

Research Paper

# Fashion, Modeling, and Beauty in Haiti: A Space of Self-Subjectivation for Young People

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## ABSTRACT

This study seeks to explore the identity formation of models in Haiti. The goal is to demonstrate how Haitian models shape their identity through fashion practices and how fashion can contribute to reinforcing their self-image. The study draws on theoretical approaches around identity and the body and applies constructivism and symbolic interaction to understand the identity construction process of the models. A qualitative methodology was used to collect and analyze the data. The research concludes that some young people in Haiti use fashion to construct and subjectivize themselves. The study categorizes the construction of the models' identity into three groups: those who want to maintain the traditional essence of modeling work, those who believe the model must manifest creativity, and those who advocate for a more relaxed fashion with less stringent body requirements.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- ① In the fashion world, modeling refers not only to a set of practices linked to its social and economic environment, but also to the work of designers and users.
- ① The body is a medium that enables the mannequin to stage an idea, a story, a creation, a life-story. What's on display is a picture worthy of contemplation and admiration.
- ① This study concludes that modeling work has two meanings. For some, it is a profession in which practitioners can earn their dream living. For others, it is a hobby for people who are passionate about art.

**Keywords:** Fashion, body, Haiti, identity, subjectivation

Fashion has historically been overlooked by researchers in the human and social sciences due to its complexity and ambiguity. It wasn't until the 1990s that researchers began in-depth studies on the subject, known as modology or fashionology. In Haiti, there has been no scientific study on fashion, particularly on modeling, and it wasn't until the 1990s that fashion established itself as an artistic practice in the country.

Haute couture workshops and fashion designers are virtually absent from the Haitian market. The few initiatives that exist provide very little information in the

process of constructing the Haitian model. Most fashion boutiques in Port-au-Prince display products imported from major fashion houses in France, England, Italy, and the USA, representing big brands. However, very little of the stock comes from them, indicating a heavy reliance on imports. This can be attributed to the lack of faith in national production by the wealthy elite in Haiti.

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The massive consumption of foreign used clothing in Haiti dates back to the 1960s, particularly during the presidency of John F. Kennedy, leading to the term “Kennedy” being used to describe used clothing imported into Haiti. The situation worsened in the 1990s with structural adjustment programs that lowered tariffs on foreign products, leading to a decrease in domestic clothing production and an increase in plastic waste in the country.

Since the 1990s, young Haitians have been participating in beauty contests, and several clothing workshops, modeling agencies, and shows have been established to showcase beauty and fashion. The question remains: how do young people who practice fashion subjectivize themselves in Haiti, and what are the identity-building mechanisms of Haitian models?

### **Modeling and Haute Couture**

Modeling developed almost simultaneously with the institutionalization of haute couture (Charliac and Lemonnier, 2009). Its first manifestation dates back to 1870 in “la vie parisienne,” Worth’s fashion house where the first fashion show was held (Jan, 2011). While haute couture marked its passage with impeccable work, the same cannot be said of modeling. We had to wait until 1923 to see the creation of the first model agency, which would eventually take over the negotiation of contracts. With the creation of the first agency, models became available to participate in advertising campaigns for other companies.

John Robert Powers is considered the first male model. He began modeling for photographers between 1913 and 1914. Powers set up the first modeling agency in 1923, paradoxically recruiting only girls. It took until 1936 to see a boy on the catwalk wearing pieces for a fashion designer. It’s worth remembering that the fashion show has never been favorable to male models. In other words, haute couture has kept male models out of the limelight. Fashion is thus characterized by a clear demarcation between its “feminine” and “masculine” components, each with its own production chain and trends (Godart, 2010). There is a growing trend towards the “binarization” of fashion.

According to Simard (2006), the model is the main actor in fashion shows. Selection procedures for fashion house casting directors are based on the specificity of each individual model and the model’s popularity on the market. Option mechanisms are a strategy developed in response to uncertainties in model selection (Godart & Mears, 2011). Options give the buyer the right, but not the obligation, to complete the transaction (Hull [2008] Quoted in Godart & Mears 2011). Options allow a fashion house to make a stop on the model’s availability in the future. Just as a model has more options on her, so she is more in demand by other fashion houses. This logic suggests that the number of options on a model determines whether he or she is among the “models of the moment.” And the biggest fashion houses are only looking for the best representation for their collection. So, they look for the best models.

### **Models and Model Agencies**

A model agency is a natural or legal person that provides temporary services to users by hiring and paying people to work as models, for a fee. This is the legal definition of a model agency. Model agencies, as commercial institutions, are responsible for mediating or negotiating on behalf of models with any individual or company requiring a professional for an advertising campaign. From this perspective, agencies are not an entity in fashion and there is nothing artistic about the work they do. However, agencies are important players in the fashion world.

