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Perspectives on Diversity and Inclusion in the Fashion Industry

Prospettive sulla diversità e l'inclusione nell'industria della moda

Abstract

Despite an increase in awareness about topics like diversity and inclusion in the fashion industry, many organizations managing fashion brands still confuse these two terms. This article addresses historical, social, communicational and managerial perspectives to discuss the challenges that organizations face in regards to diversity and inclusion in the fashion industry. The article starts by addressing how the fashion industry was historically based on exclusion and privilege, operating from a basic human need for belonging, and establishing normative behaviours. Although year 2018 was considered "the year of diversity" by fashion media, looking at the quantitative analyses of plus-size, multiracial, fifty-plus or transgender identity representation between 2018 and 2021, the numbers do not support this claim. What is missing is a radical mindset shift from a binary perspective to a spectrum-based understanding. The key concepts relevant to the discussion are applied to the investigation of concrete brands, products and campaigns within the industry. The scope covers four examples of best practices in ready-to-wear brands, social entrepreneurship and bottom-up activism. Special attention is placed on brands and how their products are opening a new stage for inclusion of diverse body types and non-conforming gender identities. Finally, the focus shifts to the business case for inclusion, covering the systemic and structural changes needed inside an organization in order to create a culture of inclusion.

Keywords: inclusion, diversity, binary thinking, intersectionality, gender-inclusive, inclusive fashion

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Abstract

Nonostante un aumento della consapevolezza su argomenti come diversità e inclusione nell'industria della moda, sono ancora molti quei brand che confondono questi due termini. Il saggio prende in esame le prospettive storiche, sociali, comunicative e manageriali per discutere le sfide che i brand devono affrontare quando si parla di diversità e inclusione nel settore della moda. Lo scopo è definire e chiarire i concetti chiave di diversità e inclusione e fornire esempi di come i marchi di moda li stiano integrando nelle loro attività. L'articolo inizia affrontando come l'industria della moda sia stata storicamente basata sull'esclusione e sul privilegio. Sebbene l'anno 2018 sia stato considerato "l'anno della diversità" dai media della moda, le analisi quantitative della rappresentazione dell'identità plus size, multirazziale o transgender tra il 2018 e il 2021 non supportano tale affermazione. Ciò che manca è un radicale cambiamento di mentalità. Le persone tendono a pensare in termini binari, mentre una prospettiva inclusiva non vede confini ma una transizione fluida che collega e unisce gli opposti. Dopo l'analisi dei concetti chiave rilevanti per la discussione, questi vengono applicati allo studio di brand e prodotti del settore moda. Il saggio prende in esame quattro esempi di buone pratiche nei marchi di prêt-à-porter. Infine, si parlerà di quei cambiamenti strutturali necessari all'interno di un'organizzazione al fine di creare una cultura dell'inclusione.

Parole chiave: inclusione, diversità, pensiero binario, intersezionalità, genere inclusivo, moda inclusiva

Exclusive Origins of the Fashion Industry

The first signs of clothing date back to 34,000 years ago, when prehistoric civilizations already collected flax fibres to sew the skins that would protect them from inclement weather (Tejada, 2020). In addition to protecting against the weather, clothing quickly stood out for its symbolic prominence, used to represent rank or religious values (Tejada, 2020). The communicative function has endured over time and, to this day, continues to be used to express cultural values of a religious, political, hierarchical, and distinctive nature (Tejada, 2020), representing the identity of each person and the group which it is part of (Tejada, 2020).

The fact that they wore clothing in the Palaeolithic era does not mean that fashion existed as such; it manifested itself much later. It was not until the sixteenth century, under the reign of Louis XIV, in France, that the fashion industry began to appear,

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showing itself as we understand it today. Garments sent messages to others, fulfilling a communicative function and facilitating the cataloguing of each individual under labels that would determine their rank within society, even going as far as to legislate on who was allowed to wear each garment. Sumptuary Laws determined who could wear certain clothes, fabrics and/or colours, limiting some, for example, to be worn only by nobility (Zambrini, 2010).

Louis XIV, also known as the Sun King, fostered the textile industry, making France a European benchmark for fashion. He used the Palace of Versailles as a showcase (Mitford, 1966) where pompous costumes were displayed, restricted to be worn by nobility, promoting «fashion as a symbol of social ostentation and luxury in seventeenth-century France» (Antúnez 2017, p.1). The court of Versailles was an example for fashion throughout Europe, setting the roots of modern industry in the 1670s in Paris, where magazines and boutiques appeared promoting the change of garments according to season.

