Lack of Diversity in the Fashion Industry:

The Culture of Colorism

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About the Author

Danielle Daniel-Ramsey is currently a student at the New York City College of Technology in

Brooklyn, New York. She is majoring in Business and Technology in Fashion and is on track to

graduate in 2021. Fashion has been a passion on mine since high school. Wearing a uniform

everyday basically forced me to get creative when it came to my look because I wanted to show

my individuality. I later began working at retailers like Macy's, UNIQLO and Madewell while

going to school full time. During the summers I interned with a freelance fashion stylist and

Vogue Ukraine where I assisted on photoshoots and did pick-ups and drop offs from PR

agencies. My plans are to graduate and work for an advertising agency. Danielle lives in central

Harlem in Manhattan, New York. Within the next few years Danielle also plans to start a fashion

blog that can inspire other young adults to create the life they want and manifest their dreams.

A. Diversity and Inclusion in the Fashion Industry

Have you ever flipped through a magazine or caught the latest runway show on your social media and thought the models looked predominantly white? The fashion industry uses predominately white models as the face of their big-name brands, though fashion affects everyone the fashion industry still struggles to reflect diversity across all platforms. From the models, photographers, even the workers in the boardroom, the fashion industry is still working on being diverse and inclusive.

The words diversity and inclusion are often interchanged with each other but what do they really mean? "Diversity is the "measure of difference" in a workplace. Inclusion on the other hand describes a climate where people of all types feel comfortable expressing themselves creating a scenario where everyone is able to contribute their best work" (Bain, 2019). According to reports from the CFDA and PVH it's often assumed that diversity is enough. Because inclusion is a learned skill, leaders often struggle with it. Diversity is about representation in different areas like gender, race, age sexual orientation and abilities. Fortunately, there are still public figures making strides in the industry breaking barriers and changing what fashion looks like.

Race has been an issue in the modeling industry from the beginning. Fashion brands would come up with reasons as to why they lack models of color. "We've already got a black girl", "it's not our creative vision", "our customer isn't ready yet" This is the feedback we get all the time" (TFL, 2017). One would think for an industry based on creative differences that they would be a lot more comfortable with allowing individuals of other ethnicities in the workforce.

Brands lack diversity in fashion from the models to the boardroom where the source of the power comes from.

Most of us wear clothing all the time; fashion has become the center of most of our lives. Though the industry services people of all gender identities and ethnicities, the people working does not always represent their customers. "And though its most fervent clients are women, its leaders are often not" (Villarreal, 2019). Though fashion influences everyone women are not getting their fair share in making all the final decisions when executing big deals in the industry. Major fashion brands like Vera Wang and Coco Chanel belong to women but there's not necessarily a woman leading in making designs. The work force in the fashion industry is having a hard time including important voices in the discussion.

B. Impact of diversity on the Fashion Industry

Since the beginning of social media and the start of the social influencer, public figures and models alike have been able to label themselves as the face of certain fashion and beauty brands. Models are the face of the fashion industry so it's important that they represent the type of people that spend money on these brands. "Although the executive suites of fashion's biggest houses are no more diverse than the models who appear in their advertisements, diversifying in many ways starts on the runway" (Brooke, 2014). With the growth and value of having an online presence being more of value in recent years, models are becoming more popular which determines their placement in ad campaigns and editorials. "Who walks on the runway defines beauty, which defines how we value people. The fashion industry has a profound effect on who we value" (Brooke, 2014). Since who walks on the runway defines beauty, the demographic of

the models are thin white models. This is evidence that fashion brands prefer white models over

models of darker skin tones.

Figure I. Colorism in the Fashion Industry

Colorism is discrimination against darker skin tones in favor of light skin tones. It has been

an issue for a lot of models trying to get noticed and prove themselves to designers that they're

the new it girl in these fashion streets. It's important that models of all backgrounds are giving a

chance. Diversity in the fashion industry is important because as a customer one would want to

relate to the girl in the ad campaigns for that cute skirt or perfume. African American models for

example are often stereotyped as being low class simply for how they look. White models are

often seen as being talented or having potential while black models have felt the pressure to

perform and still get overlooked. Lola, an African American fashion model says, "…as a black

women, I get criticized ten times harder because of the color of my skin. Therefore, I am

determined to open a fashion agency that caters to women of color" (Lawrence, 2014). When

industry players make it difficult for models win at their game, they must create a lane for

themselves. Celebrities like Rihanna has given examples with her lingerie line SavagexFenty.

With the help of social media Rihanna could establish a movement of women by using action

instead of talking about what she would do if given the opportunity. Models of all walks of life

can feel like they have a place when it comes to occupying white spaces in fashion.

C. The growth of Colorism in the fashion industry

If you turn on your television or scroll through social media you are constantly being

bombarded with what everyone is wearing. Since the beginning of the fashion industry, super

models have been the face of fashion brands and ultimately representing the men and women

buying these clothes. No one is excluded from buying fashion but predominately white models

are the leading the race when it comes to visibility in the modeling industry. "To gain insight on

consumer preference, designers and retailers research on behavior" (Stone, 2013). The VALS

system is used by to categorize consumers based on demographics and psychographics. The

modeling industry has always been a place for Caucasian models to thrive. From the start of the

fashion industry to the wake of social media, brands are still having difficulties putting Black

models mainstream.

