

Vogue Magazine's Rise as a Source for Political, Social, and Cultural Topics

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Abstract

With 11.1 million monthly readers of its print product – and 52.7 million social media followers online – Vogue is more than just a magazine, it is an iconic trendsetter and influencer. This study qualitatively analyzes election-year issues of Vogue magazine over the past 20 years to determine how the magazine has integrated cultural, political, and social topics into its content. This study looks at the September issues of Vogue because they act not only as the physically largest issue, but also the most important annual issue in the fashion industry. Through looking at both visual and written content, this study tracks the increase of progressive and diverse content within the pages of Vogue, demonstrating how the fashion magazine has responded to social progress and now sets the agenda for social, political, and cultural discussions. The findings show a wide variety of individuals featured in articles and in photoshoots, with noticeable increases in progressive content in recent issues of the magazine.

I. Introduction

Vogue is more than just a magazine. *Vogue* is an iconic trendsetter within the realms of fashion, lifestyle, and beauty, and increasingly within political, social and cultural topics. *Vogue* has an extensive reach that spans across multiple platforms. *Vogue* and its parent company *Condé Nast* view the magazine as a “cultural barometer for a global audience,” with 27 editions of the magazine internationally, including the one published in the United States.¹ The U.S. edition of the magazine reaches 11.1 million monthly readers in print, 13 million unique users on the digital site, and garners 180 million video views. *Vogue* also has 52.7 million social media followers.²

This study examines September print issues of *Vogue* in election years since the year 2000, tracking how the magazine has become increasingly culturally, politically, and socially active. September, which falls just before the elections in November, marks the beginning of a new fashion season and is traditionally associated with change and new beginnings, as fall approaches.³ The September issue of not only *Vogue*, but many major fashion publications, is the largest and most important issue of the year.⁴ In focusing on the

1 “Condé Nast Vogue Brands,” <https://www.condenast.com/brands/vogue>.

2 Ibid.

3 Laird Borrelli-Persson, “Vogue Fun Facts by the Numbers,” <https://www.vogue.com/article/vogue-covers-models-facts-history>.

4 Jessica Schiffer, “The Real Reasons September Issues Are Such a Big Deal,” <https://www.whowhatwear.com/history-of-the-fashion-magazines-september-issue>.

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September print issues of *Vogue*, this article details how the magazine has evolved by studying its most prominent and forward-looking issue of the year.

II. Literature Review

There has been discussion of the media's impact on agenda setting, and how "an independent press is charged with providing a public good: an agenda that fosters enlightened democratic participation and citizenship."⁵ Agenda setting suggests that the media's "issue priorities influence the public's issue priorities."⁶ This literature review reveals several themes related to this theory, including *Vogue's* influence as a fashion and lifestyle magazine, how the fashion industry is inherently connected to cultural, social, and political discussions, and the extent to which stereotypical women's magazines are feminist entities. These themes fall under the notion within agenda setting that the media impacts the public's view and "subsequent assessment" of media topics.⁷

The Influence of *Vogue*

Women's magazines have long aimed to connect "the serious and non-serious, the personal and the political."⁸ *Vogue* in particular has been considered the "world's most influential fashion magazine," with its powerful reach spanning internationally and having the ability to influence the content of other industry publications.⁹ The content of *Vogue* is often visually focused, with many photographs, videos, and graphics accompanying or being featured in a piece. This has allowed the magazine to reach an even larger audience, and achieve such a level of "global prestige."¹⁰ From the way models look, to photography, writing, and styling, as well as the newest fashion trends, "*Vogue* sets the standard" on a global scale.¹¹ The U.S. version of *Vogue* in particular carries extensive influence, as the birthplace of the global fashion magazine.¹²

Fashion magazines in general are considered to be "the voice of the fashion industry," and through the visual and textual aspects of their print editions, they become "cultural zeitgeist[s]."¹³ The September issue of *Vogue* in particular follows this notion, for the content it produces is the most influential issue of the year and not only physically holds weight—it tends to weigh around 5 pounds—but also holds conceptual weight within the industry as a trendsetting entity.¹⁴ The September issue focuses on "transitions" and always "marks a shift," not only in regard to the clothing trends for the upcoming seasons, but also in terms of what holds cultural importance at the time.¹⁵ Beyond the September issues, however, the fashion industry and fashion publication industry are inherently linked to political, social, and cultural topics. When *Vogue* produces political content, it is able to reach an audience that may not have sought out political stories otherwise, and guides the audience's opinion on the topic.¹⁶ Such content allows for the "potential to address and unite transnational publics around global issues like racial diversity and healthy body size."¹⁷

5 Joseph E. Uscinski, "When Does the Public's Issue Agenda Affect the Media's Issue Agenda (and Vice-Versa)? Developing a Framework for Media-Public Influence," *Social Science Quarterly* 90, no. 4 (2009): 796-815. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42940641>.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Janell Ross, "The Remarkable Political History of Women's Magazines," <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/08/14/womens-magazines-go-political-but-really-theyve-been-political-since-1792/>.