Louis XIV imposed restrictions on the wearing of fabrics and ornaments, such as gold and silver trimmings, reserved for princes of royal blood and those with the permission of the King. During his reign, jewellery became an important part of clothing, granting status to wearers and separating them from the poorer classes. «Louis XIV was the first to understand that diamonds could convey better than anything else that their owner was the richest and most powerful ruler in the world» (Antúnez 2017, p.13). In addition, the latest models were sent to other European courts on a monthly basis, promoting the country as a fashion centre.

This conversion of fashion fostered by Luis XIV was decisive in discrimination by class, since it was designed with the intention of differentiating social groups through the exclusivity provided by the wearing of expensive fabrics (Antúnez, 2017). In the second half of the seventeenth century, "costume laws" were imposed, consisting of regulations

that described what fabrics should be exclusively worn by the court, or prohibitions such as those banning the wearing of precious stones by the bourgeoisie.

The king even standardized the people closest to him by means of an exclusive patented garment, the *justaucorps à brevet* − a blue moiré overcoat, certified by a patent (Giorgi, 2016) confirming the right to wear it − used to grant distinction and power to those who wore it. The poet Balzac also spoke of this: «Louis XIV, gave his favourites a proof of privilege; by means of a patent, he allowed them to wear a highly decorated blue jacket» (Antúnez 2017, p.32).«The combination of jacket-pants-shirt-tie-stockings-high heels had become a uniform for the men of the court» (Antúnez 2017, p.35), along with jewels, gold buttons, silver and diamonds, silver buckles, or rings with precious stones. In addition, ankle-boot shoes stood out for their role (Antúnez, 2017).   The king entrusted these to Nicolas Lestage, who made them with red heels − symbolizing regeneration, power, and divinity (Antúnez, 2017) − only for the king and those nearest (Riello, 2006 in de la Peña, 2018). Therefore, red heels became a symbol of social status (Dejean, 2008 in Antúnez, 2017). Those allowed to wear red high-heel shoes boasted special influence, rights, advantages, and privileges. They were the in-crowd, differentiated from the rest of the members of the royal court.

For Louis XIV, the act of dressing was a social mechanism, used to reaffirm the identity of those who made up the court of Versailles (Antúnez, 2017). This function has persisted, becoming part of our culture and way of understanding fashion. The fashion industry, as we know it, has its origins in exclusion.

The Burden of Normative Social Influence

Why has the fashion industry evolved so slowly towards the representation of diversity and the inclusion of minority groups? Why has there not been a substantial change in

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society towards inclusion? Part of the answers to these questions can be found in social psychology and established social norms.

Social norms are rules − both implicit and explicit (Akert et al., 2010) − that exert a normative social influence: in order to be liked and accepted, individuals conform to what the group dictates (Maxwell, 2002 in Akert et al., 2010). To achieve this acceptance, they can be driven to carry out dangerous activities, beyond common sense, or even which they do not feel identified with, in order to feel included. Those members of the group who do not conform to these rules, will be perceived as different, difficult, and even deviant, risking being ridiculed, punished and even completely rejected by other participants of the group (James & Olson, 2000; Kruglanski & Webster, 1991; Levine, 1989; Miller & Anderson, 1979 in Akert et al., 2010).

Following social norms to avoid being considered an "outsider" can be fatal among young and adult people, leading some to depression, eating disorders, and even suicide. Let us remember the corset, imposed on women and compressing their organs for centuries, while compromising their health and quality of life. This also applies to other restrictive situations related to fashion choices and the expression of one's identity. For example, the way Afro-descendant people comb their hair to go to work, could lead them to lose their job or receive pressure from their superiors and teasing by their colleagues, who may consider their natural hair to be unprofessional. Doing their hair with braids or headscarves, which is part of their tradition, could also be considered unacceptable at work, leading to social pressure, prevention of promotion, and other forms of discrimination, to the point where it may become necessary to wear a wig or perform abusive treatments to their hair in order for it to be straight; thus, conforming to the normative standard.

Fashion is a clear example of normative social influence. Through fashion icons represented both on catwalks and advertising campaigns, as well as through collaborations with influencers, unreal bodies are exposed, surrounding them with an almost divine aura, making many people, mainly women, feel frustrated at not being able to reach that super-normative ideal proposed by society. This imposition of regulations may have fatal consequences for women and girls by causing different psychological disorders, such as eating disorders, but also depression, low self-esteem, etc. (Akert et al., 2010). In 2000 the American Anorexia and Bulimia Association published a study showing that one third of the girls between the ages of 12 and 13 were actively trying to lose weight (Ellin, 2000 in Akert et al., 2010).

The effects of normative social influence have hindered a shift towards the inclusion of diverse body types, different beauty standards, and non-conforming gender expression, slowing down their incorporation into mainstream fashion. Human beings crave the feeling of belonging and will instinctively avoid behaviours that could potentially lead to being excluded. They will refrain from including or relating with other people due to fear of being "othered" themselves in the process.

