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The Drive for Disability

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The Drive for Disability

In the past ten years, the world has been on fire about inclusivity. As millions took to the street and to social media to complain about systemic inequalities, industries began to listen to the growing crowds' shouts for diversity. Now change is finally happening, even in the exclusive echelons of fashion. Brands are pledging to do better, previously ignored designers are starting to be highlighted and runways have become more diverse, showcasing models of various ages, genders, sizes, and race.

But the fashion industry has been slow to include a group that is necessary to reach full inclusivity: the disabled. About one billion people, or 15%, of the world's population is ignored in it. One in four adults in the United States alone experience a form of disability, but they are still neglected in a business that notoriously looks to marginalized communities to formulate new definitions of beautiful. Diversity without disability is not diversity, it's ableism. If the fashion industry wants to become truly inclusive, it needs to start representing disabled individuals positively and regularly both on the runway and in campaigns.

Currently disability is overwhelmingly represented through tokenism in the fashion industry. On runways, in ad campaigns and at fashion week, disabled models are used, instead of celebrated, for their differences. When disabled models appear on runways, they are often presented as human interest stories. This was most recently the case with Mya Pol, a Tiktok creator, who modeled for PrettyLittleThing in their New York Fashion Week Spring-Summer 2022 show. In a POPSUGAR piece about Pol that came out after the show, she was framed as an exception to the rule: as someone who overcame her disability to become a runway model. Pol shouldn't have been considered brave for living her life in a wheelchair, she should've been considered normal.

The industry also segregates disabled models through specially campaigned fashion shows. "Role Models Not Runway Models," created by Carrie Hammer, is one of the most well-known disability-focused fashion shows. It denies disabled people the title of fashion models in favor of "role models." This patronizes them, treating them as exceptions to fashion's dominant aesthetic. Shows like this only promote diversity and inclusion to an extent. And though they may generate jobs for disabled models, they also keep them from potential opportunities that can arise from being in mainstream fashion shows.

Savage X Fenty is the only top brand that has featured disabled models both in their advertisements and on the runway. As Rihanna stated in her first show, in 2019, "I'm looking for unique characteristics and people that aren't usually highlighted in the world of fashion and how it pertains to lingerie," she said. (Since this admission she has cast disabled models in each of her shows, setting a new standard for the industry.)

Fashion magazines also tokenize the disabled community by using them to enhance stories in which they serve as accessories to abled-bodied people. For example, a [Vogue article](#) from 2016 about Elena Delle Donne, a then member of the United States Women's Olympic basketball team, claims that Donne's life has "been shaped by extreme physical disability." However, the deafness, blindness, and cerebral palsy being referenced are not her own; they are her sister Lizzie's disabilities. After briefly talking about Donne's sister, the article switches back to

Donne's attractiveness and athleticism, starkly contrasting Lizzie's capabilities. Lizzie is primarily used in this article to enhance Donne's life story.

Fashion needs to show disabled people as worthy of respect on their own. Like all minority communities, they deserve accurate, not just performative representation.

Although disability is sometimes tokenized in the fashion industry, it is still largely ignored by most designers. Adaptive fashion is created for consumers who have a variety of disabilities. It's designed to make dressing easier for those who have trouble dressing independently. None of the [top ten](#) companies that currently dominate the global fashion market have an adaptive clothing line. Tommy Hilfiger and Ugg are the only two major brands that do. Hilfiger created an adaptive children's collection in 2016, [when he noticed his two autistic kids struggled to dress themselves](#). After his collection became a success, he expanded it to include adults and built his new line, Tommy Adaptive. The Ugg Universal collection was created for Zappos Adaptive in 2020, featuring their classic boots with zippers and pull tabs for easier use. Zappos established their adaptive shopping webpage in 2017 to further their options for disabled consumers. The duo teamed up to make Uggs accessible to all.

Even when the disabled community is recognized in fashion, products for them are often poorly marketed. Nike's Go FlyEase shoes, their first hands-free sneakers, were a failure for the disabled because they became mainstream novelties. When the shoes were announced, Nike failed to label them as "accessible" or "adaptive fashion." They also didn't include any disabled models in their original advertising. When the sneakers launched in limited quantities, they sold out quickly. Most of the shoes were bought by resellers and the price soon jumped upwards of \$400 on secondhand websites. They became collector's items that the able bodied snatched up for their own benefit. If Nike had planned more carefully for this launch and its value to the disabled community, the shoes would've been more accessible for the people who could benefit from this innovative technology.

Ultimately, ignoring disability works against the industry's own interest. Commercially speaking, creating adaptive fashion lines and representing disabled people will help fashion grow into the future. According to The Return on Disability Group's, [The Global Economics of Disability annual report](#), the disability market commands over \$13 trillion in disposable income. This is a huge untapped market that can help bring fashion back after losing a lot of revenue during the pandemic. "Companies really need to understand that we're here and we're not going anywhere," Jillian Mercado, a model with muscular dystrophy, told [Fashionista](#). "They're losing a huge community of people and money."

But the fashion industry also has an ethical responsibility to be inclusive. The disabled community like and need fashion just like anyone else. Fashion is a language of self-expression. Withholding this language from someone who already has diminished tools for this is a form of discrimination.

