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Breaking barriers with disability inclusion: Brand activism as a catalyst for social sustainability in fashion

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1. Introduction

The world of fashion is a powerful force in shaping cultural norms, driving trends, and moulding consumer behaviours. In recent times, the concept of brand activism within the fashion sector has gained prominence, offering a platform to champion inclusivity and diversity issues (Park et al., 2022; Moorman, 2020). One key aspect of this movement is the pursuit of social sustainability that fosters a culture that is inclusive, equitable, and respects the dignity of all individuals (McCormick & Ram, 2022). The UN (2023) indicates that such social sustainability efforts aim to address issues related to social equality and justice irrespective of their background, abilities, or identities. One of the key manifestations of social sustainability efforts of activist fashion brands today is represented by portraying disability in advertising (Foster & Pettinicchio, 2022; Shelton & Waddell, 2021; Södergren et al., 2022). There are several examples of fashion brands involved in promoting social sustainability via featuring disabled models. For example, Victoria Secret signed up Sofia Jirau as the first model with Down's syndrome as part of their commitment to promote ableism (Stevens, 2022). Additionally, British Vogue launched a historic first for the magazines, a new edition highlighting disability justice, accessibility, equity, intersectionality

and pride (Bugel, 2023). The May 2023 edition is available in a Braille and audio version, making the magazine more accessible to many.

Brand activism is an emerging concept that operates at the intersection of culture, purpose, and society. It recognises that brands play a pivotal role as influential cultural entities with a responsibility to address and contribute to resolving pressing societal and political issues (Gambetti & Biraghi, 2023; Lee et al., 2023; Moorman, 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Sarkar (2018) defined brand activism as the act of publicly taking a stand on divisive social or political issues by a brand. In fashion, a central focus of this brand activism is to increase the representation of marginalised groups and to provide equal opportunities for all. The aim is to normalize the diversity of these groups in the socio-cultural milieu where they are embedded without diminishing their unique characteristics, but rather valorising them. Among these groups, individuals with disabilities have often found themselves excluded from the mainstream media and communications. Recent research conducted by Lloyds Bank discovered that a mere 0.06% of advertisements in the U.K. showcased individuals with disabilities, even though this group accounts for 20% of the country's population (Alexiou, 2021). Consequently, there exists a significant opportunity for fashion brands to actively participate in and champion diversity and inclusion within their brand campaigns.

However, achieving authentic disability inclusion is challenging. Fashion brands find themselves in the delicate position of advocating for diversity and inclusivity without isolating other segments of their audience. Furthermore, the fashion industry continues to uphold traditional beauty standards that prioritise thin, white and flawless-looking models (Joo & Wu, 2021). While there has been a growing body of research addressing various

aspects of diversity, such as women's empowerment (Michealidou et al., 2022; Shoenberger et al., 2020) and LGBTQAI+ representation (Li, 2022), there remains a notable gap in research focusing on genuine disability inclusion. An exception to this gap is the work of Qayyum et al. (2023), which illustrated how including people with disabilities can positively impact consumers' well-being. Foster and Pettinicchio (2021) contend that the utilisation of disabled individuals in advertising is extremely infrequent and often concealed, despite the significant economic potential they offer. When they do appear in advertisements, they are frequently perceived with sympathy or paired with the problematic notion of 'inspiration porn,' as highlighted by Grue (2016), which starkly contrasts with the aspirational image typically associated with the fashion industry.

Therefore, this chapter will critically illustrate through a number of short case studies, effective strategies for fashion marketers that have successfully embraced genuine disability inclusion. It will investigate the synergy between brand activism and authentic disability inclusion within the fashion sector, highlighting its potential to promote social sustainability by breaking down the barriers that have marginalised individuals with disabilities in the fashion landscape, and normalizing an inclusivity culture.

