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Research Paper

An Analysis of Vogue:  
Femininity & Intersectionality as a Societal Standard in Fashion

Intro:

Clothing is something that everyone everywhere engages with, whether they care about it or not. Fashion changes as different cultures' media and lifestyles change, making it a very fascinating concept to research. I am interested in comparing *Vogue* from 1975 to *Vogue* in 2019 to see how their intersectionality and feminine ideals as societal standards have evolved in fashion coverage.

Intersectionality as a term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to reference the overlapping nature of privilege and oppression (Otis, 2019). It is the interconnectedness of race, class and gender that can create an overlap for privilege or oppression. The ideal of femininity can be defined as "Fashion's ideal woman is thin, young, White, non-pregnant, and with sufficient resources to invest in beauty-a narrow construction that excludes most women" (Sternadori, Miglena (2014). Societal standards can be defined in terms of hegemonic discourse and master narrative, "Hegemony is consent to a dominant ideology by a whole social system, even those who are adversely affected by it and who therefore should be resistant to that ideology being imposed on them" (Rosenberry, Jack, 2017).

For the purpose of this project, I will be looking at feminism through a Western lens in terms of cultural relativity. I want to see if *Vogue* has evolved or changed its fashion coverage to be more intersectional as well as evolved in what it means to be ideally feminine.

## Lit Review:

*Vogue* is viewed as a powerhouse publication and remains incredibly influential after 120 years of publication. *Vogue* claims to inspire women through strong female leaders (Tangdall, 2017). It is interesting to consider how the discourse produced by and surrounding *Vogue* can influence the lives of women in the U.S. *Vogue* is part of a huge network of magazines owned by Conde Nast. It is associated with luxury and high-end fashion and attracts middle to upper-class readers. U.S. *Vogue* has an audience defined as having style, affluence and being active (Kopnina, 2007). It is also stated that fashion magazines are a messenger for the fashion industry, thus allowing their messages to be delivered to their publics (Kopnina, 2007).

Fashion magazines are viewed as the voice of the fashion industry because they put together visuals and text to get their message out there. They can dominate cultural patterns because they are a form of mass media (InSook, 2013). Even with the decline of the print magazine, *Vogue* still leads the way as the top women's fashion magazine and is considered widely recognizable. This is due to their use of simplicity and muted colors, (Hackney, 2014). Now more than ever print magazines must grab people's attention.

After the examination of *Vogue's* discourse, Tangdall found that it reflects the shifting ideologies of the feminist movement over the last century. As Tangdall 2017 wrote, "Gender performance is informed by commonly held ideologies among whatever Discourse Communities people wish to associate with, but these communities are ever-changing and evolving as ideologies shift due to people's changing values and beliefs". Standards and beliefs do not stay the same forever, the media is ever-evolving which aids in influencing the public who consumes it. From the early 1900s to the 2010s the emphasis on women's marital status-declined, there was

less focus on being wives and mothers and the media's focus turned instead to reflect women in the workforce. By the early 1970s, what was considered attractive and the ideal female body were slender figures, smaller butts, and larger breasts (Mazur, 1986). The “ideal” figure for women in society went through many fluctuations from the 1920s up through the ‘70s and of course, is different now in the current day. A shift began in the 1970s that began to popularize the miniskirt and designer jeans as the focus began to drop below the waist. Designer jeans advertisements began to focus solely on women’s butts (Mazur, 1986). According to Insook 2013, the ‘70s began an ever-shifting peace in terms of women’s fashion. “Vogue, in 1972, showed women how to dare to bare it. Casual, soft, textured styles in neutral colorings accentuated easy separates dressing” (InSook, 2013).

Fashion is often viewed as a feminist issue and feminists are often credited for the demand for more comfortable clothing as well as the switch to women wearing pants in the U.S. (Sternadori, Miglena, 2014). Feminism is seen as a political issue because it implies women are implementing active change, while some feminist scholars view fashion as being inherently un-feminist because it concerns itself with unpolitical issues (Sternadori, Miglena. (2014). “The topic of feminism should create an inherent contradiction with fashion magazines” (Sternadori, Miglena. 2014).

Feminism has historically opposed mainstream fashion. The need to conform to society's ideals of what women should wear and look like opposes feminists core issues Scott, 2006). However, Scott, 2006 argues that it is the women with the most education and connections to power that tell other women of society what they should be wearing. So should feminism and fashion be at such odds?

Much of the literature discusses the change in Hegemonic discourse in *Vogue* over time. “The hegemonic practice of the use of gendered titles peaked in the 1960s...”( Tangdall, 2017). After the 1960s and the rise of the second wave of feminism, *Vogue's* discourse changed, they stopped referring to women by their husband’s last names. “Glamour” was no longer seen as a positive word to associate with fashion in women's magazines, with the second wave of feminism the “natural” look was back in style and becoming more desirable over the sexualized term “glamour” (Dyhouse, 2013). This can be seen as yet another example of shifting ideologies in the Hegemonic discourse of the time. After the 1930s, *Vogue* started promoting specific brands and products through the use of consumer jargon. They specifically used the terms “Women, Woman, and They” when addressing their readers, thus, creating a discourse community of readers who identify as women (Tangdall, 2017). There is a certain dialogue that is coined as the term “women’s language” which can be considered the language that women use when communicating and language used to describe them. This is used systematically to deny women access to power and develop consumer-driven personalities (Tangdall, 2017).

