

## Self-care or complacency?

*Fashion's bimbofication of women— and the plethora of problems it poses.*

The 2024 presidential elections in the United States inspired an acute onset of both dejection and celebration in every part of the country. The internet was polarised in its opinions, having painted a stark line between 'good' and evil'. The win of presidential candidate Donald Trump sounded an echo of uneasiness and uncertainty for many social groups— the woman community in particular. With Trump's policies being the last nail in the coffin of gender equality and reproductive rights, one would expect vigilance on the part of the female community who are primarily bearing their brunt.

However, the act of expanding one's knowledge base and acting towards it has taken a backseat to self-pampering encouraged by the digital age and marketing. The worst part of it all? This culture is propagated in the direction of women in a manner so sly that it is unbeknownst to them at all. The word perfectly encapsulating this phenomenon lab-engineered with ingredients like misogyny and intellectual death is— wait for it, *bimbofication*.

The bimbofication of the female community is nothing new. Its weaponization is. For the purposes of revisiting this trope as old as time, think about every time you saw a 90s movie with gendered roles of a hardworking, practical husband who sustains the materialistic desires of his frivolous, retail-therapy addicted wife. In today's age of increased awareness about gender-based inequality and bridging that gap, these roles are upheld in more subtle ways. For the purpose of

achieving ulterior motives that secure existing unequal power structures in society, large companies and conglomerates are tapping into a long renowned vessel of self expression—*fashion*. What women wear has journeyed through a frenzy of changing necklines and dancing hem lengths. The only thing consistent in the ever evolving garment landscape is its chokehold on the lives of women, be it through will or imposition. Fashion's integration with the lifestyles of women may sound matter-of-factly, but what is visible to the naked eye is merely the tip of a large, menacing and interconnected web of exploitation and brainwashing. It's time for a deep dive exploring the rest of the fashion iceberg.

An average Instagram or TikTok user may not pay much heed to what they see when they open the app. For example, take the post-election social media terrain. The internet was sprouting with influencer videos recommending a 'personal care day' and putting your 'mental health first'. There was nothing too striking there. Only the general content posted by the marketing machines of the new age, albeit amidst the forsaking of humanitarian rights for more than half of the United States population. However, what dwells in the darkness beneath the surface of social media feeds polluted with product recommendations and shopping hauls is a stench of blissful ignorance and monetary privilege. Just enough cushioning to distract the average woman on social media from their power to follow up on their mail-in votes after the election that had the potential to reflect a change in the counted votes per state.

"You could be checking your mail-ins and make such a difference if you tried. But instead, it's like, I'm going to take a self care day, get my nails done, get a facial and the entire thing. Fashion preys on women." author and futurist Syl Tang observed in the aftermath of the election results.

There is a ring of truth in every sentence spoken by Tang. There exists a disproportionate concentration on appearance and dressing on social media, which has only worsened as we speak. The trend of bimbofication started off as women parodying the concept of misogyny where they wore the negative stereotypes about them as a badge of honour. Today, this trend (hand in hand with other micro-epidemics like saying ‘I’m just a girl’ whenever confronted with a testing situation), has mutated into a monster of overconsumption and using fashion as a defence mechanism against improving yourself for the better. Case in point— a ‘Bimbo Manifesto’ created by a female TikToker who claims that it helps her live a happier life. A snippet from the book is as follows:

‘Only focus on you and your looks all the time  
Show up everywhere hot all the time  
Just say ‘I don’t know’ to every question  
No critical thinking, no self-awareness, no thoughts, just vibes’

What might seem like a silent rebellion in favour of feminism has actually set it back a couple hundred years, and fashion is caught in the crossfire. Garments that were once an armour of protest are now sounding the knell of independent thinking and denoting complete subservience to propaganda pushed by big companies and politicians.

To add fuel to the fire, companies are recognising the potential of fashion to gingerly influence social narrative, seeing as fashion is always perceived in association to a certain idea. In the last

decade, companies have been using lifestyle and fashion influencers on social media to achieve this goal. As the digital age has expanded, it has also become more saturated with influencers (who, mind you, are predominantly women) that are paid to encourage a certain pattern of spending and living. This type of marketing is so normalised that viewers' first instinct is to blindly intake that information without considering the possibility of being brainwashed— which is not their fault. Fashion and beauty companies deliberately enlist trustworthy appearing women that other women look up to and would take lifestyle suggestions from. Clothing is like a book for the masses. It carries a tag of a value judgement. A mindset. It's a manner of inflicting visual influence, and who better for that job than influencers? This narrative value of clothing was observed in the rise of Americana fashion trends (especially in women's fashion) right before the win of Donald Trump, whose entire campaigning strategy is built around a patriotic vision of the great country of the United States.

Gaining dominance in 2023 and well into the next seasons, Americana was a feature in the collection of a substantial number of designers like Helmut Lang and Thom Browne. With the cowboy aesthetic, surfer themes and preppy sets, the designs established a clear cut inspiration from the American heartland, with the concept being only further amplified by the abundance of digital buzz and media coverage owing to social media influencers. Americana was also more pronounced in affordable and fast fashion brands like H&M and Brandy Melville, both popular choices for teenagers and young adults.

“I said it last year. Americana is coming back. Especially when Beyonce showed up in the cowboy hat at Luar. Many powerful people, they definitely use something like that to gain ground with the public, you know, because fashion is something you can’t escape. Everyone wears it.” said Phyllis De Verteuil, ex-designer at Yves Saint Laurent.

The universal impact of fashion is undeniable, which means that the only way of escaping the gendered rhetoric it's often used to convey is to think before you engage with fashion related media. With regards to doing that, it is safe to say that there is a lapse of judgement on the part of those on the receiving end of indoctrinating practice conveyed through harmless fronts like self-care and fashion. It is important to evaluate your choices even in an environment where the same behaviour is being regurgitated and encouraged by those put on a pedestal. It is important to realise the dangers of incessant consumptions that are being pushed as a substitute for acquainting yourself with pressing issues in society. It is important to be able to tell the difference between original content and the kind created to insulate the bubble of privilege that many of us find ourselves in, and not use it for the greater good.

To be clear, the problem here isn't the reclamation of an aesthetic that was (and arguably still is) dubbed 'airheaded', 'dumb' or 'vapid'. The problem starts when one's adherence to said aesthetic is put above all else and they're oblivious to being a pawn in a sinister game where their own agency and morality can make a difference.