FASHIONABLE: STYLING THE UNIQUE BODY

by

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ABSTRACT

FASHIONABLE: STYLING THE UNIQUE BODY

MASTERS OF ARTS IN FASHION 2014

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Keywords: diverse models, disability studies, expressing identity

Over the past decade, there has been a steady increase in the use of diverse models in fashion media ranging from plus size models to older and ethically diverse models. People with disabilities, however, remain invisible in fashion magazines and advertising. My research addresses this absence with a project that is both empirical and creative. Working across disciplinary borders, it will advance both my own field of Fashion and Disability Studies by opening a line of inquiry related to the employment (or lack) of models with disabilities in the fashion industry. The project enables me to produce a creative work that will contribute to the larger social process of representing people with disabilities in more complex ways. It will shed light onto how fashion is important to everyone as a key form of expressing identity regardless of physical differences.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION.....	II
ABSTRACT.....	III
A. INTRODUCTION.....	1
B. SITUATING MYSELF	2
C. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	3
D. METHODOLOGY.....	6
E. ANALYSIS OF IMAGERY.....	9
F. ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEW DATA.....	19
G. BRIDGING: FROM INTERVIEWS TO PHOTOGRAPHS.....	25
H. MY PHOTOS AND STYLING NOTES.....	29
I. FINAL REFLECTIONS.....	34
J. CONCLUSION.....	36
K. BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	37
L. APPENDIX.....	41

A. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade in fashion media, there has been a steady increase in the usage of models with diverse embodiment, ranging from plus size models and petite models to older and racially diverse models. People with disabilities, however, remain invisible in fashion magazines and advertising. I believe fashion media chooses to ignore those with disabilities, leading to a disenfranchised group of people that are under represented in public fashion forums. Drawing from interviews, which I have conducted with ten individuals, my research will address this absence with a project that is both empirical and imaginative. Working across the disciplines of Fashion Studies and Disability Studies, this investigation will advance both fields by opening up a line of inquiry related to the presence (or lack) of models with disabilities in the fashion industry. This endeavor enabled me to generate a fashion image that will contribute to the larger social process of representing people with disabilities in a multifaceted manner.

Fashion imagery with its evocation of powerful emotions and consequent moods has created a new visual grammar (Orbach, 2009). We are bombarded weekly, with a good 2000 to 5000 images of bodies enhanced by digital manipulation (Orbach, 2009, p. 110), conveying an unattainable icon of beauty, non-existent in the real world (Orbach, 2009) (SHOWstudio). These images infiltrate our visual field and psyche, and in so doing reconstruct how we view ourselves (Orbach, 2009), subconsciously blinding us to the fact that fashion offers a very narrow viewpoint of the body, eliminating the employ of non-normative bodies in this discipline and the media in general (SHOWstudio).

B. SITUATING MYSELF

What made me start thinking about disability and fashion was when I saw the photo of paralympian Jonnie Peacock in the I-Sustain Campaign from 2011 I.D magazine (seen in figure 4). This image inspired me to conduct research in this area. Even though I am coming from a fashion discipline, an industry that is all about the perfect image. Learning about disabilities allowed me to make comparisons to social models and let me to understand that individuals do not necessarily want to be labeled as “disabled”. I realized that there is a definite lack of images featuring non-normative bodies. Proceeding as an able-bodied woman I wanted to create a fashion image incorporating the imperfect body to be the aspirational perfect body.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

When commencing my literature review I began by concentrating research efforts in areas that characterized how the media has presented disability. This research has two streams: society's perception of the human body and how people with disabilities are stereotyped in the media. The first stream has argued that the human body is a symbolic frame that has social, economic and political associations (Haller, 2010, p. 140). Historically, the ruling hierarchies have determined the ideal body type (Haller, 2010, p. 140). Due to this preset conviction the disabled person's body does not meet the standards held by society (Haller, 2010, p. 140). Thus, it can be said that in society, the emphasis placed on our personal appearance directly impacts the disabled community (Haller, 2010, p. 140). The second stream of research has argued that the presence of disabled bodies in the media is slowly increasing; however, depictions of disability have remained largely unchanged since the 1920s (Riley, 2005). Riley discusses how the imagery focuses on the medical aspect of injury or illness; disability is viewed as something that needs to be overcome and perhaps even "fixed" – a point of view that often upsets members of the disability community (Riley, 2005). He points to the misguided coverage of disability in the media remarking that in many studies there has been much negative imagery of such individuals (Riley, 2005). Riley also discusses how powerful and influential the media is in its distortion of issues relating to disability (Riley, 2005). His investigation reveals that a problem exists between writers, editors, directors, producers, filmmakers, and advertisers and the executives who dictate their fiscal demands, which results in media misrepresentation (Riley 2005); yet, the general population is not necessarily aware of this distortion. Many people learn about disability issues through the media rather than during interactions with people with disabilities leaving

them misinformed and unaware of the real issues faced by this community (Pointon & Davies, 1997). The power of the media, be it positive or negative, still dominates representations of people with disabilities and their concerns (Haller, 2010). In *The Creatures Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery*, David Hevey, a disabled photographer and writer examines and challenges the representation of disabled people in advertising (Hevey, 1997). All of these works represent how disability is being portrayed in the media, yet there are limited academic studies that focus on disability with respect to the fashion industry. I hope to find a new way to fill in the gap and represent this devalued community by breaking the conventional stereotypes of beauty in advertising and fashion shows, while thus widening the frame of public tolerance (Vainshtein, p. 24).

