

Thinking Culture and Creativity
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In today's global economy — with its vast array of beautifully designed products, fashion and luxury brands — is creativity now an inclusive global reality for everyone, or are new forces of exclusion and social division at work?

Many forces of exclusion prevent creativity from becoming a global reality for everyone. Economic profit and competition in the global economy are just some of the factors influencing global creativity. In this essay, however, the main focus of research is how body image and its portrayal in the luxury fashion segment works as a force of exclusion by impacting beauty standards in the Western world. First, the values of liberalism are presented in relation to the luxury fashion industry, an introduction to the prevalent beauty standard of the thin ideal of the Western cultures and its relation to luxury fashion industry. Then, the complexities of fashion as a practice are explained, demonstrating a correlation between the glamorization of an unachievable product and body type and an entanglement of factors of inertia with the very management practices of absolute luxury fashion. The luxury brands' distribution principles are then connected to notions of untouchability and intertwinement of thin fetishism with racial, gender and moral issues involved in its advancement. Finally, through an explanation of neoliberalist values, social stratification in terms of wealth is connected to forces of social division. The luxury fashion's split of the sizing system and creation of two separate worlds in the fashion industry is connected to the research presented.

According to liberalist values, it is up to the individual to pursue any of the following human goods: "love, beauty, art, friendship, family, knowledge, play, pleasure, achievement, wealth, health, and so on." (Charvet and Kaczynska-Nay, 2008, pp.10-11) The higher-order values essential to liberalism are liberty, equality and autonomy, forming the pursuit of other values and hence not subject to choice on the same basis. Everyone should hence be able to pursue creativity in today's global economy. Though, in such a liberalist world where the new generation of customers strives for social change and inclusivity in all aspects, certain industries are falling behind or "working in the 20th century" (Edelkoort, 2015, p.1). An example of this would be the luxury fashion industry, with a system that is "obsolete" and "outside of society" (Edelkoort, 2015, p.1), with apparent forces of social division at work; not only is it not progressing like the rest of the world, but it is also avoiding liberal ideals of inclusivity as it is "developing the exception" (Edelkoort, 2015, p.1). The fashion industry is slowly picking up the liberalist values demanded by consumers such as individuality and diversity, making creativity not liberal, but exclusive. There is a risk that the forces of social division in the luxury fashion industry influence the judgment of creative worth, which otherwise can be impacted by "cultural environment, personal biases, through membership of social groups, such as gender or class, and personal background or status" (Martin and Wilson, 2017, p.418). This potentially intervenes with the pursuit of the mentioned human goods,

hence creativity, making it exclusive. In the current global economy, with its vast array of branding and marketing processes, there is an abundant representation of the thin body type, or representation of the “thin ideal” body image (Thompson and Stice, 2001, p.181) in absolute luxury brands, defined as “the highest level of luxury brands” (Matić and Pandža Bajs, 2022, p. 540), known as Haute Couture, or “straight fashion” brands as Volonte describes “those of the fashion weeks” (Volonté, 2017, p.262).

