Fashion Media and Body Image in African American Women

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Abstract

African American and White fashion norms are very different. The mainstream fashion magazine industry often depicts White women who are unrealistically thin, but rarely represents African American women at all, and such representations are usually characterized by sexist stereotypes. African American media and culture place less emphasis on weight loss than the mainstream and are more accepting of larger body size. They have their own style of clothing that expresses cultural heritage. Racial identity of African Americans can be a protective factor against the body image dissatisfaction often experienced by White women, and African American women showed higher body esteem than women of other ethnic groups.

*Keywords:* African Americans, women, fashion, body image
Introduction

The problems that fashion and media pose for women are well known. Magazines portray thin women as the ideal beauty and promote weight loss products that can allegedly help women attain this unrealistic ideal. Eating disorders may result from exposure to these images of “perfection.” Advertisements often depict women in a demeaning way, and women who want to look feminine and beautiful are usually influenced to act submissive and internalize sexism.

Among these problems, it can be difficult to notice the most insidious aspect of women in the media: almost all of them are White. In a study of 962 ads from fashion magazines from 1986 to 1988, only 23 contained a Black woman (Jackson and Ervin, 1991). Furthermore, the predominantly White models are almost always depicted wearing Eurocentric fashion trends. This underrepresentation implies that African American women could be severely affected by negative messages in media such as the thin ideal, which is even more unattainable for Black women with an overweight or obesity rate of 82% compared to 63% for White women (Ogden et al., 2014), and sexist portrayals, since African American women face two forms of discrimination in both racism and sexism (Szymanski and Stewart, 2010).

Studies have actually found that African American identity functions as a buffer against demeaning messages toward women in the media. This review of literature will focus on the ways in which White mainstream fashion media discriminates against African American women, African American fashion and culture differs from the norm, and racial identity protects African American women from body image problems.
Comparisons between White and African American Fashion Magazines

Disproportionality

African American women are significantly underrepresented in mainstream White media. Only 2% of advertisements in magazines from 1986 to 1988 contained an African American woman (Jackson and Ervin, 1991). Out of 18 cover models, 3 were Black women. In the advertisements, 83% of the Black women were portrayed in full-body view rather than face-only view, which the researchers concluded may symbolize distancing African Americans from the product. This also represents less favorable perceptions of intelligence of African American women, as a facial view represents intelligence and ambition while views of the body or body parts do not (McLaughlin and Goulet, 1999).

Representation of Black women in magazines directed at White women increased from 1985 to 1994 (Plous and Neptune, 1997). Despite this, the quantity of African American appearances in other White-oriented magazines did not improve, and depictions of them are still problematic. Cleavage exposure increased for both African American and White women over the time period, which is evidence that progress in representing women as independent outside the home has been accompanied by increased representations of them as sex objects in revealing clothing. Seventy percent of advertisements for animal print clothing featured a Black woman wearing the print, which was usually modeled after a predatory cat. This emphasizes sexual stereotypes of African American women as sexually provocative, animalistic, and predatory.

Sexism

As the races of women appearing in magazines with different demographics vary, so do the sexist stereotypes applied to those women. Advertisements perpetuate the negative stereotype that portrays Black women as loud, antagonistic, hypersexual, and more powerful than men in
their families, while White women are expected to be friendly, well-mannered, and submissive to men. McLaughlin and Goulet (1999) used a framework created by Erving Goffman (1976) to categorize sexist advertisements, and found that advertisements from Black women’s magazines, *Essence* and *Ebony*, had more images of function ranking and the family. In a great improvement from images of servants and maids, Black women were depicted in positions of power, but this is still problematic because it represents them as more confrontational than White women, and burdens them with “superwoman” expectations of both career success and matriarchy in their families. Ads depicting the family were the most common, and they usually depicted a non-nuclear family, to gain the empathy and support of single mothers in the African American community.

Research indicates that African Americans are less likely to criticize these damaging stereotypes. In a study of White, African American, and Hispanic women, African Americans perceived fashion images as more sexist than did the other two groups (Chesser, 1995). The other groups indicated that sexist images had less appeal, while this relationship was not significant for African Americans. These results imply that African American women are both more aware of the discrimination against them and more inclined to accept it.

**Weight Loss**

Magazines for White women are often criticized for their portrayal of an unrealistic body image and promotion of unhealthy weight loss to attain that image. African American magazines may present the opposite problem. African American women are more likely to be overweight or obese than any other American group (Ogden, 2014), but their fashion culture does not value thinness as highly as the mainstream culture and continues to promote unhealthy products such as fast food. The African American women’s magazine *Essence* had 355 weight control
advertisements for products such as diet pills and “light” foods from 1984 to 1993, while Ladies’ Home Journal had 2,019 over the 10-year period (Pratt et al., 1996). Cosmopolitan advertised more weight loss products and made more weight loss claims than Essence in 2004 (Kean & Prividera, 2007). The authors of both of these studies believed that more advertisements for healthy products should be directed towards African Americans to increase their awareness of health, encourage them to lose weight, and lower the prevalence of obesity.

