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VETEMENTS: a Two-faced Controversy Machine

Master thesis for Engaging Public Issues



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Abstract

In 2019, the luxury fashion brand VETEMENTS held a show at the McDonald's in Paris, where it presented 'SS20': a collection with a strongly capitalist-critical and anti-fashion aesthetic. The event was widely reported in the media and soon grew out to be controversial among its audience, which debated online over the meaning of the show and the brand. This descriptive case study characterizes the controversial and contradictory nature of VETEMENTS as a two-faced 'Controversy Machine': it continuously creates controversy in an attempt to stay relevant and keep its audience engaged. An online content analysis is conducted to map out four main controversies that surface in the online response. These revolve around the doubt over a) VETEMENTS' potential hypocrisy in both rebelling against and complying with the capitalist fashion industry, b) the audience's role as a consumer, c) the search for deep conceptual meaning to justify VETEMENTS' value, and d) the brand's potential power or incapability to 'troll' the system. In the McDonald's, the recurring tension of VETEMENTS' contradictory status is visually symbolized. The study ends on a speculative note: VETEMENTS exemplifies the importance of anger and irritation as a tool for disruption in the minds of its spectators.

KEYWORDS: *Controversy mapping, fashion studies, VETEMENTS, online content analysis, disruption, anti-capitalism, anti-fashion.*

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1. Introduction

Don't give yourselves to these unnatural men - machine men with machine minds and machine hearts! You are not machines! You are not cattle! You are men! You have the love of humanity in your hearts! You don't hate! Only the unloved hate - the unloved and the unnatural! [...] More than machinery, we need humanity.

— Charlie Chaplin, *The Great Dictator*

In 2019, the biggest McDonald's of Paris turned into a runway for the luxury brand VETEMENTS, as part of the Paris Fashion Week. The audience had been teased with branded condoms as invitations and was seated in the fast food restaurant at Champ Elysée's, where the presentation of the Spring Summer 2020 collection (SS20) took place (Kelly, 2019; Foreman, 2019). Models strode down the aisle and past the ordering machines to show a collection of 54 outfits, designed by VETEMENTS. This was led by two Georgian brothers, Demna and Guram Gvasalia, who founded the collective together in 2014 (Lang, 2019). People dressed as McDonald's staff were watching from the counter, giving out drinks in paper cups. Model wore fake tattoo leggings, caps with 'For Rent', duvet coats, worn-out flipflops and damaged, baggy items in combination with t-shirts of adjusted logos from PlayStation ("PlayStation") and Heineken. Others were eating French fries on the catwalk. Small name tag stickers read 'Capitalism'. A few outfits strongly resembled traditional security uniforms and franchise workers' outfits (VETEMENTS, 2019d). In January 2020, the collection became available for sale online; prices quickly went up to 400 dollars for a t-shirt (VETEMENTS, 2022c) and a pair of jeans cost no less than 1.100.

Soon after, the show became a hot topic online within the fashion world, met with severe critique and praise from all corners (Maniar, 2019; Foreman, 2019; Hargrove, 2019). Trend watchers and fashion bloggers took the lead by sharing their views on popular fashion blogs such as Vogue and Hypebeast, YouTube channels and social media (Maniar, 2019, The Fashion Archive, 2020). In the months to come, a wave of heated discussions and comments



Figure 1. Models at SS20, waiting backstage (L). A model in a wedding dress walking past the McDonald's counter (R).

followed. People strongly clashed over a multitude of subjects; from the conceptual meaning of the show or the pricing of the clothing, to the legacy of VETEMENTS in the fashion industry (Borrelli-Persson, 2019; Silbert, 2019; The Fashion Archive, 2020; Lifshits, 2019).

This response does not stand on its own: ever since the establishment of VETEMENTS in 2014, the brand has caused ongoing controversy with its items, shows and collections – and this continues until this day. As part of the McDonald's fashion show, a t-shirt with 'don't shoot' was shown (sold for \$289), which turned out to be a copy of a copy. The original design, dating from 1982, was initially meant to protect journalists against war violence in the Middle East. Seraqui de Buttafoco, a fashion activist, blamed the Gvasalia's of "culture bashing" (Bramley, 2019). There are plenty other examples; one of VETEMENTS' most famous controversies dates from 2016, when it released a t-shirt with the DHL logo for \$225. It was widely contested due to its pricing and appropriative nature (Brennan, 2016; Cochrane, 2016). More recently, VETEMENTS released images of a hoodie resembling Islamic niqabs – posted on Instagram the day that the Taliban had announced to make face-covering clothing mandatory for women again (NOS, 2022; VETEMENTS, 2022d). As is often the case, VETEMENTS did not respond to the commotion that followed.

In spite of these controversies, or perhaps *because of*, the brand continues to be prominently present in the fashion world. Even after having been announced 'dead' multiple

times by fashion journalists for being ‘overhyped’ (Harris, 2018; Leach, 2018), VETEMENTS can count on a large following of celebrities and young people worldwide (Business of Fashion, 2018). It raises the question: what does VETEMENTS’ controversies represent and how can the online response to it be understood?

2. Aim of the study

In this descriptive study, I will conceptualize VETEMENTS as a Controversy Machine: continuously creating controversy in an attempt to stay relevant and keep its online audience engaged. The critical aesthetics of VETEMENTS send a dual message of both rebellion and compliance with the capitalist fashion industry, which provokes the audience to engage with it online and debate on VETEMENTS’ integrity. As the online analysis will show, the audience is in ongoing doubt about its own role as a consumer, as well as the intentions, the pricing and the conceptual meanings produced by the Machine. The symbolic show at McDonald’s turns out to be the perfect place where VETEMENTS’ paradoxical status is put on a pedestal. In the discussion of this study, I will speculate on the importance of VETEMENTS’ ability to irritate its spectators over its resistance against the fashion industry.

Firstly, I will describe what VETEMENTS is and how it instigates controversy. I have chosen the show at McDonald’s because it is an exemplary performance where the brand’s characteristic controversies, capitalist aesthetic and anti-fashion come together. The focus is on the preparation of the show, the SS20 collection and the symbolic meaning of the McDonald’s itself. This leads to the following research question: *What characterizes the controversial nature of VETEMENTS and how is this exemplified by the SS20 in the McDonald’s?*

Secondly, I will be mapping out the reception of the SS20 show, with a focus on the online response, since this sort of engagement is intrinsically linked to the audience’s interaction with fashion-related controversies. This leads to the formation of four main controversies. I will then research what VETEMENTS’ systemic creation of controversy

implies for its audience. This leads to the following research question: *What controversies surface in the mapping out of the online response to SS20 and what does this imply for the position of the audience towards VETEMENTS' intervention in the fashion industry?*

Interestingly, VETEMENTS or similar contemporary (and contested) brands have rarely been written about in the field of Fashion Theory and Sociology (Skjulstad, 2018; Skjulstad, 2020). However, this unique case could be exemplary for how it manifests itself *through* controversy – and what the implications of this might be for the fashion industry. In mapping out the multiple controversies that surface as part of one case, I hope to contribute a detailed profile of a multi-faceted fashion controversy. On top of that, this study will coin the term ‘Controversy Machine’. Although much has been written in the political realm about intentional scandalization (Herkman, 2017; Tumber & Waisbord, 2004) or the response by businesses after a PR-damaging controversy (Boyd, 2011), little has been written about a continuing chain of controversies as strategy, together with an analysis of its integrated online response. That could lead to future research into other cases with similar ‘machine-like’ characteristics, in either the fashion domain or beyond.

