**Where Fashion, American Sex Politics, and Activism Intersect**

As said by Diana Vreeland, columnist and editor of Harper's Bazaar and Vogue, “Fashion is part of the daily air and it changes all the time, with all the events. You can even see the approaching of a revolution in clothes. You can see and feel everything in clothes.” Fashion is constantly evolving in response to contemporary events of the time. How do American sex culture and the fashion industry affect minority groups in the U.S.? Where do fashion, sex and gender politics, and activism intersect and how do they interact with each other? And how can we use them as a tool to move towards a positive future?

The Roaring Twenties was a time filled with glitz and glamour, economic prosperity, and a fashion revolution in women’s clothing. In 1920, the 19th Amendment brought women the right to vote. As women began to enter politics and gain a higher degree of representation, the idea of “separate spheres,” where women were expected to care for more domestic matters such as the home and children, began to vanish. Public acceptance of wage-earning jobs for young women increased and thus, more women were taking on jobs in fields that were traditionally seen as a man’s work. Soon enough, working women became the new audience of popular products and fashion. In the center of it all was Coco Chanel; Chanel set the stage for modern women through a signature style like no other brand had done before. Chanel recognized the desires of women at the time and designed her clothing around the freedoms from constraints society and traditional fashion had placed upon them. Chanel’s clothing were made from durable fabrics typically used in men’s work fashion. Rather than using excessive fabric to decorate the garments, Chanel used beads and embroidery. This supported women’s freedom with fashion that was meant to accomplish practicality in a workplace setting and free women from traditional constraining trends such as the tight waistlines and lengthy skirts. Chanel played in a major role in establishing the image of the modern woman as fashionable, independent, and intelligent. It laid the foundation for the “Garconne Look,” which was rapidly adopted as the “flapper look” in the U.S. A quote from Harper’s Magazine in 1927 states that the flapper, “knows that it is her American, her twentieth-century birthright to emerge from a creature of instinct to a fully fledged individual who is capable of molding her own life. And in this respect she holds that she is becoming a man’s equal.” The flapper girl would come to be the face of 1920s fashion.

Yet despite the increased opportunities for women in politics and the workforce and the new fashion hype, there were still many people who were opposed to this change. Some businesses were not as favorably receptive towards the new changes taking place. Media sought to convince women that their economic security and social status depends on a successful marriage and home life. Through the 1920’s, national advertisements in magazines increased by 600%. The ultimate goal of advertising is to increase sales, and in order to do this, a company must know and understand their target market. By knowing and understanding the target market, a company has the ability to cater its advertising to a particular market (Wells, Burnett & Moriarty, 2003). Advertising has the ability to change perceptions of what is acceptable versus unacceptable and challenge beliefs of what is morally right and wrong (Cohen, 2001). An advertisement from Phillips-Van Heusen, *Show Her It’s a Man’s World*, depicts a man relaxing in bed while wearing a snazzy neck tie as a woman serves him breakfast on her knees. The purpose of this ad was to sell men’s neckties. This fashion advertisement is a prime example of a negative business response to change in women’s role in society. The ad draws on the stereotypical representation of gender roles where women play a purely household figure and men play the dominating role. It draws on the insecurity and threat that men felt as a result of women gaining equal status, and promotes on the platform that it will give its male customers that feeling of power back. This phenomenon is detailed by John Berger’s “Ways of Seeing,” in which he states advertisements, “proposes to each of us that we transform ourselves, or our lives, by buying something more. This more, it proposes, will make us in some way richer -- even though we will be poorer by having spent our money. Publicity persuades us of such a transformation by showing us people who have apparently been transformed and are, as a result, eviable” (Berger 131). In other words, advertisements are able to convince people that if they buy a companies product, it will lead to a better, more enviable lifestyle. As a result of the new social and political power women were gaining starting from the 1920s, fashion changed to reflect these new powers. Businesses were able to draw off of this change in ways that both supported and criticized the movement. This does not just apply to the fight for women’s rights, it is relevant to other matters as well.

Halloween is a time full of fun; Pumpkins decorate the door steps leading up to people’s homes, where the smell of warm pumpkin pie and candy corn fill the air. However, for many minority groups in the U.S., this holiday comes with a lot more tricks than treats. Halloween is a time when an influx of cultural appropriators come to light because of the holiday’s tradition of costume-wearing. As described by Oxford Dictionary, cultural appropriation is “the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, etc. of one people or society by members of another and typically more dominant people or society.” The biggest problem with culturally appropriated Halloween costumes is that it reduces an entire culture into a costume, something that is easily taken off by the wearer while others who belong to that culture live with it everyday. For example, the headdress worn by a Native American chief signifies courage, strength, honor, and leadership. Each feather on the piece is earned through brave or heroic acts and awarded by the tribe in elaborate ceremonial occasions. This detailed and symbolic tradition is belittled and diminished when people wear these items as a simple Halloween costume, unaware of its significance. Furthermore, Native Americans are discriminated against everyday, and yet people dress like them for Halloween without understanding the adversity Native Americans face for being a similar way.

