



A Study on the Change of Cover Characters of Women's Fashion Magazines VOGUE as an Example

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Abstract. The article selects the covers of VOGUE magazine from 2005 to 2022 as the sample for analysis. The analysis includes the gender, age, ethnicity, identity, skin exposure and individual or group relationship of the cover characters, so as to analyze the changes of the cover characters of women's fashion magazines and discover the patterns of the characters' changes and the social factors and cultural connotations behind them.

Keywords: women's fashion magazine · cover people · VOGUE

1 Origin of the Study and Research Method

1.1 Origin of the Study

Since the 1960s, the shift from a production-based to a consumer-based society has led to the rise of the white-collar class, creating the conditions for the birth and development of fashion magazines. Fashion magazines grew rapidly because they catered to the preferences of their audiences and were favored by advertisers, and today, with the huge impact of new media on traditional media, the readership of fashion magazines continues to show an upward trend.

With the development of society and economy, women's social and family status, economic power and self-worth have been enhanced. At the same time, the image of women constructed by fashion magazines also implicitly influences the image and ideology of women in real life, and women's fashion magazines have gradually become a very important communication media for constructing the space for women in the new era [1].

Taking fashion magazines as the carrier, this paper selects VOGUE, the top women's fashion magazine in the global fashion magazine ranking, as the research object, and takes VOGUE Clothing and Beauty (VOGUE China) as the sample to explore the changing pattern of women's fashion magazine cover characters and the social factors and cultural connotations behind it.

1.2 Literature Review

From the 1980s to the present, fashion magazines in China have undergone a dramatic change from non-existence to existence, from singularity to diversity, and from traditional paper media to digital transformation. However, academic research on fashion magazines in China started relatively late.

Among them, the studies on fashion magazines focus on the following four aspects: marketing strategies of fashion magazines [2], consumerism in fashion magazine advertisements, consumer psychology [3] and consumer behavior of fashion magazine audiences [4], and analysis of fashion magazine images based on sexism [5]. There are more studies on the female image of magazine covers among the studies on fashion magazine covers [6], with case studies and comparative studies. Other scholars analyze the symbolic expression [7] and artistic design [8] of fashion magazine covers from the perspective of semiotics and design.

1.3 Research Methodology

“The image of a person on the cover of a magazine is often the core key of a magazine cover, in line with the “cover editorial” proposed by Lewis in the 1960s. This paper selects VOGUE, the top female fashion magazine in the global fashion magazine ranking, as the research object, and takes the 202 covers of VOGUE in the 17 years since its inception in September 2005 as the sample, analyzes the changes of female fashion magazine covers in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, identity, skin exposure and individual or group relationship, and The study also explores the patterns of change and the social factors behind the changes in fashion discourse, aesthetics, gender image and differences.

2 A Quantitative Study of the Cover of VOGUE

2.1 Sampling Instructions

This paper analyzes the full sample of VOGUE from September 2005 to June 2022, in which some issues have multiple covers, counted by the number of specific covers of the periodical; some characters appear multiple times, counted by the number of specific appearances of character images. A total of 330 character images were extracted from 202 issues of magazines with 236 pages of covers from September 2005 to June 2022, including 312 character images of 131 women and 18 character images of 10 men. These 330 cover characters images will be analyzed in six categories: gender, age, ethnicity, identity, skin exposure, and individual or group relationship, to summarize the changing patterns of female fashion magazine characters and the social factors and cultural connotations behind them.

2.2 Category Construction and Data Analysis

1. Gender: Divided into Male and Female, as in Table 1

According to the gender distribution, it can be seen that the cover of VOGUE Fashion &

Table 1. Gender distribution of VOGUE Fashion & Beauty covers

Year	Number of periods	Number of covers	Number of characters	Number of males	Percentage of men	Number of women	Percentage of women
2005	4	4	9	0	0%	9	100%
2006	12	12	14	0	0%	14	100%
2007	12	12	15	0	0%	15	100%
2008	12	13	13	0	0%	13	100%
2009	12	12	12	0	0%	12	100%
2010	12	14	29	0	0%	29	100%
2011	12	13	18	0	0%	18	100%
2012	12	14	26	0	0%	26	100%
2013	12	19	19	0	0%	19	100%
2014	12	13	15	0	0%	15	100%
2015	12	12	27	1	3.70%	26	96.30%
2016	12	12	19	2	10.53%	17	89.47%
2017	12	20	25	1	4%	24	96%
2018	12	14	17	2	11.76%	15	88.24%
2019	12	22	26	8	30.77%	18	69.23%
2020	12	12	20	2	10%	18	90%
2021	12	12	15	0	0%	15	100%
2022	6	6	11	2	18.18%	9	81.82%
Total	202	236	330	18	5.45%	312	94.55%

Beauty magazine is dominated by female figures, and male figures first appeared in 2015, significantly later than female figures.