The “beauty canon” model is conventional and accepted not only by haute couture houses, but also by other companies that may require the services of models for advertising. In other words, the work of model agencies cannot deviate from this predefined framework accepted by haute couture.

In the fashion world, modeling refers not only to a set of practices linked to its social and economic environment, but also to the work of designers and users. Modeling is divided into several categories: haute couture models, beauty models, photo models, and character models, among others. Each of these categories plays a specific role, although there is a tendency to confuse them.

However, this confusion does not affect the quality of the models' work. Corone (1995) supports this judgment:

*A model is any person whose job is to present a product, service or advertising message to the public, either directly or indirectly through the reproduction of their image on any visual or audiovisual medium, or to pose as a model, with or without subsequent use of their image, even if this activity is only carried out on an occasional basis.*

Through integrated criteria and requirements of the profession, models work on behalf of stylists, fashion photographers and other industry actors. Models seek to assimilate the social identity model specifically linked to the profession.

The combined work of each of these entities forms the backbone of the industry. Although other categories can be considered, such as modeling agencies and cosmetics, as part of fashion. Some believe that modeling and fashion photography are interdependent and cannot be practiced outside of haute couture work. For others, they're just independent fields, where professionals can work together if they wish. The first approach sees the mannequin as a simple mobile support replacing the frame for haute couture (Jan, 2011) and fashion photography, which itself is seen as the missing piece in the puzzle whose aim is to immortalize each piece worn by the mannequin, on behalf of the stylist or couturier. This perspective is in line with Bourdieu's (2022) field theory, in which each element cannot exist without the other. In this first approach, "Models are reduced to a symbolic function, the excitement of being presented for a season as the girl or boy of the moment often giving way to cruel disillusionment" (Alexandre: 2002:3).

The second approach, supported by Monneyron (2010) mention the models' demand for autonomy in their practice, which has been marked not only by the wave of nudity for several decades already, but even more so, they are trained to be the first advertising professionals. In this way, fashion photography is moving away from its initial object, the garment, to focus on the body that wears it (Barthes, 1967).

The mobile support represented by the mannequin body is used as a channel by haute couture to express creativity. Individuals communicate nonverbally

through their bodies (Descamps, 1989). A fashion show is a non-verbal communication aimed at orienting the consumption patterns of individuals, groups, and social classes (Davis, 1992). In this way, individuals seek to identify and distinguish themselves through the clothes they wear.

### To Understand the Somatic Identity

Somatic identity is the result of self-consciousness and self-awareness. The body is what allows us to exist in the world and to differentiate ourselves from the world. Somatic identity is a function of the synchronic manifestation of the social order, the biological order, and the psychological order. By somatic identity, Meidani means "appearance in its physical dimension, as defined both through its form and through somatic sensations that enable the actor to designate it as a coherent, limited and accessible entity" (2007:25).

Somatic identity considers the moral dimension of the body, i.e., the body's symbolic and representational system, which undergoes a cycle of modification in line with social mutations. The body changes, is transformed, is given and reappropriated. In the Bible, for example, the individual is dispossessed of his or her body, which must be kept free from all defilement: "I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, which will be reasonable worship on your part" (Romans 12:1). Clearly, religion deprives the individual of his or her own body, which is the object of gods and spirits. In Haitian Vodou, when someone is possessed, we say that he becomes a "chwal/horse," i.e., tamed by a Lwa (spirit) who takes possession of his body. In the Christian religion, Saint Paul tells us: "Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have received from God, and that you do not belong to yourselves?" The dispossession of the body does not occur to the same degree or in the same way in all religions. Vodou, for example, does not prescribe the sexual orientation of its believers. However, a Lwa may choose to marry a man or a woman. Any sexual orientation remains the will of the Lwa, so the individual can live his or her sexuality as he or she sees fit. In the Koran, a woman's body is

perceived as impure at the moment of menstruation and becomes an object of absolute prohibition: "It is an evil. Keep away from women when they are menstruating, and do not approach them until they are pure. When they are pure, go to them, as God has commanded you." (Sura 2:222).

Modernity allows the individual to reclaim his or her body, which enables him or her to subjectivize the world. The body is an object of self-representation and remains the unique property of the individual. The body enables us to showcase ourselves, project ourselves, identify ourselves and interact with the world in different ways, notably through gestures. David Le Breton (2018) believes that gestures enable the body to be put into play during social interactions.

