

Culture and Diversity: Representation of Muslims in Fashion

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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. Publicly considered and promoted as glamorously effortless, behind-the-scenes a large amount of preparation, planning and forecasting is made to engage global fashion consumers in the processes and culture of fashion driving desire and consumption. As a global business sector, there are challenges and answers that need to be sought out. The fashion industry claimed to be diverse by occasionally displaying 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. Having more Muslims in the fashion industry will help 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.

Keywords: diversity in fashion, people of color, POC, inclusive fashion, Islamic fashion, Muslims in fashion, culture appropriation, leaders of fashion

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Religion and modesty are an issue related to diversity in the fashion industry. A good example of a religion would be Islam. 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. 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 to be so diverse when there is still a lack of Muslim representation?

This issue of misrepresentation of culture and religion goes back to when fashion started, but this problem is more existing 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. It may seem surprising but there are Muslim designer in the fashion industry that are not recognized. Examples of these designers would be Dian Pelangi, Jenahara Nasution, and Melanie Elturk. They are mainly based online, or they are in store in their home countries not being accessible to everyone. Putting aside the Islamic representation in the fashion industry, modest is also not recognized in fashion. That diversity is missing in the U.S or other countries that still have a big Muslim population. For example, the United States has an estimate

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of 3.5 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 openness. 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 inflate.

Degree of this drawback

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 3.5 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. This lack of understanding is what is causing the barrier for POC and Muslims that want change in fashion.

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.

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(Alspaugh, Elon University, 2019) Designer and businesswoman, Rihanna's latest Savage X Fenty fashion show 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. Therefore, causing a hiccup in her social status. Hodhen Liaden a beauty blogger who also is a big 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. The more often the fashion business allows these cases slip by without proper repercussion the more likely the social and economic status of these businesses will be negative.

Some may think, why should we be worried about such small incidents? Of course, if it is not 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 3.5 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 social reputation, the sales of her lingerie line must have taken a plunge. This applies to other religions and cultures as well, for

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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. They have the power to shut down these businesses but again that lack of POC involved in the industry is what holds them back. This 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, designers or employees.

Impact on consumers

The fashion industry and its consumers are highly affected by the lack of diversity, 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 they are overseas leading them to pay more and go an extra mile. They do not get the advantage to see the merchandise in person, giving no guarantee of the quality. As many would like to see a product in hand and feel the material and colors of it, Muslim women want this too. It is as if Muslims or even POC are paying extra to be represented and recognized. In the end, they have no choice but to settle for the bare minimum. The global fashion business economy is getting hurt by not being as diverse or open 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 Muslims, they can avoid instances of culture appropriating. The lack of employees and designers in this category causes a constant push and pull. It prevents POC and Muslims from trying to make something of themselves in fashion, it also pushes those that are already in the business out of the mainstream fashion industry.

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Though this is a problem within the industry, it does not mean there aren't POC or Muslim's in the industry. Muslim and POC representation have been on a very slow 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 out 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. As I have been mentioning, the fashion industry is missing out on a very big margin of potential consumers. The economic values in the fashion industry would rise by an impressive amount if they were included not only because the Muslim community would buy but also general public may be interested in it too. Along with making fashion more diverse it will also inspire different designs and make impact on how Muslims are seen.

Another Muslim designer who is also a POC is Ayana Ife, season 16 contestant of Project Runway. She was one of the few Muslim finalists on 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) Every fashion season and fashion week we are presented with the many designs and options for consumers to wear or be inspired by, but this is not that easy for Muslim women. The

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ready to wear lines are not so ready to wear for Muslims. As Ayana mentioned, she was tired of wearing the same bulky modest clothing all the time. 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. Instead, it caused a relapse in the progress made so far due to the lack of recognition and representation.

Trigger and Outcome

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 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 left with no choice other than layering clothes to achieve the modest look. Naturally, this would be very uncomfortable on a hot day or if someone is very active. Many modest options are not readily available, so it affects the Muslim consumers of fast fashion. Lastly, when brands or designers fail to be considerate of a culture or religion, they will lose many loyal customers, sales and even models. Customers may even boycott the brand altogether and models may leave the industry due to the lack of understanding.

Repercussions

If the fashion industry continues to delay the advancement of diversity, there will be consequences. If we don't resolve this efficiently, 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

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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. It has come to a point where Halima Aden has decided to quit working in the fashion industry in November 2020. Aden started modeling with IMG with certain conditions that clearly showed she was standing with her beliefs. "However she was dressed, keeping her hijab on for every shoot was non-negotiable. It was so important to her that in 2017 when she signed with IMG, one of the biggest modelling agencies in the world, she added a clause to her contract making IMG agree that she would never have to remove it. Her hijab meant the world to her." (BBC, 2021) As an agency that wants to sign a Muslim model, they should have already had some knowledge on the practices of Muslims. Instead, Halima had to make sure it was in the contract and make conditions with the agency. Furthermore, at the start of her career she had to travel with a suitcase filled with hijabs, long dresses and skirts to any shoot or campaign she participated in. Stylists and designers working for these shoots and campaigns did not provide these things for her, something that is considered basic needs. Eventually later on in her career she let the styling team on-set style her hijab making her fall into a grey area. "In the last year of her career her hijab got smaller and smaller, sometimes accentuating her neck and chest. And sometimes instead of the hijab, she wrapped jeans, or other clothes and fabrics, around her head." (BBC, 2021) In the beginning Halima entered her modelling career with the intentions of being the change and not part of the change but she realized she was not able to do it herself

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because younger Muslims following her steps were not of the same level and would not be treated the same.

Resolutions

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. If we have more people like this involved in the fashion business, situations that Halima have gone through can be avoided. 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, there is a lack of Muslim representation and recognition in fashion and a big portion of consumers, potential creators, and models are being neglected. 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 Muslim representation?

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