2. The role of brand activism in Fashion

2.1. The impact of brand activism on inclusivity and diversity

At first glance, fashion and activism might seem like two unrelated spheres, but they have been intertwined throughout history. Activism in the fashion industry can be traced back to movements such as the Women's Liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s (Hillman, 2013). This movement paved the way for challenging stereotypes, especially women's rights

and gender equality in fashion and beyond. Specifically, it empowered women to shape their own identities through clothing, sparking a transformative shift towards greater autonomy and self-expression. Today, such a movement is enhanced with the involvement of various fashion brands, fostering a climate of inclusivity and diversity that continues to evolve fashion into a platform for social change.

In addition to publicly taking stand on divisive social or political issues, brands are not just social actors but also "moral subjects" as articulated by Sibai et al. (2021). This moral subjectivity grants brands cultural authority, enabling them to initiate a variety of transformations across social, moral, legal, business, economic, political, and environmental spheres, both through communication and concrete actions. The overarching objective of these endeavours is the enhancement of society, as emphasised by Vredenburg et al. (2020).

As a result, fashion brands have been compelled to include models of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, body sizes, and gender identities in their advertising and runway shows. This not only serves the cause of social justice but also reflects the shifting attitudes of consumers who value brands that align with their values (McKinsey, 2022). However, despite increasing evidence of brand activism, consumers are increasingly polarised in their political views. This presents a challenge to fashion brands because taking a stance on divisive issues risks alienating customers. For example, in Nike's support of Black Lives Matter, while some applauded the brand's decision to support a political activist (racial issue), others shared videos of themselves burning their Nike apparel. Hence, the results are mixed.

2.2. Brief examples of activist movements – femvertising and body positivity

Studies investigating advertising representation within the fashion industry have primarily focused on key social aspects such as gender, age, body size, race, ethnicity, social class, social status, religion, and cultural identity (Arsel et al., 2022; Timke, 2019). For instance, significant attention has been given to "femvertising," a movement aimed at challenging the traditional female advertising stereotype, notably featuring thin models primarily of White Caucasian ethnicity, as explored by Sobande (2019) and Watson et al. (2015). Several fashion brands have seized these opportunities to signal their commitment to women's empowerment. For example, in Chanel's spring 2015 collection, the late Karl Lagerfeld envisioned a political protest with signs that read "Ladies First" and "History is Her Story." In a recent autumn/winter 2019 show, Dior presented three additional designs based on "Sisterhood is global," "Sisterhood is powerful," and "Sisterhood is forever." In terms of other facets of diversity, McFarlane and Samsioe (2020) found evidence countering negative stereotypes related to age.

While these studies have generated essential insights regarding inclusivity, it is worth noting that the representation of disability remains relatively uncommon in the fashion industry, as highlighted by Foster & Pettinicchio (2022). In an industry that often fixates on conventional standards of attractiveness and tends to marginalise those who don't conform (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), portrayals of individuals with disabilities in advertising are frequently excessively idealised and formulated with a simplistic aim of eliciting favourable responses from consumers. This raises the question of what distinguishes the representation of people with disabilities from the existing facets of diversity in the realm of fashion.

3. The challenges of authentic disability inclusion in fashion

3.1. Existing barriers and stereotypes

While brand activism has brought about positive changes in the fashion industry, it has often overlooked one marginalized group: people with disabilities. Disability, as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990), refers to a physical, hearing, visual, or mental impairment that significantly restricts their ability to engage in typical daily activities. Individuals with disabilities face a host of barriers and stereotypes within the fashion world (Barry, 2019; de Perthuis & Findlay, 2019). Traditional beauty ideals in fashion, which prioritize able-bodied models, contribute to the exclusion of people with disabilities. These entrenched biases make it difficult for disabled individuals to find representation in the fashion industry.

A central debate in the discourse on the representation of disabled models in the UK and the US revolves around whether advertisers are shifting away from charity-driven narratives that evoke pity, aiming instead to foster acceptance and empowerment of disabled individuals (Haller & Ralph, 2001; Houston, 2022). Historically, disabled people have been largely overlooked as a potential consumer group, typically only appearing in charity campaigns designed to elicit sympathy. This has contributed to the relative invisibility of disability in the public eye (Houston, 2022). Part of this obscurity can be attributed to the fear of portraying disability in an inaccurate or exploitative manner (Timke, 2019). In the fashion industry, models with disabilities have often been excluded from mainstream advertisements due to their bodies not conforming to the prevailing ideals of beauty and aesthetics (Thomas, 2001).

