



ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

Cringe Culture and the Case of Fashion Elitism

SYEDA TASNIM ISLAM

If you've been a person on the internet in the last couple of years, chances are you have come across the word "cringe". Cringe: the monosyllabic word that determines what's socially acceptable and what's not; it acts as the metaphorical bouncer ready to chuck you out of the cool kids' club if you don't meet the requirements. So, how does this relate to fashion?

Cringing at others' fashion choices has been a thing for as long as we can remember. From internationally televised shows and YouTube commentary to your Instagram explore page and even that one auntie gasping at your ripped jeans – people have a lot of opinions and they do not hold back. At first glance, this does not seem like much of an issue, because so much of this has been normalised to the extent of us not realising how it is a major hindrance to a person exploring their own style.

By continuing to participate and even being complicit in cringe culture, we are unknowingly doing more harm than good. Shame is a powerful tool that keeps everyone in check. The notion of standing out and it potentially backfiring is a nightmare to most – but should it really be like this? It is a natural human response to want to fit in with the community, but personal fashion choices is an aspect that should be free of such negativity.

This also brings us to the peculiar notion of "trends". And more importantly, *who* creates them and consequently, benefits from them. More often than not, trends are set by people who are in a position of both power and privilege – able-bodied, slim, white, famous, and wealthy. The most mainstream example of this is the popularisation of "streetwear", baggy clothes, sneakers, and flashy accessories, all of which had previously been frowned upon because this style was mainly the look in low-income communities in America. However, now it is a multi-billion-dollar industry with huge brands like Supreme and Nike that capitalise on these looks by creating the illusion of exclusivity.

A more local example of this is the classic looks of *gram-bangla* (*gamcha* prints, simple cotton saree) which would undoubtedly be considered couture if it were made by a fashion designer, gone through fancy marketing, and carried a hefty price tag, rather than it just being made by the local craftspeople in a rural area.

We cannot deny that wealth and privilege gives people the power to gatekeep fashion. Sometimes, the difference between "cringeworthy" and "cool" can be a thin line we call "privilege". And it's so important to remember that because it helps put things in perspective -- we cannot let elitism and cringe culture dictate how we choose something as personal as fashion.

They say beauty is in the eye of the beholder and it especially applies in this case. Granted, trends are helpful and even beautiful sometimes, but our lives are far too rich, too complex, and too short to be abiding by these superficial rubrics. Personal fashion can be such a beautiful, fun, and empowering thing. It is the way you decide to pick out the most vibrant yellow jacket, or that hot pink shirt that you know is obnoxiously loud – and yet you love it. It is liberating to let yourself choose these seemingly simple things, and that is a luxury we all deserve.

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IT'S OKAY FOR MEN TO ENJOY FASHION

FAISAL BIN IQBAL

"Why is it taking you so long to get dressed? Are you a girl?"

"Wow, you sure didn't hesitate to match the colour on your belt with that of your shoes. You should've carried a purse of the same colour as well, given how fashion concerned you are."

Men are more or less familiar with these lines. They're used to mock the idea that men can be concerned about their appearance, and casually enjoy fashion. If you're someone who's been told something of a similar manner, stop listening. Men, too, are allowed to enjoy fashion, and there's no hard and fast rule that says otherwise. And if you're someone who supports such tasteless opinions, you're part of the problem.

While fashion varies from person to person, and generation to generation, every individual has the right to enjoy what they deem as fashion irrespective of their gender. The thought that it's something that only the female half of the population is entitled to, is utterly misleading. We need to understand that men can explore various styles, experiment with different wardrobes, and take their time while getting ready for a day out with friends or family.

There's nothing unusual about men trying to enjoy fashion, or being well-dressed.

The typical T-shirt or polo shirt paired with a pair of jeans is often considered satisfactory men's fashion by many. After all, it's a pairing that doesn't require much thought, and is easily accessible. Whether you're attending a university lecture, or hanging out with your friends or relatives, dressing simple for the occasion will never grab anyone's attention, nor

will it bring in any ridicule. But do something a bit extra, and you're suddenly overdressed.

Besides, there are times where you need to dress to impress, be it at a job interview, or an office meeting. Our appearance at certain places matters a lot, and we have to make ourselves as presentable as possible. Irrespective of who we are, when the time calls, or the mind feels like it, we have the right to explore different styles or fashion.

But I can't help but wonder as to whether this notion that men don't need to be fashion concerned is meant as a joke, or an attack on the female half. After all, most stigmas are born because we set roles, features, and responsibilities based on a person's gender, and this idea we're discussing is no different.

Statements, like the ones mentioned at the beginning of this article, are used to mock the idea that men too can be well dressed, and take their time getting ready for an occasion. And as you can see, such statements are often paired with subtle references to women, and how *they're* the ones more suited for such concerns surrounding fashion and appearance.

Men's fashion has evolved over the years. And it was allowed to evolve because we accepted those changes as they came. The plain tees and jeans we love to wear today may not be there in the future, and we need to accept this fact. While we wait to see what the coming days have in store for men's fashion, or fashion in general, for the time being, we really need to stop calling out men for trying to be fashionable. And we most certainly need to stop comparing well-dressed or fashion conscious men to women, because fashion is NOT something that caters to a specific gender.



ILLUSTRATION: RIDWAN NOOR NAFIS