



Why Fashion Models Don't Smile. Aesthetic Standards and Logics in the Field
of Fashion Images 1982-2011

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In today's highly visual and globalized Western culture, fashion magazines are central, transnational institutions that shape and disseminate ideas on how we should look, dress and be successful. Within scholarly and popular debates, fashion images are criticized for giving the wrong examples, for conveying ideals of beauty that are too white, too thin, too objectified and too idealized. But despite the controversy that surrounds them, studies of what fashion images actually look like, how they come about, and how they have changed are all but absent. This dissertation addresses this lacuna with its detailed study of fashion images, drawing on observations, interviews and, most importantly, a content analysis of 13,353 fashion images covering a 30-year period (1982-2011). The images are drawn from ten different magazine titles published in the United Kingdom, France, Italy and the Netherlands. The dissertation first establishes a clear picture of what fashion images look like, then explores *why* they look the way they do. Its central question is: what do fashion images look like, and how are they shaped by the aesthetic standards and logics of the field of fashion images as well as by wider societal factors?

Fashion images can broadly be understood in three different ways: 1) they reflect large-scale societal processes (for instance, gender representations reflect gender hierarchies in society); 2) they differ according to the specific institutional contexts in which they are made; 3) they are shaped by aesthetic logics. The first two rarely pay attention to the aesthetics of the object itself, and typically view differentiations between cultural products as the outcome of non-aesthetic social, economic and institutional factors. While I draw on both macro theories and institutional approaches, my study foregrounds the role of aesthetic logics and standards that, while related to social and institutional contexts, cannot be reduced to them.

Cultural products differ because they are consumed by different publics and are made by different institutions. But they also look, smell, taste and sound different. Nevertheless, few sociological studies have taken questions of form and style seriously. More than an analysis of fashion images, this thesis presents a sociological analysis of *aesthetics*, an attempt to connect the aesthetic and social dimensions of cultural production.

My research begins with a step-by-step ethnographic analysis of the making of a fashion image. How do industry professionals tell a good image from a bad one? How do aesthetic logics pertaining to style interact with institutional logics pertaining to the money, people and institutions involved?

Chapter 2 offers a detailed description of the ingredients of a photo shoot. It shows which motives and evaluations inform actors' aesthetic decisions, what resources they draw on, and how these crystallize into the end product of the photo shoot: a 'good' high or low fashion photograph. Within the photo shoot, abstract categories such as 'high' and 'low', 'edgy' and 'friendly' crystallize into different hairdos, poses and settings, and thus into different images. Drawing on insights from interaction ritual theory and symbolic interactionism, this chapter shows how the division between high and low fashion operates through concrete, embodied interactions, and how institutional, symbolic and aesthetic boundaries between high and low 'happen' simultaneously in the fashion photo shoot. The ethnographic methods employed here complement structural and institutional approaches to cultural production that assume everyday practices of aesthetic decision-making will almost mechanically reproduce field structure, macro-relations and field positions. The analysis in Chapter 2 shows that cultural production often results in reproduction, but is also open-ended and contingent; it hinges on a shared collective vibe and a situational, collective sense of what looks beautiful or 'right'.

While most content analyses of media images typically measure a narrow range of pre-defined indicators (most notably gender stereotyping or sexualisation), the codebook used in this study was designed to capture the aesthetic elements of representation as comprehensively and as open-endedly as possible. Chapter 3 describes in detail the process of designing the codebook and training the coders. The codebook contains 156 variables pertaining to the aesthetic and institutional elements of fashion images. Codes range from hair colour, eye colour and skin tone to length of skirt, height of heels, the use of glitters, latex or fur, exposed cleavage, matt or shiny lipstick, type of pose and setting, to freckles, gapped teeth and shaved eye brows. The codebook was informed by interviews with and fieldwork among industry professionals, which led to the inclusion of photographic elements such as the use of shadow and the camera standpoint. Many codes were developed specifically for this study and are thus measured for the first time. The most exciting result of this research is that this detailed coding of images actually worked: over different time periods and across countries, the representation of beauty in fashion images could indeed be comprehensively quantified. Given the explorative character of the codebook, this chapter reflects on the choices that were made in its design (for instance, the trading of quantity for empirical richness and nuance) as well as the trials and errors of the coding process. Chapter 3 elaborates on the principles of multiple correspondence analysis, employed in Chapter 4; Chapters 4, 5 and 6 draw on the results of the content analysis.

