Assessing Lookism: Analyzing Fashion Advertisements Posted on Social Media

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Introduction and Significance: Advertising in the fashion industry has traditionally focused on fantasy and escape, often depicting models that possess beauty ideals (Sinclair, 1987). The rise of social media and digital technology has perpetuated these advertisements. However, achieving the flawless looks of the models in these digital advertisements is often unachievable (e.g. too thin, flawless skin), particularly given the latest digital tools that allow for manipulation of these images (e.g. photoshop). Researchers found body image and self-esteem issues increase because of these fantasy images that feature the "perfect look." This fact is true in both digital and print advertisements (McLeon, Jarman, & Rodgers, 2019). Chae (2018) noted the modern-day phenomena of social media use increases appearance management behaviors which affects degree of happiness. Using these platforms generally leads to less happiness due to unsatisfaction with one's looks.

Images posted by fashion brands on social media can rise to the level of discrimination based on looks which can cause significant differences in treatment and resources for upward mobility (Ghodrati, Joorabchi, & Muati, 2015). Therefore, the *purpose* of this abstract is to report on a method to assess appearance of models in photographs on social media.

Application of relevant theory and pertinent literature: Related theory includes components of impression management theory where an individual's goal is to influence perceptions of others. Goffman (1978) made relationships between self-presentation behaviors and social interactions, asserting when individuals manage their appearances it affects their social interactions. This research also examines the concept of "Lookism" which has been defined as "the practice of discrimination on the basis of physical appearance in the workplace" (Ghodrati, Joorabchi, & Muati, 2015, p.1).

Appearance biases are often implicit or unintended. Print forms of advertising have been used to examine unintentional biases (e.g. Lindner, 2004)

Limited research has examined "lookism" and social media. Media presentation is important to individuals who tend to engage in social comparison. For example, the results of an online survey revealed that Korean females (ages 20-39) were less likely to engage in social comparison and selfie-editing to fine-tune digital presentation of themselves (Chae, 2018). Muslimah (2019) investigated the issue of lookism, noting media plays a role in lookism because individuals compare themselves with nearly perfect images that have been altered. These filtered images create feelings of unsatisfaction and self-awareness of body flaws and imperfections leading to depression, low self- esteem, plastic surgery, buying makeup and cosmetics, and using filters to conceal their true appearance. Specifically, social media filters can shrink the nose which can result in loathing their nose and, thus, increase the likelihood of using plastic surgery.

A recent study, by Park and Chun (2020) found Generation Z was particularly influenced by fashion-related content. This generation had positive attitudes about social media (YouTube) and the content influencing their appearance management behaviors. Exposure to the content enhanced their desires for an ideal, slender body. It also provided guidance on consumption and lifestyle. Given the influence of fashion social media on individual's appearance management and the limited studies that have examined the content of digital fashion advertisements, this study focused on a method to examine images of fashion brands on social media with the primary goal to gain insights about implicit and explicit appearance biases or "lookism." The research questions for this study included:

1) *How are models of two different fashion companies presented on social media?* 2) *Are there differences in presentation given a model's visible demographic characteristics (e.g. ethnicity)*? In addition, strategies regarding how a content analysis of photographs posted on social media can be used to determine appearance biases were explored.

Method: A content analysis was completed of images on the social media platform Facebook. Facebook was selected because the "likes" were available. Instagram recently removed like counts to improve mental wellbeing (Leventhal, 2019). Images of two diverse fashion brands were examined: 1) fast fashion brand, Shein; and 2) luxury brand, Versace. Versace was chosen because it is one of the most recognizable fashion brands in the world and Shein is an online retailer and a global leader of fast fashion (beauty Kiss, 2023; Hanbury, 2021).

Facebook photographs posted during 2023 and early 2024 were analyzed. The photographs selected had at least one model wearing the company's products and included the model's face.

These pictures were randomly selected by day posted. The following variables were documented: 1) hair, 2) make-up; 3) clothing; 4) gender; 5) ethnicity; 6) model pose, 7) number of likes, and 8) number of comments. A theme analysis was conducted for repeated types of clothing. The descriptions were independently analyzed and coded by two researchers. The researchers compared and discussed the themes and coding until agreement was reached. Quantitative analysis included calculating frequencies and percents. Qualitative and quantitative comparisons were made between visible traits of the model to variables of the model presentation and consumers' responses to the images. For example, ethnicity (visible trait) was analyzed given the model pose (model presentation) and the number of likes and presentation (consumer response).

Results: Twenty-eight pictures were available to analyze for Versace and 18 were analyzed for Shein. From the photographs where ethnicity could be assessed Versace images had greater diversity than Shein models: Caucasian (n=12; 48%); Black (n=2; 8%); Asian (n=11; 44%) when compared to Shein: Caucasian (n=13; 72.2%); Black (n=2; 11.1%); Hispanic (n=2; 11.1%). Shein models were female. For Versace, 9 (32%) were male and 18 (64%) were female models. One of the Versace models was categorized as non-binary. Despite the international appeal of these brands, the finding regarding ethnicity demonstrates the dominance of Caucasian models in fashion advertising, particularly for fast fashion. Additionally, none of Versace advertisements featured black females.

Interestingly, for Versace, the lowest number of likes (m=1.18 K; 32.4 comments) were photographs featuring Caucasian models. Photographs with Asian models had the highest responses on social media ($\bar{x}$ =2.80K likes; 183 comments). For Shein, products on Caucasian models had the most likes ($\bar{X}$ =2.00K) versus 1.8K mean for African American Models and 1.35K mean for Hispanic models. No discernable differences were found for postings by either company in the number of comments per photograph.

Versace used different models for clothing trends. Asian models were utilized to feature the Grecia bag and Barraco Jacquard Patterns. Leather and a tailored garment were featured on the black male, and the black non-binary model. Caucasian female models were used to feature all trends, except leather. There was no discernable clothing type given ethnicity in the Shein images. However, Shein used clothing that was basic (white, brown) for Caucasian models and Hispanic and Black models wore vibrant colors. There was some differentiation in model pose based on gender with the men in the photographs looking directly at the camera or engaged in an activity.

Discussion, Conclusions, Recommendations for Further Research: "Lookism" is an issue in society where individuals are treated unfairly because of appearance. Social media has perpetuated the problem. Analyzing the presentation of models in social media images for fashion brand advertising can be a fruitful method to understand "lookism" and related implicit biases that still exist. It is interesting that these international brands continue to feature mostly Caucasian, able- bodied models. Helpful variables for analysis of potential biases include counting the number of diverse models in advertisements posted on social media. In addition, model gender and ethnicity related to model pose and clothing color could

provide further insights on appearance expectations of different demographic groups. The number of likes might help understand implicit biases among consumers of fashion. Due to the limited number of photographs with diverse models, analyzing the themes in the comment section of the posted photographs might provide additional insights.
Photographs posted on social media by additional fashion brands and adding to this data on Versace and Shein is warranted to better understand lookism (e.g. traits that perpetuate lookism, fast fashion versus luxury fashion presentation, etc.).

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