



Sociocultural Dynamics of Aesthetic Standards Transformation in the Modern Global Fashion Industry

Hanna Kuliesh

Model, Florida, USA

Email: contact@annavostretsova.com

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Abstract— *The global fashion industry has moved during the past decade away from a narrow Eurocentric repertoire of beauty toward a wider vocabulary that admits a broader range of bodies, ages, ethnicities, and gender expressions. This article examines the sociocultural dynamics behind that shift. The argument draws on Bourdieu's field theory and on the social-constructionist tradition, which together frame the change as a contested reorganisation of symbolic capital inside the field of global fashion. The study uses a qualitative, multi-case design that combines discourse analysis of advertising campaigns with structured comparison of four representative brand cases between 2021 and 2025. The analysis identifies four interlocking drivers, which are globalisation and cultural hybridisation, digital platforms and algorithmic visibility, body-positivity and inclusivity movements, and the rise of sustainability as an aesthetic value. Each driver enlarges the repertoire of legitimate aesthetic positions, and at the same time each generates new exclusions and commercial pressures, among them performative inclusivity, algorithmic homogenisation, and the commodification of ethical concern. The article contributes to fashion studies and the sociology of culture through a unified framework that integrates these drivers and through a clearer specification of the conditions under which aesthetic pluralism becomes durable at the level of structure and does not remain confined to reputation.*



Keywords— *aesthetic standards, body positivity, cultural diversity, fashion industry, globalisation, social media.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Across most of the twentieth century, the dominant aesthetic standard promoted by the global fashion industry remained narrow. The bodies that magazine covers, runways, and advertising campaigns celebrated were white, young, tall, and thin to an extreme degree, and the visual codes of high fashion were anchored in a small group of Western European capitals. Critical scholarship has long documented the social costs of that monoculture, and the past decade has shown a reorganisation of the visual field of fashion. Brands have rebuilt their casting practices around racial and size diversity, digital platforms have brought visibility to aesthetics rooted outside the traditional centres, and sustainability has emerged as both an ethical demand and a recognisable visual style.

Industry communications celebrate these changes as evidence of progress, and a parallel current of criticism reads them as superficial, commercially motivated, and uneven across markets. The scholarly literature on the transformation tends to address single dimensions in isolation, such as representation, digital media, or sustainability, with few attempts to articulate how those dimensions interact. The present article addresses that gap and treats the transformation of aesthetic standards as one multidimensional sociocultural process.

Three research questions guide the article. The opening question asks which sociocultural forces account for the recent diversification of aesthetic standards in global fashion. The second question asks how those forces interact within the institutional logic of the industry. The third

question asks under what conditions aesthetic pluralism becomes durable at the level of structure and does not remain confined to reputation. The remainder of the article follows a fixed sequence. Section II reviews the relevant literature. Section III sets out the theoretical framework and methodology. Section IV presents the analysis around four drivers of change. Section V discusses cross-cutting findings, and Section VI concludes.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study draws on three strands of scholarship. The opening strand concerns the social construction of beauty and the body. Classical critical work has shown how beauty ideals act as instruments of social stratification and discipline bodies through aspiration and shame. More recent contributions refine the argument and examine how digital media reshape the visual economy of the body, including the rise of filtered self-presentation and the spread of algorithmically curated ideals [1].

A second strand examines fashion as a social institution. Classical sociologists framed fashion as a mechanism of distinction and emulation. Contemporary scholarship extends that view and analyses fashion as a transnational cultural industry with its own field-specific logic of symbolic capital, in which legitimacy passes through editorial, retail, and platform gatekeepers [2]. Within that strand, recent work attends to the role of non-Western design centres and to the renegotiation of cultural authority that follows their growing visibility [3].

A third strand addresses representation, inclusion, and the politics of visibility. Studies have documented measurable increases in racial, size, age, and gender diversity in editorial and runway contexts since the late 2010s, and the same studies raise concerns about the gap between visibility and structural change [4]. Parallel work on sustainability shows that ecological concern now translates into aesthetic vocabulary, such as visible mending, monochrome capsule wardrobes, and the rehabilitation of secondhand garments as objects of taste [5].

These strands intersect, and they seldom converge into an integrated account. The present article responds and treats representation, platform dynamics, transnational diffusion, and sustainability as components of a single field-level transformation.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHOD

The study uses a qualitative, interpretive design that rests on two compatible traditions. The opening tradition is social constructionism, which treats aesthetic standards as

categories collectively produced, negotiated, and open to revision, and which denies them the status of fixed properties of bodies or garments. The second tradition is Bourdieu's field theory, which conceptualises fashion as a structured social space in which actors compete for symbolic capital under specific rules of legitimacy. The combination of those traditions supports an analysis of how new aesthetic positions are constructed and of how the existing structure of the field absorbs them, resists them, or pushes them to the margin.

