

Beauty Beyond Borders: The Globalization of the Fashion Industry

Alek Wek, a Sudanese-born supermodel, found her way to international catwalks of the fashion industry after escaping war-stricken Sudan and being discovered in London, England. Her non-European, exotic look took the fashion world by storm once embraced by a select group of industry insiders. She became the first African model to appear on the cover of *ELLE* and inspired a new wave of African women to be successful in the modeling world. Alek's strictly Sudanese features broke the mold of beauty ideals in the Western world and proved that a broad range of appearances could be positively received by consumers (Wek). Models with distinctly ethnic looks, like Alek Wek's, inspired designers and photographers of the fashion industry to seek new cutting-edge ways to sell products to consumers and seek models that can be targeted at a wide range of countries, cultures, and people. Alek's success, alone, demonstrates the gradual integration of the fashion industry throughout the globe, and the globe throughout the fashion industry.

The faces of African women, such as Alek Wek and Iman, Brazilian women, such as Gisele Bündchen, and Chinese women, such as Liu Wen, have all graced the covers of top fashion magazines including *Vogue*, *ELLE*, and *Harper's Bazaar*. This phenomenon was enabled only through globalization; once the growing industry began to focus its efforts on becoming a worldwide market, it had to find new ways to sell products to consumers with a wide range of interests. This meant embracing a wider range of beauties from different cultural origins and targeting sales around the world. With the fashion industry now connecting the entire world with its influence, beauty ideals have modified and evolved to fit the mold of the twenty-first century. While beauty once was determined by individual cultures separated by oceans, country borders, or religions, it has more recently been defined through the fashion industry which is now prominent in various countries throughout the world. This is not necessarily to say that the industry has produced a single stereotype of beauty but, instead, has challenged the traditional formation of

beauty ideals; the globalization of the fashion industry has changed the way the world understands beauty.

Because the fashion industry is international, fashion campaigns are advertised in various countries throughout the world, bringing many contrasting looks to the forefront. Fashion editorials are sold in countries far from where they are originally produced and far from the models seen in the photographs. Because the ideals of the powerful fashion industry often determine the way beauty is understood, the spread of the industry throughout the globe has universalized the way the whole world recognizes beauty. In "Globalization and Beauty: A Historical and Firm Perspective" by Geoffrey Jones, Jones says that "beauty had always been a craft which was very local in its products and traditions. There was no global standard of what it meant to be beautiful. Societies had always varied considerably, both over time and between geographies, in how they sought to enhance their attractiveness through the use of cosmetic aids, hairstyles, and clothing, and in their broader views of aesthetics... As firms advertised their brands, there were frequent assertions of the universality of beauty" (890-891). Jones also argues in "Blonde and Blue-Eyed? The Globalization of the Beauty Industry" that "in a long-term historical perspective there has been a significant narrowing of [beauty ideals]" (1). However, "universality of beauty" in Jones' first source does not equate with the "narrowing of beauty ideals" in his second source. While the globalization of the fashion industry and beauty ideals may have produced a homogenized beauty standard and minimized the global variation of beauty ideals, this is not to say that fewer appearances are considered beautiful in today's world as the language suggests in Jones' second source ("Blonde and Blue-Eyed?..."). In fact, it seems as though quite the opposite is true. While people were once only exposed to images of those around them who were often of the same ethnicity and had similar features, the fashion industry now bombards people with campaigns of models of numerous ethnic origins with diverse traits. In doing so, the fashion industry broadens the beauty standard in individual regions by opening beauty ideals past the normal appearances

that exist in these areas and expanding these ideals to appearances that exist worldwide. Through globalization, the world is able to understand beauty on an international level rather than only on a cultural basis.

Although the fashion industry embraces many different looks in order to represent a broad range of consumers, the industry is, nonetheless, primarily driven by Western society, allowing one part of the world to define beauty standards for the rest of the world. Fashion magazines produced in Western countries are distributed worldwide. This gradual expansion in distribution has allowed the Western world to have greater influence in defining international beauty ideals. While the industry has increased its use of models of different ethnicities, these models still must fit the Western mold of beauty to be successful. The line between having an exotic look and being downright unsellable is a thin one. Designers and photographers want to push the boundaries of beauty while still being able to sell products to mainstream, Western consumers who constitute the majority of the buyers. Jones argues “the momentum of the homogenization wave of the first global economy left a strong legacy... of certain ideals, especially for women, [which] had become widely diffused worldwide, including a lack of body odor, white natural teeth, slim figures, paler skins and rounder eyes” (“Blonde and Blue-Eyed?...” 42). These, among many other, overarching standards of beauty often encourage beauty practices such as plastic surgery in the rest of the world in order to achieve a more westernized appearance. Dr Kim Byung-gun, the head of South Korea's biggest plastic surgery clinic said, “The Chinese and Korean patients tell me that they want to have faces like Americans. The idea of beauty is more westernized recently. That means the Asian people want to have a little less Asian, more westernized appearance. They don't like big cheekbones or small eyes. They want to have big, bright eyes with slender, nice facial bones” (Lah par.11). People have always seemed to be obsessed with being beautiful and have used a variety of beauty products to enhance their beauty. Today, globalization has allowed much of the world to become aware of the various standards of beauty existent in different areas. Because Western standards of beauty have

become popular in many parts of the world, individuals who do not possess a Western look have to go to extreme lengths to feel beautiful because these standards may seem further from their natural appearances than ever before. Although it is not necessarily the goal of the fashion industry to encourage Western beauty practices in non-Western nations, this effect occurs anyways because, in many countries, there exists an exaggerated stereotype of what it means to appear “western,” although this stereotype does not reflect the true appearance of many westerners. Still, these beauty practices further enforce the homogenization of beauty ideals and may even cause the variation of this standard to be reduced. The globalizing fashion industry’s alteration of the way the world perceives beauty has enabled Western societies to determine worldwide beauty standards and unintentionally encourages Western beauty practices, whether or not these ideals realistically reflect Western appearance.

