

DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

What Fashion Brands Are Doing to Make Their Products More Inclusive

Gucci, Target, Aerie and others have created new lines



Illustration: Amira Lin; Source: Getty Images

BY **EMMY LIEDERMAN**

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In June, an [Instagram post](#) promoting a luxury brand's latest mascara became its most liked content to date. But the success of the photo, which has amassed over 800,000 likes, probably has a lot more to do with the teenager wearing it than the product itself.

Ellie Goldstein, an 18-year-old model with Down syndrome, is the latest face of Gucci.

Gucci is just one example of a brand that is expanding its reach by making its products and marketing more inclusive. In an industry that has historically catered to thin, able-bodied women, experts say brands will face financial losses if they fail to create diverse products and ads.

In a [2019 survey](#), Adobe found that most Americans (61%) find diversity in advertising important, and 34% of respondents said they've boycotted a brand when they did not feel their identity was represented.

"The issue that I see is that our advertising does not reflect the current diversity of people in this world," said Christina Mallon, the head of inclusive design and accessibility at global digital agency Wunderman Thompson. "Because of social media, these marginalized groups can now speak their truth."



Consumers aren't just looking for diversity in ads—they are demanding tangible inclusion. Successful fashion brands have carved a path for other brands to follow by expanding sizing options, creating adaptable clothing and uplifting the efforts of advocates. Brands have also aligned themselves with smaller partners to create more inclusive products and tapped real customers to represent their brands.

Aligning company and consumer values

Newer brands are gaining traction by centering their products, advertisements and mission statements around inclusivity.

Universal Standard, which prides itself on promoting "fashion freedom for all," is [revolutionizing retail](#) with its products and advertisements. The brand carries sizes 0 to 40 and promises customers a free exchange on products if their size changes.

Classic names are also embracing inclusivity. Tommy Hilfiger launched its [adaptive line](#), which includes features like magnetic snaps and pant leg openings that assist people with disabilities, in 2018.

Target has also made progress by creating sensory-friendly apparel, post-mastectomy swimwear and adaptive Halloween costumes for kids with disabilities.

Mallon emphasized that when brands fail to acknowledge the disabled community, they are making a financial

mistake. She cited one report that people with disabilities in the U.S. control \$645 billion in disposable income. While consumers are demanding inclusivity, those that were once excluded from the mainstream fashion industry are contributing to its success.

Marketing research shows that diversity and inclusion has a significant impact on purchasing decisions. A [2019 study](#) revealed that 69% of Black consumers are more likely to purchase from a brand that represents their race or ethnicity, while 71% of LGBTQ consumers are more likely to interact with an ad that authentically represents their sexual orientation.

Even if certain consumers have been historically represented in fashion and aren't directly affected by inclusion campaigns, marketing experts said millennials and Gen Zers are much more intentional about their purchases than past generations were.

"Younger consumers display their values based on the brands and businesses that they buy and associate themselves with," said Mary Zalla, the global president of consumer brands at Landor, a brand management company.

According to Zalla, consumers are now viewing their purchasing trends as "conscious declarations" of their beliefs and values.

"Fashion designers are now seeing that inclusion is what Generation Z and millennials want," said Mallon.

Creating meaningful partnerships

Bigger brands are promoting inclusion by partnering with startups that cater to diverse bodies. This year, [Aerie starting selling Slick Chicks](#), an adaptable underwear made for people with disabilities. The small business also partnered with Zappos Adaptive and [is projected to grow](#) sales to \$1.5 million by its third year and triple that by its fifth year.

"The biggest challenge when you're a small brand is getting your name out there," said founder and CEO Helya Mohammadian. "Partnerships are key. There aren't enough inclusive products, and people with disabilities shouldn't have to just look at adaptive sites to find clothing."

While Mohammadian recognized these partnerships can be profitable, she said mainstreaming diverse products is a necessary step in "making the world a more inclusive place."

Using customers as brand ambassadors

Many brands that are focused on inclusion have made the switch from traditional model advertisements to photos and testimonies from real customers.

Aerie's senior vp of marketing, Stacey McCormick, said the brand took a major risk when it promised to stop retouching models and challenge exclusive beauty standards, adding the brand hopes the success of #AerieREAL will continue to drive change in the industry.

"Now more than ever, it is important that we continue to use our platform to highlight real women who are using their voices to create change," she said.

Other brands like Pop Fit, an athleisure line that carries sizes XXS-4X, is also committed to representing real bodies in its advertisements. The brand encourages Instagram users to share photos with its clothing through a personalized hashtag and allows customers to scroll through these images when making a purchase on the Pop Fit site.

"As Americans, we are getting heavier over time," Zalla said. "It's not just inclusive, it's also reflective of where we are as a country. I think that any brand that ultimately seeks to be relevant to consumer needs to reflect on dynamic of the population."

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