ABLEISM, STYLE, AND VISIBILITY: THE SHIFTING NARRATIVE AROUND BODY, BEAUTY, AND DESIRABILITY
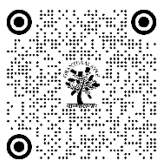
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ABSTRACT

The proposed study focuses on the shifting narratives around body, beauty, and desirability. The study highlights the way people with disabilities are represented and included in the fashion industry. This inclusion and visibility can be achieved by challenging the preconceived stereotypes of body, beauty, desirability, and style can play a crucial role in achieving this goal. The study foregrounds fashion as a significant inclusion practice.

Concept: The present study views body, beauty, and desirability positively and supports the inclusion of all people to promote diversity. The study focuses on the way disabled people are represented in fashion by applying the critical disability theory.

Results and Conclusion: The very presence of disabled people in fashion breaks the stereotypes regarding their underserved and underrepresented roles in the social structure.

Keywords: Body, Beauty, Narrative, Style, Desirability, Visibility

1. INTRODUCTION

The fashion industry is a means to persuade and attract consumers easily through the advertisement of their products. A global business of almost 1.3 trillion dollars, fashion industry employs over 300 million people from around the world and is referred to a potential driver of economic development and of the global GDP growth. In recent times, despite many financial crises of the last decade, the fashion industry has attained fast growth and influenced a huge number of consumers. With the rise of digital media and social media, the fashion industry is opening its arena for people with activity limitations and such transformation in the pre-established

standards leads it towards the diversity, heterogeneity, and consumer-focused industry.

Despite a long history of exclusion, the very presence and inclusion of people with disabilities represent their individuality and the diversity in fashion and challenges the stereotypical notions of body, beauty, and desirability. Traditionally, the fashion industry is not too diverse and has a history of inadequately representing the people with disability, by picking instead a troupe of homogeneously slender models who share a static standard of beauty and body Foster (2021) 1. The same reflects the shared cultural ideologies about what kind of bodies should be valued, accepted, and adored in the social structure. The data provided by World Health Organization (WHO) apprises that of the total population of the world more than 1 billion people are having disabilities. That accounts for 15% of the entire global population and represents the largest minority group.

The research paper entitled " Ableism, Style and Visibility: The Shifting Narrative Around Body, Beauty, and Desirability" focuses on the inclusion of disabled people in Fashion and how the presence of these people with disabilities is challenging the preconceived notions of body, beauty, and desirability. In fashion, the image seems like everything. It is an evolving process because fashion is not at all static, and every image supporting the ableist perspective and ableist views suppress the visibility and representation of people with disabilities in the mainstream culture. In today's world of fashion, the body is not merely a way of suppressing oneself rather for disabled people it is an investment of the body through which an individual exercises political autonomy.

Through the proposed study the researcher aims to explore the voices of disabled communities that need to be heard and with the help of fashion. Fashion has indeed witnessed exponential growth over the past few decades and the next step of such forwardness should be to make it more inclusive and accessible to people with impairments. The study foregrounds the role of consumers and their choices rather than fixed rules or standards. The purpose of the research is to emphasize fashion as an important tool to promote inclusion and diversity across cultural industries and as a catalyst for positive social change. Fashion can be reckoned as a force for good.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Does the inclusion of disabled people in the fashion industry, break the negative stereotypes regarding their disabled bodies?
- How diversity is used as a tool to bring out the individuality of people with impairments in social structure?
- How do shifting narratives around body, beauty and desirability challenge the persona of normalcy?
- How socially constructed impairment is more disastrous than physical impairment?

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To explore the inclusion of disabled people and diversity in the fashion industry
- To examine body, beauty, and desirability as one's own choice
- To challenge the preconceived stereotypes around body and beauty

- To explore the role of consumers in the mainstream production
- To represent the image of people with limitations rather than the idealized image constructed in social structure

4. METHODOLOGY

To thoroughly elaborate the main questions and research objectives, a qualitative method is used. Qualitative research through the application of Critical Disability theory is the most suitable method to examine socially constructed meanings of body, beauty, and desirability rather than physical impairment. The research paper explores the diversity or inclusion of disabled people in mainstream fashion. The study tends to overcome the fear of mockery among disabled people by building confidence among them.

5. LITERATURE SURVEY

Barry in Fabolous Masculinities: Refashioning the Fat and Disabled Male Body Barry (2019), examines the marginalization and depreciation of men whose bodies don't fit into the traditional beauty standards put upon them by society. The study explores the daily practices of men who push up against the ideal appearance. By applying Moore's (2018) theory of "fabulousness", Barry refers to his investment in understanding how to get rid of or go away from these fashionable ideals which oppress the fat or disabled bodies and being part of the society, they are not well treated or accepted. The paper also investigates how unrealistic beauty standards problematize the hegemonic masculinities and seek to promote or expand fabulousness by centering disabled or fat bodies and removing their fixed roles in the peripheries.