Elizabeth Hayman's research explores dress and disability. Hayman notes that disability performs as a social phenomenon, as a representational metaphor, in that it is contested, rejected or proudly assumed (Hayman, 2012, p. 8). Disability is an aspect of life which is rarely recognized for its human intricacies, its cultural generativity, and its essential social critique, making it an integral component of what makes societies consistent, relevant and meaningful (Hayman, 2012, p. 10). Women with disabilities go unrepresented, not only in American apparel, but also in most of popular culture (Hayman, 2012, p. 32). Thus, the fashion industry has an important untapped, role to play in expanding cultural perceptions around disability, namely that disability has a natural place in life and consequently a natural place in fashion (Hayman, 2012, p. 87).

Western cultures tend not to visualize disability, making it seem as if it is non-existent (Hayman, 2012, p. 20), yet, when it does gain appearance it tends to be negatively represented. Fashion, beauty, and style are culturally dissociated from the human differences that come to mind when we think of disability (Hayman, 2012, p 21). Images of disability and fashion are far removed from the culturally processed and idealized bodies that we behold in today's fashion media (Hayman, 2012 p. 40)

Alexander McQueen's October 1998 'Access-Able Campaign, a fashion editorial featuring models with various physical disabilities (Kuppers 2006 [2002], p. 186) appeared in the style magazine *Dazed & Confused* (Hayman, 2012, p. 95). The models have evident disabilities, which are not necessarily obvious in these photographs (Bancroft, 2012). McQueen found himself in a unique position, allowed to explore the tried and true ethics attributed to the visibility of disabilities from a different angle while advancing some seriously new fashion agendas (Hayman, 2012, p. 95). He aimed to show that our preconceptions of beauty are too narrow by far (Frankel, 2011) (Hayman, 2012).

Disabilities do exist and present a valuable means for more introspective thinking about bodies, namely that disabilities prompt us to re-evaluate the traditional doctrine of dress (Hayman, 2012, p. 113). Rosemarie-Garland Thomson investigates how culture saturates the particularities of bodies with meanings and probes the consequences of those meanings, taking academic enquiry beyond the usual 'explicit disability topics' (Thomson 2004, p. 75, both quotes) (Hayman, 156).

D. METHODOLOGY

This study draws from the qualitative tradition of arts-informed research which is an emergent form of inquiry that uses visual and creative methods to facilitate our exploration of layers of experience that are difficult to express through language (Gauntlett, 2007). That said, people with disabilities have had ambivalent relationships with research and with the arts as each of these endeavors has contributed to normalization and social exclusion (Ignagi & Church, p. 625). Disability theorists argue that art and imagery are imperative in a culture and cannot, without debilitating consequences, be controlled by those outside of the disability rights movement (Ignagi & Church, p. 627). In recent years, there has been an increase in disabled artists and performers seeking to reclaim the ways in which images of disability are constructed and delivered, in an effort to control the words, images, and ideas that have historically worked against them (Abbas, Church, Frazee and Panitch, 2004). Arts-informed research may provide new ways to “language” the experience of disability. In an attempt to transform representation of disability, this study may allow for engagement across physical differences, rather than merely reproducing these differences (Ignagi & Church, p. 633).

My design is multi-layered. To begin, I built a collection of existing fashion photographs taken from fashion editorials featuring models with a physical disability. I also sourced a series of on-line web documents of news articles and blog postings featuring models or various aspects of non-normative body representation within the fashion industry. A prominent example showcases Aimee Mullins, dressed in carved wooden prosthetic boots designed by Alexander McQueen, in an edition of *Dazed & Confused* Magazine (1998), photographed by Nick Knight. Another illustrative sample may be found in Helmut Newton’s controversial photographs for *American Vogue* (1995) in which he featured

an abled-bodied model sporting a prosthetic leg, seated in a wheelchair. Images such as these force the viewer to pay attention to reality differently, making the ordinary become extraordinary (Weber, 2008).

During the second phase of my study I conducted a series of face-to-face interviews with ten individuals. This proved to be a challenging process for me as I was interviewing a minority group. It was imperative to receive ethics board approval before any interviews could be conducted. The ethics board was cautious as I was targeting a vulnerable community, and could cause harm. I had to reword my sentence structure in order to clarify exactly whom I was targeting. I contacted each candidate via their places of employment with information available in the public domain (websites etc.). Two people were able-bodied persons who work in the fashion industry: a designer, and an editor for a magazine. The other eight interviewees were a model, a photographer, a writer and students and all were disabled people who work in or comment on the industry. Interviewing across this spectrum allowed for a better understanding of the issues at hand. The questions were designed around image-based conversations with participants, who are working adults that have already directly engaged in this world – as creators and/or critics.

I introduced six images of models with various physical differences taken from fashion editorials or campaigns ranging from 1998 to present day. The images allowed each individual a focus for their comments, facilitating dialogue. Sample questions I posed of the participants pertaining to the images included: What did you like or dislike? Which photo did you prefer? How do these images make you feel about people with physical disabilities? Do you think these images affect the disability community in a positive or negative light?