The body is a medium that enables the mannequin to stage an idea, a story, a creation, a life story. What's on display is a picture worthy of contemplation and admiration. The body is a vehicle that both conceals and expresses messages and can tell a story about painting (body painting), clothing (fabric transformation) and so on. "Bodies and faces exhaust themselves to resemble the words and images that, while claiming to reproduce them, actually shape them" (Perrot, 1984:8). It's in this sense that designers and users are sometimes quite strict when it comes to choosing models. Criteria can vary from one designer or user to another, depending on the message to be conveyed or the story to be told through a collection.

### **Fashion and Identity**

An individual's shape and appearance constitute a veritable anthropological structure. According to gestalt theory, form is different from the sum of its parts (Köhler, 1910). This theory assumes that the meaning we attribute to each element depends on the way we perceive things. This conception of form and appearance covers the field of fashion, particularly haute couture, which is not limited to the creation of style. We think that would be a reductionist conception of its scope. For us, fashion is also dedicated to the invention and reinvention of styles, depending on the designer's taste. Each style presented embodies a distinction in the Bourdieusian sense. It is through this distinction that individuals in this world

attempt to identify themselves. Villaça (2008:25) believes in this sense:

*Those individuals seek to identify with media icons is becoming commonplace today. The space of the catwalk, of the stage, of the screen is gradually merging with the real, and a society of simulacra acquires positive accents in the consideration of creative appropriations of lifestyle, through consumption.*

The style created by the fashion designer has a double attribute. Firstly, the work of the fashion designer enables models, who are considered media icons in Villaça's (2008) sense, to exist through their work of presentation and the symbolic representation of pieces through their bodies. In the world of fashion, in Becker's (1991) sense, wearing a piece means appropriating the spirit of the garment. It also means giving life to the creative process. Secondly, the task of the fashion designer is more subtle, reflecting the fact that young people who want to follow media icons let themselves be influenced by the images sold on TV or in fashion magazines. From this perspective, some young people try to create their own identity by wearing style.

### **Methodology**

The results are based on qualitative research carried out between February 2019 and December 2022 with 75 participants aged 18 to 33, including 35 boys and 40 girls through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. These are people who practice modeling in agencies, most of whom come from the metropolitan area of Port-au-Prince and others who live in provincial towns. To recruit participants, a poster was published on the researchers' Facebook page. Most participants were recruited through the snowball method and through intermediaries. The interviews and focus groups, for the most part, were conducted at the Faculty of Ethnology. Other interviews are carried out with young people in the greatest confidentiality. Participants were informed that no information could identify them. The individual interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and the focus groups lasted approximately 110 to 160 minutes. All discussions were recorded with the consent of the participants.

### Socio-demographic data of the Research Participants

Regarding the university education of the respondents, there is a very high proportion of female models who are at university compared to male models, 20 female models out of 40 or 50%, and 27% of the overall population have received a university education, including 13 male models out of 35, or 17% of the study population.

The study data report that 77% of participants live in the metropolitan region of Port-au-Prince (Pétion-ville, Delmas, Tabarre, Carrefour, Cité-Soleil) and the provincial towns combined comprise 23% of the population of the study. However, 29 models or 39% declare that they come from a provincial town. The cities most represented in the survey are Cayes, Gonaïves, Saint-Marc and Petit-Goâve.

Of the 40 female models who participated in the survey, 35% declared themselves heterosexual compared to 17 male models out of the overall percentage of 47%. So the difference is marked by 12%, or double the difference in the overall percentage. Nine percent of boys do not define their gender compared to 3% of women. Which shows that male models have difficulty accepting their sexual choice. We tried to understand this considering a discourse built on male and female homosexuality. According to respondents, people are more intolerant of gay models than lesbian models. This stems from the way homosexuality is perceived in Haitian society.

### Evolution of Fashion in Haiti

We had to wait until 2012 to see a major fashion event throughout the country: Haiti Fashion Week. In 2017, it was the turn of Pétion-Ville Fashion Week. These two fashion shows, also known as fashion weeks, are held once a year and bring together only a small number of models, fashion photographers, journalists, and other professionals. In this sense, it's a closed circle. On the one hand, activities are organized in a venue with a very small capacity. On the other hand, most of the people can't afford to pay for tickets. What's more, the fashion shows are usually organized by model agencies themselves, in order to introduce new models to the general public. These shows take place over the course of a day, and usually over a weekend.

Aside from Port-au-Prince and Pétion-Ville, the practice of fashion shows was noticeable in other towns such as Saint-Marc, Petit-Goâve and Les Cayes. Lacking the structures and funds available for a week-long fashion show, these towns organize a one-day show. With these kinds of activities, designers' work gains in value; the public learns more about new collections; fashion photographers take advantage of the opportunity to make a name for themselves. Organized once a year, the name alone posed a problem: Haiti Fashion Week. In other words, a fashion week for the whole country. Unlike other countries, where every major city organizes its own fashion week to meet the demands of fashion houses, models, and photographers.