9 Giseline Kuipers, You Fai Chow & Elise van der Laan, "'Vogue' and the Possibility of Cosmopolitanism: Race, Health and Cosmopolitan Engagement in the Global Beauty Industry," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37, no. 12 (2014): 2158-2175.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Helen Kopnina, "The World According to 'Vogue': The Role of Culture(s) in International Fashion Magazines," *Dialectical Anthropology* 31 (2007), <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.elon.edu/stable/29790799>.

14 Ned Martel, "Vogue's September issue boosts spirits, economy," <https://ezproxy.elon.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.elon.edu/docview/1037652231?accountid=10730>.

15 Alaina Demopoulos, "How Coronavirus Will Shake Up Glossy Magazines' September Issues," <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-coronavirus-will-shake-up-glossy-magazines-september-issues?ref=scroll>.

16 Giseline Kuipers, You Fai Chow & Elise van der Laan, "'Vogue' and the Possibility of Cosmopolitanism: Race, Health and Cosmopolitan Engagement in the Global Beauty Industry," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37, no. 12 (2014): 2158-2175.

17 Ibid.

Fashion's Connection to Political and Cultural Topics

Fashion is greatly intertwined with culture, for both realms grapple with questions of “cultural diversity, expressions of body, gender, and sexuality, globalization vs. localization.”¹⁸ *Vogue* has used brand power to discuss cultural, social, and political topics. *Vogue Italia*'s 2008 “The Black Issue” featured solely Black models in an effort to diversify the magazine, and also criticized how the fashion industry is generally made up of predominantly white people.¹⁹ In 2012, all *Vogue* editors signed the *Vogue* Health Initiative, which “pledged not to work with underage models and to ensure healthy working conditions for models.”²⁰ Overall though, the fashion publication industry has progressed slowly and continues to be “criticized for diffusion of unrealistic and unhealthy body standards; exploitation of young models; and the reproduction of racial and ethnic stereotypes.”²¹

In recent years, fashion publications and the fashion industry have outwardly expressed political views. There was a noticeable rise during the 2016 presidential election, when popular fashion publications like *Vogue*, *Glamour*, *Marie Claire*, and *Teen Vogue* made political endorsements for the first time.²² These magazines, among other fashion publications, “are now unashamedly political, securing access to top-ranking leaders.”²³ The criticisms the fashion publication industry has received and the actions it has taken—or even not taken—still continue to demonstrate how the industry is intrinsically connected and related to social, political, and cultural issues.

Fashion and politics have become intertwined, including the sense that what one wears speaks to the type of candidate or political figure they are. When comparing First Ladies Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama, for example, the clothes each woman wore were directly correlated to their message.²⁴ In Clinton's case, her famed “pantsuit” demonstrated that she was an equal with her husband, President Bill Clinton.²⁵ Obama, however, often wore dresses and casual clothes that alluded to her “personal style.”²⁶ Obama's choice of clothes reinforced the idea that she and her husband were not “vying for the same political power” and represented traditional gender roles, which separated “the political/power and domestic/glamour spheres respectively.”²⁷

The clothes one wears are directly correlated to social and cultural discussions. Clothes make a statement, and for women in particular, the choice of clothing “can alter the course of her life.”²⁸ There are social repercussions with wearing a miniskirt, for example, versus a pantsuit. Due to social constructs and today's male-dominated, “victim-blaming” society, items such as miniskirts have been associated “with asking for it.”²⁹ Such socially created ideals under the male gaze have led women to approach dressing as “a professional and political minefield.”³⁰ The fashion industry has even increasingly begun “weaving politically motivated messages into their work.”³¹ Luxury, high-fashion brands such as Dior and Prabal Gurung directly incorporate “language of the resistance” onto their clothing, further emphasizing how fashion has a place within social and political movements.³²

18 Helen Kopnina, “The World According to ‘Vogue’: The Role of Culture(s) in International Fashion Magazines,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 31, no. 4 (2007): 363-381.

19 Giseline Kuipers, You Fai Chow & Elise van der Laan, “‘Vogue’ and the Possibility of Cosmopolitics: Race, Health and Cosmopolitan Engagement in the Global Beauty Industry,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37, no. 12 (2014): 2158-2175.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Rebecca Seales, “How Women's Magazines like Vogue Got Political in 2016,” <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38287698>.