Since part of my research process involved the creation of a fashion image, having participants share their feedback of existing imagery furnished me with a better awareness of what was already being presented in visual fashion culture. For these visuals and web-based images are paramount in putting a finger on the pulse of the industry. The image that brought about the strongest reaction from the participants was Figure Four. This image, taken from *I.D Magazine*, provided me with my inspiration for conducting research in this area as models with diverse body shapes and sizes are rarely portrayed in media.

The final phase of my project employed the creative element. Along with a photographer, I created a fashion image that directly responded to the issues raised in my interviews, incorporating what I had learned about disability relations in the course of this inquiry. One of the interviewees also acted as my model, which made the creative endeavour a much easier and interesting process.

E. ANALYSIS OF IMAGERY

I carried out a purposive selection of individuals from two groups where I identified and deliberately selected my participants on the basis of their work and expertise. The first group consisted of two individuals from the fashion industry, one, a Toronto based designer and the other, an editor of a magazine. The second group was comprised of five individuals from the disability community. In this group, the first participant was a twenty-two year old student from the University of Toronto who does not follow fashion. The second participant was a PhD student from the London College of Fashion. The third participant was a client of a Toronto based designer for the seated clientele, and the fourth was a student from Ryerson's Disability Studies program. Three participants came from both groups. One participant has muscular dystrophy and is actively working in the fashion industry in New York City, another was a model and the last was a fashion and portrait photographer.

The interview process for each individual lasted approximately one hour. To open up our discussions I selected six photographs depicting fashion, featuring models with various physical disabilities. Each participant gave various responses towards the images. Many of the images provided more groundwork for discussion, which lead to them being favoured higher than others. The order of preference for these images ranked from most favoured to least favoured were as follows: Figure 4 i-Sustain Campaign, Figure 1 Aimee Mullins, Figure 6 Diesel Campaign. Figure 5 Positive Exposure Campaign and Figure 2, Catherine Long for Dazed & Confused with the latter two vying for equal position as regards least favourite. Participants had similar comments towards the images.

During discussion, participants favoured some images over others. They read these photos as high fashion imagery commenting that they were empowering beautiful shots. All of the images had one thing in common, or as one participant simply noted that you see these images now and then you will never see them again. In other words, displaying a variety of body types in the fashion media is vital, yet such fashion photography still remains elusive. One participant commented that, “*it’s not the first thing you see; that she has an arm missing or a leg missing*” (see figure 1 and 2) (personal communication, March 12, 2014). By incorporating the absent body part within the narrative and not placing it solely at the forefront, this notion of non-normative is challenged.

Image 1: i-Sustain Campaign, 2012 (Fig. 4)

Out of all the images shown, Figure 4, the i-Sustain Campaign was the image that was mentioned the most within conversation, perhaps because this image was considered most normative. One participant noted that the model appears as “*how fashion is supposed to be, aspirational*” (personal communication, March 20, 2014). “*I like this image of Johnny Peacock because that’s how athletes are shot and it sort of looks like any sort of Adidas campaign or something like that*” (personal communication, March 14, 2014).

In contrast one participant noted that this photo was set up like a sports campaign. *“I kind of like the imagery, the sorts of sports’ imagery but at the same time it’s sort of like that super crip kind of thing which can be positive; it is kind of a bit problematic in terms of like oh look how they’ve overcome their disability”*. However the designer states, *“one of the images is showing a capability emphasizing the whole super crip”*(personal communication, March 11, 2014).

Many participants were drawn to the overall construction of the image and the styling of the model. But one participant noted, *“My first reaction was the grey coloured cape thing on him which he is wearing. I don’t know what that is. That almost makes him look somewhat like a superhero person.”* She noted that this image depicts super crip due to the overall styling and stance of the model (personal communication, March 22, 2014). The model appears as if he is heroic.

Image 2: Aimee Mullins by Nick Knight, *Dazed & Confused*, Access-able shoot, September, 1998 (Fig. 1)

The next highest ranked photo was the Alexander McQueen image of Para Olympian, model and spokesperson Aimee Mullins (see figure 1). Many participants agreed this was a high fashion aspirational photograph. One participant from the disability community noted that the

first picture reminded her of “*an almost broken down doll or a character in Blade Runner*” (personal communication, March 20, 2014).

However the participant also remarked “*I don’t know if someone with an amputation would find it off putting*” (personal communication, March 20, 2014) as the stylist has glamorized and blended the prosthetics within the image, making her fit a certain mold in an effort to restore perfection. “*It doesn’t hide her prosthetics; it kind of shows what could be done with prosthetics and sort of fashioning them, in terms of they fit in with that sort of look with the rest of the outfit. It’s a bit sort of strange and a bit unusual and I like that. I really like this campaign anyway*” (personal communication, March 14, 2014).

One participant felt that this photo was inspirational whether looking at it through a designer’s or a stylist’s lens “*even if the viewer doesn’t know the intention or if there was an intention, I like to think that there was a back story for both the stylist and the photographer and then it makes me more curious about that and then this is also obviously the hoop skirt, things aren’t things that I could go out and buy, but look at the different fabrics and how they interact together then you’re like okay I see what they are doing there. I can look for like materials or like colours. You can try and seek out and get inspiration from that image*” (personal communication, March 20, 2014). The participant also felt that this photo was an image that could be inspiring to both the fashion and disability community as it eases their unfamiliarity with the prosthetic.

