

GNDR 400 Research Proposal:

Change is In Vogue – Political and Social Discourse in Vogue Magazine

My research project for next semester is analyzing neoliberal and political discourse in Vogue magazine. Through this analysis I hope to understand how Vogue's historical identity as a women's magazine has affected how it presents its political articles. I also hope to understand how Vogue functions as a neoliberal institution and what impact this may have on the fashion industry generally. I think that fashion has the potential to change people's minds, and educate the general public about art, politics, and social justice issues that matter and want to understand how Vogue, as one of the most influential magazines in the world, disseminates information and how that may align or not align with traditional standards within the fashion, beauty and news industries. Vogue magazine holds immense power, and its messaging and content influences not only its readers but also culture generally. As the holder of taste in the fashion industry, Vogue dictates change both inside and outside of its immediate spheres of influence. While watching the Disney + show *In Vogue: The Nineties*, I was reminded of the work that Vogue magazine did in the late eighties and early nineties with advocating for those affected by the HIV/AIDS crisis. By using their social capital to raise money for HIV/AIDS research through a massive clothing sale, Vogue expressed a political opinion even if it wasn't popular or non-controversial. While HIV/AIDS is now more commonly talked about by people within the fashion industry, Hollywood, and other elite industries, it was not at the time. This example of political orientation

by Vogue made me question if Vogue often expresses a distinct opinion, and if that opinion ever strays from the palatable neoliberal ideologies often expressed by celebrities and major businesses. I personally have a subscription to Vogue magazine and have had one since I was 13 and my parents bought me a subscription to Teen Vogue as a Christmas present. While I don't have any of those magazines anymore, I remember there being articles about eating disorders, the reality of vaping, and the dangers of online relationships. While these articles were extremely impactful on me in a positive way, they were sandwiched in between images that only exasperated my insecurities, body dysmorphia, and feeling of inadequacy. When my subscription switched from Teen Vogue to regular Vogue, I noticed a shift in the kinds of articles being included in the magazine. Where my Teen Vogue was filled with articles relevant to my life, "adult" Vogue is much more focused on luxury, promoting pages of products that are unattainable for the majority of its readers. The mixing of this heavy promotion of capitalism at its most extreme with discussion of American politics, particularly the promotion of the Democrat party has always been extremely interesting to me. As someone who actively follows politics, has an interest in feminism and social justice, and holds more progressive socialist values, reconciling these things with my love of fashion and Vogue magazine has always occupied my thoughts and that is why I wanted to analyse the discourse that the most powerful voice in fashion produces.

Research Questions

My main research question for this project is how does Vogue magazine discuss social justice, activism, and politics? Understanding how Vogue discusses these topics, meaning what language do they use, what placement in the magazines do these discussions have, how often are these topics discussed and in what issues, seems to me the best way of understanding how Vogue

creates neoliberal discourse. I have many subsequent questions including how does Vogue contribute to cultural understanding of social justice issues, how does Vogue use neoliberal language to discuss political issues, how does the construction of Vogue as a women's magazine contribute to its political discussion, and how do social justice issues get placed within Vogue magazine in relation to advertisements and other articles? I hope to answer some of these subsequent questions using my lit review and doing more library research as I am actively doing my research. When I first began thinking of this research project, I was going to ask questions of the fashion industry more generally. I also had more of a focus on protest within the fashion industry, and how certain fashion designers have expressed protest through their art. I also wanted to analyze fashion advertisements, and the concept of greenwashing within the fashion industry. I realized that this was simply too broad and too large of a concept to execute research on in four months. I also had no way to quantify the effects of protest in the way I wanted to and had to change my perspective on what I wanted the results of my project to be. I am now seeking to understand better how Vogue magazine produces political discourse, and what language and ideas come up within that discourse.

Methodology and Method

For my research methodology I will be using feminist critical discourse analysis as discussed in Michelle Lazars *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis: Articulating a Feminist Discourse Praxis*. I will be using this methodology to analyze 17 print issues of Vogue ranging from October 2013 to November 2024. I also will analyze online issues of Vogue from politically important times ie. December 2016, November 2008, and November 2001. My sources of data will be specifically the articles relating to politics, social justice, or activism. I plan on highlighting the number of articles relevant to my topic per issue, and within those issues

observing what kind of language is used to describe the topic at hand. I also plan on creating a spreadsheet to map this data in order to look at the articles and magazines quantitatively. I will also be doing a more in-depth analysis on the articles that I find are the most relevant to my topic and really breaking them down theoretically through an understanding of globalization, capitalism, and neoliberalism. I want to be able to understand how neoliberalism is present throughout the magazine, not just in the articles and that is why I plan on doing a general magazine analysis and noting my observations as I read them as well as just diving into the relevant articles. My timeline is that I want to have read all of the magazines and entered the quantitative data into my spreadsheet by the middle of February, at which point I will begin the more in-depth analysis of 3-5 articles from the magazines. I hope to have all of the research elements done by the first week of March, from which point on I can focus on writing my paper as that is what I am the most concerned about having enough time for.

