

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

## Exposure is now a currency in modeling: Sissi Johnson

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*Louis Vuitton's women's fall-winter 2017 collection. Image credit: Louis Vuitton*

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By SARAH JONES

**NEW YORK** The business of modeling has evolved courtesy of social media, as influence determines castings and success.

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The era of the supermodel is over and has given way to the rise of the It girl, with talent boasting thousands or even millions of followers. In a fireside chat at Women in Luxury on Sept. 26, brand strategist, academic and Huffington Post contributor Sissi Johnson explained the ways the business has changed in recent decades, covering topics including diversity and regulations.

"When I used to model we would go to a casting and we'll get asked for our portfolio and our measurements," **Ms. Johnson** said.

"Now when you go to a lot of castings, we ask you how many followers do you have," she said. "So it's not so much your height anymore or your looks, it's the influence that you have online."

*The Women in Luxury conference was organized by Luxury Daily.*

### Remodeling

French luxury conglomerates LVMH and Kering have joined forces to create a common charter that determines how the groups will work with fashion models in the future.

The goal is ostensibly to ensure the well being of the models and reflect the values of the luxury brands under their umbrellas. The statement comes a day after **The New York Times ran an article** that spelled out several concerns expressed by models, including objectification, sexism, racism and loss of dignity

These rules include not hiring models below a size 34, and also keeping adult casting at 16 years old or older (**see story**).



*Bottega Veneta's spring/summer 2018 runway show. Image credit: Bottega Veneta*

Ms. Johnson said that while admirable, the efficacy of these efforts remains to be seen. Based on her experiences, she said that some agencies will have models lie about their age or find other ways to skirt rules.

However, models today have social media as an additional tool to combat mistreatment, as they can broadcast issues publicly.

One of the challenges facing models today is the use of exposure as currency. Models who are newer to the business might be willing to work for less in exchange for being the face of a big brand since money is less of an issue than achieving social media status.

As models get out of their teens and they are concerned about making money, they therefore become less hireable.

Social media is also representative of the overall focus on personality. This has led to modeling agencies representing individuals who would not have been considered modeling material earlier, including chefs and personalities.

Diversity in fashion is not a new concept, as the runways of the 1970s featured a plethora of black models. While in earlier decades, models of color were primarily African American, whereas today the famous faces are coming from other nations, including countries in Africa.

For instance, Maria Borges is an Angolan model who is now the face of L'Oral Paris. She follows in the footsteps of models who previously rose to stardom such as Alek Wek, who came from South Sudan.



*Maria Borges for L'Oral Paris. Image credit: L'Oral Paris*

As brands look to embrace diversity, Ms. Johnson advised them to make the change in a deeper way.

"It's good that you're taking initiative, but the change has to be from the inside out," Ms. Johnson said. "It's not enough to produce a photo shoot with models of color. It has to be reflected in your company DNA. This too is part of

corporate social responsibility, as we like to talk about this so much.

"If you're producing this type of campaign, make sure that your staff looks just like that so you have a better understanding of your consumer and can convey the most authentic message and storytelling," she said. "This is where we started, OK we were not catering to everybody, but this is what we learned along the way.

"And I think we almost have to humble ourselves as an industry and say, 'You know what, we were wrong,' and it's OK because consumers will appreciate that honesty."

### Approaching Africa

The perspective on luxury in Africa differs from other markets, with consumers on the continent thinking of it as a lifestyle.

Part of the influence for their definition of luxury stems from the resources available in the earth, such as diamonds. Therefore luxury goods are a means to achieve luxury rather than the luxury itself.

As the BRIC nations have become increasingly developed, Sub-Saharan Africa has emerged as the "next big thing," according to a new report by A.T. Kearney.

Research suggests that the countries within the Sub-Saharan region of Africa will likely grow in potential over the next decades due to a young, fast-growing and connected middle class, many of whom are still discovering their next favorite brands. A.T. Kearney's "Retail in Africa: Still the Next Big Thing" report, part of the "2015 African Retail Development Index," looks closely at these consumers and the economies of their home countries to determine the opportunity for retail marketers as a shopping culture emerges ([see story](#)).

A misconception that exists as well is that Africa can be considered a single luxury market, since the various countries and cultures need to be approached differently.

"As a luxury brand, you cannot say, 'Oh, we're going to tap into the African luxury market,' because it doesn't exist. It's luxury markets," Ms. Johnson said.

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