From a societal perspective, this case study could shed light on the contemporary public consequences of ‘going against the conventions’ within the realm of fashion. It can expose the disruptive potential that an ‘avant-garde’ initiative like VETEMENTS might have (Docker, 1989), characterized by aesthetic innovation and initial unacceptability by the public (Kostelanetz, 2001; Léger, 2014). Mauro (2013) argues that these kinds of unorthodox and experimental approaches can generate new autonomous spaces of critique on society’s standards, however transitional or temporary. By pushing the boundaries of what is accepted, unconventional, artistic endeavours have the ability to change the status quo (Kostelanetz, 2001; Léger, 2015; Henry, 1984). Potentially, VETEMENTS might even be taking a ‘line of flight’ from the highly consumerist, profit-driven fashion industry that it finds itself in. As developed by Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze (1987), this “designates an infinitesimal possibility of escape; it is the elusive moment when change happens, as it was bound to, when a threshold between two paradigms is crossed” (Fournier, 2014).

The choice for this subject is also ideologically motivated. Fashion has long been systematically put aside as an unworthy subject of research for being little more than a ‘consumer good’, negatively associated with capitalist manipulation of the public and neoliberal markets (Hanson, 1990; Crane & Bovone, 2006). It is often frowned upon as anything but ‘high art’ by arts experts, deemed somewhat of a superficial occupation (Gerakiti, 2021; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). I would like to dissent from that idea: fashion is clothing and clothing is *to be worn*, by people. It is thus ‘fully of the social’ (Marres et al., 2018) and it can be very telling for the analysis of cultural phenomena. In a way, the case study of VETEMENTS is, among other things, an attempt to debunk that ‘superficiality clause’; fashion can prove to be sociologically relevant in shedding new light on ways in which fashion is *able to* challenge social conventions and break boundaries.

3. Methodology

For the analysis of VETEMENTS’ controversial nature and its show at McDonald’s, I have gathered data from online sources. Those included are established and popular fashion websites, media platforms, YouTube videos, social media and Reddit. Online written interviews of the Gvasalia’s were consulted to gain insight into the brand’s vision. Photographic material was used for a description of VETEMENTS’ work and the McDonald’s show. Next to that, I have used many personal testimonials of people that were present at SS20. All of the above caused a ‘chain of research’: every bit of new information was researched separately for validation. Since most information heavily relied on personal testimonies, blogs and opinionated reviews, this double-check was necessary to assess the trustworthiness of the sources. In an attempt to get in touch with some of the show’s visitors to talk about their experience, I reached out to five people by e-mail. However, only one responded by sending the photos and videos she took during the show, unable to answer questions due to her busy schedule.

Since the amount of information on VETEMENTS is too extensive to read and

analyse completely, I have deliberately limited the amount of sources. The end of data-gathering was prompted by a moment of saturation; material would eventually start to overlap, until a point where nothing new would appear.

For the mapping of the online controversy that followed after SS20, I made use of the same method of saturation. This time, special attention was directed towards the ‘comment section’ on forums, underneath videos and blogs, due to the participants’ strong online engagement. This provided rich opined data. In total, I analysed 21 articles from fashion blogs and websites that are specifically about the McDonald’s show. Seven articles are more generally about VETEMENTS as a brand. I have chosen to include these, because early on I came to understand that much of the controversy discussion is about VETEMENTS in general – and less about one specific show or collection. Additionally, a part of the 158 comments from the website ‘Hypebeast’ were analysed, which occurred as a response to VETEMENTS-themed articles. Lastly, some YouTube videos were analysed. However, these videos have not been fully transcribed and coded due to its extensive length. Underneath the videos related to the McDonald’s collection, I collected all 279 comments. A total of 391 comments were taken from three videos that analyse the identity of the brand (“Vetements - Spring / Summer 2017 Panel Discussion”, “Here’s why you don’t get VETEMENTS” and “Understanding Demna's Vetements”). On Twitter I searched for tweets posted by people present at the show or writing about it happening beforehand – for which I chose a modest time span of two weeks: June 16 till June 30, 2019. This did not yield much, since VETEMENTS also means ‘clothing’ in French, which led to a lot of unrelated tweets. I did dissect 11 tweets, but was unable to find substantial relevant material.

In order to structurally analyse this, I have chosen to do an inductive narrative analysis (Boeijs & Blijenbergh, 2014) with the help of ATLAS.ti, a tool for qualitative data analysis (ATLAS.ti, 2022). I separated it by source and selectively coded this to define subgroups (Boeijs & Blijenbergh, 2014) that reflect on the core of the content. The coding process of the online response led to a total of 108 codes. Some overlap in the content it refers to, such as the terms ‘post-hype’ and ‘hype’ or ‘trolling’ and ‘mockery’. The following

codes were used most frequently: pricing (63), appropriation (59), Demna (59), conceptual meaning (55), irony (39), aesthetic (35), hype (33), capitalism (32), challenging system (29), shit (28), mockery (23), soviet (22), hypocrisy (20), post-hype (20), typical VETEMENTS (19), memes (19), business focus (19), marketing tricks (18), referential (16), controversy (16), repetitive (16), don't get it (15), anti-fashion (14) and consumerism (13). This was then categorized into four main controversies, for which I prioritized the data that are illustrative for the chosen narrative of this study.

On a final note; the chosen subject is embedded in a furious debate on the definition and demarcation between fashion and art (Rhodes & Rawsthorn, 2003; Wartenberg, 2007; McNeil & Miller, 2014). I will not be going into this. How VETEMENTS is to be 'classified', is subordinate to the aim of this study, focused on its controversies and disruption within the fashion industry. For the readability of this thesis, words like 'designers, makers, creators or artists' will be used somewhat interchangeably. Similarly, the words 'audience, viewers and or spectators' refer to the same group.

Lastly, this study does not lead to definite conclusions as to whether it is 'right' what VETEMENTS does, or what makes for a 'good' aesthetic. These normative questions do lie at the heart of the case, but I will leave that final judgement up to the reader. Neither can I establish with certainty the 'real intention' and underlying ideology of VETEMENTS. Some parts of the creative process will forever belong to the black box.

4. Theoretical framework

In this section, the main theoretical concepts are explained. Since this study focuses on the mapping of controversy in fashion, this comes first. Due to VETEMENTS' analogy with artistic 'disruptors', controversy in art is the subject that follows.

Online controversy in fashion

Controversies are "situations where actors disagree (or better, agree on their disagreement)"

(Venturini, 2009, p.261). The analysis of controversies is meant to study debates and disagreements that involve issues of public concern. Marres et al. (2018) imply that the word ‘controversy’ is better fitted than to speak of a ‘debate’; debates are only one way of dealing with controversies, nor does a controversy always equate to ‘problems’ that need to be solved by debate. They add that controversies ‘live’ through various stages – from being born to closure. According to Venturini, “controversies begin when actors discover that they cannot ignore each other and controversies end when actors manage to work out a solid compromise to live together. Anything between these two extremes can be called a controversy” (Venturini, 2009, p.261).

In the fashion industry, big controversies are often referred to as ‘scandals’ (Vänskä & Gurova, 2021). According to Titton (2016), most contemporary fashion scandals stem from accusations of (alleged) unintentional harm, often due to cultural appropriation, racism and insensitivity towards minorities. Nowadays, these scandals often ‘go viral’ on social media (Titton, 2016), after which brands try to do damage control. Due to the increasing influence of social media, fashion influencers, celebrities and YouTubers can play a major role in the boosting of controversy (Pedroni, 2014; Gerrie 2019).