Diversity does not guarantee inclusion

Understanding that diversity does not imply inclusion is the first condition needed to make a shift towards a more inclusive fashion industry. Diversity is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as the condition of having or being composed of differing elements or qualities. During the last decade, the term has been increasingly used in the fashion industry. It can be found in marketing campaigns, sustainability reports, press releases, and mission statements. Some brands use "diversity" and "inclusion" as synonyms even though they have different meanings. While diversity is concerned with managing and recognising the value of differences, inclusion is concerned with the processes that incorporate differences and thereby help to realise their value (Oswick & Noon, 2012).

According to Skliar (2007), it seems that the mere mention of the term diversity grants «democratic, political, cultural and pedagogical virtue, impossible to be put under suspicion» (Skliar 2007, p.2), and is being used to mask terms such as disability, poverty, or inequality. What is even worse, it is being used as a substitute for inclusion and, even though physically heterogeneous groups are being attained, the sociocultural reality of those bodies is being omitted. We understand the term diversity as what refers to "the other" from our Eurocentric point of view, that usually refers to race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, religion, disability, body norms, among others. When we talk about diversity, we do so by referring to the fact that «the others» are diverse, creating an unbreakable dichotomy between «us» and «them» (Skliar, 2007). This binary opposition centres on the differences and creates an illusion of diversity with an absence of inclusion.

For Pless & Maak (2004), an organization that copes with diversity should recognize difference while looking for the common bond. The authors include participation, respect and value in their definition of inclusion:

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A culture of inclusion is an organizational environment that allows people with multiple backgrounds, mindsets, and ways of thinking to work effectively together and to perform to their highest potential in order to achieve organizational objectives based on sound principles. In such an environment, different voices are respected and heard, diverse viewpoints, perspectives, and approaches are valued, and everyone is encouraged to make a unique and meaningful contribution (Pless & Maak, 2004, p. 130–131).

An inclusive organization recognizes and values differences, considering all perspectives as legitimate, integrating them in decision-making and problem-solving processes, granting them an active role in the shaping of culture and the fostering of creativity and innovation, therefore adding value to the organization.

The way in which diversity is expressed and experienced inside an organization must also be taken into account. For a fashion brand to be inclusive, the representation of different gender identities, abilities, ethnic groups, and ages in its external communications, needs to be paired with the existence and participation of these groups inside the organization. Without a deeper inclusion of the "other" into the system, diversity marketing is just colourful makeup: a cosmetic illusion.

Binary, spectral, and intersectional thinking

After understanding the difference between diversity and inclusion, a radical shift needs to take place, one that requires a change in the way we think of differences, moving from binary to spectral thinking. Binary thinking is linear and one dimensional. It makes absolute classifications or choices between two extreme opposites. The human brain is propense to polarization. It is wired this way due to a primal mechanism that keeps us safe from danger through quick, unconscious discrimination triggered by the amygdala (Wood & Petriglieri, 2005). This part of the brain quickly classifies objects, people, and stimuli as either good or bad, safe or unsafe, friend or foe, triggering a response before we can figure out what is going on in a logical way. Whereas, rational recognition is produced in the cerebral cortex, which is slower. Our brain is wired to make fast, emotional judgements, labelling objects (and people) as good or bad before we can understand them. This is the origin of our tendency to quickly judge people as bad or dangerous simply because they are different to us.

Apart from the unconscious polarization performed by the brain, there are also additional learnings that reside in the collective imaginary due to growing up in a colonial society, where there is racism and other forms of social discrimination. A more nuanced way of thinking is needed, allowing for options between opposed categories. There is a need to change the conception of the "other" as a potential threat and start thinking in terms of "us". Physical and identity differences should not create a social gap that separates and prevents collaboration.

Binary thinking is necessary in risky situations, when our life is in danger, and a quick reaction is called for. It is connected to the "fight or flight" response. It will be useful if we encounter a bear in the wild, but it is less so if we are socializing with other people and it prevents us from looking beyond our differences. Fashion and self-expression across different cultures, age groups, and lifestyles can trigger quick, unconscious judgements. People are quick to categorize others by the way they look, recurring to dichotomies such as white-black, beautiful-ugly, thin-fat, rich-poor, in-out, young-old, man-woman. According to Wood & Petriglieri (2005) the irrational and rational parts of the brain can engage in dialogue, when the tension generated by encounters with the unknown (diversity) stimulates a more sophisticated exploration of the environment. If the emotional reactions are managed consciously, tension can be considered an opportunity for progress, learning, and development.