Beauty ideals are recognised as a “set of characteristics that a society considers attractive depending on the era” (Speranza et al, 2022, p. 2310). As explained by Speranza and others, body image is not a fixed construct but is accessible to sociocultural pressures or influences that direct and bolster the internalisation of such ideals. Forces of exclusion are identified in sectors of the luxury industry, such as the personal luxury goods segment, which encompasses luxury fashion, accessories, watches, jewellery and eyewear (Sabanoglu, 2022). The internalisation of the thin ideal refers to the “extent to which an individual cognitively “buys into” socially defined ideals of attractiveness and engages in behaviours designed to produce an approximation of these ideals” (Thompson and Stice, 2001, p. 181) Heather Widdows argues, that as our culture has become more visual and virtual, appearance norms for the face and the body have become more dominant, increasingly demanding and globalised (Widdows, 2018, pp. 3-10). As the beauty standard has become a social norm, not engaging with the beauty ideal has disadvantageous social consequences, and liberalism’s acclaimed freedom of choice no longer applies. According to Volonté, an increasing “slimming” of the bodies in “advertising, television programmes, fashion shows, beauty contests and in the pages of Playboy” has been apparent since the 1950s (Volonté, 2017, p. 258). One’s body image perception and formation can be strongly affected by societal standards such as “strong male” and “thin female,” which are common in today’s “WEIRD” (Speranza et al., 2022, p. 2310) cultures, an acronym for western, educated, industrialised, rich, democratic cultures. High visibility social agents, hence people with influencer, celebrity, athlete and model professions engage in commentation or action (Speranza et al., 2022, p. 2310), which aids to encourage the sustaining of this ideal, alongside other agents such as family members, peer groups and mass media (Thompson and Stice, 2001, p. 181). There is social hegemony when it comes to the thin ideal, dominating various sectors of the “cultural industry” (Volonte, 2017, p. 258). Examples include the “glorification of ultra-slender models” (Thompson and Stice, 2001, p. 181) in the luxury fashion industry, relating to Volonté’s explanation that higher-weight bodies are even entirely removed from representation in cases such as mainstream fashion magazines. Phases of research in 1998 found thin-ideal internalisation as a risk factor for body image and eating disturbances and proved a connection to fashion magazines. Educational programs were developed for women to consume media more critically, reducing thin-ideal internalisation: one of the trials providing them with information on digital manipulation of model body images in magazines led to a reduction in internalisation of the thin ideal (Thompson and Stice, 2001, p. 182) A demand for ultra-thin

bodies in high-end fashion to use for “fitting clothing, display at fashion shows and the communication of products and brands through the media,” (Volonté, 2017, p. 258) has been created by the focus on slim sizes by the production system. The favouritism/prioritisation of the “thin ideal” is not only seen by the industries use of especially thin models for the promotion of the fashion industries products but also from the practice of limiting the products to small and medium sizes (smaller than 12/14 US)(Volonté, 2017, p. 253). Hence, it can be questioned how such a prevalence of thin bodies is possible in a world that is supposedly becoming ever more inclusive and the forces of social division at work.

The forces of exclusion that prevent creativity from becoming a global reality for everyone, as argued by Czerniawski (2011), relate to the “complexity of fashion as a practice.” By viewing fashion, especially women’s fashion, through the lens of “practice theory”, comparing the “practice of fashion” to the practice of cooking, for example, Volonté(2017, pp. 255-256) points out that there is a set of constraints, or factors of inertia that are present within a practice, alongside factors of change, as for example a more inclusive approach to different body type inclusivity, between which there is “unstable balance.” *Inertia* is defined as a “bond that every new action necessarily has with an array of actions, relationships and objects that pre-exist it.” (Volonté, 2017, p.256) The bond acts in the form of, and its central importance of “routines, habits and conventions produced by reciprocal expectations of behaviour within the community of practice” (Volonté, 2017, p. 256) It can be used to identify the thin ideal, which takes hold of the fashion industry, as a habit or convention in the performance of the practice of fashion. This information leads to the question of whether, in today’s global economy, a new force of exclusion is just simply an entanglement of factors of inertia and the management of absolute luxury fashion. What would affirm this point is that “those engaged in the practice do not react so much to what they see (an ever-changing world around them),” such as more inclusive approaches to body representations in the media for example, “but instead what they foresee, meaning what their habitus -resulting from their history as practitioners of that practice – induces them to see in advance” (Volonté, 2017, p.256). The very management of absolute luxury brands involves “turning traditional marketing practices upside down, meaning that instead of seeking to satisfy consumer demands” -for example for liberalist values such as individuality and diversity, a demand for larger sizes and inclusive approach to different body type representations in brand communication - “producers should seek to resist them.” (Walley et al., 2013, p.826) make a distinction between absolute luxury brands, quoting them to have a “dream-like” quality when compared to both accessible luxury and ordinary brands. They quote, “retail luxury is producer rather than consumer-oriented and seeks to generate awe rather than community” (Walley et al., 2013, p.826). Hence, the following two concerns can be raised: Firstly, selling expensive luxury products that have attributions of a “dream”, in connection with glamorising the thin ideal; both the product and the body type of models portrayed are unachievable by most of the population. Secondly, as luxury fashion