3.2 Consequences of tokenism and inauthentic inclusion

In some instances, fashion brands have attempted to address the lack of disability representation through tokenism. Tokenism is when individuals with disabilities are included merely for the sake of appearing inclusive, rather than a genuine commitment to diversity.

For example, in Victoria's Secret brand campaign, their use of multi-racial models has never provoked a backlash from the public in the same way as its new initiative to use a model with Down Syndrome in its commitment to celebrate all women (Palumbo, 2022). Feng et al. (2019) further state that consumers perceive such marketing efforts aimed at promoting self-empowerment in disability inclusion as manipulative.

Hence, this approach can be counterproductive, as it perpetuates harmful stereotypes and fails to create meaningful change to achieve desirable social sustainability in the industry.

Authentic inclusion, on the other hand, requires a deep-seated commitment to making the industry more accessible and welcoming to disabled individuals.

3.3 Economic and social benefits of authentic disability inclusion

Authentic disability inclusion can offer economic and social benefits to the fashion industry. By embracing inclusion, fashion brands can unlock an underserved market of consumers with disabilities and their supporters. Södergren and Vallström (2022) highlight a broader cultural trend in which advertisers are weaving people with disabilities, including influencers, into their brand narratives. This shift acknowledges the economic potential of the spending power within disabled households, often referred to as the 'Purple Pound.' The term "Purple Pound" refers to the collective purchasing power of disabled consumers, with families of disabled individuals in the UK estimated to spend a substantial £274 billion annually. On a global scale, this figure surpasses £16 trillion (de Castro, 2023). Consequently, this offers companies fresh prospects to connect with previously untapped markets.

Existing studies (e.g., Burgess et al., 2022; Eisend et al., 2022) suggest that consumers are likely to favour disability inclusion because it signals a brand's altruistic intentions and can

evoke positive emotions, including a feeling of connectedness, self-esteem, and internal self-satisfaction. Qayyum et al. (2023) argue that inclusive advertising featuring disability on Instagram in non-luxury contexts can promote hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, as these ads resonate with consumers at a deeper level, tapping into their sense of purpose and value. Other studies reveal that consumers consider models with disabilities as inspirational, attributing them qualities such as superheroes (Foster & Pettinicchio, 2022).

The increasing representation of models with disabilities can enhance fashion brands' image by emphasising inclusivity and social responsibility. Additionally, the heightened visibility of successful sports events like the Paralympics has showcased the accomplishments of athletes with disabilities (de Perthuis & Findlay, 2019). Furthermore, Teen Vogue's 2018 cover featured three models with disabilities, and other prominent fashion brands like Nike, Tommy Hilfiger, and Aerie have incorporated models with disabilities in their advertising and promotional efforts. This shift has garnered positive responses from consumers, who have expressed identification with these inclusive representations (e.g., "a model who looks like me"; Rasool, 2018). Furthermore, fashion brands have begun to portray people with disabilities as inspirational figures who have overcome their disabilities to achieve their dreams, a phenomenon sometimes termed 'inspiration porn.' An example is Nike's 2018 "Dream Crazy" ad, which features individuals with disabilities among others, overcoming daunting odds to pursue their passions. In a world where consumers are increasingly conscious of ethical and inclusive practices, disability inclusions are not only the right thing to do but also a smart business move.

4. Case studies: brands leading the way

4.1. Case insights I: The rise of disabled influencer in fashion: A case of Gucci

We are currently witnessing an increase in the representation of models with physical disabilities across various industries, such as fashion, jewellery/cosmetics, automobiles, and pharmaceuticals (Low, 2020; Nielsen, 2021). In recent times, major corporations and renowned designer brands like Prada and Burberry, have formed a joint consortium known as “The Valuable 500 community”. This global effort aims to promote inclusivity and disability awareness, particularly within the realm of fashion brands (The Valuable 500, 2023). An increase in inclusive advertising (or ads) can refer to “an increase in representation in advertising across the category spectrum, and when brands from a broader range of industries are more inclusive of disabilities in their creative, they help balance the narrative and normalise living with a disability” (Nielsen, 2021).