Extreme opposites are, in fact, part of a continuum, and can be situated within a spectrum. Age is a good example of how apparent dichotomies are part of the same continuum. Every person, during their lifetime, is in a constant transit from young to old. The same happens with gender identification. A toddler, for example, is not aware of gender differences. We could say that all young children are, up to a certain age, gender-neutral, but this also applies to older children and adults who define themselves as gender-fluid. They feel comfortable inhabiting the space in between gender categories. They transit the linear difference between manhood and womanhood, transforming separate opposites into a spectrum that connects them. There are also gender non-conforming people who place themselves outside the man-woman dichotomy altogether. They do not transit between poles but subtract themselves from the linear equation of gender. These alternative gender expressions have always existed and have become more visible over the last few years. The new generations are much more fluid and questioning of assumptions, forcing the fashion industry to reconsider whether a sharp differentiation between men's and women's clothing is actually needed in retail or department stores.

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For Johansen (2020), categories coerce, caging people and trivialising the way they perceive each other, distancing them from the understanding of a broader perspective because they stereotype due to lack of context. Categories lead towards «false certainty and away from clarity». Looking at opposites from a multidimensional perspective can help to find ways in which different people may connect to each other. This requires shifting from binary to spectral thinking. Figure 2 shows the difference between binary thinking, represented on the left by two switches (on/off), and spectral thinking, represented by volume sliders on the right.
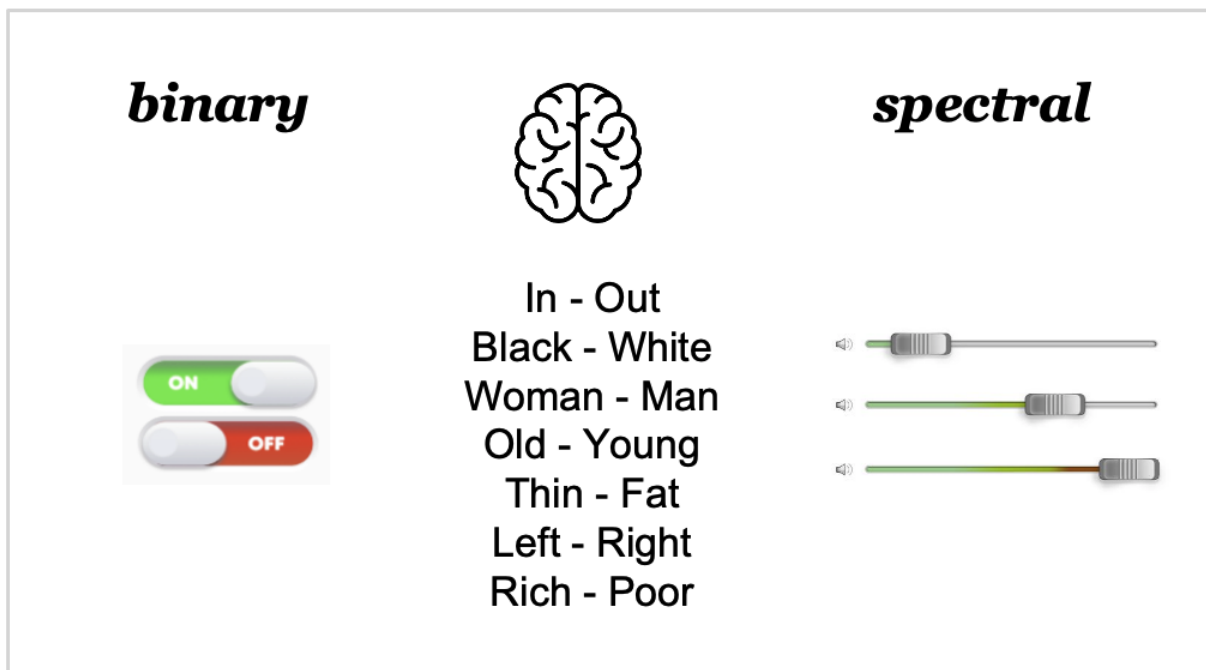
Figure 2. Illustration of binary thinking versus spectral thinking.

Spectral thinking fosters empathy by acknowledging the space that separates two opposite categories. Johansen (2020) proposes a spectrum-based approach aimed at detecting patterns across gradients of possibility, dropping categories, and looking outside, across, beyond or without them altogether. Hidden commonalities can be revealed by encouraging nuances and providing context beyond labels. Categories will continue to exist, but they will be less coercive. Johansen proposes a type of spectral thinking that allows for depolarising strategic conversations, opening a range of alternatives beyond binary choices.