On top of these issues, an even bigger problem arises when people sexualize these cultures, showcasing costumes marketed as the “sexy ninja,” “sexy egyptian princess,” or “sexy china doll.” This creates a fetishization of these minority groups. This sexualization is no where near new. As detailed by Felicity Amaya Schaeffer in *Globalization*, “Colonial fantasies of the “exotic” lands and people they encountered were well documented in travelogues and diaries written by European travelers and friars… Blackness and a primitive sexuality became inseparable, resurrecting a colonial fantasy that justified the inhuman treatment of black slaves brought to the Americas as a natural resource to be mined for amassing great profit for the propertied landowners.” In other words, this demonstrates the negative impact of the sexualization of minority groups; the people belonging to these groups are shrouded under a primitive and dehumanizing light due to the sexualization of their culture. Schaeffer goes on to describe how corporations exploit and promote these fetishes and the sexualization of racial minorities for economic gain, like how Halloween costume supplies market and advertise their costumes at the expense of racial minorities. But who is actually responsible for cultural appropriation in costumes? Certainly, the people who purchase and wear these costumes are partially at fault for their racial insensitivity, but the fault also lies partially in the companies who create and market these costumes in the first place. So how could society go about fixing this problem? Currently, there are no policies or regulations put in place to combat cultural appropriation and racial insensitivity in Halloween costumes. However, many schools are beginning to put regulations in place to ensure that their campuses uphold a safe and respectable environment.

One of the biggest concerns of the 1980s was HIV and AIDS. HIV, or human immunodeficiency virus, is a virus that spreads through body fluids and attacks the body’s immune system, making it harder for the body to fight off infections and other diseases. HIV can lead to AIDS, or acquired immune deficiency syndrome, a set of symptoms caused by HIV and the most severe phase of the HIV infection. AIDS was the cause of more than 120,453 deaths by the end of the 1980s. Despite the high death toll, many people did not want to help the victims of this disease. One of the biggest reasons being that the early victims of AIDS were primarily homosexual men or drug users who shared needles. Even the US government considered the illness unworthy of serious medical attention. According to the article *AIDS in the ‘80s: The rise of a new civil rights movement by CNN*, because the disease was seen as “the gay plague” or a punishment to the gay community, many “doctors in major medical journals debated whether they had a moral obligation to treat people with AIDS. Parents refused to see their sick children, and faith communities called patients with HIV an ‘abomination’.” Because of many people’s negative views towards the LGBTQ commmunity at the time, the search for a cure was a slow and controversial issue. An example of how people would display their disapproval occured in 1983, when a New York doctor was threatened with eviction from his building for treating AIDS patients. However, the cause still had strong supporters. In response to this incident, Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHS) and Lambda Legal filed the first AIDS discrimination lawsuit. In December of that same year, a congressional subcommittee released The Federal Response to AIDS, a report criticising the U.S Government for failure to invest sufficient funding in AIDS research. In February of 1987, the Global Program on AIDS was launched by the WORLD Health Organization. Its purpose was to raise awareness; formulate evidence-based policies; provide technical and financial support to countries; initiate relevant social, behavioral, and biomedical research; and champion the rights of those living with HIV (HIV.gov). Despite these achievements, the stigma placed on LGBTQ communities continues to thrive. Thanh-Dam Truong accounts in the article *Prostitution (female*) that, “Labels placed on people with sexual orientations other than heterosexual carry various forms of stigma and prejudice that can cause stress and may also reduce access to quality health care and underutilization of health‐care services as a result of fear or lack of confidence arising from widespread and persistent individual and systemic discrimination against people carrying these labels by the service providers (Mulé et al. 2009).” Simply put, the stigma and prejudice against LGBTQ individuals advocate for poor confidence or access to healthcare to this day.

As a response to the AIDS epidemic and in order to show their support towards LGBTQ individuals, United Colors of Benetton, a global fashion brand based in Italy, released an awareness campaign about HIV called *The HIV 1993 Campaign*. The photographer behind some of Benetton’s most popular campaigns, Oliviero Toscani, frequently rocked the public with socially controversial advertisements that openly depicted subjects such as racism, AIDS, sexuality, religion, and poverty (“Benetton's ‘shockvertising’ ”). In one particular image from the HIV campaign, the arm of a very fit and healthy shirtless man is depicted with a stamp which reads “H.I.V. positive.” In another, inspired by the Olympics in Barcelona the preceding year, colorful condoms are arranged to look like the Olympic rings. The power from these advertisements stem from Benetton’s use of HIV positivity to create lively images: the health and vibrancy of the man in the firstly described image and the festivity and power of the Olympic Games are juxtaposed by traditional representation of AIDs as deathly, sickly, and cursed. The advertisements were seen as shocking and provocative, but their habit of whipping up controversy stimulated important conversation about the topics and brought popularity to the brand, making it a global fashion giant.

Many other big fashion names have raised awareness for this cause in many other ways. Bornfree, a philanthropic initiative, aims to eradicate HIV transmissions from mothers to their children. Fashion designers at this initiative have worked to design a collection of items crafted for moms and babies that support this cause. Additionally, Weaving Destination is a regional social enterprise in India and Cambodia which “aims to economically empower women living with HIV… The women learn design techniques and marketing skills to sell their fashion products” (Gondew). Through this program, women are able to rebuild their self esteem and confidence as well as fight the stigmas and reduce discrimination against the disease to create a more accepting community. Red Ribbon Runways and the makeup company MAC sell red products where all the proceeds go to supporting communities affected by HIV or supports projects globally on HIV prevention, treatment, and care.

Fashion is form of representation that people use to express themselves and is constantly changing to match our society and political ideals. Because of this, analyzing fashion and the way businesses market fashion can be a key look into society at that moment in time. Specifically, fashion; from loser bodices when women’s suffrage began to peak, to culturally appropriated Halloween costumes, to fashion adverts that combat stigmas against AIDS and LGBTQ communities; reveals a lot about American sex and gender politics and can be used both to enforce or fight against stigmatization and prejudice.

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