Some scholars claim that the *intentional* creation of scandals can prove to be an effective marketing tool on social media. According to Vänskä and Gurova (2021), its ‘shock factor’ can attract a large audience and promote the memorability of a brand or individual (Vänskä & Gurova, 2021). This is sometimes politically motivated (Herkman, 2017) but often serves corporate goals. Within the context of social media, Bertaglia et al. (2021) call this phenomenon of intentional controversy ‘Clout Chasing’: by generating a shock response, users create more engagement, which is monetized through extra views, brand awareness, sponsorships and product sales. ‘Clout Chasing’ is more than ‘creating debate’ alone: it is intended to shock and trigger strong emotions. The authors state that these intentional controversies appear on social media in two ways (Bertaglia et al., 2021). Firstly, the subject of the content itself can stir controversy; such as political opinions, taboos or ideas that go against the ‘public morale’. Secondly, the way of presenting the content, its aesthetic

elements, can be controversial. Think of gruesome, sexual, extremely unconventional or absurd imagery (Bertaglia et al., 2021), or cultural appropriation (Titton, 2016).

The emotional response is, as argued by Voorveld et al. (2018), a crucial tool to skyrocket online engagement. However, it can also result in intense conflicts, aggressive exchanges, hate speech and polarizing ideas (Smyrnaois & Ratinaud, 2017; Bertaglia et al., 2021). Taylor (2020) emphasizes that the relationship between maker and user online rests on a sense of trust and community; the use of controversy for engagement can undermine this, since it can harm the ‘integrity’ of the maker. ‘Clout chasing’ thus requires a fine balance between the wishes of the social media platforms, sponsors, and viewers (Bertaglia et al., 2021).

Controversy in art

The history of art is characterized by a long list of exemplary controversies that were long disputed and debated by its audience (Funk, 2012). Chander (2012) argues that “for every claim about art there is an equal and opposite claim about art. Or rather, for every claim there are multiple opposing claims” (p.296). He states that this is the *point* of art: it is supposed to cause that fight, to leave us disputed and torn about the work. A state of contestation keeps the work *alive*, leaving it inherently controversial. In “Outrage, Art, Controversy and Society”, Howells et al. (2012) argue how “controversies in the arts are rarely only about the arts”. Groys (2013) argues how it revolves around *power*: it can *challenge* power, *change* power and be *abused* for or *confirm* power. Howells et al. (2012) add to this that a work of art does not take place in an aesthetic vacuum and is thus not ‘inherently’ controversial. It only becomes controversial once it travels into the public sphere where the audience can ‘judge’. Thus it exists in the grace of its spectators and critics. To have the work enter that public sphere, some artists also deliberately mobilize controversy for financial gain and publicity (Howells et al., 2012), similar to the ‘Clout Chasing’ concept discussed before.

One exemplary anti-establishment movement that was highly successful in causing controversy, was Dada. As a response to the carnage and inhumanities of World War I, the

Dadaists radically resisted against the cultural norms that they believed had led to this war through its 'anti-art'. Dada tried to 'denigrate' art by turning all kinds of objects, performances and everyday acts into art. It was meant to shock and disrupt the system, while struggling for individual liberty (Lombardo, 2010; Pinder, 2009). According to Funk (2012), Dada ushered in an ongoing state of controversy in the art world: artists would systematically provoke "intense debate, fierce disputes and even fistfights" (Funk, 2012, p.303) by going beyond cultural conventions and clashing with the established norms.

Novitz (1996) argues that the desires of the audience lie at the core of controversy caused by these disruptive artists. Whether it is seen as a 'good' or 'bad' work, arises from the inability to live up to the spectator's expectations: "We hope and expect that it will... [give] not just aesthetic pleasure and delight, but insights, values, and emotional understanding." He argues that the root of art controversy lies with "the fulfillment and disappointment of these hopes and expectations" (Novitz, 1996, p.155). This aligns with Gaztambide-Fernández's (2008) description of the expected role of the artist in society. The author argues that the artist can confront us with the challenges of our time by looking at the world differently. This 'border crosser' is not very responsive to social conventions nor creating 'great works of beauty' (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2008), but wants to move boundaries, challenge rules and disturb the social order in an attempt to destabilize dominant ideologies (Bauman, 1999 and reimagine the public sphere (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2008). Its audience expects artists to take on that role and thus indirectly stimulates them into making more trouble. Gaztambide-Fernández (2008) adds that some artists are extremely sensitive to the audience's wishes, which he calls the 'populist perspective'. This artist is often seen as an integral part of a demanding industry, caught up in the demands of the financial market (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2008).

Both Dada and above-mentioned 'border crossers' in the arts have historically made good use of satire as a tool, to voice criticism and question the status quo (Lombardo, 2010). LeBoeuf (2009) argues that satire in the arts can turn the acceptable into something ridiculous, and offer a breach in our line of reasoning. The author characterizes three

following characteristics for satire: critique, irony and implicitness. Firstly, satire is always “a critique of some form of human behavior, vice, or folly, with the intent of persuading the audience to view it disdainfully and thereby encourage a degree of social change (LeBoeuf, 2009, p3)” Secondly, satire uses irony to humorously point at problems. Thirdly, satire is not an overt statement nor an explicit verdict. By making satire while staying implicit in intention, something acceptable can start faltering (LeBoeuf, 2009; Doyle, 2006).

5. What is VETEMENTS?

Before getting into the case, I highly encourage the reader to open the official Instagram account of VETEMENTS (@vetements_official), in order to get familiar with the brand. At the time of writing, more than 8.200 posts have been put online (VETEMENTS, 2022a).

I will first explain the foundation of VETEMENTS in 2014, the influential vision of ex-creative director Demna Gvasalia and the brand’s controversies. Then I will provide a detailed description of the fashion show at McDonald’s. Lastly, I will map out the main four controversies that surface in the online response.

Becoming of VETEMENTS

VETEMENTS was founded as a collective in 2014 by Demna Gvasalia, a Georgian fashion designer who graduated from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp in 2006. He started it together with his brother Guram and a group of friends from the fashion field (VETEMENTS, 2022b). Before that, Demna worked for various famous fashion brands – such as Margiela, Marc Jacobs and Louis Vuitton (Skjulstad, 2020). In the many interviews he has given over the years, he has explained how VETEMENTS started from his living room in Paris (High Snobiety, 2018; Anaya, 2016), out of a deep frustration with the fashion industry and its restrictive rules. Strikingly, the designer said that “the industry itself is very old school and is ruled by very old school elephant houses with very old school elephant

management structures” (Anaya, 2016). His main critique is directed at the ‘cycle’ of seasons, in which designers are expected to present a certain amount of collections per year: “The creative cycle [...] didn't really coincide at all with the production side” (Amed, 2016). Demna Gvasalia has also criticized the demand for overproduction and the amount of clothing that goes to waste, often unworn, while one trend follows after another: “This whole vicious circle turns and turns at a very fast speed and kills both the creativity and the business” (Amed, 2016). Thus, VETEMENTS is his attempt to do it differently (Anaya, 2016; Amed, 2016). The name of the brand literally translates back to ‘clothing’ in French, which reflects on the original philosophy; that clothing is meant to be worn – and that there is nothing conceptual about that (High Snobiety, 2018). At the time of writing, the brand is still producing new collections.

Demna worked as the Creative Director from 2014 until 2019 and his brother Guram Gvasalia was the CEO of business operations, until Demna’s departure to the fashion brand Balenciaga in 2019 (Skjulstad, 2020). In 2017, the team decided to move to Switzerland for economical and cultural reasons (Fernandez, 2017; Sajonas, 2017). VETEMENTS is registered under the name of “VETEMENTS GROUP AG” as a listed company. Throughout the years in both Paris and Zurich, it has remained relatively unknown who exactly works and designs at VETEMENTS, nor does the anonymous team provide information about the creative process and production (Lifshits, 2019). Despite the ‘collective’ character of the VETEMENTS, only one other team member is relatively known: a Russian stylist, named Lotta Volkova (Satenstein, 2016).