practitioners “react to a worldview deeply rooted in history,” instead of that of the “ever-changing world,” (Volonté, 2017, p.256), the recurring issue is that their generation of “awe” (Walley et al., 2013, p. 826) which includes glorification of the thin ideal, seems to be accepted as glorification seems to be part of the practice of luxury fashion itself. Both of these concerns, viewed as complexities of fashion as a practice, are significant when examining the forces of exclusion of creativity in this industry, demonstrating a correlation between the glamorisation of both an unachievable product and body type, alongside an entanglement of factors of inertia with the very management practices of absolute luxury fashion.

Luxury fashion brands are hence often associated with notions of “elusiveness, rarity and untouchability.” (Matić and Pandža Bajs, 2022, p. 542) As defined by Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling (2006, p. 107), branding is a cultural process, performed in an interplay between art and business, production and consumption, images and stories, design and communication. Luxury fashion brands’ very principles of distribution reflect these notions of untouchability and distinguish them from other brands as even the time frame (time spent searching, waiting for a product and waiting for the purchase to be finalised) for certain luxury fashion products is “large when compared to traditional marketing principles” (Matić and Pandža Bajs, 2022, pp. 542-543) such as selling as many units in the shortest time frame possible. In fact, according to the research of Walley et al. (2013, p.824), personal luxury goods have been a significant commercial concept for various centuries, reporting the ancient Egyptians developed functional alongside emotional aspects for the luxury concept, such as the use of glass to safeguard perfume. The Theory of Conspicuous Consumption was used by Thorsten Veblen in 1899 to convey early insight into the “luxury” concept, linking consumption to social status and suggesting that wealthy people use it to consume very noticeable goods and services to “reinforce or enhance their social status” (Walley et al., 2013, p.824) The notion of the elite distinguishing itself from the rest of the population acts as a force of social division, as researched by Sabrina Strings, PhD, an associate Sociology professor at the University of California Irvine.

Strings presents an analysis drawn from works of social theorists Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu and argues that to separate themselves from the “lower classes” (Strings, 2019, p.7), elites constantly cultivate diets, tastes and physical appearances that oppose those of the subordinated groups. Social hierarchies are hence naturalised and normalised by these “social distinctions” that serve to do so. In her analysis, she relates the concepts of thin fetishism and a “phobia” (Strings, 2019, p.6) of higher-weight bodies in the Western world, with racial, gender and moral issues involved in their advancement: she argues that two critical historical developments, the transatlantic slave trade and the rise of Protestantism are what contributed to the development of such forces of division. Having researched various historical sources such as known periodicals, medical publications, newspapers, works of art, and philosophical and religious texts, the former is presented on how racial scientific rhetoric about slavery

