Fashion and Intersectionality

Runjia Wei[1, *]

[1]*Veritas Collegiate Academy, United States*
[*]*Corresponding author. Email: joywei04@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

This essay explores in depth the interconnection between the fashion industry and intersectionality - how one's defining identities, including race, ethnicity, and gender, affect her performance in the industry - highlighting the history and progression of the industry, yet pinpointing the commercial incentives of such progression as well as remaining obstacles in the industry in the topic of diversity and exploring how the industry's social norms and beauty standards are internalized by both models and consumers and exacerbate racial stereotypes and body image issues. Prejudice and exclusion have been a long-standing problem in the industry with few effective interventions, thus this passage is intended to give insights for both social advocates as well as fashion workers who are dedicated to working towards creating a less hostile, more embracing environment.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Fashion Industry, Social Equity, Gender Equity

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Social Progression

The standards of beauty are evolving. Slender body with ample bosom, pale skin, golden long hair, sculpted nose, sleek cheekbones, and big blue eyes were the ideals of beauty, which narrowly limited to a specific race, age, culture, religion, and size, that appeared in the first women's fashion magazines [1]. For several decades, the industry is filled with all-white catwalks and shoots [2].

Gradually the conventional body for the runways and shoots for the high fashion industry shrink into a size 0; the cut-throat, homogeneous standards of slimness strike for being obsessively unhealthy [1]. Each models' body is built differently, but many chose to practice strenuous, vigorous diet plans and exercises to fit into a size 0/2 and stay competitive in the industry. Thus, a term in Mandarin appeared referring to the mainstream fashion norms - "Bing Tai Mei," which translates to the term "Morbid Beauty," highlighting the unnatural and almost twisted infatuation of being skinny in the industry.

In 1959, China Machado became the first model of colour to be featured in the fashion magazine Harper's Bazaar, and not until the year 1966 was Donyale Luna, another model of colour, got featured on Vogue's cover [2]. Later, Alek Wek - an African woman with dark skin, short coiled hair, and a broad nose - on the Elle magazine in 1997 led to a signifying transformation in the beauty standards of the fashion industry [3]. Previously, a common misconception in the White community is that people of colour are the 'people without fashion' [4]. The emergence of models of colour was expected to be controversial, yet determined to make a change on the racial inclusiveness of fashion.

In 2016, the featuring of Ashley Graham on the cover of Sports Illustrated onset the industry's acceptance of plus-size models [5]. Ashley Graham, tanned and curvy, is portrayed sitting on the beach within the waves. Her distinctive body features were emphasized in bright purple bikinis. Graham's accomplishment is followed by the emergence of the Muslim model Halima Aden in 2019 in the same magazine [6]. Aden is the first Muslim supermodel in the industry who wore Hijabs on the runway [1]. With the exposure and publicity of diversity in body types and religions within the period as rapid as three years, the fashion industry and its consumers begin acknowledging and recognizing the beauty of embracing features that are different from the conventional norms.

1.2 Current Limitations

Undoubtedly, the expansion of models of different races and body types is partial, if not mostly, driven by

the consumer-driven demand of the commercial industry [1]. Since it is not excluded from the costumers who fit the conventional beauty standards who are purchasing fashion products, many customers would be more encouraged to purchase products on models with their similar skin tone, body type, and other features. Thus, the progress made is far from being purely genuine. Although the status quo of the concept of inclusion in fashion is significantly more embracing than before with the appearance of diverse models, it is far from reaching a utopia.

1.3 Current Study

This research documents several key contributions made to the field of fashion and social justice through exploring an emerging question of how intersectionality plays into the fashion industry and the impacts of toxic beauty norms and standards impact both fashion workers and consumers.

From the history of the social progression of the fashion industry, it is apparent to see that the lack of identity and social inclusion commercially and editorially industry has been a long-standing problem, among new obstacles that came into the public spotlight as the progression proceeds, specifically revolving around the frequent lack of or featuring of models of color as well as plus-size models, and the role of online media which facilitates the industry's molding of unattainable beauty standards in the public population.

Solutions to these problems involve showcasing the existing problems with specific examples extracted from previous fashion shoots, advertisement campaigns, and runways by various renowned brands, compiling statistics that suggest the degree of influence of fashion media on consumers, and advocating for further improvements in the general environment of the fashion in light of eliminating prejudice against any gender, sexuality, ability, race, and body types.

