

GENDER AND HEGEMONY IN FASHION MAGAZINES

Women's Interpretations of Fashion Photographs

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Fashion has generally been conceived as a form of hegemonic oppression, exerting an obligation to conform that weighs heavily on the female population (Wolf 1991). Robin T. Lakoff and Raquel L. Scherr (1984, p. 114) claim that fashion photographs generate enormous dissatisfaction among women because they create unrealistic expectations that most women are unable to meet. However, recent changes in the nature of fashion, the content of fashion magazines, and the ways women perceive fashion and fashion magazines raise questions concerning the accuracy of this interpretation. Few empirical studies exist that examine how women respond to these types of materials. The present study uses women's responses to fashion photographs elicited in the context of focus groups to examine these issues. . . .

Feminists argue that media images of women are always directed at men and that women are encouraged to look at themselves and other women the way men do (Davis 1997). They view hegemonic femininity as

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incorporating masculine standards for female appearance that emphasize physical attributes and sexuality. Images that express hegemonic femininity present women in sexualized and demeaning poses (Davis 1997). Media images are constructed for the male spectator's gaze and embody his expectations of women and of male-female relationships (Mulvey 1975-1976). The classic analysis of codes that are used to pose female subjects is Erving Goffman's (1979) study of "gender advertisements," in which he identifies characteristic poses in advertisements that present women as subordinate or inferior to men. According to Goffman, these poses are instantly understood by the public because they represent in an exaggerated manner stereotypical images of women that correspond to the ways in which women's roles are understood in American culture. One set of codes, "ritualization of subordination," relies on positions that subtly demean the female subject, such as showing the subject lying on her side or back, smiling in a ritualistically exaggerated manner, or assuming awkward stances with arms and legs thrust upward or to the side of the picture frame, sometimes in midair. Another stereotype is the female subject with a vacant gaze, seemingly directed at an unseen object inside the picture frame. Goffman interprets this gaze as "licensed withdrawal," implying that the subject is passive, alienated from, and not in control of the situation.

Recently, some authors have suggested that women in their teens and twenties view hegemonic femininity differently compared to middle-aged women and to the feminist interpretation of it (Winship 1985; Skeggs 1993). Younger women are said to view images identified with hegemonic femininity not as signs of weakness and passivity in women but as indications of being "in control" of their sexuality. Madonna's attitude toward her sexuality exemplifies this point of view.

In addition, traditional standards of feminine demeanor according to which women are expected to be constrained and passive,

but not sexually available, constitute a form of hegemony that might be characterized as "traditional" hegemonic femininity. Nancy M. Henley (1977) shows that norms for nonverbal behavior are different for each gender. Women, as a consequence of their inferior status, are expected to occupy less space than men and to exert greater control over their bodies and facial expressions. This is seen in the expectation that clothing should be neat and well put together and limbs placed in disciplined postures. Women's legs are supposed to be closed rather than apart and arms should be close to the sides of the body. Nudity and displays of breasts and genital areas are also defined as inappropriate.

Norms concerning eye contact proscribe staring on the part of women since staring is a gesture that indicates dominance. Women are expected to avert their eyes, particularly if the other person is male. They are expected to smile and to show pleasant emotions rather than indifference (Henley 1977, p. 194). Since gender is the primary factor determining how individuals relate to one another in social interaction, Henley (1977, p. 93) argues that gender ambiguity is highly disturbing for many people. The norm is that gender identification should be unambiguous. If traditional standards of feminine demeanor are still accepted by women, they are likely to respond negatively to images that do not conform to these standards.

These contrasting views challenge the usual claim that in contemporary culture there is a single dominant hegemony, whose definitions of reality, norms, and standards appear "natural" rather than contestable. Douglas Kellner (1990) suggests that contemporary American media and popular culture can more accurately be understood in terms of the concept of conflicted hegemony. Kellner argues that no single elite group dominates American society and that the media provide a site for conflicts, debates, and negotiations among different interpretations of the dominant culture. Fashion as a form of media culture can also be interpreted

in terms of conflicted hegemony. In the nineties, there is no single fashion standard; the consumer chooses from different interpretations of fashion, depending on her social affiliations and ethnic background (Kaiser, Nagasawa, and Hutton 1991). In their analysis of women's images in fashion magazine advertising, Robert Goldman and his colleagues (1991, p. 71) argue that fashion advertisements are indications of an "internally contradictory hegemonic process—an ongoing dialectic between dominant and oppositional discourses." They conclude that advertisers have been forced to incorporate oppositional elements in order to hold the attention of increasingly sophisticated consumers. . . .

Susan B. Kaiser, Richard H. Nagasawa, and Sandra S. Hutton (1991) see postmodernism in fashion as liberating for women. Because a great variety of styles are fashionable at the same period of time, women are able to construct personal styles that are meaningful to them, using specific elements of fashionable styles, rather than merely "following" a new and well-defined style. Since the resulting styles are ambiguous and difficult to interpret, their meanings have to be negotiated through social interaction, leading to subsequent style changes. Anthony Freitas and his colleagues (1997), on the basis of a study of attitudes toward "least favorite" clothes, suggest that people tend to reject certain types of clothing that are associated with specific statuses (e.g., age, race, sexual orientation) as a way of indicating their lack of connections with specific groups. This may also occur when fashionable clothes suggest ambiguous or unconventional interpretations of identities. . . .