One participant did not like the photo, commenting, “*The woman in the photo is made to look freakish. You know, it seems that they deliberately put her in a skirt that people could see through to accent her prosthetics. I understand that some people with disabilities may be*

like, okay, yes I have a disability. I want to show the world my difference, whereas other people may look at this and be like, this is exposing her” (personal communication, March 22 2014). This participant thought that the model could be portrayed in a more natural manner as this image could have been playing on the idea of the freak show or even “disability pride” by showcasing her differences.

There exists a misrepresentation of disability here as well with her conformity to beauty standards (Hayman, 2012). In the image her legs appear as though she does not have a disability. Her prosthetics blend into her leg, which thus brings to mind this idea of the desirable body and the notion that non normative bodies have es aesthetically pleasing and gender normative (Liddiard, 2013)

Image 3: Spring/Summer campaign, 2014 (Fig. 6)

The recent Diesel Ad Campaign (see Figure 6) had mixed responses. One of the participants felt *“a disconnect between models, and how do you bend, sort of leaning next to her or kneeling more front and centre. It might also be not a belittling stance but sort of like I’m getting down to your level. I don’t know how this can be shot better or get models to interact more fluidly because of the chair and different height differences and things”* (personal communication, March 20, 2014). The designer participant did not like the Diesel campaign

(See Figure 6) as he said that, *“Diesel is a company that likes to push social buttons” and “felt like it was a form of tokenism”*. He doesn’t *“know if anyone benefits from the approach other than Diesel”* (personal communication, March 11, 2014). In the end, it is important to recognize that ad campaigns never benefit anyone other than the companies they represent.

On the other hand, the PhD student from London College of Fashion commented, *“Usually when you see wheelchair users in any sort of campaign like this, they are in small manual wheelchairs. I’ve got this theory that it eases anxieties of non-disabled people because you seem less frail if you are in one of these sporty light little chairs. I think that is some of the anxieties non-disabled people have about seeing disabled people. Disabled people sort of represent frailty and weakness and illness and disease. I think power chairs can represent that, whereas you have to have a sort of physical ability to be able to use a manual chair.”* She also mentioned, *“That’s what I really like about the campaign, about this image, is that she is in a power chair, which is kind of unusual. And I like it because she looks really cool. That’s what I like cause usually when you see disabled people in these things, they have to be inspirational. So they have to look really happy or yah, look how happy I am. Or they have to look really able, or they have to look really sporty or stuff like that. In this, Jillian just looks cool. Jillian looks sort of hip and cool and she fits in with everyone else in the campaign because they are all artists and bloggers and people who work in the industry”* (personal communication, March 14, 2014).

Additionally, one participant commented that *“it almost just gives the impression that people with physical disabilities have this attitude about themselves just like I’m fashionable but I’m very non- approachable and that’s not how I want people to perceive me”* (personal communication, March 22, 2014).

Image 4: Levi Strauss & Co Campaign, March 1999 (Fig. 3)

The least favoured photographed was the Levi's Campaign (see figure 3). Many participants questioned the Levi's image and its content matter. Participants were confused by the height difference of the little person versus the tall model (see figure 3). One participant noted the little person was treated as either a prop or was placed this way in order to appear tall (personal communication, March 20, 2014). Participants were confused by the overall image: *Is that the first picture in figure 3, the top of the head, or is that someone else's head? He sort of looks like he is floating in mid-air. It's almost like comical. If he was sort of just standing next to her at the same height I feel like it would be a lot better. It almost emphasizes his stature. It's like, hey, look how small he is. He is floating in the air. In a way it would have been a lot cooler if he were on the ground.* (personal communication, March 14, 2014).

Just the height representation and it almost looks like the girl is holding him and It would have been better if the girl was maybe laying down on him or something so that the prominence of him being short is not there. It's almost like they are a couple but they are not a couple because the girl is just like I'm prettier than you, I'm sort of better than you type of thing. So I don't like that one. (personal communication, March 22, 2014).

Image 5: Catherine Long shot, *Dazed & Confused* Access-able shoot, September 1998

Participants liked the photograph in the *Dazed and Confused* shot of Catherine Long (See Figure 2) but it was not discussed in much depth. The Toronto based designer noted that he was familiar with the *Dazed and Confused* shot (see figure 2). One participant observed, *“It’s a really nice shot because it looks like it doesn’t hide her, the fact that she has one arm as they usually they try to hide it.”* Not many commented on this image, as it seemed like such a natural approach.

Sometimes the images you see, there are a couple of models that have one arm, sometimes it’s hidden that they only have one arm. It kind of feels a bit like they don’t want to show it and I understand that in some ways because if you are not confident in showing that. Sometimes it feels like its strategically placed and strategically posed to not show they have one arm. I love figure 2. I think it’s really beautiful (personal communication, March 14, 2014).

Another participant thought the model looked pensive (personal communication, March 22, 2014) while one participant thought maybe she was not happy because she was missing her arm. *“Then rather she is just posing and being empowered by the fact she is posing in a very exposed manner. But this photo to me is better than the first photo in the sense that they*

made an effort to put her in everyday clothes. So there is not that sort of freakish image of her” (personal communication, March 22, 2014). Participants felt this image was indeed different but not set up to attract attention. Even though the image had the most obvious absence of a limb, participants all agreed that the image was visually pleasing and had a “cool” factor in that the model was not presented as vulnerable.

