Subjugation and Sexualization: The Portrayal of Women in Fashion Magazines

In her study, “Reading the Representations of Black, East Asian, and White Women in Magazines for Adolescent Girls”, Sengupta states that "Women's magazines are not only thought to shape a woman's view of herself but also a society's view of her." Moreover, they "collectively comprise a 'social institution which serves to foster and maintain a cult of femininity'" (799). If the fashion magazines are indeed a means of shaping a woman's view of herself as well as society's view of her, then the representations of women and marginalized women within these magazines becomes very important. However, when one flips through a mainstream fashion magazine it is like looking through a catalogue of cookie-cutter women with different shades of hair. We then have to wonder what the advertisements as well as fashion spreads are saying about women and the kinds of stereotypes they might be implying.

I spent a great deal of my teenage years devoted to the pages of Teen Vogue and Seventeen magazines. I was mesmerized by fashion and longed to look like the models on the pages. I lived for their how-to sections on hair and make-up and I purchased the make-up products that they recommended. As a young adult, I find myself purchasing Vogue when I see it in the check-out line at the grocery store. However, when I flip through these magazines, I am surprised at how sexualized everything seems to be.

On the surface, one would think that fashion magazines are simply unique clothing designs and expensive labels being advertised on the glossy pages. However, there are messages and implications in the poses of the models and in the representations of marginalized groups of people. Additionally, there are a number of racial and gender stereotypes within the glossy pages
of their fashion magazine as well. Motivated to understand what these messages are really implying, I decided to look into the stereotypes placed on women within fashion magazines. Having been an avid reader of these magazines in my youth, I am interested in uncovering the messages that were being delivered to me and my peers and the effects that this might have had on us and society as a whole.

In order to understand the effects of fashion magazines on readers, I investigated popular fashion magazines and broke them into two parts: advertisements and fashion spreads. Advertisements are pages of the magazine that represent a brand or a product. These pages are submitted to the magazine by the brand or the company wishing to advertise. Fashion spreads are the pages that the magazine uses to display the newest clothing lines. These are pages that the photographers hired by the magazines as well as the editors of the magazine have chosen to place within the magazine. I looked at two main stream adult fashion magazines: Vogue and Elle. I also investigated two mainstream teen magazines: Cosmo Girl and Seventeen. I investigated the two parts of the magazines separately while summarizing the images that were seen within the two parts and comparing them against each other. I was able to notice common trends of stereotypes being used and the sexualizing and objectification of women's bodies.

This is a difficult topic to research, as the results must be reached by examining the elements of the photographs within these magazines as opposed to examining the photographs as a whole. In order to examine the elements of the photographs, I utilized a method used by Millard in his studies on fashion and advertising photographs. This method looks at six specific things: "relative size, seen when one person is displayed larger or taller than another person; feminine touch, where a person's hands or fingers are used to caress or cradle an object; function ranking, observed when one person is portrayed as instructing another person; ritualization of
subordination, in which a person is shown in a submissive position relative to others or to the viewer; licenses withdrawal, in which a person appears psychologically removed from his or her surroundings; and the family, observed in photographs that portray family relationships" (Millard 660).

**Sexualization in Fashion Advertisements**

As noted above, there are two categories of pictures that one can investigate within fashion magazines: fashion spreads and advertisements. A shocking "6 billion advertisements appear in magazines and other periodicals" and occupies 52% of a magazine's content (Plous 628). According to Plous, advertisements contain the most shocking stereotyping on women. Women's bodies, within magazines, are exposed four times more often than men. Not only this, but it has also been found that "magazine advertisements have a tendency to portray women's body parts, rather than their faces" (660). For example, "by 1993-1994, 42.8% of the advertisements with White women contained a display of cleavage or breasts, compared to 22.8% in 1985-1986" (634). Moreover, within advertising women are also shown as the submissive sex objects.

Within my own research, I found specific examples of this amongst all the high-fashion designers. The most interesting example of an advertisement sexualizing women is Dolce and Gabbana's advertisement within the March 2008 edition of *Vogue* (Fig 1A and 1B). Dolce and Gabbana, interestingly enough, were able sexualize the women within these ads while keeping them fully clothed. The advertisement, consisting of 4 full pages making up 2 spreads, consists of 3 cookie-cutter women. All the women are ghostly white with the same shade of blonde hair that looks almost straw-like and made to look untamed. All are wearing similar dresses and are posed in extremely provocative ways. On the second spread one of the women looks like she is trying to
rip herself out of her dress, looking untamed and out of control. All the women are either touching themselves in some manner, or are sitting or laid out creating a submissive appearance, aside from the model pulling at her dress, as seen in figure 1A. Within the advertisement seen in figure 1B for Dolce and Gabbana, one woman is posed with her body language being completely open. The other two models in the photo are posed closely touching each other with an evoking look, almost giving the feel of a sexual attraction or a look of longing. Women in advertisements like this become sexualized objects even as they are fully clothed. Therefore, it is unfortunate for women who are fully clothed in their day to day life, for there are images circulating in popular media that imply that they are still highly sexualized objects.

