

Vogue Anti-Fandom: Who Owns Luxury?
Ben Mazer, FMST 085, Spring 2008

Vogue, an influential magazine about women's fashion, has come under attack for being elitist, conservative in their styles, and most recently, as racist. The April 2008 cover has sparked dissent and farther-reaching criticism about the magazine from within the fashion industry and fan communities. This growing anti-fandom within the larger world of fashion fandom is detailed and placed within models of fan communities. We conclude that anti-fandom of *Vogue* represents a disagreement with larger taste hierarchies and deserves a different type of analytic treatment.

Vogue is a transnational magazine about women's fashion. Among people who work in style and fashion, it is ubiquitous, and has a fan base spanning many demographics. Naturally it has fans who find its reports on fashion original and forward-thinking. A subset of fashion fans, however, has emerged that is strongly critical of *Vogue*, despite their being fans of the industry in general. This paper catalogs and rationalizes the *Vogue* anti-fan movement and its motivations.

Traditional social gatherings in the fashion industry are highly structured shows and parties. These provide little room for organized discussion or critique of the fashion industry. The largest traditional outlet for meta-discussion of the industry has been from the fashion magazines and newspapers themselves. These do not provide an unfiltered look at fans' views, however, as industry ties are unavoidably present. Yet with the Internet's rise in popularity, blogs and websites related to fashion have become extremely popular. Many prominent fashion writers from traditional media outlets also maintain more informal blogs that allow uncensored reader feedback. One such blog is the "On the Runway" blog at the New York Times, run by famous fashion writer Cathy Horyn.ⁱ The blog's posts receive hundreds of comments from both outsider fans and even industry insiders such as Marc Jacobs. This particular website and the newly created official *Vogue* message board have been used as resources for anti-fan comments.ⁱⁱ

Much of *Vogue*'s content and the fandom surrounding it are related to fashion photography. A popular LiveJournal community trades *Vogue* photos from different issues published globally.ⁱⁱⁱ A fashion blog called Jezebel features frequent posting of "LOLVogues", where *Vogue* images are re-contextualized with humorous text.^{iv} These texts are often critical of *Vogue*'s editing. Anna Wintour, the Editor-in-Chief, is a controversial figure who is often characterized as cold and arrogant. Although these cartoons include no more than one sentence of text, we will see that their criticism is in earnest, and echoes other sentiment on the Internet. A "LOLVogue" has been included in the Appendix.

The photo most recently brewing controversy is April 2008's cover photo of a black basketball star holding a white model. It was discovered that the cover looks like a racist propaganda poster from World War I, and *Vogue* anti-fandom has become vocal, most prominently about *Vogue*'s supposed racism. A side-by-side comparison of the cover and poster has been included in the Appendix of this paper.

One post on the official *Vogue* message board reads: "The beauty of buying a Vogue back in the day was the vast array of fresh new faces on the cover. Now it's like a fashion knock-off People magazine."^v Criticisms often complain about the focus on celebrities and not fashion. Criticism specifically about the controversial April, 2008 cover centers around *Vogue*'s lack of women of color in the magazine. On the cover only a handful of women of color have appeared in *Vogue*'s entire history, and the April cover was the first time a black man appeared on its cover.

The April, 2008 issue was the annual "Shape" issue, where fashion is explained for those of "every" body type. This issue has unsurprisingly drawn criticism for again being conservative in its choice of fashion and unrealistic in its portrayal of "diverse" body types. The issue

promises “every shape” on the cover, but the body types described are: tall, pregnant, thin, curvy, and short. Even the “curvy” models are still likely underweight. Again larger women are not represented. One critic on Cathy Horyn’s blog writes: “Vogue seems like they know they have long ago set the standard, and now are just maintaining it.” Another writes, “American Vogue has been boring for years.”^{vi}

The core of the anti-fan complaint rests in the values *Vogue* supposedly represents. *Vogue* is criticized as being not about fashion but about high society and being wealthy. One blog comment reads: “The magazine has always been impractical and overly glamorous and aspirational, but it was also fun. Now I just think it’s snotty and elitist.”^{vii} *Vogue* today is about conspicuous consumption. The clothes are unaffordable and brand names are very prominent in the fashion represented by *Vogue*. Celebrities grace the cover (a frequent complaint) and affluent parties and events are detailed within the magazine. But, as one anti-fan asks, “does anyone think *Vogue* is relevant anymore? It aspires to be a discerning elitist guide to luxury at a time when most of luxury is mass produced and mass consumed and unoriginal?”^{viii} *Vogue*, however, is relevant for precisely this reason. The median household income of its readers is a working-class \$65,000/year, and it has an estimated 10 million readers.^{ix} *Vogue* is criticized for being read by people who “aspire to look like New York socialites.”^x

Vogue is not actually targeted at the affluent, but it is designed to appear as such, to be a dream and escape for millions. Its couture is not meant to be bought; the brands will make most of their profit from people buying smaller goods such as purses and wallets. *Vogue* brings the luxury-goods market considerable success. The topic of conspicuous consumption in the luxury fashion business has become prominent recently, producing a book entitled *Deluxe: How Luxury Lost its Luster*^{xi} and numerous newspaper and magazine commentaries such as one that appeared

this year in *The Scotsman* called “Status for Sale.”^{xii} For critical fans, *Vogue* seems to be at the head of this business of “encouraging women to empty their bank accounts for acceptance and status.”^{xiii}

The case of *Vogue* is an important one in fan studies. The vocal anti-fan movement is from within the fashion community itself. Complaints come from the very people *Vogue* writes about, and many of these fans grew up adoring *Vogue*. Why is this relationship, then, failing?

