Examining Body Positivity in Rihanna's Savage X Fenty Lingerie Runway Show

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Beauty ideals are the norms that represent attractiveness based on the perspective of every culture about the ideal features of the human body (Calogero, Boroughs, & Thompson, 2007, p. 4). However, these ideal beauty standards are largely unobtainable for the majority of the population (Calogero et al., 2007). The fashion industry often reinforces unrealistic beauty ideals by emphasizing the thinness, youthfulness, and attractiveness of models (Brownbridge, Sanderson, & Gill, 2016; David, Morrison, Johnson, & Ross, 2002; Hogan & Strasburger, 2008). These unrealistic standards are particularly evident in the lingerie market. Lingerie brands, such as Victoria's Secret (VS), promote improbable images of beauty (Hogan & Strasburger, 2008).

However, some lingerie brands are striving to change societal standards of beauty by designing for a more inclusive audience (Zhou, 2019). One example is singer Rihanna's Savage X Fenty (SxF) lingerie collection, which launched in 2018. The brand received enormous support because it utilized models of all different shapes, ethnicities, attitudes, and sexualities. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to explore the role of inclusive fashion runway shows, specifically the shows for the SxF lingerie collection, in establishing new beauty ideals through the lens of body positivity.

Body positivity refers to an appreciation of “real bodies” (i.e., those that do not conform to narrow beauty ideals) and seeks to challenge the unrealistic representations of “perfect” bodies as the standard of feminine beauty (Cwynar-Horta, 2016, p. 38). With the birth of the body-positive movement, women's self-acceptance of their bodies is increasing, motivating more women to support body-positivity-based fashion brands (Cwynar-Horta, 2016).

Methods and Procedures

To investigate the purpose, online comments for the Rihanna SxF Fall/Winter 2018 collection runway shows and Fall/Winter 2019 runway shows were examined using a netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2002). Netnography is the ethnography of the Internet (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). According to Kozinets (2002), this method allows researchers to explore the different online opinions of people who share and discuss the same interests in the digital world (p. 64).

Comments that describe the show from an individual perspective and express the viewer's personal feelings toward the brand were collected. A total of 80 comments were collected using a non-random convenience sample strategy (Privitera, 2016), and analyzed using the *stages of the constant comparison* method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), the three stages were: a) using open coding to find the concepts mentioned consistently in the data and grouping them, and titling every group separately, b) using axial coding by making a comparison between the coded data and categorizing them, and c) finally collapsing categories of similar meaning into larger themes.

Results and Discussion

Four themes emerged from the data. They included, (a) feelings of sexiness, beauty, and empowerment, (b) inclusivity, (c) uniqueness of the performance, and (d) challenges to capitalism.

The theme of *feelings of sexiness, beauty, and empowerment* was a reflection of the desire women had to feel attractive to others. The importance of this theme is that women considered beauty as a sort of psychological weapon. Meaning to be pretty is to be powerful. (Calogero et al., 2007; Gleysteen, 2018). For example, one woman noted that it was a, “Great show ... I felt like this finally ... empowered [all women] to [be] confident and reminds me to show off my body too. I am sexy too. Everyone is SEXY!” (CV91). Women measure their physical perfection based on the beauty ideals imposed by the media and society (Calogero et al., 2007). There is a strong link between media exposure and its effect on a woman's perception of their body (Levine & Harrison, 2004). Thus, having body-positivity-based fashion runways will help significantly to rebuild women's confidence in their appearance.

The theme of *inclusivity* describes the SxF collection. Inclusivity refers to all characteristics that represent people who are often excluded from society and it is a key concept in the body positivity movement (Cwynar-Horta, 2016, p. 38; Zhou, 2019, p. 25). The SxF shows featured all types of women who do not meet traditional beauty standards. For instance, “Trans inclusion, queer models, disabled models, plus sized models and models in every hue were represented in this show” (The Best!). Another one woman stated, “Love how we got to see such a range of women from all different colors, shapes, sizes, ages, and backgrounds, being a true representative of how diverse we women are” (Yvonne A. Amoh). The comments expressed admiration of seeing the variety of the designs and models in the show aligned with the concept of inclusivity.

The *uniqueness of the performance* theme considered the unusual performance of the models. One woman commented, “I love how the show ignored the traditional runway scene to show the women working together to create a huge performance from start to end. The models WERE THE SHOW!” (Andrea Simone). The women in the online community emphasized how SxF's models were presented as a living soul while walking, so they laughed, danced, cheered, and made eye-contact with the audience. According to Awan (2017), in the professional environment of the fashion industry, models only seen as objects. By allowing the models to act as living souls and perform as “aesthetic objects” (Holla, 2017, p. 254), the SxF runway show was challenging the traditional objectification of runway models.

The *challenges to capitalism* theme symbolizes the power of designers and consumers to influence the fashion system. In the lingerie world, Victoria's Secret set the rules for design and runway shows. When Rihanna launched her SxF brand and broke the old rules, viewers couldn't believe it had finally happened and considered this show to be bold move that represents “the end of capitalism” (Patterson, 2019, para. 1). One comment titled: “Prepare for total DOMINATION” (Ashlei Caldwell). Capitalism in fashion is defined by the domination of certain designers, usually from high-end *haute couture* brands, who are positioned at the top of the fashion hierarchy and control the rules of the business (Bourdieu, 1993, p.133; Rocamora,

2002, p.343). The women in comments expressed clearly their deep dissatisfaction toward VS through all media, explained the reasons for rejecting the VS show, and compared the two lingerie brands and runways—SxF and VS—and were much more favorable to SxF.

Conclusion

The four emergent themes clearly emphasized support for SxF and other fashion brands that are empowering and inclusive, offer unique performances, and challenge capitalism. The influence of the body positivity movement could be seen in the online comments. Although there were some critical comments on the SxF runway shows and collations, most comments were overwhelmingly positive. These positive comments meet the goals of the movement by challenging beauty ideals, improving women's self-esteem, and boosting women's self-confidence (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). The SxF brand could replace the biggest competitors in the market, such as Victoria's Secret, if it continues to present inclusive models in its runway shows (Iqbal, 2019).

Future research should investigate women's feedback on websites selling SxF collections to explore customers' perceptions about the quality of the brand and their opinions after wearing lingerie, and take all critical reviews into consideration. Replicating this study to other fashion runways by lingerie brands that support body positivity is recommended as well, in order to discover more women's perceptions toward this new phenomenon and how does it impact on their self-love.

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