a marked reduction in assertiveness and traditionally masculine characteristics, accompanied by an increased degree of sensitivity when compared to the generation of men that typified the 1950s. However, it is important to note that this lifestyle

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and philosophy were not widely adopted by men from lower social strata in the United States during the 1980s [44].

The new ideal of masculinity promoted by fashion in the 1980s was shaped by the socio-cultural movements of the mid-20th century, when, in addition to feminist currents, homosexual subcultures became visible in both the United States and Europe. While Diana Crane argues that these subcultures challenged valid ideals of femininity and masculinity, experimented with new gender identities and new types of lifestyles [45], Shaun Cole believes that these social groups, like feminist movements, protested against marginalized status and stereotypes formed about their identities. Homosexual subcultures, like feminists, have demanded equality and recognition, expressing these aspirations through dress style [46].

Members of these homosexual subcultures were not necessarily effeminate or androgynous men. Those in New York or Los Angeles were much more masculine-looking than their heterosexual counterparts. Their clothing style was characterized by strong ma-

sculine features: they wore leather jackets, plaid shirts, jeans and boots, with short hair and moustaches. They drew inspiration from the rough American masculine ideal; they reinterpreted the styles of the cowboy, lumberjack and construction worker. But these borrowed style elements were paired in a way that emphasized the male body [47].

With the consolidation of gay communities, many heterosexual men have become more interested in fashion. They adopted a more androgynous style. In the 1960s, with the spread of fashion trends on London's Carnaby Street, it became more acceptable for men to follow fashion, to devote more time and attention to their appearance, and to spend more money on clothing and personal care [48].

The fashion industry reacted relatively late to these complex changes in the masculine ideal. In France, men's designer fashion did not appear until the early 1980s, responding to social changes in meanings of masculinity and the role of men in society [49], but it has moved away from the mainstream. This can be explained by the fact that gay men were generally consumers of fashion, so designers targeted their collections specifically at this group, offering them clothing inspired by various elements of gay subcultures [50]. Once these elements were integrated into the fashion system and accepted by a growing number of consumers, they became part of a wider fashion culture, losing their specific and recognized meaning for marginal groups [51].

The menswear collections, which responded to the new masculine ideal, challenged traditional gender roles, reinterpreted typical elements of the dandy's wardrobe, promoting white suits, floral waistcoats and briefs, three-

-quarter trousers, products with lace collars and cuffs, embroidery, as well as clothing made of feminine materials such as satin and silk. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, suits were introduced in shades of pink, yellow and turquoise, colours previously associated exclusively with women's fashion [52].

Anne Hollander believes that, by adopting feminine elements, men's fashion has regained its expressive power [53], a quality that had been repressed by social norms since the 19th century.

With the decline of the aristocracy and the rise of the bourgeoisie, the moral attitudes of society transformed, adopting austere Protestant values such as hard work, sobriety and frugality. The clothing of the bourgeois man reflected this change, being simple, somber and resistant to change. It symbolized the rejection of aristocratic elegance and ostentation [54], emphasizing the privileged position of the successful man, whose authority and income came from his work. Masculinity was defined by professional success, and the clothing emphasized only this characteristic of men [55]. For fear of any reference that might compromise his professional side, the man eliminated any element of dress that might imply 'femininity, passivity or indolence' [56].

In this history of fashion of almost two centuries, men have not been able to express their sexuality through clothing. It wasn't until the 1970s that the first pieces of clothing were introduced into men's wardrobes, the denim-cut sweatpants that allowed men to express their sexuality. In the 1980s this range expanded to include slim-fitting trousers split to the thigh. In the big cities, shorts, Bermudas or cycling pants gave the wearer an opportunity to show off his masculine body [57].

In the late 1980s, Jean-Paul Gaultier challenged hegemonic masculinity with avant-garde clothing collections. He reintroduced codpiece to menswear and reinvented the polka-dotted boxer shorts, a symbol of gay subcultures. He also created feminine jackets for men, decorated with military elements and worn on bare skin or with tight-fitting T-shirts, aiming to objectify the male body. The designer used textiles and accessories associated with femininity or traditional female roles; men's products were often accessorized with jewellery and decorated with satin ribbons [58].

Men's fashion with gay and feminine references was viewed with distrust by most men. The designers' clientele did not reflect the general taste but was composed of a minority group of sophisticated consumers, such as members of gay and African-American minorities or adherents of various subcultures [59], i.e. marginal groups or cultural divides that generate changes in fashion trends. According to anthropologist Mary Douglas's theory, changes in fashion originate in marginalized cultural groups that challenge the norms of society and reject accepted forms of identity [60]. In this context, male fashion design identifies with the margins rather than the centre of contemporary culture [61].