2. Age

The ages of the comprehensive cover characters, according to the age statistics of the characters at the time of shooting, were divided into under 18, 18–29, 30–39, and 40 and above, as shown in Table 2.

According to the age distribution, it can be seen that the age of women on the cover of Vogue is concentrated in the age range of “18–29”, while the age of men is more concentrated in the age range of “40+”, as shown in Fig. 1. In recent years, the growth and spiritual independence of the “30+” women group has become a hot topic of concern, and Women in the “30+” age group are considered to be more mature, independent and sexy. This is closely related to the change of social aesthetics and the audience of women’s fashion magazines.

Table 2. Age distribution of VOGUE Fashion & Beauty cover characters

Age	Women		Male		Total	
	Quantity	Proportion	Quantity	Proportion	Quantity	Proportion
Under 18 years old	1	0.32%	0	0%	1	0.30%
18–29 years old	209	66.99%	4	22.22%	213	64.55%
30–39 years old	67	21.47%	5	27.78%	72	21.82%
Over 40 years old	35	11.22%	9	50%	44	13.33%
Total	312	100%	18	100%	330	100%

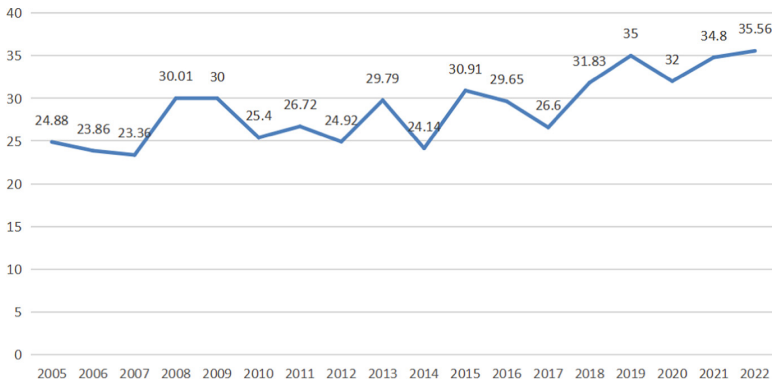


Fig. 1. Trends in the average annual age of VOGUE Fashion & Beauty covers

3. Ethnicity

Ethnicity is divided into yellow, white, black, and mixed according to skin color, as shown in Table 3.

Analysis of the ethnic distribution reveals that the highest percentage of cover characters are yellow, followed by white and black, and the gap between yellow and white is not large. Most of the yellow people are Chinese, and a few of them are Chinese and

Table 3. Ethnicity distribution of VOGUE Fashion & Beauty cover characters

Ethnicity	Women		Male		Total	
	Quantity	Proportion	Quantity	Proportion	Quantity	Proportion
The Yellow Man	157	50.32%	18	100%	175	53.03%
Caucasian	150	48.08%	0	0%	150	45.05%
Black people	4	1.28%	0	0%	4	1.21%
Mixed Blood	1	0.32%	0	0%	1	0.30%
Total	312	100%	18	100%	330	100%

Korean. Since VOGUE is a magazine of American brands, the highest percentage of white people on the cover of VOGUE Fashion & Beauty are American, and other white people come from the United Kingdom, Russia, Germany, the Netherlands, Canada and other European and American countries where international supermodels are abundant.

And by analyzing the trend of the percentage of yellow people on the cover of VOGUE Fashion & Beauty, we can find that the percentage of yellow people is generally on the rise, exceeding 50% for the first time in 2008 and 80% for the first time in 2020, as shown in Fig. 2. China is building up its own cultural confidence in fashion, and the focus of aesthetics is no longer on Europe and the United States as the benchmark, but the Chinese style is gradually spreading to the whole world.

4. Status

The cover characters are classified into models, actors, multi-stars and others according to their status or occupation, as in Table 4.

Due to the nature of fashion magazines, the majority of their covers feature professional models or celebrities. VOGUE, as the top magazine of fashion, is very strict in



Fig. 2. Ethnic trends on the cover of VOGUE Fashion & Beauty

Table 4. Occupational distribution of VOGUE Fashion & Beauty cover characters

Status Occupation	Women		Male		Total	
	Quantity	Proportion	Quantity	Proportion	Quantity	Proportion
Model	171	54.81%	2	11.11%	173	52.42%
Multi-hyphenate star	117	37.50%	14	77.78%	131	39.70%
Actors	22	7.05%	2	11.11%	24	7.27%
Other	2	0.64%	0	0%	2	0.61%
Total	312	100%	18	100%	330	100%

choosing the cover characters, and more than half of the cover characters are professional models. Moreover, the proportion of models among Caucasians is higher than that among Yellows, and the proportion of models among female figures is higher than that of male figures.