Ellie Goldstein, an Instagram celebrity, serves as a compelling example of the changing landscape in the fashion and cosmetics industries. Despite being born with Down syndrome, Ellie states that she always wanted to become famous and would not consider her disability would hamper her from becoming one. Ellie's unwavering determination to promote positivity and send a powerful message about the importance of inclusivity led to her being selected as a model for Gucci at the age of 18 (Mazzone, 2020). Her influence extends beyond Gucci, as she has appeared in numerous other advertising campaigns and graced the covers of prestigious magazines, including Vogue (Mazzone, 2020).

Nonetheless, the portray of models with physical disabilities in advertising is still a relatively new phenomenon. It may be premature to assess how consumers will respond to such brands, including their purchase intentions, and the overall effectiveness of inclusive campaigns. Haller and Ralph (2001) and Low (2020) explain that disabled representation in marketing and advertising has room for growth. Brands should avoid limiting their perception of this

consumer group solely based on their disposable income. Modern consumers are increasingly inclined to support brands that embrace socially responsible initiatives and campaigns for the greater good. Crawl (2019) elaborates on the use of disabled models, noting that it aims to encourage a shift in perception and evaluation among consumers who have a vested interest in societal improvement, particularly concerning the quality of life for disabled individuals. Such inclusive marketing campaigns help advance the well-being of disabled models themselves, as well as their living and working conditions, and the overall entertainment experiences of the people they care about.

Furthermore, Cosgrave and O'Dwyer (2020) contend that society is undergoing transformative changes. However, de Perthuis and Findlay (2019) highlight the persisting discomfort and stigma surrounding people with disabilities that still exists in society at large. Nevertheless, it remains crucial for companies to exhibit authenticity, as this can contribute to enduring support from various stakeholder groups, including NGOs, government entities, customers, and employees. Additionally, Seo and Buchanan-Oliver (2015) discuss the current trends in the luxury fashion industry, characterized as the "democratisation of luxury." This trend aims to make luxury goods less distinct, exclusive, and self-differentiated, making them more accessible to a broader audience.

Case questions:

- (1) Does the inclusion of disabled individuals enhance the “authenticity” and “exclusivity” of luxury brands?
- (2) Is this a passing trend, or is it a permanent shift in the industry?
- (3) Is society prepared to embrace these changes?

(4) To what extent does the authenticity and ethicality of companies featuring disabled individuals in their advertising campaigns impact their effectiveness?

Case insight II: Equality, diversity and inclusive (EDI): Nike

The industrial revolution around the 1880s led to a significant migration of less affluent individuals to urban areas. During this period, disabled individuals often struggled to secure better employment opportunities, prompting Christian charities to seek donations from the public. To evoke empathy and support, these charities began using images of disabled individuals in their advertising campaigns, marking the initial introduction of such imagery in advertising, closely associated with Victorian philanthropists (Haller and Ralph, 2021). It wasn't until the late 1980s that disabled models started to gain recognition in commercial fashion imagery with a focus on inclusivity. This new wave of inclusive photographs included models from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, various cultures, plus-size individuals, people with disabilities, non-binary models, and the elderly, reflecting the evolving societal acceptance (de Perthuis and Findlay, 2019). Recognising these images, TV shows later incorporated disabled people in broadcasting. For example, beginning in 2008, there was a notable increase in the visibility of disabled individuals on UK television, as demonstrated by reality TV shows like “Britain’s Missing Top Model,” which featured disabled participants (Wilde, 2018).