23 Ibid.

24 Stefanie Schäfer, “Phenomenal Woman: Michelle Obama's Embodied Rhetoric and the Cultural Work of Fashion Biographies,” *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 60, no. 2/3 (2015): 235-54.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Lauren Duca, “Fashion IS Political, Period,” <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/fashion-is-political-period>.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

Fashion Publications and Feminism

The question of whether or not fashion is feminist is continuously asked, and the answers vary and are subjective.³³ A central point of discussion follows the notion that if the “culture of femininity” portrayed in fashion is led by women, then fashion falls under a feminist view.³⁴ Whereas when a field is dominated by men but is targeted towards women, the product is de facto not feminist.³⁵

While the fashion industry/fashion magazines and feminism may appear contradictory, the notion of “feminist fashion” has risen within popular publications such as *Cosmopolitan*.³⁶ Particularly since 2008, *Cosmopolitan* has written articles for women with a more feminist eye. While the publication used to focus on how women could “please one’s man,” it shifted its direction to being female centered.³⁷ Critiques of the magazine, however, question what the publication is doing to change the non-feminist structures within the industry.³⁸

While the fashion publication industry as a whole may have detached women’s identities from the men in their lives years ago, one study argues that magazines like *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* still objectify women because the publications “operate for profit,” noting that many of the advertisements and the beauty standards presented promote an “unsisterly synthetic sisterhood.”³⁹ However, the fact that a magazine is for-profit may not be the only reason it is considered not feminist. The stigma that comes with a woman being interested in fashion may actually be the stronger pull as to why fashion magazines are not often considered feminist, despite the millions of successful, progressive women reading publications like *Vogue*, and the fact that it is “edited by the most powerful woman in the fashion industry, Anna Wintour.”⁴⁰

When fashion magazines such as *Vogue*, *Glamour*, and *Marie Claire* took a political stance during the presidential election in 2016, conventional critics condemned them, arguing that the fashion magazines were out of place to politicize their content.⁴¹ Readers, however, appreciated the industry for “considering [their] core concerns.”⁴² The level of shock with which commentators and critics portrayed in response to the politicization of fashion magazines is “a sign of how badly women are under-estimated,” and are assumed to be unaware of political issues.⁴³ Stereotypically, when women express their interest in fashion, “it is often weaponized as a means of denying [them] access to political conversations.”⁴⁴ Though the two topics are not mutually exclusive, they are treated as such.⁴⁵

The unwarranted perception that having an interest in fashion correlates to a lack of “critical thought” is intrinsically rooted in misogynistic views of how society functions.⁴⁶ Fashion increasingly promotes feminist ideals and has been disbanding the idea that having an interest in fashion is synonymous with a lack of passion towards the future of politics, culture, or social topics.⁴⁷

33 Eugenia Paulicelli and Elizabeth Wissinger, “Introduction,” *Women's Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 1/2 (2012): 14-27.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Miglena Sternadori and Mandy Hagseth, “Fashionable Feminism or Feminist Fashion?” *Media Report to Women* 42, no. 4 (2014), 12–21.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Sara Tangdall, “The Influence of Popular Culture on Women’s Identities: A Diachronic Discourse Analysis of Vogue Magazine,” *Southern Journal of Linguistics* 41, no. 2 (2017), 47–94.

40 Ibid.

41 Rebecca Seales, “How Women’s Magazines like Vogue Got Political in 2016,” <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38287698>.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Lauren Duca, “Fashion IS Political, Period,” <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/fashion-is-political-period>.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

Research Questions

RQ 1: How has *Vogue* magazine's presidential election-year September issues integrated more politically, socially, and culturally charged articles?

RQ 2: How has *Vogue* woven political, social, and cultural messaging through its fashion content in presidential election-year September issues?

RQ 3: How has *Vogue* magazine created diverse and progressive photoshoot spreads within the presidential-election year September issues?

III. Methods

This study examined the presidential election year September issues of *Vogue* magazine from the last 20 years, including a qualitative content analysis of the September issues from the years 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020. The September issue of *Vogue* magazine is deemed the most important, and often the largest, issue of the year.⁴⁸ The purpose of this issue of the magazine is to make a statement about the upcoming year in fashion and to set trends—not just fashion trends, but social and cultural trends—moving forward.⁴⁹ Individuals are generally more socially and politically engaged during election years,⁵⁰ and this study will analyze if this holds true for the fashion magazine.

Critics suggest that the magazine lacks substance and creates frivolous, shallow content.⁵¹ This study looked at whether or not *Vogue* has increasingly featured more diverse, substantial content, or if the magazine's critics have been correct. Through a qualitative content analysis of the article topics and models used in photoshoots, this study aimed to track if *Vogue* magazine's content has progressed. For the purpose of this research, the word "progress" refers to content dealing with social, cultural, and political issues or topics.⁵²

This study qualitatively tracked how article topics and individuals featured addressed politics (i.e. content about the government or governmental figures), social issues (i.e. climate change, civil rights, healthcare, etc.), or cultural topics (i.e. features on people from various countries, excerpts on religion, literature, etc.). The qualitative content analysis approach allows focus to be placed on the "substantive meanings of the given text" while still considering the frequency of topics.⁵³ This study draws upon the qualitative content analysis method of "three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing."⁵⁴

Each page from each issue was analyzed for its relation to political, cultural, and social topics. In addition, in order to account for the visual aspects of the magazine, this study examined the portrayal of diverse body types of models. Traditionally, fashion models have been "largely white, waifish and woefully young."⁵⁵ In order to determine whether or not *Vogue* has progressed past these non-inclusive barriers, this study analyzed how spreads presented more diverse, non-white, and plus-size models. Advertisements were also considered when examining the visual and contextual aspects of the magazines. The content considered during analysis of the advertisements include the model, product, and copy, and were tracked to gauge progress from non-inclusive to progressive content.