Three sources of evidence were assembled for the period from 2021 to 2025. The first source is a purposive sample of twenty-four advertising campaigns from major global and challenger brands, which discourse analysis coded for representational claims, visual conventions, and rhetorical framings of inclusivity and sustainability. The second source is public industry commentary on runway castings, editorial coverage, and brand statements, which thematic review processed in order to identify recurring strategic patterns. The third source is a set of four brand cases selected for structured comparison on the basis of their prominence in industry discourse and the diversity of strategies they exemplify, covering inclusive sizing, modest fashion, digital-native influencer collaboration, and circularity. The analysis proceeded in iterations, alternating between case-level interpretation and cross-case synthesis, until the four-driver framework presented in Section IV stabilised.

Two complementary diagrams present the framework that organises the analysis. Fig. 1 introduces a typology of brand strategies along two axes, which are the depth of integration of inclusive practices and the breadth of drivers they engage, and the figure identifies the trajectory associated with durable pluralism. Fig. 2 depicts the four drivers as interacting forces operating within the sociocultural field of global fashion.

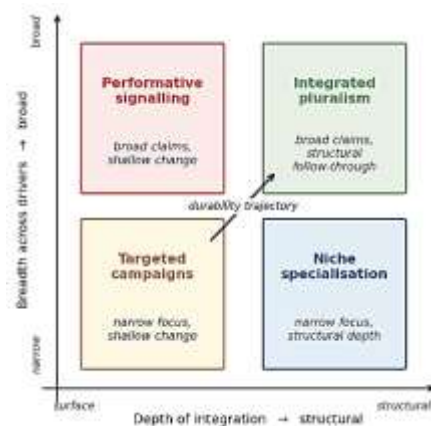


Fig. 1: A typology of brand strategies for aesthetic diversification, mapped along depth of integration and breadth of drivers engaged



Fig.2: Conceptual framework of four interacting drivers within the sociocultural field of global fashion

IV. RESULTS

4.1 Globalisation and Cultural Hybridisation

The opening driver concerns the diffusion of aesthetic codes from outside the traditional Euro-American centres. The expansion of Korean popular culture, the institutionalisation of modest fashion through dedicated weeks and retail categories [6], and the international visibility of African and Afro-diasporic design have altered the repertoire of styles that global gatekeepers recognise as legitimate. These developments cannot be reduced to a one-directional flow toward the periphery. They reorganise the centre and introduce new reference points that compete with longstanding ones [3].

The case material yields two observations. One observation is that hybridisation operates as a selective process. Elements of non-Western aesthetics that translate into the global luxury vocabulary with ease, such as silhouette experimentation or surface decoration, enter the field at a faster pace than elements that challenge the underlying logic of the field, such as alternative production rhythms. The other observation is that gains in visibility for non-Western aesthetics remain uneven across product categories and price points, which suggests that commercial calculation shapes hybridisation as much as cultural openness does.

4.2 Digital Platforms and Algorithmic Visibility

A second driver is the platformisation of taste-making. Social media has cut into the editorial monopoly that a small number of magazines and houses once held, and platforms have enabled a wider range of bodies and styles to gain visibility through peer-driven amplification. Within the typology in Fig. 1, platform-driven inclusion places most brands in the upper-left quadrant of broad and shallow signalling, and a smaller cohort of brands converts platform visibility into structural follow-through.

Platforms also introduce new constraints. Algorithmic systems reward engagement, which favours visual

conventions that the eye recognises at once and which produces a homogenised micro-aesthetic that travels across users at speed [1]. Influencer culture concentrates symbolic capital around individuals whose visibility depends on platform metrics and not on traditional editorial recognition, and the rapid turnover of micro-trends raises its own sustainability concerns. Platforms therefore widen aesthetic pluralism along some axes, and they compress it along others.

4.3 Body Positivity and Inclusivity Movements

A third driver is the cumulative pressure that body-positivity and the broader family of inclusivity movements exert on industry practice. Activist communities, consumer groups, and media commentary have raised the reputational cost of any absence of plus-size, mature, disabled, transgender, and non-binary representation. Brands that integrate inclusive sizing and casting as core operational choices, and not as occasional campaigns, appear in industry discourse as benchmarks [4].

The case material confirms the analytical value of separating structural inclusivity from performative inclusivity. Structural inclusivity becomes visible in the range of sizes that the brand produces and stocks, in the diversity of fit models used for product development, and in the composition of design teams. Performative inclusivity concentrates in seasonal campaigns and seldom changes the underlying production logic. The two forms coexist within the same firm, and firms deploy them as instruments for the management of reputational risk without a commitment to structural change [7].

