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Lorynn R. Divita
Baylor University, Lorynn_Divita@baylor.edu

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‘Bury My Heart at Coachella’ – The Hipster Fascination with Native American Headdresses

Lorynn R. Divita, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, USA

Introduction. The cycle of a typical fashion trend follows a diffusion curve that has five major segments: innovators, early adopters, majority, late adopters and laggards (Rogers, 1962). Recently an emerging trend embraced by the style tribe popularly described as “hipsters” has been met with negative reaction by members of Native American tribes in the media: the wearing of headdresses as fashion. Rogers (2006) defines cultural appropriation as “the use of a culture’s symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture.” In response to the use of headdresses on underwear models in the 2013 Victoria’s Secret fashion show (footage of which was ultimately removed from the television broadcast), Native American activist Ruth Hopkins said

Also, we're a people, not a trend. We don't wear costumes. We dress in regalia, and every single piece means something special. Our beadwork, leatherwork, and quillwork-every piece is a work of Art, unique onto itself and created by skilled, dedicated Native craftsman. War paint is also evocative, with colors and patterns that are meaningful. They tell a story. It's not finger paint.

This research traces the movement of the Native American headdress trend through the social system and examines its continued progression through the diffusion curve despite resistance from Native American tribal members.

Theory and Method. Vejlgaard (2008) states that there are six groups of people in which trendsetters (equivalent to Rogers’ innovators) tend to congregate: the young, designers, artists, wealthy people, gay men and celebrities. Using this framework and Rogers’ diffusion of innovations (1962), a comprehensive media scan was conducted to find all references to use of Native American headdresses and related iconography such as tomahawks and warpaint by fashion designers, retailers, and in editorial photoshoots from 2002 (the earliest representation of the current trend) through the present. An initial online search for examples of Native American headdresses as fashion led to additional examples, all of which were also researched. Ultimately, after exhausting all references, numerous instances were found at all levels of the fashion industry, some representative cases of which are included below in the Results section.

Results. One of the earliest representations of the trend was a photo of model Maggie Rizer wearing a couture Jean Paul Gaultier bridal dress in Vogue in October 2002. (Gaultier himself falls into multiple categories of Vejlgaard’s trendsetter categories.) The trend then went through a simmering process before appearing on hipsters, who fall into the trendsetter category of ‘the
young.’ These young people congregated at the famed Coachella Music Festival in the desert of Southern California, where “it seems like the go-to outfit of choice for attendees (and even some performers) included the now ubiquitous headdress” (Native Appropriations, 2010). The trend began to accelerate and move into the mainstream, each time being faced with resistance from Native American tribal members and almost always accompanied by an apology issued by the company. In September 2012, the fashion label Paul Frank held a Fashion’s Night Out “Dream Catchin’ Pow Wow”, in which the invitation featured the label’s iconic monkey wearing a headdress. In November 2012, model Karlie Kloss’ wearing of a headdress in the Victoria’s Secret fashion show resulted in the footage being removed from the final broadcast, while that same month, the lookbook for Colorado boutique Goldyn featured non-Native models wearing headdresses, which caused the lookbook to be pulled. In August 2013, H&M Canada sold headdresses in its stores briefly before pulling them off the shelves after negative publicity. Even as recently as December 2013, the use of headdresses at the Chanel-Dallas Metiers d’Art 2013/2014 collection caused controversy and resulted in a statement of apology from the brand. Despite these apologies, the trend continues to diffuse.

Summary and Conclusions. The results of this media scan show that after being introduced by fashion innovators at the highest level of fashion—couture—the use of Native American headdress as a fashion item has continued to grow in popularity among young people. This is happening despite the best efforts of Native American tribes to educate the public about why the use and wearing of deeply held cultural symbols is reductive and viewed by them as disrespectful. Despite negative reaction in the media each time a designer, retailer, or fashion magazine has used Native American headdresses, the trend has progressed from higher-end to popular price point retailers. The results of the media scan establish the basis for a future study of adopters of the headdress trend to examine their awareness of how the wearing of headdresses is perceived by Native Americans and their own motivation for participating in this trend.

References