48 Matthew Schneier, "The Stars of September," <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/09/style/diversity-september-issue-magazines.html>.

49 Ibid.

50 Mohamed Younis, "In U.S., Attention to Politics Shows Typical Election Year Surge," <https://news.gallup.com/poll/320738/attention-politics-shows-typical-election-year-surge.aspx>.

51 Cathy Horyn, "What's Wrong With Vogue?," <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/01/fashion/01ANNA.html>.

52 Tara McKelvey, "What Does It Mean to Be a Progressive in the US?" <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-35467470>.

53 Siegfried Kracauer, "The Challenge of Qualitative Content Analysis," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1952): 631-42.

54 Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, "Drawing Valid Meaning from Qualitative Data: Toward a Shared Craft," *Educational Researcher* 13, no. 5 (1984): 20-30.

55 Hunt, Kenya. "Is The Fashion World Finally Getting Diversity?" <https://www.elle.com/uk/fashion/longform/a37245/fashions-ever-evolving-new-diversity/>.

IV. Findings

Analysis of the election-year issues of *Vogue* magazine demonstrate a gradual but steady increase in politically, socially, and culturally charged content. The most recent September issue looked at, 2020, had a noticeable increase in progressive and diverse content.

Written Content: Letter From the Editor

The first form of article in each of the issues is the “Letter From the Editor,” in which the editor-in-chief of the magazine, Anna Wintour, introduces the issue and its articles. The first “Letter From the Editor” considered from the year 2000 does not include any mention of the election, politics, social, or cultural issues. There is one mention of a photoshoot spread entitled “Conservative Party,” but it is referring to the season’s latest trend of refined, conservative clothing.⁵⁶ The letter from the 2004 issue describes the shift of how models are no longer seen as partiers or socialites, but are respected working women who use modeling to also pursue other interests.⁵⁷ This was the one mention of a socially charged topic, but there was no mention of politics or cultural issues.

Wintour wrote in the 2008 issue of how fashion directly relates to history and how clothes can “remind you of the world” through their unique cultural references.⁵⁸ In addition, the editor-in-chief recognized the current political and social issues of the time, including the recession. Wintour wrote that the editors were “always conscious that fashion may not be, in this period of economic and political uncertainty, at the forefront of our reader’s minds,” so the features had an economical focus.⁵⁹ The 2012 “Letter From the Editor” reverted back to not mentioning current events. The issue was the 120th anniversary of *Vogue*, and Wintour wrote about various impactful editors who have shaped the magazine and donned a “sampling of life and culture as we are experiencing it at that time.”⁶⁰ Wintour did not, however, mention any current issues in particular.

The 2016 issue directly addressed the presidential election and cultural discussions of the time. Wintour wrote of the presidential election “taking place against national and international backdrops that are fraught and charged, what with the rightly felt anger at racial and gender inequality and injustice and the need to honor and protect a world where diversity is a welcome and positive force.”⁶¹ The 2020 “Letter From the Editor” directly discussed cultural, social, and political topics to a heightened degree in comparison to the past issues. Wintour wrote about the general theme of the month’s magazine, which was “hope.”⁶² Every global edition of *Vogue* celebrated this same theme, “from Britain to Russia, from Mexico to Australia.”⁶³ Wintour wrote about the “battle against COVID-19,” the fight for racial justice, and the critical presidential election.⁶⁴

The latest two issues studied—2016 and 2020—clearly addressed cultural, social, and political topics, and the 2020 issue in particular made clear that the entire issue was dedicated to progress and diversity. Throughout all of the issues, the “Letter From the Editor” was generally a reliable portrayal of the magazines as a whole.

Written Content: Lifestyle Articles

The 2000 September issue focused primarily on celebrities, socialites, and trends. One article, however, did highlight screenplay writer Christina Wayne, detailing how she is a hardworking woman of color in Hollywood under the age of 30.⁶⁵ The lifestyle articles in the 2004 issue touched on more progressive topics, including “A Family Affair” about the filmmaker daughters of politician John Kerry and their work on and documentary of the campaign trail.⁶⁶ There were features on international movies such as Zhang Yimou’s *Heroes* and José Rivera’s *The Motorcycle Diaries*.⁶⁷ In addition, political activist, feminist, and musician Laura

56 *Vogue*, September 2000, pp. 60-78.