This posed two major problems. Firstly, the show could not meet the desires of the models, designers and fashion photographers gathered in the country's biggest cities. Demand was far greater than what the organizers could offer, not to mention the bias or partiality of the juries with regard to the method of model selection. According to the respondents we met, who have already taken part in some castings, the criteria are not always objective and change unexpectedly.

Secondly, despite its very limited capacity, the fashion show is organized for a single "autumn" season, and worse still, the show is not organized on a regular basis. This leaves the models with very little choice, and in no way works in their favor.

### Modeling in the Haitian Context

From a strictly artistic point of view, a model is a person who uses his or her body as a mobile support to promote other artistic objects on behalf of a fashion designer. This point of view has evolved over time. Today, the model is more a person capable of using his or her body for promotional purposes. In addition, the model may take part in advertising campaigns on behalf of fashion designers or a company. A model is someone who works for a modeling agency, ensuring coverage and promotion of her career.

In Haiti, the advertising market is not favorable to models. On top of that, there's the lack of recognition of their profession as such. On top of this, some modeling

agencies have no resources or qualifications to train models.

*In Haiti, the advertising market seems to leave no opportunity for models (beauty canons as far as images are concerned) whether they are active in a modeling agency or freelance. Artists and unknown faces from nowhere are the ones who triumph in the territory of these advertising professionals (Saint-Fleur, 2020).*

The task of those who practice modeling is doubly complicated from an economic point of view. Not only do they have to work hard to be recognized as advertising professionals, but they also must strive for celebrity status like artists. Here again, they are not insured, since we must consider the “kolonn” (sectarism, nepotism) approach that has gone viral in Haiti. The primary responsibility for the decline in the frequency with which models sign contracts falls squarely on the shoulders of the modeling agencies, since this is part of their function. Model agencies must therefore have a management team and brokers to carry out the work of finding and signing contracts.

### **The Mannequin and the Self-Identity**

Talking about yourself means saying who you are, according to your own perception. The “who am I?” remains an existential question which even underpins the debate on identity. Through their response, most models define themselves as people with strong potential and have a positive view of themselves. The answer to the question, “who am I?” suggests a self-description of identity in the sense of Mucchielli (2015). To define themselves, people generally appeal to the banal context of daily life, where we refer, for example, to our name (Mucchielli, 2015). Beyond the simple name or title to which we refer to describe ourselves, then comes our social belonging. According to Messu, “It is in the intertwining of the social world that the question of identity is lodged” (2008:25). Therefore, identity takes its form in relationships with others.

At the start of the interview, Tani not only says her name, but she gives a whole speech about herself and her work as a model.

*I see myself as normal and I meet the standard criteria*

*that define an international haute couture model. There is no real supervision for models, but otherwise I must have already been at the top like many other international models. I am very professional. When I parade or pose, I do it well and I put my all into everything I do relate to fashion (Tani, 22 years old).*

Tani’s speech has two important aspects: on the one hand, she refers to the criteria established to define herself as a high-fashion model. On the other hand, we can observe the passion and confidence she puts into what she does. Ford (24 years) answers the question differently. He believes that the modeling profession as we know it in Haiti is different compared to Western countries. This approach highlights the cultural dimensions of the modeling profession, but also the taboos that surround the practice of this profession. “I see myself as an innovator, a fighter. Especially since in Haiti, it is a marginal profession, you must fight every day to respect the work” (Ford).

The model is built in opposition to others, but also in rapprochement with others by creating networks. So, fashion designers and fashion photographers represent others. Thus, “Identity otherness becomes a simple variation on the theme of the other, the one with whom I share many traits or attributes but who is not me” (Messu, 2008:26). Some respondents try to provide some clarification on the contributions of modeling to their lives:

*Modeling is a profession like any other profession, in my speeches, I have always expressed thanks for its contributions to my daily life. [...] when I joined modeling, I cultivated more discipline, and I am conscious of my actions. It develops in me a sort of curiosity, I watch my every move because I have become sensitive to my image, to my name. It puts me in another dimension, like when I arrive somewhere, people whisper that it’s the Divo that’s coming. So, I have become meticulous not only in the way I dress, but in the details that relate to my image, and I am satisfied with this contribution (Peter, 27 years old).*

Modeling agencies are not only a training space on the approach, but also a place where models can learn to manage their image. In the interview with Peter, we were able to understand that his training as a model allowed him to consider every detail about himself.