During his time as creative director of VETEMENTS, Demna Gvasalia was at the center of attention for the media. This meant that he stepped forward in all interviews about the brand, in which his Georgian background, his youth under the Soviet regime and his coming of age is discussed (Jonkers, 2022; Roazen, 2016a; Amed, 2016). On rare occasions, his brother took the spotlights (Socha, 2017). Over the past two years, Guram Gvasalia has become more prominently present as the face of VETEMENTS, ever since he has taken over Demna’s role as creative director (Yotka, 2021).



Figure 2. VETEMENTS show at a Chinese restaurant in 2016 (L) and at a shopping mall in 2017 (R).

From newcomer to big dog

VETEMENTS' first collection was presented from Demna's living room in Paris in 2014. The kick-off did not go unnoticed, but investors were wary due to the brand's 'newcomer' status (Phelps, 2016). In 2015, the brand showed its new collection at a Parisian sex club – and soon started 'booming' (Brumfitt, 2015). Its real breakthrough follows in 2016, when the spring-summer collection was shown at a Chinese restaurant (Skjulstad, 2020; Mower, 2015). The brand's hyperfocus on streetwear, the re-appropriation of household brands and its stereotypical characters were unheard of, together with its highly unconventional show locations and the refusal to label clothing by gender (Hine, 2017). Its sources of inspiration were, and still are, unusual to the fashion world: outfits from office workers and security, Georgian tradition (Slavik Snow White, 2020), the Titanic movie (High Snobiety, 2018), Soviet aesthetic, kitchen aprons and death metal (High Snobiety, 2018; Skjulstad, 2020). Around 2017, the Gvasalia brothers announced that they no longer chose to follow the traditional fashion schedule. Instead, they now drop their collections as and whenever they like (High Snobiety, 2018).

This unorthodox, controversial approach to fashion is combined with an emphasis on conceptual insignificance and unclarity about the makers' intention. In his interviews,

Demna continuously repeated how “there is no message” (Anaya, 2016) behind the collection, nor did he explain his ‘real’ intention behind the, often critical, referential items. These non-answers only add fuel to the debate and speculation online. Instead, Demna said that VETEMENTS’ main focus is commercial in nature; the making of a desirable, wearable product that people ‘just want to have’ (Anaya, 2016; Amed, 2016). Its high prices, with t-shirts starting from 350 euros, limited orders and collaborations with other famous brands, are meant to create an ideal of scarcity, hype and unicity. This also holds true for the endorsement of celebrities such as Billie Eilish, Kim Kardashian and Kanye West, who have been seen wearing the brand (Rogers, 2019; High Snobiety, 2018).

Controversies

Over the course of the past eight years, VETEMENTS has established a long resume of controversy, characterized by a lot of online engagement from its followers and viewers. One of the most infamous is the release of a t-shirt with the DHL logo on it, in 2016. It looks very similar to the shirt worn by a DHL-employee, but was re-made and sold by VETEMENTS for a luxury price (Sawyer, 2018; Gustashaw; 2016). This appropriated piece went viral and became an extremely popular yet contested item. In the same year, the team pulled the same trick by selling a t-shirt identical to that of one sold by a touristic shop in Antwerp. VETEMENTS’ version cost \$225 (Rabkin, 2016), whereas the original only cost 10 euros. The brand experienced more severe negative backlash when it released a \$295 necklace with a spoon in a metal tube; designed for doing cocaine or other drugs. The response was so aggressively phrased and overwhelmingly negative (Griffiths, 2017; Scott, 2017; Brennan, 2017) that VETEMENTS decided to remove it from its Instagram. However, the necklace is still for sale (Ssense, n.d.). In 2021, the brand released outfits inspired by the blue paint thrown at Hong Kong protestors, which is used by authorities to identify resistance and prosecute them (Elan, 2021). Guram Gvasalia continued Demna’s legacy of vague intention by stating how these outfits were inspired by “the hell we’re all living through”. In 2020, VETEMENTS launched a private Instagram page, accessible to the lucky few, where

sensitive and pornographic content is posted (VETEMENTS Uncensored, n.d.; Mazhar, 2020). In May 2022, the brand released photos of a hoodie with full face coverage – a few hours after the Taliban had announced that women were supposed to veil themselves again in Afghanistan (NOS, 2022; VETEMENTS, 2022d).

Ever since the move of Demna Gvasalia to Balenciaga, this company has been struck with controversies similar to those of VETEMENTS. ‘Demna struck again’ at Balenciaga with a limited edition of shoes that look extremely worn out and destroyed – sold for a price of \$1850 (Sung, 2022). These controversies (see figure 3), both by VETEMENTS and Balenciaga, often hinge on online responses of outrage over its societal insensitivity and critique on its cultural appropriation, or the questioning of the brand’s integrity – as later shown in the analysis of the online response.

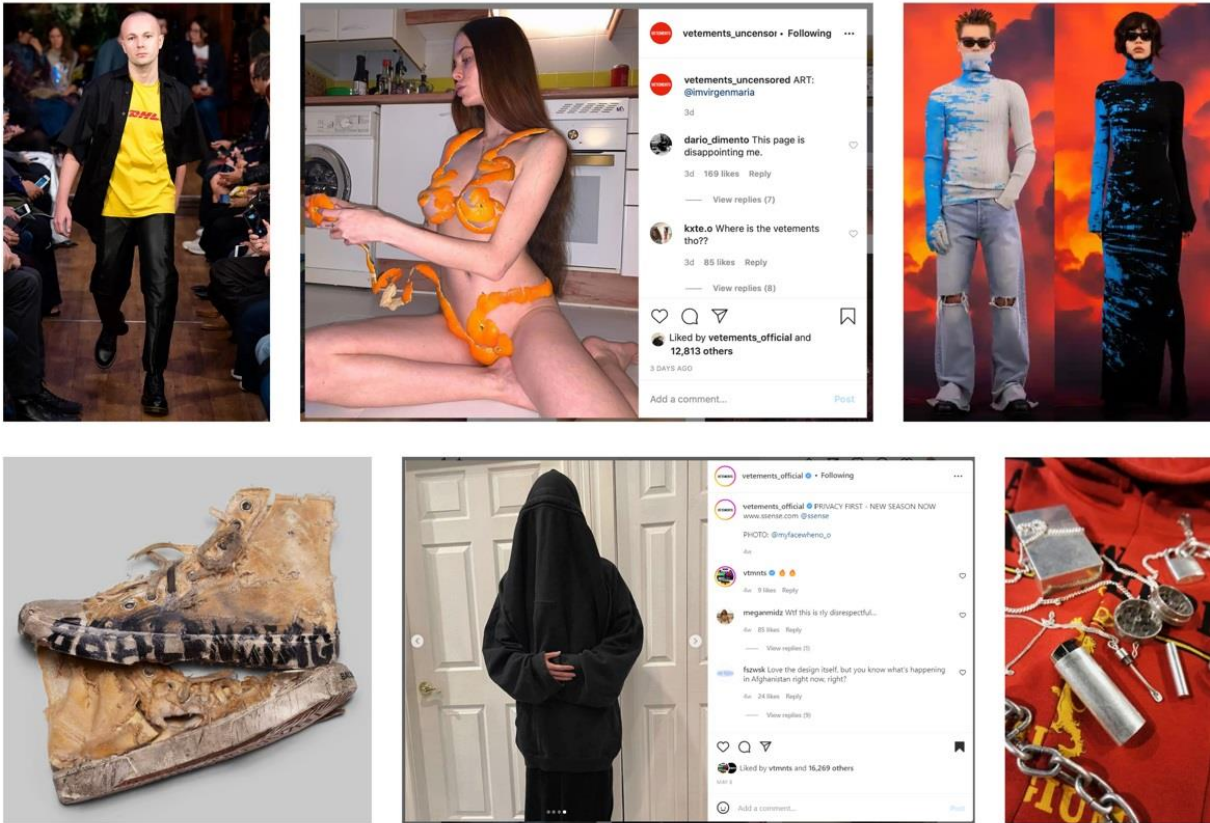


Figure 3. Controversies. Left-to-right, then top-to-bottom: the DHL-shirt, a post on the private Instagram-account of VETEMENTS, two outfits inspired by the Hong Kong protests, a sweater that resembles a niqab, Balenciaga’s destroyed shoes and the ‘cocaine’ necklace.

