

# Getting Rid of Male Gaze Gradually: Exploring the Development of Feminism from ELLE Magazine

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**Abstract.** In order to focus on women's fashion and lifestyle, a Frenchwoman named Helene Lazareff started ELLE magazine in 1945. After 50 years, ELLE has evolved from a fashion publication to a global fashion brand. Most notably, the ELLE brand process incorporates gender equality as a major theme. In this publication, women from varied backgrounds continue to express how they have defined men and their own social standing throughout history, as well as how they see femininity and masculinity now. Through a comparative analysis of images on magazine covers from the 20th and 21st centuries and theoretical knowledge of the male gaze, this paper finds that the development of the female gaze contributed to the rise in male models, that changes in clothing styles and brands reflected the emergence of women's sense of self, and that a variety of poses allowed women to present themselves bravely. Combined with such arguments, the paper concludes that feminism is developing rapidly, reflected on the covers of ELLE magazines, as women are gradually getting rid of the male gaze. Besides, based on the additional risks that come with advancing times, there are still many obstacles in the path of feminism challenging current feminists and females, which need them to make more efforts to overcome.

**Keywords:** ELLE magazine, feminism, fashion, French.

## 1. Introduction

In 1945, after the Second World War, H el ene Gordon Lazareff successfully launched the first ELLE magazine in France. Not long ago, while she was residing in Manhattan and penning articles for reputable fashion publications, H el ene had already wanted to start her own women's fashion magazine. She recognized that such a moment had come to begin working on ELLE magazine after she arrived back in Paris [1]. In French, ELLE means SHE or HER, indicating that this magazine is targeting women all around the globe. H el ene Lazareff initially intended to create ELLE as a women's fashion publication focusing on women's dressing, beauty, and lifestyle. After more than half a century of development, according to Le Monde, ELLE has already become "a truly global brand" that moderates differences and balances social trends in fashion and beauty. Above all, developing gender equality is a crucial notion reflected in the process of the ELLE brand. Women from all backgrounds are constantly sharing their interpretation of femineity and masculinity in this magazine through all historical periods --how they characterize female beauty, freedom, life-meaning, and how they define the social status of men and themselves. From which the world audience can see the significant revolution in women's thinking mirrored in the ELLE: from quiet and submissive to rebellious self, from conformity to social norms to the courage of breaking through. The development of the female gaze contributing to an increase in the number of male models, changes in styles and brands of clothing mirroring an awakening of female self-awareness, the diversity of poses allowing women bravely to show themselves-- the changes in covers' concepts throughout history reflect the progressive feminism as women are gradually getting rid of the male discrimination.

With precise analysis, this study aims to explore the evolution in the models' genders, clothing, and postures on the covers of ELLE magazine with the development of female powers. Plus, it references academic theories about the male gaze to analyze better the reasons behind such changes in women's spirituality from the opposite sex's side. Understanding the development of feminism through Magazine Media is very important. It effectively reflects women's breakthrough of gender limitations under the male gaze and the fundamental shift in women's self-positioning. Moreover, it

extensively strengthens contemporary women's power and confidence to be themselves courageously, loves themselves, and express themselves.

## 2. Models' Genders

The number of male models on the covers of ELLE magazines is constantly growing, which reflects the developing female gaze as the most potent response to the male gaze. According to FASHION MODEL DEMOGRAPHICS AND STATISTICS IN THE US, from 2010 to 2019, the percentage of the male model in the US increased from 19.98% to 30.09%, and that of the female model decreased from 80.02% to 69.91% [2]. Besides, Men In ELLE claims that as a female magazine ELLE has always featured female models on its cover until November 1989: the first man seen by the audience on the cover, Michel de Windt, standing alongside American model Elaine Irwin. Since then, more and more male models have appeared on the covers of ELLE [3]. However, why were there so many more female models than male models initially? This phenomenon of a disproportionate number of female models in the fashion industry links to the "male gaze." In the early stage, the idea that "ELLE is a women's magazine, so women should be gazed at" was deeply entrenched. Countless pairs of male eyes were eager to see more female models, gazing at the female world from a straight male viewpoint which objectifies women sexually for enjoyment [4]. They desired to see more "idealized" women in their minds—the submissive elegant, and gentle housewives—to satisfy their psychological needs. Meanwhile, the targeted female audience was also seeing the female models under the male gaze's influence and even took such stereotyped models as role models to emulate—swotting at how to be a virtuous and charming woman to make men fascinated by her. As a result, they came to self-objectification, "view[ing] themselves as sexual objects" to men [5]. Males were gazing at the female, and females were imitating the female gazed at by the male.

