

INEQUALITIES IN GLOBAL FASHION INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

The fashion industry faces inequalities in many genres like gender, race, wealth, culture, etc. The idea of homosocial propagation or homophily, is a construction that empowers the persistence of gender inequality in the fashion industry. Another area of concern is racism where black designers go through a lot of struggle to get recognition. Wealth inequality is a huge upcoming concern in the industry. "Normcore" describes the phenomenon of the way high fashion has engulfed and redefined the items of low fashion and in so doing, heightened the existing divide between rich and poor. Regardless of whether you wear a tracksuit or a T-shirt, it is not a mysterious piece of comfort apparel, but an opportunity to make a statement. Cultural appropriation (or misappropriation is the selection of components of one culture by individuals from another). While appropriation or adoption is not itself problematic, when members of a dominant or majority culture appropriate pose minority cultures as their own, that is misappropriation. Being a part of fashion industry, it is necessary to create awareness about the inequalities held in the fashion industry. The researcher has explored the available literature to understand and pen down the impact of inequalities and ways to overcome them. Researching the concept and its impact leads to the realisation that the fashion industry is in desperate need to include multiple methods to assess the inequalities. This paper is an attempt to highlight about the inequalities within the fashion industry and ways to implement equality in the industry.

Keywords: Homophily, Normcore, Gender Inequality, Racism, Cultural Appropriation, Wealth Inequality.

Introduction

Fashion industry is the largest industry employing more than 75 million workers worldwide (Garment Textile Industry fact sheet, 2019). The global apparel market is expected to grow in value from 1.5 trillion U.S.D in 2020 to about 2.25 trillion U.S.D by 2025 (Statista, 2021). It is one of the largest and fast growing industry in India. Men are in the top tiers of the management in the fashion industry. It is proved that more than 85% of women prefer fashion as a career and only 15% men prefer fashion as a career. As per the reports and records, women hold less than 25% of leadership positions (Glass Runway survey by Glamour magazine, 2018). "Just 14% of significant brands are run by women executives", as per the study by the Council of Fashion Designers of America, Glamor and McKinsey and Company, which point out presence of the "Glass Runway" at the highest point of the style business pyramid (Stokes A, 2014).

Homophily is very much existing in the industry where male prefer other male colleagues professionally and train them so that they can take over after their retirement.

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On the other hand, racism has been practiced since many years in fashion. Fashion is not fancied for its racial diversity. Black models have been put more on runways but inclusion of black designers has been overlooked. Black women come with a rich cultural background. The rich cultural impressions from different cultures are simply taken up by high end brands and designers and such impressions become cool and accepted when they become part of such brands. As said by Farai Simoyi, a Zimbabwean designer "For a lot of us, minorities and the underprivileged- we want you to see us, but it's so hard to be seen." In particular, at the centre of the issues that have emerged in recent years, there is a problem of cultural appropriation. This concept, also referred to within cultural theft, cultural diversion, and cultural borrowing, is especially popular in cultural scenes around the world (Freeman, 2014).

Normcore is also an emerging issue that can have negative impact on the small businesses. It is described as embracing sameness and blend in rather than stand out. It is all about high end fashion everybody wants to make a bold statement through brands, rather than styling old garments, recycling and standing out with trying something new.

AIM

To study about the different types of inequalities in global fashion industry.

Rationale

Fashion industry is a very vast industry with a lot of future scope. Being an important industry it is necessary to learn about the inequalities in the fashion industry and ways to overcome that. There have been many inequalities in various industries. It is important to enlighten the ways to improve and adopt various measures, assessments in the industry. Through the understanding of the concepts and their impacts, the present research review will give a precise understanding of the topics and broaden up the different ways to minimize the inequality. Gender Inequality, Racism, Cultural Appropriation, Wealth Inequality, Normcore are some of the inequalities existing in the fashion industry and how some brands are trying to overcome this in different ways.

