Improved Racial Diversity on the Runways of Fashion Week

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Abstract

Diversity is a contentious issue in the fashion industry, and most notable and newsworthy during what is known as Fashion Month. In most fashion designers' shows, representation of white, thin models is the norm. However, in recent years, the number of people of color and the number of plus-size models appear to be increasing in the model lineups of Fashion Week shows. This study analyzed the change in diversity, both in race and body size, in the Fashion Week runway shows of three brands — Calvin Klein of the United States, Chanel of France, and Versace of Italy — between 2013 and 2018. Using a content analysis, the study found that the percentage of white models decreased between 2013 and 2018, indicating that Fashion Week shows became more racially diverse. This study found no occurrences of plus-size models in the sample, so body size diversity in runway shows still needs improvement.

I. Introduction

Diversity is a contentious issue in the fashion industry that is most notable and newsworthy during what is known as Fashion Month, which occurs twice per year, when every participating brand unveils its latest collections in a runway fashion show as part of either New York, Paris, London, or Milan Fashion Week. Each designer is responsible for producing two shows per year, a Fall/Winter Ready-to-Wear collection and a Spring/Summer Ready-to-Wear collection. Designers often choose models for the first 10 looks of the show that embody their brand and how the designer wishes to represent themselves and their new collection to the public (Okwodu, 2015). In most fashion designers' shows, representation of white, thin models is the norm. However, in recent years, the number of people of color and the number of plus-size models appears to be increasing in the model lineups of Fashion Week shows. In 2017, the number of non-white models at New York Fashion Week doubled since the previous season, with the overall percentage of nonwhite models landing at 36.9 percent (Eckardt, 2017).

Studying diversity in the fashion industry is vital to seeing how such an influential industry can affect and be affected by culture's norms of what is desirable, attractive, and beautiful. Runway shows in particular represent how fashion designers choose to represent themselves and their target audience. By choosing racially diverse models, designers and brands can create a more accepting environment for people of color in the fashion industry. By including plus-size models in fashion shows, designers and brands can similarly show there is more than one acceptable body type, which is generally tall and thin. Though the fashion industry still

has a long way to go in terms of diversity, more brands have recently committed to greater racial and body size representation (Safronova, 2017).

This study analyzed the change in diversity, both in race and body size, in the Fashion Week runway shows of three brands between 2013 and 2018. The brands are three iconic brands of their respective countries — Calvin Klein of the United States, Chanel of France, and Versace of Italy. In this study, the researcher defined plus-size models as models size 8 and up, and non-plus size models as size 6 and below, though most runway models range from size 00 to 4.

II. Literature Review

To investigate how diversity in Fashion Week runway shows has shifted, the researcher analyzed diversity in the fashion industry as a whole, diversity at New York, Paris, and Milan Fashion Week, and how diversity trends differ by brand.

Diversity in the Fashion Industry

During the mid-2000s, runways were a glaring example of the lack of diversity in the fashion industry, where a majority of the models were white and extremely thin (Givhan, 2017). There were no editors-in-chief of major fashion publications who were black. Additionally, plus-size women were not represented in the fashion industry outside of specific retailers that catered to plus sizes.

Diversity in the fashion industry has an effect on how the public views and analyzes the concept of beauty and what physical qualities are most attractive. "These media representations trickle-down into the communities of consumers and leaves an impression of what 'beauty' is supposed to look like. By not featuring women of color, it implies that beauty is exclusive to White models" (Adodo, 2016, p. 7).

For decades "the fashion world has been the target of enduring criticism for using models who are largely white, waifish and woefully young" (Hunt, 2018, para. 4). However, more fashion campaigns in recent years are featuring plus-size models, older models, and models of color. The definition of diversity has also changed from simply referring to race, to now including age and body size.

Diversity at Fashion Week

New York Fashion Week is leading the industry in terms of runway model diversity. Spring 2018 was the most racially diverse New York Fashion Week in recent history. After examining 94 major New York shows and tallying 2,601 runway appearances, The Fashion Spot found that 63.1 percent of castings were white and 36.9 percent were non-white (Thai, 2017).

