

Running Heading: Culture and Diversity: POC and Muslims in Context of Global Fashion
Business

Culture and Diversity: POC and Muslims
in Context of Global Fashion Business
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About Me



I grew up in a practicing Muslim family with 4 older siblings and my parents. At a young age I have always struggled to find clothes for myself because of the lack big sizes and modest clothes. This caused me to want to major within the fashion industry and in the future to have my own line of clothes. Within my high school years, I participated in a Girls Who Code club which piqued interest in me which later influenced my career choices. This helped me decide to pursue fashion design and computer science as career choices. With the help of City Tech and its Business and Tech of Fashion major I look forward to use this and have a business of my own for all people, not just Muslims.

Abstract

Fashion is the world's second-largest industry, a large-scale global employer encompassing agriculture manufacturing, hand craftsmanship, design, logistics, and retail. Progressively, fashion is a global business sector, which is having to come up with answers and solutions for an assortment of challenges for a range of challenges. The fashion industry is known to be diverse by displaying some plus-size models, multiracial models, and support of the LGBTQ+ community. Although that is quite diverse, there is still a percentage of people rarely included. That would include people of color (POC) and Muslims by themselves, also within the previously mentioned groups. Using examples of Muslims in the fashion industry helps us understand the challenges deeper. Then the use of real events of cultural appropriation within the industry helps us further comprehend the problem. Ultimately, learning about an issue within the global fashion business and how it can be resolved.

Muslim fashion model, Halima Aden said, “We all need someone to go be first, but that doesn’t mean it won’t be hard. A year ago, I couldn’t pick up a magazine and see someone wearing a hijab. All the time we’re talked about, but we’re not given the opportunities to speak for ourselves.” Halima brings to our attention that Muslims, Muslim women in particular, or people of color (POC) are often talked about but are not allowed to speak for themselves. This applies to daily life but specifically in global fashion businesses. The fashion industry is known to be diverse by displaying some plus size models, multiracial models, and support of the LGBTQ+ community. Although that is quite diverse, there is still a percentage of people that are rarely included. That would include POC and Muslims by themselves also within the previously mentioned groups. So, why is the fashion industry considered diverse when there is still a lack of POC and Muslim representation?

This issue of misrepresentation of culture and religion goes back quite far, but this problem is more current for Muslims and POC with a cultural background. As fast fashion became available for the majority, Muslims, females in particular, who are interested in fashion have felt discouraged due to the lack of diversity and representation. Although globally there are representations of Muslims in countries such as Dubai, Malaysia, and Turkey because it is heavily Muslim populated. This diversity is nonexistent in the U.S or other countries that still have a big Muslim population. For example, the United States has an estimate of 3.45 million Muslims that can be catered to if the industry was truly diverse. Many aspiring Muslim designers have to resort to moving to those countries to make a name for themselves because of the lack of representation and diversity. Another problem would be many of the mentors and leaders now are not educated in the religion of Islam to mentor those that want to close the gap. The misuse of certain religious garments and cultural appropriation done by name brands we know today

have been an issue for years as well. Due to the lack of diversity and unwarranted cultural appropriation of POC and Muslims, there are missed opportunities for the global fashion businesses to expand.

Extent of the problem

This challenge is an issue that's been repeating for years and is affecting the fast fashion business and the consumers. The problem is not detrimental to the point it is affecting the everyday lives of consumers. This can be considered a moderate issue, but it is hurting the fashion industry tremendously. The potential consumer population from Muslims alone is about 3.45 million in the United States, these consumers also look for recognition in the fashion industry for modest looks. Maha Sayed explains how it feels to be recognized by the fashion industry, "I realized that I was a part of a bigger group of people who wanted brands to understand them." (Allure magazine, 2020) She brings to the reader's attention that the Muslim community wants to be understood.

Then there have been countless occasions of cultural appropriation globally in the fashion industry. Cultural appropriation, the use of culturally laden images by people with no association with that culture, occurs across the fashion industry. This can be practiced with or without an understanding or appreciation of the origins, therefore undervaluing the original heritage. (Alspaugh, Elon University, 2019) A recent event would be during Rihanna's latest Savage X Fenty fashion show. She received a lot of backlash for using a song that contained Islamic text spoken by the Prophet Muhammad. Although this is not directly associated with apparel in the fashion industry, it showed how cultural appropriation can be detrimental to a company's reputation. Hodhen Liaden is a beauty blogger who also is a fan of Rihanna's line of lingerie. She says, "it's refreshing to see Rihanna's apology but thinks big brands need more Muslim

people in these industries that can pick up on things like this” and proceeds with “Do you actually celebrate people like me or does it just look good for you?” (BBC Minute, 2020) A similar incident happened in 2011, American apparel store Urban Outfitters launched a Native American Navajo themed clothing and accessories line. To the Navajo Nation, this was considered unpleasant and making fun of Indigenous identity and their distinctive cultures. This stemmed to the Navajo Nation filing a federal lawsuit against Urban Outfitters in 2012 because they still had products with the Navajo name being sold in other company brands. (Vézina, 2019, p.3-4) Even after incidents like these the global fashion industry fails to avoid them from happening.

