One Size Does Not Fit All: Inclusion in the Fashion Industry

By Guest Columnist, Cameron Derian

In 1949 a young woman walked into her first fashion show for French designer Christian Dior. What stood out to the audience was not her beautiful gown, but the color of her skin. Dorothea Church became the first successful African American model to strut the Paris runways.

Flash forward to 2019 when, according to the Fashion Spot’s annual diversity report, of the 7,300 models participating in fall shows, a record breaking 38.8% of them were women of color. This is a huge jump from even four years ago; in spring 2015 just 17% of runway participants were women of color.

While these statistics show a positive change in diversity for women of color being represented, only .69% of the 7,300 models were “non-straight-size” — or at least a size 14. Vox reports that 68% of American woman fall into plus size, so these figures seem sadly disproportionate and, unfortunately, they are nothing new. This .69% is the second highest representation for plus-size models recorded during fashion week.

Research has clearly shown that unrealistic female beauty standards and the exclusivity of the fashion industry can have a negative psychological influence on young girls. And with the rise of social media, fashion models are more visible and prevalent than ever before. Models, designers and fashion houses on Instagram have tens of millions of followers, many of them young girls. According to NPR (National Public Radio), 70% of teen girls use social media every day.

This great exposure could be an amazing tool to not only subdue toxic beauty standards, but help to create and perpetuate an inclusive message that everyone is unique and beautiful. Models reflecting diverse audiences in runway shows could give members of usually underrepresented groups inspiration and the confidence that the clothes are not just for specific people, but are for them too.

Designers like Rihanna are highlighting this message. For her debut show of lingerie brand Savage x Fenty, she not only redefined the runway model, she redefined the meaning of sexy.
The show celebrated diversity and inclusivity with models of different skin tones, sizes, abilities and genders. By showing lingerie on a wide range of different models, large groups of underrepresented people (often left out by companies like, well, you know who with the initials VS!) can be helped to feel empowered and confident.

Very slowly, the old ideologies of the “fashion model” are being challenged and inclusivity is gradually on the rise in the fashion world. There is still a long way to go in the industry for an accurate representation of women of different sizes, shapes, skin tones, ages, abilities and genders. Designers and photographers, along with models, all play important roles in this representation. If they — and the companies they work with/for — choose not to represent all people appropriately, their sales will fall. If they don’t change, they will become irrelevant.

Fashion is cyclical and constantly changing, but we can hope that diversity will become a constant. With the growing representation of so many different people, a diverse platform will add creativity never seen in fashion before and, very likely, increase sales. It seems safe to say that Dorothea Church would be proud of, and also probably impatient with, the progress made in the fashion industry. But she would be optimistic for its future.

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