Humans are complex beings that cannot be placed in one-dimensional categories. Different categories and levels of discrimination intersect, coexist, and overlap within a single person. Kimberly Crenshaw (1989) observed that when talking about

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discrimination, a single dominant approach always stands out and tends to focus on a single axis. Crenshaw identified that this erased black women from the debate, as they suffered double discrimination: sexual, because they are women, and racial, because they are black. The origin of the discrimination they suffered was always reduced to belonging either to the black group or to the female group, but there was no concern for the specific experiences of black women who lived under two intersecting discriminations (Crenshaw, 1989). For Crenshaw (1989) the sum of racism and sexism is not enough to address the forms of discrimination suffered by black women. Crenshaw defines intersectionality as «a perspective that reveals how race, gender and social class interact to shape the multiple dimensions that make up the experiences of non-Western women» (Solé et al. 2008, p.22). In addition to experiencing the glass ceiling because of being a woman, a black woman will have other barriers besides what a white woman already encounters during her professional life.

For a casting agent, it is easy to add a multiracial transgender model in a fashion show for the benefit of the brand's image. But, is the idealized representation of transgender women on the catwalk making a contribution to reduce the violence that transgender people face on the streets and inside their communities on a daily basis? Diversity marketing is an easy win that brings immediate benefits to the brands, but without sustained inclusion efforts it does not generate a systemic change in the fashion industry nor a meaningful one for the underrepresented communities themselves. This is not to say that the representation of diverse identities in fashion campaigns is not necessary. It should not be the result of an advertisement tactic. Both sides of a partnership should have the same stakes when collaborating. Too often organizations neglect considering the costs and benefits for the community they are partnering with (Srinivas et al, 2015). Binary thinking flattens complex experiences; it perpetuates the "us" and "them" mentality by focusing on differences and stereotyping, homogenizing at best. A broader perspective that considers multiple dimensions and spectrums rather than exclusive categories is needed, one that is capable of taking into account different dimensions of a person, being able to understand the complexities of discrimination and exclusion. In this sense, both intersectionality and spectral thinking are necessary to nuance binary thinking. An intersectional perspective is capable of taking into account multiple levels of discrimination and exclusion, whereas spectral thinking conceives opposed categories as two extremes of the same continuum, allowing a range of connection between apparent opposites.

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A closer look at the representation of diversity in Fashion Weeks

2018 was considered "the year of diversity" by various media in the fashion industry, but statistics indicate that this slogan does not meet reality. Transgender, over-fifty, and plus-size models were less than 2% of all who walked on the runways, 66% of which were white models. The figures did not improve considerably if we analyse the data provided by «The Fashion Spot» (n.d.) between 2018 and 2021. Every year, this platform makes several reports on the representativeness of diverse bodies in the fashion industry, based on the models hired at fashion weeks in New York, London, Paris and Milan. To carry out this analysis, it is important to consider the data in percentages and not in absolute numbers, since in 2021 the number of participating models was drastically reduced due to the pandemic: In 2018, «The Fashion Spot» counted 8,258 models, while in 2021 the figure fell to 1,641. The table below contains the data of these reports converted into percentages.

Table 1. Representation of diversity according to the Diversity reports between 2018 and 2021 as reported by «The Fashion Spot»

Model category	Season and year		Growth
	Spring 2018	Fall 2021	Growth
People of colour	30.2%	43%	12.8%
Plus-size	1.12%	1.15%	0.03%
Transgender and non-binary	0.59%	0.73%	0.14%
50 years old or over	0.32%	0.97%	0.65%

Race, size, gender and age breakdown

Fall 2021 was the most racially diverse season recorded to date, with 43% multiracial models on the runways in New York, London, Paris and Milan combined. After analysing 266 shows where 8,258 models appeared, we may see that in the spring of 2018, 30.2% were multiracial women, which shows a 6.9% increase compared to autumn 2016. This shows a truly positive trend towards racial diversity: for the first time in history, in 2018, each show included at least two multiracial models, in contrast to 2017, the first time that all the shows had, at least, one.

By autumn 2021, only 1.15% of the total were plus-size models, only a 0.03% increase since 2018. Plus-size models are totally underrepresented on the catwalks of New York, London, Milan and Paris. Furthermore, this 1.15% is distributed only among a few brands, which means that the vast majority of brands do not have any plus-size models.

In 2018, the representation of transgender/non-binary models was less than 1%. Despite being a significantly low number, 2018 broke the diversity record in this category. In 2021 the figures remain below 1%. The fact that gender diversity began to appear on the catwalks is not only due to an increase in awareness and brands' desire to provide support to these communities, but also to the success of model Teddy Quinlivan − discovered by the creative director of *Louis Vuitton*, Nicolas Ghesquière − who promoted the emergence of non-cisgender people due to her popularity.

