Theoretical Position

Addressing Issues Surrounding the Representation of Women of Colour in Media and Fashion Media

By Fiona Pitt

It is an important and emerging trend for fashion designers, who can be incredibly influential to the public, to consider and address current social and environmental issues.

This theoretical position outlines the problems facing women of colour regarding their representation in mainstream media, specifically fashion media, and provides a pathway for possible design solutions.

The background research for this paper started by looking into the damaging effects of the portrayal of black culture by the fashion industry, then the exclusion of women of colour from mainstream feminism and finally the portrayal and exclusion of women of colour in the fashion industry.

Theory

Fashion media’s misrepresentation and erasure of women of colour is reflective of western society’s and mainstream western media’s attitude. Both men and women of colour are objectified for their race, however, women of colour are further subjected to discrimination for being female. The bigotry they face cannot be easily divided into each subsection-the two build upon and reinforce each other. For this reason, many feminist or anti-racism movements fail to take into consideration the problems women of colour are forced to confront.

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9 In 118 years, Vogue magazine has featured only 14 people of colour on their front cover. At the 2013 Brazilian Fashion Week, out of 1128 only 28 models were black. In one New York Fashion Week, only 18% of models were people of colour. Vanity Fair, a magazine supposed to name Hollywood’s newest, important stars almost completely shows white women only. In 2011 and 2012 a total of 3 women of colour featured; on the inner flap of a tri-folded cover (see figure 1). Women of colour are heavily erased in the fashion industry- and when they’re included, the effort is only tokenistic.

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Figure 1: The 2011 Hollywood issue of Vanity Fair features Rashida Jones as the sole woman of colour, seen on the far right.
The industry presents white women as aspirational figures of beauty, implying that to be otherwise is undesirable. When women of colour are present, photographs are manipulated to make their skin colour vastly lighter and bodies slimmer; hair is straightened; and they typically already have features that are close to western beauty ideals. This is referred to as white-washing (see figure 2).

This can be incredibly damaging to youths of different ethnic and racial backgrounds, as mass media has a strong hand in shaping people's identities, anxieties and ambitions. The messages media tells are often regarded by society as absolute truths. Young women of colour are made to feel inferior and ashamed of their own bodies as they literally cannot reach this ideal, although not for lack of trying; there is an entire cosmetic market for skin-whitening products (see figure 3). People will go to dangerous lengths to achieve these beauty ideals, which means that the fashion industry and other media forms must be held responsible.

Studies have been conducted that show the negative impacts of these portrayals of beauty in media. Latina girls under the age of 18 have been found to have equal or higher rates of eating disorders than white girls in the same age bracket, and describe a similar thin, ideal body.

The greatest level of eating disorders among Mexican-Americans are present in those that have been assimilated the most into American culture, and exposed to high levels of its media. They realize that their bodies are considered undesirable, and are doing everything to try and fit in.

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Figure 2 (above): A comparison between the image of Gabourey Sidibe used for the cover of Elle magazine in 2011, and an unedited photo. Her skin and hair colour is lightened considerably in the former.

Figure 3 (right): An advertisement for skin-whitening products which presents as a kind of before-and-after image. “Before and after” comparisons almost always have a negative-to-positive connotation; similar advertising techniques are used to promote the abilities of weight loss or acne treatments. It promotes darker skin as something to be ashamed of.

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Much like the use of African American men in fashion media, women of colour are used as props to surround a white model\textsuperscript{17}. They are treated as generic, interchangeable objects there to illustrate the brilliance of the white woman; nothing more than a part of the landscape. The settings also place people of different races not only geographically distant, but temporally; although Africa and China both contain teeming cities, fashion photography has them stuck firmly in the past with images of untouched landscapes and ancient clothing stereotypes (see figures 4 and 5).

Figure 4 (right): This image depicts a white woman in the foreground, with a man in the background. The man’s features are indistinguishable in the fog that serves to highlight their unimportance; save for the silhouette of the stereotypical shape of a farmer’s hat in an Asian country. Their sole purpose is as a place setting, and their outfit falls into an un-urbanised stereotype.