57 *Vogue*, September 2004, pp. 112-126.

58 *Vogue*, September 2008, pp. 312-320.

59 *Vogue*, September 2008, pp. 312-320.

60 *Vogue*, September 2012, pp. 264-302.

61 *Vogue*, September 2016, pp. 320.

62 *Vogue*, September 2020, pp. 86.

63 *Ibid.*

64 *Ibid.*

65 *Vogue*, September 2000, pp. 446.

66 *Vogue*, September 2004, pp. 559.

67 *Vogue*, September 2004, pp. 564.

Dawn Galphin shared her work creating anti-Bush campaigns and speaking at the Women’s March for our Lives and Planned Parenthood events.⁶⁸ The featured book of the month was about Mumbai and described the various problems with class and economic divisions.⁶⁹

From a contributor questionnaire about the presidential race, to a female reporter’s assignment on an electricity plant inception ceremony in Tajikistan, the lifestyle articles in 2008 showed yet another increase in diverse topics.⁷⁰ “Modern Manners: Party Lines” aimed to help navigate political discussions for the modern hostess, which was progressive in that it addressed the importance of the election, but regressive by emphasizing that political discussions are often not “the mood you want at your party” and giving tips on how to change the subject.⁷¹ The 2012 issue shifts to include more direct political content, with a nine-page spread on Chelsea Clinton and her readiness to tackle the political scene and “change the world.”⁷² Clinton detailed the many microaggressions she received as a successful woman in politics.⁷³ The 2012 issue also features various socially and culturally charged articles. Tennis player Sloane Stephens shared her rise as a female athlete of color; writer Marie NDiaye wrote about her book *Three Strong Women* set in Senegal; and Somalian model Ubah Hassan described her story as a refugee and how through Oxfam she was able to return to her home and provide aid.⁷⁴

Lifestyle articles in the 2016 issue placed an emphasis on female empowerment. Black writer Nina Lorez Collins wrote about her filmmaker and activist mother Kathleen Collins; Kate Darling, “MIT researcher leading a groundbreaking new field of ethics,” shared her research on humans’ interactions with robots; the three lead actresses of *Good Girls Revolt* described the show’s premise of “young women on the edge of a revolution”; actress, playwright, woman of color, and UNICEF goodwill ambassador Sarah Jones wrote about her one woman show set in “a future free of sexism, racism, and all unpleasant emotions.”⁷⁵ The “I’m With Her” spread features Hillary Clinton’s campaign strategist Huma Abedin, who is praised for her political work but if not in politics, she “would work in fashion.”⁷⁶ The issue also shared diverse painters, actors, and athletes’ stories, along with a feature on Annie Novak, model and environmental activist who manages a rooftop farm in New York City.⁷⁷

The 2020 September issue had the largest amount of progressive lifestyle articles. “The State of Hope” spread directly addressed current issues with “rising numbers of Covid-19 infections, horrifying instances of police brutality, and an election season as divisive as any in history.”⁷⁸ The article featured various “leaders, innovators, and creative talents”—including Governor Andrew Cuomo; Afro-Latina trans woman, artist, activist Sage Grace Dolan-Sandrino; Apple CEO Tim Cook; philanthropist Melinda Gates; and tennis champion Serena Williams—to discuss the issue’s theme of hope in addressing the aforementioned problems.⁷⁹ The issue includes diverse stories, from the author Raven Leilani’s complex novel about a Black girl leaving the Seventh-day Adventist Church, to actor Jonathan Majors describing his Jim Crow-era HBO show *Lovecraft Country*, to a feature on Atlanta mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms and how she has been managing a city with “police violence, social unrest, and rising COVID-19 numbers.”⁸⁰

Written Content: Fashion Articles

The 2000 September issue lacks progressive fashion articles and leans toward traditional gender roles in clothing, albeit with a few diverse articles. One multi-page spread highlights various “real,” working women who also have an interest in fashion, including individuals such as Columbia University student Anna Paquin, tech mogul Sarah Glaser, TV news reporter Andrea Thompson, and Janet Langhart, the wife of the former Secretary of Defense.⁸¹ “The Mother of Invention” is also for the “real” woman, detailing the difficulties

68 Ibid.

69 *Vogue*, September 2004, pp. 602.

70 *Vogue*, September 2008, pp. 384, 463.

71 *Vogue*, September 2008, pp. 482.

72 *Vogue*, September 2012, pp. 824-831.

73 *Vogue*, September 2012, pp. 828.

74 *Vogue*, September 2012, pp. 580, 586, 596.

75 *Vogue*, September 2016, pp. 388, 432, 648, 664.

76 *Vogue*, September 2016, pp. 724.

77 *Vogue*, September 2016, pp. 731, 721, 738.

78 *Vogue*, September 2020, pp. 112.