Figure 1A: Dolce and Gabbana advertisement from March 2008
Making the Already Marginalized Invisible

The representation of marginalized groups was shockingly low in the big name fashion magazines, such as *Vogue* and *Elle*. As found in the Plous study on biases of race and gender in magazine advertisements, "African American's appeared in 10.1 % of advertisements carried by magazines with a predominantly White readership" (633). This number is close to the actual representation of African Americans in the United States with 12.9 percent of the population being African American according to the 2000 U.S. Census. However, within Millard's study, amongst the advertisements in which African Americans did appear, not many of them were found in full-page advertisements. On the other hand, 89% of full-page advertisements contained White women. Additionally, according to Millard’s study, and noted in mine as well, there were little to no pictures of any other racial groups.
Within my own research, I found it interesting that within the advertisements, Black women were posed either amongst a group of White women or were significantly small in proportion to the picture or the items in the picture. An example of this is the Louis Vuitton advertisement within the March 2008 edition of *Vogue* (Fig. 2). The Black woman in the advertisement is lying in the middle of a group of five White women. Also later in the magazine is an advertisement for Ports in which a Black woman is pictured in the middle of a vast space (Fig 3). Not only is she significantly small amongst the lands surrounding her, but she is only shown on one page of the two page spread.

Figure 2: Louis Vuitton advertisement from *Vogue’s* March 2008 issue.
It’s All in the Pose

The element of body position is also very important within advertisements. Plous' research found that White women were nearly twice more likely to appear in a low-status position than Black women. They found that, "of the advertisements containing White females, 17.4% showed a White woman in a low-status position (e.g. on her knees), compared with corresponding figures of 9.3% for Black women" (636). It is, therefore, also interesting that "Black models were more likely to be portrayed in a submissive pose (licensed withdrawal), whereas an explicitly sexual pose (body display) was portrayed more often by White models" (Millard 664). An example of this explicitly sexual pose can be seen in the advertisement for Bebe in *Vogue’s* March 2008 Magazine (Fig 4). The woman in this advertisement has her shirt unbuttoned revealing her lingerie and she is posed in a low-status position, sitting with her legs spread apart and has her hands touching her body on her inner thighs.
Fashion: What do the Clothes Mean

Another element that can be focused on within advertisements is clothing. Within the Plous study they found that 9.2 percent of women, despite race, were depicted in bikini-style swimsuits or undergarments. The exposure of Black women was also found to mirror the exposure of the White women mentioned above, with an increase of over 40% in breast exposure of Black women. Plous also found that Black women were displayed in animal prints more then White women were. "Of the 43 advertisements that displayed animal prints, 30 (69.8%) showed a Black woman wearing the print" (Plous 637). Moreover, a jungle cat pattern was used within 70% of the animal print patterned advertisements. This is a very problematic finding. In a research study conducted by Gladden, it was found that people who wore animal prints were believed to be "more sexually
active than other women, less educated, lower income, more concerned about their physical appearance, less concerned about society's problems, less supportive of the feminist movement, and more likely to be African American” (Plous 640). The usage of animal print, therefore, on Black women in so many of the advertisements is a reinforcement of negative stereotypes.

Take for example, the Roberto Cavalli advertisements for his H&M line in Vogue’s September 2007 issue. He created a line of animal print outfits; however, the print advertisements to be used in magazines such as Vogue and Elle were extremely animalistic. In figure 5, we see a woman sprawled out on thick tree branches, appearing like she is ready to pounce on some prey. Her make-up is purposely done to make her eyes appear cat-like, and I feel there is a connection between the sex kitten as mentioned above. Her skin is extremely bronzed and her hair is blowing wildly out around her legs are sprawled apart. Her dress blows in the wind around her, leaving us with a lot of leg to look at. She is highly sexualized by the animal print, through making her animalistic while also revealing more of her body. This could be an example of why such stereotypes now lie in the usage of animal print on women.
**Vogue: Explicit Subjugation**

*Vogue* is considered to be one of the most influential fashion magazines of our time. *Vogue* is ranked 73rd amongst the top selling magazines according to the Audit Bureau of Circulation. As Caroline Weber wrote in The New York Times in December 2006, "*Vogue* is to our era what the idea of God was, in Voltaire's famous parlance, to his: if it didn't exist, we would have to invent it. Revered for its editorial excellence and its visual panache, the magazine has long functioned as a bible for anyone worshiping at the altar of luxury, celebrity and style. And while we perhaps take for granted the extent to which this trinity dominates consumer culture today, *Vogue’s* role in catalyzing its rise to pre-eminence cannot be underestimated."

