Ethical Glamour and Fashion: Styling Persona Brands

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Part II:
Style in Ethical Influencer Marketing

Is an Ethics of Bodily Inclusion Emerging in the Glamorous World of Fashion Models?

Vitor Sérgio Ferreira

Abstract. Recent structural changes in the fashion industry have produced transformations in the forms of embodiment socially valued by the modeling industry. These transformations seem to move in the direction of the democratization of the models' appearance canon, and towards the diversification of corporeality welcomed in the fashion market. Drawing from this perspective, the objective of this article is to comprehend sociologically the conditions, meanings and some of the effects of those changes in a way that can point to the emergence of a new ethics that values inclusive forms of embodiment inside the glamorous and highly selective world of fashion models. The discussion will be empirically based on a set of semi-directed interviews conducted with a set of professional fashion bookers, as well as focus groups done with young fashion models.

Keywords: Fashion models, body, bodily capital, inclusion.

Introduction

A broad definition of what constitutes ethical behavior in fashion goes beyond the sustainability concerns with material goods and processes, and also starts to embrace concerns with the human rights of the consumers and labor force. In this sense, the glamorous and highly selective world of fashion models is being confronted with a variety of human rights concerns, including at the level of social inclusion and representativeness of bodily diversity. Bodily appearance is one of the most important forms of capital in the modeling and fashion industries and requires professional models to embody certain forms of socially valued corporeality (Mears & Finlay, 2005; Soley-Beltran, 2012).

Recent structural changes in the fashion industry have produced transformations in the forms of embodiment that are socially valued to access a career in the modeling industry. These transformations move toward a certain democratization of the models' appearance canon and toward the diversification of the morphology of physical capital welcomed in the fashion market. The "right look" to be a model is not as strict as it was in the past. The ideals of bodily perfection and beauty embodied by the social figure of *top model* are being replaced by common bodies of *real people,* as well as by bodies with physical characteristics that used to be barred at the entrance of

the fashion industry in the past (disabilities, tattoos, gender fluidity, maturity, plus-size, ethnicity/race, etc.).

This shift is socially significant because the bodily surface of a fashion model, being a celebrity-icon, "is an aesthetic structure whose sensuous qualities command attention and compel attachment" (Alexander, 2010: 324), triggering the absorption of a moral structure that promotes the understanding that fashion goods and the fashion world can be for everyone. From this point of view, this shift raises a number of relevant questions: are we dealing with new ethical standards inside the fashion industry that value inclusive forms of fashion models' embodiment? Or is this simply a readjustment of the fashion world to the economic crisis, and thus to the lack of capital circulating within it, leading to an opening of its borders and goods towards more diversified bodies?

In order to answer these questions, this article will explore findings from a research project about why and how young people are making a new dream job in the fashion and modeling industry come true.[1] This project sought to examine from a sociological perspective the transitions of young people in Lisbon, Portugal, into new attractive professional worlds, such as being a tattoo artist (Ferreira, 2014), football player, chef, DJ (Ferreira, 2017) and, for purposes of this article, a career as fashion model.

With this aim in mind, I started my fieldwork conducting five interviews with "gatekeepers" from the world of fashion modeling - including directors of modeling agencies and bookers - in order to understand the institutional structure, requisites, and perceptions of the attractiveness of a career as fashion model to young people. The findings explored in this article rely mainly on this set of exploratory interviews. However, this research also draws on interviews conducted with two focus groups comprised of eight young models (five women and three men), and 17 individual interviews with young models in different stages of their career (aged 19 to 34 years old). The fieldwork was carried out between 2013 and 2015.

Being a fashion model as a *new dream job*

It is consensual among all the interviewees that, in recent years, the dreams and aspirations of young people in Portugal to become a fashion model have been growing. As one head booker noted, until the 1990s, "There were very few models. It's not like now, that everybody wants to be a model! (...) Particularly, for the last three years, it's crazy! It's crazy! It's crazy, because everyone thinks they can be a model!"

This observation indicates the recognition of fashion model as a "new dream job" among younger generations, i.e., as part of the more recent forms of "aspirational labor" (Duffy, 2017), representing the combination of the ideal of getting paid to do what one loves, with the promises of contemporary celebrity cultures: success, glamour, fortune and social visibility while *being oneself* (Sternheimer, 2015).

In fact, the investment in a modeling career is driven by a social belief that the young person can succeed to be *some-body* in the world, providing him or her a feeling of achievement as an individual *and* as a worker. In other words, a sense of individuality which is very difficult to obtain via the types of jobs usually available to young people. In the contemporary labor market, the young are usually perceived as one more amongst many, placed in the backstage of the social scene, and left at the mercy of various mechanisms that submit young people to the invisibility of underemployment, unemployment or the desolating and not promising job. Thus, to become a fashion model is perceived as a way of styling and branding an individual existence in a very self-distinctive way in the youth world.