Some may think, why should we be worried about such small incidents? Of course, if it isn't about someone personally, it does not seem to be a big deal. But the fashion industry must be apprehensive about this issue. As mentioned previously there are about 3.45 million Muslims in the United States alone and about 2 billion Muslims in the world. If this is taken into account for a situation similar to Rihanna's fashion show aside from reputation, the sales of her lingerie line must have taken a plunge. This applies to other religions and cultures as well, for example, the case of the Navajo Nation and Urban Outfitters. The people that identified with the Navajo Nation would have possibly boycotted or just stopped shopping from them altogether. These should bring upon the concern that the fashion industry is not as diverse as it claims to be. Also due to the lack of recognition businesses lose potential customers and designers.

Who is affected?

The fashion industry and its consumers are highly affected by the lack of diversity. Especially the consumers that do not fall under the “normal” category. For example, many Muslim customers have to resort to buying from brands targeted for them, but often overseas

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causing them to pay more. They do not get the advantage to see the merchandise in person, giving no guarantee of the quality. It is as if Muslims or even POC are paying extra to be represented. In the end, they have no choice but to settle for the minimum. The global fashion business is getting hurt by not being as diverse as it seems to be. As mentioned before, the business is missing a very large margin in regular consumers and sales. If the fashion industry were to at least hire more POC or Muslim's they can avoid instances of culture appropriating.

Though this is a problem within the industry, it does not mean there aren't POC or Muslim's in the industry. In recent years, Muslim and POC representation has been on a steady rise. A perfect example would be the American Muslim model Halima Aden signed with the IMG model agency. She is the first hijab-wearing model to sign with a big modeling agency and has been on several front pages. In a short interview, Aden spoke about the lack of Muslim representation in fashion. Aden said, "Modesty is not for Muslim women, that is the biggest misconception in the industry. A lot of you are dressed modestly today, probably because it's cold outside, but that goes to show that it's a global thing." (Business of Fashion, 2017) It was also mentioned that companies are starting to understand the Islamic market's huge commercial potential, by 2021 there is a 51% increase expected compared to 2015. Another Muslim POC is Ayana Ife, season 16 contestant of Project Runway. She was one of the few Muslim finalists of the show and made a clear statement before she lost the last round. Through her modest fashion and amazing designs, she was able to present her designs in New York Fashion Week. Ayana is a practicing Muslim woman and, per an interview with Maire Claire, the designer said that she started to get sick of wearing the same kind of bulky, modest clothing all the time growing up, wrote Alaina Urquhart-White. (Bustle, 2017) Even though there are great examples of POC and Muslim representation here, it isn't enough to make the push in the global fashion business.

Cause and Effect

Just like any issue, there will be a cause and effect, because of the lack of diversity there have been household name brands that culture appropriated without knowledge of what they were doing. In some cases, some may have even done it knowingly. Since there are barely POC or Muslims in the fashion business it makes it harder for others to catch something offensive before presenting it. As mentioned previously, Muslim customers are having to settle for less often causing them discomfort. Since Muslim women look for modest fashion, they are often left with no choice other than layering clothes to achieve the desired look. This is would be very uncomfortable on a hot summer day. Many modest options are not available, so it affects the Muslim consumers of fast fashion. Lastly, when a brand fails to be considerate of one's culture, they will lose many loyal customers and sales. Some customers may even boycott the brand altogether.

Repercussions

If the fashion industry continues to delay the progress of diversity, there will be repercussions. If we don't resolve this more quickly, consumers will stop supporting brands that blatantly continue to culturally appropriate. Loyal consumers hold respect for their favorite businesses but when the respect is broken it would be hard to get those customers back. The industry will sacrifice a big portion of potential customers because the Islamic market has a large influence on the global fashion business. If this is not solved, the fashion industry may lose a 51% increase in sales. As mentioned before some businesses may get boycotted, especially given the times now. There are many social justice movements on the rise and that won't stop the current generation from boycotting against them. There is no encouragement for Muslims to go for the business because of the lack of representation of those who are already in the industry.

Solutions

To every problem, there are solutions we can try. What are some possible solutions that will work? First, Muslims need to unite inside and outside of the industry to break the “norms” of fashion. Secondly, those already in the fashion business need to educate themselves more on Muslim and POC cultures. Brands should give the appropriate credit to those POC and Muslims behind the scenes to encourage Muslims to pursue fashion. Lastly, what are some things that will not help? The global fashion businesses turning a blind eye to the influence Islamic markets carry just because of modest fashion. Using mainstream ideologies of Muslims to show representation, instead, they need to interact with more Muslims in person. Finally, staying silent and going with the norms will not work. Some people need to be more open-minded for there to be changes.

In summary, the fashion industry is recognized to be diverse by showing some plus-size models, multiracial models, and support of the LGBTQ+ community. Although that is diverse, there is still a percentage of individuals that are rarely included. That would include POC and Muslims by themselves, also within the formerly mentioned groups. As model Halima Aden said, “We all need someone to go be first, but that doesn’t mean it won’t be hard. A year ago, I couldn’t pick up a magazine and see someone wearing a hijab. All the time we’re talked about, but we’re not given the opportunities to speak for ourselves.” So, why is the fashion industry considered diverse when there is still a lack of POC and Muslim representation?

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