

Race and representation in the fashion world

[Design](#), [Fashion](#)



In this brief we have been asked to discuss race and especially the concept of race and its relevance and representation in modern visual culture. Prior to starting this essay, I researched racism in the fashion industry. I decided to base my essay on the fashion industry, not just because I am a fashion student, but also because I feel it is such a big influence on people, regardless of race, gender or age. Clothes are also one of the most obvious ways that people use to define themselves and they can be used to make both cultural and political statements. With the fashion industry being so huge, I thought it would be interesting to see if it is as progressive as we all think it is. I specifically researched how models of different races are represented and also whether these representations are always politically sensitive or are they still reinforcing stereotypes. I wanted to see how much equality is actually taking place in an industry which prides itself on being cutting edge and progressive. I was initially inspired to write about this by an article I read, written by Isabelle A Lake. The article was titled "Has black gone bad?", this was directed specifically at the models used in the fashion industry, this obviously caught my attention as I thought this industry was one of the most advanced in terms of using models of all races.

In the article "Has black gone bad?", the first paragraph was titled "Have you ever wondered why true black models are never in any commercials, ads or covers?". With the author herself being of an ethnic background, I wondered why she had specifically used the term "true black", was she using this term because she felt the ethnic models used in fashion today aren't a true representation of black people? To understand this better, I researched black models used in adverts, campaigns and covers, and found

that the majority of these models were represented without their natural hair (Ibid). This lead me to question if the reason these models are being styled with straighter hair was to appear more attractive to a Caucasian market and so in order for models of colour to be accepted and included in the world of fashion they have to change a major part of themselves.

As recently as 2013, the percentage of Caucasian models used was 82, 7% compared to the 6% of ethnic models used. Although this percentage has increased since then, I feel models of colour are only selected for the diversity statement (Ibid). Model Chanel Iman stated that she has been rejected from shows because the designers had already recruited a black model. This leads me to believe that ethnic models are only used because of their colour and to meet diversity quotas rather than just because they are purely a model (Ibid). For example, Naomi Campbell is known for being a model of colour, where as Kate Moss is just known as a model, and not specially a white model (Ibid). According to Gordon Hodson, race is seen as a social construction, “ But recognising race as a social construction does not make race less ‘ real’.” Although I partially agree with this, I feel it shouldn’t be something that depicts who you are as a person (Ibid).

According to Frantz Fanon, racism which aspired to be rational, individual, genotypical and phenotypical has transformed into cultural racism, and that the object of racism is no longer the individual man but a certain form of existing. Hank Willis Thomas also quoted that “ when you see advertising directed towards a demographic, specifically lets say black people, that there’s all these generalisations that come into play.” (Thomas, 2016, 00:

01: 46). I agree with this quote especially in terms of how ethnic groups are portrayed in the fashion industry and the fact that I feel they are sometimes only used for their ethnicity and not for their talent (Ibid).

The lack of ethnic models used in the fashion industry is predominant in my first image (Ibid). In 2013 For the French magazine, Numero, an American Caucasian model has been black faced and dressed in traditional African clothing. The magazine went further by naming the article " African Queen". This is obviously a shocking and unacceptable portrayal of another race, especially in an era that claims it is diverse and accepting of all people. It can be seen as appropriating another culture with little thought or concern about ethnic sensibilities. It is perpetuating the stereotype of African culture with the use of tribal jewellery and African looking headwear which is just a gross generalisation of a continent which boasts more than thousands of different cultures, languages and styles (Ibid). This lead me to believe that models of ethnicity are not as predominant as Caucasian models, as this magazine deliberately and clearly chose a white American model to be an African queen.

Numero was accused of racism and of being insensitive, although they apologised they claimed it was not their intention. The photographer of the piece, Sebastian Kim, quoted " We at no point attempted to portray an African woman by painting her skin black. We wanted tanned and golden skin to be showcased as part of the beauty aesthetic of this shoot. It saddens me that people would interpret this as a mockery of race." In my opinion the

model in this image looks in no way tanned or golden, and it could not have been more obvious as to what the magazine and photographer were doing.

Once again a Caucasian model has been used and represented as a person of ethnicity, a child of colour is alongside her. When reading an article on this image, I discovered that it is by the same French magazine, Numero, except this is three years prior to my first image. This spread had also caused a lot of issues, once again relating to race and how the French Caucasian model, Constance Jablonski, had been black faced. The model is seen heavily bronzed and with a hairstyle that is not natural to a white person, an afro (Ibid). In this image it is difficult to understand the magazines intentions at all. The models outfit seems inspired by 70's disco culture and the African Americans in the 70's used the afro as a political statement representing their cultural pride and identity (Ibid). To see it worn by a 'blackened up' white model seems even more offensive when seen through this historical perspective. It is an example of how an important cultural identity can be trivialised by reducing it to a mere fashion accessory.

The magazine stated that they have always supported the artistic freedom of their photographers and in regards to the 2013 image of "African Queen", Numero respect the creative work of their photographers, and firmly exclude the intention to hurt readers sensitivity. Although a magazine should respect their photographers creativity and ideas, there should be a line that mustn't be crossed (Ibid). I feel it is completely unacceptable that this type of imagery was accepted to be printed in a modern day magazine and it is

interesting to wonder if the magazine, by being so deliberately contentious, was hoping to increase publicity for their publication (Ibid).

Numero later went on to name a number of ethnic models used in their magazine, such as Naomi Campbell and Fernando Cabral. They quoted “ This demonstrates the completely inappropriate nature of the accusations made against our magazine, deeply committed to the respect for differences, tolerance and more generally to non-discrimination.”. According to Numero, them black facing Caucasian models on two accounts, was to show how none discriminatory they are, I feel like this is completely false and them saying that the accusations made against them are inappropriate is disgraceful (Ibid).

In conclusion I feel that the fashion industry still has a long way to go in terms of true diversity and in breaking down stereotypes. Why should models such as Iman or Naomi Campbell be predominantly known as models of colour, their ethnicity seemingly more important than anything else. Why do magazines feel the need to use Caucasian models and make them look “ African” without feeling it is deeply inappropriate and unnecessary given the wealth of talent and diversity of models available. It is also interesting that so many models of colour are favoured if they are lighter skinned and have more `Westernised` hair. We need as a modern society to move away from reinforcing stereotypes and embracing all cultures as relevant in a way which is sensitive. Models should be able to work without being purely defined by their colour, race or ethnicity. Appropriating another culture and

reducing it to a cliched fashion statement is not progressive and can often cause offence.