The current aspirational boom for being a fashion model among young people in Portugal has its roots in the intense growth of the textile industry in Portugal during the 1990s, together with the establishment and expansion of the fashion world as a professional system of collective action. A set of occupations achieved the status of professions, such as stylist and fashion designer, fashion photographer, event producer, fashion journalist, fashion blogger or Instagrammer, etc. The occupation of a fashion model also became increasingly professionalized, mainly due to the appearance of a new range of modeling agencies in the 1990s (Macedo, 2007).

If, until recently, the fashion model was waiting to be chosen directly and individually by the client, they are now more likely chosen, placed and promoted in the market by professional agencies, who have increasingly come to play a structuring role in regulating the world of fashion models. This role starts with the selection process and also includes recruitment, training, and management careers at the national and international levels. Inside each agency, the *bookers* have become the fundamental "tastemakers" of the looks and beauty canons that come to be relevant in the larger world of fashion modeling (Mears, 2011, pp.121-137). In this way, bookers come to act as

[1] "Making dream jobs come true: transitions to new attractive professional worlds to young people", is a research project funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology (PTDC/CS-SOC/122727/2010), coordinated by Dr. Vitor Sérgio Ferreira. For further information, see http://newdreamjobs.wixsite.com/dreamjobs/home-page

gatekeepers of that world, managing the contact between the agency's portfolio of models and the potential customers.

In this new organizational context, more and more teenagers have begun looking to embrace a career as a fashion model, either as a full-time career or as a part-time job running parallel to other labor force or educational activities. As one agency director noted,

> The truth is that in the past there weren't so many agencies. (...) [Recently] many agencies have opened up. And that has meant looking for more models. (…) In the old days, there wasn't so much looking for models as there is today. Today, there are people ... at the door of a school, looking for kids, and everyone else ... constantly! In the old days, it didn't happen that way. (...) It was pretty much that [the growth of agencies], which came to make it that way.

Alongside this process of agency expansion, the recent appeal of a career in fashion modeling also results from the increasing media coverage of the activity (Schmitz, 2018; Pereira, 2009). The *mediatization* of the modeling world through contests and reality shows with young contestants, ordinary young people from different backgrounds with diverse life stories and bodily morphologies, has had a transformative effect on the ways audiences have come to imagine access to the world of modeling.

The practice of fashion modeling has become an enchanted occupation, wrapped up in an aura of glamour and celebrity for its protagonists, where anybody who shows "talent" or is willing to "work hard" can dream or aspire to achieve to be in the spotlight (Allen & Mendick, 2012; Mendick, Allen, & Harvey, 2015). As one director of a school for modeling and acting noted,

> It's the TV. That is the main factor responsible for all this. (...) There are young people of thirteen, fourteen years old who believe in it and they think it's possible to make this life and that's what they want. (...) It's to show up, what they want ... (...) [They say] "oh dear! I Love Tyra Banks. I watched America's Next Top Model, I watched that every day, and then they took pictures", and whatever… It's the TV shows. That's just it.

During a focus group, Clara and Jessica, both in the beginning of a fashion modeling career, shared the same opinion, adding weight to the argument for the socialization power of mainstream media and the contemporary power of social media sites such as Instagram and Facebook:

> [Clara] I think television is a medium that provides a lot of information, increasingly, holds the attention of a lot of young people and creates great illusions.

> Expectations! [kept saying Jessica]
>
> Yes! [replied Clara] Expectations and illusions. (…) Sometimes this happens with everybody who likes a lot of what they watch on TV and they want to be a model and whatever… And then they want to participate in those contests, like Elite Model Look. (...) And social media have also contributed to the growth of this desire.

From *top model* to *real people*

The widening of dreams and aspirations for fashion modeling is a consequence not only of the growth of agencies dedicated to the recruitment of models, but also of the diversification of areas in which they start to act, with a more permeable access for "real people," the terminology of the fashion world for people with ordinary faces, bodies and silhouettes. In fact, as a response to the exponential growth of work that was required on several fronts, and to the need of different types of faces and silhouettes, there was a great enlargement of the volume and variety of modeling work profiles. This expansion meant that the modeling activity is far beyond the activity of the *editorial models,* as recalled by Mears (2011, pp. 37-45), in the most prestigious runways and relevant fashion shows and editorials, and non-traditional models are hired for the most prestigious advertising campaigns of specific brands. As a booker of one agency stated,

> There are many kinds of agencies that, suddenly, in the last two years, have opened. They are also agencies for actors and extras, agencies working more in the advertising market, even because of what the customer asks them, that is 'real people', that is ordinary people.

Furthermore, in contemporary times of global and radicalized economic crisis, the more traditional market segment for editorial models – that is, the shows and fashion events – has sharply contracted. As a result, job opportunities for the more "traditional" runway model have also contracted. In general, editorial models are models with edgy physical traits that set them apart from "real people". During the time ruled by top models or supermodels, it used to be very tall and skinny women and men, drawn from the more traditional canon of "beauty" and "bodily perfection."