Fortunately, nowadays, increasing numbers of male models are breaking such unfair social norms—females currently are being able to gaze at males. The male models in ELLE magazine, including handsome movie actors or muscular soccer stars, are being exposed in front of females and meeting the female's audience emotional needs: the famous England football player David Beckham on the cover in July 2012; the excellent American actor, Joseph Gordon-LevittSuch on the cover in November 2013. More and more men are also paying attention to women's wants from male models on magazine covers and gradually moving closer to the standards set by women. Such a female gaze allows women to break out of the circle of constant objectification and self-criticism under the male gaze. They began to look at their opposing genders from the same standpoint and became conscious of the equal "seeing" and "being seen" relationship that both genders deserve. Thus, the development of the female gaze following the growing number of male models promotes feminism significantly.

## 3. Dressing Styles

### 3.1 Overall Styles

The changes in the female models' dressing styles reflect the increased self-awareness of women fighting against the male gaze, from overall styles to brands' concepts. In terms of the overall styles, throughout various historical periods, the dressing styles of women mirrored on ELLE covers shifted significantly. In twenty century, under the influence of the male gaze, women's clothing is conservative. The cover of the March 1, 1954, spring issue of ELLE magazine depicted a female model wearing a set of grey and white suit dresses and a matching delicate round hat. She has a long-knotted white silk scarf in front of her chest that drapes down, echoing the two white embroidered gloves on her hands. Her hat, scarf, and gloves were all covering her hair and skin, and only her face was visible, which was extremely sober and conventional. Likewise, the grey and white hue, as well as the listless neat suit, were dull and monotonous. Such conservative dressing style reflected in ELLE

magazine shows that women at that time were strongly influenced by the male gaze: they were ashamed to expose their skin and acted as submissive as possible to satisfy men.

In the 21st century, women's overall clothing style is becoming more diverse and open. The famous American model, Kaia Gerber, appeared on the American ELLE cover in December 2021. She was dressed in a bright red velvet suit, half-naked without a shirt inside and one of her hands in her pants pocket, embodying the passion and panache of contemporary women. Likewise, the flowing hair, heavy eyeliner, and metal gleam watch on her wrist create an unrestrained, rebellious female character. What is more, English actress Lily Collins appears on the covers of Elle UK December 2021/January 2022. She wears a white strapless dress with half of her left shoulder exposed, which is very sexy and dynamic. Her hair is dyed white and short to her ears, echoing the dress. The outfit style reflects the bold personality of the women who have the courage to break the stereotype. In a word, the modern fashion dressing style are more focusing on how to express a true woman's self and how to show the diverse female's world through a different lens. Thus, from the variation of women models' dressing styles on the covers of ELLE, the audience can observe that the women are getting stronger and more confident because of their awakened self-awareness.

### 3.2 Brands' Concepts

Regarding brand concepts, fashion brands convey their feminist ideas through ELLE magazine, showing progressive feminism around the globe. According to CHANEL NEWS, Angèle Van Laeken, the breakout female French pop singer and a CHANEL ambassador, is wearing Chanel's Fall/Winter 2021/22 ready-to-wear collection on the cover of ELLE magazine [6]. She returns with her brand-new album, "Nonante-cinq," telling the world about her ideas on "amours, doutes, féminisme," or love, doubts, and feminism, as noted by ELLE [7]. CHANEL has long been the fashion label that embodies feminism. Coco Chanel began to take inspiration from men's clothing and design because she found the elaborate attire that women wore at the time—tight corsets and flamboyant skirts—to be restrictive and depressing. She started creating uncomplicated, airy, and distinctive CHANEL clothing for women. Such rebellion, individuality, and self-awareness are the very soul of CHANEL; as Ms. Coco Chanel said, "my life did not please me, so I created my life." The promotion of CHANEL's "rebellious" aesthetic by ELLE magazine is a successful strategy for advancing feminism in the magazine industry. The unisex style of the cool suit that Angèle is wearing is a continuation of Chanel's iconic tweed fabric. Blending the punk elements of 70's disco culture, the colourful jewellery embellishes the outfit. Angèle's deep eyes and metallic earrings echo her arrogance and determination. The intense collision of colours and textures on this cover reflects the freedom and personality of the woman, creating a delicate and rebellious sense of CHANEL.

Besides, ELLE magazine also promotes DIOR as a leading fashion company that embraces feminism. Natalie Portman, an Israeli American actress, is featured on the 2015 cover of ELLE Magazine. She dons the traditional DIOR long dress, DIOR lipstick, and DIOR perfume as the face of the brand. Her elegant black dress is modest and dignified with a silky texture, while her brown hair is retro and sophisticated, with sleek makeup. Natalie is sitting in a chair placidly with her deep eyes gazing directly at the camera, allowing the audience to sense her wisdom, maturity, and inner strength. The quote that appears next to Natalie on the covers: "J'ai fait des études pour me construire, me défier et me confronter à moi-même", which means "I study to build myself up, to challenge myself, and to confront myself", reflecting woman's independent thinking and strong heart. All in all, ELLE magazine serves as a medium to give many of the world's clothing brands the opportunity to speak out for women's power, allowing viewers to feel a strong visual and psychological impact on deepening the image of ELLE's own feminism.