Fan communities have a sincere investment in the object of their fandom. These fans adore both fashion and likely *Vogue* itself at one point. Many even earn their living from this industry. Collectively a fan community has a self-perception. When the creators of a fan object change the object so that it conflicts with fans’ self-perceptions, antagonism between producer and creator occurs.

But is this the simple case of a fan community disagreeing with the change of a fan object? Or is this representative of something else more general within anti-fan communities? There is no inherent binary setup in the fashion industry as there are in many sports. Reading rival magazine *Elle* does not entail disliking *Vogue*. Instead *Vogue* occupies a position more important than just a fan object. *Vogue* is an arbiter of taste. Both its self-perception and the perceptions of those in the fashion industry see *Vogue* as a powerful trend-setter. The types of reactions *Vogue* receives, then, including anti-fan sentiment, are driven by undertones of a battle for culture and aesthetics. *Vogue* is at the top of the taste hierarchy, so to be an anti-fan of *Vogue* is to be against its definitions of high art and low art.

Vogue anti-fans are anti-fans of something larger than the magazine and this must be taken into account. Similarly, both positive and anti-fan sentiment from other sources may at times be a larger cultural criticism. Different analytic methods are required to account for this

type of activity. One must separate critics of *Vogue*, like those of any other media objects, as fan-critics and outsider-critics. Both the motivation and the substance of a criticism will be different depending on its source. But how should we categorize the *Vogue* anti-fans quoted previously? The fashion industry itself has become in many ways separated from *Vogue*. A member of the industry may not feel a belonging in the pages of *Vogue* and may criticize it as he would a magazine from another trade. Others may still read *Vogue* regularly but regardless have some criticisms. These types of criticisms can in many cases function as a wonderful beginning for analysis of fans' closeness to a text and how that process can be dynamic throughout history. We have seen here that perhaps *Vogue* is losing fans that would otherwise have ignored flaws because they still felt a type of brand-loyalty. As it is, many fans are rejecting the very aesthetics *Vogue* is putting forth.

APPENDIX



Figure 1. On the left is a US Army poster from World War I. On the right is *Vogue*'s April, 2008 cover. Similarities include the holding of an object in the right hand, the facial expression of the “ape” character, and the embracing of a white woman in a green dress. This photo was taken from:

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/03/28/uncovered-possible-inspi_n_93944.html>. The original photo was taken by Annie Leibowitz.



Figure 2. A “LOLVogue” from the Jezebel fashion blog. It is representative of a frequent criticism of *Vogue*: that they re-appropriate the native fashion of a cultural group without acknowledgement or respect for that culture.

<<http://jezebel.com/352938/lolvogue-sheez-over-ayteen-i-sware>>

ⁱ Horyn, Cathy. “On the Runway” Blog. <<http://runway.blogs.nytimes.com>>.

ⁱⁱ “Official Vogue Forums.” <<http://boards.style.com/forum.jspa?forumID=4>>.

ⁱⁱⁱ “FotoDecadent Community: Avant-Garde Fashion Photography.”
<http://community.livejournal.com/foto_decadent>.

^{iv} “Jezebel Blog: LOLVogue” <<http://jezebel.com/tag/lolvogue>>.

^v “Does Vogue use the same women over and over on the cover?” on the “Official Vogue Forums.” <<http://boards.style.com/thread.jspa?threadID=13089&tstart=0>>

^{vi} Comments from “Big Mama, The New Vogue” on the “On the Runway” blog.
<<http://runway.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/08/16/big-mama-the-new-vogue/>>

^{vii} Comment from “Big Mama, The New Vogue” blog post.

^{viii} Comment from “Big Mama, The New Vogue” blog post.

^{ix} “Vogue: Demographics” from the Conde Nast Media Kit.

<<http://www.condenastmediakit.com/vog/circulation.cfm>>

^x Comment from “Big Mama, The New Vogue” blog post.

^{xi} Thomas, Dana. 2007. *Deluxe: How Luxury Lost its Luster*. Penguin Press: NY.

^{xii} Pye, Michael. “Status for Sale.” *The New Scotsman*.

<<http://living.scotsman.com/features/Status-for-sale.3324938.jp>>

^{xiii} Comment from “Big Mama, The New Vogue” blog post.