In the spring of 2018, a record was broken once again, this time in the category of models over fifty years of age. The four cities analysed had, at least, three models over fifty (50), but New York stood out with ten (10). Despite being a record, the figure remains extremely low, at 0.32% of the total. In 2021, it increased to 0.97%. The low representation of older women, below 1%, shows how strong ageism is within the fashion industry.

Intersectionality and lack of representation

It should be noted that, as non-normative models begin to appear on the catwalks, categories begin to intersect with each other: the most acclaimed plus-size model, Jocelyn Corona, is also a Latin American person born in Mexico. When several categories, which have been minorities to date, begin to intersect, we can perceive diversity that is truly representative of society. In this sense, it is also worth mentioning that in 2018, out of forty-nine (49) trans-gender or non-binary models that, ten (10) were multiracial, and one of them, Sophia Lamar, was over fifty years old.

Although little by little, plus-size, over-fifty, transgender and/or non-binary models are beginning to find their place in fashion shows, we are far from reaching a real representation of the diversity that exists in our society. None of the categories mentioned so far, except that of race, exceeds even 1.50% representation, and the increase between year 2018 and 2021 is negligible. It is important for the fashion industry to make some space, on and off the catwalk, for diverse people. Furthermore, it is extremely important to represent diverse types of beauty standards, as opposed to homogenization and stereotyping. If the only identities we see represented in the fashion industry fit the norm

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of the top model, women will continue to consider that as being the standard. Then, trans, non-binary, fifty-plus and plus-size people will still feel the need to conform to a beauty norm in order to be accepted.

In the next section, there are some examples set by women managing companies that have taken the initiative to represent a wider type of beauty in their campaigns. They also develop services, products or programs aimed to satisfy the specific needs of diverse identities and non-normative bodies, providing them with visibility within an industry which they were invisible to, or underrepresented in. These examples touch upon aspects mentioned earlier, like normalizing without stereotyping, and responding to the needs of people who experience multiple layers of exclusion.

Inclusive Sizing: Universal Standard and #FatAtFashionWeek

*Universal Standard i*s a brand with a bold statement: it claims to be the world's most size-inclusive brand, offering a broad size range from 00 to 40 that covers every size. What is interesting about this company is that it does not use a single standard model and then size proportionally, like most fashion brands do. It uses at least eleven (11) fit models to develop the sizing of its collections, because people don't grow tall and wide to the same extent or proportionally. Instead of numerical calculations and standard grading, it uses real people and a diverse model base in order to fit everybody, every size and gender identity. It provides a detailed size-chart with information on the garment's fit on different types of bodies. As reported by Segran (2017) for «Fast Company»*,* the founders of the brand aimed at helping plus-size women who feel anxious about their weight issues when buying clothes, disassociating from their bodies and making the wrong size choices because they are afraid of gaining more weight or are planning to lose it. They don't want to invest in costly garments because they plan to wear them briefly. Or they may also buy clothes that are too small for them thinking they will be losing weight in the short term. To remove the size issue from the equation, the founders, Alex Waldman and Polina Veksler, created a program called *Fit Liberty*, which allows size exchanges up to one year after purchase. If a customer's size changes within that time frame, they will send the item in the new size free of charge and donate the returned items to charity. With this program, *Universal Standard i*s addressing the generalised assumption in the fashion industry that plus-size women only buy discount clothing either because they do not have money, or they do not want to spend it on clothing.

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Fashion activist Kellie Brown invented the hashtag *#FatAtFashionWeek* to call out the fashion industry for not serving the needs of plus-size people, and to raise awareness. The hashtag started being used by those attending fashion weeks around the globe. To date, it's been posted more than four thousand times on *Instagram*. Kellie Brown wanted higher visibility of plus-size people in fashion events and, as a consumer, struggled to find stylish quality garments. «The size of your body doesn't disable your understanding of colour, proportions, and taste, but the industry doesn't make us a priority» (Brown, 2019), she commented in an interview with «TeenVogue». The fashion industry assumes that plus-size women want to hide behind their clothes and are ashamed of their body size. She invented this hashtag to challenge an industry that was making big bodies invisible through lack of representation on catwalks, and by not including larger sizes in their collections. The hashtag started a movement that served as a reminder of the work and contributions of plus-size women within the industry.

The bottom-up activism of Kellie Brown and the inclusive sizing strategy of *Universal Standard* are contributing to reducing shame by empowering and changing the narrative of plus-size bodies in fashion communications. Both include empowered, happy and fashionable women in their platforms. Figure 3 shows *Universal Standard* customers, representing a broad spectrum of women in a non-stereotypical way, embodying the diversity of womanhood as a wide spectrum of possibilities, combining expression of race, age, body types, physical abilities, and gender identity.

