



*forward*  
MAG

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# *the* **WHITE** **GAZE** *of the* fashion industry

BY CARISSA LONG

The United States is a diverse country, consisting of people of different backgrounds from around the world, but despite the country's diversity, there is a lack of minority representation included in fashion media and across the industry as a whole. The fashion industry has a large amount of influence on society, culture, and expectations across the country and minority groups can be negatively impacted when they are not represented in the media. This is partly due to the white gaze that exists within the industry, as designers and editors consider the aesthetics of models used in media to be an important selling strategy. This gaze negatively impacts models of color across the industry as they only make up 6% of runway models hired, meaning not only do they face a lack of representation in media, but they have a lack of opportunities to advance their career in the industry (Newman, 2017). Furthermore, "part of being a model is meeting the aesthetic of a client, and black models need to work even harder to align with societal beauty standards," meaning they must work to change

their appearance such as straightening their hair or following a strict diet to better appeal to the white gaze of the industry and its consumers (Newman,

**models of color make up**  
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2017). This is a problem, because it communicates to models in the industry and people of color in society that they are unwanted and that they do not meet societal standards of beauty. Models of color have traditionally been intentionally left out as "casting directors, agencies, and designers claimed that black models are hired less often because they don't sell" (Newman, 2017). Not only do models of color get less representation, but when they are represented, they are referred to as being "exotic," which leads



Photo by Carissa Long

to the fetishization of models and people of color throughout society. Because of the stigma around models of color, it is crucial that the fashion industry includes more diverse models in their media content, advertisements, and runway shows.

Anuli Ononye, a law student and current student body President at Cornell University is a former employee of the popular California swimwear company Swim Spot. During her time at Swim Spot, Ononye worked in their social media department under the social media manager to create content for Instagram and Pinterest. During her interview, Ononye admitted "each company has a very different look or aesthetic," highlighting how designers prioritize content that conforms to their idea of what their aesthetic should be (Ononye, 2021). Unfortunately, for many companies including Swim Spot, they edit their aesthetic to fit the white gaze in an attempt to increase sales and cater their brand's media content to fit what they believe their consumers want.

During her time at Swim Spot, Ononye noticed more "white petite women than any other category" included in photos she was given to use in their social media (Ononye, 2021). By only including petite white women in their brand's media, Swim Spot is sending the message to their shoppers and followers that their models represent the ideal beauty standard for who should wear their products, rather than celebrating the realistic diversity of race and body type in society. Newman writes "representation plays a major role in media and consumption, and the fashion industry continues to disregard the plea from its consumers to be reflected and represented," meaning the fashion industry has consciously made these choices (Newman, 2017). Moving forward, it is important for the industry to recognize the harm it has caused to marginalized communities who don't see themselves represented and learn how models of color can be better included and represented in media.



# *fashion's* intersectionality *problem*

BY CAMERON HICKMAN

Promoting diversity in fashion isn't just about high-profile models and designers—it's also about how the industry treats its workers. While at its surface, fashion might appear to be a level playing field for people of all genders and races, in truth, the fashion industry suffers from racism and sexism like many other industries—and these forces intersect for women of color.

One might assume that since fashion is an industry that caters to women and female models are some of the most prominent faces in the public's perception of fashion, gender discrimination is not prevalent in the fashion industry. However, a Glamour and Council of Fashion Designers of America study found that 100% of women employed in fashion believe gender inequality to be a problem within the industry (George-Parkin 2018).

Gender discrimination in fashion is somewhat subtle: at the entry level, women far outnumber men.

However, as women ascend the ranks, they become significantly less likely than men to be promoted. Women also often take on additional responsibilities without a promotion or pay increase. Knitwear designer Hannah Mir recounted how she was expected to take on additional responsibilities to support a White male coworker without acknowledgement of her expanded duties or a pay raise.

*“It's not necessarily the content of what you're saying that matters, it's how loud are you in the room, how male are you, sometimes — neither of which I am.”*

As a woman of color in fashion, Mir's experience in the workplace is intersectional: it is shaped both by her race and her gender. Mir described a tension between stereotypically masculine and American expectations of workplace conduct and her own demeanor. She was asked to be louder and more outspoken in meetings—a departure from how she normally talks. At many companies, she says, “it's not necessarily the content of what you're saying that matters, it's how loud are you in the room, how male are you, sometimes—neither of which I am.”