In Gendered Ableism: Media Representations and Gender Role Beliefs' Effect on Perceptions of Disability and Sexuality (2016) Alexandria Parsons et al. scrutinize the attitude of society toward sexuality of women and men with disability. Through the procedure of the questionnaire, it is assumed or hypothesized that participants with traditional or orthodox ways of thinking have negative attitudes toward the people with limitations and more negativity is towards women. There is a very a smaller number of people who support or have positivity towards the bodies of disabled people.

A Model Who Looks Like Me: Communicating and Consuming Representations of Disability (2021) by Foster and Pettinicchio (2021), represents the diversity and inclusivity of disabled in the fashion. Foster himself promotes diversity and according to him, the very inclusion challenged the negative stereotypes regarding disabled people or models. Their hypothesis is informed by content analysis of editorials, advertisements, and online consumer responses from 2014 to 2019. In the given study, it is described that in the industry for aesthetic preferences some creative decisions are necessary while diversity or inclusion of people with disabilities in the fashion industry is the same. Workman and Freeburg (1996) state that "Models in wheelchairs are more effective than models in lawn chairs in stimulating increasing levels of consumer commitment to fashion products" (p. 250). This contributes to the aesthetic economy which Foster talked about.

In "Framing Disability in Fashion" (2021), Foster investigates the change in the way disabled models are represented in the fashion industry. The study traces the change fashion industry has undergone over the past few years. The research shows

a positive change with respect to the inclusion of disabled models in the mainstream fashion magazines and fore of fashion advertisements.

6. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present uses Critical Disability Theory as its conceptual framework. CDT is an evolving theoretic approach in Disabilities Studies which tends to analyse the concerned issues related to disability. Mainly, Critical Disability Theory is an effort to positively foreground the lives of people with impairments, and a way to move towards the principles of liberalization to depict the reality of such impaired lives. It is a critique of the traditional attributes of disability which marginalize people with limitations Hosking (2008) 4 and is considered a process of making invisible, visible. According to this approach disability is not only the result of biological disorder, medicine, and sensitivity rather it is a matter of the power Devlin (2006) 2. It seeks to challenge orthodoxical issues of disabilities and engages in new thinking of disability that is critical, despite just foregrounding the people with disabilities as peripheral Ellis et al. (2018).

Hosking (2008) in his paper that he presented at the 4th Biennial Disability Studies Conference at Lancaster University, UK, Sept. 2-4, 2008, expounds that Critical disability theory focuses on disability in a social environment to examine the role of disabled people as they are rather than considering ' other' and mere projection of dominant ideology. Hosking's concept of CDT is very much influenced by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer and has its roots in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, which consists of a group of Western philosophers, who originally worked in Frankfurt, Germany, and was a major concern of the study is Marxism in social structure.

Hosking underlines the relevance of critical theory in locating sites of oppression and states that critical theory has the power to transform society with the objective of emancipating mankind. He plainly calls attention to Horkheimer's work to initiate combined but critical engagement with how to portray the realistic image of the world, instead of conforming to traditional means and methods of dispassionate researchers who describe the world as it is. Critical theory subverts the positivist methodology, a key concern of traditional theorists, to offer both "descriptive" and "prescriptive" constructs for social inquiry. Unlike traditional theory, the critical theory is not stratified as normatively objective – its central purpose is to reflect the formation of the suppression among marginalized people and tends to transform social structure with the objective of human independence. Rather than just a theoretical framework, critical theory is practical, explanatory, and normative, as it examines what is wrong or disturbing in society and refers to the actions to change it through both criticism and practical goals of change. This combined critical framework must, as Hosking contends, explore the wrong and injustice done to the disabled people and challenge the stereotypes of established and fixed social standards. Emerged from critical theory CDT tries to connect theory with practice. CDT is based on the power play that who and what gets power and value. CDT provides a theoretical basis for distinguishing disability policies that promote inclusion and diversity in the mainstream culture. The central aim of CDT is to liberate the society from the psychological prison of ableism and move toward a society which is more inclusive where there are no barriers and where people have infinite possibilities for future.