6. The show at McDonald's

Preparation of the show

The presentation of VETEMENTS' summer-spring collection of 2020 (SS20) was held on June 20, 2019, as part of *Paris Fashion Week Men's SS20*, in the biggest Parisian McDonald's at Champs-Élysées. In line with VETEMENTS' unknown creative process, little to nothing can be found on the preparation of the show, except for some spare pictures of the build-up, posted by an external logistics company (Novelty Group, 2019). VETEMENTS does not have a publicly accessible newsletter, nor does it run a Twitter or TikTok account. Its LinkedIn is rarely in use (VETEMENTS, 2022b). Nearly everything is communicated through Instagram (VETEMENTS, 2019b). On May 27 2019, five different GIF's were posted there, announcing the show in Paris. It depicts short repetitive videos of Black Friday chaos (see figure 4).



Figure 4. Screenshots of 'Black Friday' GIFs on Instagram.

Big crowds were running into shops, pushing each other aside and grabbing products from the shelves. A few hours before the show started, an Instagram picture was posted of someone holding a condom, the show's official invitation, in front of a little dinner table in Paris. The description of the post was capitalized, as is done to all Instagram text consistently: VETEMENTS SUMMER 2020 SHOW / TONIGHT 20:30 / PARIS. A few hours later a similar message was posted with an image of two black condoms (see figure 5). The day after the show, photos of all outfits were shared separately, again on Instagram. In January 2020, VETEMENTS announced that some of the SS20 items were going to go for sale

on the website 'endclothing' (VETEMENTS, 2022a). Or, to use fashion jargon: VETEMENTS simply 'dropped' its show and collection in a perfectly orchestrated way. The process, the making and team behind it were conspicuous by their absence; what is not shown, tells us as much about the brand as what it does show us.

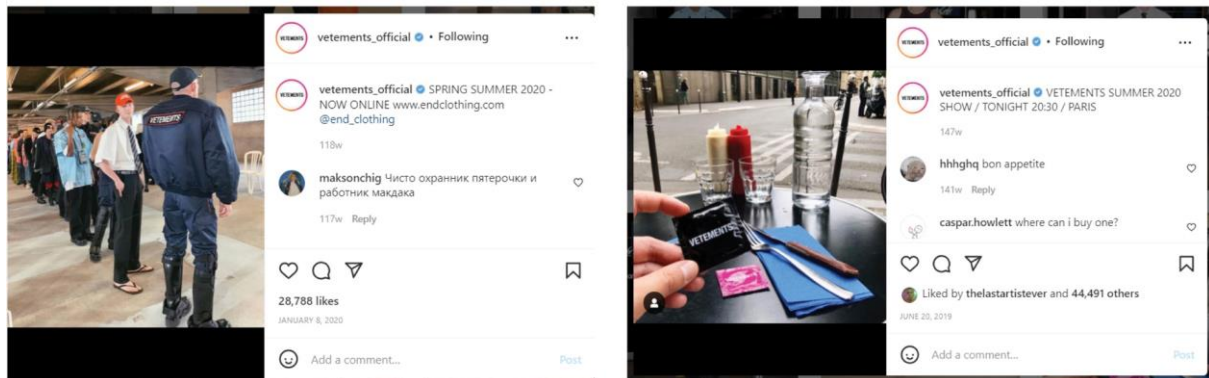


Figure 5. Screenshots of two Instagram posts before the start of SS20 at the McDonald's.

The show at McDonald's

Attendance was by invite-only. Among those allowed at the show were people that could contribute to the brand's visibility. Inside of the McDonald's, guests were seated at the fast food chain's dinner tables (Kelly, 2019). They were given a large coke in a McDonald's cup with straw, which had 'VETEMENTS' handwritten on the side (Foreman, 2019). On the table lay McDonald's branded paper napkins with the 'show notes' printed on it in caps lock:

VETEMENTS IN ARAMAIC - POLICE UNIFORM - KAPITALISM - CLOTHES 4
RENT - GLOBAL MIND FUCK - GARMENT BAG GARMENT - ALL-JERSEY
SUITS - TRACKSUIT DRESS - BIKER DENIM - TABLECLOTH COAT - BÖSE
(ANGRY IN GERMAN) - DRESS WITH SKIRTS AS SLEEVES - TRACKSUIT
TRENCH - WHAT YOU SEE IS NOT WHAT IT IS - BLACK FRIDAY DRESS -
ASYMMETRIC BOMBER - DRESS WITH SHIRTS AS SLEEVES - NEW OLD GOTH
- RAVE SUITS - ANATOMIC FLIP FLOPS - FASHION FOREVER - FR€€
(Gibbons, 2019).

Behind the counter of McDonald's stood people dressed as cashiers, acting as if they were taking orders (VETEMENTS, 2019c). The digital billboards showed McDonald's promotions as before. The corridor was set up as a loop and featured as the 'run way' for the models, with photographers all around to capture the show (Novelty Group, 2019; Allwood, 2019). When the show started, the models manoeuvred through the crowd, who were seated at an arm length away. On their round, the models also exited the McDonald's shortly, for the crowd outside to see, who were standing behind crush barriers.

The 54 models, showing 54 outfits, were said to walk 'aggressively fast' on loud music, which can be described as upbeat electronic. When the show neared its end, the music was blended with the continuous sound of barking dogs (Ehlen, 2019). After the applause, the main designers did *not* enter the runway (The Fashion Archive, 2019), which is uncommon in the fashion world, where the creative director is expected to show his or her face. A day later, VETEMENTS uploaded a video of the show on YouTube, displaying all outfits. The song put under the clip is named 'KAPITALISM' by BFRND (VETEMENTS, 2019d).

Capitalism and consumerism were reoccurring themes in the outfits shown, of which many play with the aesthetic of 'security' and workwear. Some items occurred multiple times, such as a set of VETEMENTS flipflops, sold online for 255\$, and a pair of tights with fake tattoos on it (197\$) (Lyst, 2022). The slogan 'GLOBAL MIND FUCK' was shown printed on a



Figure 6. The items on the table of the visitors (L). A model walking out of the McDonald's during SS20 (R).

few jackets, caps and t-shirts – together with a logo parodying the Global Economic Forum. On top of that, a multitude of brand identities were appropriated; the logo of Heineken, Bose (now turned into ‘böse: the German word for angry) and Vodafone’s branding were adapted. Another remarkable piece was a replica of the blue-heart diamond necklace from the Titanic movie. Together with the outfits of appropriated logos, six photos stood out for being published a lot by fashion websites (Silbert, 2019; Lang, 2019; Kelly, 2019). See figure 7.



Figure 7. A selection of the outfits shown at SS20 in the McDonald's.