In the realm of advertising, Nike stands out as a noteworthy example of a brand that has embraced inclusivity. Nike has a long tracked record of taking a stand on various socialpolitical issues from race and racism (Graham, 2020) to addressing religious identity, as exemplified by their production of sportswear for women who wear hijabs allowing them to

participate in sports such as running, swimming, and boxing (Stanglin, 2023). Nike has also shown support for individuals like personal trainer Jack Eyers, who wears a prosthetic leg after having his leg amputated at 16 years old due to a medical condition, further exemplifying their dedication to inclusivity and social responsibility.

In a statement about the ad, Nike states that “Nike has a long history of standing against bigotry, hatred and inequality in all forms,” and “We hope that by sharing this film we can serve as a catalyst to inspire action against a deep issue in our society and encourage people to help shape a better future” (Graham, 2020). Their aim, in this case, is to "educate" rather than "promote," seeking to influence how society perceives matters related to Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI). The ultimate goal is to facilitate the success of disabled models while fostering greater inclusivity and acceptance toward them.

This approach aligns with the values of younger generations, such as Millennials as reported by the US General Social Survey, who are more inclined to celebrate and value diversity and inclusion, including the representation of disabled individuals in the media (Low, 2020). An illustrative example is Jack Eyers, a model who wears a prosthetic leg due to a medical condition that led to his leg amputation at the age of 16. In 2015, he made history by becoming the first male disabled model to walk the runway at New York Fashion Week. He has also graced the catwalk at London Fashion Week and was crowned Mr. England in 2017, a remarkable achievement that made him the first amputee to earn that title (The Photo Studio, 2023).

The prosthetic leg in Jack Eyers' case serves as a symbolic visual image, representing attributes like "coolness" and "determination," aligning with Nike's iconic brand slogan, "Just

Do It." This visual representation has the potential to reshape how society perceives individuals with disabilities, challenging existing perceptions and reducing stigmas. In doing so, it can evoke positive feelings and perceptions that, in turn, can contribute to achieving businesses' objectives. However, it's worth noting that, as of now, the effects on brands and their responses to such initiatives are still relatively new and not yet fully understood, as highlighted by researchers and organizations like The Valuable 500 (2023).

Case questions

- (1) Has Nike's strategy been effective?
- (2) How do stakeholders perceive Nike's corporate brand image?
- (3) Is consumers' loyalty to Nike primarily influenced by the brand's stances or its products?
- (4) Is acceptance of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) a factor that varies across different generations? Discuss.

5. Discussion

This chapter sets out to understand how brand activism can act as a catalyst for achieving social sustainability in fashion. Consumers demand and want to support diverse and inclusive fashion brands, as this connects with their well-being and a sense of empowerment (Licsandru & Cui, 2018). However, at the brand level, it is much more complex because not all groups are equally represented in a meaningful way (Foster & Pettinicchio, 2022). Here, the chapter delves into three key strategies that fashion brands can employ to promote social sustainability via inclusivity in fashion: Education and training, collaborating with disability organizations, and action-driven efforts that embrace the concept of fashion design for all.

First, promoting diversity and inclusion through brand campaigns is sensitive, requiring marketers to support minority groups without alienating others (Oakenfull et al., 2008) and avoiding to elicit consumer reactions of sympathy and pity (Houston, 2022). The mere representation of a diverse model is not sufficient; it is how diversity is portrayed and in which context it is embedded that matter. In this case, fashion brands need to consider investing in educating and training their teams on cultural competence and sensitivity. This is important to be able to fine-tune with people who may have different mindsets and emotional worlds and who may be offended or hurt when being seen and publicly represented through the eyes of people who ignore the cultural and emotional complexity of their specific condition. For example, employees should be educated about the significance of cultural symbols and practices so they do not unintentionally appropriate or misrepresent them. Training can also help team members become more aware of unconscious biases and provide them with the tools to create content that reflects diverse backgrounds and perspectives of their audience. Hence, understanding the lived experiences, challenges, and aspirations of individuals with disabilities is vital in ensuring that the representations in fashion are authentic, respectful, and empowering.