79 Ibid.

80 *Vogue*, September 2020, pp. 136, 172, 194.

81 *Vogue*, September 2000, pp. 306-380.

of shopping while pregnant, and shares designers who make maternity lines for women.⁸²

Similarly to the 2000 issue, 2004 features 20 working women in “What Women Want: Reality Check” on their work-life style.⁸³ The features include an Executive Vice President of a Real Estate, a U.S. Attorney, a businesswoman, the President of Chicago’s Peoples Energy Corporation, and an M.D. OB-GYN.⁸⁴ The working woman theme carries throughout the issue, including in an advice column describing black tie outfits—“you may be the president of a bank or a brain surgeon or First Lady by day...”—and in two articles about suits for women—“Hey, Ladies” and “Leg Room.”⁸⁵

The 2008 September Issue does not integrate many political, social, or cultural topics into the fashion articles. Of note, “Vogue Moment: American Woman” features Michelle Obama on the campaign trail with husband Barack and describes her “classic American style.” “Sari, Right Number” features a young, female designer who makes clothes for the “college undergrads and young professionals,” and “The Masters” shares the tale of an African designer who incorporates traditional African prints into clothes for the modern woman.⁸⁶ In comparison, the 2012 fashion articles place more of an emphasis on feminism and diversity in fashion.

The 2012, 120th anniversary issue of *Vogue* offers many retrospectives on past issues. Famed *Vogue* editor André Leon Talley reminisces on an image by photographer Helmut Newton, detailing how “the image liberates women [...] in a way that, until that point, we would only have seen men look at women. This story and the specific image indicate how *Vogue* has embodied female empowerment and beauty throughout the years.”⁸⁷ A spread focusing solely on famed models celebrates the “ethnic multiplicity, the panorama of diversity, that makes American beauty so distinctive” in the pages of *Vogue*.⁸⁸ The spread features a few models in particular with El Salvadoran, Korean, African, Taino Indian, Hindu, Puerto Rican roots.⁸⁹

Another spread in the 2012 issue aims to appreciate various sizes in the fashion industry, but uses harmful language insinuating that certain body types are preferred from others. “Post-waif: The Sexy Model Returns” deems models of a certain size—“underfed waifs”—now unattractive, unlike the “sexy” models who are not the sample size.⁹⁰ The article does address, however, that “in the upside-down, topsy-turvy world of fashion, these so-called bigger girls rarely require anything larger than a size 4.”⁹¹ This spread, while aiming to recognize models of various sizes, still admits to the size disparities in the fashion industry. The 2016 issue addresses this same topic, stating “we’re in the midst of a movement that celebrates all diverse shapes and sizes.”⁹² The article features high fashion plus-size models such as Ashley Graham and Candice Huffine, along with quoting designer Carly Cushnie that it’s “not really about the male gaze anymore—it’s about dressing for your own pleasure.”⁹³

The 2016 issue also highlights women in the behind-the-scenes aspects of the industry. Designer of color Simone Rocha makes clothes with a “feminist feminine fashion vision.”⁹⁴ Another spread addresses how “fashion photography has long been hyperglossed and male-dominated,” but features three young, female fashion photographers who embody a “thoroughly provocative female gaze.”⁹⁵ “Making the Cut” highlights young “headliners” of the day, and features a diverse group of actors and celebrities like Zendaya, Sasha Lane, Willow Smith, and Jaden Smith.⁹⁶

The most recent issue in September 2020 integrates a significant amount of cultural, political, and social topics into the fashion articles. In the spread “Protective Measures,” eight models—six of whom are models of color and two of whom are plus-size models—wear a culturally relevant face mask, while the article details the necessity of the accessory.⁹⁷ Another spread, “Vogue Voices,” poses the question of “What is the

82 *Vogue*, September 2000, pp. 668.

83 *Vogue*, September 2004, pp. 400.

84 *Vogue*, September 2004, pp. 402-450.

85 *Vogue*, September 2004, pp. 484, 512, 531.

86 *Vogue*, September 2008, pp. 481, 562, 500-514.

87 *Vogue*, September 2012, pp. 598.

88 *Vogue*, September 2012, pp. 742.

89 *Ibid.*

90 *Vogue*, September 2012, pp. 754.

91 *Ibid.*

92 *Vogue*, September 2016, pp. 510.

93 *Vogue*, September 2016, pp. 520.

94 *Vogue*, September 2016, pp. 472.

95 *Vogue*, September 2016, pp. 534.

96 *Vogue*, September 2016, pp. 692.