♦ *Postmodernism, Feminism, and Fashion Magazines*

Fashion, as represented in fashion magazines, has several diverse and contradictory

social agendas. Fashion magazines must please both advertisers, who represent media culture, and consumers. The primary source of profit for these magazines is advertising; therefore, editorial content must supplement and reinforce advertising, while attempting to maintain or increase readership (McCracken 1993).

In the past decade, fashion photographers and editors have synchronized their themes and images with those that circulate in youth cultures and that are disseminated by the media, particularly rock music. This material frequently includes references to drugs, crime, violence, sexual orientations that are not widely accepted and negative attitudes toward women (Dowd 1997; Summer 1996). Fashion photography has incorporated blatantly sexual poses from pornographic publications (Myers 1987; Steele 1996) that include sexual cues, such as closed eyes, open mouth, legs spread to reveal the genital area, and nudity or semi-nudity, particularly in the areas of the breasts and genitals. A recent study of advertisements in fashion magazines covering the ten-year period 1985-1994 found a substantial increase in the extent to which parts of women's bodies were exposed and their bodies were shown in low-status, animal-like positions (Plous and Neptune 1997).

A second fashion agenda that appears in fashion magazines is a response to changes in the activities and goals of their readers. Women are portrayed as empowered and androgynous, capable of achieving goals and managing others (Davis 1992; Rabine 1994). These images show women wearing business suits and other costumes derived from masculine attire. A third agenda is to present women as creators of "heterogeneous and contradictory" identities when experimenting with clothes and products, such as perfume, that are deliberately designed to project different images of women (Partington 1996, p. 215; Rabine 1994).

As one of the leading fashion magazines throughout the twentieth century, *Vogue* exemplifies changes that have taken place

in the representation of the fashionable woman and her clothing in photographs.¹ In 1947, the magazine's fashion photographs precisely documented an upper-middle-class world. Fashion photographs were taken in identifiable settings, such as city streets or beaches. Nude legs, thighs, or breasts were rare. There were no close-ups. Models rarely assumed demeaning or childlike poses. The camera was generally placed at eye level. The models were young women but not adolescents, as is frequently the case today. The center of attention in most of these photographs was the clothing rather than the model. This was a milieu viewed almost entirely from a feminine perspective. No men appeared in the fashion photographs. Women were almost invariably photographed alone.

By 1957, changes in certain aspects of *Vogue's* fashion photography were beginning to be noticeable. More models were photographed looking directly at the camera, an indication of inferior status, according to some analysts (Lutz and Collins 1993). Few photographs were contextualized in urban or vacation settings. Many more women assumed contorted or exaggerated positions, typical of Goffman's (1979) "ritualization of subordination." There were occasional close-ups. However, there was still virtually no nudity, and men almost never appeared. The major focus of the photographs remained the clothing. By 1967, the magazine was showing close-ups of models in bathing suits. There was increasing emphasis on youth, youth cultures, and film stars as trendsetters (Lakoff and Scherr 1984, pp. 96-97). The super-model rather than the society woman was becoming the role model.

By 1977, the character of the magazine had changed radically in comparison with its character in 1947. The proportion of advertising pages had doubled and, as a result, the visual impression of the magazine was conveyed more by advertising than by editorial content. The magazine's circulation had more than doubled since 1967.²

Both advertisements and editorial pages appeared to be oriented toward a male gaze (Rabine 1994, p. 65; Mulvey 1975-1976). Men were more likely to be included in the photographs, along with pairs or groups of women. Models generally looked directly at the camera and often assumed childlike or contorted positions. Most photographs were not contextualized. The vantage point of the camera was less likely to be at eye level and more likely to be looking down or looking up at its subject.

By 1987, the model's body was much more likely to be partially nude, either breasts or thighs, and more likely than the clothing to be the focus of the photographs. The camera's vantage point was frequently below its subject, emphasizing legs and thighs. Models wearing bathing suits were photographed in close-ups, resembling pinups. In many photographs, models looked directly at the camera without smiling and frequently assumed the exaggerated poses that characterize "ritualization of subordination." Models were expected "to look sexually provocative. . . . Modern beauty is deeply embedded in sexual politics—the woman acting out male fantasies engaging in purposeful provocation" (Lakoff and Scherr 1984, p. 106). Contextualization had virtually disappeared; most photographs were not located in any recognizable geographical space. These trends continued in the 1990s. In 1997, advertisements outnumbered editorial pages by more than three to one. Women in fashion layouts and clothing advertisements were frequently presented as sexually provocative, androgynous, or homoerotic.

Over time, the fashion photographs in the magazine appear to have changed their function. Exhibiting the latest trends in appropriate clothing for women of means ceased to be the primary goal of the magazine; instead fashion photographs provide a kind of visual entertainment analogous to other forms of media culture, such as Hollywood films and music videos.

♦ Selection of Photographs and Questions for Research

There are no previous studies of how women interpret representations of gender in fashion photographs.³ The goal of this study was to examine responses to representations of gender in fashion photographs and clothing advertisements among young and middle-aged women representing diverse ethnicities and nationalities.⁴ Eighteen photographs were selected from the February, March, and September 1997 issues of *Vogue* of which a subset of 6-9 photographs was shown to members of each focus group. The photographs were divided almost equally between fashion editorial photos and clothing advertisements. The clothing in these photographs had, in most cases, been produced by companies headed by leading American, French, and Italian designers. The photographs were selected to fit the following categories: (1) frontal gaze and eye contact, (2) side gaze: positive, (3) androgyny and gender ambiguity, (4) lesbianism, (5) ritualization of subordination, (6) licensed withdrawal, (7) sexuality/pornography, and (8) nudity. In addition to gender stereotypes, two of the photographs could be interpreted as representing racial stereotypes. Several photographs could be categorized as postmodern on the basis of ambiguities and contradictions in their imagery or in the nature of the clothing.