**Unique Aspects of African American Fashion**

**Body Image**

While the ideal image of the White woman has become thinner, the African American community prefers larger body sizes and is more tolerant of a wider range of sizes. The Jet Magazine Beauty of the Week, an indicator of African American ideal female beauty, became larger in body size and less curvaceous from 1980 to 2006 (Dawson-Andoh et al. 2011). The researchers expected models to become more curvaceous, as indicated by a lower waist-to-hip ratio, but they exhibited the same trend as White fashion models and became straighter in shape. On the other hand, the data supported the hypothesis that models would be larger, but why do African Americans accept and prefer larger body sizes than the mainstream?

African American and Latino youth had similar supportive attitudes toward behaviors that lead to overweight and obesity (Barroso et al. 2010). A behavioral belief that caused African Americans to accept obesity was cultural eating; the popular cuisine called “soul food” developed during slavery and features fatty fried foods and sauces. Peer normative beliefs included the beliefs that overweight females were more attractive because they were less arrogant, overweight males were more athletic and protective, and baggy hip-hop fashion looked better on a larger frame. Parental normative beliefs held that overweight was healthier, because
of family history of food scarcity and an association of thinness with HIV and STIs. Control beliefs that prevented African Americans from losing weight were laziness, excessive responsibilities, and availability of fast food. These preferences make African Americans more susceptible to being overweight, but also protect them from the negative body image associated with mainstream media.

Clothing

The fashion industry caters to a Eurocentric perspective and often neglects African Americans’ clothing needs (MacDonald, Lazorchak, & Currie, 2009). Older African American women were dissatisfied with advertisements that depicted skinny models with small breasts and buttocks, because it showed that the clothes were not designed to look good on an African American figure. They stated that bras, jeans, and pantyhose usually did not fit them well for the same reasons. Marketing for African Americans is only directed at youth, so the elderly women interviewed found the clothes too flamboyant and the language of the advertisements too hip. The women preferred to express themselves in the workplace through cultural dress, such as bold colors, hair braids, and head scarves. The African American style of dress is neither African nor American, but influenced by both West African culture and experiences in America. This style emerged during slavery as an act of insubordination against the slave owners, and became popular as a way to rebel against European-American norms in the civil rights era (MacDonald et al. 2009; O’Neal, 1999). The aesthetic involves “high affect” colors that evoke emotion, self-expression, exotic features and improvisation, and dressing up, reflecting African metaphysical beliefs of unity and oneness (O’Neal, 1998).
African American Identity as a Protective Factor

Body Image Not Affected by Models

As a result of cultural values that defy the mainstream, African American women are usually less susceptible to the decrease in self-esteem after exposure to media that is often seen in White women, and several studies have confirmed this hypothesis. In a study of African American college women, there was no correlation between their BMI and their reading of magazines, measured by the Reader Usage Measure (RUM), implying that age, income, exercise, and African American magazine readership have a greater influence on lifestyle choices affecting their BMI (Prince, 2012). This is surprising because magazines are filled with advertisements for both weight loss products and fattening foods (Pratt et al., 1996; Kean & Prividera, 2007), yet it appears that African American women are unaffected by either.

Unlike Caucasian women, African American women do not experience lower body image after exposure to images of models (Beasley, 2000). Beasley presented African American college women with images of Caucasian or African American, thin or plus-sized models, and found no difference in their answers to a body image test before and after the brief exposure to any of the four treatments, concluding that depictions of ideal females do not lead them to body dissatisfaction. In a similar study, Caucasians and African Americans viewed advertisements containing the aforementioned categories, and African American women had significantly less body dissatisfaction than Caucasians (Bruns, 2013).

African American identity is limited as a buffer against body dissatisfaction. The similarity hypothesis states that social comparison, the behavior responsible for connecting idealized images with negative body image, is more likely to occur when individuals see images that look similar to them (Festinger, 1954). As a result, African American women who already
had low body esteem reported more dissatisfaction when exposed to images of attractive African Americans, but not Caucasians (Frisby, 2004).

Racial Identity Increases Body Esteem

African American women use different coping strategies regarding beauty ideals than other social groups (Lennon et al. 1999). African American women reported higher self-esteem and body satisfaction and lower preoccupation with weight. This is because they compare themselves to an in-group standard and do not accept the dominant culture. Since African American culture values larger figures, the mainstream thin ideal is too thin to serve as a comparison (Bruns, 2013). Traditional gender roles encouraged a woman to be conscious of her appearance, so nontraditional gender roles were correlated with higher body image (Lennon et al. 1999).

When women are exposed to sexually objectifying experiences that insinuate that their worth lies in their bodies, they internalize dominant standards of beauty which can lead to body surveillance, body shame, and appearance anxiety, which contribute to eating disorders. Multiculturally inclusive racial identity attitudes, the final stage in Cross’s nigrescence model characterized by pride in one’s own racial identity and recognition of others, help African American women resist these negative influences. Women who reported high sexually objectifying experiences and low multiculturally inclusive attitudes were more likely to internalize the thin ideal. Racial identity buffered against the relationship between sexual objectification and internalizing dominant beauty standards (Watson et al., 2013).

Conclusion

African American women are underrepresented and stereotyped in mainstream White media because they inhabit a different culture with norms and problems unlike those of Whites.
Their culture places less emphasis on thinness, weight loss, and the submissive feminine ideal. Instead, it holds overweight individuals as attractive and encourages self-expression and heritage pride through clothing. African American women have high self-esteem and body image even when they are bombarded with images of thin, attractive women. This is just one example in which racial identity buffers against the harmful effects of discrimination.
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