

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Fashion looks "beyond the runway" toward more inclusive industry

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The New York Times presented a discussion on diversity and inclusivity in conversation with fashion industry leaders. Image credit: Valentino

By NORA HOWE

The fashion industry has promised change in regards to sustainability, diversity and inclusion, but many speculate whether these promises are performative or if the institution is taking concrete steps toward systemic transformation.

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It has now been a year since the COVID-19 pandemic drove a reassessment of the fashion system and more than six months since the latest iteration of the Black Lives Matter movement spread across the U.S. and the world. During *The New York Times* Beyond The Runway virtual panel on March 11 moderated by *Times* fashion director Vanessa Friedman, fashion industry leaders discussed where progress is being made and by whom, whether the industry is moving away from performative activism and what the path is toward lasting change.

"The way we talk about these events comes down to one word: inclusivity," said Olivier Rousteing, creative director of **Balmain**. "Fashion was only talking to an elite' and, after going through this pandemic, we realized that audiences outside of just fashion shows are really important.

"In regards to Black Lives Matter, there is a difference between latching onto the trend and really believing in it," he said. "You can see that difference among houses those who just do not want fingers pointed at them and those who truly believe in this movement."

Inclusive fashion

Social media has been a powerful tool especially over the past year, as it quickly became the primary means of global communication. Brands were able to connect with their audiences in ways like never before and have intimate conversations on topics such as racial inequality, mental health and sustainability.



Olivier Rousteing aims to foster a community around the Balmain brand. Image credit: Olivier Rousteing

For Balmain, social media has been the primary channel for spreading its message and fostering an authentic community, to the point at which its digital presence and influencer cohort has been named the "Balmain Army."

"Seven years ago, social media was not seen as chic or right for fashion' because fashion was all about exclusivity, and people asked me, Can luxury be on social media?" Mr. Rousteing said. "Of course it can.

"When I talk about inclusivity, [social media] is where I can invite people into my world," he said. "And all the people that are on my catwalk are expressing more than just modeling they're soldiers fighting for my values and what I believe in."

More so, shopping platform **Depop** relies almost exclusively on social media to reach Gen Z consumers, who make up 90 percent of its users.

"When thinking about the fashion experience, these consumers are looking to be experiential," said Maria Raga, chief executive officer of Depop, London. "They are so fluid and love to experiment and evolve."

Ms. Raga shared the story of one user who thrifted and sold clothing through their online Depop shop and used the money they earned to fund a documentary about mental health issues in the LGBT+ community.

To ensure that the fashion industry does not simply move on from this trend and sincerely implements sustainable, diverse and inclusive practices into its system, brands and designers cannot play it safe anymore and must act on the issues they believe in, according to Valentino creative director Pierpaolo Piccioli.

"We have all been changed by the events of this past year, and I cannot think of a world after the pandemic that will be like it was before," Mr. Piccioli said.

Social awareness and inclusivity were trending before the onset of COVID-19, but the pandemic has accelerated demand. More than ever, consumers are expecting businesses to follow through on their promises.



Fashion stylist Zerina Akers. Image credit: Black Owned Everything

"When you're talking about humanity and human life being harmed and injured, that must take precedence over business," said Zerina Akers, fashion stylist and founder of **Black Owned Everything**. "We need to remind ourselves that that is where the movement started.

"It is something that needs to stay at the forefront of our minds," she said. "It is something we have to continue talking about, or else it will be forgotten like it has before."

Black Owned Everything is an online platform and marketplace dedicated to elevating the visibility of Black-owned brands. What started as an Instagram account has evolved into a medium for creating meaningful and long-lasting participation between Black business, community and talent following the motto "we exist for when the trend is over."

"When I first made the Instagram page, I really was just sharing the things that I personally loved," Ms. Akers said. "I was coming across so many fantastic brands and just wanted to share what I was finding."

"It spun into this need, this demand, for a hub where people could discover Black fashion brands," she said. "Then it became this idea of, how do I blur the lines of luxury?"

While industry leaders agree it is still a long way to go before the business is shifted completely, as more leaders in the fashion space use their platforms to talk and write about these issues and implement concrete efforts, the further the industry moves away from performative activism.

Transparency is key

As demand for social and environmental consciousness grows on behalf of consumers, brands have publicly declared ways in which they are taking steps towards sustainability.

Italian fashion house Gucci was ranked the most transparent luxury brands according to the Fashion Revolution index. The index tracks the performance of fashion brands against five key areas: policy and commitments, governance, traceability, supplier assessment and remediation and spotlight issues ([see story](#)).

French luxury group Kering partnered with Albin Group, Supima and Oritain to develop a more sustainable business model through 100 percent traceable organic cotton. The company was the first company in the fashion and luxury businesses to offer such transparency with cotton sourcing ([see story](#)).

These efforts towards transparency resonate with the younger generation of more proactive consumers.

"So many [consumers] are activists, as well, and have these voices they want to use," she said. "They are socially empowered individuals and support causes they care about through social media activism."

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