## 4. Models' Poses

The diversity of model poses in magazines allows women to bravely express themselves without being constrained by the male gaze. The female models in the 20th century ELLE magazine were

basically standing straight, like the iron racks of clothes, unable to behave in any other meaningful postures. They were not allowed to squat, to lie down (such acts would be seen as sexually suggestive), which reminded women time after time that their function as models was merely displaying the clothes to the audience without any expression of personal emotions. In other words, women were posing to highlight their clothing rather than utilizing the clothing to accentuate their personalities under the influence of social objectification. According to the article *Women Who Objectify Other Women: The Vicious Circle of Objectification*, women were likely to be judged on the basis of "what they look[ed] like", not "who they were". They adopted the perspective of others, especially the males, and therefore began to spontaneously believe "they [were] defined by how they look". (Peter Strelan<sup>1,3</sup> and Duane Hargreaves, 2005). Thus, women models stand hollow and stiff on each magazine cover, perfectly maintaining the angle at which their bodies are tilted -- shoulders slightly shrugged, chin slightly lowered - in order to allow the audience to appreciate the clothes and the picture's harmony with the maximum extent, wishing the audience positively evaluate "how they look" but losing themselves gradually.

After half a century of ELLE's growth, as women's self-awareness has gradually increased, female models are expressing "who they are" in an increasing variety of poses. Modern dance tension, futuristic camera interaction, leaping up, neck twisting, crotch shaking, and full-body squatting all feature the model's body stretching and amplitude increasing. Their emotion and eye coordination allow women to better express their attitudes with dynamic communication with their audience--whether it is handsome, sexy, young, or mature. In the article *Doja Overload* from ELLE's *Celebrity News 2022*, the young female American rapper and singer Doja Cat is dressed in a long black coat and black boots, head turned to the left, eyes looking at the ceiling, both feet inward, slightly hunched over, and most importantly, she is smoking with the smoke filling around her face. Her pose is very different from the "obedient girl" image in past magazines, showing the rebelliousness and swag of a rapper [8]. The model's pose is no longer just a display of clothes to the audience but becomes a transmission of the soul and spirit of the new era of women. Women are becoming more confident and determined to show the true self with various postures, which reflects the developing feminist courage.

## 5. Discussion

As ELLE states in an article titled *ELLE 100: Women That Are Changing the World*, "[women] have fought tirelessly for [their] rights, battling prejudice at every turn, using their voices to change the world" [9]. Nevertheless, women are still facing challenges in the current world for fighting for gender equality and developing the feminism reflected in ELLE magazine. According to the 2020 UN Women study, given that the COVID-19 epidemic has the potential to treble the amount of time that women spend on unpaid tasks such as housework and child care, gender equality may be delayed by 25 years [10]. Around 865,000 women lost their employment or left labor during the epidemic, compared to 200,000 men in the United States alone in September 2020. On March 25, 2020, ELLE tweeted a photo of several female physicians wearing masks, some of whom had stethoscopes dangling from their shoulders. The female doctors had various skin tones, hair colors, and medical jackets. What is more, the blue "MERCII" (THANK) at the bottom of the image not only shows the admiration for the women who are continually working in their job positions and saving lives, but it also symbolizes the significant physical and mental hardship that the COVID-19 pandemic has placed on women.

Also, the legal rights of black women and the lesbian community are still incompletely developed in nowadays' world. The cover of the November 2020 issue of the British ELLE magazine features two black women--model Aweng Ade-Chuol is Kissing her wife Alexis, both dressed in black and white polka dot gowns and with their eyes closed. This controversial magazine cover focuses on the fight against homophobia and male limited gaze toward them, which also expresses ELLE's calling

for legal rights and respect for the black and gay communities as well as reflects the difficult path of feminist development under the feudal conservative bias.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, as women are gradually getting rid of the male gaze, the covers of ELLE magazine reflect that feminism around the whole world has been developing in a significant way throughout history. The evolving female gaze is leading to an increasing number of male models, meeting the female's audience emotional needs; overall dressing styles are becoming more diverse and open, mirroring an awakening of female self-awareness; fashion brands such as CHANEL and DIOR convey their feminist ideas through ELLE magazine, showing progressive feminism around the globe; the diversity of poses is calling on women bravely to show themselves, expressing "who they are" rather than "how they look". However, based on the additional risks that come with advancing times, there are still many obstacles in the path of feminism that challenge current-thinking women, including the pandemic and the feudal conservative bias. However, none of these will stop the feminists from moving forward, and the quest for elles(women)'s rights is unstoppable.

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