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Figure 3. *Universal Standard's* Denim by US collection. Copyright by *Universal Standard.*

Empowering unmentionables

*Laura's Under There i*s a social enterprise that produces unique, size-inclusive, upcycled underwear. This brand provides custom underwear made from upcycled second-hand fabrics found in thrift stores. For every pair of underwear sold, another is donated to homeless people living in shelters. It operates in Winnipeg, Canada and collaborates with one of the region's biggest clothing services for homeless people. Its turnaround production time is two to three weeks, and production is on demand, which is a sustainable way that aligns to the slow fashion movement.

Its founder, Laura Everett, sees poverty from an intersectional perspective where race, class and sexuality overlap. She declares to stand against racism, classism, colonialism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, ableism and fascism. The brand aims to raise awareness and generate dialogue in opposition to oppression and poverty. On its website, Everett explains the brand's mission:

> Through utilizing a "get one, give one" model in which a pair of underwear is donated to an organization in need each time a pair is sold, we endeavour to do our part in destabilizing the failing model of late capitalism upon which the present economy is based. We further commit to fostering personal connections with the organizations with which we partner, as we believe the work of true justice cannot be done separately from that of relationship-building. (Everett, 2020).

For its founder, clothing and especially undergarments are crucial. Although people avoid talking about them and some even refer to underwear as "unmentionables", for Laura, underwear empowers people. It is a vehicle through which individuals can claim dignity and safety. The creative term "genderful" is used to define their product, as a way to highlight inclusiveness instead of using the usual term "genderless", an adjective that implies subtraction (CBC News, 2019). Their marketing imagery is non-stereotypical and advocates for unconventional standards of beauty. The images shared by the brand on its website and social media show real people who are comfortable in their skin, content to be who they are. Its photographic images could be described as body-positive. The language used in its communications is inclusive of gender identities, sexualities, and race. Figure 4 shows an example of the body-positive style of the brand's imagery.

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Figure 4. Image from the website of *Laura's Under There*. Copyright: *Laura's Under There*. (Source: https://www.laurasunderthere.com)

Another brand that operates in the same sector and also applies an intersectional approach to its product development is *Slick Chicks.* This brand produces adaptable garments for all body types, including women with different physical abilities that experience challenges when getting dressed while sitting or lying. These challenges may be temporary, for example, when a woman gives birth by undergoing a C-section delivery; or long-term due to permanent disability. In both cases, these women experience discrimination on multiple levels: for being women, having different body types and different physical abilities. In the fashion industry, women with impaired mobility are often invisible and underrepresented. Furthermore, their specific dressing needs are not considered by designers when producing undergarment lines. One of the brand's website messages reads: «You adapt to life, let us adapt to you» (Slick Chicks, 2021). It developed and patented underwear with side fasteners so that people wearing it can seamlessly transition in and out of the garment regardless of their physical condition. Just like with the messaging and imagery of *Laura's Under There, Slick Chick* uses straightforward and positive messaging. Its photographic images represent confident women with diverse body types. Figure 5 shows an example of the images used in its site that contribute to the

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fair representation of different abilities using non-stereotypical models and exhibiting body hair, usually retouched or censored in standard intimate clothing marketing campaigns.   With its adaptable undergarments and realistic representation of diverse women, *Slick Chicks* promotes adaptability, independence and confidence for women that often feel excluded by the clothing industry and society at large.

Figure 5. Example of non-stereotypical representation of women. Copyright: *Beyond Studios* for *Slick Chicks.* (Source: https://slickchicksonline.com)

What's Next: From the Catwalk to the Boardroom

Before making efforts to communicate diversity externally, organizations need to foster a culture of inclusion internally. Companies should address and contribute to solve the struggles of people with multiple levels of exclusion, considering overlapping factors that negate the participation of certain identities inside of the organization. Generally, the focus is on gender and ethnic diversity, but diversity is multivariant. It also includes other factors like sexual orientation, educational or socio-economic background, and diversity of thought (neurodiversity). The representation of diversity should be reflected on all levels of the organization including positions of leadership and power where decisions are being made.

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According to research by Ferdman and Deane (2013), effective leaders and successful organizations incorporate different types of diversity and foster inclusion as core elements to their leadership development and workforce engagement processes. There are many practices that an organization can adopt to foster a culture of inclusion. For the authors, having a clear approach towards inclusion is key, which must be translated into strategies, policies, and practices that can be evaluated and measured. These practices must be performed both individually and systemically to support an inclusive culture and a feeling of inclusion. The authors recommend choosing key dimensions of inclusion relevant to the organization and defining how they will be addressed by specific systems within the organization. They propose a framework with seventeen dimensions that intersect to assess the degree and depth of diversity and inclusion. These are grouped in two categories: the dimensions of the organization and the dimensions of inclusion. Figure 6 illustrates these dimensions and how they can be combined to assess and plan an inclusion strategy customised to the context and needs of each particular organization.