97 *Vogue*, September 2020, pp. 148-155.

future of fashion?” to 100 designers, models, photographers, activists, and CEOs.⁹⁸ The article includes many people of color within the fashion industry, including model Ugbad Abdi, who says “brands should understand the importance of assembling a team that is diverse and inclusive, both in front of and behind the camera.”⁹⁹ Aurora James, a designer noted for creating the 15 percent pledge which “calls on the world’s biggest retailers to devote shelf space to Black-owned businesses and suppliers,” has her own multi-page spread.¹⁰⁰

Visual Content: Fashion Photoshoots

One photo spread, “Madly Max,” in the 2000 September issue sets a dystopian scene and mixes various cultures’ styles to create rugged, sci-fi looks.¹⁰¹ The clothing emulates costumes from the film *Mad Max* with the use of raw fur and draped clothing.¹⁰² The original *Mad Max* placed minimal emphasis on women, and therefore this photoshoot reclaims the narrative for women by placing female models at the forefront of the scenes.¹⁰³ The 2004 issue’s photo spread “Sparkle All Day: Day Dreams” places models performing domestic chores while wearing glamorous sequin and sparkle clothing.¹⁰⁴ The piece appears to be a form of cultural satire, playing on the stereotypical suburban housewife character while the models are dressed in powerful and intriguing clothing. Another spread, “Be Boyish: About a Boy,” shows models dressed in suits, suit vests, and trousers.¹⁰⁵ The models embrace the stereotypically deemed “men’s clothing” through power stances and stereotypical masculine poses.¹⁰⁶

The 2008 photo spread “Noble Endeavor” similarly features female models embracing stereotypical men’s clothing, with “an anti-establishment attitude.”¹⁰⁷ The models wear plush red velvet clothing with embroidery, white blouses, and clothes that emulate those of medieval male royalty. Photo spreads in the 2012 issue also promote female empowerment in various forms. “Space Odyssey” places female models in futuristic spaceships and neo-modern settings, portrayed as the commanders or leaders of the expedition.¹⁰⁸ The clothes create a “jedi-warrior attitude.”¹⁰⁹ Continuing with the female-forward theme, “Her Brilliant Career” shows outfits for various career positions such as broadcast journalist, lawyer, investment banker, venture capitalist, architect, professor, CEO.¹¹⁰ The spread is for the modern woman, who has “an office wardrobe that works as hard as she does.”¹¹¹

The 2016 September issue includes spreads similar to those from 2004 and 2008. “Major General” places female models in “field jackets and military coats,” emulating the stereotypically male role of army general.¹¹² “Mad About the Boy” features models in stereotypical menswear clothing, including khaki trousers and tweed blazers.¹¹³ The photoshoot includes models of color, leaning back and sitting with legs widespread, which is a typical male stance of “manspreading.”¹¹⁴ Rare amongst the aforementioned studied *Vogue* magazines, the 2016 spread “Pomp and Circumstance” includes a photoshoot solely of women of color with various hair types, showcasing accessories for every hair type.¹¹⁵

The 2020 issue features significantly more models of color and includes various spreads solely with women of color, including the magazine’s covers. “*Vogue* covers talk to us about who we are and the world we live in,” and with the “plagues of coronavirus, racist violence, and presidential incompetence” two Black artists painted the covers of the 2020 issue.¹¹⁶ The other September issues mentioned all feature either white

98 *Vogue*, September 2020, pp. 156-157.

99 Ibid.

100 *Vogue*, September 2020, pp. 164-165.

101 *Vogue*, September 2000, pp. 594.

102 Ibid.

103 Noah Berlatsky, “The Radical Evolution Of Gender Roles In The Mad Max Films,” <https://theestablishment.co/the-radical-evolution-of-gender-roles-in-the-mad-max-films-d109f772fea3/index.html>.

104 *Vogue*, September 2004, pp. 678.

105 Ibid.

106 *Vogue*, September 2004, pp. 696.

107 *Vogue*, September 2008, pp. 723.

108 *Vogue*, September 2012, pp. 784-797.

109 *Vogue*, September 2012, pp. 784.

110 *Vogue*, September 2012, pp. 882.

111 Ibid.

112 *Vogue*, September 2016, pp. 746-757.

113 *Vogue*, September 2016, pp. 766.

114 Olivia Petter, “There’s an Entirely Reasonable Explanation for ‘Manspreading,’” <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/manspreading-scientific-explanation-revealed-men-behaviour-public-transport-etiquette-a7862771.html>.

115 *Vogue*, September 2016, pp. 722.