Though racial diversity in runway models has improved, many designers still choose to display a majority white model cast in their runway shows. In the fashion industry, an "appeal to aesthetics" exists where designers can choose to show mostly white, thin models and claim that as the "look" they were going for in their collection. Racial discrimination extends into the area of "lookism," which "skirts dangerously along racial protections in labor law" (Wissinger, 2012, p. 127). Designers and brand executives have the power to choose how diverse their model castings will be, with no regard for racial quotas imposed in other business models of employment. This creative control leads to real-world consequences and income disparity for non-white models who are, on average, cast less often and therefore make less income as a whole than their white model counterparts.

Diversity has changed both in model casting and the designers present at New York Fashion Week, with more models of color and plus-size models on the runway than in previous years and a fresh crop of young, racially diverse designers. New York Fashion Week was the most diverse of any show during the 2017 Spring/Summer season. The 2017 Spring/Summer season "was the season of the best castings—most diverse, most beautiful, and most relevant—of any city, period" (Singer, 2017, para. 4). A similar study showed that "during the fall season there were lower numbers of models on the runway for the majority 23 of the designers than the spring season. This concludes that more [models of color] are on the runway during the spring seasons for the designers selected for this study" than in the fall seasons (Adodo, 2017, p. 23).

The New York Times found New York Fashion Week to be the most diverse city for runway models. In

Fall 2017, 31.5% of models at New York Fashion Week were non-white (Safronova, 2017). All of the New York shows that the report analyzed included at least one model of color. According to the study, New York showed the most model diversity, whereas Milan was the least diverse Fashion Week amongst the four cities.

Diversity by Brand

Calvin Klein's brand image has changed in terms of diversity since Raf Simons took over as CCO in 2016, which was reflected in Calvin Klein's runway shows. Simons was quoted as saying that "being in this position with this brand, which has always stood for diversity anyway, I wanted to show that. [Diversity] is a big part of our dialogue right now. I think it should have always been a big part of the dialogue" (Anderson, 2017, para. 2).

Chanel went above and beyond in terms of diversity in its Fall 2016 show. Twenty looks from their Fall/Winter show featured models of color, which is considered a highly diverse Fashion Week runway lineup. "Chanel isn't just for Inès de la Fressange–esque French [girls] or the Fifth Avenue doyennes—the Chanel girl is international, multicultural, and completely modern" (Okwodu, 2016, para. 2). For reference, Inès de la Fressange is a French fashion icon known for her chic yet conservative style.

The literature review showed a snapshot of diversity in the fashion industry. The author aimed to analyze the trend of how diversity has progressed in the industry by formulating the following research questions and hypotheses.

Research Questions

RQ1: How have the brands used models by race?

RQ2: How have the brands used models by body size?

III. Methods

The researcher conducted a content analysis on New York, Paris, and Milan Fashion Week shows over six years between 2013 and 2018. Among many brands, Calvin Klein, Chanel, and Versace were chosen based on their recognition as "legacy" or iconic brands of their corresponding countries — Calvin Klein with the United States, Chanel with France, and Versace with Italy. The author analyzed the racial and body size diversity trend in their Spring/Summer and Fall/Winter Ready-to-Wear collections.

Images of models from 36 shows were gathered from the Vogue Runway archive, which stores every look from each Fashion Week show from 1992 up until 2019. The first 10 looks of each show provided the sample.

The researcher categorized each look into one race group such as black, white, Asian, or Latinx, and into a body size group like a slender or plus-size models.

IV. Findings

This section is organized based on the analysis of racial diversity and body size diversity in the 36 Fashion Week shows.