In the 18 years since VOGUE Fashion & Beauty was first published, the top five people with the most covers are Du Juan, Liu Wen, Zhou Xun, Sun Fei Fei and Ju Xiaowen, four of whom are professional models and one is an actress. However, the proportion of non-professional models has been on the rise in recent years, and for the first time in 2022, a “vegetarian model” was featured on the cover. In the March issue of 2022, post-70 Chinese supermodel Ma Yanli, post-95 Chinese supermodel He Cong, plus-size female model Xu Ruoxin, a graduate of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, and female model Niu Yu, who lost her leg in the Wenchuan earthquake, are featured on the cover, with the theme “Every Body”, as shown in Fig. 3.

5. Skin Exposure

According to the degree of nudity is divided into no nudity, general nudity and sexy nudity, as in Table 5.

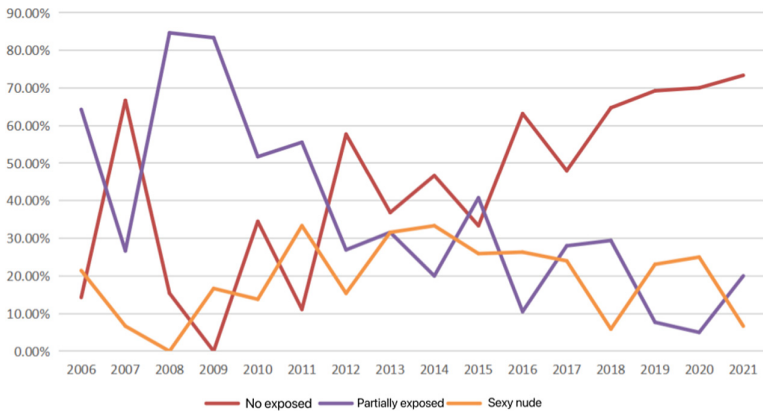
No nudity means clothing covers the body; general nudity means a small part of nudity, such as arms, ankles and other small areas of nudity; sexy nudity means a large area of nudity or nudity of body parts with gender characteristics (breasts, thigh roots, etc.).



Fig. 3. Cover of the March 2022 issue of VOGUE Fashion & Beauty

Table 5. Distribution of skin exposure on the cover of VOGUE Fashion & Beauty

Exposure level	Women		Male		Total	
	Quantity	Proportion	Quantity	Proportion	Quantity	Proportion
No nudity	137	43.91%	18	100%	155	46.97%
General Exposure	111	35.58%	0	0%	111	33.64%
Sexy Nude	64	20.51%	0	0%	64	19.39%
Total	312	100%	18	100%	330	100%

**Fig. 4.** Trend of skin exposure on the cover of VOGUE Fashion & Beauty

By comparing the degree of nudity between men and women, we can see that women are more revealing, with no nudity accounting for 100% of men, while the percentage of no nudity for women is only 43.91%. However, overall, the proportion of no nudity is the highest, followed by general nudity and sexy nudity, and the proportion of no nudity is increasing, as shown in Fig. 4. The attitude towards women's bodies has also changed from "the viewing of sex" to "the appreciation of people".

6. Individual or Group Relationship

According to the number of cover characters and gender, they are divided into single cover, same-sex group cover, and opposite-sex group cover, as in Table 6.

Under the influence of fan economy, fashion magazine covers are dominated by single covers. Among them, female characters shoot more single covers and male characters shoot more opposite sex group covers, as shown in Fig. 5. This means that there is a shift from a western image to a Chinese image and a rise in fashion discourse in China.

Table 6. Distribution of individual or group relationships of VOGUE Fashion & Beauty’s cover characters

Individuals or Group relations	Women		Male		Total	
	Quantity	Proportion	Quantity	Proportion	Quantity	Proportion
Single	193	61.86%	8	44.44%	201	60.91%
Same-sex community	110	35.26%	0	0%	110	33.33%
Heterosexual group	9	2.88%	10	56%	19	5.76%
Total	312	100%	18	100%	330	100%

