

Trend Appropriation and the Bosae System

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Abstract

The history and cultural context of the Bosae system in Korea are important to understand its place and purpose in the fashion industry. First established in the Dongdaemun area of Seoul, the Bosae system has been in operation for a long time as a supplier of fast-fashion clothes to the ever-adapting market. The term “Bosae” means the bonded warehouse areas where raw materials were processed into value-added manufactured goods for export, a fast-moving, vertically integrated system that also enabled Korean producers to cope with the fashion changes and meet the needs of international clients like GAP and Nike. In the contemporary world, the term has extended to refer to all manner of fast fashion goods, from legally manufactured clothing to those that are borderline, or even outright fakes. This Bosae system has now largely formed the basis of the Korean fashion industry, which has been able to produce and distribute cheap fashion garments to cater to Korea and other fashion lovers around the world. This paper aims to link the trend to the study of visual sociology and see how its implications appear in today’s society.

Keywords

Korean Visual Sociology, Fashion, Bosae, Fast-Fashion, Styling, Appropriation

1. Introduction

The Korean fashion industry is rather diverse and includes elements of both traditional and postmodernist artistry. At the center of this fashion scene is the Bosae System, a fast fashion trend situated in the Dongdaemun area of Seoul (Park, 2024). This is a two-in-one ecosystem that meets the requirements and needs of both local and foreign buyers of fashionable clothing. Generally, the Bosae system offers reasonable and tangible solutions to the fashion needs of the local Korean consumer base. It is for this reason that many Korean consumers have come to appreciate Bosae items not necessarily because they are fashionable or new but because they present a practical and convenient way to dress. In general, local Ko-

reans seem to be rather indifferent to fashion and prefer simple and practical clothes that fit the norms of society rather than being extraordinary. This functional, convenience-oriented approach to fashion is due to a cultural predisposition that values practicality in place of more innovative trends. Furthermore, the Bosae system also functions as a canvas that can be freely used and remixed by foreign residents in Korea. While the locals use it in a rational and reserved manner, foreigners are more likely to try to incorporate it into their wardrobe and lifestyle much more enthusiastically. Such an active appropriation implies the need to reclaim the aesthetics of standard or even utilitarian Korean fashion pieces and make them new and innovative (Hong, Cho, & Kinney, 2022). For foreigners, Bosae items may be seen as objects that are well-suited for creative uses; that is, they can be taken out of their practical purpose and turned into a new, artistic one. This dichotomy of the functional approach of Korean citizens and the creative adaptation of foreigners makes it rather difficult to explore the ideas of authenticity and trend borrowing within the context of Korean fashion. The Bosae system, with its capacity to provide both utilitarian and inventive fashion solutions, represents a distinct cultural and economic entity that complicates any views of authentic or original fashion. Through exploring this dual-function platform, this research aims to further provide an understanding of the intricate relationship between the local and the global fashion system and the construction of the new Korean fashion based on cultural syncretism and visuality.

2. Context

2.1. Literature Review

The history and cultural context of the Bosae system in Korea are important to understand its place and purpose in the fashion industry. First established in the Dongdaemun area of Seoul, the Bosae system has been in operation for a long time as a supplier of fast-fashion clothes to the ever-adapting market. The term “Bosae” means the bonded warehouse areas where raw materials were processed into value-added manufactured goods for export, a fast-moving, vertically integrated system that also enabled Korean producers to cope with the fashion changes and meet the needs of international clients like GAP and Nike. In the contemporary world, the term has extended to refer to all manner of fast fashion goods, from legally manufactured clothing to those that are borderline, or even outright fakes. This Bosae system has now largely formed the basis of the Korean fashion industry, which has been able to produce and distribute cheap fashion garments to cater to Korea and other fashion lovers around the world.

2.2. Trend Appropriation

Understanding the principles of cultural appropriation is essential to uncovering the processes occurring within the Korean fashion context. The related theoretical frameworks focus on how cultural objects, including fashion, are being imported, assimilated, and re-signified by people or collectives in a different cultural context

(Ko & Yim, 2023). Knowledge of these processes is crucial for evaluating the involvement of the Bosae system in the provision of both rational and innovative fashion solutions. From the East Asian perspective, researchers have noted that fashion has become more functional, that is, wearing comfortable and easily accessible clothing is more valuable than experimenting with new outrageous looks (Danwen & Arus, 2024). This rational approach to fashion is still in stark contrast to the artistic and provocative fashion cultures that exist in the Western world where individuality and provocation are the order of the day. Thus, for many local Koreans, and specifically for many consumers who are the target customers of Bosae items, the convenience and affordability of the products are important factors, not the novelty of the item (Kyunghee & Yeonwoo, 2024). On the other hand, analysis of trend appropriation in fashion is more inclined toward the idea of authenticity. Borrowing or assimilation of cultural features can therefore be viewed as the appreciation of other cultures or as the act of cultural piracy. For instance, Bosae items are employed by foreign residents in Korea for self-identification and as the art of blending both international and Korean fashion. This creative appropriation poses what can be considered a provocative question about the essence of the concept of “Korean fashion authenticity”.

