The Concept of Fashion Revolution & the Politics of Identity: How is "Woke Fashion"?

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Abstract

This paper aims to shed light on the concept of "woke fashion" for Asian fashion academics and practitioners, by reviewing the development of the woke concept and how it has come to impact the fashion industry. "Woke" is now widely accepted in the mainstream, with woke culture is recognized as a socio-political revolutionary concept that is discussed and acted upon not only in real everyday life, but also being acknowledged at academic level, researched and debated by major disciplines. In the West and increasingly in Asia, the fashion industry today is now directly impacted upon by the "woke" impact, as people also project their identity through the garments that they wear. In particular, this research also presents a review of how "woke" has taken front stage in the fashion industry, shaping the identity that fashion brands now have to choose to represent themselves by. Therefore. teaching and learning of fashion and design today will need to consider incorporating the woke concept into the curriculum. The authors of this conceptual paper were awaken long before the woke movement, but forgive academia for its slowness in accepting and promoting diversity.

Keywords: Concept of fashion, Fashion revolution, Politics of identity, Woke fashion

INTRODUCTION

Today, the concept of "woke" is an unavoidable state-of-being that individuals living in multi-cultural West cannot avoid, especially for fashion items which wrap a person's bodies and project the wearer's image and identity for the world to see.

Fashion is more than an industry; it embodies cultural statements, such as the "woke trend". This trend motivates in our paper an investigation of the contemporary values of woke which shapes the brand choice and purchase decisions of fashion consumers today. We begin from reviewing the literature on "woke", towards what we call a "woke hypothesis", which articulates the idea that gender can be "worn" just as identities can be "fashioned" through a digitally oriented "marketing of the self". Can fashion be "cancelled" or are we witnessing just another "greenwashing"?

This conceptual paper is especially critical for Asia, where multi-cultural integration has been smooth socially and politically, in comparison to Western countries. A goal of this research is to define and clarify woke culture and its significant impact on the fashion industry for the fashion industry in Asia, where production of many famous brands are based, as well as the source of new upcoming fashion designers too.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Development of "woke" and its influence on the brand's identity

Although not so widely addressed in Asia, woke is a socio-political concept is a fact of life which cannot be avoided in the West, where multi-culturalism is a social identity that has been incorporated into teaching and learning at schools. According to Caldera [1], even school teachers have to integrate woke concepts as well, where woke pedagogy can be seen as a form of critical multicultural education, with teaching practices that integrate a wide range of knowledge, skills, and dispositions, critical thinking about multi-cultural issues that forms the basis of woke culture.

In fact, the word "woke" has now been added in June 2017 to the Oxford English Dictionary, where it is defined as "originally: well-informed, up-to-date", as referred by Butterworth [2]. Basically, woke means being well informed and up-to-date, being sensitive to social issues, contemporary causes and concerns. Although more recently in Western media, the word "woke" has taken on a racial discrimination connotation (e.g. Plag &Jules-Plag, [3]), at its roots the cultural phenomenon is about a state of mind of a person who is aware and sensitive to his social surroundings and happenings.

Woke began as a concept of being aware and sensitive, and has since then developed into a perspective for analyzing, shaping culture and society, and hence the way that new generation of consumers think when deciding what brands they choose to buy. Woke is explained by Mirzaei, Wilkie and Suiki [4] a "political commonsense" that is growing in the society among consumers. In other words, "woke" is affecting the thoughts, beliefs and behavior of people in their economic activities. As individual customers at the end of the supply chain, their "woke" purchasing decisions also correspondingly impacts the operation of the entire supply chain, through retailers, wholesalers, producers, and even to the production of the raw materials at the source.

New phenomenon occurs, as brands quickly jumped onto the woke trend to capitalize by engaging in what can be called is woke advertising (Feng, Chen & Ahn, 2021) [5], to the extent that this evoke a reaction from customers, many of whom became suspicious about the authenticity of the brand's image. On the other hand, in the environment of woke consumerism in the USA for example, brands that take a strong and convincing stand on their social cause, may also be able to shift consumer's focus away from the quality and price of the products and services, since the purchase decision is now based on the philosophical identity of the brand, rather than a focus on the product or services [6-7].