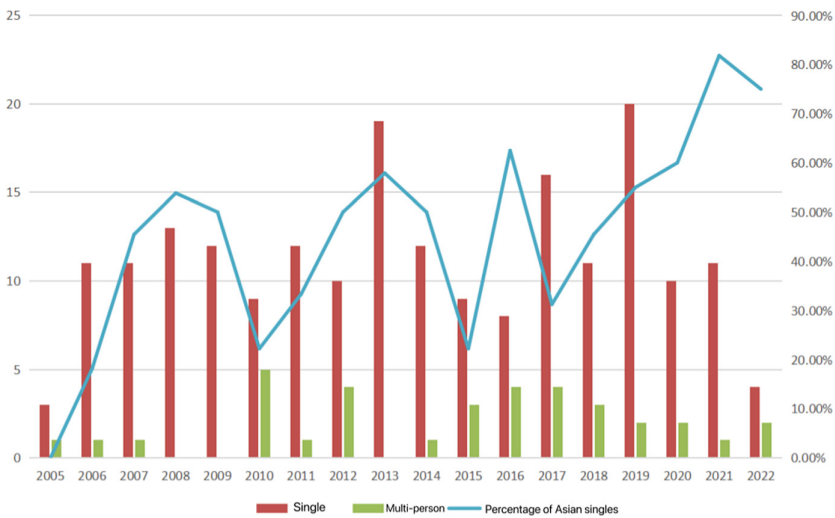


Fig. 5. Trend of individual or group relationship of VOGUE Fashion & Beauty’s cover characters

3 The Social Factors and Cultural Connotations Behind the Change of Cover Characters

3.1 Shift in Fashion Discourse from a Western Image as the Core to a Chinese Image as the Core

Before the creation of VOGUE Fashion & Beauty, VOGUE’s domestic copyright cooperation issues were largely based on the input of overseas copyrighted content, i.e., the secondary use of the content of images used in other editions. In the first two years of its existence, VOGUE chose to take a high-end and international route, hiring top international photographers, stylists and models to be unique in their profession, but without Chinese characteristics.

Entering 2008, the Beijing Olympics brought the ancient Eastern country of China to the world’s attention, and fashion and luxury brands raised the weight of the Chinese market. It was also in this year that the percentage of Chinese faces on the cover of

VOGUE Fashion & Beauty exceeded 50% for the first time. Subsequently, VOGUE Fashion & Beauty gradually built up a relatively stable brand image and VOGUE Fashion & Beauty became more and more prominent among the global VOGUE brands. In order to cater to the Chinese market, VOGUE Fashion & Beauty has introduced the new “Vogue Attitude” concept.

From the first five or six Chinese models on one cover to the current large number of Chinese faces on a single cover, the growing proportion of Chinese faces and the “Chinese style” that has taken the world by storm are all signs of China’s rising fashion discourse.

3.2 Diverse Aesthetic Transformation from International Supermodel to Vegetarian Model

The change from 100% tall and slender supermodels to “plus size girls” and disabled people means that beauty is not singular, but diverse. While fashion magazines disseminate fashion information and give styling advice, they also take on the social responsibility of promoting diverse aesthetics, protecting women’s rights and highlighting women’s status.

3.3 Shift from Ornamental to Appreciation of Human Gender Body Symbols

In a consumer society, everything can be consumed. In the role of fashion magazines, the female body is not an exception to this rule and is objectified for consumption. As Baudrillard says: “Among the whole kit of consumption, there is one object that is more beautiful, more precious, more glorious than everything else, and that is the body” [9].

For a long time, the “gaze” model has played a role in the discursive logic behind fashion magazines [10], with men on the side of “looking” and women on the side of “being looked at”. The “gaze” model has been at work in the discursive logic behind fashion magazines for a long time. Some fashion magazines feature young women’s hot bodies, pretty faces and seductive postures to satisfy male readers’ desire to gaze at or peek into women’s bodies. Other covers, although linking beauty and body shape with women’s “success”, still reflect the so-called “beauty” portrayal of women’s appearance and body features from traditional masculine aesthetics, failing to break away from the deeper attachment to male aesthetics. It is not free from the deeper attachment to male aesthetics.

In response to the passive status of the gaze, a group of women who oppose the gaze is on the rise. They believe that behind the “male gaze” lies a distinct gender consciousness and power, and that women are in an unequal position, and that women, who were originally the other, have become the subject and have begun to confront the male gaze in order to take control of the main position of the discourse, especially the obvious manifestation is the “consumption of male sex”. This is particularly evident in the “consumption of male sex”. As a result, male figures began to appear on the covers of women’s fashion magazines. The images of women in fashion magazines have also become richer and more diverse, and the gender body symbols of women are no longer just “sexy”. The appreciation of fashion magazine covers shifted from the “appreciation of sex” to the “appreciation of people”.

4 Summary

With the development of society, the recognition of women's value is increasing and women's self-awareness is rising, which further drives the development of "her economy". Chinese women's fashion magazines follow the pace of the "her economy" and create a cultural fashion scene with strong oriental aesthetic interest, mainly for Chinese women. Chinese fashion magazines fully absorb the elements of overseas fashion culture and give Chinese women more space for fashion development, creating a more vivid image of Chinese women, advocating women's diverse fashion expressions, while weakening the symbols of women's bodies and transforming the previous sexual viewing of women into an appreciation of women themselves.

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