Focus group members were asked several questions designed to elicit their perceptions of these photographs and the extent to which they identified with the models in the photographs. Before the focus group began, they were asked to complete a short questionnaire that tapped their level of interest in fashion and their techniques for following fashion. . . .

The "Authority" ♦ of Fashion

Has fashion retained the "authority" that it appears to have exerted in the past? On the questionnaire, almost all (84 percent) of these women responded positively to the question: "Do you attempt to keep up with current fashion?"⁵ When asked what aspects of fashion they particularly followed, the majority checked "specific styles" (65 percent) and "accessories" (55 percent). About one-quarter (24 percent) checked "brand names" and 18 percent noted "hemlines."

According to their responses on the questionnaires, these women relied on three different types of sources for information about fashion. The first type of source was their social milieu, broadly defined. This suggests that following fashion was motivated by a desire to be accepted by their peers. This category included "cool friends and relatives" (chosen by 53 percent) but also "what people are wearing on the street" (59 percent). Sixty-nine percent of the women relied on one or both of these sources. The second type of source for information about fashion was the media, including fashion magazines, television, and clothes worn by popular singers. Sixty-nine percent of the women relied on some form of media for information about fashion. The third type of source was also the most important: 76 percent relied on local stores for information about fashion.

Most of the women relied on more than one source for information about fashion (80 percent) and many relied on all three sources of information (43 percent). . . . Eighty-one percent of the women read fashion magazines at least occasionally but fashion magazines were a source of information about fashion for only 55 percent of the women. Magazines were apparently not considered sufficiently authoritative to be

used as the individual's only source of information. Only 16 percent relied on fashion magazines without using other types of media, and just 4 percent relied only on fashion magazines (i.e., excluding all other sources of information).

These findings suggest a certain ambivalence about fashion magazines that was also expressed during the focus groups. Very rarely in the focus group discussions was there any suggestion that these women viewed fashion editors as authorities on fashion. Rather than viewing fashion editors as authoritative, some women questioned fashion editors' judgments about fashion. A black undergraduate said, "Like the image that they always set, that everyone is alike which everyone is not."

Some of these women doubted the capacity of fashion editors to understand or express the perspective of women:

Even though the fashion editors in the magazines are usually women, I still think it's not really a woman's point of view. It's what a woman thinks a man wants to see or something like that.
(white undergraduate)

Some white undergraduates perceived fashion as something remote from their own experience:

These outfits remind me of the newer style that is coming out . . . bandish, faddish type stuff that I don't see around me that often. It is kind of removed from me is what I am trying to say.

Another young white woman asserted that the fashion standards set in these magazines were impossible for normal women to achieve:

Anything in these magazines, especially high fashion, *W* and *Vogue* to a certain extent, nobody who is normal can wear any of those clothes. You cannot look

good in those clothes. You just can't.
(white college student)

. . . Some women suggested that fashion photographs should be viewed as a form of art and fantasy rather than as representations of fashion: "It's just like a dream because you know that 90 percent, probably 98 percent of the clothes, are unattainable."

Other women were able to distance themselves from these photographs by pointing out personal constraints that prevented them from being influenced by these images. A few mentioned financial constraints. Older women admitted that they were incapable of meeting the standards set by models in these photographs but attributed this failure to age differences rather than to personal failings. Almost half the middle-aged women said they did not attempt to follow fashion.

Almost half the African Americans also said they did not attempt to follow fashion. The comments of African American women suggested that they perceived fashionable styles as being created for white women and particularly for white bodies rather than black bodies.

Interviewer: Would these clothes influence the way you dress at all?

Black college student: This look is impossible for us to achieve. Genetically, that is not how we are mapped out and so if we are in the right frame of mind within ourselves, we know that it is going to be unlikely that we could achieve it through working out and what have you.

Only very occasionally did younger white women admit to being critical of themselves for not being able to meet the standards of beauty and physical perfection set by these photographs. A comment

such as the following from a white undergraduate was rare: "I know I'll never be able to look like her and it really pisses me off."

Some of these women may not have felt sufficiently comfortable in the social situation created in the focus groups to acknowledge their failure to meet these standards and to attribute this failure to their own inadequacies. Alternatively, some images in these photographs may have been too extreme to elicit identification on the part of the participants.

♦ *The Fashion Magazine and Its Social Agendas: Images of Blatant and Marginal Sexuality*

Several photographs presented women in a manner consistent with the representation of women in many aspects of rock music, including lyrics, album covers, and public appearances—in other words, in highly sexualized poses, suggesting that a woman's role is that of sex object (Signorielli, McLeod, and Healy 1994). Other photographs presented subjects whose sexuality was ambiguous—possibly lesbian or transvestite. To what extent did participants in the focus groups accept this agenda? If women subscribe to traditional norms of feminine demeanor (Henley 1977), one might expect them to reject images that depict overt sexuality, nudity, and sexual ambiguity.

One photograph that exemplified this agenda showed a woman wearing a very short, sleeveless, flesh-colored dress and very high-heeled shoes, with her body bent forward, leaning her buttocks against a wall. Many of these women, both young and middle-aged, did not identify with the level of sexuality expressed in the photograph, as suggested by the comments of two undergraduates.