Objectives

- To study the various inequalities prevailing in the fashion industry
- To understand the concept and impact of various inequalities on the industry
- To create awareness about existing inequalities and steps taken to overcome these issues by the fashion industry

Review of Literature

Gender inequality (Homophily)

The fashion industry is one of the industries that faces least criticisms for gender inequality compared to other industries. Many assume that the industry is owned by women. Unfortunately, the majority of influential fashion houses top tier management jobs are owned by men. The industry as a whole is feminized, but there is evidence of job-level gender-segregation and male advantage in power and prestige. The concept of homosocial reproduction also referred as homophily, encourages the presence the gender inequality. Homophily is a behavioural concept in which a person tends to associate with others similar to themselves. It is observed by the sociologists that male prefers male professionally and train them to take up their jobs when they get retired. Males held more top tier management jobs leading to male preferring male and female getting less or no jobs in top tier managements, according to the study "The Glass Runway" conducted by Glamour magazine in partnership with the Council of Fashion Designers of America and McKinsey & Company consulting group. The study surveyed 535 people in the industry about their "ambitions, opportunities, and setbacks and it proved that women are 17% more likely to be on top tier management jobs than men. But as they went to the level of vice president, men were 20% more likely to aspire to be a top executive. There were variety of factors in low levels that led to gender gap in top tier managements. At junior levels men are 10% more likely to get promoted than women, this gap grows rapidly during senior levels where male are 18% more likely to get promoted without asking in contrary for women its just 5%(Glass Runway Survey,2018)

The CEO of Ralph Lauren Inc., white American man, recently stepped down from his role and appointed a new executive, Stefan Larson- male with previous experience running operations in world famous brands, including Old Navy, H&M, and Gap (Tabuchi and Friedman, 2015). This is the unconscious tendency to associate to same gender people hence leading to continuous gendering of jobs and imbalance in gender ratio in the fashion industry. Ridgeway, 2011 explains that there are many social norms and beliefs created by the society. These gender stereotypes believe that men possess

more agentic skills and women possess communal skills. Due to these beliefs, such inequalities exist in the industry. As soon as one enters the fashion industry clothing store, the low-level management jobs like the store associates, customer service attendants and secretaries, more women are appointed as they are believed to have more communal skills (Purcell, 2010). A study was conducted in the Midwestern headquarters of a large retail corporation, 70-80% of low-level management jobs are acquired by women where communal skills are required, women are seen to be engaging with employees and clientele. In the same corporation, top tier management jobs consisted only 18% of women due to the social belief of men being agented skills. This proves that the discrimination between male and female for the jobs starts from the low-level management and the gap becomes wide in the higher-level management jobs. But only around 14% of the top 50 major fashion brands are run by women (Fair Trade Certified, 2018). According to Marks and Spencer statistics approximately 72 percent are female and 28 percent are male. However, its average female employee in top tier management are 12.3 percent less than its average male workers, more staff being women than men but still the women are dominated by the most men in senior ranks.

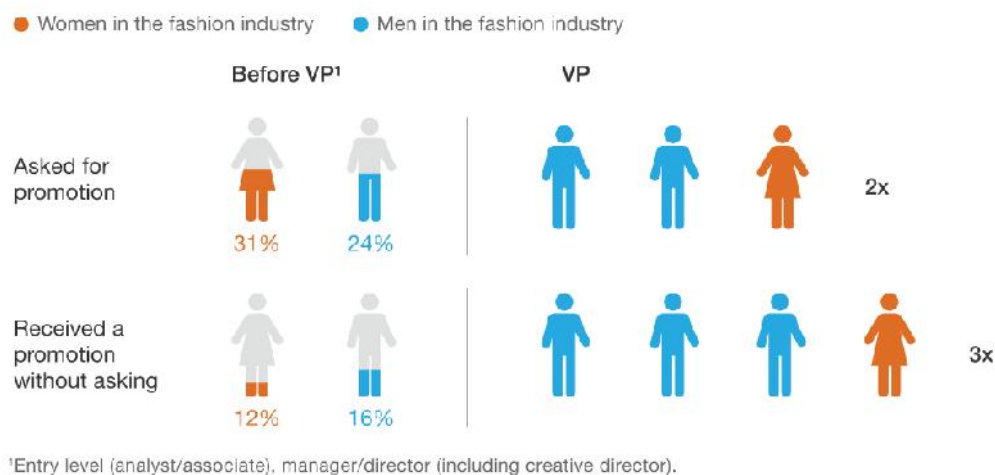


Figure 1: Scenario of Promotion Process before and after Vice Presidential (VP) Elections, Glass Runway Survey, 2018)