In this context of compression of the fashion shows market, the activity of many modeling agencies started turning to the field of advertising and commercial events, where the ideals of bodily perfection represented by the figures of top or editorial model have little penetration and dissemination. As one booker stated,

> Many years ago, about twenty years ago, there was a model ... The model was the typical model, maybe today we have that image: it was a beautiful model... Today the model is no longer that typical model. Anyone nowadays can enroll in an agency. That's exactly because as I said earlier: there are several areas. 20 years ago, there was only one type of model. The model was a tall model, a model who did runway, a skinny model. Nowadays, no. And in the past that model was also the one making commercials. Nowadays ... what one is looking for, what our clients are looking for in advertising, is a beautiful person, but real. A person who doesn't have that typical air of the old model, but a normal person.

After the economic crisis, the figure of the traditional top model is no longer aligned with market demand – which has fewer possibilities to pay – as well as the unfeasible dreams of aspiring models, considering the body canon represented by that figure. Shifting to the publicity of commercial mass consumption goods, the modeling agencies began to respond to the call of the market to use more images of "ordinary bodies," for easier communication and immediate identification with the consumer. In this way, the fashion world starts to give a public stage to the *commercial model*, the one that displays the normative standards of everyday bodies and shapes.

The *commercial model* is one who works in commercials for common products and brands (mobile phones, food, beverages, etc.), in small events organized for the general public (in shopping malls, for local authorities), or for the promotion of certain brands of mass consumption. This type of model is represented by persons whom the general public easily identifies with and/or identifies on the screen (in the case of being a public person, even without being from the fashion world, as it often happens in Portugal, with actors or micro-celebrities from reality shows).

Therefore, the mediatization of "real people" diversifies and extends the space of bodily possibilities for the exercise of modeling, and also provides a certain "democratization" on the social and bodily spectrum of young people aspiring to enter the profession. At the same time, there is also a profound transformation of the criteria of social and bodily recruitment at the level of the editorial models, in the direction of the enlargement of the morphologies of bodily capital; also at this high level of the modeling practice, we see the entrance of "real people," not in the sense of "ordinary people," but of people with bodily characteristics that used to be barred at the entrance of fashion industry in the past.

In the past, the branded singularity of an editorial model was based on a rare, perfect and beautiful body, as evidenced by the bodies of global top models.

Nowadays, the situation is different: an editorial model is physically requested to have "unusual" or "weird" bodily characteristics, as being an androgenous, drag, having physical characteristics as vitiligo or extensive tattoos, or having disabilities such as being an amputee or having muscular dystrophy, for example.[2]

As one booker put it, the editorial models

> Are the strangest. In fashion, when we are talking about real fashion, they are the strangest. They are the giraffes of the school, the ones that are known [and bullied] as being too tall (…) For example, if we go to Haute Couture, we need to have nine heads [a Portuguese expression meaning to stand above the crowd]. (...) So, there are [different] markets. We have totally contrasting customers, attention! We have customers who only like strange models – what we call the "gremlins" almost, right? -- that make fabulous fashion pictures and images to fashion editorials or ... This is what is more worth in the book of a model, an editorial. And then there's the customer who is fully commercial. For the shirt with flowers, the bath towel...

Conclusion

The arguments made in this paper point to the ethical changes in what is happening in the fashion industry. On one hand, we are clearly dealing with mechanisms of socio-economical exploration, as we know that the bodily democratization of the world of fashion models is happening because of a lack of capital flowing in the fashion market (considering that newcomers arriving earn much less than models in the past, and have much shorter trajectories inside the profession). On the other hand, and at the same time, we are dealing with an opportunity to give visibility and voice to the circulation inside the fashion industry of certain kinds of political discourses on the representation, recognition, and empowerment of social categories traditionally left out of the industry.

This situation can provide new ethical standards related to social and bodily inclusion and diversity in the highly selective and elitist world of modeling. The non-profit organization *Models of Diversity*[3], for instance, is an exemplary

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[2] As Jamie Brewer, Madeline Stuart or Jilian Mercado, for example, the model who was the star of Diesel's 2014 campaign, and that was signed to IMG Models, the same agency as Gisele Bündchen.

[3] See http://www.modelsofdiversity.org/

case of a social movement that aims at greater diversity in the models we see every day, calling on the fashion, beauty and marketing industries to recognize the beauty in people of all races, ages, shapes, sizes, and abilities.

Are we dealing with a new ethics inside the fashion industry that values inclusive forms of embodiment? Maybe, as the request for all kinds of "real people" does represent "some increase" in the plurality of bodies used for modeling, showcased that the fashion industry is slowly becoming more inclusive of representations of people from an expanding diversity. If, at the end of the day, the overall fashion modeling industry still has a long way to go, there are certainly efforts being made to finally be more inclusive, thereby fostering the empowerment and self-esteem of many social segments that started to have some cultural and social visibility inside and through the world of fashion modeling.

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