Interviewer: What aspects of this photograph do you like?

Tracee: Quite honestly, nothing, nothing. (black college student)

Nathalie: I would categorize it as an image of a slut or a prostitute or just not a good girl. (white college student)

Tracee: It's trying to be very seductive and I guess that's kind of what I associate with being a super-model or just a model in general.

Nathalie: Like a negative sexy.

Another undergraduate expressed a somewhat more positive attitude toward this photograph:

Judy: She has a seductive feel. She gives off this aura. So like there are times when I'd want to feel like—going to a black-tie party you want to feel seductive or sexy, but, in my own way. Not like that.

A few younger white women associated the sexuality in this photograph with strength rather than weakness.

Sandy: There's something strong about her. I mean she doesn't look lost, you know. She's not the lost sex symbol. She's more like she wanted to be that way. It's not that she is the victim of something.

Helen: I think this photograph expresses a woman's point of view. She's ready to take on the world and she can "live-on-the-edge" kind of thing. Because it's sexy in a way that it's powerful—she's the one in control. It's not sexy like you know, she's lying on a bed half naked.

In a group of middle-aged women, participants objected to the emphasis on

the body rather than the clothing in the photograph.

Christine: I don't like the way the model is posed. Because I think it's showing the body rather than the clothing. That's the first thing you see. The dress is barely there. Not that there's anything wrong, but it's the photograph itself that suggests that they're not showing the clothes; they're showing the woman's body. And without that, the clothing would be nothing.

Nina: She's selling herself. This woman's selling her body.

Dorothy: From a distance she could be naked. The dress almost blends into her body.

In keeping with norms of traditional feminine demeanor that sanction nudity, many of the women disliked nudity and transparent materials that revealed breasts and genital hair.

Anne: They're selling it to women. And we all have this body. We don't need to see her without a shirt on. Which I never understood. You know? That doesn't really excite me, being a girl, without her shirt on.

Their objections to transparent materials were not so much on the basis of modesty or prudishness but because they could not visualize themselves wearing such revealing clothes.

Interviewer: Would you like to look like this woman?

Tracee: No. Like she's going out of her way to be sexy and I tend to prefer things that are more. . . . You weren't trying to be sexy. . . . Whereas this almost seems as though they had to

really work to make her look sexy, and so there's just something very negative about that.

Joan: I wouldn't ever wear something that let boobs show but I think for the image she's trying to convey, it's appropriate.

Another photograph showed an African American model, entirely nude except for costume jewelry, sitting on the floor. African American women disagreed in their evaluations of this photograph. Several of these participants did not like the fact that the model was nude. One woman in this group said: "I think the person who created this must be a man because he is just trying to expose her body and I doubt a woman would ever do this." Another African American woman had a different viewpoint:

Lisa: It's redefining nudity. It is not done in poor taste. I think that she is proud of her body and she is not afraid to—it is not really sexual—she is showing off the accessories.

A third photograph contained elements that could be interpreted as androgynous or homosexual. An advertisement for Chanel, it showed a woman wearing an unbuttoned suit jacket over a very pale, bare, flat torso with black jeans. The face was heavily made-up, particularly around the eyes, which were obscured by a shadow. The overall impression that participants received from this photograph was one of gender ambiguity. Most participants were puzzled, critical, and to some extent disturbed by it. The following comments by white undergraduates illustrate a desire to distance themselves from this image and particularly its connotations of marginality and gender ambiguity:

Ruth: It looks very androgynous. She doesn't have a chest at all. Like you see a glimpse of something. It's all pale and wiped out. Like a

ghost. And her face looks very like a guy dressed in drag.

Nathalie: I would say scary, unnatural, and witch-like. And neither masculine nor feminine because this just seems so unnatural to me that it doesn't seem like it would appeal to any regular man or woman.

Older women also tended to attribute marginal connotations to the subject of this photograph. One woman commented on the model's expression, which connoted "licensed withdrawal" while another woman indicated she could not identify with her:

Dorothy: And that vacuous look she has—like she's almost dead. She looks like corpses I've seen.

Mary: I wouldn't want to look like her. There is something very harsh about her.

Another older woman was dismissive: "This isn't a serious fashion statement at all. They just want your attention."

A fourth photograph showed two women, wearing long transparent dresses and standing close together, one behind the other. The second woman's right hand was placed over the first woman's stomach. In keeping with Reina Lewis and Katrina Rolley's (1996) attribution of lesbian connotations to photographs showing two female models in the same photograph, some participants did in fact detect overtones of lesbianism in the photograph.

Nathalie: They look easy and maybe there is a hint of homosexuality. I just see where the hand is placed, and it doesn't look very friendly or sister-like; it looks like they are girlfriends. It's a hard image, like a heavy metal type of look, and it is just something that I don't aspire to.

A middle-aged participant had a different impression: "There's this fake sort of lesbianism in there too, the way the person had those two women pose. And I always associate that with men." Members of an African American focus group did not respond to any homosexual overtones in this photograph but interpreted it as representing a culture very removed from their own.

Tamara: Drug addict club models. I see them as being in a club.

Michelle: Rock star chicks.

Dina: I see this stereotypical, tall, skinny, anorexic-looking white female.

