What do fashion designers look like?
Comparing representations of stock photograph designers and professional designers

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Background: Stock photographs are created in such a way as to efficiently communicate a clear and simple message (Frosh, 2001). One of the primary missions of stock photography is "universal appeal" (Purcell & Purcell, 1993, p. 15), and to achieve it, stock photograph creators construct an idealized and "glossy, formulaic, multipurpose representation" (Frosh, 2001, p. 230). This study intended to evaluate how American stock photograph companies portray fashion designers. The U.S. apparel industry is a large and varied field. In 2010, there were 7,855 apparel manufacturing firms, and more than 16,000 fashion designers were employed in at least 30 states (BLS, 2012). Over 200 institutions offer secondary degrees in fashion-related programs ("Top 75," 2013). Clearly, the occupation of fashion designer is of interest to many Americans, making it important to understand how it is characterized in the media and to compare its depictions to reality. To explore this idea, this study developed two research questions: (1) How do stock photographs represent fashion designers? and (2) How do those representations compare to those presented by professional designers of themselves?

Method: To complete such a assessment, content analysis was chosen as a systematic method for classifying key ideas in communication (GAO, 1996). A coding sheet was developed to evaluate person-related (e.g., gender, race, and age) and setting-related variables. Setting-related variables included the location depicted and the props visible in the photo. An audit coder was employed and discrepancies were negotiated until agreement was reached. The images for this study were found on three stock photography websites (Fotolia, iStock, and Shutterstock) and the websites of the professional designers under consideration. Twenty-five representations of fashion designers from each of the three stock photography sites were compared to 25 representations of professional established American fashion designers selected in part because of their inclusion in *Impact: 50 Years of the Council of Fashion Designers of America*.

Results: Though the stock photograph sites were evaluated as independent entities, in reality their depictions of fashion designers were fairly consistent. The three stock sites each presented fashion designers as overwhelmingly young, white, attractive, and female and in a manner consistent with stereotypically gendered qualities. For example, 30% of the women were seated, but every man was standing, typically considered a position of strength and authority. In addition, the men were depicted as older than the women, which can imply a distinction between expertise and inexperience, insinuating that men are skilled and women are not. This perception was supported through the image titles; 16% of stock photographs of female fashion designers had the word "young" in the title, but none of the men were titled. In all, the stock photographs reinforced the perspective of masculine expertise and skill.

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Stock fashion designers appeared to be decidedly more homogeneous than professional designers. While the vast majority of stock fashion designers were women (93%), more professional designers were male (56%). Age range also varied between the two groups of photographs; only one of the professional designers appeared younger than 30 as determined by the coders, while 84% of stock designers looked that way. In addition, while both stock fashion designers and professional designers were depicted as white, there was a notable difference in the proportion (88% and 76%, respectively), and 16% of the professional designers were Asian, while only 7% of the stock designers were. Other ethnicities were represented even less.

Another obvious differentiation was the use of fashion referents. Every stock photograph included fashion-related props such as fabric, dress forms, and tape measures. Of the photographs of professional designers, only two used referential props, indicating that the majority felt no need to present themselves specifically as fashion designers. In fact, while every stock photograph clearly pertained to fashion, 78% of photographs of professional designers were located in empty photography studios or unknown locations showing no fashion referents. Although stock photographs require that viewers instantaneously identify the subject depicted, professional fashion designers seemed not so motivated.

Conclusion: For all their differences, the two groups of photographs seemed to accurately represent the current state of the fashion industry, a field that has been historically associated with women but in which "higher-management jobs and prominent positions of status" are held by men (Karpova, Garrin, & Lee, 2014). Stock photography, in creating the idealized and generic version of fashion design, has instead constructed a specific world in which all but white, young, attractive women are excluded. Given the ubiquity of stock photography and its goal of effective and efficient communication, it is possible that anyone other than that small subset of people might feel barred from fashion design and instead choose another career path, resulting in an impoverished field, especially an issue in one that thrives on a diversity of ideas.

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