Another respondent agrees:

*For others, when they look at me, because modeling has given me a new style, which people perhaps don't understand, they see me and look at me in a weird way. It's like I'm an alien, it's normal for me. What these people don't know about all this is that modeling is a way of life: the way of speaking, of dressing, of behaving, of eating, because you must keep your size correct and to monitor your weight regularly; you have to keep a line. [...], it's important for me to keep this line. No matter what people say, for me modeling through these characteristics constitutes the basis on which we can identify a model and categorize them (Nanona, 23 years old).*

In short, these comments allowed us to understand their self-description and the way in which they subject themselves as models in the community. Nanona highlights her belonging and her beauty when she spontaneously talks to us about her potential. This also allows us to understand what fashion represents for these people met as part of this study. For Nanona, modeling allows her to create and manage her image and at the same time participates in the construction of her identity.

### Reflexivity and Identity

According to Dubar (2000), the identity process is the result of incessant work of reflexivity which consists of searching, dialoguing, presenting arguments and suggesting definitions of oneself, day after day. These elements, to take up Francilus Sanon (2021), allow human beings to study and question the facts, with a view to reaching their own understanding of the phenomena. Reflexivity allows the person to take a step back from their position. It places more emphasis on individual human characteristics. To this end, Rondeau assumes two possible forms of reflexivity:

*The first form assumes a distancing where the individual "adopts an observer-analyst position, a bit as if he were looking at the situation from the outside, mentally extracting himself from it in order to take a more objective look at it." (Donnay, 2002:60).*

The second form assumes a step back where the individual "returns on himself by taking himself as an object of reflexivity" (2019:40). Some respondents use

reflexivity to take a critical look at both the working relationship between models and fashion photographers, but also the relationship between models and fashion designers.

*The job is a friendly affair. Since you are a model and the photographer assumes that he will need you one day, he gives you a price reduction, but otherwise you have to pay the full service, or he asks you to have sex against the service he offers you (Tani, 22 years old).*

Dranie's comments reinforce those of Tani on economic-sexual exchanges:

*Most photographers in Haiti take advantage of their position to make sexual advances towards models. Probably because of economic insecurity. Automatically when a model contacts a photographer for a job, the photographer wants to go beyond professional relationships. Photographers want sex in return. Even if you pay for the work, they always try to put aside the professional aspect to make inappropriate requests or make indecent proposals (Dranie, 22 years old).*

These comments allow us to understand a little better the unbalanced work relationship between the different fashion entities. Dranie goes further than other models due to her experiences both with fashion actors in provincial towns and in the capital. Danie's comments suggest that the daily life of female models is not easy, because they are often victims of sexual harassment and abuse. In this sense, there is still a lot of work to do to ensure respect for women who practice this profession.

We must emphasize the lack of information among female models regarding their rights and certain ethical principles which protect them against harassment from those with whom they contract. The data allows us to think that they are inclined to accept or refuse but do not think of denouncing when they are victims.

*The working relationships between fashion photographers and designers with models are not the same in provincial towns and Port-au-Prince, the capital. Due to the lack of activities in provincial towns, these players have exorbitant prices and are more likely to rise. The agencies, for their part, lack the means to function well [...]. There is a lack of collaboration between fashion photographers and models. Their report is biased by acts of harassment and sexual touching (Styne, 23 years old).*

These criticisms are leveled not only against fashion photographers, but also against fashion designers. Of course, the work of these two executives is not the same, but both use the model for the expressive side of the body. The work between models and fashion photographers is generally biased, which is why some agency managers require them to attend every photo shoot. The most repeated cases of harassment are recorded following nude photo sessions with fashion photographers.

*Fashion designers do not organize any promotional campaigns for their new collections. They do not do any promotion; however, they wait for an agency to organize a fashion show to ask them to present their collections. So, the models don't really benefit, they don't benefit from almost anything with the fashion designers in terms of advertising (Mill, 25 years old).*

These comments allow us to understand the decline of models compared to other fashion entities. These critiques also allow us to understand the mode of relationship that the models develop with other entities. The models take a reflective look at their surroundings. In other words, a perspective that allows them to be both an observer and an analyst.

Lahn, aged 24 at the time of the investigation, sees herself as a *manbo*, in other words a voodoo priestess. In her artistic approach as a high-fashion model and photo, she is more interested in promoting local culture through wearing brightly colored costumes sewn with Vodou symbols. She tries to create a corridor between Vodou deities and the practice of modeling. Her main photo shoots highlight the beauty and elegance that hides behind each Vodou-related piece. According to her, Vodou has as much class as any cultural and religious practice. In its relationships with other fashion entities, it always seeks the best profile of photographers or fashion designers with a penchant for Vodou in order to have the best possible results. For her, this should be one of the priorities of fashion players in Haiti who must highlight Vodou as an identity marker of the Haitian people. She advocates for authentic Haitian fashion.