Discussions in the focus groups did not suggest that there were substantial differences between women in different generations in their conceptions of their gender identities. Younger participants were not more inclined than older women to accept as appropriate for themselves a wider range of sexual orientations. Most of these women tended to reject images that suggested bisexuality, lesbianism, and transvestism. Displays of nudity were generally sanctioned as inappropriate for their own lives. In general, their reactions were explicable on the basis of traditional norms of feminine demeanor, as described by Henley (1977). However, they were ambivalent toward a photograph of a woman in a very seductive pose. Some younger women admired her appearance of being in control, an interpretation that was consistent with recent changes in the ways expressions of sexuality by women are understood. Others interpreted her pose as demeaning.

The Fashion Magazine ♦ and Its Social Agendas: Images of Empowerment

Members of several focus groups were shown a Donna Karan advertisement that

consisted of a black-and-white photograph of a woman in a pants suit staring directly at the camera. This woman's image could be interpreted as empowered, successful, and androgynous, another of the magazine's agendas. A male participant summed up what he viewed as the rationale underlying the way this model was being presented:

Look, she's made it. It's not about her sexuality. It's not about her breasts. She's a working woman. Her clothes are about working woman's clothing. If you're successful and you're smart, I've got clothes for you. You don't have to put on tons of makeup. It's like you're the boss, darn it, and you can do what you want.

Most participants responded to this photograph on the basis of the model's personality, although their assessments of her personality varied. Some groups were repelled and others were attracted by the image the model appeared to convey. The model's stare violated a norm of appropriate female expressive behavior (Henley 1977), and this appeared to be a major factor in terms of their reactions to this image. The impact of the model's facial expression on the reactions of members of a focus group composed of white undergraduates is shown in the following discussion:

Interviewer: Are there any aspects of the photograph you don't like?

Ruth: The expression on her face.

Judy: I think she looks kind of aggressive. It's kind of portraying the attitude that the clothes are like, well, you know, I'm an elitist, like you can't touch me. I still like the clothes but the attitude the model is portraying . . .

Another undergraduate stated a preference for the type of expression that women have traditionally been expected to show:

"I like that she's powerful but I don't like . . . she's not smiling. She's not happy."

Asked whether on some occasions they might want to look like the model in this photograph, younger women found it difficult to identify with the woman in the Karan ad, as indicated by the comments from two focus groups.

Interviewer: Would you like to look like this woman?

Judy: This facial expression? No way.

Tracee: For me it's just like the whole image. I don't think I could ever be like that. . . . And I don't want to be like her.

Nathalie: I don't like her attitude. I think it's something that I don't relate to. I don't see myself as having that type of attitude in general. Although I do agree that there might be times in certain situations, certain office situations, where I might feel that it might be to my advantage to look a little bit more like her, to be strong, and to seem to have a sense of identity like that and confidence in myself.

One young woman doubted that she could convey an attitude of empowerment successfully by wearing those clothes.

If I was wearing that, I wouldn't look like that. I'm not saying I wouldn't look good but I wouldn't feel like "Listen to me. I am woman. Hear me roar. I'm the boss."

In other words, adopting a type of clothing appropriate for the role would not necessarily allow her to perform the role convincingly. In contrast, a group of middle-aged women also interpreted the model's image as strong and confident but reacted more positively to it. One woman commented:

I wouldn't mind looking like that on a lot of occasions. Not just because she's beautiful but because of the message that she's giving . . . strong and don't contradict me.

♦ *The Fashion Magazine and Its Social Agendas: Postmodernist Role Playing*

In contrast to the fashion magazine, which proposed a postmodernist conception of multiple identities, women in the focus groups appeared to have a distinctly modernist outlook toward their identities and, consequently, toward fashionable clothing. They perceived the selection of suitable clothing as an expression of stable identities and as a task for which they possessed the requisite skills. They evaluated fashionable clothing in terms of its usefulness for the types of occasions in which they participated but not in terms of adopting a series of distinctly different roles. . . .

Consciously or unconsciously, these participants seemed to believe that clothes represent the self which they perceived as consistent and unchanging. This attitude underlies the following comment by an African American college student about an African American model:

I like the fact that she looks a lot like me. . . . So the question is not if I want to look like her but the fact that she looks like me, and that is what is appealing to me about her.

This was also seen in a phrase that was used many times, referring to an outfit:

It's not me. I just don't really like what she is wearing, the general style of it. . . . I guess also it is the attitude, the stance she is taking is not really me at all.

Or, referring to a model: "I think it's her."

One result of the variety of stylistic standards that postmodernist fashion proposes is that particular styles and costumes are likely to be difficult to interpret (Davis 1992; Kaiser et al. 1991). In some of the photographs, certain aspects of the model's clothing were considered puzzling or difficult to comprehend by focus group members. For example, participants commented on ambiguous qualities in the clothes portrayed in a photograph of a woman on a beach, such as the use of untied sneakers, combined with a very baggy man's suit, a necktie, and an untucked shirt, worn by a rather feminine woman.

Interviewer: What aspects of this photograph do you not like?

Tracee: The disorder, the shirt untucked. Kind of like, she was confused. What were they really trying to go for? Why is the shirt untucked? What's the point of the tie?

Ruth: When would you wear a suit with the shirt hanging out with sneakers?

Anne: I think the whole outfit is out of place. Like the shoes with the suit and the entire thing on the beach.

Interviewer: What meanings do you think the clothing in the photograph conveys?

Elena: Androgyny and professionalism because she's in a suit.

Joan: But she's in sneakers.

When the level of ambiguity in a model's appearance was very high, participants tended to reject it vehemently. One photograph showed a model with a highly toned, muscular body and very dark eyeshadow, wearing a very sheer, transparent dress of indeterminate color. The dress had

connotations of fairy tales and fantasy for participants that seemed incongruous with the model's almost masculine body. Two older participants commented:

Catherine: The dress is soft and gauzy but she looks very hard. . . . It's kind of an aggressive pose and there's that little wispy dress on her.

