

Conscientiously woke consumer culture: Generation-Z males perception of masculinity representations in fashion marketing

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Abstract

Background scientific research: Conscientious fashion consumption encapsulates concern for the negative impact production and consumption has upon the environment and workers to awareness; however more recently this has evolved to include recognition that the fashion industry purports social inequalities (Magnusdottir, 2020). This conscientiousness is fashionably referred to as being 'woke' to the lack of diversity, equity and inclusivity within society (Magnusdottir, 2020). Wokeness has been expressed in two social campaigns: the #MeToo movement which highlights the weaponisation of sexual misconduct and the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) which seeks to minimise racial and ethnicity prejudice. Both campaigns emerge from institutionalised discrimination within society, also reflected in business activities and marketing; specifically, the fashion industry has been alleged of exploiting gender and sexuality, and not equally representing racially, ethnically diverse or plus size models (Magnusdottir). One of the main critiques of the fashion industry is that it portrays a narrow representation of aesthetics that does not embrace the diversity of society (Magnusdottir, 2020). While this continues (Elan, 2021), woke attitudes increase the likelihood of criticism and as this is currently a sensitive issue, some fashion brands promote more inclusive ranges, illustrated within marketing. This is a particularly under examined research area; although some studies have examined LGBTQIA+ representation in marketing (Boyd et al., 2020), there has been little acknowledgement of how young males navigate this conscientiously woke environment, how notions of maleness may be evolving and how this is represented in fashion marketing. This exploratory research

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examines young male perceptions of masculinity, within consumer identity project work, to determine how this contributes to their sense of identity and the identity of the fashion brand.

Research issue to be addressed: Consumer identity project work recognises consumers as identity seekers and makers, amid the complexity and pressure of consumers' identity negotiation, in terms of gender, race, age and status (Arsel and Thompson, 2011). The marketplace influences consumer identity (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), however relevance depends on brands fulfilling identity myths to support consumer identity construction (Holt, 2004) This may include narratives that address topical trends, such as femininity or masculinity (Holt and Thompson, 2004), where wokeness is evident by brands that address gender-fluidity within fashion, moving away from conventional norms. Examples include British department store, Selfridges, removing its men's and women's departments in favour of unisex clothing (Mendoza, 2015). Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory (SCT) SCT can be linked to consumer identity project work due to the fact that normative influences effect the development of behavioural intentions. Miniard and Cohen (1983) highlight that consumer behaviour can be shaped by concerns of people's opinions of how others may act towards them due to their consumption choices. This demonstrates that sensitivity to social comparison information, stimulated by factors such as fear of negative social evaluations, influences consumer behaviours. As some consumers build their self-concept centred around gaining appraisal from others, this could be linked to unconsciously absorbing a woke attitude that becomes embed within new norms.

Given the research issue to be addressed the following questions inform the study:

RQ1: What are young male perceptions of woke culture debates around masculinity?

RQ2: How do their perceptions inform brand opinions?

Methodology used: Using convenience sampling, ten generation-z males contributed with semi-structured interviews in Edinburgh in early 2021. Given that consumer identity project work is socially constructed, dependent on external and internal influences, and that social comparisons are subjective interpretations, the research is interpretive in nature (Berger and Luckman, 1966). All interviews were conducted online via Zoom and lasted between 30 minutes to an hour. The interview questions were developed from the literature and drew upon three themes: Woke culture; Masculinity; Male Body Image. Fashion, male fragrance and masculinised advertising imagery was used to inspired insightful and rich data (Pink, 2005). After transcribing verbatim the audio recordings, data were subjected to thematic analysis and three main themes were identified: inauthenticity of woke washing; abstraction of wokeness; and, branding precedence over wokeness.

Results achieved (conclusions) or expected as well as their relevance for theory and practice: Inauthenticity of woke washing emerged from perceptions that wokeness was being addressed as a fashionable issue rather than bringing about meaningful change. The participants expressed cynicism for woke marketing, especially when it contrasted with pervious marketing - a move which was considered as hypocritical, resulting in

negative brand perceptions. Abstraction of wokeness related to how the participants felt disconnected from woke advertising, however they also noted disconnect from masculinised imagery but were used to that, so it did not evoke such emotive responses. While masculinity was accepted and no longer penetrated a response, there were discussions on mental health being a consequence of not fitting in with societal body ideals. Similar to the attitude-behaviour gap noted in other aspects of ethical consumption, 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' where woke ideology was considered as destabilising brand reputation. However, this was applied to brands that were 'ingrained' within society, whereas lesser-known brands could be impacted by negative responses to inclusivity.

The results provide a unique insight into how young males navigate gendered debates within society, and how this shapes their sense of self and identity, along with building brand perception. Understanding how debates around wokeness have been interpreted and how this has informed conscientiousness around diversity has the potential to construct future fashion marketing that can help progress a more inclusive society. It also advances theoretical debates around identity construction, the role of brands in shaping society and the authenticity of brand purpose or Corporate Social Responsibility as part of business activities. If fashion marketing has been criticised for marginalising some members of society, perhaps this can be repositioned to embrace and celebrate diversity. While this exploratory research emerges from a small sample, there are indications that woke culture has infused throughout society and that it has provoked consumer opinions. Further research to examine this with a larger cohort, as well as diverse cultural, ethnic and generational cohorts would be beneficial. Additionally, focus groups with mixed demographics could potentially inspire a spicy debate!

Keywords: fashion-marketing; woke; gender; social comparison theory; consumer culture

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