2.3. Visual Sociology

Taking the Bosae system as the case study in the context of Korean fashion, the field of visual sociology can be applied to the analysis. This approach recognizes the fact that fashion is a visual form of communication and that the decisions and conduct in the areas of dressing are reflections of cultural processes (Ilyin, 2023). When it comes to the Bosae system, therefore, visual sociology is useful in helping unravel how such signs of authenticity and appropriation are made and interpreted. It is also crucial to investigate how the local Koreans and the foreigners living in Korea assert their identity through their uses of the Bosae fashion and how this would assist in the understanding of the correlation between functionality, aesthetics, and the perceived “suitability” of these fashion ornaments. In this way, the visual signs of Bosae fashion may continue to enforce a certain way of dressing for local Koreans, which is utilitarian and primarily concerned with practicality, efficiency, and comfort; and does not bother with the aesthetics of clothing or with the desire for newness (Lee, 2017). On the other hand, the foreigners’ visual practices in Korea may mean the use of Bosae in a restricted manner that is fitting to the taste and culture of the foreigner (Min, 2015). For that reason, the comparative analysis of these two types of visual practices contributes to casting more light on how the Bosae system disrupts the category of authenticity and how different groups mediate the conflict between purpose, art, and the presumed authenticity of fashion. Overall, the Bosae system visual sociology is a helpful framework to make sense of and interpret questions of identity, marginality, and formation of cultural discourses in the Korean fashion context. Furthermore, the methodology of visual sociology acknowledges the fact that fashion is not only the ornament, the choice

of the aesthetic, but it is a social and cultural phenomenon that can be used to explain power relations and traditional versus modernity (Demir Parlak, 2022).

3. Research Methodology

This research used a qualitative approach to establish the factors that led to the emergence of two opposing views in the Korean fashion industry: functional clothing worn by Koreans and fashion as a foreign adaptation of trends.

3.1. Research Design

The choice of research method was a qualitative study that employed both semi-structured interviews and content analysis. This approach of data collection meant we were able to capture both the individualistic and structural/ discursive dimensions concerning the Bosae system.

3.2. Data Collection

The main element of data collection was a set of interviews with both Korean citizens living in the country and foreigners residing in Korea. The interviews were designed to reveal the participants' understanding of fashion, their attitudes towards Bosae items, and their beliefs about authenticity and borrowing trends in the Korean context. The interviews were held in English and Korean and participants could choose what language they felt most comfortable speaking, thus the interviews captured a variety of views and experiences from the participants. Some of the questions posed to the participants in the interviews were on their fashion influences, the position of Bosae items in their closets, and their definitions of what is Korean fashion.

3.3. Content Analysis

In addition to the interviews, we conducted a content analysis of a YouTube documentary titled "Counterfeit Culture | Seoul: A Look Inside Korea's Fake Fashion World." This documentary offered an outsider's view into the Korean fashion environment, mainly the problems of piracy and the influence of international trends on Korean fashion identities. In the context of content analysis, the emphasis was made on the key themes and narratives that were highlighted in the course of the documentary, including the so-called "counterfeiting problem" in Korea and how the global onlookers might view the Bosae system. This analysis provided the researchers with a framework for understanding the Bosae system and possible interviewees' misunderstandings or omissions in describing the system.

3.4. Data Analysis

The interview data as well as the content analysis data was analyzed with the help of a thematic analysis framework. The study was designed in a way that should be useful to search for and categorize the similar and dissimilar concerns and attitudes of the local Koreans and foreigners regarding functionalism, creativity,

trend adaptation, and authenticity. Therefore, comparing the results of the interview and the analysis of the YouTube documentary, we aimed to show some of the biases or misconceptions that can occur when investigating the Korean fashion business from the outside.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

While undertaking this research, we were fully aware of various ethical factors that are associated with the study. All precautions were made to maintain anonymity of the participants of the interviews and their consent was sought before the interviews were carried out. We also discussed the sources of bias and how they could be reduced, including having participants from different backgrounds.

4. Findings

4.1. Functionalism among Locals

The interview data painted a different picture of the local Koreans' perception of fashion and the Bosae system. Some of the local consumers were described as being indifferent and rational in their attitude towards fashion, which meant that they did not use fashion to express themselves or make statements that would cause controversy, but as a product that has to be consumed to satisfy certain needs (Bai et al., 2024). This rationalistic, functionalist approach was reflected in the participants' outfits and their relation to Bosae clothing. Some of the local interviewees stated that they shop at Bosae Fashion not for fashionable and new styles, but for cheap and wearable clothes. One of the participants stated: "Fashion is not about being unique anymore and is more about what is comfortable." Local Koreans' interaction with the Bosae system is influenced by such a functionalist understanding of fashion. While many people in South Korea understand Bosae items as a way to express themselves through clothing, the majority of citizens perceive them as utilitarian garments that are cheap and sufficient for their needs, without having to actively engage in fashion as a sign of personal or cultural belonging.