Elizabeth: She looks a little grotesque.

Younger participants were particularly negative toward this photo:

Beth: She doesn't even look human.

Barbara: I wouldn't stay on that page for more than a second.

Evelyn: Her body's sick. Like she's so toned that it's disgusting.

Lucy: It looks like she got slimed.

Lauren: Distasteful.

Lucy: Prehistoric.

Evelyn: Out of touch.

Participants' conceptions of their own appearance appeared to be shaped by practical considerations and by conformity to traditional norms of feminine personal demeanor. These women were seeking comfortable, useful clothing and rejecting elements of ambiguity and subversion. They were not postmodernist role-players, manipulating visual codes to simulate different identities.

♦ *The Model as Role Model*

Rather than the clothes or fashion itself, the focus of attention in these photographs for most of the women in the focus groups was the model. Many of the women, particularly younger women, recognized well-known models and identified them by name. Almost invariably, the models elicited strong reactions on the part of these

women, sometimes positive, often negative. The model as a physical presence and as a personality served both as the channel for the transmission of fashion ideals, along with whatever hegemony that might have entailed, and as the justification for rejecting these ideals, the latter on the grounds that the model projected a negative and undesirable image. Younger participants in the focus groups seemed to find it quite natural to make comparisons between themselves and the models in the photographs. They were inclined to identify with the models and seemed disappointed when they were unable to do so.

Participants discussed at length the models' physical attributes, their facial expressions, and their gender identifications. The models' bodies were analyzed in terms of body frame, height, weight, and skin. Body parts, such as feet, legs, arms, hands, waistlines, and bustlines, were examined, along with facial characteristics such as eyes, eyebrows, and expressions. Haircuts, makeup, and nail polish were also scrutinized. On the basis of physical characteristics and facial expressions, focus group members almost invariably drew inferences concerning the models' personalities (e.g., strong, aggressive, confident, aloof, carefree, fun-loving). They responded to the models as individuals, as people with distinct identities apart from the clothing they were wearing.

Facial expressions were a major factor that determined how participants reacted to the models and whether they appeared to identify with them. Only one woman (a white college student) said that for her the models' facial expressions were not important because "I know they're not real." Most women responded positively to one of the few models who was smiling and who appeared to be enjoying herself. A college student said:

Evelyn: She looks natural.

Interviewer: Why does she look natural to you?

Evelyn: She's smiling.

In keeping with norms concerning women's demeanor, the absence of positive facial expressions was perceived as disturbing. An older participant complained that two models in a photograph looked unhappy.

Interviewer: Do you think the fact that they look unhappy influences the way you respond to the photograph?

Louise: Yes, I do. It looks unnatural. The one on the left looks miserable.

Another older participant observed: "Her face is very cold. . . . That's why I don't like this photo. It's because of her face, not because of her clothes."

Some focus groups were shown an advertisement for Helmut Lang that was in black and white, depicting a very young model, head canted, shoulders slouched, wearing a sleeveless T-shirt. The young woman was not wearing any obvious makeup. The presence of small wrinkles around the mouth indicated that the photograph had not been airbrushed. Her shoulder-length blond hair was not parted and appeared to be uncombed. Although she was looking toward the camera, there were elements of "licensed withdrawal" in her serious, self-absorbed, alienated expression. Members of a group of white undergraduates close to the model's age described her as "mean," "upset," "unhappy," and "asexual." One middle-aged participant thought the model's body suggested drug addiction. A college student said: "I think she just looks like a heroin addict."

These comments reveal that the model's personality, as suggested by her facial expression, her personal demeanor as indicated by her stance, and the extent to which her image expressed sexuality or other aspects of gender, often had more impact on these participants than her clothes. Contrary to what is generally believed to be

the impact of fashion images on women, these women were not intimidated by them. Models were not necessarily perceived as beautiful or as being exemplars of physical perfection. Their bodies were often criticized as being too thin, too muscular, or otherwise unappealing. Their clothes and their makeup were frequently described as bizarre, inappropriate, or unattractive. In spite of the fact that participants were as interested in the models as in their clothing and attempted to attribute distinct personalities and identities to the models on the basis of their physical appearance, these women did not often wish to emulate their appearance. When asked whether they would like to look like the models in these photographs on certain occasions, participants generally replied negatively. The images projected by these photographs were not ones these women wished to project themselves. These images were often incompatible with their attitudes and preferences. The image younger participants accepted most readily was that of the woman in a transparent dress leaning provocatively against a wall, in spite of the fact that many of them made critical remarks about the level of sexuality in her appearance. By contrast, the disheveled woman in a man's suit with sneakers was almost unanimously rejected.

These issues were particularly pertinent for African American women, as suggested by these comments from an African American focus group:

Interviewer: Does this photograph represent your point of view at all?

All: No.

Interviewer: Why not?

Tamara: She is blond-haired.

Kyla: I can't relate to her.

Interviewer: Why not?

Kyla: She is just different from me.

Tamara: She is six foot, very thin, pale.

By contrast, these women interpreted a photograph of an African model as clearly representing "the black woman's point of view." One of these women said: "I like her figure. It's an obvious African figure, the hips, butt, her arms. . . . She's an African woman. She's an elegant African woman."