116 *Vogue*, September 2020, pp. 104.

models or celebrities. The 2020 spread “It Takes an Industry” tributes people all across the fashion world, from patternmakers to magazine-store owners, by photographing these individuals in the season’s latest clothing.¹¹⁷ Of the 67 individuals photographed, 59 were people of color, and there is a wide range of different body types and ages.¹¹⁸

Visual Content: Advertisements

The 2000 September issue includes various regressive ads, of which do not occur in the later issues. A cigarette ad features a white male in a cowboy hat as the “true American” who smokes, while another ad for breast implants features a white woman with the motto “I am confident, I am beautiful,” because of the breast implants.¹¹⁹ One progressive, multi-page spread ad for the clothing brand Lane Bryant, however, features three models of color, two of whom are plus size.¹²⁰

Throughout the 2004 and 2008 issues many ads feature suits for the working woman, including brands such as Ellen Tracy, Max Mara, Liz Claiborne, Oscar de la Renta, Isabel Marant among others.¹²¹ Another 2004 ad for TSE Cashmere portrays a woman in a business dress—presumably the mother figure—walking out of the bathroom while a man in a t-shirt—presumably the father figure—plays with a child in the bathtub.¹²² This ad normalizes the reversal of stereotypical gender roles in which the mother leaves to go to work and the father stays at home.¹²³

Progressive beauty ads increase significantly throughout the 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020 issues. Ads for makeup companies such as L’Oreal, Urban Decay, Clinique, and Maybelline all feature foundation shades for models of color.¹²⁴ A Secret deodorant ad from the 2016 issue features a Black model wearing a spacesuit, with the copy: “Graduate top of your class in robotics. Complete 1,000 pilot hours. Be selected to go to space. Have people ask how you’ll cope in space without makeup.”¹²⁵ The ad insinuates the double standard for women, and how despite the career successes people will still ask about appearance, and Secret deodorant is there for these “stressful moments.”¹²⁶

V. Discussion

The evident progression of the September issues of *Vogue* demonstrates more than an increase in political, social, and cultural topics. These findings show how *Vogue* has gradually become what it claims to be, a “cultural barometer for a global audience.”¹²⁷ When looking at the magazines from the early part of this century, it may be hard to believe that the content *Vogue* published was truly setting the agenda for its audience—the “Letters from the Editor” from the 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012 September editions, which set the tone for the magazine, did not mention any such progressive topics. The content of later years, however, does demonstrate a progressive agenda, proving that *Vogue* has grown into a politically, socially, and culturally charged publication leading the way. Of note are articles like the “I’m With Her” spread featuring Hillary Clinton’s campaign strategist Huma Abedin, along with the 2020 covers painted by two Black artists which aim to “talk to us about who we are and the world we live in.”¹²⁸

Especially prevalent in the later issues of *Vogue* are features of unique individuals across a variety of industries and fields. Articles such as “Vogue Voices” from the 2020 issue and features on filmmaker and activist Kathleen Collins, MIT researcher Kate Darling, and actress and philanthropist Sarah Jones in the 2016 issue demonstrate how *Vogue* curates its interviews to promote an array of progressive individuals, to

117 *Vogue*, September 2020, pp. 256.

118 *Ibid.*

119 *Vogue*, September 2000, pp. 388, 654.

120 *Vogue*, September 2000, pp. 434.

121 *Vogue*, September 2004, pp. 224, 571, 330; *Vogue*, September 2008, pp. 310, 336.

122 *Vogue*, September 2004, pp. 550.

123 *Ibid.*

124 *Vogue*, September 2008, pp. 618; *Vogue*, September 2012, pp. 22, 726; *Vogue*, September 2016, pp. 88, 591; *Vogue*, September 2020, pp. 124, 246.

125 *Vogue*, September 2016, pp. 647.

126 *Ibid.*

127 “Condé Nast Vogue Brands,” accessed September 30, 2020, <https://www.condenast.com/brands/vogue>.

128 *Vogue*, September 2016, pp. 724; *Vogue*, September 2020, pp. 104.

steer the conversation in a particular direction.¹²⁹ Audiences do gravitate towards publications like *Vogue*, for Condé Nast reported that subscriptions increased by 85 percent from March 2019 to March 2020, in addition to a 35 percent increase in weekly average digital readership in the United States.¹³⁰ In today's media-heavy world, *Vogue's* content has prevailed as a source for social, cultural, and political discussions, and has garnered a large following to boot.

VI. Conclusion

The analysis of the *Vogue* issues reveal a noticeable increase in progressive and diverse content as the years advance. The most recent years 2016 and 2020 include spreads that directly integrate cultural, social, and political topics. All of the issues feature content that touches on female empowerment in terms of careers and gender roles.

There are noticeable direct relations to cultural, political, and social topics in the written work, whereas the visual spreads and advertisements did not directly integrate as many diverse ideals. However, as the magazines progressed, more photoshoot spreads directly correlated to social and cultural topics.

This study reveals how *Vogue* has become a more socially, culturally, and politically aware magazine, delivering readers with an intersection of fashion and current events. While the study analyzed the largest and arguably the most culturally attuned issue of the year—the September issue—during the past six presidential election years, future analyses of the subject may look at the November issue to see if there are similar trends. Looking at an entire years' worth of *Vogue* magazines, rather than one issue from every four years, may also further demonstrate how the magazine has evolved to become more progressive and feature more diverse individuals.

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129 *Vogue*, September 2020, pp. 156-157; *Vogue*, September 2016, pp. 388, 432, 664.

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