### **Feminism, Hypersexualization and the Model's Body**

Feminism is this complex movement that advocates

for gender equality and other important human rights. Riot-Sarcey (2002:110) tells us that "the feminist movement has favored the development of reflection and pressure groups against all dominations, of race, sex and gender [...]". In the world of fashion, producers and/or users place more emphasis on the naked female body in advertisements. Which is sometimes seen as a departure from the feminist movement. In this sense, we interviewed female models to find out what they think of this approach.

The participants did not miss the opportunity to show how modeling can support the feminist struggle. The evolution of the work of fashion designers between the 1970s and 1980s shows the desire to not only put women at the forefront after so many years of restrictions imposed on women, but also through the assembly of non-binary or mixed. One participant affirms:

*I think that fashion is a way for models to promote their bodies, to get involved in the fight against discrimination and gender stereotypes. Through photo shoots, we can show that there is no barrier between men and women in professions. It is therefore a step forward for the feminist movement (Zah, 23 years old).*

Understanding the model body does not always have the same impact depending on the work in which it is invested. Several debates have been organized for this purpose by intellectuals' feminists. For certain trends, women can do what they want with their bodies. While others believe that a woman's body should not be exhibited as if it were a work of art. The discrimination based on gender in the modeling profession is probably a reflection of the Haitian social imagination which is constructed in a heteronormative manner. Regarding the use of the body-object model, Lia thinks that:

*Highlighting women's sexuality in an advertisement means that people are more attracted to it. And this does not go against feminist values, in my opinion. The model's body remains attached to her person. She is in control of her body to the extent that she is always conscious of her actions and this has no impact on feminist values (Lia, 22 years old).*

Another participant goes in the same direction as Lia by stating that:



*When a model participates in an advertisement, it is not her body that she is selling, even if there is a lot of emphasis on it, but the objective is to attract more attention to the product. The latter remains the main element (Styne, 23 years old).*

For this respondent, the body of the female model is the central element of her potential. For several young women we met, the body is just a mobile that allows the person to send a message that goes beyond the body we are looking at to which we will not have access. In this sense, the body is believed to be a work of art worthy of being looked at. And the look of the other is not perceived as malice but as an element of theatricality. As long as the look embodies respect for the individual and for their dignity, it contributes to the enhancement of the being.

### Perception Around Modeling

Perception differs from one model to another. Several participants take an enlightened look at the work of models. Mill speaks of a mannequin responding to the initial ideal which is a lifeless body:

*Italian models are dying when they parade on a catwalk, that's how it translates exactly what the model represented in the past before the modern period, it was just an object intended to carry the creation of the producers. Viewers could only focus on the creation and not on the person wearing it. Makeup also says a lot about performance, which is why we generally give dull makeup to models. When you look at Naomi Campbell, whom I respect a lot, on a catwalk, you don't really have time to admire the work of the fashion designer that she is wearing, because it imposes itself. We see her, above all, with her Diva looks. What is different with Italian models, however, is that when you go wow, you do it to the creation and not to the model. [...]. With black models, it's a bit like that too, they really create too much drama on the catwalk, added to all that, their beauty. You will have difficulty concentrating on creation. At my place, you find the Italian model (Mill, 25 years old).*

Wanting to appear this way can be seen as a fault in the modeling world. However, elegance and charisma must be highlighted by fashion actors and actresses. That is not always the case. In addition, Mill's comments allow

us to note that Haitian fashion is not prioritized by the majority of models since they project themselves more into the Western model. Lia thinks that "our models, to get noticed, quite often, do a lot of drama to be seen in the absence of class" (Lia, 22 years old).

This view of model types is typically cultural. It is built and promoted by producers and fashion houses. This corresponds more to the ideal of beauty valued by Western countries. Several participants criticize this attitude. Malla does not miss the opportunity to express his disappointment with the profession.

*The way I understand Haitian models is no different from my understanding of Santa Claus. We make you believe that Uncle Christmas will come in December to bring you gifts and we grew up with this myth of Uncle (Father) Christmas. It's almost the same for modeling. You are made to believe that you are going to be a star, you are going to be a hit, you are going to be able to earn a lot of money with it, yet it is the agents who win at the expense of your skills (Malla, 28 years old).*

Malla believes that she was duped. For her, fashion is a deception, because she has unmet expectations, and she is still frustrated about it all. She thinks that the work of modeling agencies must be considered because it is based on their entire responsibility. Modeling agencies are there to train models to suit the tastes of producers who have very particular and specific expectations. We often forget that models are an important piece of the puzzle.