♦ *The Visibility/Invisibility of the Pose*

Strongly implicated in the ways the models were perceived by participants were the kinds of poses in which they were placed and, in general, the various techniques underlying the social construction of the photographs. To what extent were these poses and techniques visible or invisible to these participants? These photographs, like many others in the issues of *Vogue* from which they were taken, relied on a small number of stereotypical poses that have been interpreted by social scientists as demeaning to women.

Members of the focus groups indicated their awareness of the social construction of these photographs through comments such as the following:

Nathalie: You can tell there's obviously a fan or wind machine blowing the hair.

Joan: I'm sure that they took a hundred pictures to get that and still her smile's not perfect. But like they tried hard to make it look natural.

Evelyn: It's intended to make you wonder if it's a man or a woman. It's meant to grab our attention. That's how they're going to get you into their ad.

Participants were clearly sensitive to the fact that these photographs were designed

to sell clothing or at least the image of the designer or brand-name. At the same time, they expected these photographs to meet certain standards of realism, to match their conceptions of how young women actually behaved. The following comments are an example of this attitude:

Dorothy: It looks like a fashion photograph, whereas the other two photographs we just saw could be real.

Lucy: She looks like a mannequin. She doesn't really look real.

Members of the focus groups sometimes interpreted the "evidence" in these photographs in different ways. They varied in their sensitivity to the meanings of the stereotypical poses that appeared in certain photographs. Some photographs illustrated an aspect of what Goffman called "ritualization of subordination," the use of child-like, passive, awkward, or ridiculous body positions. In response to a photograph showing a model barefoot in midair with her arms outspread, one woman found the pose amusing: "I think the photograph is nice. It's kind of arresting—how they have her jumping. It looks kind of fun." Other participants who appeared to have a sense of the underlying connotations in the photograph said: "She looks like a marionette" and "She looks like Peter Pan because she's jumping."

If the stereotypical pose appeared to have sexual connotations or violated norms concerning bodily exposure, these participants were more likely to be critical of it. One of the photographs projected contradictory images. It showed a woman wearing a short black dress and lying supine on a chair. The upper part of the woman's body, her hair, and her face were neat, sleek, and well groomed. The lower part of the photograph showed her legs slightly open, revealing the inside of her right thigh, violating the norm against exposing this part of a woman's body (Henley 1977).

Participants responded differently, depending upon which part of the picture seemed most important to them:

Mark: She's pretty. Her face is the focal point.

Robin: You can totally see her crotch.

Laurie: You see her entire right thigh.

The following exchange of comments is generally favorable but reveals a slight ambivalence toward the pose.

Beth: She looks very pulled together and relaxed. She's obviously reclining but I like it.

Interviewer: Whose point of view does this photograph express?

Robin: I'd say a man's. . . . I don't know. I see her lying there.

Beth: Submissive.

Interviewer: Does this photograph express your point of view?

All: No.

Other participants were more critical of this pose:

Nathalie: It seems like she's giving herself away or something.

Tracee: I don't like the pose. . . . I just don't like the whole laid-back look, and it's almost as though her legs are gaped open and that's what really kind of offends me.

Another photo that illustrated Goffman's "ritualization of subordination" and that also had subtle sexual connotations showed the back of a young woman who was bent forward with her buttocks in the foreground of the picture. She was wearing a long dress in a colorful fabric. Again reactions to this photograph were mixed.

Interviewer: What adjectives would you use to describe the image of the woman?

Elena: I think she's sexual but it's not a very slutty sexual. . . . I think it's nice and I think it's feminine. (white undergraduate)

Another white participant was more critical of this pose:

Courtney: I don't like the pose. It's a sexualized pose.

Interviewer: Would you like to look like this woman on certain occasions?

Courtney: No. I don't care to be in that position.

African American students were also critical of the pose in this photograph:

Lisa: I don't like what she is doing. Why does her butt have to be in our faces?

Toyah: It's like she's an animal. She looks like a lizard.

One African American participant pointed to the racist aspects of a photograph that showed an African American model in a pose that also fit Goffman's "ritualization of subordination"—seated on the floor, wearing a long, elegant dress, smiling broadly, and holding a musical instrument:

I really like the dress and I think she is definitely very attractive. I guess mostly I have more negative feelings. I really don't like how she is sitting in this picture. It just looks really unnatural. . . . It just seems that there is a definite attempt to portray her as some kind of oddity. . . . I really don't like the expression on her face and I don't like the instrument in her hand because it brings up like a negative stereotype of a samba image, where they have the little pick-aninny with a musical instrument or just with watermelon and it is to kind of make you think of that image. . . . If you

were in a dress like this, you wouldn't be sitting on the floor in this kind of pose. You would be standing, you wouldn't actually be in that position. . . . It just seems so forced. It just seems like there could be a better picture to take of her and there is a definite attempt to make sure she looks kind of like this strange oddity of a person so that you can keep thinking she is different, she is not like the other models that you are going to see in a spread, or whatever.

In general, participants appeared to be more sensitive to the sexual or racist connotations of stereotypical poses than to connotations of childishness or passivity. Demeaning poses with sexual connotations were rejected unless the sexual aspects of the photograph were offset by elements in the photograph that had more positive implications for the participants.

♦ Conclusion

The findings from this study raise questions about the extent to which fashion photographs constitute a form of hegemonic femininity that is accepted as natural and uncontested by readers. As exemplified by *Vogue*, the fashion magazine presents a wider range of social identities and "agendas" than was the case several decades ago. The overall effect is closer to conflicted hegemony than hegemonic femininity and probably facilitates the expression of negative attitudes toward these images. Judging from the responses of a racially and ethnically varied group of women of different ages, the authority of fashion magazines as arbiters of fashion is no greater than that of the television screen, the street, or local stores. Fashion editors were viewed as one source of information about fashion but not as being particularly authoritative.