7. Controversy analysis of online response

During the show, the outfits and photos of the location were shared on social media by attendees (Allwood, 2019; Ehlen, 2019; Gibbons, 2019). A day later, fashion websites were flooded with reports on the show, including pictures of the outfits. The majority of articles would start with a detailed description of the show and culminate into a more general discussion of VETEMENTS' style. The most famous website is Vogue, a highly influential fashion platform, for which Mower (2019) wrote a review about SS20. Soon after, people started engaging online through comments, social media posts, forums and blogs, where they went into lengthy discussions with one another. Strikingly, the vast majority of these participants talked generically about VETEMENTS and Demna Gvasalia (often just 'Demna'), leaving the specific show or the brand's collective character for what it was. Throughout the analysed online data, four main controversial subjects surfaced about VETEMENTS and its show at SS20, which I will now elaborate on.

Is VETEMENTS hypocrite?

A significant part of the participants expresses how they are 'torn about' VETEMENTS. In a critical blog named 'referential clothing – chic or darkly capitalist?', Khraibaniapr (2020) sums up her doubts about the McDonald's show: "Is Vetements' stunt a blatant scam, a comment on global capitalism, or is it a high-fashion conspiracy? An exceptional subversion that set the fashion world on a different path?" Maniar, a blog writer, also expresses how she is unable to choose sides in the controversy: "I'm not sure if this is pure genius or a questioning of our collective intelligence" (Maniar, 2019). Others deem it 'fascinating' and 'off-putting' at the same time, expressing a lingering uncertainty.

The reoccurring critique is nearly always directed at the tension between the prices, VETEMENTS' story and its aesthetics. Nyx (2020) states how "their prices ignore their statement" of accessible fashion. Especially online commentators, underneath YouTube videos and on forums, find it hard to believe that VETEMENTS' clothing is 'worth the money': "The

prices get to the point where you can't justify it any more” (Leach, 2018). Underneath a blog at Hypebeast, participants go into a lengthy discussion about what price is reasonable: “Yes, this is expensive, is it an extreme markup? No. Consider the material, craftsmanship, shipping, treatment.” Someone else responds that this person is talking ‘shit on the price’. Another participant goes on to defend VETEMENTS and calls for intellectual property, creativity, meaning, brand status and luxury marketing to be taken into account for the justification of the prices. What a fashion commodity *should* cost, is a popular topic for debate.

The accusation of hypocrisy is omnipresent and it is, again, strongly price-related: it would be hypocrite and opportunistic that VETEMENTS stresses the importance of ‘wearability’ and ‘clothing for all’, whereas its prices suggest an exclusive elite as the target group. In the influential Vogue article on SS20, Sarah Mower asks whether Demna Gvasalia can have it both ways with his capitalist-critical show. Can he “participat[e] in the novelty-driven production cycle of the fashion industry, while criticizing it[?]” (Mower, 2019). VETEMENTS’ integrity and its ‘right’ to challenge the system is repeatedly questioned: “It mocks the excess and the superficial triviality of the fashion world all while contributing to it” (Erer, 2017). Pepe Silvia (YouTube) adds to this that “Demna getting on his high horse about capitalism is laughable”. Or as Davidson (2019) writes in his review on the McDonald’s show: “[...] criticizing the capitalist system is a bit rich coming from a brand that deems £500 an acceptable price for a hoodie.” Christ Schick summarizes the main sentiment in a comment on YouTube:

“Vetements would probably be my favorite brand if it wasn't so unbelievably overpriced, [I] love the designs, the aesthetic and the message but come on there is no way u can claim to make clothes for everyday people and then charge these exorbitant prices nobody with a normal income can afford, this kills the whole idea, in my opinion they aren't criticizing capitalism they are capitalism itself.”

On being a consumer

The participants are also trying to position themselves towards the brand. In doing so, there is a reoccurring, strong resistance against being ‘treated as a consumer’. When people praise VETEMENTS’ aesthetics in the online comments, for being so ‘dope’ and ‘fresh’, they often add the disclaimer that they would never be ‘so stupid’ to purchase VETEMENTS items themselves. For the majority of its online audience, VETEMENTS is a brand to reflect on, to critique, to love or to laugh at – but not to spend your money on. Some participants do not seem to mind at all: they respond that they would love to wear VETEMENTS’ items, because the clothing is ‘fire’. Others casually mention that they already own a few pieces. However, these actual ‘consumers’ are repeatedly mocked for having mindlessly fallen for a hype without noticing: “Everything about this brand was about how high can you set the bar in order to convince dumb shoppers to buy your ironic overpriced fashion brand” (Tomitomo, Reddit). Some find this disrespectful and destructive for the relationship between consumer and designer. A few applaud VETEMENTS’ ability to ‘rip off’ consumers, as a comeuppance for the ‘rich kids’. This all comes together in a Reddit comment by sonQUAALUDE:

[...] its pretty fun to have all this weird antifashion stuff around. [...] im not going to buy it, but if rich people want to dress like they assembled a clown costume from eas[t]ern european garbage bins then more power to em! its funny as hell.

Its conceptual meaning

Another way for the online participants to wrap their head around the unclear brand’s intentions, is a search for deep conceptual clues. The cultural references in SS20 and other collections spark a game of hide and seek for its ‘true meaning’. The Ukrainian Youtuber ‘Slavik Snow White’ is especially keen on this; in her video ‘here's why you don't get Vetements’ (2020), she dissects references one by one. She explains the aesthetic clues in the clothing and links them to, among others, the punishment camps in Russia, Demna’s childhood in wartime Georgia and the clothing worn by those living under soviet oppression.

In the comments, some people ask for further explanation, post their theories or debate on the cultural concepts behind certain items.

However, when someone expresses a strong dislike for VETEMENTS or gives off on those “try[ing] to find a deeper meaning for things that are shit”, the mood changes. What follows is often a wave of response where this kind of critique is called out for being ignorant: “clearly [you] don’t get vetements [...], IMO It’s better to at least try to understand Demna/Vetements than blindly hating it” (Josher56, Reddit). Some commentators go on to explain the brand’s philosophy to those that ‘don’t get it’. Some initial sceptics even come around after an online discussion: “It made me understand and appreciate Demna’s work more and more[,] even though it was hard for me to understand the collection at first” (Dede Jubran, YouTube). Often, participants quote statements by Demna Gvasalia, to argue how the brand initially meant it. This confirms the importance of his persona to the brand. Among others, Demna’s emphasis on ‘wearable clothing’ is a recurring argument to explain what VETEMENTS does. Ironically, his rejection of deeper conceptual meaning does not seem to concern his following: many argue how it would be unacceptable to believe that VETEMENTS is entirely superficial and meaningless. Thus, they keep searching for that ‘deeper layer’.

The recurring sentiment here is that participants try to educate themselves and others on the brand to understand its *real* value, while a small group strongly rejects those that are trying to attribute certain concepts to VETEMENTS.

The power of a ‘troll’

The last dimension is offered by those with the general assumption that *everything* that VETEMENTS does is one big purposeful joke – including its prices, its conceptual references and its hypocrisy: “Demna Gvasalia is the greatest troll of our times” (Slavic Snow White). These people strongly side with the idea that the brand is fully going against the fashion system and they are laughing along about its disruption. Maniar (2019) summarizes VETEMENTS as “a big ‘fuck you’ to any other designer who says that high fashion has to

have any sort of rules.” Some participants express how they hope that VETEMENTS’ ‘anti-fashion’ will actually change the fashion industry for the better, with its collections that “drip[...] with irony”. Here, VETEMENTS is seen as the ‘border crosser’, able to challenge and change the status quo (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2008). It is seen as a necessary breath of fresh air and a “much needed comic relief in an industry that does so well on reflecting and commenting on the world around it, but never itself” (Cybrselfover, Youtube). Underneath this lies a fundamental rejection of the fashion industry as a whole. In a response to the McDonald’s show, @Shelblindexpresses this on Twitter (2019) as “LMAAOO IM SO DONE WITH FASHION”.

