

REFERENCE

Bhaba, Homi K. 1991. "The Commitment to Theory". In *Questions of Third Cinema*, edited by Jim Pines and Paul Willemen. Fakenhan Photosetting.

DOI: 10.1355/sj39-2n

Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Social Media's Influence on Fashion, Ethics and Property. By Minh-Ha T. Pham. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022. 176 pp.

Don't read the comments. For many a news article, that simple advisory serves to caution liberal readers that egregious voices, cloaked in ethereal anonymity, have already spewed their vitriolic misogyny, racism or homophobia into the response section. But what about social media posts and comments ostensibly motivated by good intentions? Can everyday internet practices expose wrongdoing and ultimately effect positive change in the consumer marketplace? These are some of the questions that underlie Min-ha T. Pham's compelling book.

This book is centred on the global fashion market, exploring recent controversies on the internet. Pham's lucid analysis describes how these battles to enforce ethical boundaries regarding production are wrought through the veins of advertising and (anti-)marketing by unwaged social media participants. Following the introduction, the volume contains four chapters weaving through topics of fashion, intellectual property (IP) and copyright, and persisting racialized stereotypes of Asian fashion that extend to colonial ideologies about culture writ large as derivative. The book articulates some of the value-laden understandings of concepts like innovation and inspiration, seeing these as legal and therefore cultural legacies of empire. Today these are materially reinforced by IP machinations, and now these volunteer armies of keyboard warriors. As such, the internet and the very communities that police some of these ethical boundaries serve to perpetuate these stereotypes and inequities into new corners of the marketplace.

In her opening case study, Pham explores one example in which social media users leapt to the defence of a Canadian sweater brand named Granted, which representatives claimed had their garment design poached by clothing giant Forever 21, even though the former company's design was "inspired" by the hand-knit Cowichan sweaters made by Coast Salish women of Vancouver Island. The self-appointed copyright fashion police seemingly forgave Granted for copying an indigenous style, but then demonized Forever 21. As Pham rightly points out, most of the social media users who engage in these practices are not IP experts (p. 5). But with little barrier to entry other than access to social media sites or apps and interest in the topic (or perhaps the knock-on effect of a friend or contact's connection with the issue), such interventions could perhaps be seen as a new form of IP populism, framed around a popular want to feel like one is a good consumer. But is that necessarily so? Is there no possibility of people arguing on the internet for argument's sake? Or even true cases for justice?

Although intentions are multiple, the ideology of the crowd skews towards the exploitative. As Pham concisely argues, "Today, being an ethical consumer means holding and sharing racial stereotypes about Asian retailers and products made in Asia" (p. 74). These practices do have real material effects, as noted when fashion brands gain or lose consumers, including spikes (or plummets) of sales of specific items, or the change in esteem for a brand or designer across their individual products (p. 9). As suggested above, the very patterning of these phenomena, the ideological lines upon which these ethical dilemmas are wrought, tend to follow the contours of established Euro-American copyright hegemony—the very racial inflections of colonial extraction.

But all is not lost: there are moments of contradiction, slippage and opportunities for punching up at the global giants. Pham points to a case—actually, a bag—through which Thai social media users mocked and shamed designer brand Balenciaga for making an expensive version of a striped plastic carry-all bag sold in everyday markets throughout Thailand. Pham lucidly captures the joy in the

mockery, although there is an aspect of internet practices about these items that assumes a “punching-up” orientation of Thai netizens; the symbolic power of luxury brands is often racialized within Thailand, where economically precarious migrants use their knowledge of designer brands to present themselves as cosmopolitan like their Thai middle-class counterparts. Where Bangkok netizens might have been revelling in teasing the European designer, were they doing something else in relation to consumer practices in Southeast Asia? Is the prestige ladder for aspirational consumerism necessarily vertical, or how can we know? Whatever the case, the other effect of controversies gone viral is that such clickbait stories generate all the more revenue for internet advertisers, where aspiring capitalists feed on the cookies of these keyboard warriors and entice them with future products to behold.

Of particular note are Pham’s reflections on the real-fake trend; that is, when designers make knockoff versions of their own products. For example, Diesel marketed its own purposely misspelled *Deisel* clothing, selling these items in Manhattan’s Chinatown (p. 128). The intentionally misspelled *Deisel* still carries a designer price tag. Pham argues that this trend can be read in multiple ways. On the one hand, it can serve to destigmatize the inexpensive knockoff; but on the other, it facilitates the process referred to as “slumming”. Even though the wearers might see themselves as transgressing fashion norms, they are reinforcing those very boundaries in their haughty irony. Ultimately, by engaging in these expensive displays of supposed brand indifference, they affirm their own status as rich white people by making fun of the less privileged for wanting to be rich. Will poor taste ever go out of fashion? Find out now. Get yourself a copy of this book today.

Jane M. Ferguson

Anthropology and Southeast Asian History, School of Culture, History and Languages, The Australian National University, Acton, ACT 2601, Australia; email: Jane.ferguson@anu.edu.au.