Image 6: Positive Exposure Campaign, 2012 (Fig. 5)

Figure 5 was the least popular image but considered to be the most natural. The *Positive Exposure* image was the least talked about, perhaps due to the normality of the model. Bleached hair and eyebrows has been on and off trend. One participant noted that that the model could very well be a model on a runway show (personal communication, March 20, 2014). *“Having her eyebrows bleached, like how they bleached the actress in dragon tattoo and stuff. I don’t even know how many people would just flip past this one and not really see the disability”* (personal communication, March 20, 2014).

Another participant remarked, *“I kind of really like the images, I think, the people with albinism. I like them cause it kind of looks like any sort of campaign for a clothing store”* (personal communication, March 14, 2014).

Even though one participant did not like the title *Positive Exposure*, the caption was inspirational for some. *“Like look how happy they are. I really like the images. They look really cool. It looks like it could be for Target or something like that. I just think the phrase Positive Exposure, in the same way it could almost be inspiration”* (personal communication, March 14, 2014).

Yet another commented, *“I think this is the most natural picture of all of them because this just depicts someone enjoying life and being happy with themselves, just being like, hey, this is me. So yeah, so I like that”* (personal communication, March 22, 2014). This was the first image that people thought was the most natural for she did not appear to be different.

F. ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEW DATA

Fashion Individuals' Insights

“Diversity is just a Trend”

The individuals from the fashion side had excellent insights into the industry, yet both groups ended having similar views. They each noted that diversity representation was seen as a trend, something that comes and goes and follows the path of the fashion cycle. A Toronto based fashion designer noted with respect to diversity representation that *“there is this kind of dialogue around diversity representation and that it comes and goes in a kind of cycle every few years”* (personal communication, March 11, 2014).

There has been minimal diverse representation but what little representation that has taken place has been directed at race, age and size while disability continues to remain invisible. Some designers have used different aged models in order to move away from the industry's obsession with exploitation of youth and its unhealthy beauty aesthetic (personal communication, March 11, 2014). At the end of the day the fashion industry is a business and must sell to consumers in order to survive. It is not passive in relation to its consumers as the two become enmeshed in a relationship when the industry creates a sense of aspiration in order to peddle its product.

Portrayed as Weak

Many of the fashion images of the disability community tend to have been portrayed as gimmicky or “lame”. A participant, a fashion editor of a magazine stated, *“I think the reason people may be tentative about using models like this is because they won't translate as being as high fashion but this kind of proves this is not true. It is still high gloss and aspirational and seems glamorous and all those things fashion tries to be* (personal communication,

March 13, 2014). “Yet, the fashion industry continues to hedge away from using different body shapes and sizes to advertise their product. Another participant noted that “ *reviewers and critics could maybe have more input as they do maybe in getting diversity of sorts of models with race and gender identity to happen more fluidly on runways and in print as I think there is still quite a disconnect between, sort of, all of us average people and what goes on in fashion.* (personal communication, March 20, 2014).

Taking a Political Stance

Sometimes designers use diverse models to challenge the norm, taking a political stance on the industry. However most designers avoid this tactic for fear that it may cheapen their brand or design and that it may be seen as a publicity stunt. Diversity representation has so far been treated cyclically just as it is in the cycle of fashion (personal communication, March 11, 2014). Many times if the industry is implementing diversity it is because they are attempting to create a political stand or a new moment in time. The designer noted, “*you have this idea of incorporating other body types and maybe for a few seasons that’s deemed fashionable but then what happens?*” (personal communication, March 11, 2014). He commented, “*sort of the same with a sustainable approach with that kind of mandate*” (personal communication, March 11, 2014). The designer remarked that diversity is a continuous cycle, “*Especially in an industry that likes to think that it is being forward which in fact is the furthest from the truth*” (personal communication, March 11, 2014). However, the fashion industry likes to feel safe, especially in Toronto and it does not like to take risks. The industry does not want to “push the envelope” and move away from the norm by changing its employment of the ideal body shape and size. Fashion is seen as aspirational because it is trying to sell a fantasy (personal communication, March 13, 2014), but this fantasy never includes physical differences or impairment.

“Fashion is just a business”

Some fashion individuals commented that diversity matters when it suits someone’s brand image. The designer stated, *“even when you think you are being inclusive or supportive of other forms of beauty and diversity, it’s not necessarily construed as such by, maybe, the people you think. And of course everyone in fashion loves it. Ooh wow it’s amazing, what a moment! But then that’s it. It’s a moment. It’s not a prevailing strategy for social change and representation. It’s like an exciting moment, that’s quickly ready to be replaced by the next exciting moment and so there is a danger there”* (personal communication, March 11, 2014).

The fashion editor remarked that “in order for diversity representation to happen, it has to start at the beginning of the business but not just something that occurs once” and is a moment in time. Yet, fashion remains a business and the consumers are the ones in charge while others argue consumers are the ones held hostage by the whims of the producers. I believe that designers (and the fashion industry in general) continue to have shortsighted vision and stick to a preconceived notion of the fashion consumer, namely that of upwardly mobile, largely urban, educated, white, and obsessed with an ideal.