One way the industry can work towards full inclusivity is by learning from its troubled past, when it was done insensitively. Starting with Alexander McQueen in the late 90's, disability representation has been largely performative. McQueen was the first designer to feature a

disabled model on the runway when he created a pair of carved wooden prosthetic legs for Aimee Mullins, a Paralympic athlete, to wear in his Spring-Summer 1999 runway show. Known for his dramatic and unpredictable shows, McQueen used Mullins as just another shock vehicle. Beginning in the 2010's, we saw more disabled models on the runways and in advertisements on a more regular basis. However, they were only consistently used by progressive brands like Chromat, who has always been at the forefront of diversity and inclusion. (Over the last five years, Chromat has featured disabled models in over half of their 11 runway shows.)

This was also a time when we saw the biggest shifts in fashion towards other kinds of inclusion. Movements like The Body Positivity Movement and The Black Lives Matter movement pushed the industry to take giant leaps of inclusion, resulting in a steady increase in the casting of plus size models and models of color in every season of New York Fashion Week. But disability representation still fell behind other kinds of inclusion.

Brands that have done poorly in the past can improve by learning from those who are leading the way for inclusion. New York, where designers are constantly innovating and looking for new talent, has consistently been the most diverse city in terms of runways. Out of the 1252 models that were featured in the Spring-Summer 2022 New York Fashion Week shows, only five were physically disabled models. Although this is only 0.40%, it is the highest number of disabled models ever to be cast in mainstream fashion shows. This uptick is directly correlated to the Council of Fashion Designers of America's inclusion of lesser-known designers in the New York Fashion Week calendar for the first time. These new innovators like Johnathan Hayden and Maisie Wilen, are more progressive with model choices and clearly want to change the industry's standards.

"I hope this is the start of more and inspires and empowers more global brands at the same level to truly work towards including and normalizing [the] disabled," posted Aaron Rose Philip, a Black trans model with cerebral palsy, on Instagram after she finished making her runway debut in Moschino's Spring-Summer 2022 New York Fashion Week show. "Black trans girls and women matter and are beautiful."

This season at London Fashion Week, Faduma's Fellowship X Harriet Eccleston became the first ever adaptive wear brand to showcase at London fashion week. The few brands who make adaptive fashion rarely present their creations in fashion shows as Faduma's Fellowship X Harriet Eccleston did. Its inclusion on the runway helps normalize and mainstream the adaptive fashion community. This specific adaptive collection was made for wheelchair users and incorporated magnetic buttons, breathable fabric, hidden seams, and relocated pockets. Each of these adaptations were made without sacrificing style. A standout look from the collection featured a hot pink suit with an adaptive-friendly waistband. "Our choice in what we wear is often the first indication the people around us understand about our character," Eccleston said to [Byrdie](#). "This should not be any different for wheelchair users. I hope that through these garments the wearer is able to express themselves and wear the clothes that they love whilst not feeling limited or constricted."

Tommy Hilfiger is another enlightened brand. His adaptive fashion line, Tommy Adaptive, features magnetic button closures, internal toggles, and Velcro openings to make it easier for

disabled people to dress themselves. After the line was expanded in 2017, Hilfiger's brand was overwhelmed with positive feedback. Since then, over 30% of their customer service calls in the United States have been from admirers who just wanted to say "thank you" for creating attractive accessible clothing that recognizes a struggle that the disabled population faces. "Reach out and listen to your audience," Hilfiger told [Vogue Business](#) about responding to such feedback. "It's their needs you're trying to meet, and without them you'll never get it right."

Mercado, who was highlighted in Tommy Hilfiger's latest Adaptive collection for Fall-Winter 2021, told [Fashionista](#), "It's been awesome working with Tommy Hilfiger [on campaigns for its adaptive fashion line]. It introduced the idea that big brands can cater to people who have disabilities and it doesn't have to be dramatic," she said. "A lot of companies say it's a lot of money, but that's honestly an excuse — you just have to be creative about it. Have a team with people who actually have disabilities to help you do it. I'm thankful that they at least started the conversation."

ASOS has also made great progress in recent years. In 2018 they collaborated with Chloe Ball-Hopkins to create a "wheelchair-friendly" jumpsuit. Hopkins, a reporter and a disabled model, uses a wheelchair herself. The jumpsuit has zippers around the waist, so that the piece is easier to get on and off. It also features a waterproof breast pocket to carry essentials: "Whether that's to put your phone in, or [because] you've got medication or information you need to have on you in case of emergency, you can have it on you and know that it can stay dry," Ball-Hopkins told [BBC](#). "It was just literally those little tiny details that make the difference to people like me."

Beauty campaigns have also started to become more inclusive. In 2020, Gucci Beauty's Mascara L'Obscur campaign starred Ellie Goldstein, a model with down syndrome. This was a first for high fashion. Similarly, that same year Benefit Cosmetics hired, Kate Grant, another model with down syndrome, as an ambassador for their brand.

Young visionaries who want to transform the industries standards, can't do it alone. It's time for every brand to fully commit to foregrounding marginalized populations. It matters who the industry welcomes into its spotlight; it reveals who we are, who we admire, and who we can be: fashion lovers who not only accept diversity but honor it.