This leads to the idea of identity holding power, people who identify with certain communities gain or lose power depending on the situations. According to Sara Tangdall’s conclusion, the discourse within *Vogue* promotes aesthetic perfection. “Women implicitly reinforce the patriarchy by participating in the synthetic sisterhood discourse community, which is driven by the consumerism culture inherently found in capitalism” (Tangdall, 2017). However, there was some progress towards women’s freedom of choice and buying power as women stopped being referred to by their husband’s names this gave women the choice over their consumerism as they began gaining financial freedom.

Popular media encourages consumerism which is often perpetrated through fashion magazines such as *Vogue*. Fashion connotes and elite- upper-class status, which reflects such status and wealth. Although some argue that fashion is important to women's mobility in the workspace due to things like hiring and equal pay, which is contradictory to the feminist idea that ability and will-power should propel women higher. Sternadori and Miglena state that *Vogue* references feminism in sales pitches for designer clothes. Their research was a framing analysis of feminism in the online archives of *Cosmopolitan* and *Vogue*. Their findings showed that references to feminism in a political context have been on the rise since 2008.

Clothing is an everyday object, something we observe continually in our lives, which makes it one of the most prominently observed features in our society. Barthes discusses that fashion magazines often hide the semantic messages linked within them (Barthes, 2013). The function of a piece of clothing is never missing from its tie to a societal status or meaning beyond its general function. "Whether causality or finality, the phrasing used in a fashion magazine always has a subtle tendency to transform the linguistic status of the clothing item into one of naturalness or usefulness, to invest an effect or a function in the sign; in both cases, it is all about changing an arbitrary link into a natural property or a technical affinity, in short providing fashion creations with the guarantee of being eternal or empirically necessary" (Barthes, 2013). The signifier is the clothing itself and it signifies a specific meaning in society. One could be wearing a dress, however, the shape, design and color of the dress signify a specific meaning as to where one might be going or their class status.

It is believed that the perceived attractiveness of a model when used to sell a product makes a difference in terms of successfulness of sales. When a model is believed to be more

attractive the product will sell better, especially when the model's look correlates to said product. "A number of studies in both psychology and marketing show that an attractive model favorably affects attitudes toward products, advertisements, and messages" (Trampe, 2012). People view an attractive model with positive attributes and thus when they think of or see the product their brain will associate it positively (Trampe, 2012).

### Methods:

My research question is: How has *Vogue's* intersectionality and feminine ideals evolved in its fashion coverage from 1975 to 2019? In order to answer this question, I will need to define the "ideal of femininity". The ideal of femininity as mentioned above can be defined as "Fashion's ideal woman is thin, young, White, non-pregnant, and with sufficient resources to invest in beauty-a narrow construction that excludes most women", (Sternadori, Miglena. (2014).

There were 12 issues of *Vogue* published in 1975 and 12 published in 2019. I will be looking at all the issues in 1975 except for April because I did not have access to it. I will be looking at all the issues in 2019 except for January and February because I did not have access to the internal articles. I looked at all the fashion articles available in each issue unless there were more than five, in which case I only looked at five.

### Content Analysis:

My coding terms include Slim, Athleisure, Run-way looks, Gucci, Balenciaga, Prada, Givenchy, Yeezy, Versace, Dolce & Gabbana, Bags, Purses, Shoes, Necklace, Earrings, Rings, Nails, Sweaters, Crop-tops, Off-the-shoulder, T-shirt, Sports Bras, Jeans, Slacks, Leggings, Sweats, High-waisted/high rise, Shorts, Skirts Boots, Dresses, Feminine, Weightless Fabric, Smallness, Ruffle, Style, Wrap, Blouse, Sleeveless, Hat, Headscarf, T-shirt dress, Coat, Yves

Saint Laurent, Lettuce Edging, Bikini, Sexy, Provocative, Shirt-dress, Heels, Flats, Sneakers, Pretty, Jumpsuit, Suit.

I will do a semiotic analysis of every cover of *Vogue* in 1975 and every cover in 2019 that I have access to. So I will be analyzing a total of 11 issues from 1975 and 12 issues from 2019. I will be looking to see if *Vogue* has evolved in its diversity of cover models, looks and styles since 1975. This can be determined by the people/models on the cover, their race, ethnicity, hairstyles, makeup and the styling of their clothing.