Aesthetic logics define the patterns of combinations in which words make a poem, sounds make a song, and visual elements make a beautiful image. Chapter 4 analyses the underlying order that structures the assemblage of aesthetic elements in photographs of female beauty into coherent ‘styles’ or ‘tastes’. Through correspondence analysis – a technique that analyses data as a system of relations of similarity and difference – the chapter examines to what extent the field of fashion images is ordered by aesthetic logics, and how they interact with other ordering structures. I first categorize fashion images from three countries (Italy, the Netherlands and the UK) and time periods (1982, 1996, 2011) on the basis of their aesthetic elements. I then compare this categorization to structural institutional categories: do stylistic differences between fashion images overlap with different countries, time periods, magazine titles or genres? Results show that the field of fashion images is structured along three dimensions – stylization versus naturalness, glamorous sexualization versus no sexualization, and expressive sexualization versus withdrawal – which make up the aesthetic ‘space of possibilities’ in which each fashion image is positioned. Despite increasing globalization, commercialization and expansion of the fashion field, the positioning of fashion images in this “space of possible” styles is remarkably consistent over thirty years and across national contexts. The stability and homogeneity of representational styles is traced to the distinctive niche position of fashion photography in the wider field of representational forms. Over time and across countries, stylistic differences overlap most clearly with different magazine types and magazine titles. The leading organizing principle – the opposition between stylized and natural fashion images – is grounded in the opposition between the transnational style of high fashion magazine titles (*Vogue*, *Elle*) and that of local, mainstream magazines. The analysis further reveals a distinctive commercial style characterized by expressiveness and sexualization, exemplified cross-nationally in *Cosmopolitan* and *Men’s Health*.

Chapter 5 turns to the gendered dimension of aesthetic standards and the extent to which differences between representations of men and women can be explained by power differentials between the genders. Comparing fashion images from Italy and the Netherlands – countries that differ considerably in gender equality – over a period of thirty years, I find that gender-specific representations grow more pronounced in Italy and slightly less so in the Netherlands. While aesthetic standards for representation indeed remain gendered, femininity and masculinity are signified in new and unexpected ways. Although representations of women rarely suggest ‘ritualized subordination’ (Goffman) or dependence, they are increasingly marked by withdrawal and objectification, seen in the emergence of a transnational and gendered representational style featuring vacant looks, a lack of smiles and open mouths. This chapter suggests that gendered differences in representation are about more than power; they point to new ways of “doing” femininity and

sexuality as traditional feminine values, expressivity and engagement give way to disengagement and stylization. Furthermore, both men and women are increasingly objectified. The chapter also shows that gendered aesthetic conventions may be culture-specific, polysemic and contingent – aspects which have largely been ignored in analyses of gender representation.

Chapter 6 analyses the different ways in which women are presented as things in fashion images. Despite widespread attention to the objectification of women in media and its many harmful effects, the concept has not received the nuanced empirical and theoretical grounding that it deserves, thus leading to its erroneous conflation with sexualisation or submissiveness. I start with visual examples of objectification to unpack the different ways in which objectification is conveyed in images, pointing to the contextual nature of visual signs and the combination of aesthetic elements that make an image objectified or sexualized. I distinguish between three types of objectification – sexual, decorative and withdrawn objectification – and present a new methodological framework to measure them. Results show how visual elements that have been taken as straightforward indicators of (sexual) objectification, such as the averted gaze and open mouth, are ambiguous in their meanings. I find that women are increasingly objectified in fashion images in ways that do not necessarily convey sexualization or submissiveness but detachment or passivity, and trace these patterns to the broader trend of aestheticization, field dynamics, and the niche position of fashion photography. Alongside such changes, my findings also reveal that over time, approximately 75% of female fashion models are portrayed passively, and from a considerable distance. The distinctiveness of fashion models is that they are “there to be looked at”.

In sum, the chapters of this dissertation showcase an aesthetic perspective for studying cultural production – and a call to sociologists to take aesthetics seriously. They reveal the added value of an approach that begins with aesthetic content and then extrapolates to social structure, rather than the other way around. Why not begin by closely examining fashion images when trying to understand how they look?

I conclude that a typical fashion image shows a styled and groomed, non-smiling model in a passive pose that allows the viewer to see her clothes. Some are more stylized than others; some show more smiles, others more skin. I argue that fashion images look the way they do because: 1) they follow an aesthetic logic that coordinates which aesthetic elements go together and which do not. The elements that are used and the way in which they are combined are patterned like words in a language or sounds in a song; 2) they represent an aesthetic niche in the wider field of representational forms, distinguished from other forms for instance by stylization, passive poses and cool looks with open,

non-smiling mouths. Variation takes place within these boundaries; and 3) they represent a specific gender, or the aesthetic style of a specific magazine type.

Returning to the central question of this study, stylistic differences in fashion images are sometimes explained by aesthetic logics, sometimes by wider explanations that relate to social trends or categories, and sometimes by institutional explanations such as field expansion and stratification. The contribution of this thesis is that it adds an aesthetic perspective to cultural differentiation and shows, by examining fashion images, that their aesthetic properties cannot be explained by *only* looking at social or institutional structures. Aesthetic differentiation does not necessarily overlap with institutional or societal partitioning. Aesthetic content is indeed tied to social context, but not in the way that existing studies of fashion images and advertisements too readily assume. More research that relates stylistic differences to specific contexts is needed to see *which* explanatory levels best account for aesthetic variation and change in *which* contexts. This will require research that takes aesthetics seriously as well as the development of a more comprehensive sociological theory of aesthetics to unravel the puzzles this thesis leaves unresolved: what actually drives aesthetic change, how do meanings of visual signs change, and how do social developments affect cultural content?