Fashion: More than an industry

Fashion is first and foremost an "industry", which includes a wide array of professions. From the haute couture and "high street" designs of famous artists (Coco Chanel, Giorgio Armani, Alexander McQuee) to top models (Cindy Crawford, Claudia Schiffer, Iman Abdulmajid), "behind-the-scenes" fabric technologists, photographers and specialised journalists, the "star system" is a complex organism that pulses with feverish anticipations of "seasons", "collections" and "performances" on catwalks. The marketing machine (public relations, advertisements in fashion magazines) works closely with more or less prestigious retailers and branded stores. Fashion is this network of people cooperating - relationships between fashion magazine staff, their readers, advertisers and the fashion world that now includes "influencers" on social networks (YouTubers, Instagrammers, TikTokers, etc.). Influencers both create and consume marketing "content". Further, in their embodying brands

or commodities, they become both advertisers and advertisements; producers and products; subjects and objects.

But fashion is also more than an industry. It is a larger cultural phenomenon that links clothing, images and social interactions broadly speaking. Clothes create identity and status, and ideas about hygiene and comfort influence the direction of style [8]. No wonder sociology and later "cultural studies" have been interested in how communities negotiate their appearance based on political and/or artistic revendications. "Tribes" or "subcultures" (e.g. punks and hippies in the West, ganguro in Japan, etc.) borrow visual codes to recognise one another and distinguish themselves from other groupings. Thus classic sociology stresses the dynamic role that fashion fulfils in class segregation. In this view, the elite initiates the "fashionable" and, when masses imitate it to obliterate class distinctions, abandons it for newer styles. Simmel [9] argues that people feel trapped in this cycle of imitation, which erodes their freedom. Cultural studies shifted the emphasis to the creativity of groups, not passively receiving cultural artefacts but actively re-appropriating and even subverting their intended purposes. The teenage punk, for example, could turn her granny's corset into an angry statement [10].

Fashion embodies cultural statements

Fashion can therefore be understood as a historical process concerned with aesthetics. At its core, the media have constantly promoted perfect bodies and the pursuit of newness. Fashion shows represent, in this view, contemporary artwork [11]. Like photography for instance, fashion is industrially produced yet deeply individual. It is poised between present and past. The photograph and today's fashionable freezes the moment in a snapshot for eternity: both locate us in history. Clothes are objects, but they are also images. They communicate more subtly than most objects and commodities, because of that intimate relationship to our bodies - so that we speak of both a "language" and a "psychology" of dress. Thus the sexual allure of dress is central, but dress is as often used to astonish, to ward off as well as to attract.

What makes fashion such a fascinating but difficult object of study is our lack of knowledge of the symbolisms attached to shapes, textures, colours and other elements of any local culture [12]. For example, what does it mean to wear Chloe Chen, Moschino or Super Dry? Are there any real differences between hip-hop style and gothic attires? For fashion not only communicates and challenges class; it also constructs gender and sexual identities [13]. It says something about who we are or who we think we are; it communicates messages about our identities, wealth, professionalism, political allegiances and even our mood. Much of what we assume to be individual preference actually surfaces from deeper cultural roots. The world we live in is characterised by tensions over gender, race and sexuality [14].

The good news is that it becomes possible, from such a wide vision of fashion, to study specific areas: as an illustration, Craik [15] goes through topics as diverse as the meaning of black in fashion, the rise of celebrity branding, the cult of thinness, the politics of veiling, the eroticism of shoes and the power of cosmetics; while Finkelstein [16] considers fashion "in its various guises" - as body decoration, as a language, as an expression of sexuality and as part of the urban experience. Kaiser and Green [17]. relate fashion to religion and spirituality, and as a political tool against beauty standards and for the "inclusion of diverse sizes, shapes and dis/abilities". In this way their case studies question the entanglements of production, distribution, consumption and identity formation.

As a result, Wilson [10] concludes, fashion studies allow us to challenge political stereotypes - that of feminists as uninterested in fashion for example, or that of socialists as hostile to the surfaces of life. Yet to celebrate dress as presenting possibilities of empowerment is not to endorse an underlying system of production – the sweatshops and exploitative

conditions that have dogged the production of clothing for hundreds of years – nor is it to deny that contemporary culture is vulgar and shallow in many ways and that fashion currently plays a part in the creation of celebrity cults that if not pernicious are at least futile.