4.2. Creative Appropriation by Foreigners

Foreign residents of Korea, as opposed to the locals, seemed to participate in fashion as a creative activity to a greater extent. Foreigners had a less conscious approach to Korean fashion and tended to look for Bosae items that would fit their aesthetics and their cultural references. One of the foreign participants described it in the following manner: "I enjoy taking what is considered normal or utilitarian in the Korean context and trying to make it look like I am the first one to use it." The creative recontextualization of Bosae items means that even though these objects were initially designed for functional use, their purpose can be extended to exploring new cultural identities.

4.3. The Role of the Bosae System

The results indicate that the Bosae system can be seen as a cultural and economic

phenomenon that is used to address both the functionalist approach of the locals and creative expression by foreigners. Thus, the Bosae system meets the functional demand for quickly produced and cheap clothing that follows the current trends, as well as creates an opportunity for foreigners to perform cultural appropriation through fashion. The Bosae system's modularity and selectiveness in terms of producers and selling spaces provide an approach to the variability of the fashion trends among domestic and international consumers. One of the interviewees summed up the situation: "The Bosae market offers me so many choices that allow me to achieve the desired look for convenience or a statement," This duality of the Bosae system challenges the conventional idea of identity and uniqueness in fashion. Thus, it can be stated that while some Bosae items may be legally questionable and can be deemed as counterfeit, the system incorporates both functional and creative solutions, meaning that the question "What is real Korean fashion" cannot be easily answered. In other words, the Bosae system satisfies the needs and desires of domestic and international consumers of fashion and can be defined as a multifaceted and culturally diverse phenomenon that cannot be interpreted as a single type.

5. Discussion

5.1. Misinterpretations of Bosae

The findings suggest that external critiques of the Korean fashion industry, such as those presented in the YouTube documentary "Counterfeit Culture | Seoul: A Look Inside Korea's Fake Fashion World" may give a wrong perception of the Bosae system. This is because the documentary only focuses on the so-called "counterfeiting problem" in Korea, without caring about the system's potential to provide both utilitarian and ornamental fashion solutions for both domestic and global consumers (Lee, 2024b). When concentrating on the legal and ethical issues that are associated with the production and sale of Bosae items, the two-fold functionality of the system is not acknowledged. While some of the Bosae items may be legally questionable or even violate intellectual property rights, the significance of the Bosae system is that it can cater to all the needs and objectives of everyone interested in Korean fashion and those around the world. Such misinterpretations are not isolated incidents and have significant repercussions on discussions regarding authenticity and originality in fashion. The Bosae system is problematic in terms of defining what it means to be "real," or to be a "replica," as it simply reassembles culture to create new forms of fashion (Wardaya et al., 2024). Thus, by not recognizing the role of the system in creative borrowing, the external critique may be playing a part in promoting the boxing of fashion culture rather than appreciating fashion as an intercultural playground.

5.2. Visual Sociology Implications

That the Bosae system can be described as functionalistic as well as inviting creative appropriations has implications for the visual sociology of Korean fashion.

The interactions of local and foreign residents in Korea with Bosae fashion give details on how consumers develop views on authenticity and appropriation in the formation of cultural and identity differences (Lee, 2024a). For local Koreans, the visual aspects of Bosae fashion might contribute to the idea of dressing efficiently, which means that they do not necessarily strive to come up with new aesthetics. On the other hand, the visual practices of foreign fashion enthusiasts in Korea may involve the act of taking and changing Bosae elements in a manner that is acceptable in the specific culture of the said individual. The Bosae system gives a small glimpse of the Korean fashion culture: the Korean self and how the individuals in this culture interact.

6. Conclusion

This research gives a better understanding of the diversified and sensitive function of the Bosae system in Korean fashion. The results show that the Bosae system functions in two ways: to meet the needs and demand of the Korean domestic market, as to the function and use of the item and for foreign fashion consumers to use the said item as a canvas for their creative expression. This segregation of the functional and the creative aspects brings the question of “authenticity” and “originality” of Korean fashion into question, for it is not a homogenous and singular movement, but more of a continuous and progressive development. The goal of this work is to provide some enlightenment on how the Bosae System is culturally and visually interpreted by foreigners and locals. The consequences are not only confined to the sphere of fashion but also point to the function of Bosae for the formation of the current visual regime and the entanglement of the global and the local within the domain of aesthetics. Further studies on the Korean fashion industry should extend to the examination of digital media and the system in other cultural sectors to give more understanding of this phenomenon that has remained important as the fashion industry advances. Overall, this research demonstrates that the Bosae system is not only complex but also very diverse; it is an example and test of authenticity, creativity, and culture exchange.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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