I will also discuss the content within the articles regarding what is being said and how it is portrayed. How does *Vogue* describe the clothes, the ways they can be styled, the reasons that one might need them, different haircuts and makeup looks, as well as how they advertise pricing and where you can purchase the pieces? I will be comparing the language used to speak to the reader about the fashion they are inquiring about.

Do we have a more diverse range of people and styles on *Vogue* in 2019? Is *Vogue* in 2019 more intersectional? Has our ideal of modern femininity shifted to being more open and interpretive societally than in 1975? These are some of the sub-questions I am looking to answer through my qualitative analysis. The semiotic analysis will go along with my content analysis and qualitative discussion to see if the magazine covers align with the content message being written within fashion articles.

#### Discussion:

After my semiotic analysis of *Vogue's* covers from 1975 to 2019, I determined that *Vogue* has expanded its diversity, but only slightly. *Vogue* covers in 1975 are exclusively face-only shots with the models looking directly into the camera. There was one cover featuring

a person of color. With 90.9% of those models being white and 9.1% being a person of color.

The cover models in 1975 were also predominantly blonde, at 63.6%, 18.2% had black hair, and 18.2% were brunette. *Vogue* covers in 2019 featured only one cover with a face only shot, 70% of the covers were waist-up photos of the models and 20% were full body. This allowed me to be able to analyze the clothing being worn, wherein 1975 I could not see the full outfits of the cover models. Diversity expanded a little, 80% of the covers models were white, 30% people of color, and 10% Asian. There was one cover with three people (White, Asian, and Person of Color). Brunette, blonde, and black hair were all split equally at 30% in 2019 with one cover model (10%) with gray hair.

Hairstyles and makeup looks are very prominent on *Vogues* covers, even more so than clothing. In 1975 short hair was very popular; there wasn't a single model with hair longer than her shoulders. I described the hairstyle based on the month, January cover has Short (shoulder length), straight hair. February cover has short (chin length) hair blown out and backs away from the face. March cover has short (shoulder length) wavy hair flowing away from the face, middle part. May cover has short (chin length) waved in at the ends. June cover has short (chin length) blown out and away from the face. July cover has short (chin length), straight hair, long hair waving out away from the face. August cover has short (shoulder length) straight hair that turns in at the bottom, middle part. October cover has short (shoulder length) wavy hair, with a middle part. November cover has long straight hair brushed back and away from the face hanging down behind. December cover has short (chin length), with straight across long bangs, hair waving towards the face at the ends.

While in 2019 hairstyles were very messy and voluminous. The March cover has two people, the Female model has hair brushed back away from the face with wavy ends. The Male model has buzz-cut hair. April cover has three models, all messy updos, May cover has short wavy, messy hair. June cover has short hair slicked back wavy. July cover has hair that appears short, could be in an updo, Pieces sticking out on top and in the face. August has hair brushed back into a hat you can't see. September cover has hair waived at ends, bangs and hair framing face. October has very short hair that doesn't hang down at all. November has Hair is brushed back into a robe covering the head. December cover has short hair, very voluminous on top, brushed back.

Overall, *Vogue* has improved on its diversity inside the pages rather than on the cover. There are numerous articles from the 2019 issues featuring models of color as well as feature articles focused on highlighting female empowerment and women in fashion. However, from simply analyzing *Vogue's* covers, you would not see their more intersectional work. *Vogue* in 1975 had little to no women of color within its pages and focused mostly on selling women an ideal look and product. Within the pages on 2019, there is no exclusive “Fashion” section it is grouped as “Fashion & Features”, they don't specifically give fashion tips and are more focused on the imagery and layout of the photos that show the looks. These pages have small photo captions telling the designer of each piece, the model wearing it, and the price. *Vogue* in 1975 had many specifically fashion-focused articles and a section that began them called “*Vogues* Point of View” where they concentrated specifically on giving the newest advice and updates on what you should wear in the upcoming season. The clothing advertised in 1975 was still incredibly expensive and from high-end brands and stores, yet, seemed more appropriate for

daily wear. 2019 is exclusively designer brands and the collections featured are much more abstract and not really something one would wear in day-to-day life.

I hypothesized that *Vogue* would be more diverse and intersectional in 2019, which is somewhat true, but I also thought they would have more of a focus on street-style clothing and realistic daily advice. *Vogue* has turned less from a product selling and trend-setting advice to features and updates on designer collections. There was a lot of time spent on the pages in 1975 describing specific pieces and what you need for each season. 2019 *Vogue* tells you the designer and the price and focuses more on the writing work on features. *Vogue* has always been a magazine targeted towards wealthy women, promoting high-end brands and clothing that costs hundreds to thousands of dollars. In terms of fashion, *Vogue* is even less realistic in 2019 of what the majority of women would be wearing even in wealthier demographics.

My analysis showed me that *Vogue's* hegemonic discourse has changed over time. What was seen as normative in women's fashion and feminine ideals in 1975 is very different than what is viewed as normative in today's fashion magazines.

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