Currently, the research generalized different sectors of intersectionality into four major groups that are most relevant for discussion: race, ethnicity, body types, and gender. We also characterized the fashion industry in three different aspects: consumerism, fashion workers, and the demand-driven market. The aim here is to investigate the interconnection between each group.

2. WORKERS AND THE MARKET

2.1 Race and Ethnicity

In 2008 Paris Fashion Week, 40 designers exhibited their work, yet none of the models were of colour, in particular, Prada's catwalk did not feature a single black model between 1997 and 2008 [2]. Sometimes clients would request black models, but specifically request 'don't let her be too black,' signifying how blatantly racist one can be in the industry due to its long-standing history of exclusion [2].

On top of the lacking of diversity, the diversity present was mostly included with racial and ethnic stereotypes, with portrayals of black models as primitive, alienated, or hyper-sexualized through shoots with models, for instance, running with cheetahs and feeding giraffes while naked; models of colour are increasingly more likely to model nude than white models, highlighting their inferiority and 'servitude [2].' Regardless of whether these actions sprung from the industry's white-saviour-intent attempts to try and integrate diversity into shoots, these prints and covers featuring models of colour end up enforcing racial stereotypes, as it is almost like giving white consumers a pair of lenses to the 'jungles' in the 'native' or 'oriental' world, where models are dehumanized and materialized, not to mention the fact that common 'Black Fishing,' 'Asian fishing,' and other cultural appropriation currently remain widely popular. In 2018, D&G's advertisement campaign 'With Chopsticks' features an Asian model squinting her eyes, while the voiceover, in mocking Asian Accents, depicts the model using 'these little stick-like tools' (chopsticks) to eat 'our great traditional Pizza,' highlighting the inferiority of Chinese culture [7].

Using cultural and ethnic inspirations is an effective way to raise awareness on diversity and appreciation in unique beauty, yet patronizing and underlining the act of 'white saviour' would only do the opposite.

2.2 Size Discrimination

The plus-size modelling industry is still consistently ruled by thin privilege. For instance, many companies prefer models with curvy body shapes but a toned, defined face with apparent cheekbones [8].

Moreover, models with smaller sizes on the plus-size spectrum are defined as more competitive in the commercial industry [8]. On the other hand, the ideal size for the editorial fashion sector remains a size 0/2, thus models bigger than a size 0/2 but too small for plus-size prints are deemed as uncompetitive in the industry; models of the size 18 and up are not featured in fashion prints, which means there are still fewer job opportunities and gaps between the spectrum of sizes - the industry's commercial incentives exacerbate discrimination towards sizes [8]. The employers explained that since there are more commercial opportunities for models on the smaller spectrum of plus-size, they prefer hiring members from this group than larger women [8]. Many size 10 and 12 models are assigned to shoot plus-sizes prints wearing paddings, as it is more economically profitable to do so than hiring another model just to meet certain

requirements [8]. Such paddings accentuate the hips and breasts of the models while keeping the slim body features on the models elsewhere, giving the models more apparent "hourglass" figures [8]. The Norwegian website, in 2011, exposed H&M for generating digital bodies and putting them under models' heads, and H&M's defense towards these accusations was that it is adjusting its shoots to align with the industry standards [2].

Although a general view would suggest that the concept of body positivity in the industry has developed and communicated more over the past decade, from the aforementioned research, it is apparent that as the industry started to feature bigger models, work opportunities for plus-size models appear to be just the silver linings. New obstacles emerge and old obstacles remain. Model agencies and brands need to perceive the problems within their exclusive, toxic acts and open up the occupation market to a wider range of populations.

2.3 Sexism

Frequently, female models are portrayed with nudity or in seductive poses. For example, in an American Apparel 2012 front cover, the model posed in uni with her legs wide opened, and on the top right corner of the cover, the caption reads 'Now Open [9].' This front cover is a case in point of how blatantly the industry sexualizes and materializes women in general through highlighting women's body features including lips, hips, waist, and feet in a sexual instead of empowering way, while perhaps, writing degrading puns. The incentive behind these portrayals is also clear - to draw in consumers' attention, because 'sex sells.' Needless to say, sexism and gender bias are not directly caused by the fashion industry. However, businesses in the industry take advantage of existing gender stereotypes and the subjection of women for their private gains.