On the opposite side of this are those that do very much appreciate VETEMENTS’ mockery, but not believe that its trolling behavior can actually change a single thing. Similar to Gaztambide-Fernández’ (2008) definition of the ‘populist perspective’, these participants believe that they are caught up in the demands of the fashion industry and are unable to escape this. Charlie Stockbridge (YouTube) phrases this scepticism well, in which the question of hypocrisy returns once more: “One can operate inside, and profit from, a system of which they still have heavy criticisms of. [Demna] can’t change the system so he might as well exploit it to his best benefit while still showing us his criticisms.”

8. Interpretation

VETEMENTS: the Controversy Machine

A reoccurring pattern surfaces throughout the timeline of VETEMENTS’ existence, from 2014 to present; the brand is in an ongoing state of controversy. It shows characteristics of a machine. ‘VETEMENTS as a Controversy Machine’ is a metaphor that I would like to put forward because it visually imagines the systemic character of ‘controversy creation’, similar to the way that an industrial machine can keep producing - until someone pulls the plug or the system fails.

What does the Controversy Machine do? It periodically spits out unexplained items that have the potential of creating a ‘fashion scandal’ (Vänska & Gurova, 2021), often due to its appropriative nature and unconventional aesthetic. It is then made public by purposefully feeding the fresh content to Instagram and its following, where it can go viral (Titton, 2016). Here it is able to grow in the hands of its clashing online users (Pedroni, 2014; Bertaglia et al., 2021), who hold the power to ‘controversialise’ the potential scandal by engaging online and giving expression to their strong feelings and emotions about the items (Voorveld et al., 2018). Once these actors are no longer able to ignore the other’s stances much longer, it becomes truly controversial (Venturini, 2009) which is often expressed through debate.

VETEMENTS’ Controversy Machine shows a few remarkable features:

- a. It requires an audience. VETEMENTS exists in the grace of its spectators and consumers; the Machine would not function if no one engaged with it. The attention and financial gain that it brings, is crucial for the Machine to keep running. The definition of ‘Clout Chasing’, by Bertaglia et al. (2021), fits like a glove: VETEMENTS has a commercial goal and is able to transform its controversies into financial benefits through the sale of its items. The potential success of its ‘Clout Chasing’ heavily relies on the engagement generated by social media structures and celebrities or influencers (Pedroni, 2014; Gerrie, 2019).
- b. In order to retain the gaze of that audience, the Machine has to keep reinventing itself. Predictability can bore its spectators and level out the strong emotional response that VETEMENTS thrives on. Thus, despite its initial resistance against the speed of fashion, this Machine too needs to keep coming up with potential new controversies.
- c. However, the Machine ought to dose its potential controversies well. Its ‘shock factor’ has the ability to attract and retain a large audience (Vänska & Gurova, 2021; Bertaglia et al., 2021), but it requires a fine balancing act. The released items should be debatable enough not to go unnoticed, but if it becomes too much of an extreme scandal, the trust and sense of community can be fundamentally broken and damage the brand’s legitimacy (Taylor, 2020).
- d. The Controversy Machine runs on mockery and satire. In a humorous and ironic way, it makes fun of the fashion system that it is inherently attached to, while avoiding fixed

verdicts or clear intentionality. These characteristics of satire, as described by LeBoeuf (2009), are powerful tools to question the status quo.

e. It thrives on its mysterious black box. Spectators are actively kept away from understanding the functioning of the Machine. Its creative process is submerged in ambiguity. It keeps the doubt of the audience alive: what do they *really* stand for?

Although the term is unused, the Controversy Machine as such is nothing new: VETEMENTS stands in a long tradition of artistic disturbers (Howells et al, 2012), in which many individuals, brands and initiatives have taken up a similar role. An allegory between this Controversy Machine and Dada can be made (Lombardo, 2010; Pinder, 2009; Funk, 2012). Dada's main controversy also hinged on appropriation and the continuous creation of works that would enrage its audience with its unconventional, critical aesthetic. In the way Dada did with art, VETEMENTS too is pushing against the borders of what fashion can or should be (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2008). Unsurprisingly, Demna Gvasalia has once called Dada-frontman Marcel DuChamp one of his greatest sources of inspiration (Jonkers, 2022). Importantly, the commercial aspect fundamentally differentiates VETEMENTS from Dada: this fashion brand is profit-driven, which is an integral part of its controversial status. In that sense, this part of the Machine shows more similarities to highly criticized artists such as Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, who have become exorbitantly rich with their art practices (Riding, 2007; Kent, 2012; Brockes, 2015). As we have seen in the analysis of the online response, VETEMENTS' integrity and intentions are subject to severe critique due to this commercial aspect and its high prices, but the Controversy Machine actively tries to postpone a final verdict to the audience's questions through ambiguous intentionality. However, some clues can be dissected from the SS20 show at the McDonald's.

Clashing consumerism at McDonald's

What place would one associate most with hyper-consumerism and capitalism? It would be no surprise if the McDonald's comes to mind. This fast food chain carries a strong symbolic meaning; it has long been used as the epitome of capitalism by many artists (Short, 2014; Fine

Art America, 2022), sociologists (Ritzer, 1996), activists (Corbin, 2021; Chandler, 2015) and designers (Ainley, 2016; Giulione, 2018). The McDonald's as a place signifies a complex societal message; it has become an icon of capitalist greed and dehumanizing efficiency for many (Mosley & Raphelson, 2022; Ritzer, 1996; Kincheloe, 2002), while also signifying the simplicity and ease of consumption at the same time. A similar consumerist narrative can be found in other show locations used by VETEMENTS, such as the Chinese restaurant, a sex club and a shopping mall. The McDonald's protrudes above it all: it is anything but a place with "no message" (Anaya, 2016), to use Demna Gvasalia's words.

In the analysis of the symbolic meaning behind SS20, we enter a more speculative aspect to VETEMENTS' intentions. It is likely that its designers are well aware of the clash they represented at the McDonald's: an aesthetically capitalist-critical collection put on display at the paragon of capitalism. Here, VETEMENTS visually performs its own omnipresent struggle with capitalism and consumerism: it attempts to rebel against a fashion industry that dictates the speed of production and promotes overconsumption, while also 'accelerating' into the abyss of hyper-consumerism as a profit-driven brand that creates trends, boosts hype and stimulates scarcity to push up prices and attract more consumers. This duality surfaces in a highly ironic performance at the fast food restaurant. VETEMENTS is anti-capitalist but capitalist, anti-consumerist but consumerist, anti-fashion but fashion, anti-establishment but establishment and anti-aesthetic but aesthetic. In a sense, it is anti-McDonald's while symbolizing the system that McDonald's stands for. Its audience keeps speculating: what alternative does it *really* represent?

9. Conclusion

Throughout this research, I have come to conceptualize VETEMENTS as an two-faced Controversy Machine. Its disruptive nature radiates an attitude of no concern with 'how things are done'. However, VETEMENTS too has a commercial goal to live up to and serves its audience what it wants to see – a form of fashion that aesthetically goes against the

fashion industry's morale. In only a few years, this controversial take on clothing, together with its high prices, has made VETEMENTS into one of the most influential newcomers in the fashion world – unheard of in an industry generally dominated by decades-old traditional brands. In the positioning of the brand, Demna Gvasalia's influence is omnipresent. His philosophy of fashion, characterized by its ambiguity and contradictions, is crucial to what VETEMENTS has become and how it is perceived by its spectators. While Demna states he 'just wants to design wearable clothing', the audience is met with items that radiate an entirely different atmosphere of societal critique, elitist pricing and scarcely available collections.