This phenomenon also characterizes the fashion of the 21st millennium, in which the differences between different ages, but less between social classes, are highlighted [62], 'non-occupational identities' [63], young people or racial and sexual minorities, who perceive themselves as marginalized or exceptional in relation to the dominant culture, express their identity through clothing. Although most men continue to identify with their professional

activities [64], men's clothing lines of fashion houses have been strengthened by gay consumers [65]. Since the 2000s, the visibility of men's fashion on international catwalks, in fashion photography and in articles in glossy publications has increased since the 2000s due to exciting collections and a stronger focus on male models [66].

The new millennium brought significant changes in the fashion world, especially in the creative direction of fashion houses. With the consolidation of menswear lines, a new generation of designers has emerged who have focused on the principles of classic menswear tailoring. These designers, among them Christopher Bailey, Stefano Pilati, Thom Browne, Nicolas Ghesquière, Hedi Slimane, John Varvatos, Rick Owens and Alexander Wang, presented collections that showcased remarkable tailoring skills, professional knowledge, commitment to structured construction and sensitivity to fine textiles. Pilati and Browne's collections demonstrated technical excellence, while John Varvatos distinguished himself with rock-inspired outfits and Rick Owens created a unique style by blending grunge subculture with Hollywood glam [67]. This aesthetic direction in menswear collections is the result of the economic recession of the 1990s, which influenced

the menswear market, increasing the value of products made with exceptional technical expertise [68].

The masculine ideal has evolved since the 2000s, a development that has been influenced by the cultural impact of the LGBT and feminist movements, as well as popular culture. Particularly since the 2010s, the popularity and influence of non-binary and non-heterosexual celebrities has increased, and the visibility of transgender people has been noted in modelling, cinema, TV shows, fashion advertising campaigns and international pop culture events. The younger generation has been particularly receptive to this diversification of gender identity. According to a 2015 UK survey, only 26% of 18-24-year-olds identified as exclusively heterosexual [69].

Gender fluidity has also been reflected in fashion, where designers have focused on the definitions and boundaries of femininity and masculinity, exploring concepts that undermine or overturn the bipolar system of gender division. New York Times journalist Susan Chira notes that while gender fluidity is present in fashion, only a few brands have created collections that reflect this new approach to gender identity [70].

'Fluid fashion' integrates opposite-sex clothing insignia, cross-dressing techniques and androgynous elements.

The New York Times journalist Susan Chira noted that in some collections presented in fall 2017, men's and women's outfits showed no difference in materials, tailoring or accessories. At Calvin Klein, the non-gender character of the collection was emphasized not only by the clothes, but also by the absence of gender insignia worn by the models [71].

Pop culture celebrities, social media influencers and photographers have contributed to the spread of gender fluidity. The contribution of fashion companies and lifestyle magazines was also important. The Louis Vuitton brand included a young celebrity, Jaden Smith, in its advertising campaign for its 2016 spring-summer ready-to-wear collection, where he was pictured wearing a knee-length skirt and a leather jacket. The fashion house's creative director, Nicolas Ghesquière, chose Jaden Smith because he

represents a generation that has assimilated the codes of true freedom, one that is free of manifestoes and questions about gender. [...]

Wearing a skirt comes as naturally to him as it would to a woman who, long ago, granted herself permission to wear a man's trench or a tuxedo [72].

The new ideal of masculine beauty and concepts of masculinity that emerged in the late 2010s emerged in the Asian region but are also characteristic of European or American culture.

The Louis Vuitton collection promoted by this advertising campaign is neither unisex nor gender neutral and does not fit into the gender fluidity phenomenon, lacking any message related to gender identity. Instead, it shows a new clothing vision of Generation Z: when a man dresses in a skirt, he is expressing his unlimited freedom in his clothing choices.

A landmark moment in contemporary fashion is the cover of the December 2020 issue of US Vogue, where singer-star Harry Styles poses in one of the women's outfits by Gucci. As with Jaden Smith, the singer was chosen by fashion editors and Alessandro Michele, Gucci's creative director, because Styles is '[the] embodiment of the masculine ideal of the new age' [73].

The new ideal of masculine beauty and concepts of masculinity that emerged in the late 2010s emerged in the Asian region but are also characteristic of European or American culture. These young men have an attractiveness that

often extends to both sexes and have a boyish, often androgynous, sometimes feminine and delicate appearance with fine features. This generation of idealized men are sensitive and base their status symbols on values such as sustainability and cultural sophistication [74].

All these values and beauty ideals coexist with traditional gender role paradigms; this fragmentation is reflected in the menswear collections presented since the 2000s at the major fashion weeks. Many of these collections are structured in such a way that both non-binary consumers

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and cis-gendered shoppers can identify with their message. However, there are significantly fewer outfits aimed exclusively at non-binary consumers compared to those aimed at heterosexuals.

The fact that the male skirt has gained widespread popularity can be attributed to the changes in fashion over the last four decades, as well as to the evolution of the masculine ideal and the social role of men. However, it is important to note that these ideals and phenomena are influenced by the media, and fashion only serves a small segment of men [75]. ■

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*All these values
and beauty ideals
coexist with
traditional gender
role paradigms.*

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