Historically, beauty in America has been depicted with Caucasian women personifying Caucasian ideals. In accordance with this imagery, American fashion models have been predominately Caucasian as well. Before World War II, African American women found that they were portrayed negatively and stereotypically in mainstream media. These problematic images were challenged when African American women began to enter fashion modeling, first in race-specific magazines like Ebony and then in the mainstream press, which assisted in the acceptance of alternative ideals of beauty. African American women have now been a part of the American fashion model industry since the Postwar Era, when an increase in African American buying power and an overall change in race and gendered images brought new opportunities. African American models began to use their modeling talent as a tool for racial advancement and uplift. Although many challenges to racial stereotypes and imagery have been made since then, the continued hegemonic representations of beauty seem to have prevented African American models from fully integrating into the American fashion industry.

The purpose of this research was to compare and contrast the biographical background, physical characteristics, and post-modeling contributions to society made by African American fashion models who were pioneers in the American fashion industry, beginning with Ophelia Devore who, after working as a Caucasian model, opened a modeling agency for African Americans in 1946. Women like Dorothea Towles, Sara Lou Harris, Naomi Sims, and Veronica Webb were established as pioneers because they were the first of their race to accomplish
milestones in the fashion industry, such as modeling in Paris, appearing in a national advertisements or on the cover of national fashion and women’s magazines, and representing a major cosmetics company. These and other specific African American models featured in mainstream fashion outlets were also utilized to examine beauty and image ideals at various times throughout the twentieth century. The physical characteristics of these pioneering African American models were compared to and contrasted with prominent Caucasian models of the time to identify overlapping and diverging beauty standards. Primary resources including cover images and fashion photographs were used, along with secondary sources of biographies and scholarly articles related to African American models and beauty. Sources pertaining to modeling in general were also explored to add depth to content.

Research has determined that though a few African American models have achieved widespread acceptance in mainstream society, fashion modeling largely remains a segregated industry. Successful African American models have often used their accomplishments as a platform to promote racial equality and in return have created organizations with which to do so. This presentation intends to draw attention to those models in order to highlight the contributions they have made to the fashion industry, the African American community, and American society.

3 McAndrew, “Selling Black Beauty”.
4 “All Ages and Sizes Attend School to Take Courses,” Ebony, September 1, 1950, 74-76.