Within the nearly 600 page *Vogue* magazine for March of 2008 I found shocking results. Within the advertisements, 89.5%, or 306 out of 342, of photo advertisements consisted of White
women. Within these advertisements, celebrities typically represented marginalized races. Jennifer Lopez was pictured in advertisements for her perfume and Rihanna was pictured for Covergirl cosmetics. Within the pages of the fashion spreads, 85.4%, or 187 out of 219, of the photos consisted of White women. I also found that marginalized people were either depicted in photos for human-interest stories or they were one amongst a numerous amount of White models within a fashion photo. Similar to research done by Millard, I found that 5.9% (13 out of 219) of fashion spreads contained Black models, while Black models were only seen in 4.1% (14 out of 342) of the advertisements. This supports Millard's point that, "a significant race by type of photograph showed that Black models were judged to be more attractive in advertisements whereas White models were judged to be more attractive in fashion spreads" (668).

Also within Vogue magazine, I would like to concentrate on a fashion spread run in the September 2006 Italian issue, declared “State of Emergency”. First of all, the entire spread consists of only White women. Their clothes are tight and their attitudes appear animalistic. However, the issue also had shocking images of violence against females (see fig. 6). This is a prime example of White women in a low-status position. One would be hard pressed to put a woman down lower than forcibly pinned to the ground by what appears to be a man's booted foot. All the while, she is also being stared down by a man hovering over her face. However, this is even sexualized with the revealing of the woman’s thigh and chest.
Figure 7 is another photograph from this fashion spread. In this photo, we see an officer pushing a woman’s head into the ground while holding onto a chunk of her hair. Guns are pointed at her and she is left in a flailing pose on the ground. Again, her pose is very animalistic, as well as the treatment that is being given to her. Additionally, she once again fulfills this role of being placed in a low-status position. The officer even has his knee between her legs causing her dress to push up and expose more of her thighs. Moreover, it is clear one leg is still partially in the car, showing the force that was used to rip her out of the car and down onto the ground.
In figure 8, an officer is seen sliding his hands up the thighs of the model, taking her dress with his hand, in what appears to be a somewhat sexual way. The officer has forced the woman’s legs apart with his knee and is pinning her against the side of the cop car. It is almost like being on onlooker as someone is being molested. Again, the woman is placed in a low-status position.

Another prime example of a low-status position without physical violence is the example in figure 9. The woman is on her knees, hands behind her head, as submissively posed as possible with the threat of violence around her. She is being barked at by a lunging dog and an officer stands ready with his billy club at his side.
Figure 8: From the spread “State of Emergency” in Vogue’s Italian September 2006 issue.

Figure 9: From the spread “State of Emergency” in Vogue’s Italian September 2006 issue.
The images in the “State of Emergency” spread in the Italian *Vogue* were startling because it showed middle class white women in their designer clothes being brutally arrested by police. One certainly does not expect to see high-class, affluent women in designer dresses being brutally arrested and pressed down against the asphalt in the middle of a street. Not only this, but the spread was an excellent example of white women being placed in low-status positions despite the high-status symbol that they carry in their fancy cars and designer clothes.

*Elle: Highly Sexualized Women*

I also researched within *Elle* magazine, another large fashion magazine in the U.S. Selling 39 International Editions; *Elle* is the World’s largest selling fashion magazine. With over 4.8 million readers, 82 percent of which are women, it is an excellent magazine to use to investigate women’s representations. *Elle* magazine is ranked as the 86th top circulating magazine by the Audit Bureau of Circulation.

When looking into *Elle* magazine’s advertisements, I found that 90.1 percent, or 264 out of 293 advertisements consisted of white women, while 4.78 percent, or 14 out of 293 advertisements consisted of black women. However, within their fashion spreads 91.26 percent of advertisements consisted of white women, or 376 of the 412, while 3.16 percent or 13 out of 412 advertisements consisted of black women.