With a new standard of international beauty, a conflict is created in numerous countries between traditional beauty ideals and the globalized beauty ideals, a conflict that may have never existed before globalization. People of various countries around the world seek methods of fitting the mold of this modern standard while others attempt to preserve the beauty standards that have existed in their culture throughout history. This conflict between modernity and tradition is not an uncommon effect of globalization. Since the fashion industry has spread its influence to Africa, many Africans, notably Nigerians, have begun to trade their traditional preference of heavier set women for slimmer models that are idolized in the West. “The change is an example of the power of Western culture on a continent caught between tradition and modernity. Older Nigerians' views of beauty have not changed. But among young, fashionable Nigerians, voluptuousness is out and thin is in” (Onishi par.10). This conflict is also seen in the life of Alek Wek, whose family refused to scar her face as a child, a traditional cultural practice in the Dinka tribe of the Sudan. Her mother and father wanted Alek to have the opportunity to be successful in the Western world and be physically unmarked by Dinka culture. Many elders in Alek’s family did not support this decision and

constantly attempted to convince Alek's mother to take part in this cultural beauty practice (Wek 9). Like Alek's parents, many people are beginning to turn away from cultural practices and ideals that once signified beauty in exchange for the more universalized beauty practices and ideals enforced by the Western-controlled fashion industry. This change may occur either because of a natural shaping of aspirations in favor of a seemingly more modern appearance or to be accepted in the Western world. However, where there is change, there is always opposition in favor of tradition. This difference between those who favor the new, globalized standard of beauty and those who favor the older, more traditional standard of beauty has caused beauty ideals to exert a cultural conflict on many areas of the world.

The globalization of beauty ideals has enabled the existence of international supermodels of various ethnic backgrounds. In a world where beauty standards are defined on a cultural or regional basis, models are only popular and targetable to a very limited group of people who value the standards that the model's beauty reflects. In a world where beauty standards are defined on a global scale, models can be embraced worldwide and can be successful in countries outside of their own because beauty can now be understood universally despite differences in geographic location. Alek Wek, for instance, had very distinct features found only in Africa, or, more specifically, the Dinka tribe of Sudan. Her dark skin and eyes, shaved head, and long, thin body, however, made her very successful as a model in Europe, the United States, and throughout the world. "As far as I'm concerned," Alek writes in her autobiography *Alek: My Life from Sudanese Refugee to International Supermodel*, "there are beautiful women all over the world, whether they're brown-eyed Indians, blue-eyed Americans, or green-eyed Mongolian-Swedes. I also knew that most people weren't so limited in their worldview that they'd only respond to images of people who shared their skin color" (Wek 159). Alek has personally experienced the effects of the globalization of the fashion industry and recognizes the disappearance of a cultural or ethnic barrier when it comes to beauty. She has seen beauty standards transform before her eyes as her African features were gradually

integrated into the ideals of beauty in the Western world. Alek opened up the notion of the existence of beauty in the dark-skinned people of Africa, and she helped this notion of beauty spread outside of Africa. Although Alek Wek's look came straight from Sudan, her beauty was understood throughout the world because of the fashion industry's development of a universal standard of beauty. Once Alek came into the public eye, she was able to raise awareness about the situation in her home country of Sudan and share aspects of her culture with the Western world. Despite the control that Western society has over the fashion industry's shaping of international beauty ideals and the cultural conflict it may cause, non-Western individuals of the fashion industry are given the ability to share and gain acceptance for their cultures through publicity.

The globalization of the fashion industry has developed a beauty standard shared by much of the world. This standard is created essentially by Western society, has caused the encouragement of Western beauty practices throughout the world, and creates a cultural conflict between modernity and tradition. However, the internationality of beauty and fashion also presents opportunities for many unique individuals to be successful in the industry and gain awareness and acceptance of their cultures. It is difficult to determine what is truly at stake when it comes to the globalization of beauty. Where it may present an opportunity for the world to embrace every individual's beauty and develop a broader definition of what it means to be beautiful in today's society, it may also result in the loss of culture and identity. The irony of globalization is that while the world is moving towards awareness and appreciation of the individualism of different regions and people, the individual is moving towards a global "me" that leads to the homogenization of individuality. Still, if beauty truly is only skin deep, perhaps the stakes are not high at all. While we certainly do not desire a world in which everyone is exactly the same, the disappearance of beauty practices, especially ones like facial and body scarring or foot-binding, does not seem like a great loss. Though body image and self-esteem seem to be a growing problem for girls in today's society, there also seems to be a wider range of celebrities and models trying to gain acceptance for the

beauty that exists in everyone. The success story of Alek Wek, a woman who, against all odds, lifted herself up in the face of adversity to become an international success, a woman who gained acceptance for different forms of beauty around the world, a woman who is a product of globalization, seems to suggest that the world may be headed in the right direction.

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