Theoretical Framework

In order to analyze my findings, I have considered using multiple theoretical frameworks.

Because of the nature of the research, I think the most effective theories in which to ground my work are postmodernism and feminism. Post modernism works well to analyze discourse and break down the dominant narrative found within that discourse and will be helpful in deconstructing the assumptions and common themes found throughout my readings of Vogue.

Using a feminist lens for my discourse analysis will also help me to break down these narratives by examining how Vogue markets itself to women, and what it's marketing and construction says about how Vogue views women and their interests. Understanding how Vogue aligns or doesn't with modern feminist beliefs, particularly neoliberal feminist beliefs will be a key part of my paper. I will probably take in elements of intersectional analysis as that often works in

conjunction with feminist and postmodern analysis but will not be focusing on this as a primary theory for my analysis. While intersectional analysis of Vogue magazine would be very interesting to understand who their demographics and target audience are, I mostly hope to focus on the political discourse discussed in Vogue and not the larger identity politics that come into play but will probably end up discussing this a little bit. I will also be using neoliberal theory as a primary theory in my discussion, because I want to understand how Vogue functions using neoliberalism. I particularly will be using theories regarding neoliberal feminism and populist neoliberalism.

Literature Review

The literature surrounding my topic primarily examines the intersection of the fashion industry with feminism and neoliberalism. While my research is specifically focused on *Vogue* magazine as a discursive space within the broader fashion industry, this body of literature provides a foundational framework for understanding how my study reflects larger trends and ideologies shaping the industry as a whole. Additionally, I have incorporated research on beauty politics, exploring how inclusion and exclusion manifest in fashion media, and how these dynamics are influenced by both capitalist forces and societal norms. I have also gathered literature that critically engages with neoliberalism and modern neo feminism, particularly in the context of late-stage capitalism. This includes an analysis of how neoliberal policies, such as individualism, globalization, and privatization, shape not only economic practices but also cultural and ideological production in the fashion world. Together, these sources enrich my understanding of how *Vogue* navigates, challenges, or reinforces these powerful forces within its discourse.

The text I am using the most articles from is the journal titled *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism*, edited by Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff. This journal contains the article of the same title written by the editors, as well as *'I'm Beautiful the Way I Am': Empowerment, Beauty, and Aesthetic Labour* by Sarah Banet-Weiser and *'Just Be Confident Girls!': Confidence Chic as Neoliberal Governmentality* by Laura Favaro. All three of these articles discuss explicitly the interconnections between aesthetic labour, neoliberalism, and modern ideals of feminism and empowerment. Elias, Gill, and Scharff's piece focuses on three main things, first of all they seek to situate the fascination with beauty and looking ones best always within the culture of neoliberalism, the influence of which in shaping societal expectations around beauty is often not understood. Their second point is to "push at questions concerned with embodied beauty and to link them in a novel way with a growing literature focused on work or labour" (pg.5). Finally, their article seeks to "point up the importance of subjectivity and the need to think about the 'psychic life' of neoliberalism and post feminism." (pg.5). I hope to use this article to situate my theoretical analysis and form my understanding of how neoliberalism and concepts of beauty are linked together. All of the points they explore throughout their article feel relevant to my research, hence why I chose to look into not only the title article of the journal but also those by Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Favaro. Banet-Weiser's article she explores the connection between the rise in female empowerment focused ad campaigns and the rising field of beauty vlogging. I hope to use her neoliberal analysis of the beauty industry to better understand how Vogue uses similar language and marketing strategies in their magazine. In the article by Favaro, she explores self-confidence and "love yourself narratives" in popular UK websites/online magazines. Her method of analyzing

the articles is similar to mine, and while her research focuses more on self-confidence and positivity, it does link these things to neoliberalism.

Another key piece of literature I will be using in my research project is *Girl Power-Dressing: Fashion, Feminism, and Neoliberalism with Beckham, Beyonce, and Trump* by Susan Hopkins. This piece uses magazine quotes and critical textual analysis to analyze the increasing overlaps between liberal feminism, consumerism, and celebrity. In a short article Hopkins is able to analyze Beyonce, Victoria Beckham, and Ivanka Trump through a neoliberal capitalist lens and understand how their politics, style, and branding hold such influence. She specifically dives into their connections with the idea of “girl power dressing” which she describes as “the convergence of luxury fashion, lifestyle branding and neoliberal feminism” (pg.2).