Second, fashion brands have the opportunity to amplify their inclusivity messages by collaborating with nonprofit disability organizations. Prior research has pointed out the prevalent lack of authenticity and commitment to diversity and inclusion within the industry (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Thus, engaging in a partnership with nonprofit organizations and adopting a more assertive and brave messaging can significantly enhance the effectiveness of their campaigns (Lee et al., 2023). Additionally, these cross-sector partnerships offer a range of advantages. They not only expand the reach of the campaign to a wider audience but also

raise much-needed awareness about the quality of life for disabled individuals. Establishing a long-term collaboration that aligns with the brand's core values can foster stronger trust and even lead to a shift in perspective among those who may have been indifferent to diversity and inclusivity issues (Wilkie et al., 2023).

In addition to revolutionising communication within the fashion industry, brands are pioneering a remarkable shift by introducing adaptive clothing lines, aiming to democratise fashion and make it more accessible to all. The significance of inclusive design has become increasingly evident, especially given the growing global population of individuals with disabilities. The adaptive fashion is projected to be worth around \$400 billion by 2026 (Alexiou, 2022). This presents a golden opportunity for brands to not only maximise their profitability but also to profoundly impact people's lives.

Going the extra mile in delivering inclusive products on a grand scale can be a powerful means of enhancing brand credibility, rooted in the authenticity of their commitment to inclusivity. It's worth noting, however, that the path to successful inclusive design must involve working with disabled individuals rather than merely for them. This collaboration ensures that the design approach aligns seamlessly with the diverse needs and preferences of the community in question, resulting in products that truly resonate with their intended audience. Furthermore, this collaborative approach between brands and disabled individuals also opens up doors for what we might call 'inclusivepreneurs.' These are entrepreneurial visionaries from underserved communities who emerge as champions of innovation.

An important example of 'inclusivepreneurs' are disability influencers and creators. Lauren “Lolo” Spencer, for instance, was a lively girl that loved running, street hockey and dancing.

But when she turned 14, she started feeling fatigued and became concerned after noticing that her muscles had begun to weaken. Doctors diagnosed her with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as ALS. Having used a wheelchair for 12 years, Spencer knows all the everyday hardships that come with a disability. Initially, she had trouble finding answers or help online. So she turned to social media and began sharing her own personal experience (Bergeron, 2019). Through her Instagram account, @itslololove, and her YouTube channel, Sitting Pretty, she gives insight, advice and support to the disabled community, and she has become an inclusivepreneur with many brand collaborations that actively sustain her business project, giving voice to disability and spreading inspirational stories. By engaging in a collaborative dialogue with these visionary entrepreneurs, brands not only foster an atmosphere of inclusivity but also help cultivate opportunities for these burgeoning entrepreneurs to thrive in the industry (Hallensleben, 2022).

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the fashion industry has a pivotal role in shaping not just aesthetic appearances but also the values that underpin our society. As this chapter explores, one of the most pressing issues in the modern fashion landscape is the quest for authentic brand activism and social sustainability, which entails inclusivity, equity, and respect for all individuals. In the context of disability representation, what will the “inclusion revolution” look like, and will individuals with disabilities continue to be a part of it?

The fashion world is no stranger to rapid change and innovation, and the "inclusion revolution" presents a unique opportunity for positive transformation for fashion brands.

Vogue's recent and historic move to 'Reframing Fashion' is a great step in the right direction

in the industry (Mowbray, 2023). It's a chance to build a fashion industry that reflects and celebrates the diversity of our society, where disabled people need to be seen and represented. It is no longer sufficient to be treated as a tick-boxing exercise, and it is important to recognise that inclusive marketing can do both what's good for society and what's good for business (Ferraro et al., 2023). However, it's not only industry leaders who should bear the responsibility of ushering in this era of inclusivity; consumers, too, play a pivotal role. They must continue demanding that fashion brands engage meaningfully with their efforts towards diversity and inclusion. To ensure lasting change, these demands should extend beyond merely focusing on casting calls and runway models. They should encompass corporate boardrooms, and the branding and multi-channel teams – those who ultimately influence what consumers are exposed to and choose to buy.

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