7. DISCUSSION

> Inclusive are societies that make room for the social recognition of a variety of groups. They are societies that sustain competing definitions of a worthy life and a worthy person, which empower low-status groups to contest stereotypes and measure their worth independently of dominant social matrices. Lamont (2009) 151

The shift in narratives around body, beauty and desirability is a result of the consciousness of impaired people about their visibility and style. On the matter of disability, the very visibility in the fashion industry is an effort to recognize their identity, individuality, and their very existence in the ableist social structure. Though physical limitations or impairment occur in a biological phase along with medical damage, it is a social construction too in which concepts like ableism, normal, and normalcy are developed to oppress the role of a particular disabled community.

Persons with disabilities need better representation in fashion. It is believed that in an industry (especially in the fashion industry) where appearances are flickery and highly uncertain, the exclusion of disabled bodies is intentionally designed to maximize profit and minimize risk Entwistle and Mears (2013). Although the fashion industry is a commercial business involved with profit and loss, it is an aid for fashion brands to represent models with disabilities. The fashion brands such as Nike, Tommy Hilfiger, Aerie, and Gucci have become important factors of inclusivity and diversity with the inclusion of disabled people in the mainstream fashion industry. Fashion in society is "Supposed to be a powerful form of social and political critiques, which reflect societal changes" Lai and Perminiene (2020) 685. The inclusivity of disabled people in the fashion industry opens the way for people with impairments to assert their self and identity. Representation of persons with disabilities within fashion is the major step towards diversity. To achieve that we need to change the perception of people towards diversity. This concludes that brand communication has to shift toward a more inclusive and diverse reality, which along with disability also considers various ethnicities, gender identities, religions, ages, and sexual orientations. Boyd et al. (2020).

While discussing disability or disabled people the first assumption that comes to one's mind is whether the disability only a matter of biological disorder or is it more than that? To explore this assumption, one should think of social structure and social factors which are a major influence on the lives of people socially, physically, and psychologically. Disability, as a social construction provides a new insight for understanding the binary oppositions between ability and disability and making sense of abled bodies or disabled bodies. Disability as a concept can be explained both objectively and subjectively. As an objective phenomenon, it is based on the medical concerns of a disabled individual, and in subjective terms, it is represented as a social construction.

Disability is a form of social disadvantage faced by people with disabilities. This drawback of physical, institutional, and attitudinal atmosphere fails not only the expectations of disabled people in the world of preferred normalcy but also shows the failure of the society to accept diversity. UNICEF (2017) says, "Disability is caused by the way society organized and not a by a person's impairment."

Recent years have witnessed a significant progress with respect to the inclusion and integration of disabled community in the mainstream. The burgeoning body-positivity movement and the calls for greater diversity have opened up the space to

celebrate diverse bodies of all shapes, sizes and colors. As a result, we can see persons with disability making appearances in fashion advertisements, participating in beauty campaigns and runway walks. Still, there is a long way to go.

The ableist representation of models in the fashion industry overshadows the potential of disabled people. The fashion industry operates within the context of industrial societies that have a long history of suppressing the voices of the marginalized and those who are thrown out of the center to the periphery. To represent the visibility of the invisible above aesthetic views of ableist society it is important to reconcile the past with the representation of disabled people in front of others. The study highlights that it is not the disability but the attitude of the people that becomes an obstacle in the way of being visual. Societies need to rise above optics and tokenism and have to ensure that no one is left behind if they want to achieve real progress.

8. CONCLUSION

Banking on the above discussion one can conclude that diversity is on the rise in the fashion industry whereas cultural changes are still slow socially, politically, and psychologically. Despite of the fact that in recent times there is a lot of emphasis on diversifying fashion and making it more inclusive, this emphasis on inclusion or diversity in the fashion industry does not mean that all groups are adequately represented or that these representations do not support the typecasts that consumers find reiterating. Though it is for a small group of disabled people, it is a way to assert their rights and build confidence among other people with disabilities too.

In the mainstream fashion industry, the inclusion of people with impairments is in the right direction toward the promotion of diversity and heterogeneity in society. This diversity or inclusion is used as a tool to bring out the individuality and identity of people with disabilities. Their visibility in the fashion indicates the belongingness of disabled models and builds confidence among them. The process of inclusion designates equality and justice for disabled models in fashion and leads them toward empowerment and awareness regarding their bodies and beauty in the ableist world. The inclusion of disabled models in the fashion industry challenges the negative stereotypes regarding their disabled bodies and promotes body positivity and real beauty as it is, rather than the ideal beauty. Therefore, the presence of people with limitations in fashion breaks stereotypes regarding their underrepresented roles in society and empowers them to be visible, and their very visibility as a result of consumer support moves towards a diverse and inclusive social culture. Their inclusion in mainstream culture enriches the society.

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