Research motivation: the woke hypothesis

It is with this political dimension of fashion that we wish to start from. In particular and as a continuation of our research on "fast fashion" [18], we have observed that the industry has been dramatically transformed over the past twenty years. Fast fashion refers to a business model characterised by rapid supply chains, merchandising techniques and retail technology that respond to fast-changing consumer demands. The contemporary fashion industry is now highly competitive with this pressure to deliver original products at affordable prices. But beyond this business model and its purely economic forms of pressure, cultural pressures have emerged with "woke" trends coming from the United States. "Woke" is a set of mentalities that militates against the oppression of minorities or "victim" categories: women, LGBT people, handicapped people, black people and other groups. It includes movements promoting feminism ("Me Too"), racial equality ("Black Lives Matter"), sexual freedom ("gay pride") but also gender choices that have become technically possible, including body modification and commodification (transgender and gender neutrality issues, surrogate mothers, etc.).

In this context, Cannon, Ritch and Dodd [19] outline how the fashion industry purports inequalities, before exploring how young males perceive masculinity as they navigate this "woke" environment. Indeed "Me too" and "Black Lives Matter" have denounced the institutionalised discrimination reflected in business and marketing. Specifically, the fashion industry has been accused of exploiting gender and sexuality, and of not representing ethnically diverse or fatter models. Marketplace narratives address topical trends, such as femininity or masculinity, where wokeness is evident by brands that address gender-fluidity. Examples include British department store Selfridges, which removed its men's and women's departments in favour of unisex clothing! Cannon, Ritch and Dodd observed that their participants expressed cynicism for woke marketing, and saw it as a kind of inauthentic "woke washing". These young and polite kids felt disconnected from woke advertising - as if the whole thing was a bit of a joke really! As they concluded:

In sum, branding took precedence over woke ideology. Rationales for this included satisfaction with styling, familiarity with the brand offering and the nuances of brand activities. This was aligned with 'cancel culture' were woke ideology was considered as destabilising brand reputation.

Such results help us to understand how debates around wokeness have been interpreted, and whether there is potential to construct fashion marketing towards a more inclusive society. If fashion marketing has been criticised for marginalising some members of society, the authors suggest, "perhaps this can be repositioned to embrace and celebrate diversity". Bulgakova, Manich and Fomina [20] agree, for example, that branding policies should adapt to the current trends so as to avoid conflicts among members of a society. We have outlined in the preceding section the historical constitution of fashion: as an illustration, Minai [21] focuses on the masculine suit within queer fashion cultures. The author observes how black women are mostly absent from fashion history and how sexual images of the "butch", the "dapper", the "tomboy" or the "dandy" have reworked masculinity as a project of embodiment. Digital "butch" fashion is a creative space and a resource of queer fantasy. It is also messy and fraught with eroticism and the politics of race and class, thereby providing frames for rethinking masculinity as a category.

Wearing gender and marketing the self

Home sewing has recently experienced a revival in Western countries. Alongside this has emerged a vibrant online presence of what Bain [22] calls “digital dressmakers”. She asks in what ways home dressmaking can be thought as an intentional engagement with feminism. Drawing on an analysis of blogs, she notices that within the digital dressmaking community sewers consider their craft in a range of ways… including its relationship to feminism. We find it relevant here to link DIY systems, such as Bain’s “digital dressmakers”, to the “circuit of culture” model in cultural studies. Indeed, such systems involving people, objects, words and images do combine the design, manufacture and distribution (if at a smaller scale) of clothes. And indeed a new system of design and promotion has emerged in the last two decades, which has its own fashion leaders in young female celebrities, its own magazines to chronicle their activities and showcase their style, its own internet presence (on Instagram, TikTok and whatnot), and its own retailing patterns. These young female influencers often present themselves, according to Gibson [23], as glamorous pin-up girls, a muted version of the styling associated with that of hard-core pornography. The “body ideal” of this alternative system is very different to that of high-fashion; it resembles the look of the women pictured in magazines for men. Although one or two writers on fashion have noted this new trend, it is feminist scholars who have shown most interest.

Turney [24] explores more violent gender tensions through clothing. By exhibiting clothing worn alongside the words, memories and experiences of rape victims, an exhibition aimed to demonstrate that popular conceptions surrounding dress and rape were inaccurate. Indeed, by viewing the clothing on display, the spectator became acutely aware of the preposterousness of this statement or attitude; the clothes exhibited were bland, ordinary, mundane, jeans, t-shirts, jumpers, clothing that anyone, of any age, background, or anywhere could be wearing at anytime. At no stage, the author argues, do our clothes ‘ask’ to be violated; yet these narratives dominate our understanding of sexual assault in the media, or in general conversation.