Another piece of literature that demonstrates research similar to my project is *In/Exclusion in Fashion Discourse: Are we in or Out?* By Kateryna Pilyarchuk. Her research analyzes 1061 Vogue articles using the container metaphor to understand “how women are denied or restricted the access to the bounded space of fashion based on a part of their identity, be it their race, religion, disability, gender identification, body weight, or social class.” (pg.1). Using Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Critical Discursive Psychology, her work has more of an emphasis on using a specific metaphor to understand Vogue, but nonetheless is helpful in establishing how Vogue uses identity politics to govern its articles, and what is left in or out of the magazine with regards to those articles. Her exploration of marginalization within fashion, and who holds the power that creates that marginalization, is also very relevant to my research and useful in establishing some relative truths about the fashion industry.

The final key piece of literature which I am using to situate my research is *Postfeminism, Popular Feminism and Neoliberal Feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in conversation*. By Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg. These three scholars each discuss their different approaches and slightly different takes on feminism in our modern era. Why this research is so relevant to mine is that a key theme from their discussion is about how “post-, neoliberal and popular feminism all depend on and validate media platforms and organizations as well neoliberal capitalism. These iterations of contemporary feminism do not critique or challenge the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism (or the media platforms that are co-constitutive with capitalism), but rather contribute to its normalization and conceit of inevitability.” (pg.2). Using this understanding of neoliberal capitalism and it’s interconnection with feminism and media is helpful in establishing how *Vogue* functions as a key institution for all of these concepts. While this paper uses a more unconventional form of research, conversation, it still contains insights into post, neoliberal, and popular feminism that can be perfectly applied to what I hope to write about.

In conclusion, my research paper on neoliberal political discourse in *Vogue* magazine will employ Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), grounded in post-modern feminist ideologies, and will analyze over seventeen issues of *Vogue* magazine. Through this research, I aim to critically examine the types of discourse *Vogue* generates, and how the placement, wording, and frequency of such discourse shape both the magazine's content and its impact on broader societal perceptions. By analyzing these elements, I hope to uncover how *Vogue* strategically constructs narratives that influence the fashion industry, especially in terms of beauty standards, gender norms, and consumer behavior. In addition, I seek to explore how

Vogue positions itself as a political or discursive entity and how it is perceived by the world. How do the stereotypes surrounding fashion and *Vogue* affect the credibility and legitimacy of its discourse? Furthermore, how do its ties to the capitalistic fashion industry limit the scope of the progressive messages *Vogue* might aim to create? This research paper will seek to offer insights into the interplay between media, ideology, and power within the context of modern fashion culture. (Word Count 2507)

Bibliography

Michelle M. Lazar (2007) Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis: Articulating a Feminist Discourse Praxis , Critical Discourse Studies, 4:2, 141-164, DOI: 10.1080/17405900701464816

Elias, Ana, et al. "Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism." *Aesthetic Labour*, 2017, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-47765-1_1.

Hopkins, Susan. "Girl power-dressing: Fashion, feminism and neoliberalism with Beckham, Beyoncé and trump." *Celebrity Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 17 July 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2017.1346052>.

Titton, Monica. "Afterthought: Fashion, feminism and radical protest." *Fashion Theory*, vol. 23, no. 6, 2 Nov. 2019, pp. 747–756, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704x.2019.1657273>.

Miller, Joshua I. "Fashion and Democratic relationships." *Polity*, vol. 37, no. 1, Jan. 2005, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.polity.2300002>.

Keller, Jessalynn. "A Politics of Snap: Teen Vogue's Public Feminism." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 45, no. 4, June 2020, pp. 817–843, <https://doi.org/10.1086/707797>.

Parkins, Ilya. "Hurricane Sandy in Vogue." *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 30, no. 85, 3 July 2015, pp. 221–237, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2015.1107941>.

Pilyarchuk, Kateryna. "In/exclusion in fashion discourse: Are we in or out?" *Discourse & Society*, vol. 35, no. 5, 30 Mar. 2024, pp. 606–624, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09579265241241074>.

Rottenberg, Catherine. "The Neoliberal Feminist." *Oxford Scholarship Online*, 23 Aug. 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190901226.003.0003>.

Kukuczka, Anne, and Claudia Liebelt. "Aesthetic Citizenship, Beauty Politics and the State: An introduction." *Citizenship Studies*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2 Jan. 2024, pp. 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2024.2363623>.

Banet-Weiser, Sarah, et al. "Postfeminism, Popular Feminism and Neoliberal Feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in conversation." *Feminist Theory*, vol. 21, no. 1, 23 Apr. 2019, pp. 3–24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700119842555>.