The color Black is considered chic and slimming by most but as a skin color it has

struggled to be accepted in mainstream fashion. The fashion industry has always struggled with

putting Black models on the fore front. "There's a certain image it upholds, a checklist in which

marginalized people are judged by their proximity to Eurocentric beauty standards. A person's

marketability in the beauty, entertainment, and fashion industries is heavily determined by skin

color" (Jones, 2019). Beauty standards have shaped the way we view attractiveness in the

fashion industry, ultimately it all comes down to taste. "Colorism has done both horrifying things

in terms of my career progression. I've been passed over for lighter-skinned models and

actresses" (Jones,2019). Unfortunately, designers prefer light-skinned models over dark-skinned

models. They are profitable and sophisticated while dark-skinned models are considered ghetto

and put in place to wear mediocre garments.

Colorism in the modeling industry effects models just as much as the average person on

the street. Over the year's diversity in fashion has grown to accepting some Black models as

forces on the runway but the industry still has a long way to go in terms of representation and

inclusion. "I definitely feel that there has been a lot of improvement in the industry with the use

of black models, but I would definitely say that it has a long way to go especially with regards to

shade"(Avila, 2015). Though the modeling industry is slowly gravitating towards Black models,

light-skinned models still manage to get more work. Black models are often type casted and

hired to meet a quota.

<center>D. Impact of Colorism on Fashion</center>

When one thinks of diversity and the fashion industry negative factors always seem to

come to mind. In recent years, due to the growth of the importance of social followings, models

have been finding their voice. In an industry where models are usually seen not heard this is

important. "Now models have social media platforms, so even if they're not incredibly well

known, they can still have a relatively big following and articulate their views in a way they weren't able to do before" (Safronova, 2017). Models are no longer staying silent during trying times. With their platforms, models use social media as a part of their selling power. Writing post about their experiences on casting calls and the real life of a model that's not just pretty clothes and makeup. "When I decided to wear my hair natural, at first my agency was totally against it. They told me that just-rolled-out-of-bed look isn't going to work. And it wasn't just-rolled-out-of-bed. It takes a lot of work" (Safronova, 2017). Model, Ebonee Davis who is also an activist says her decision to wear her natural hair booked a gig with Calvin Klein when other designers told her she didn't fit the image they wanted to portray. "Silence is violence", Ebonee Davis says. Models who decide to stay silence and not speak up are a part of the problem why it's so difficult for models to get ahead being their authentic selves.

E. Impact of Colorism on Consumers

With the growing popularity of having an online social media presence, fashion has now become more accessible. Platforms like Instagram get a lot of attention for advertising fashion brands to a mass of people. Fast fashion brands like Fashion Nova are connecting with their audience and even paying them to promote their latest trendy clothes. While that's amazing, the models on these platforms all look the same; biracial or racially ambiguous. Social media influencer, Jackie Aina who was a consumer of the Fashion Nova brand two years before working with them noticed the lack of representation when it came to the complexion of these models. "I don't have a problem with light-skinned women or biracial women being represented in beauty or fashion but when that's the only thing I see on you page hmm… As much as this

brand post on media platforms like *TheShadeRoom* who's average demographic is African

American they clearly know who their audience is" (Aina, 2019). Having dozens of models that

are fair skin sends a negative subliminal message to the consumer that if you don't look a certain

way they won't post you.

Figure II. Colorism and social media

The issue of colorism has left multiple influencers feeling insulted and upset. A friend of

Jackie Aina, who is also an influencer but remains anonymous, sent her screenshots of an email

conversation they had with Fashion Nova raising concerns about why they don't post women of

color or dark-skinned models on their Instagram page.

Fashion Nova responded with, "So sorry if you think we intentionally don't post

women of color. I went through our Instagram and was a little confused. All our models

are either Hispanic or African American, less we do have white models as well. As a

matter of fact, here are a few links to a few models we booked this week" (Aina, 2019).

Unfortunately, the three models they were referring to were all relatively the same fair skinned

complexion. Fashion Nova's argument as to why they don't repost certain people that get paid

to promote their stuff is because they don't meet the "repost requirements" which include all the items having to be in stock and a full body photo taken in good lighting. These brands need influencers more than the other way around for the overall growth of the brands. Fast fashion brands like Fashion Nova need online engagement to gain profit in the industry.

F. My Thoughts on Colorism in the Fashion Industry

The topic of colorism can almost every time make people uncomfortable. Western beauty standards have made it difficult for women and men of ethnic backgrounds to thrive in the fashion industry. I believe dark-skinned models should have more representation in fashion. In addition to ad campaigns and editorials, research shows that designers are now realizing that the internet and social media can make or break how well their collection makes a profit. In recent times fashion brands have become more inclusive but still has flaws. "There are too many cases of profound insensitivity and cavalier cultural appropriation but in the past decade, the industry has opened its doors to more people of color, plus-size women, transgender women and those who simply don't fit the fashion world's definition of beauty" (Givhan, 2017). Designers are now coming to terms with the fact that consumers want to be represented. We want to see people just like us walking the runway and in ad campaigns in magazines and on social media. Having models of different backgrounds may cause controversy but that what makes fashion interesting.

Brands expose themselves often when it came to visibility on the runway. By having only white models it sends the message that their clothes are only for white teens and young adults. One suggesting for change in the fashion industry is create more opportunities for all types of people. In recent years, social media have been giving rookie models and everyday people a platform to show their skills. People who are transgender or disabled deserve equal

opportunities like their white counterparts. "Things are slowly changing in the fashion industry

for sure. People generally want to support others and see themselves represented. High fashion is

normally restricted to one type of person and people like me are changing that narrative" (Philip,

2019). In recent years, the modelling world has become more acceptable of people like Philip.

The industry is slowly diversifying before our eyes and it's the models who don't look racially

ambiguous that's turning heads and making a difference in the industry.

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