Fashion participants agreed that everyone is responsible when it comes to diversity representation. It may just be a trend and no one is responsible or it could depend on the individual, it all depends on the brand’s mandate. *“I mean individual people can make individual choices about specific ad campaigns but you are talking about a part of status quo that goes beyond the single person. You sort of make the excuse that you’re just doing what customers want to see”* (personal communication, March 11, 2014).

Disability Side

When interviewing the disability community, participants had similar views about the portrayal of non-normative body types in the media. A participant from the London College of Fashion noted that there has definitely been more conversation around it due to the use of social media as well and personal fashion blog activism (personal communication, March 14, 2014). Diversity is slowly being implemented into everyday conversation, but right now that is all it is, talk. Everyone tends to talk about it but nothing gets done (personal communications, March 14, 2014). It needs to start being part of their mandate rather than serving as shock value. One participant reported, the disability is usually masked or hidden (personal communication, March 22, 2014). They are “*made to seem very heroic or powerful or not sexy and beautiful and fashionable*”. Or “*when you see a disabled woman, usually her disability is somewhat masked through the makeup or through the clothes that she is wearing or something*” (personal communication, March 22, 2014). Thus, it can seem almost impossible to escape the set parameters of disability already entrenched in society.

Tokenism

The notion of tokenism was a point raised by both the fashion side and the disability side. The cycle perpetuates as noted by a recent model in a wheelchair, “*You get a disabled model, used in a campaign. It gets all the press. Everyone goes, how wonderful it is and nothing else comes of it and then a couple years later it all starts again*” (personal communications, March 10, 2014).

Absence of non-normative bodies

Only recently has more imagery using non-normative bodied models been observed in fashion and yet no one knows if it will continue. The PhD student noted, “*I don’t think we*

really see these images because we don't really see disability being represented at all. Fashion imagery is supposed to be aspirational and stuff like that. The sort of cultural representations of disability are ones of either pity or overcoming; or bravery in the face of adversity. So a lot of the images you see of disabled people are the ones that are supposed to make you feel sorry for people. (personal communication, March 14, 2014) It is also of importance to note that the largest genre of disability representation crops up in clinical images in medical literature.

Due to the narrow ideal of what is being represented in the fashion world, disability is something that doesn't fit into that narrative (personal communication, March 14, 2014). *I think the reason why you don't see it, is because of the cultural and societal representations in disabled people that don't fit in the aspirational kind of thing. I think that's the case for a lot of types of bodies (personal communication, March 14, 2014).*

Social Stigma

The PhD student noted how society has marginalized disabled people. *"I think it's also because disabled people are not just marginalized in their representation we actually are quite marginalized in society in general. Disability isn't seen as a societal issue in the same way as sexuality or race or gender is. It's not really seen as a group. It's seen as an individual thing (personal communication, March 14, 2014). The idea of disability rights is quite alien to a lot of people because a lot of people will see disability as something individual to a person that will only affect them in a certain way. It's not like a cultural sort of element to it"* (personal communication, March 14, 2014). The disability culture is just emerging.

Narrow View of Beauty

The first participant whom I interviewed was a student from the University of Toronto. She thought it was important to have more representation of different body types in the media (personal communication, March 10 2014). She claims that she has seen very little representation in the media (personal communication, March 10 2014), yet she has never felt any pressure to conform despite the fact that there is so much pressure on conformity to body types (personal communication, March 10, 2014). The industry has created this narrow view of beauty emphasizing how we are completely owned by images (personal communications, March 10, 2014).

The disability studies student noted that *“I think for one, already people, the media is so obsessed, with what beauty is and how to define beauty. They have not yet grown to sort of be like, beauty is not just based on body type meaning fat people, skinny, round, flat whatever or the colour of a person’s skin or their ethnicity or any of that stuff. They have not really invited people with disabilities in to their little bubble and are like oh you know what? There is beauty in these people too. They have just selected this one percent of people who are blonde blue eyed, anorexic looking. They sort of posted their images. I truly believe that the media has not yet come to terms with the reality of the twentieth century”* (personal communication, March 22, 2014).

G. BRIDGING: FROM INTERVIEWS TO PHOTOGRAPHS

Talking to the eight participants in my study enabled me to better understand the challenges that arise from using models of different shapes and sizes and the reasoning behind why there is so little availability in this area. As one of my participants pointed out, *“I’m sure there is a lot on a bigger scale on why we don’t but even we logistically, it might be harder to find a roster of disabled models. Also again the logistics about finding garments or tailoring or modifying garments or if you are doing a shoot with maybe seven looks it could take someone with any sort of disability so much longer to change their garments or need assistants that I think on a time thing on a rate scale thing, looking at it, is problematically more difficult than just booking able bodied models or non disabled models”* (personal communication, March 20, 2014).

Another reason for this absence of different body types is due to the lack of education.

Participants noted that diversity should be *“encouraged in different schools and different entrepreneurships and training of new designers, with new sewing techniques thinking about either the changing body or different bodies”* (personal communication, March 14, 2014).

Many participants felt there should be a more of a mandate for representation of diverse bodies *“ I don’t know about garments specifically but I know which sort of representation with shows and campaigns that there is, there should be more of a mandate for diversity* (personal communication, March 20, 2014). With their encouragement, and with increased sensitivity to issues raised on both the fashion and disability sides of my conversations, I moved into the creative phase of this project by directing the creation of my own photographic representations.