Gender Baseline Assessment by the world benchmarking alliance discloses the percentage of male and female workers working in a particular company/industry. The top 35 companies like Adidas, LVM Group, Amazon.com, Gap, M&S, Nike, Ralph and Lauren, etc are part of the assessment in order to contribute to Sustainable Developmental Goal 5. These companies try to be as transparent as possible to deliver gender equality in the industry. These companies are planning to empower woman by promoting them to top tier management jobs. These 36 companies are still trying to attain the equality. H&M, Marks and spencer and many other companies are providing teaching programs where senior teachers are provided by the company to improve the skills of the workers. This also leads to promotion after learning the new skills, even the women are trained for assessing the clothes, and therefore breaking the barrier of homophily and accepting all genders.

Racism

The black designer path of success is surrounded by obstacles, disadvantage, setbacks and compromises. A conscious effort should be taken to support the black designers. While in pandemic, relief grants were given to the designers but were not granted to many black designers and people started special programs to get grants and loans specifically for black businesses- Sean M. Horton (Designer). The famous designers take the ideas from the small based designers and make it seem like its their own idea. A lot of small designers struggle for recognition, as said by Farai Simoyi, a Zimbabwean designer. Black models have been put more on runways but inclusion of black designers has been overlooked. The Council of Fashion Designers of America, has been providing solutions to get rid of racism in fashion industry. Black female-owned businesses are not given enough funding, whereas black female entrepreneurs are the fastest-growing group yet were given 1% of venture capital funding(The fearless fund) (Reid, 2020). Recent initiatives announced by the CFDA include in-house employment programs to give them jobs, they are also offered internship programmes. In recent years

fashion business have been taken up by high-profile designers who are celebrities with no background of fashion industry like Yeezy by Kanye West has been in business for five minutes but have gained high popularity without any experience in Fashion industry. With power and wealth, such companies are able to under write their own businesses. There are many businesses like Ashley and Mary-Kate Olsen and Victoria Beckham who are able to start up their new fashion brands due to popularity and wealth.

Many high-end fashion brands have tried to support the eradication of racism but have failed in it miserably like Dolce & Gabbana's "slave sandal" in its spring/summer 2016 collection where they supported black but received insulting remarks and were forced to cancel fashion show.

Wealth Inequality

Everybody nowadays wants to blend into norms made by the society, it has been noticed that many new norms have emerged during these past few years by the teenagers and celebrities. Due to the increased usage of social media and internet its been observed that people are directly following the celebrity trends without acknowledging any other small businesses or trends which are the true essence of fashion. Brands play a huge role in fashion industry, they come up with new trends every other day and allure people to buy new trendy clothes in very cheap prices like many high end fashion industries such as H&M, ZARA etc. Many local influencers make a huge impact on the commoners as they can connect with them easily and they preferably tag high end fashion industries. Norms are typically made by the society and people try to blend in rather than standing out has been the new normcore in these recent years. The Normcore is embracing sameness deliberately and trying to fit in rather than stand out. "Normcore" is a phrase coined by trend forecasting collective K-Hole to describe the phenomenon of cool kids adopting the dressing staples of the masses – from fleece jackets, frumpy tracksuits, slogan T-shirts Normcore is basically wearing basic classic clothes but luxury ones. Fashion and brands are completely different phenomenon. Fashion is way of styling any type of clothes and can be achieved without wearing high ended fashion brands. In recent years, due to the increasing efforts by fashion influencers and them promoting small businesses, the consumers are trying to reach out to the local brands. The increase of social media has also led to easy access to any brand/designer/small merchants.

