

**Racism, Tokenism, and Colorism of Black Models in the Fashion Industry**

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**Abstract**

Fashion is lit. Can I say that one more time?, maybe scream it a little? FASHION IS LIT!!! It's lit to be able to afford clothes, and dress up, it's lit to be in, the fashion industry, it's lit to have connections to people in fashion, the fashion shows are lit. Say it with me one more time, FASHION IS LIT!!! Truthfully worded, as unique as fashion is, let's be honest, the fashion industry sucks, it just sucks. It's a business that waits for no one, it's quick, ruthless, terrifying, taboo, and almost cruel to women, and people of color. It's an industry that not only makes a person feel disposable, but lets a person know they are disposable. Fashion can be quite disrespectful. Real bold. The industry hasn't really hidden much of its taboos, but it hasn't really exposed them either, But the question I personally have for myself, and others is, Why do we love it so much? It disrespects, and violates women, and people of color, but we love it. For an industry whose inspiration comes from predominantly women, it's misogynistic, but we love it. The industry steals ideas from minorities, and lesser known creators, and barely gives them credit, but we love it. Not all, but many know this, so why do we love it so much? Take some time to think about that as you continue to read.

**Racism, Tokenism, and Colorism of Black Models in the Fashion Industry**

For an industry so feminine, it possesses so much toxic masculinity. Men acting perverted and creepy, taking advantage of women, because of power. Women policing other women's bodies, so

they can appeal to men. Women destroying themselves, and other women to get ahead. If anyone in the fashion industry knows about this, it's runway models. Models often feel disposable, because of how fashion, so rapidly changes. Women already have a hard time in the fashion industry, but just imagine how black women have it. For the punishments women already suffer from, in regards to this industry, black women seem to have some extra punishment, simply because of their skin, and how society views them, instead of the type of work they have to offer. Amidst the unnecessary drama black women go through, they always manage to come up better, than they were before, sort of like a Phoenix. Often imitated, yet never duplicated, Black women are the true underdogs of the fashion industry.

I stated above that Models often feel disposable. This is because people of power in the fashion industry, like modeling agencies, fashion designers, and runway directors make them feel that way.

*“We Already Found One Black Girl. We Don't Need You”- Chanel Iman*

Fashion has always been relatively harsh, to black women. Many models such as Naomi Campbell, Alek Wek, Adut Akech etc, have talked about racial discrimination, in the fashion industry. How the fashion industry bashes black women and men, but has no problem, stealing ideas, and designs from them. Fashion Models, the visualizers of the fashion industry, are already treated poorly, but for black women, it seems as if it's, almost torture for them. Some models felt as if their treatment was intentional. Many black models such as Anok Yai, said that she felt she had to not only compete with her white counterparts, but work 10x times harder to be recognized.

*“A few times I got excused by designers who told me ‘we already found one black girl. We don't need you anymore.’ I felt very discouraged. When someone tells you, ‘we don't want you because we already have one of your kind, it's really sad”*. These are the heartbreaking words, from model Chanel Iman. As I stated above, fashion can be very disrespectful. These type of words hurt people, and the disrespect is part of the reason why, many models destroy themselves, or worse commit suicide.

*“I've asked my advertising clients so many times, ‘Can we use a black girl?’ They say No.*

*Advertisers say black models don't sell” - Steven Miesel*

*“When I started out, I wasn't being booked for certain shows because of the colour of my skin,”*  
*. “I didn't let it rattle me. From attending auditions and performing at an early age, I understood what it meant to be black. You had to put in the extra effort. You had to be twice as good.” “Then, in September 1989 (the biggest issue of the year), Anna Wintour put me on the cover of American Vogue. It was nerve-racking, because I understood the importance of being a black model”. “That was her first September issue as editor-in-chief, and I think she was given a lot of flak for it. I will be forever grateful”. “When I was younger, I encountered this same issue.*

*I would be backstage at shows and there would be stylists who didn't have any experience working with black models,”. “It’s disappointing to hear that models of colour are still encountering these same issues all these years later,” - Naomi Campbell.* There’s a common theme with black models in the industry. Lack of knowledge, lack of consideration, and lack of care. For over 40 years, this seems to be the same story, that every black model in the industry has spoken about. The lack of knowledge. Supermodel Iman said, that she would have to do her own hair, and make up. Naomi Campbell, Chanel Iman, Beverly Peele, Beverley Johnson, Jordan Dunn, Adut Akeck and so many black models, from every decade since the 60s, have said the same thing, so when is the fashion, and beauty industry, going to get it together? There’s some change happening, but it’s still not enough. When is the fashion industry going to dedicate time, and effort into learning about black women, the same way they do with other races.

### **Tokenism and Colorism**

*'Everyone used to think that I liked being the token Black person in the room... I never did,'  
- Naomi Campbell*

Racism isn’t the only thing, black models have to go through. Black models also go through tokenism, and colorism. Tokenism, is the practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort to do a particular thing, especially by recruiting a small number of people from underrepresented groups, in order to give the appearance of sexual, or racial equality within a workforce. Colorism, is prejudice, or discrimination against individuals with a dark skin tone, typically among people of the same ethnic, or racial group. Tokenism, and colorism both go hand-in-hand, as they are both sub-groupings of racism. At least one model has gone through some sort of tokenism, and/or

colorism in her career. Black people in the fashion industry, want to get ahead. We want to be as successful as our white counterparts. The thing is, many models don't think about others, only themselves, which is understandable. In a business as ruthless as fashion, you have to put yourself first, but the problem occurs, when you don't support your own. Some black models even get into competition with other black models, just for the approval of another race, who barely respects them. They will accept others, but not their own, and therefore that makes them a token.

Colorism, is also a very big deal in the fashion industry. When we complain, and talk about inclusivity and diversity, we mean all different types of black people. It's very simple, we wanna see different types of black people. Because of lack of care, and knowledge, we are left with black models, but many of them are not dark skinned. Some of them are light-skinned. The light skin models are still a black, aren't they? Yes this is true, but there's still not enough diversity. Many of these light-skinned models, become token models. This type of selection also shows, that the fashion industry not only thinks, that this is just black, but it's the acceptable black. It's like they are trying, to do the right thing, but at the same time they are half-assing it. When dark skin models are chosen for certain shows, they have to "adjust themselves" to look appealing, like light skin models, and white models as well. Dark skin models with hair, will often straighten it, or cut it off. Natural hair is seen as weird, and undesirable. But at the same time, many fashion shows will have their models wearing fake afro wigs, but bash black Women, for actually possessing that same type of hair, that was deemed unattractive and unprofessional.

Often imitated, yet never duplicated, Black women are the true underdogs of the fashion industry. The story of a black woman's come up in this industry, seems all too familiar. No matter where black women are from, we always are taught to fight harder. "I'm black, I'm a women, I

have to work harder, to get ahead". It's so tiring to hear about the same thing, to have the same thoughts, and to constantly live the same life over and over again. When is the industry gonna learn to be easy on us, and treat us like everyone else, this really does get tiring. Hopefully change will come, hopefully things will get better for black people, and other people color, so we can all thrive.

### References

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Definitions: Wikipedia

The story of a black woman's come up in the fashion industry seems all too similar.