On the other hand, fashion could be a great medium to advocate for feminism. The Spring-summer 2015 Chanel runway show, designed and planned by Karl Lagerfeld, unfolds through a mock-feminism-parade [10]. A liberal grand event like this, in which gender-neutral elements, as well as girl-boss elements, are exhibited, raises awareness and conversations on topics surrounding feminism. Again, efforts like designer Lagerfeld's need to be taken by more fashion designers and fashion businesses. Instead of taking advantage of ingrained conservative biases, intersectionality can be integrated into the industry to bring empowering and liberating social change.

3. IMPACTS ON CONSUMERS

Famous fashion photographer Velvet D'Amour state that the motives behind such actions are "to create the unattainable," as "the unattainable is what drives capitalism," and "if everyone accepted themselves just as they are," the "sales would go down the tubes [2]." D'Amour's statement not only indicates the choking expectations for plus-size models but also accentuates the motives of commercial fashion for featuring bodies that are unattainable to raise self-consciousness in consumers.

3.1 Fashion and Media

The fashion industry alone perpetuates a thin beauty ideal that many internalize, yet when the traditional fashion media is integrated with online social media and the digital world expands, people are now seeing 2,000 - 5,000 images of bodies weekly, and they are constantly reminded to work towards becoming their better selves [2, 11]. Even when Googling Ashley Graham, the aforementioned model famous for being plus-sized, the first search suggestion is 'Ashley Graham Weight Loss,' signifying that Graham's presence in fashion prints may have led to the idealization of her weight loss journey, as supposed to her fierce stand taking pride in her size and body. The industry blurs consumers' conception between aspiration and fantasy by setting unattainable standards, yet giving the allusion that if products are purchased and actions are taken, these standards can be fulfilled [2].

3.2 Race and consumerism

China Machado in 2012 said that decades ago, the people of colour 'had no images' and 'had nothing that told us we were nice-looking,' so she 'didn't think of [herself] as good-looking at all [2].' Just like for many people of colour, when they were young, anything related to fashion seen on the television or magazines is an exclusively white entity. The lack of or misrepresentation of people of colour has influence far beyond people working in the modelling industry. Just like Machado's views, the industry must strive to eliminate the under-representation and the stigmatization of people of colour, or else not only would the absence of diversity negatively impact people of colour's self-image and conception of fashion, it would also enforce racial stereotypes and discrimination, receding the society's progress of social equity.

3.3 Body Image, Gender Norms, and Consumerism

Under the industry's masks of beauty democracy, it encourages the urge to take effort and work hard towards certain images through taming and eliminates satisfaction [2]. This gives women, in particular, the

illusion that an abundant collection of activities to be done regularly - shaving, waxing, dieting, dyeing, and many women constantly feel the choking pressure to be presented with smooth hairless skin, fit curvy bodies, and meticulously blow-dried hair. In a research conducted by the Florida House Experience in 2011, out of the 1,000 people who answered the survey, 87% of women compare their bodies to images they consume on social and traditional media, and 50% of the women compare their bodies unfavourably [11, 12]. The ' unattainable' images produced by the commercial fashion industry from techniques such as padding and Photoshop retouch may potentially aggravate body image issues and body dysmorphia and lead to eating disorders, according to Mental Health America [11].

It is essential for businesses in the industry to understand that setting unachievable beauty norms is not the only way to keep high demands. Featuring models that represent all body types, looks, and races may increase demand, encouraging consumers to embrace their identities and let their unique beauty shine. After all, it is truly immoral for many fashion agencies and advertisement campaigns to highlight homogeneous and unreasonably high beauty standards with the motive of raising self-consciousness and insecurities in consumers to boost sales.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper reviews the status and trend of social setbacks and progression in the fashion industry and its impact. We have examined the development of the fashion industry as well as specific research and analysis on multiple fashion brands and their advertisement campaigns, commercial shoots, magazine prints, and runways. This research shows that there has been a gradual development of a more inclusive, diverse fashion industry; the demand-driven industry generally takes advantage of intersectionality for its own economic gains; there are multiple gaps on the size and body type spectrum that are not represented in commercial shoots, runways, and prints; models that are not White or slim face various obstacles in their careers; the fashion industry is striving to create unattainable images for consumers to boost sales, exacerbating the consumer population's body image issues and eating habit issues. Overall, this work can provide well-rounded knowledge that can serve as references for those who plan to contribute to prospects surrounding social justice in the fashion industry.

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