Cultural Misappropriation

Cultural misappropriation got highlighted after the critical analysis of the modern industrial society by Waters, 1995. The adoption of cultural elements and impressions of one culture by members of another is called as cultural misappropriation.

- **Cultural Misappropriation through Symbols of Religion and Tradition**

Gucci's 2018 F/W collection was recently criticized where a white model wore a Sikh turban which according to the Sikhs, the turban is not a fashion accessory but hold religious sentiments.



Figure 2: Cultural Misappropriation during Fashion Shows (Lee, 2019)

- Marine Serre, a fashion designer in his fashion show of 2018 used crescent moon patterns on the garments. The designer covered the model's face with a brightly coloured bodysuit similar to the skin tone of a white model. Many Muslims came ahead and spoke against this issue as the bodysuit looked like the Hijab. In many schools of France the wearing of clothing with prominent religious symbols such as the hijab is prohibited. This collection led to a controversy where hijab became part of fashion as it was worn by white women.
- British brand Ashish's 2017 S/S collection featured white models with blue skin colour reminiscent of the god Vishnu along with Bindi and nath. It was criticized as cultural misappropriation where a white model wore traditional accessories.

There have been many protection cells to protect the culture and the tradition. The WIPO document (the World Intellectual Property Organization) The Protection of Traditional Cultural Expressions: Updated Draft Gap Analysis offers a detailed examination of the shortcomings of Intellectual Protection law, particularly copyright, preventing the misappropriation of traditional cultural expressions.

Discussion

As per the available literature it can be discussed that there are a lot of attempts to improve the current scenario, there have been a few assessments and measures taken to improve the work environment. Yet, there are ample of loop holes to be covered to implement these measures successfully. Women being a part of the industry should be given an equal chance for the job. Top tier management jobs are always preferably given to the male candidates and due to existing homophily in the society where male prefer male lead to unequal chance for the women of getting a job for top managements. There have been measures taken gradually like gender line assessment to improve the work environment and to equalise the chance of all genders to get a job. Racism is a problem in every industry, black designers are not given equal recognition and neither given profits or grants by the government. There are a lot of private organisations that take up the lead and help the black community. It is usually seen that black has to back up black. A prime example is the COVID-19 relief grants. Black businesses didn't get those grants at the same rate as white-owned businesses.

Normcore has become a part of the society, it was first coined in 1990's but has been emerging again recently. It is defined as sameness where people want to blend in rather than stand out. It leads to people following celebrities as an inspiration. Getting inspired from them is a very different perspective but copying them by buying the expensive clothes from the well-known brands gives a negative impact on the society. Fashion always means to stand out and find your own style rather than copying. It may not be a major issue in the current times but in near future the upcoming designer and small businesses might face struggle a bit more than today due to this. Cultural appropriation is a major issue of plagiarism in fashion industry getting inspired by the cultures and copying them without giving in any credits, leads to negativity in the industry. There have been many cases where top fashion brands have been sued to plagiarise the cultures of many countries. There should be an act on it, where cultures can stand there point and where there has to be given equal respect and appreciation to the culture.

Conclusion

The fashion industry is gradually making an attempt to improve the current scenario. There have been assessments and measures taken to improve the work environment. Gender baseline assignment, voicing out and rallies held for black designers, social media has brought the upcoming designers closer to the consumers. Measures have been taken by the fashion industry to minimize the plagiarism or cultural theft. Fashion industry is one of most fast developing industry with a lot of new technologies coming in. Fashion industry is known for adapting to new trends, technology etc. quickly. There is still a lot of improvement to be taken upon on all these inequalities. These are one of the major issues in fashion industry and should be looked upon.

Limitations and Recommendations

Research Implications

The review highlights the inequalities existing in the fashion industry and the consequences faced by industry due to inequalities. A shift to equality will be the new fashion in next few years.

Limitations

Not all the inequalities could be covered from the fashion industry.

It is suggested that, further research is required to carry out an in-depth study about prevailing inequalities in different areas or domains of the fashion industry.

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