4.4 Sustainability as an Aesthetic Value

A fourth driver concerns the reframing of sustainability and turns it from an ethical constraint into a recognisable aesthetic vocabulary. Visible mending, durable basics, monochrome capsule wardrobes, and the rehabilitation of secondhand garments as objects of taste now serve as markers of distinction among younger consumers in high-income markets [5]. Within Bourdieusian terms, ecological concern undergoes conversion into a form of cultural capital that operates alongside traditional markers of style.

The driver illustrates the analytical value of treating sustainability as a cultural category and as a material category at once. Where ecological vocabulary appears without corresponding changes in sourcing, production, or labour conditions, observers describe the outcome as greenwashing. Firms that integrate provenance, repair, and circularity into their core proposition develop a durable aesthetic identity that depends less on seasonal campaigns [8].

4.5 Cross-Driver Synthesis

Table 1 summarises the four drivers, their key mechanisms, illustrative cases, and theoretical anchors. The four drivers stand apart in analytical terms and remain entangled in empirical terms. The digital amplification of non-Western aesthetics activates the first and second drivers at the same time, and inclusivity claims appear bundled with sustainability claims in brand communication.

Table 1. Four drivers of aesthetic standards transformation

Driver	Key mechanism	Illustrative case	Theoretical anchor
Globalisation & cultural hybridisation	Diffusion of non-Western aesthetics through trade, migration, media	K-fashion, modest fashion, Afrofuturism	World-system, hybridity theory
Digital platforms & algorithmic visibility	Peer-driven taste-making and algorithmic amplification of niche bodies	TikTok micro-trends, Instagram influencer culture	Platform sociology, Bourdieu's field theory
Body positivity & inclusivity	Consumer pressure on size, race, age, gender representation	Savage X Fenty, Aerie, Skims	Critical body studies, intersectionality
Sustainability as aesthetic value	Reframing wear, repair, provenance as markers of taste	Slow fashion, secondhand luxury, repair-as-style	Eco-cultural capital, theories of consumption

V. DISCUSSION

Three implications follow from the analysis. The opening implication concerns the nature of the transformation itself. The diversification of aesthetic standards is real, and, as the typology in Fig. 1 shows, the change is best read as a reorganisation of the field and not as a linear move toward openness. New aesthetic positions enter the field, and they enter under conditions that existing gatekeepers set, among them legacy houses, large platforms, and influential retailers. The persistent gap between visibility on the runway and structural change in production, sourcing, and

decision-making shows that pluralism at the level of image can coexist with continuity at the level of organisation [2].

A second implication concerns the conditions under which pluralism becomes durable. The case material suggests that pluralism persists when operational decisions embed inclusive practices, when sourcing anchors sustainability claims and communication does not carry them on its own, and when non-Western design centres exercise editorial influence and not only inspirational influence. Pluralism that depends on platform attention or seasonal campaigning remains reversible and exposed to shifts in commercial sentiment [7].

A third implication is conceptual. A single hegemonic ideal no longer describes aesthetic standards in contemporary fashion. The field now hosts several legitimate but unequally resourced ideals that compete for symbolic capital. The shift calls for analytical tools that can represent plural and partially overlapping standards, of the kind that the framework in Fig. 2 suggests. The framework serves as a heuristic for further empirical work.

The analysis carries several limitations. The empirical material concentrates on the European, North American, and East Asian markets that dominate global fashion discourse, and the coverage of Global South consumer markets remains thin. The reliance on publicly available materials excludes the perspectives of designers, casting directors, and platform engineers, whose decisions shape the field from within. Future research can incorporate interviews with such actors and can examine markets where the four drivers interact under different institutional conditions.

VI. CONCLUSION

The article has argued that the transformation of aesthetic standards in the modern global fashion industry takes the form of a multidimensional sociocultural process driven by four interacting forces, which are globalisation and cultural hybridisation, digital platforms and algorithmic visibility, body-positivity and inclusivity movements, and the rise of sustainability as an aesthetic value. The qualitative, case-based design, grounded in social constructionism and field theory, has shown that each driver enlarges the repertoire of legitimate aesthetic positions and at the same time produces new exclusions and commercial pressures. The diversification observed across the past decade is real and uneven, and its durability depends on whether operational decisions absorb new aesthetic positions or whether such positions remain confined to communication. For brands, the practical implication is that credible pluralism calls for changes upstream of the campaign. For scholars, the implication is the need for integrated frameworks that can represent several legitimate aesthetic standards in tension.

For regulators and educators, the implication is that the visual transformation of the industry will not translate into structural change without aligned interventions in labour, sourcing, and platform governance.

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