A similar ambiguity is observed at the show at McDonald's: it is a perfectly orchestrated event, for which the details of its preparations, the design team and the creative process are not revealed. Its meaning is kept intentionally mysterious. At this fast food restaurant, the capitalist-critical aesthetic is ironically placed in the epistome of capitalism, which creates a clash that is exemplary for VETEMENTS' dual, paradoxical relationship with the fashion industry. The designers want to break free from its restraints, but continues to be tied to many of the conventions of the demanding, highly consumerist fashion world. By now, its work has become *inherently controversial*.

VETEMENTS' audience is all the more aware of these contradictions. Its duality provokes the viewers to actively engage in trying to make sense of this brand, which is channeled into long debates and, on occasion, even hateful online fights. The participants rarely speak of one show alone, such as SS20. The vast majority immediately takes it into a broader context by speaking of the brand or Demna Gvasalia more generally. In doing so, people's opinions vary widely and are often expressed very strongly. Or as one person put it in the comments of a VETEMENTS-related YouTube video: "Everyone in fashion gets the most mad an[d] critical about the topic of vetements". This emotional response skyrockets online engagement and helps to make VETEMENTS as present as it is today in the fashion industry.

Throughout the analysis of this online response, I have come to distinguish four main controversies. Firstly, the audience visibly struggles with the question of VETEMENTS' alleged hypocrisy, which is often directed at its -potentially- unfair prices for products. Is the brand shamelessly critiquing the fashion industry's infrastructures that it profits off, fueling capitalism? Or is it justified anti-systemic behavior as a response to a toxic industry, which might actually make a difference? This dilemma is the main feeding ground for debate, but there seems to be little to no conclusive verdicts – the audience is torn by doubt. Secondly, the audience expresses a general fear of being seen as a mindless consumer, who has sheepishly fallen for yet another marketing scheme. Those engaged with VETEMENTS are united in their resistance against 'being played by the system' and emphasize on the fact that they would never buy it themselves. However, others applaud the brand for serving its consumers and simply enjoy its products. Thirdly, in an attempt to make sense of VETEMENTS, there is the need to justify *why* VETEMENTS is so popular and *why* its pricing is so high. The participants find solace in the search for deep conceptual meaning. Lastly, a part of its audience applauds VETEMENTS for 'trolling the system', in which its mockery and ironic take on fashion is recognized broadly as a powerful tool, with the potential for *real* change. Others are more cynic and do not believe that its disruption will make much of a difference and deem it powerless, but very much enjoy the anti-system sentiment for the critique it represents. Throughout its disruption, the inherent duality of the Controversy Machine keeps surfacing – and leaves its audience afloat.

For some, VETEMENTS might represent a new kind of fashion industry, or no more than a weak extract of that radical dream. For others, VETEMENTS is yet another brand trying to play its consumers, only speeding up the already mass-destructive mechanisms of capitalism. The clash between those two extremes is so fundamental, that most disagreements are not being settled but continue to live on as part of VETEMENTS' growing 'collection of controversies' – as befits a true Controversy Machine.

10. Discussion

At the end of the line, I hope the reader has taken the time to personally dwell on the question of what to make of VETEMENTS. While covering or revealing the body, the brand's wearable pieces and its events can offend, disgust, enlighten, amuse and bore us.

VETEMENTS is irritating, from time to time angering. In this discussion, I hope to end on a more speculative note and provide another way of looking at its disruptive character. I want to make clear that, in doing so, I do not wish to argue why we should give VETEMENTS 'the benefit of the doubt' for having pure intentions, nor am I trying to persuade the reader to write it off as filthy capitalism. After all, I do not believe that this study is about that final verdict. At the heart of this case lies the inner commotion it might cause to the viewer, who is forced to make sense of something so conflictive. What is at stake when we look at VETEMENTS?

I would like to shortly return to the words of Mauro (2013), who states that experimental and unorthodox approaches are able to open up to new autonomous spaces of critique on society's standards. Unconventional artistic acts push us to rethink, and eventually change, the status quo (Kostelanetz, 2001; Léger, 2015; Henry, 1984). This is crucial at times where it has become extremely difficult to see beyond the destructive mechanisms of capitalism – as described in 'Capitalist Realism' by Fisher (2009). However, if capitalism is a 'pervasive atmosphere', to use Fisher's words, that means there might also be something outside of that.

The concept of 'Line of flight' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) can visualize how the imagination of alternatives can have the disruptive power to move boundaries. Imagine those lines are arrows that are trying to move away from an instable core (Cole, 2014). In its moving outwards, they might poke into the opaque barrier of our current atmosphere and cross the threshold between two paradigms (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). This could take us *anywhere*: some of those arrows might accelerate into even more capitalism or other '-isms'. Others can take us to where we can see past the barrier; where something awaits that we do not even

have a name for yet.

VETEMENTS is one of those lines. It is characterized by its ability to move into a space that we have rarely touched upon before, although its social complexity demands it to overlap with the already existent world (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). By looking at the brand's disruptive and ironic work, we are invited to speculate where VETEMENTS might want to take us. The inability to pinpoint it down can be irritating: what direction is it going to go? Exactly this response is crucial: it creates space for the new in the minds of the spectator.

Artists happen to be very good at forcing that space by *angering us* and causing that 'fight' (Chander, 2012). We need people that are willing to put little goslings in blenders to make a statement about the meat industry (Verroen, 2009), have huge blocks of melting ice moved from the arctics to London during a climate convention (Eliasson, 2014), put an urinoir on a pedestal (Lombardo, 2010) call a golden toilet 'America' (Guggenheim, n.d.) or tape a banana to the wall and sell it for 120.000 dollars (Grebey, 2019). Not because these acts represent the kind of future we want to live in - full of chopped-up baby animals, taped-up fruits and unaffordable DHL-shirts - but precisely because they confronts us with the ridicule and absurdity of the current state of affairs. While poking at those opaque barriers, sometimes quite humorously, this kind of disruption has the ability to stretch up our imagination in many ways. Those provocative 'lines of flight' could potentially move the viewer to extend that line or counter it, out of sheer irritation with the mold that we have found ourselves in. "*I know that if you don't look for an alternative, [...] you certainly won't find one* (Turner, 2010)".

Reflection

In the writing of this study, I have had to leave behind some of my findings for the sake of a clear narrative. Firstly, the reader may have noticed how the subject of 'cultural appropriation' is omnipresent in the work of VETEMENTS – and potentially a crucial cause to its controversies. Despite the absolute fascinating character of this subject, a thorough

analysis simply did not fit the scope of this study. Secondly, I purposefully chose not to do interviews with relevant groups of people, out of a strong, personal preference for independence during the short writing period of the thesis. This means that a major group is absent; the actual ‘consumers’ of VETEMENTS. I did not speak to anyone at length about the reasons to buy VETEMENTS, nor with those that chose to engage online. An advantage of not doing this, is the focus on the *online, written* engagement and controversy as such. The pitfall is that I was not able to deeply research people’s motives behind their choice to purchase the brand’s clothing, or to engage in online debates. For future research, it would be valuable to speak to this group and provide a deeper understanding of VETEMENTS’ (or other brands) aesthetic affect on its spectators, for which its controversial status could play a key role. Lastly, the focus of this study was on the *life* and functioning of a Controversy Machine. Since VETEMENTS is still a successful player in the fashion world, the analysis of its collapse would have been entirely speculative. However, if VETEMENTS – or any other similar brands - were to *die* eventually, this could raise questions over the reasons why a Controversy Machine might eventually falter and crash.

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