Racial Diversity

To answer RQ1 on the shift in racial diversity, the author analyzed the race of 360 models. The percentage of white models did not change until 2015, and then decreased over time, indicating that Fashion Week shows became more racially diverse in recent years.
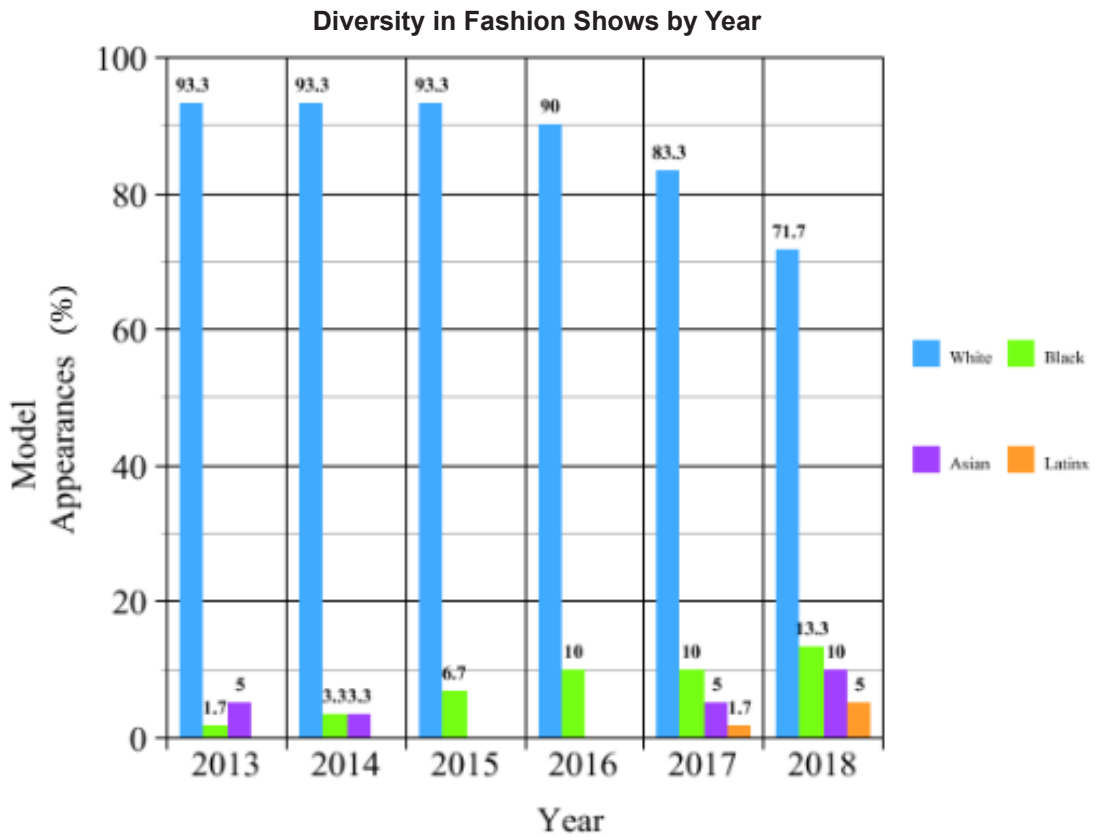
Diversity in Fashion Shows by Year

Figure 1. White models decreased over time from 2013 to 2018.

The percentage of white models decreased by 21.6% between the years 2013 and 2018. The percentage of black models increased by 11.6% during the same period. The percentage of Latinx models increased by five percent from the years 2013 to 2018. The percentage of Asian model appearances fluctuated. Asian models saw a nearly two percent decrease in appearances between the years 2013 and 2014, and remained at zero in the years 2015 and 2016. In 2017, Asian models appeared five percent of the time, and increased to 10% in 2018.

To further analyze the ratio of white models to non-white models in the years 2013 to 2018, the researcher compared the total number of white model appearances to the total number of non-white model appearances.