It's hard to quantify diversity within the fashion industry: a recent New York Times investigation found that there is a lack of transparency about diversity in fashion as brands are unwilling or unable to share information (“The Fashion World” 2021). However, it's clear from the experiences of people of color within the industry that greater diversity is needed.

When asked if she thought the fashion industry had a diversity problem, Mir responded, “100%, a gazillionfold.” She went on to speak on a personal experience with discrimination in the workplace. Mir was repeatedly harassed and threatened by a woman in upper management, and while people noticed the tension, no one stood up for her. “I was targeted for who I was,” she said.

The need for diverse leadership, in particular, is critical. In a 2021 study by CFDA, a sample of the C-suites of 10 prominent fashion brands only contained three executives of color—all three of whom were chief diversity officers, evidencing a great failure to promote designers of color to the executive role.

The same study found that fashion employees of color reported lower levels of mentorship and advocacy than their white counterparts. Mir highlighted the importance of managers who want to see their subordinates succeed. “I have always managed my team so that they grow,” she said, but she has often encountered managers who do not have her back.

Fashion employees of color were also less likely to report that they found their companies to be meritocracies: 23% of fashion employees of color



Photo by Hannah Mir

disagreed that the best opportunities go to the most deserving employees, as compared to 16% of White employees. Furthermore, 26% of employees of color reported that their race or ethnicity negatively affected their raises or promotions (CFDA 2021).

In order to allow young female designers of color to thrive, we need to pull back the curtain on the ugly truths of discrimination within the fashion industry. It starts with visualizing the problem: conclusive data on where employees of color and female employees are held back is essential to a push for accountability. Company-wide steps, like requiring unconscious bias training and implementing more inclusive hiring practices, are also important (Black in Fashion Council Report 2021). But promoting inclusivity and equity in the fashion industry must also happen at an individual level, through mentorship, advocacy, and speaking up when they see bias in action.



# *surprise,* FASHION EDUCATION *isn't diverse, either*

BY JAYDA HINDS

**B**ari White, the only Black, male Fashion Major at the University of Delaware, has gotten a taste of the fashion industry's diversity issue, directly in the classroom. White, designer behind upcoming streetwear brand Gallerie Blanco, has been designing clothing independently for seven years. It wasn't until 2016 where he decided to switch his major from Computer Engineering to Fashion, to "take a risk on [his] passion for arts and creativity". White, having been in the fashion industry for upwards of 7 years, has seen the industry change right in front of him.

It is no secret that externally, the fashion industry is becoming more diverse. Fashion conglomerates like Gucci, Mugler, and Versace have been increasingly using more plus models in their runway shows, breaking records in the fashion industry and sparking a media frenzy in the names of body diversity and a changing industry. Edward Enninful, the first Black editor-in-chief of British Vogue, has just

entered his role three years ago – with his mission statement including his goals of increased diversity for the magazine. Similarly, Harper's Bazaar, recently appointed their first Black woman, editor-in-chief.

These changes are not to go unnoticed, and they prove that as the conversations of political activism grow more robust, so do company's desires to match their consumer's conversations. However, the positive changes in the fashion industry do remain total outliers, and the industry is still majority white, skinny, and cisgender. White views this external progression as a "facade, that covers up the reality of non-diverse executive boards behind-the-scenes' but that the use of diversity, albeit sometimes un-representative of the industry, "can show consumers that they are being seen" – a necessary part of validity.

Like the fashion industry, the college industry also remains majority white. Over 70% of all college



Photo by Bari White

professors are white, and additionally, over 60% of all college students are white (Davis & Fry, 2020). These numbers narrow down even further into specific groups of education, like fashion majors. At the

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Fashion Institute of Technology, in the hub of New York City, 9% of their students enrolled are Black, with less than one percent Native American, or Native Pacific Islander (Data USA: Fashion Institute of Technology, 2019). The power of representation is especially important in an academic environment,

where the student represents the inexperienced who works towards becoming as knowledgeable and skilled as their professor; seeing a part of themselves akin to the trained and practiced professor. This sense of inspiration is naturally stronger when a leader also resembles the people who look to them.