Similar to my findings in *Vogue*, the elements of body position and sexualization were also very present in *Elle* Magazine’s fashion spreads. In the March 2008 issue a fashion spread was done called “Piece de resistance” whose first page featured a woman lounging on a chair (fig. 10). Her hands are caressing her hair and her arms are up, leaving her body exposed while still physically touching a part of herself. Much like the women seen in the “State of Emergency”
spread in *Vogue*; this woman’s legs are extremely exposed and seem to be a focus of the picture. In this sense, even with her entire body pictures, a part of her is still objectified as being separate from her whole being.

![Figure 10: Fashion spread from *Elle*'s March 2008 issue.](image)

In *Elle*’s fashion spread for April of 2008 entitled, “Shirt Story”, a woman is featured standing in a white button up shirt with most of the buttons undone, exposing her pink lingerie, leaving her with a sloppy just out of bed look, as seen in figure 11. Her hair is slightly messed and she is wearing extremely heavy eye make-up, paired with her pink boxers, leaving the thoughts of rushing out of bed after a crazy night. Her legs are bowed inward as her toes come to face each
other in an almost shy stance. This image again is highly sexualized with lanky legs becoming the central objectified portion of the woman. Elle’s fashion spreads provided a parallel to the images found in Vogue, providing evidence that this objectification and subjugation of women is a trend amongst the main-stream fashion magazines.

![Fashion Spread](image)

**Figure 11: Fashion spread from Elle’s April 2008 issue.**

**Teen Magazines: Issues of Influence**

Moreover, I decided to look at teen fashion magazines, since the teenage years are the most influential, and as talked about in the introduction of my research, magazines are seen to be a means of women understanding themselves. These magazines are seen as "important sites for
adolescent girls to negotiate their roles in society and to explore what it means to be a woman" (Sengupta 800). Teen magazines, however, "assert a class-less, race-less, sameness, a kind of false unity which assumes a common experience of [...] girlhood" (Sengupta 800).

When looking into *Cosmo Girl* magazine for March of 2008, I found that within the magazines advertisements, 88.52 percent, or 54 out of 61 of the advertisements consisted of images of white women. Out of these 61 advertisements, 5 of them, or 8.2 percent, consisted of Black women. None of the advertisements consisted of any Asian or Latina women. When looking into the magazines fashion spreads and articles, I found that 88.78 percent, or 182 out of 205 of the images were of white women, while 4.88 percent, or 10 out of 205 of the images were of black women. Moreover, there actually was one Latina woman pictured, which accounted for .48 percent of the images and three Asian women were pictured, accounting for 1.46 percent of the images.

Within this particular magazine I found a very provocative article with an extremely provocative image as the introductory page to the article. The article, entitled “What is Sexy”, features photos of celebrities such as Britney Spears and Paris Hilton in barely there clothing, as seen in figure 12. Most of the women pictured in the image are displayed in nothing more than a bikini top, or very short dresses. While none of these women are depicted in low-status positions, most of them are sexualized in their images. One of the women is blowing a kiss and Brittany Spears is clearly dancing as she runs her hand through her hair. Every larger photo within the collage is of a white woman. Through the absence of the predominant black woman in the photos leads one to believe why there is an absence within an article declaring what is sexy. One must wonder if the article, through the absence of a black woman, is implying that black women are not considered to be sexy. Moreover, I believe this also points to the fact pointed out in the introduction, that white women are portrayed as the sex kitten type more so than black women.
Another example of the white women being used as the only women within a fashion spread is the “Beauty Trends” spread within Cosmo Girl’s March 2008 issue (see fig. 13). Within this spread we see 12 white women posing in this summer’s beauty trends. Again we face the issue of the lack of representation of any marginalized groups of women, only within this spread there is no sign of the sexualization of these women. These women are simply modeling this season’s
designer trends. However, they are doing so without any marginalized groups being acknowledged of having the ability or the means to wear these trends.

I also used Seventeen’s April 2008 issue for my research. Within the advertisements in this magazine I found that 78.35 percent, or 76 out of 97 of the images were of white women. There was one Latina women in all of these advertisements, making up 1.03 percent of the woman portrayed. Black women took up 14.43 percent, or 14 out of 97 of the advertisements in the magazine and once again, no Asian women were found in the advertisements. Within Seventeen’s fashion spreads I found that 73.08 percent or 152 out of 208 advertisements consisted of white women while 33 out of 208, or 15.87 percent of advertisements consisted of black women. There

Figure 13: “Beauty Trends” spread from Elle’s March 2008 issue.
were also equal numbers of Latinas and Asians represented in the fashion spreads, three of each, making up 1.44 percent of the women in the fashion spreads.

