

Media Portrayal of Female Models' Sexuality and Ethnicity in Fashion Advertisements

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Fashion magazines have constantly promoted mostly European figures—thin, perfect-looking models—who emit an unattainable beauty, whose features are seen as more attractive and sexually appealing (Aybay & Kara, 2018; Paxton et al., 2005). According to prior studies, continuous or daily exposure of sexualized images may result in higher levels of body dissatisfaction, greater body conscious and objectifying behaviors, self-objectification, greater support of sexist beliefs and adversarial sexual beliefs, greater tolerance of sexual violence toward women, and lessened self-esteem (Bernard et al., 2020; Brown, 2002; Cook & Kaiser, 2004; Ward, 2016). Furthermore, exposure to sexualized images leads both women and men to perceive lower women's competence, morality, and humanity (Ward, 2016). As media continuously portray sexualized or sexually objectifying female models, questions arise about the potential impact of these model images on viewers (Ward, 2016). Especially, fashion advertisements tend to sexualize the female body to sell products, and women and girls are more likely affected by the appearances and sexuality of models' images in fashion ads (Gramazio et al., 2021). A recent study shows women and men, who view female sexualized ads, have a lower appeal and intentions to buy the products (Gramazio et al., 2021). Besides, ads in magazines pertaining to Caucasian models were seen as having slightly less sexualized characteristics than those of ethnic minority backgrounds (Graff, 2013). It is unknown how media have portrayed female models' sexuality and ethnicity in fashion ads over decades. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine how sexuality and ethnicity of female models in fashion ads have changed from the 1990s to the 2020s. Body objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) was applied to explain how female models are sexually objectified through the interaction of viewing the person as an object, based on the person's body and how they are treated as an implementation for sexual pleasure in fashion ads in U.S. culture.

A content analysis of fashion ads in the U.S. *Vogue* magazine was conducted. A total of 283 fashion ads totaling 341 female models were collected from the July and August volume for 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2020. From each magazine, all one-paged fashion ads with female models were collected. If any of the full-paged advertisements had multiple female models in the ad, then all female models in the ad were used for the content analysis. Modified from DuRant et al. (1997), the presence of female models' sexualization was measured using a 4-point semantic differential scale, including (1) no references to sexuality, (2) present but minor references to sexuality, (3) moderate level of sexuality, and (4) significant level of sexuality. Female models' ethnicities were assessed as European, African, Hispanic, Asian, Native American and Other. Two coders independently analyzed the same ads and negotiated coding if there were discrepancies between the raters. The two raters' agreement for data coding of female models' sexuality and ethnicity in fashion ads was 76%, indicating acceptable inter-rater reliability.

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Results indicated female models' sexuality in fashion ads was moving like a pendulum. Throughout the years, changes were constantly in women being sexualized. In the July and August issues for 1990, 62.2% were no reference to sexuality, 26.38% were present, but minor references to sexuality, 9.84% showed a moderate level of sexuality, and 1.57% had a significant level of sexuality. All female models in the fashion ads were 97.64% European, 1.57% African and .79% Asian. Regarding female models' sexuality by ethnicity, only 37.80% of European model showed a minor to significant level of sexuality. For the July and August issues in 2000, there were increases in sexuality of female models in fashion ads, compared with those in 1990. There were 46.59% of the ads with no reference to sexuality, 16.48% of the ads were present, but minor references to sexuality, 20.45% showed a moderate level of sexuality, and 16.48% had a significant level of sexuality for a major part of the ad. The ethnicity of the female models in these issues included 82.95% showcased European models, 11.93% African, 2% Asian, and 2.27% Hispanic. European models were more sexualized (43.19%), followed by 5.12% African, 2.5% Hispanic, and 2% Asian models. In the July and August issues of 2010, there was an increase in ads with 53.62% no references to sexuality, 29.71% present, but minor references to sexuality, 10.87% a moderate level of sexuality, and 5.80% had a significant level of sexuality for major part of the ad. The female models in the fashion ads were 92.03% European, 5.07% African, 2.90% Asian, and none for Hispanic. The female models with minor to a significant level of sexuality were 41.31% European, 5.5% African, and 1.5% Asian. In the July and August issues of 2020, 80.95% had no reference to sexuality, 9.52% were present, but minor references to sexuality, 5.95% were a moderate level of sexuality, and 3.57% had a significant level of sexuality. For ethnicity, 80.95% of the female models were European, 14.29% African, and 4.76% Asian. European American models were still dominant in fashion ads, but there was an increase in ethnic diversity of female models in the July and August issues of 2020, compared to previous decades. Interestingly, there was a decrease of a minor to significant level of sexuality. Only 5.5% were European, 1.5% were African, and 0.50% were Asian.

Overall, results indicated significant increases of sexualized model images in 2000, but a decrease of sexualized model images in 2010 and 2020, compared with those in 1990. The technological development of the internet and hyper sexuality of pop culture in the 2000s might lead to an increase in sexualized ads (Jackson & Vares, 2015; McGowan, 2005). Sociocultural movements such as "Me Too" or "Body Positivity" in the 2010s may empower women and girls to resist sexualized media images and protect them from sexual objectification of their bodies in the media (Zavattaro, 2021). Most female models depicted in *Vogue* was predominantly white across all decades, but the ethnicity of female models was more diversified in the 2000s and 2020s. Over the decades, White female models were more sexualized or sexually objectified in the fashion ads, indicating greater or more negative influences of sexualization on white viewers than other ethnicities. This study provides an understanding of media portrayal of female models' sexuality and their ethnicity in fashion ads, which potentially influence young women's body objectification and self-sexualization tendency. Based on these findings, it is suggested fashion marketers or advertising professionals who sexualize female model images to understand the negative impact on women and girls. They may need to develop ads, which focus more on an

empowering message of body positivity rather than sexual appeal. It is also suggested school and public media policymakers consider more critical media education or develop prevention and treatment strategies, which may assist individuals to resist sexualized or sexually objectified media images and empower them to build more positive, desirable body images and self-esteem.

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