The Creative Process

After perusing pre-existing photographs depicting different body shapes and sizes a common theme emerged. Many of the models appeared unhappy or were posed in unnatural or weak stances. Before creating the photos I asked the participant who was going to model for me how she would like to be portrayed. She discussed how she liked a natural take on things (personal communications, March 10, 2014). The participant stated that the industry should accept various body types (personal communication, March 10, 2014). It must also be noted that a fashion photograph is constructed by a team, consisting of art director, stylist, makeup artist and photographer.

There have been many fashion images of models with diverse sizes and shapes that were high fashion aspirational photos, such as the Alexander McQueen image (seen in Figure 1). My goal was to create an image that allowed the viewer to look at the absence of the model's limb and garment as a whole. I did not want to target one specific element, rather I wanted to examine the idea of how I could feature a unique body but at the same time be selling an item of fashion. However, when non-disabled individuals are creating these images, it is difficult to get into the headspace of the disability community and produce a photo that is authentic. It was also challenging to act as art director to a non-model. One participant from the Disability Studies program noted, *"Yes this person looks natural and their disability is not the forefront, but then in terms of the disability community looking at it, no, but this person mimics an able bodied individual. I think that would only be the tricky part of the portrait and image taking"* (personal communication, March 22, 2014).

While going through the process of analyzing interviews, many participants from the fashion and disability cohort noted that fashion was indeed a business, not simply an art, and thus it was imperative to listen to consumers' needs. My vision was to create a series of images that showcased the act of advertising a product. After looking through countless fashion magazines and selecting the ones that focused more on the product and clothes while exhibiting more of a minimalist look, I still had to consider the high fashion aspect. I then compiled a succession of images isolating certain elements of the body while incorporating the missing limb. Photos were taken from the neck down. One portrait shot, in particular, was taken in order to focus in on the model's identity while in the rest of the images I wanted the viewers to concentrate their attention mainly on the body and the missing limb.

When deliberating on the overall content, my intent was to examine the project through a feminist lens. I wanted the images to be of a strong, independent, powerful woman versus the weak, delicate model commonplace in today's fashion industry. My aim was to shed light on the natural body for far too often women strive to attain the body shape deemed desirable by a patriarchal society – a body shape which has become increasingly thinner (Negrin, 2008).

My overall aim was to allow the model to feel as natural as possible and I began this process by keeping her hair and makeup to a minimum. I also left her piercings in, thereby enabling her to maintain part of her identity and be true to her real self. When beginning to pull clothes for the shoot, I could not just go into a store and take whatever garment I wanted. While styling for a “normal” sized body, I found that even the largest sizes in some manufacturers were too small. Despite the fact that I knew the model's size, I still would need to choose a bigger size.

Finding models was indeed a challenge, as it was all through word of mouth. One constraint stemmed from the fact that the photographer did not have an elevator in his studio, thereby making it inaccessible for individuals in a chair – many more details to consider.

At the beginning of the shoot the model seemed hesitant. However once the photographer started taking pictures she started moving and she felt more confident and comfortable being on set. I felt that this project was interesting and creative. All in all it was an informative and rewarding experience.

H. MY PHOTOS AND STYLING NOTES

Some of the ideas I thought about when pulling the garments and accessories was not to make them look overly trendy and thereby challenging this idea that diversity is just a trend. Styling was kept minimal and clean to emphasize the notion of real beauty and naturalness. It seemed important to incorporate the absent body part within the narrative and not place it solely at the forefront. In this way, the notion of non-normative is challenged. Art directing was definitely difficult and using a model who has never modeled before was a leap of faith on both sides. I did not want to target one specific element, rather I wanted to examine the idea of how I could feature a unique body but at the same time be selling an item of fashion which is something I projected within all my images.

Image 1

Image 1 was the hardest shot as it was difficult to envision how to hold a clutch in a natural manner and then voicing that to the model. Art direction was definitely a thought provoking undertaking.

Image 2

With the styling of this shot I wanted to create a cool laid back and comfortable look and move away from hiding the disability. I also wanted to challenge this idea of how the industry thinks they are taking risk or being forward - I did this by putting the model in just a pair of boyfriend jeans and white sweatshirt. This also can be seen when brands think they are making a statement through using a diverse model but still fits that feminine ideal but its just another beautiful model who may be a different race age or size.

Image 3

When creating image 3 I toyed with the idea of presence versus absence. I isolated the missing body part in a subtle way, mimicking poses that would be seen in any fashion campaign.

Image 4

This shot plays with the idea that fashion is a business. Here I focused more on selling the accessory but also trying to create an aspirational look.

I. FINAL REFLECTIONS

This project allowed me to combine my interest in fashion studies with my newfound awareness from disability studies. Although I initially thought that the fashion community and disability community were going to be on opposite ends of the spectrum there was quite a lot of overlap of conversation during the interview process. I feel that this project allowed the viewer to behold the body in a different light. No matter what the body shape or form, with the right direction, the unique body can be created in a fashion editorial, allowing fashion to be enjoyed by anyone despite its present perceived target of a narrow group of individuals.

One of the challenges I faced was the difficulty encountered when pulling garments for the shoot in order to style for the “normal sized” body. Another issue arose when I had originally planned to use a model in a wheelchair but the studio was not wheelchair accessible.