*“There have been times where my work has been criticized or picked on the most in my classes, to the point of unfairness. Or on the other hand, my work has been overlooked and unacknowledged by my professors.”*

Marginalized communities, however, do not experience the power of representation as often as more privileged, whiter communities. Bari White, being the only Black, male student in his school, has sometimes felt unsupported by his professors and peers because of his identity. “There have been times where my work has been criticized or picked on the most in my classes, to the point of unfairness. Or on the other hand, my work has been overlooked and unacknowledged by my professors,” he notes. “Being the only Black male fashion student is sometimes encouraging to know that I am able to work alongside peers as passionate as me, but the truth is that over or under critical treatment is not beneficial for any student. But, I push through,” he adds on.

White is set to graduate with a Bachelor's Degree in Fashion in May of 2022, and already has plans of another clothing line on the way. He offers three pieces of advice to creatives wanting to enter the competitive fashion industry: “know who you are, know what you want to create, and do not let anyone stop you from dreaming, because your dreams can be larger than what people can see.”



# TOKENISM

## in fashion media

BY CARISSA LONG

Over the past few years, the number of models of color included in fashion media has increased, but this inclusion has sparked a debate of whether or not they are being tokenized by the brands they model for. This is because, “in practice, a token model allows a designer to avoid the accusation of racism and discrimination,” meaning they care more about publicity than representation of models of color (Newman, 2017). This is a problem because it contributes to unrealistic beauty standards throughout the United States and other countries, as viewers are pressured to attempt to conform to these standards they see in the media. Designers only look for a limited number of models of color to include in their media content and “tokenism theory posits that numerical underrepresentation is a primary cause of negative work experiences for minority group members” meaning these brands make decisions which negatively impact models of color and society to claim they are a diverse brand (Yoder, 1991).

*“In America, the public opinion is so diverse and open that the only way to increase brand image and reputation is if these companies branch out to target a wider audience and in doing so, they use and disrespect other cultures rather than genuinely appreciating their characteristics and authenticity”*



Photo by Carissa Long

Savannah Sun, a former intern for CLD PR, a fashion PR and marketing firm in Los Angeles believes models of color are often tokenized by designers and editors in the fashion industry. At CLD, Savannah was responsible for sending article ideas to major editors at magazines such as Vogue, Cosmo, or Elle using the brands represented by CLD. Through what she learned during her time at CLD, Sun stated “many companies only choose models of color and other ethnicities for publicity” and that “in America, the public opinion is so diverse and open that the only way to increase brand image and reputation is if these companies branch out to target a wider audience and in doing so, they use and disrespect other cultures rather than genuinely appreciating their characteristics and authenticity” (Sun, 2021). This highlights that the tokenization of models of color also impacts those cultures as they are clearly used to showcase a brand’s diversity. In doing this, these fashion brands are not truly appreciating or celebrating those cultures, and through priming and

framing, fashion media sends the message to audiences that their culture is not truly respected throughout society.

During the interview, Sun also revealed her experiences working in the fashion industry in Asia, stating “the fashion industry and most brands have established Eurocentric standards of beauty throughout history and throughout Asia, models are chosen for their pretty traits similar to those of Europeans rather than their own ethnicity” (Sun, 2021). This demonstrates the problem in the fashion industry as viewers across the world are taught to idolize western societal standards of beauty over their own culture and ethnicity. It is important to understand the power of the media and the messages sent to audiences around the world when designers, brands, and editors choose to portray models of color as being tokenized rather than celebrated.



# BULKING SZN

men's fashion and body image  
— is it changing?

BY JOE SAGHAFI

Every year since I was 12 years old a friend, family member, or coworker would ask me if I'm going to start trying to participate in "Bulking Season" when winter starts to approach. I would usually just laugh it off, "yeah dude I'm gonna look like the Rock this summer", which would always

body, and puberty had a way of evening everything out. However, I still hear skinnier male friends talk about "Bulking Season" starting around September or October. It makes you wonder about the reasons behind that desire to "bulk up," where it comes from, and what it means about male body image.