Some of these narratives are deployed online, on social media for example, where relative anonymity leads to intense debates and even “hate speeches”. Thus Lee and Abidin [25] report accusations by tabloids and other YouTubers in August 2020, against influencers embroiled in “backdoor advertising scandals”. Fashion stylist Han Haeyoun and mukbang-YouTuber tzuyang advertised products in exchange for a significant amount of money from sponsoring companies, without any notice to followers. Embroilments ensued, including with online hate, call-out cultures and misogyny. The authors argue that the myth of “hitting the jackpot” in Korea compels people to follow, worship, and debunk influencers. Another example of “scandal” is the so-called “Succès de Scandale”, which refers to “the manipulation of outcry over the deliberately shocking”. This method used to garner notoriety and fame in the past. In contemporary times, fashion brands are notorious for dropping crypto-offensive items into their marketing and then backing off with an apology when customers feel offended. Social media hashtags generate viral visibility, and the associated brand is amplified exponentially. Brands can appear “cool” through such tactics, because they push back against the “politically correct” and go to ever-greater lengths to generate the publicity they hope will translate into more profit. Racially charged and homophobic visuals provoke online masses to engage with them. O’Connell [26] finds it legitimate to ask, therefore, if there are deeper consequences to such dissemination of shocking content.

Cancelling fashion

In sum, fashion criticism has found a new platform in our digital age, which has emerged from the so-called "cancel culture". Independent voices are finding their way through the reputedly hermetic fashion industry. Gatekeepers are accountable not only for copycat fashion products, but also for racist appropriations that appear in campaigns and editorials. Ideas of authenticity and transparency, effects of social media, and the role of cultural criticism in fashion have been extensively studied [27]. Indeed, despite the fact that feminist celebrities are not academics, their role in education is powerful. The role of Jameela Jamil, a British queer actor, has been famously analysed by Kannen [28]. Jameela's use of Instagram and Twitter as platforms for education and social change relates to body acceptance, racial and sexual inclusivity and queer representation. Kannen gives a ground-breaking account of clapbacks, cancel culture, mistake-making, shame culture and affective solidarity via Jameela's use of language, such as through the vulnerable phrase 'I want to delete this tweet so much, but…'. In positioning the celebrity as more than simply a feminist, and beyond what is considered a public intellectual, the author contends that Jameela embodies the role of a feminist educator. This role is unique as it creates space for online feminist activism, her accessible use of language and her desire to teach and learn from her followers.

Morgan [29], in parallel, has clarified for us the effectiveness of influencer marketing. Through authentic connection with followers, influencers create a strong sense of community with their fanbase. Thus marketers target specific influencers to promote products and obtain a higher chance of selling their products. Morgan includes examples of influencer-brand partnerships to understand how marketing can be extremely effective if done appropriately. Influencer marketing is a growing industry and has many components to it that must be taken into account. Fashion-focused influencers on social media platforms are fast becoming critical. They can inspire purchases by linking high-fashion visuals with daily street styles. Fashion buyers often rely on information they receive from Instagram influencers when selecting their outfits or fashion items. These buyers view social media influencers as expert trendsetters. They consciously follow influencers who reflect with their ideal self, which is the crucial persuading factor for consumers to buy fashion brands they have seen on influencers ' Instagram accounts. Moreover, consumers have reportedly increased their positive attitude towards the fast fashion brands and still opt in for fashion items regardless of sponsorship. There is a visual influence funnel from bloggers to individual users, because people incorporate user personal style and her preferred fashion features across time. Yin and Caverlee [30] have run experiments showing that state-of-the-art fashion recommenders can bring greater improvements in recommendation compared with using other potential sources of visual information.