### To Understand the Haitian Models

This research allowed us to think of a model, although questionable, of beauty or an ideal type to which people bow. During the interview, participants were able to cite certain indicators through which people can evaluate them. This is also the point of view of Messu (2008:25), to be identified you still must be identifiable.

For some participants, a model is an actor or actress and an influencer who is endowed with a certain leadership in his world and, moreover, he or she must be admired by the public. This work of influence can only be done if models go beyond the ordinary framework, the normal framework of everyone's everyday life, to

build themselves like stars. This demarcation passes through elegance and charisma which are two essential ingredients of his profession. In this sense, we have categorized the models' speech into two. On the one hand, some respondents explain the way in which people manage to identify them in an environment, without having the slightest information about their person, which constitutes something important for them:

*Most often to identify a model, it is first by their height, then their thinness, their gait, their charisma and finally their look (expression) and their way of speaking. It is by these elements that we identify a model, because he learns good manners during his training. So, it doesn't matter whether it's a catwalk or on a photographer's carpet, the model will have the same attitude (Sade, 26 years old).*

Another participant agrees:

*In my daily journeys, people I meet always ask me this question, "are you a model?" this question answers a whole set: my height, I have a thin waist, my approach as an international model and I also have a lady's approach and finally my appearance (Mill, 25 years old).*

On the other hand, there is another group that identifies with charm and elegance too, but with a new element that is roundness. At first glance, you might not guess that they are models, strictly speaking, because of their size. But we will eventually find out, by observing their approach. For this group, there is reason to take into account the influence of Western media on black societies.

*Haitian beauty, what is also called marabou kreyòl (Creole Marabout) does not have a specific shape, thin or round. The beauty canon is not just about the body, but it is a package. You have to take into account the person's attitude, their elegance, their build. Everything is a matter of class and standards (Lia, 22 years old).*

Zah broadens the framework to say that:

*Despite my thinness, I would not describe the Haitian beauty model as a thin woman. Even in some music videos, curvy women are given more prominence. You should also add full lips and frizzy hair to the criteria. Which is the opposite of the beauty model in the West, if we take France as an example (Zah, 23 years old).*

Styne is more categorical regarding the criteria she attributes to Haitian beauty. She tries to justify her speech in relation to what she describes as a "cultural weakness," that is to say the control of Haitian importers and the images sold in the media. Styne argues by saying:

*We, Haitians, as descendants of Africans, our model of beauty is not the same as other countries. We are well aware that there is an acculturation in the country, which explains why thin women are more appreciated than other categories in the field. But, deep down, Haitian beauty is round (Styne, 23.)*

For Styne, Haitians should get closer to Africa in terms of fashion. However there is a strong influence of Western culture which calls into question Haitian physical and cultural attractions. Several women claim Haitian beauty based on roundness. For this same category, it is the work and skill of the model that prevails and not their slender body. These respondents also think that the training that models receive should be integrated into their everyday lives. It is from this moment that their popularity or celebrity level will be able to reach a certain level. It is in fact a work of recognition of the value given to the model.

It is important to mention that thin women are not always valued in all walks of life in Haiti. For example, in the peasant environment, roundness is synonymous with abundance and good health. So, being the size of a French model can be interpreted as a punishment from nature or the gods. This conception is a function of the predominance of African culture, i.e. bossal identity. In other urban spaces, particularly in working-class neighborhoods, the valued size is neither roundness nor thinness, but a happy medium between these two which is subjectively constructed in the imagination. This is what Haitians would call "yon gwosè nòm (a normal size)". Since before the 2000s and still today, many Haitians have taken tablets to gain weight. This shows how roundness is valued in this country. However, it must be remembered that obesity is frowned upon. Furthermore, thinness as a dominant value is a late invention of the West, and, more precisely, it is the world of fashion which has made this corpulence the

ideal and idealized canon of beauty since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The Identity Construction of Models**

Identity construction therefore invites us to think and rethink our actions in terms of constraints and possibilities. For Ramos (2006), identity is constructed “between dependence and autonomy, attachment and detachment.” In the context of this study, identity is therefore constructed in the symbolic relationships between people exercising the same profession of modeling, but also between models and their immediate environment, photographers, agencies among others. The interactions give meaning and coherence to the self-formation of the models. Which could be explained by Ramos’s (2006) quest for “self-loyalty.” Models try to build themselves through fashion practices while remaining true to themselves and the values of the profession.