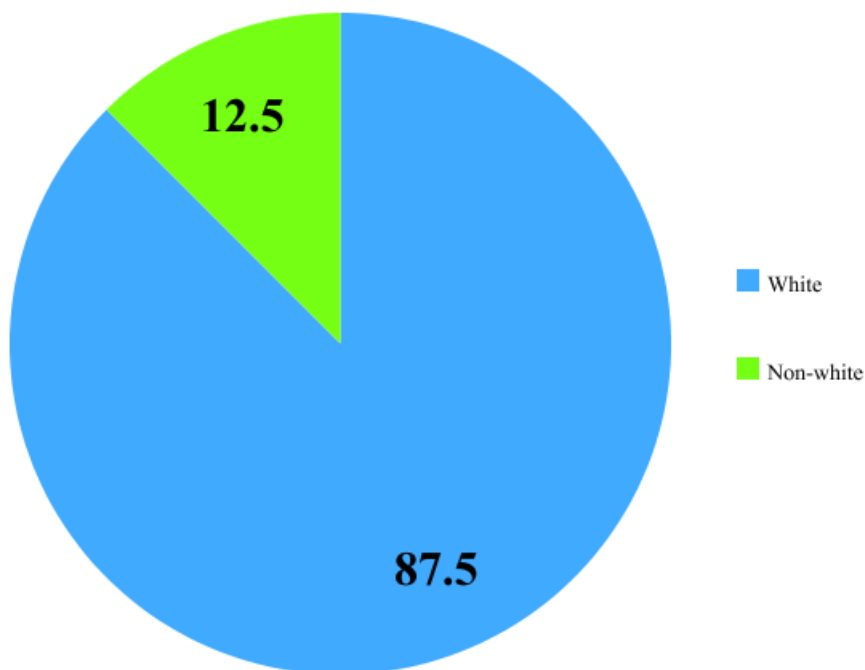**Diversity in Fashion Shows 2013-2018**

Figure 2. White models were the majority throughout 2013-2018.

Although racial diversity increased between the years 2013 and 2018 (as shown in Figure 1), over the 5 years the total number of white models outnumbered the total number of non-white models by 75%.

To see whether this racial difference can be generalized to the population, the author did a chi-square test. The expected numbers of white and non-white models were determined to be 105 and 15 respectively, according to the numbers found in the research. The p-value of the chi-square test is 0.00024, lower than the significance level of 0.05. This suggests that the racial difference in representation exists at the population level.

The study also analyzed how the racial diversity of models differed by brand. Chanel was the most diverse brand with 82.5% white models, 10% black models, 6.7 percent Asian models, and .8 percent Latinx models, as shown in Figure 3 below. Among the three, Chanel featured the highest number of appearances of black and Asian models.

Versace was the least diverse brand with 93.3% white models, 4.2 percent black models, .8 percent Asian models, and 1.7 percent Latinx models. Versace's percentages of Asian and black models were significantly lower than Chanel and Calvin Klein. However, they featured the highest percentage of Latinx models studied in the sample.
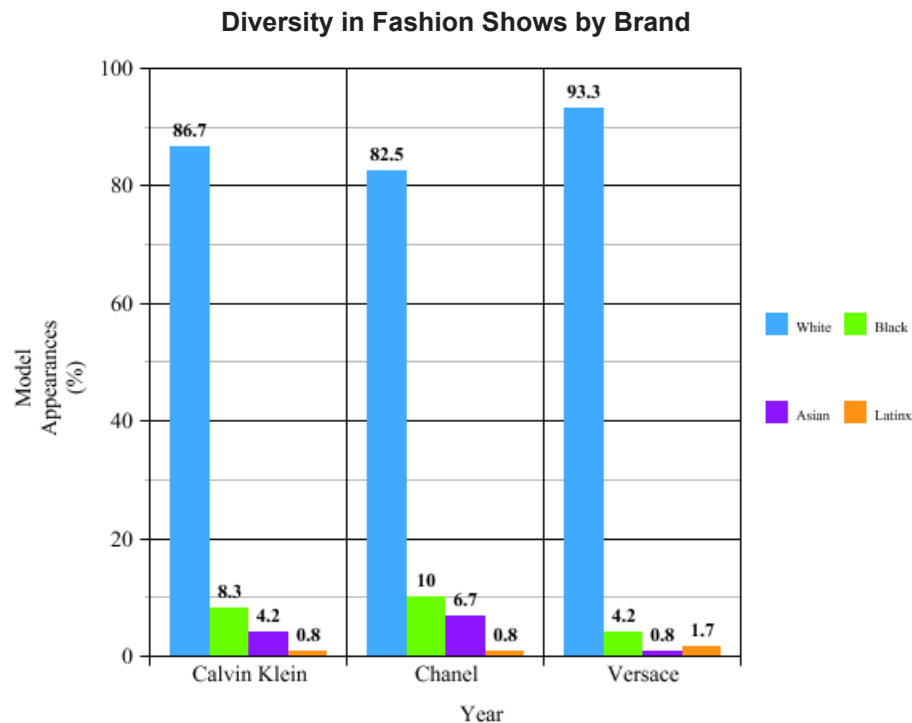
Diversity in Fashion Shows by Brand