linked higher-weighted bodies to Africans. This rhetoric, scientific racism or otherwise explained by the Harvard Library (n.d.) as the co-option of the authority of science to justify racial inequality, shows how elite Europeans and white Americans used racial discourse, defined as “the collective text and talk of society with respect to issues of race,” (Doane, 2006, p.256) to create social dissimilarity between themselves and “racial Others.” (Strings, 2019, p. 7) Amongst the principal targets of these arguments were people of colour and “so-called degraded or hybrid whites (e.g., Celtic Irish, southern Italians and Russians)” (Strings, 2019, p.7). String explains the latter in her analysis, as overeating was suggested as ungodly by Protestant religious discourse with its ideals of asceticism, the elites claiming moral superiority over the mentioned racialised groups. String establishes the connection between racism and Western idealised standards of body size. As scientific racism saw race as a fixed, immutable category, placing white people at the top of a “hierarchical system of human difference” (Strings, 2019, p.18), the racial scientific rhetoric of the Enlightenment era was the foundation on which modern Western culture was constructed. The United States were identified by scholars as the country in which by the 19th-century stigmatisation of higher-weight bodies and pro-thin bias acquired strength by elite Americans, especially women considered “morally upright” (Strings, 2019, p.9). By the early 20th century, it was delineated into a mainstream position. Hence provided, evidence from gender scholars’ work suggests that it was the women in each racial/ethnic group who were primarily targeted by “racial-moral” (Strings, 2019, p.7) forces of social distinction since evaluated based mostly on their physical appearance. It can therefore be argued that Strings’ drawl of centuries of racist pseudoscience up to the 20th century evidences that the present-day ideal of thinness is rooted in historical sexism and racism, potentially making it intrinsically both sexist and racist.

Strings’ research adds to the understanding of the historical development of the forces of exclusion, which prevent creativity from becoming a global reality. It suggests that absolute luxury that “targets the rich” (Walley et al., 2013, p.825) appears to design apparel for a specific “elite” group of people, excluding all those who do not fit the thin ideal, hence reinforcing not only social stratification in terms of wealth, but potentially a force of social division stemming from racial, gender and moral prejudices that are deeply embedded into the luxury fashion’s inertia within the Western world. Thin bodies are glamorised and linked to dream-like luxury; herewith, the economic elite is asserting their “exclusivity” by making luxury goods feel inaccessible to the majority of the world population, who either can not afford the luxury added value for economic reasons or do not conform to the thin ideal body type. The luxury fashion industry and social stratification are further interlinked through the inequalities perpetuated by neoliberal economic policies and consumer culture. All aspects are seen from one perspective: how to “produce better figures” (Edelkoort, 2015, p.4). Free market capitalism and deregulation have led to clothing manufacturers moving production to countries with low labour costs and

poor working conditions, linking the fashion industry directly to the exploitation of marginalised population groups in developing countries and widening the gap between rich and poor. The idea of creativity being portrayed as exclusive, or the stratification in Haute Couture brands, is similarly reaffirmed by the “segregation of plus-size clothing” (Volonté, 2017, pp. 262-263), excluding sizes larger than US 12 from straight fashion and removal of “fashion content from clothing larger than size 12.” (Volonté, 2017, pp. 262-263) Hence two separate worlds have been created that Volonté (2017) describes as not having much in common; the world of sizes smaller than 12 containing clothes enhanced by immaterial content, and the world of sizes larger than 12, aiming to conceal rather than enhance the body (except for cases like the Elena Mirò brand). In other words, they are making creativity in luxury fashion exclusive and divisional.

Throughout this research, by looking at luxury fashion branding in connection to body image and exploring the historical perspective of the body image’s relation to racial, gender and moral prejudices, and luxury fashion’s glorification of the “thin ideal,” the following forces of exclusion and social division were identified in today’s global economy: a correlated glamorisation of an unachievable luxury image and thin body type; an entanglement of factors of inertia and the management of absolute luxury fashion; the prevalence of neoliberalist dynamics which compromise creativity for profit; exploitation and discrimination of workers in developing countries driven by neoliberal markets and imposed globalised beauty ideals that have become more dominant and demanding. These factors of exclusion demonstrate that creativity is not an inclusive global reality for everyone. Neoliberalist values and profit-driven markets further limit creative potential in the fashion industry and sacrifice innovative and artistic designs in favour of mass-producing commercially viable products. The luxury brands’ principles of untouchability, exclusivity and prioritisation of the thin ideal are rooted in historical sexism and racism; they hence resist liberalist social change and diversity. The industries and infrastructure of the beauty industry are intertwined with social stratification. The Western beauty ideals are globalised and demanding of all racial groups, therefore, making creative expression subordinate to glamorised beauty norms.

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