The Fashion Industry Should Not Be Held Responsible for Eating Disorders

Eating Disorders, 2007

"The notion that the fashion industry should endure government meddling because its products or marketing techniques may [promote] an unhealthy desire for thinness seems dubious at best."

In the following viewpoint, Michelle Cottle argues that the fashion industry has no obligation to change its practices, including using ultra-skinny models. It is not in the business of promoting healthy body images, Cottle suggests, just as fast-food restaurants are not in the business of selling healthy food. Michelle Cottle is a senior editor at the New Republic.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. To what other industries selling risky products, but nevertheless not subject to regulation, does Cottle compare the fashion industry?
2. What two criteria, in Cottle's view, would constitute grounds for intervention in the fashion industry?
3. What does the author say will eventually happen to resolve the issue of ultra-thin models on the catwalk?

Call it Revenge of the Carb Lovers. While much of the Middle East continues to devour itself, the hot controversy to come out of the West [in September 2006] is Madrid's decision to ban super-skinny models from its fashion week, the Pasarela Cibeles, which begins on September 18th. Responding to complaints from women's groups and health associations about the negative impact of emaciated models on the body image of young women, the Madrid regional government, which sponsors the Pasarela Cibeles, demanded that the show's organizers go with fuller-figured gals, asserting that the industry has a responsibility to portray healthy body images. As Concha Guerra, the deputy finance minister for the regional administration, eloquently put it, "Fashion is a mirror and many teenagers imitate what they see on the catwalk."

Activists' concerns are easy to understand. With ultra-thinness all the rage on the catwalk, your average model is about 5'9" and 110 pounds [7.8 stone]. But henceforth, following the body mass index standard set by Madrid, a 5'9" model must weigh at least 123 pounds [8.8 stone]. (To ensure there's no cheating, physicians will be on site to examine anyone looking suspiciously svelte.) Intrigued by the move, other venues are considering similar restrictions—notably the city of Milan, whose annual show is considerably more prestigious than Madrid's.

Industry Opposition

Modeling agencies meanwhile, are decidedly unamused. Cathy Gould of New York's Elite agency publicly denounced the ban as an attempt to scapegoat the fashion world for eating disorders—not to mention as gross discrimination against both "the freedom of the designer" and "gazellelike" models. (Yeah, I laughed, too.) Pro-ban activists acknowledge that many designers and models will attempt to flout the new rules. But in that
case, declared Carmen Gonzalez of Spain's Association in Defense of Attention for Anorexia and Bulimia, "the next step is to seek legislation, just like with tobacco."

Whoa, there, Carmen. I dislike catwalk freaks—pardon me, I mean human-gazelle hybrids—as much as the next normal woman. But surely most governments have better things to do than pass laws about what constitutes an acceptable butt size. Yes, without the coiffed tresses and acres of eyeliner, many models could be mistaken for those Third World kids that ex-celebs like Sally Struthers are always collecting money to feed. But that, ultimately, is their business. These women are paid to be models—not role models. The fashion world, no matter how unhealthy, is not Big Tobacco. (Though, come to think of it, Donatella Versace does bear a disturbing resemblance to Joe Camel.) And, with all due respect to the Madrid regional government, it is not the job of the industry to promote a healthy body image.

Indeed, there seems to be increasing confusion about what it is the "responsibility" of private industry to do. It is, for example, not the business of McDonald's to promote heart healthiness or slim waistlines. The company's central mission is, in fact, to sell enough fast, cheap, convenient eats to keep its stockholders rolling in dough. If this means loading up the food with salt and grease—because, as a chef friend once put it, "fat is flavor"—then that's what they're gonna do. Likewise, the fashion industry's goal has never been to make women feel good about themselves. (Stoking insecurity about consumers' stylishness—or lack thereof—is what the biz is all about.) Rather, the fashion industry's raison d'être is to sell glamour—to dazzle women with fantastical standards of beauty that, whether we're talking about a malnourished model or a $10,000 pair of gauchos, are, by design, far beyond the reach of regular people.

This is not to suggest that companies should be able to do whatever they like in the name of maximizing profits. False advertising, for instance, is a no-no. But long ago we decided that manufacturing and marketing products that could pose a significant risk to consumers' personal health and well-being—guns, booze, motorcycles, Ann Coulter—was okay so long as the dangers were fairly obvious (which is one reason Big Tobacco's secretly manipulating the nicotine levels in cigarettes to make them more addictive—not to mention lying about their health risks—was such bad form). The notion that the fashion industry should endure government meddling because its products or marketing techniques may pose an indirect risk to consumers by promoting an unhealthy desire for thinness seems dubious at best. More often than not, in the recognized trade-off between safety and freedom of choice, consumers tend to go with Option B.

Of course, whenever the issue of personal choice comes up, advocates of regulation typically point to the damage being done to impressionable young people. Be it consuming alcohol, overeating, smoking, watching violent movies, having anything other than straight, married, strictly procreation-aimed sex—whenever something is happening that certain people don't like, the first response is to decry the damage being done to our kids and start exploring legislative/regulatory remedies.

The Fashion Industry Should Be Left Alone

But here, again, the fashion industry's admittedly troubling affinity for women built like little boys doesn't seem to clear the hurdle for intervention. It was one thing for R.J. Reynolds to specifically target teens with its cigarette advertising. And, while I disagree with the attempts to make the war on fat the next war on smoking (for more on why, see here and here), you could at least make a similar argument that junk-food peddlers use kid-targeted advertising to sell youngsters everything from cupcakes to soda to french fries. But there's a difference between industries that specifically go after young consumers and those that happen to catch their eye—like, say, the fashion industry or Hollywood.
So let's give all those chain-smoking, Evian-guzzling, "gazelle-like" human-coatracks a break. In another couple of years, their metabolisms will slow down or they'll accidentally ingest some real food, and they'll be unceremoniously tossed off the catwalk like a bad pantsuit. Until then, in the name of personal choice, they should be allowed to strut their stuff—no matter how hideously skinny they are.

**Further Readings**

**Books**


Periodicals
• BBC News "Crohn's 'Mistaken for Anorexia,'" March 20, 2005.


• University of Pittsburgh Medical Center "Specific Regions of Brain Implicated in Anorexia Nervosa, Finds
• Univ. of Pittsburgh Study," July 7, 2005.


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