Dimensions of Inclusion	Dimensions of the Organization									
	Socialization	Career planning	Recruitment, selection, promotion	Training & education	Performance appraisal	Reward systems	Work/life policies & practices	Communication	Measurement	Structural & informal integration
Openness										
Representation and voice										
Climate										
Fairness										
Leadership & commitment										
Continuous improvement										
Social responsibility										

Figure 6. Organizational-Level Inclusion Assessment Matrix. Source: Adapted from Ferdman, Brody, Cooper, Jeffcoat, and Le, 1995, Inclusion Assessment Matrix, unpublished document, California School of Professional Psychology, San Diego, CA.

Inclusion is a sustained and company-wide effort that needs to be embedded in the core values and vision of an organization. For Yingling (2020), it is a process that requires

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some collective efforts. Leaders and decision makers must be willing to listen to different people, challenge belief systems, and question ideologies. Organizational performance improves with increased diversity and inclusion, but there are a myriad of challenges and issues that can arise through diversification and inclusion processes. According to the author, if organizational decision makers are not representative of the communities they claim to serve, then they are not serving them as they should.

Apart from the human and social justice aspect, there is also mounting evidence on the business case for diversity and inclusion. McKinsey (2020), has established a positive correlation between board diversity and financial outperformance. This was observed in their previous research but has now become statistically significant: companies whose boards are in the top quartile of gender diversity are 28% more likely than their peers to outperform financially. The same is true for gender diversity in executive teams: companies in the top quartile were 15% more likely to experience above-peer-average profitability than companies in the fourth quartile. The percentage increases when looking at ethnic and cultural diversity in executive teams with a 36% higher likelihood of outperformance for top quartile companies. Overall, McKinsey's report found that companies in the top-quartile for gender and ethnic diversity are 12% more likely to outperform other companies.

Culturally and cognitively diverse workforce will be more innovative. Research shows that diverse teams have a better ability to formulate and execute successful strategies (Reynolds & Lewis, 2017). Individuals who work in diverse and inclusive environments are 80% more likely to believe they belong to a high-performing organization (Yingling, 2020). Additionally, an organization that fosters a climate of inclusion will attract new talent, contributing to improving the performance of the organization further. These are just some examples of the latest research on the business case for diversity and inclusion that prove that it is not only the right thing to do on a social level, but is also profitable for the business. In the long term, increasing the feeling of inclusion and representing different aspects of diversity inside of an organization is essential for the well-being of its people and for the performance of the business. The representation of diversity in the catwalk or promotional events should be a result of an inclusive company culture, not a replacement.

Conclusion

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Companies, corporations and organizations in the fashion industry need to do better. There are inspiring examples and innovative approaches from start-ups and more established brands. Nevertheless, there is room for improvement at all levels. Mid-size companies and large conglomerates are still perpetuating stereotypes and operating from an exclusive perspective. Fashion weeks and marketing campaigns could contribute to broaden the standards of beauty, but a representation of less than 2% of transgender, multiracial or plus-sized models is not enough. Organizations need to develop meaningful partnerships with the communities they want to include in their fashion shows and communication campaigns. The incidental inclusion of underrepresented communities in marketing campaigns does not lead to a systemic change. In order to be effective, representation must be fair, realistic and heterogeneous, opposing normative standards of beauty, gender and body types to reduce stigmatisation and discrimination. Representation must be paired with participation; all bodies, identities, and voices need to be heard, understood, respected, and validated. Inclusion must also be cultivated inside companies by hiring, listening to and valuing decisions made by diverse groups and individuals. Then, the alienated "other" becomes part of the corporate "us", changing the culture of an organization and by extension, the industry at large.

Acknowledgement

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Figure 1. Image with detail based on: Rigaud, Hyachinte. (1701) *Louis XIV in Coronation Robes* [Painting]. Wikimedia Commons. Retrieved August 19, 2021, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Louis_XIV_of_France.jpg

Figure 2. Illustration of binary thinking versus spectral thinking.

Figure 3. Image from *Universal Standard* website. (n.d.) Copyright by *Universal Standard*. Retrieved August 21, 2021, from *https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0838/4441/files/01-about-us-dt_1600x.jpg*

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Figure 5. [Image from *Slick Chicks'* website]. (n.d.) Retrieved August 28, 2021 from https://slickchicksonline.com/

Figure 6. Organizational-Level Inclusion Assessment Matrix. Source: Adapted from Ferdman, Brody, & Cooper, Jeffcoat, & Le, 1995, Inclusion Assessment Matrix, unpublished document, California School of Professional Psychology, San Diego, CA.

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