Sometimes, as Hsu [31] reports, influencers don't even need to exist in flesh and bones for their impact to be real. A kiss between Bella [32], part of a Calvin Klein commercial, struck many viewers as offensive. Ms. Hadid, a supermodel, identifies as heterosexual, and the ad sparked complaints that Calvin Klein was deceiving customers with a lesbian encounter. The fashion company apologized for "queerbaiting" after the 30-second spot appeared online. Ms. Sousa, better known as Lil Miquela, is a computer-generated character; she also has 1.6 million

Instagram followers. Introduced in 2016 by a Los Angeles company backed by Silicon Valley money, she belongs to a growing cadre of social media marketers known as *virtual influencers:*

Each month, more than 80,000 people stream Lil Miquela's songs on Spotify. She has worked with the Italian fashion label Prada, given interviews from Coachella and flaunted a tattoo designed by an artist who inked Miley Cyrus. Until last year, when her creators orchestrated a publicity stunt to reveal her provenance, many of her fans assumed she was a flesh-and-blood 19-year-old. But Lil Miquela is made of pixels, and she was designed to attract follows and likes.

Indeed, why hire a celebrity, a supermodel or even a social media influencer to market your product when you can create the ideal brand ambassador from scratch? Human simulations have existed for years. But lately they have become realistic and more engaging. Coca-Cola and Louis Vuitton have used video game characters in their ads. Virtual influencers come with an advantage: They are less regulated than their human counterparts, and the people behind them aren't required to disclose their presence. Virtual influencers are not so far removed from their real-life predecessors. Social media, to date, has largely been the domain of real humans being fake, whereas avatars are the future of storytelling. For example KFC recently introduced a new Colonel Sanders on social media. As Hsu [31] puts it:

He has a dusting of stubble on his jaw, tattooed abs, a silver coif worthy of a teen idol and bulging biceps beneath a perpetually unbuttoned white jacket. The reimagined fried chicken kingpin - another virtual being - was designed to spoof the vast ecosystem of influencers, which includes nanoinfluencers, kidfluencers and petfluencers. His creators consulted an inspiration board plastered with photos of human Instagram celebrities to generate the mash-up that became the new Colonel.

Lil Miquela operated for two years before it was revealed that she was the product of a secretive company, Brud. Last summer, her Instagram account appeared to be hacked by a woman named Bermuda, a Trump supporter who accused Lil Miquela of "running from the truth." Wild accusations appeared on social media: Lil Miquela was programmed her to appear "woke". But while virtual influencers are becoming more common, fans have engaged less with them than with the average fashion tastemaker online.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

According to the literature we have explored, "woke" has developed very far from the notion of an individual person's state-of-mind of being aware and sensitive, being alive and in touch with the happenings of one's surroundings and the world. "Woke" has now extended not only to the identity of a person, but also to the identity of brands, including fashion brands and related services. The "woke" identity that brands now have to select for themselves. Today's consumers are more demanding, and want brands to take a stand on sociopolitical issues so brands have to engage in activism that is believable and realistic, otherwise the consumers will not become their customers. Therefore, this practical need pressures brands to engage in "woke washing," trying to convince consumers that the brand is sincere and genuine, truly believing in the social (and political) philosophy that they appear to promote.

In the past, to gain the image of being good and trustworthy, companies including the fashion industry have the obligation of conducting Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities in order to project the image that they are a good, trustworthy company with integrity,

giving back to society and the world. The management would assign a CSR budget specifically to participate or organize some activities for their staff, and publicise photographs of these activities in the media. The range of CSR activities could be random, it did not have to fall under any one theme in particular. It was sufficient just to have CSR budget and CSR activities to show, in order for the company to be seen as a socially caring and responsible company. But today, brands are expected to strongly demonstrate specific social and environmental themes in their products and services. Thus, it has become a necessity, a requirement for brands to take a firm and definite stand, rather than taking part in a variety of CSR activities.

But today, fashion brands and fashion designers today also need to show their constant state of being 'woke', not only having to make the decision and choose a main cause to focus on, but also to represent that cause convincingly, to the point where people can show their support for that cause just by being a customer or user of that brand. The designer has to also demonstrate on social media that it is a genuine care and concern that they breath, eat and live for the particular cause, twenty four hours and seven days a week, or lose their fan base and customers.

The 'woke' is yet another factor, a tall challenge in creating and maintaining one's identity by which fashion designers, fashion start-ups, well established and famous brands, and fashion aficionados must all adapt and adjust to, in order to exist in the vast global array of online marketing applications today. Because of the deep permeating impact of woke notion in every aspect of fashion, teaching and learning in fashion and design also have to incorporate the woke concepts and woke cultural impact into the curriculum as well.

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