Figure 3. Chanel was the most diverse designer with the lowest percentage of white models.

Body Size Diversity

RQ2 asked how body size diversity varied in New York, Paris, and Milan Fashion Week through the inclusion of plus-size models. The study did not find any plus-size models included in the sample.

V. Discussion

Throughout all elements of the fashion industry – particularly advertising campaigns, commercials, and runway shows – white and thin models are the norm. However, in recent years, the number of people of color and the number of plus-size models appears to be increasing in the model lineups of Fashion Week shows, perhaps due to the public's critical eye for designers who fail to include diverse models in their shows and campaigns.

In total, the study discovered that racial diversity increased throughout the 36 shows and 360 looks. The percentage of white models decreased by 21.6% between the years 2013 and 2018, while the percentage of black models increased by 11.6%, and the percentage of Latinx models increased by five percent. The percentage of Asian models fluctuated over the years, but saw a five percent increase between 2013 and 2018. The researcher was unable to analyze any change in the appearances of plus-size models because no plus-size models appeared in the study. Newer brands like Chromat and Yeezy, which cater to plus-sizes, have shown plus-size models in their runway shows (Safronova, 2017). However, the three major brands analyzed in this study have continued to use primarily thin, white models.

Racial diversity has progressed in Fashion Week runway shows. The literature review indicated that more designers are also committed to including larger models, however, body size diversity did not exist in the analyzed Fashion Week runway shows.

The study was dependent on the researcher's ability to correctly identify each models' race, which was determined by looking at the models and reviewing information online pertaining to each model's race. Models of color were determined by visible cues, which is a limitation of this study. The study was also limited

to the first 10 looks. Had the researcher analyzed the numbers of each type of model in the entire show, the study may have produced different results. Also, the study did not analyze races/ethnicities other than black, Latinx, Asian, and white. Finally, the study was limited to only three brands. These three brands are not known for including plus-size models, unlike newer brands like Chromat and Yeezy (Safronova, 2017). Due to the limited scope of the content analysis, the percentage of plus-size models in this study may not be representative of the actual industry as a whole.

VI. Conclusion

This study sought to examine how models' racial and body size diversity has shifted in Fashion Week runway shows. The study found that racial diversity increased from the last six years, with the percentage of white models decreasing and the percentage of black, Asian, and Latinx models increasing steadily.

The study also found that Chanel, which showed at Paris Fashion Week, was the most diverse brand with the lowest percentage of white models and highest percentages of black and Asian model appearances. Both Chanel and Calvin Klein had the same percentage of Latinx models. Versace was found to be the least diverse brand with the highest percentage of white models and lowest percentages of black and Asian models. However, Versace had the highest percentage of Latinx models among the three brands.

Even though the three brands showed some progress in racial diversity, they should make further efforts to embrace more models from minority groups. Increasing model diversity is a useful strategy for designers to extend their reach to a wider audience, and in turn a larger market. The same can be said about the body size diversity. Consumers want to feel represented in the brands they buy. Representation of different races and body sizes on the runway is the starting point for greater representation of minorities in the fashion industry.

Acknowledgments

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