*Bulking Season: The season in which someone eats lots of food in an attempt to gain weight and thereby increase their muscle mass.*

—Urban Dictionary

elicit a good chuckle and I could move past the comment. Growing up, I was super skinny and awkwardly lanky, the only company that made pants that fit my 28-34 legs was JCrew (I even sent them an email at 16 thanking them for making clothes in my sizes). Over time I became very comfortable with my

I spoke with Jack, who worked at GQ Magazine last summer as an editorial intern. I came into the conversation wanting to hear if male body image was discussed at the organization if so, how, and what it looks like to be a fashionable man in 2021. What I found out was surprising:



Photos by Isabella Feder

**Joe:** Hey man, thanks for hopping on a call to chat with me; it's been too long

**Jack:** Dude, I know! I've got a great gift picked out for your grad gift when you get back home in December.

**Joe:** Oh boy, Is it a creatine and protein powder gift box?! Should I have started bulking already, huh? What is up with that man? Why do so many people think they gotta get bigger than they are?

**Jack:** I think for lots of guys who maybe read sports magazines and websites over fashion-oriented ones, if you're not big, muscular, with a six-pack of abs, then there is no way for you to look good. Further, on that, many guys think if you don't look like that crazy standard, you don't have anything to feel good about either regarding self-image. For so many guys, bigger muscles equal attractive, sexy, and desirable when that shouldn't be the case.

**Joe:** Anecdotal, it feels like even pretty average guys like you, and I feel pressure to get bigger and do the bulking thing. Did you ever talk about that at work?

**Jack:** We always spin the conversation to how can we make the celeb or whoever we're interviewing for the mag look and FEEL like themselves. Whether that's Jason Sudekis in a total dad-fit where he's killing it, or Timothee Chalamet and Harry Styles really pushing the boundaries of male fashion with more feminine spin while still being one of the sexiest men around, that being said, my boss learned over the summer that 25% of average size men feel like they are underweight.

**Joe:** No way, that's insane! We might be in the clear after all.

**Jack:** Yeah, dude, implementing style and fashion into your everyday life in an authentic way is a great way to feel better about yourself. We talked about



*“We want to show people at all heights, sizes, and shapes that you can look incredible regardless of what your body looks like, it’s all about learning what works for you.”*

ible regardless of what your body looks like, it’s all about learning what works for you.

**Joe:** Honestly, this is not the way I thought this conversation was going to go man. But I’m really happy to hear what you just told me. Thanks for chatting, see ya in a couple of weeks man.

**Jack:** I think I might get you some creatine and protein shakes as a joke now, bulking season and all.

**Joe:** Please don’t.

I had fully expected to go into that call and either berate or commiserate with Jack about how the men’s fashion industry confines men and conditions young men to squeeze themselves into these molds of what a “Man” is. But after that call, I took a look through an Esquire or a GQ magazine and found he wasn’t just saying all that stuff. There is a wider variety of men on those pages than I expected. Was everyone portrayed, no definitely not, but it’s so much better than I had expected. The fashion industry is quick-moving when it comes to seasonal trends, but slow when it comes to larger shifts. Such as who is and isn’t a man and what that looks like. Like almost anything, it appears that men’s fashion and the idea of male body image that are intertwined is slowly becoming more inclusive.

I just might need to start correcting my male friends that it’s actually knitwear season rather than bulking season next time it’s brought up.

that a lot at GQ, like how can we get dudes who don’t think of themselves as “fashionable” to still feel comfortable in the clothes they wear and the products they use. I think the whole #menswear segment is becoming more and more accepting of all types of people and how they express themselves.

**Joe:** In what way do you think that affects a kid just starting to care about how they look?

**Jack:** While it’s obviously not a perfect source I do think that the menswear category on social media is becoming more inclusive and accepting every day. It’s not just ripped dudes in tiny suits or in just their underwear anymore. From where I’m looking it’s way more nuanced than that. I’m super excited about the trajectory of men’s fashion at all levels, and I thought when I started at the magazine I was gonna be this revolutionary. But really everyone was on the same page as me. We want to show people at all heights, sizes, and shapes that you can look incred-

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