The second advertising spread within this issue of *Seventeen* magazine is a Kohls advertisement for their Candies’ line. The images within this advertisement are highly sexualized and feature this younger woman in submissive positions. The larger image, in the spread, seen in figure 14, shows the model kneeling on a chair, a low status position, and her mouth is partially parted. Despite the cute, fluffy white dog which brings a sense of innocence to the photograph, the model is overshadowing this with her provocative pose and facial expression. Within the smaller images on the facing page, seen in figure 15, we see this same model, sipping from a straw, holding lollipops and in yet another one, seductively eating a cherry. In other photos on the page we see the model lying on her back and leaning up against a wall. These advertisements are being placed in hopes of gearing these clothes to the younger women who shop the junior’s section at Kohls Department Stores. In this sense, these images become extremely problematic as they are showing younger women that these poses are sexy and this image is what they should strive to obtain. The clothes are shown on a model posed in a provocative way and using food for suggestive images. If this is what these young, impressionable minds are being shown in the magazines that they use as guidance during the hardest years, in terms of finding themselves, then one must wonder what they will in fact find in themselves.
Figure 14: Candies’ advertisement from Seventeen magazine’s April 2008 issue.
Cosmo Girl had a total paid and verified circulation of 1.451 million, more than Vogue and Elle, which ranks it as the 58th top circulating magazine by the Audit Bureau of Circulation. Even higher ranking is Seventeen magazine, with a circulation of 2.067 million and a ranking of being the 33rd top circulating magazine. Clearly magazines for younger women and teenage girls have a much greater readership than do the fashion magazines geared towards older women, publications such as Vogue and Elle. I find this to be a troubling fact considering the stereotypes and the subjugating of women to the role of mere objects that were found circulating in these magazines to
an average of roughly 2 million teenage women over the last six months of 2007, with the amount of actual readers over this period being potentially much higher as each circulated copy may be read by more than one individual. This is alarming in the sense that younger women are typically still trying to find their identity and are facing pressure to conform to society and be accepted by their peers. If they are viewing magazines with such rampant derogatory and negative stereotypes spread throughout each magazine, then one would be hard pressed to believe that the teenage readers of these magazines will begin to be influenced by and potentially attempt to conform to these societal stereotypes of what type of woman is accepted in today's society.

What Does it All Mean?

Implications of representations or lack thereof within magazines and media are investigated in Sengupta's research. She explores the representation of marginalized groups and the effects that this has on them. "If models who belong to a certain minority group are frequently shown in stereotypical ways or are made invisible in the media, members of that group may feel a lack of understanding or acceptance from members of the majority. In addition, if the same negative stereotypes are consistently associated with a particular minority group, those minority group members may believe that it is socially permissible, if not socially expected, for them to fulfill that stereotype" (800). Media images, such as the images portrayed in the advertisements of such popular magazines, are believed to be a reflection of the public opinion.

"Poran (2002) found that young women frequently compare themselves to other women presented in advertisements, often with detrimental affects to self-esteem and self-concept” (Sengupta 801). If teenage girls are influenced enough by skinny models in magazines that it causes them to suffer from eating disorders, who is to say that a marginalized girl won’t be
influenced by the invisibility of her race, or the stereotyping of her race. When women are constantly exposed to the objectification and subjugation of women’s bodies one must wonder if they themselves are going to become an object of subjugation. The woman may become an object in the reflection of herself and in the eyes of those reading into the stereotypes seen in such images. Given the substantial readership of fashion magazines as evidenced by the circulation totals shown above, the manner in which women are represented in these magazines becomes even more critical when considering these facts.

As shown above, my research revealed several stereotypes of women buried within the pages of *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Seventeen*, and *Cosmo Girl*. There were clear examples of sexualization and subjugation of women as a whole as well as the marginalization of certain women through body poses, clothing, and invisibility. Given that the population from which the samples above were chosen was limited to only these four magazines, one might be hesitant to project these findings onto the general population of fashion magazines as a whole. However, considering the substantial readership of these magazines as evidenced by the circulation totals above, the effects of the stereotypes within these four magazines cannot be taken lightly. Even if these were the only four magazines displaying photos laden with stereotypes and the clear subjugation and sexualization of women, the population effected by these messages would still be substantial. Further, considering that most fashion magazines appear at the very least relatively similar, it would not be a stretch to think that the majority of fashion magazines being circulated to the general public show at least some evidence of the stereotypes shown above. As such, there appears to be a potentially pervasive portrayal of derogatory stereotypes and images of women in popular fashion magazines, particularly those that will be influencing young, impressionable minds. As a result, this is a rather alarming trend in modern fashion magazines and one that needs to be investigated farther.
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