Figure 5 (above): This image depicts two white individuals in the foreground with a presumably African individual in the background; depth of skin tone blending into the ground and sunset. The image uses the man and vehicle solely to create the setting, in this case an African safari.

\textsuperscript{17} Mimi 2008, Background Colour, Racialicious, [19/3/14], <http://www.racialicious.com/2008/07/28/background-color/>.


When not a bland backdrop for the supposedly more important white figure, women of colour are treated like sexual objects for the white man’s gaze. African women are sexualised by and compared through imagery to exotic animals, with an untamed darkness\(^{18}\) (see figure 6). Latinas are portrayed as curvy, sexy and seductive\(^{19}\) (see figure 7): Asian women are also hypersexualised\(^{20}\). Native Americans are compared to primitive beings and type-casted as “sexy Pocahontas”\(^{21}\) (see figure 8).

There is a current trend in models to have unconventionally beautiful women with features that would have previously had them labelled as ugly, however, this is limited to white models. Top models of colour are still perfect by western beauty standards; their ethnicity is seen as enough of a point of difference, so they cannot be lacking in any other aspect\(^{22}\).

Although fashion media conveys white western society’s attitude towards women of colour, in no way is it an actual portrayal of these societies. In a country such as Australia, almost half of Australians were born overseas or have one parent who was born overseas. Approximately 2.4% of the population are Indigenous Australians, and combined the country speaks over 200 different languages\(^{23}\). Likewise in America, approximately 36% of women are women of colour\(^{24}\).

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Influence on Fashion

Despite their low amount of representation, the fashion industry still uses stereotypes of the “otherness” of women of colour to exoticise white models. Disregarding society’s awareness of the problematic nature of things such as blackface and yellowface, even now they are used on catwalks and in photoshoots (see figures 13 and 14). Native American headdresses are worn whilst ignoring the immense disrespect that it shows. Props from different societies combined with heavy spray tans or well-known hair styles claim these cultures with no understanding of their significance. The act of appropriating is used to create a forbidden sexiness, a racial fetishisation to draw in the consumer.

This can also be seen in examples such as orientalism, which dates back centuries and is still alive today, as illustrated by Victoria’s Secret in 2012 (see figure 15).

Figure 13 (left): Amongst many such recent examples, Vogue Netherlands used blackface in 2013.

Figure 14 (above): In 2011 Crystal Renn used yellowface in a copy of Vogue Japan.

Figure 15 (below): Victoria’s Secret’s Go East range uses prints, hairstyles, accessories and, if it weren’t hint enough, the word “geisha” to sell Japanese culture as a sexual fantasy; although they only define a vague “Exotic East”. It does so by using these stereotypes, but instead presenting them on a distinctly white model.

Positive precedents for representation include Givenchy, whom in their spring 2014 collection’s advertisement campaign used all women of colour models. Modeling agency IMG has stated they wanted to increase diversity in age, race and size. They also stated that they won’t segment their models into divisions based on how they don’t conform to the standard model- all the models will be listed together, as equals. Although unable to compare to the website prior to this date, the current website as of May 2014 hosts a range of racially diverse models (see figure 16).

Indigenous Fashion Unearthed (IFU) is a program that has been running since 2012, dedicated to providing pathways and opportunities for Indigenous Australian and New Zealand designers, as well as training for runway and print modeling.

There is an increasing amount of smaller labels that are concerned by the lack of multifaceted representation in the fashion industry, as well as media in general. SZN and Pure Pod are examples of labels with designers that understand the importance of representation both socially, ethically and economically; using models of colour at Canberra’s 2014 FashFest.

The Diversity Coalition was launched in 2013, addressing letters to fashion houses in an effort to encourage designers to increase racial diversity on runways, bluntly stating those that are performing poorly. However, in the interest of one media minority, they put down another; claiming that using Asian models is the same as using white models. This completely denies the existence of anti-Asian racism, and ignores their equal or lesser representation on the runway in comparison to “black” individuals.