In this context, this research work allowed us to identify the three models in relation to which models try to build themselves. Firstly, there are those who cling to the ideal type of model living in the words of Frédéric Worth: I am a model, I am here to sell the creation of the fashion house or the fashion designer and not to sell myself. Some people are very strict on the standard criteria for catwalk models. You are only a model if you meet the requirements in stricto sensu. For these people, these requirements (like 90-60-90 for example) made on the model’s body are fair. Second, there are those who see the need to kill two birds with one stone: to sell both the creation and oneself in a single fashion show. These mannequins also claim compliance with standard requirements. Third, there is another category that believes that fashion should be more equitable and as inclusive as possible. For the latter, talent should be prioritized over physical criteria.

### **Fashion Requirements That Remain Static**

The requirements on the model’s body are set by fashion producers and designers to mark a considerable gap between an ordinary body and a fashion-manufactured body. Wanting to enter the world of modeling means, first of all, refusing any autonomy over your body in order

to cling to the values demanded by fashion designers. Models who adhere to these dynamic values (Magnan-Mac Kay, 2011), thus assume their choice and work to keep the brand. Lahn, Tani, Mill and Malla are in fact those for whom the requirements and criteria must be respected to the letter and one must remain within the predefined framework of modeling. These women think they are made to sell the work of fashion designers.

### **Play a double game!**

Some models believe that their job cannot just be about selling others without being able to sell themselves. The catwalk and fashion photographer’s carpet are the main places to sell the work of fashion designers, but that doesn’t stop you from taking advantage of these spaces to sell yourself as well. “My very first fashion show was in Pernier. There was a large audience, I took the opportunity to show off my talent as a model. Everyone only looked at me on the catwalk, even after the parade people stared at me. That’s where people discovered my talent and it benefited my career,” says Peter, 27. As for Lia, she expressed herself in very simple and precise words about her passage on a catwalk: “I will never go unnoticed on a catwalk. The drama that I do on the catwalk, the public will not be able to fail to notice me (Lia, 22 years old).” They believe that the physical demands are indisputable since they are necessary for the prestige of the profession; however, they need to show that they can please the spectators. These models even think that they can exist outside of the haute couture work that does their hair, by highlighting their bodies. This category brings together Peter, Lus, Dona, Dranie, Lia and Mas.

### **Protesting Demands on the Body**

“There are details about our physique that we cannot change, just as we did not choose to have them too,” contests Med (29 years old). Among these details, she cited size. This is because thanks to weight loss or cosmetic surgery, we can lose weight and become thin, but we cannot do it to get the size, except, of course, that with certain physical exercises, we could take up to six (6) centimeters longer. But is this enough? It is this point of view that Nanona, Sade, Styne and Med

defend. They believe that these requirements do not meet the criteria for inclusion of certain social groups. “[...], I believe that there are people who really have too much to offer to restrict the framework to such a level because you must have a minimum size, thinness, etc. [...], I think the restrictions go well beyond physical characteristics. There are people who want to give everything for fashion, but who are limited because they do not meet the requirements” Sade (26 years old). These young people are pleading in favor of a more inclusive approach aimed at integrating everyone into fashion, because it is a space that allows the individual to invent themselves.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that modeling work has two meanings. For some, it is a profession in which practitioners can earn their dream living. For others, it is a hobby for people who are passionate about art. We understood, in the light of individual identity (Dubar, 2000; Lenclud, 2008; Kauffman, 1999), that the identity construction of models passes through three channels: professional experience, discourse and finally the representation of their future as a model. Thus, this is the answer to our research question: What are the mechanisms of identity construction among Haitian models?

There is a group of respondents who want modeling to keep its essence, what it was created for, the mobile medium of the fashion designer. These people believe that the work of fashion houses and designers deserves to be well represented on the catwalks. These respondents think that the requirements are imposed by fashion designers, the shows are organized by fashion houses and designers and to promote their work. Keeping the essence means keeping the initial ideal.

Other people believe that, on the contrary, fashion shows should be beneficial for all stakeholders, namely designers and fashion houses, models, and fashion photographers. These people agree that models should no longer remain in the shadows in fashion shows, they should instead come out of their shell and show their talent. Just as photographers can take the opportunity

to sell their work and creation with each photo taken, the model must be seen as an artist who can showcase their talents. A third category claims a free hand by the organizers on the requirements imposed (height, weight, diet) on the model’s body. She believes that the requirements do not consider certain details which are beyond the control of the person in question. The requirements sometimes constitute a barrier and a form of discrimination against short people.

The results of the study allowed us to categorize the construction of models’ identities into three groups: The first group wishes to keep the essence of modeling work: selling the creation of fashion houses on the catwalk while remaining anonymous. The second group believes that this moment is over, the model can no longer remain insignificant on the catwalk, he must come forward and show his creativity in public. The third group demands a more inclusive fashion with less rigor on the demands of the body.

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