The responses of most of the participants in the focus groups to images representing hegemonic femininity and feminine

empowerment suggest that they had internalized traditional norms of feminine demeanor and perceived these photographs as violating these norms. These taboos concerning appropriate gender behavior for women led them to reject exaggerated expressions of sexuality, both heterosexual and androgynous, and images that implied gender ambiguity. Images that conveyed feminine empowerment and dominance evoked ambivalent responses. On the one hand, they admired women who appeared to be strong, but expressions of strength that deviated from norms of feminine personal demeanor evoked negative responses. At times, they were insensitive to demeaning gender stereotypes that carried connotations of childishness but were more sensitive to stereotypes connoting sexual availability. African American participants were adept at decoding racial stereotypes and expressed explicitly their perception that these styles were not intended for women of color. Participants' attitudes toward the models were curiously ambivalent: they appeared to want to identify with them but they were not intimidated by their beauty, the perfection of their bodies, or their clothing.

Criticism of the images in these photographs came not just from women who, on the basis of age or ethnicity, might have perceived themselves as being outside the youthful audience for whom the clothing in the photographs was presumably intended, but also from young white college women. The often strident tone of their critiques may have resulted from an underlying emotional involvement in fashionable images and in the culturally prescribed requirement to look feminine and attractive (Thompson and Haytko 1997, p. 30). A group consisting of younger and less educated women might have responded differently to these photographs.⁶

This study suggests that women respond critically to the fashion press in part because these magazines express the tensions and contradictions of a conflicted hegemony and in part because traditional

values and perceptions of personal demeanor (another form of hegemony) and modernist conceptions of social identity continue to shape women's perceptions of postmodern culture. These women did not appear likely to engage in postmodernist role-playing; they evaluated fashionable clothing with a strong sense of stable, personal identities. Instead of reveling in postmodernist ambiguity, they disliked outfits that appeared to convey conflicting messages. They examined clothes for their relevance to their personal lives and rejected a postmodernist confusion of styles and genders.

It is difficult to generalize these findings to women's clothing behavior in other contexts, such as shopping, where they are exposed directly to the clothing. Fashion photographs incorporate clothes into a complex gestalt of imagery that often overshadows the clothes themselves, so that participants respond as much to the setting in which the clothes are placed as to the clothes themselves. Seeing clothes in these unfamiliar contexts, they may be more likely to reject the identities associated with them than they would in a shopping mall. In other words, they may be responding to the ambiguities in the identities projected by these photographs by emphasizing their lack of connection with them (Freitas et al. 1997). Participants in the focus groups were sensitive to the ways in which their reactions to these photographs were affected by the fact that they were seeing them outside the covers of the magazine. Several participants commented that their responses would have been different if they had seen the photographs while flipping through the pages of the magazine, because they claimed they would have looked less carefully at certain photographs under those circumstances. The results of this study suggest the complexity of evaluating women's responses to visual representations in the media and the need for further research on this topic.

Notes ♦

1. *Vogue* was founded in 1893. For a brief history of *Vogue*, see Lakoff and Scherr (1984, pp. 69-114). This discussion is based on an analysis of the first three issues of the following years: 1947, 1957, 1967, 1977, 1987, and 1997.

2. *Vogue's* circulation was 449,722 in 1968; 970,084 in 1978; and 1,126,193 in 1997 (the last date for which such figures are available) (*World Almanac and Book of Facts*, 1969, 1980, and 1999).

3. A different type of research on women's perceptions of advertisements in fashion magazines has attempted to ascertain the effects of ads showing images of highly attractive models on college women's perceived levels of satisfaction with their appearance (Richins 1991). McCracken (1988) showed fashion ads to college students and asked them to try to explain how they interpreted them.

4. Focus groups rather than interviews were used as a means of obtaining responses to fashion photographs because the task of commenting on photographs was unfamiliar to respondents. In developing their opinions, focus group members were stimulated by the comments of other respondents in the group setting. Focus group members were not obliged to participate to meet the requirements of a course. They varied in terms of age, racial background, and nationality: 83 percent were college age (the rest were middle-aged); 33 percent were African American, African, East and West Indian, Eurasian and Asian American (the remainder were Caucasian); and 13 percent were not American (Ghana, Indonesia, Iran, Lebanon, and Panama). Three of the respondents were male. Undergraduates were students in classes in sociology and communication. A total of forty-five people participated. The fifteen focus groups varied in size from 2 to 4 respondents and were conducted in college classrooms or private homes. They typically lasted for half an hour to an hour. As far as possible, each focus group was homogeneous in terms of age and racial background. Focus group leaders for groups of

college students were graduate students in most cases. An African American graduate student led the focus groups of African Americans. The other groups were led by the author. All focus groups were recorded and transcribed. All names used in the text are fictitious.

5. This figure is substantially higher than comparable figures obtained in American surveys (one-third and one-fifth, respectively) (Gutman and Mills 1982; Krafft 1991) and is probably due to the fact that the majority of the women who participated in the study were under age 25. It is also likely that most women who agreed to participate in the study had some interest in fashion.

6. Although the number of participants who were not U.S. citizens was small, it appeared that race was a more important influence than nationality on participants' responses to these images.

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