Rick Owen’s Spring 2014 collection used African American dancers of various body sizes in his performance. However, whilst this was a form of representation, it was not positive representation. The choreography was angry, and the women were presented with the stereotype of a vicious, animalistic darkness (see figure 17). This is typical of representation in mainstream fashion. The show used the racial bodies of the dancers as a spectacle; a way to draw press.

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32 Dlouhy S 2014, CIT fashion student assignment- quick questions, [22/4/14], <suzan@szn.com.au>.
Donovan K 2014, CIT fashion student assignment- quick questions, [10/4/14], <kelli@podproductions.com.au>.
TIMELINE OF WOMEN OF COLOUR IN FASHION MEDIA

1940 - 1950:
- 1950s: The "Black is Beautiful" movement starts in America, a reaction by African-American women to the way media was telling them that being beautiful was impossible with their genetic features. This coincided with the start of the African-American civil rights movement (1955-1968).

1950 - 1960:
- 1960s: New photography technology moves fashion outdoors to more documentary-style imagery. As a result, racist stereotypes of African Americans are portrayed as and believed to be the truth.
- 1961: Pat Cleveland first begins modelling and is successful in both magazines and on the runway, however, she is disillusioned by the racism she faced.

1960 - 1970:
- 1968: America's first African-American supermodel, Naomi Ruth Sims, became the first to feature on the cover of Ladies' Home Journal. She is an icon to the "Black is Beautiful" movement.
- 1969: Harper's Bazaar used the African American armed bandit/outlaw as a subject of fashionable desire.
- 1974: Beverly Johnson was the first African-American on the cover of the US Vogue.

1970 - 1980:
- 1980s and 1990s: There are a number of multiracial supermodels on the runway. However, despite increased representation, these models still face racism throughout the industry, and feature on much less magazine covers than runways.

1980 - 1990:
- 1987: Naomi Campbell is the first dark-skinned woman to feature on the British Vogue cover.
- 1988: Naomi Campbell is the first dark-skinned woman to feature on the French Vogue cover.

1990 - 2000:
- 2000s: Almost no models of colour are on the runway or magazine covers. Women of colour are reduced to single slots in shows of hundreds, or thousands.

2000 - 2010:
- 2008: Vogue runs article "Is Fashion Racist?", crying out at the lack of progress.
- 2009: Old Navy’s "SuperModelquins" include mannequins of various races.
- 2011: Jourdan Dunn was chosen as the face of Yves Saint Laurent, Shay Mitchell for Pantene and Shu Pei for Maybelline New York, among others.

2010 - 2013:
- 2013: The Diversity Coalition is launched in an effort to encourage designers to increase racial diversity on runways, addressing letters to fashion houses and blatantly stating the designers that need to pick up their game.

2013 - 2014:
- 2014: There are several new multiethnic models on the runway; women such as Grace Mahary, Imaan Hammam and Cindy Bruna.

Developments in media technology play a large role in how and what is communicated in fashion media.

MAGAZINES AND PHOTOGRAPHY  BLACK AND WHITE TV  COLOUR TV  INTERNET
Contemporary Ideas and Creative Direction

A predicted macro trend for autumn/winter 2015/16, as described on WGSN, is that of “Social Superheroes”36. There are several different approaches to this movement where designers take upon themselves to address problems regarding sustainability and the environment; product lifecycle; privacy in the contemporary world; and societal issues. Regarding the erasure and misrepresentation of women of colour, this theoretical position is about taking a proactive approach but also about playing the part of a “design detective” (A/W 15/16 Macro Trends, WGSN, pg 7); exploring the social systems that shape this dynamic, and creating an open flow of communication to discuss this.