Models work in a disciplinary regime of surveillance and objectification, in which the female body is broken down by a ubiquitous gaze and put on display for unspecified judgment (Mears, 2011, p, 430). My aim was to transform this gaze to encompass the overall body not just focusing on the absence itself. If I were to expand my research I would continue the interview process and examine various physical differences and imperfections. I feel that highlighting the differences and imperfections in our physical selves will allow for more admiration and acceptance of the plethora of bodies that make up the human life.

It was wonderful because the final images came out as I envisioned them. When creating the images you don't really know until you see the final product. It opened a creative door for me and in the future I will be looking at bodies of all shapes and sizes in a new way. Looking

through a feminist lens allowed me to see how isolating a non-normative body part could be seen in a new light through styling and dress. When creating the images I was using a styling perspective to see how the clothes worked around the non-normative body part. I learned that there is a strong ethical consideration when doing research-evolving people who are considered to be a vulnerable group. There were two different perspectives; fashion versus disability side when I was creating these images that I had to consider. Clearly, we have much to learn to bridge the gap between fashion studies and disability studies, which is part of the struggle.

J. CONCLUSION

Acceptance of the female body is the Holy Grail in the fashion industry (Franklin, 2011) where models are made into “looks” or must “fit the ideal” according to the industry (Mears, 2008). Feminists have made the case that images of fashion models define and reinforce an ‘idealized femininity’ – one that serves as a disparaging reminder of other women’s deficiencies (Barthel, 1998, Bartky, 1998; Bordo, 1993; Smith, 1990; Wolf, 1991). (Mears, 2011, page 430) It was important to me to create a visual perceptible as the typical fashion photograph depicts only one body type. Beauty comes in diverse forms. Instead of observing it with tunnel vision it can best be appreciated by admiring it as a whole from many perspectives. To paraphrase Jean Paul Gaultier, when you look at something like a tin can with a fresh eye, you can see a kind of beauty where others will only see a garden-variety object (Jean Paul Gaultier exhibition). We have to humanize the marketing of fashion to the extent that all people are recognized, in one form or another, and valued for their uniqueness regardless of the fashion media’s image of “perfection”.

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L. APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Questions for people in the Fashion Industry

Complete the consent form

Remind participant shel/he does not have to respond to any question that he does not wish to answer.

Open-ended questions:

- 1) I am curious about your career path in the fashion industry can you tell me about that? How did you get started in the industry? How many years have you worked in the fashion industry?
- 2) Have you noticed a change in diversity representation in the fashion industry over the years? For example in body shape and size of models? (Non-normative body types)
- 3) *At this point I am going to show you a number of photographs and I am interested in your response.*
 - What do you like or dislike about the photos I've shown you?
 - Do you think any of the editorial images are more effective then the others? Can you elaborate on what it is that you respond to is your favourite photographs?
 - What do these photographs make you feel about people with physical disabilities?
 - How do you think these images represent or affect the disability community? (do you think they might be seen as empowering, or a misrepresentation, or otherwise?)
- 4) Why don't we see more of these kinds of photographs?
- 5) What are the barriers that prevent their inclusion? Who is responsible? Is it designers, editors, stylists, photographers or modeling/casting agents? Why do they hold this power?
- 6) Do you think the public has a role in ensuring a broad range of representation in fashion imagery? If so what do you think it is?
- 7) What do you think needs to happen so that fashion industry becomes more representative of wide range of physical embodiment.

Interview questions for the disability community

- 1) My project is about the representation of disabled people or the lack thereof in the fashion industry. I have come to talk to you because you have an interest in this area. Can you tell me about it?
- 2) Do you follow fashion or have any interest in fashion?
- 3) Have you ever witnessed the use of models with disability in the fashion industry?
- 4) *At this point I am going to show you a number of photographs and I am interested in your response.*
 - What do you like or dislike about the photos I've shown you?
 - Do you think any of the editorial images are more effective than the others? Can you elaborate on what it is that you respond to in your favourite photographs?
 - What do these photographs make you feel about people with physical disabilities?
 - How do you think these images represent or affect the disability community? (do you think they might be seen as empowering, or a misrepresentation, or otherwise?)
- 5) Why don't we see more of these kinds of photographs?
- 6) What is your response to these images? What are the barriers that prevent inclusion of these kind of images in fashion representation?
- 8) What are the barriers that prevent their inclusion? Who is responsible?
Is it designers, editors, stylists, photographers or modeling/casting agents? Why do they hold this power?
- 7) What do you think could be done in order to include more diverse models?
- 8) Do you think the public has a role in ensuring a broad range of representation in fashion imagery? If so what do you think it is?
- 9) What do you think needs to happen so that fashion industry becomes more representative of wide range of physical embodiment.
- 10) If you were to model how would you like to be portrayed?

INTERVIEW IMAGES

Fig. 1
Aimee Mullins by Nick Knight
Dazed & Confused, Access-able shoot
September 1998

Fig. 2
Catherine Long shot
Dazed & Confused Access-able shoot
September 1998

Fig. 3
Levi Strauss & Co Campaign
March 1999.

Fig. 4
i-Sustain Campaign
2012

Fig. 5
Positive Exposure Campaign
2012

Fig. 6
Spring/Summer campaign
2014

CREATIVE COMPONENT