Trends

In the 2010s, representation of women of colour in fashion media has been slowly improving. In 2011, Jourdan Dunn was chosen as the face of Yves Saint Laurent, Shay Mitchell for Pantene and Shu Pei for Maybelline New York, among others37. In 2014, there were new multiethnic models on the runway38; women such as Grace Mahary, Imaan Hammam and Cindy Bruna. Old Navy’s “SuperModelquins” have begun including mannequins of various races39. However, this is still only a small amount of representation. It is the smaller brands and organisations that are leading the way regarding racial and ethnic diversity. Although the runway and high-end fashion has proven slow to take up the idea of a diverse cast of ethnicities in models, in the future, smaller labels will continue to pave the way. The internet will help these to create a much larger impact than otherwise possible, and as a new generation become adults, designers who are socially educated will become more common in the industry.

Context

Although this theoretical position is about challenging social inequities, it is also a viable economic strategy.

Despite many labels claiming that the current marketing method sells better40, a logical conclusion could be drawn that including and targeting the largest luxury goods consumers, countries like China, South Korea and Saudi Arabia, would be more effective; especially in such a global market41. This is supported by research; studies by Dr Ben Barry conclude that consumers react more favourably and have increased purchasing intentions when models reflect their size, age and race42. Anecdotal evidence includes the July 2008 issue of Italian Vogue43. A magazine that usually has a small circulation, it ended up with a re-print of 40 000 copies and global distribution. The magazine featured only dark-skinned models, as well as articles about women of colour, and is the highest grossing issue of Italian Vogue in history.

Using models who are women of colour for a label such as Balenciaga will create aspiration figures for women of colour in the corporate world, as well as normalise the idea of successful women of colour to mainstream society. Ambitious women of colour currently face a large amount of resistance in the professional world44.

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36 WGSN Creative Direction Team 2013, A/W 15/16 Macro Trends, WGSN, [20/3/14], <www.wgsn.com/content/report/Creative_Direction/Autumn_Winter_2015_16Macro/a_w_15_16_macrotrends.html>
The inclusion of more models of colour would be well received; one only needs to look so far as to the warm welcome of plus sized models by the people they represent. There are already many bloggers voicing their dissatisfaction with the current system as it pertains to women of colour.

Solution

To consistently, so that it cannot be written off as a novelty, use female models of colour, without playing off bland or sexualised stereotypes. Women of colour need to be presented as multi-faceted human beings, realising that they make up a large percentage of this planet’s population as well as individual western countries.

It is important to think as you observe the contemporary world. Being anti-racist requires conscious effort\(^45\), to critically reflect on one’s own actions and to affect change in society around you.

Communication is an important tool for instigating change. People need to be informed of these issues, so that they may take the initiative to boycott problematic products and voice their dissent to people they know and through online media. If companies are made aware of the opinions of their consumers, then there is a chance for reform. For young women of colour, awareness gives them a chance to resist the message that fashion media is currently feeding them\(^46\).

There are currently small pockets challenging the norm, such as the online shop Colored Girls Hustle\(^47\), which delivers a message of pride in imperfect bodies, and the bodies of women of colour. There is also progress in mainstream fashion, but at a pace that is incredibly slow. As we work to change the majority, it is also important to support the message of these smaller groups.

Conclusion

Women of colour are treated as less than human, sexually objectified, and for the majority completely erased by fashion media. White-washing sends the message that the beauty of other races and ethnicities is not beauty at all. Combined, this has a detrimental effect on young women of colour and their futures.

Fashion media needs to correctly and in a multifaceted manner represent a subsection of women that is not nearly as small as implied, in order to challenge oppressive stereotypes and create relatable and/or aspiration figures.

As discussed in this theoretical position, consistency in diversity is crucial to creating change. I will place emphasis on diversity in models, to be continued in future ranges, and later my professional career.

As a person in a position of privilege, it is within my power to make a difference. Although it would be preferable for women of colour to make this change themselves, as they would have a deeper understanding of and connection to these problems, with my white privilege I am still obligated to act. If everybody does nothing, nothing will change.

\(^{45}\) Pham M 2011, Unintentionally Eating the Other, Racialicious, [19/3/14].
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