



The thin ideal and the practice of fashion

Paolo Volonté

Politecnico di Milano, Italy

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Abstract

The thin ideal is a characteristic feature of late-modern western societies. Yet, the awareness of the harm it causes has proved insufficient to defeat it. Moreover, despite the international trend of overweight and obesity's increase, the fashion industry and fashion consumers continue to adjust their decisions to an ideal of slenderness. This seems contradictory. This article shows that the inertia of the thin ideal can be explained by referring to the practice of fashion: The ideal of thinness has been incorporated into habits, routines, objects and the bodies themselves of those who engage in the practice. On one hand, the article shows that at the origin of the tyranny of thinness there is, among other things, a technological development in the production of fashion, namely, the application of the sizing system to the manufacture of clothing. On the other hand, it argues that the thin ideal today is not just a standard of perfection in people's minds – for instance, in the attitude of fashion designers and consumers towards the female body – but is also incorporated in very solid elements in the process of fashion production, for instance, the models' bodies. This makes it especially hard for all protagonists of the fashion system to change their attitude and practices towards the standards to be pursued. The inclusion of the ideal of thinness in the practice of fashion can be considered a significant reason of its resilience in a changing world.

Keywords

Practice theory, ideal of thinness, plus-size fashion, sizing system, fashion industry

Introduction

It has been widely recognized that the ideal body as regards weight, shape and size has varied radically in the course of history (Garner et al., 1980; Gilman, 2008). In societies where the western cultural industry is hegemonic, slenderness became a dominant cultural ideal in the 20th century (Bordo, 1993: 46) and is now the reference model to which men and, especially, women usually refer when caring for their bodies (Hesse-Biber, 2007).

Corresponding author:

Paolo Volonté, Dipartimento di Design, Politecnico di Milano, Via Durando 38/A, 20158 Milano, Italy.
Email: paolo.volonte@polimi.it

The link between the thin ideal and the fashion world is apparent. Some studies have shown the linkage between the promotion of the thin ideal by the fashion industry and the spread of anorexia nervosa among young women (Boselli, 2012; Thomsen et al., 2001). Other studies have focused on the effects of the thin ideal's internalization on body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem among consumers (Groesz et al., 2002; Shaw, 1995). Several studies have explored the world of plus-size fashion (Czerniawski, 2011, 2015; Peters, 2014; Zangrillo, 1990). Yet few studies have addressed the privileged position that the thin ideal as such has acquired in the fashion system.

In recent decades, a new phenomenon has made this privileged position more evident. This is the 'fattening' of the world population, and especially the populations of western countries. This phenomenon has been reported, at times with alarm, by the World Health Organization (WHO) for some time. According to the most recent data available, overweight people are increasing, and they are now approaching two-thirds of the population in some English-speaking countries, while they represent around half in most other western countries. The data are not fully reliable because the methodologies employed are controversial and not comparable and the very idea of a body mass index is contested, but the trend is patent (Poulain, 2002: 95–128). Given this phenomenon, the privileged position of the thin ideal in the fashion system becomes evident because the persistence of that ideal seems contradictory. As we shall see, the fashion industry not only promotes its products using particularly thin models but also restricts them to small and medium sizes, that is, less than 12/14 (in the American sizing system, to which I shall refer in this article.)¹ One might expect that as the population grows fatter, the dependence of fashion on the thin ideal would diminish. But it does not. Despite some striking tendencies in the opposite direction, for now limited to the sphere of communication, fashion continues to confine fat bodies to productive, distributive and communicative niches.

My aim in this article is to contribute to the analysis of the privileged position that the thin ideal occupies in the fashion system, and especially with regard to women's fashion. By 'fashion system' I do not mean the fashion industry alone, but the complex and closely interconnected domains of production and consumption. Callon et al. (2005) have shown how the definition ('qualification') of products in a context of mass consumption is the result of joint work by a multiplicity of actors in constant interaction with each other, and where a fundamental role is played by consumers. In fact, the thin ideal predominates not only among those who produce clothing and fashion images but also in the imaginary of consumers, thus constituting a notable example of hegemonic discourse (Connell, 2013; Gruys, 2012).

I propose to interpret the privileged position of thinness in fashion by applying some basic elements of the theory of practice. Practice theory allows one to consider the thin ideal not as an abstract value (something that people think is right) but as an ingredient of the *practice* of fashion (something that people do), thus highlighting the inertia that makes it particularly stable and 'irrationally'

indifferent to cultural change. While it is true that consumption, as a symbolic act, is a fundamental tool of construction, negotiation and communication of social identity, it is also true that the objects and material situations contribute, with their resilience, to determining the behaviour of consumers as much as those of the producers (Warde, 2005: 137). I believe that practice theory, in addition to and not in the stead of many other explanations already put forward (Fay and Price, 1994 cite six), affords fruitful understanding of both the rise and the persistence of the thin ideal in contemporary society, showing that these two processes are part of a single phenomenon. Application of the practice approach will allow to identify in a technical constraint inherent to the mass production of clothing (i.e. the impossibility of extending the algorithmic reproduction of samples beyond size 14) a factor of decisive importance in the rise of the ideal of thinness and to show the importance of the incorporation of production standards in the bodies of models in explaining the resistance of the fashion industry to the inclusion of fat bodies.

Is fashion a practice?

The theory of practice is an effort to explain how social beings adapt to the world in which they live, internalize the social order and thus become able to govern situations. According to such approach, it is at the level of practice that social order is reproduced and an alignment among actor's behaviours is achieved. For many reasons, there is no need to detail here the theory of practice, not least the fact that it has already been notably done in this same journal (Warde, 2005, 2014). It can be easily referred to already-existing extensive and well-known reconstructions (Reckwitz, 2002; Rouse, 2007; Shove et al., 2012). But before applying the theory of practice to the case of the thin ideal in the fashion industry, I have to address this fundamental question: Is fashion a practice? Providing an answer will require a brief digression.

A key feature of practices is the fact that they are complex formations. They involve multiple interdependencies among bodily actions, mental states, objects, material structures, social structures, rules, meanings and many other things besides (Reckwitz, 2002: 249; Shove et al., 2012: 7). Sports practices are an area in which this is particularly apparent. Indeed, scholars of practices often expressly refer to them (see Dant, 1999 on windsurfing; Nicolini and Monteiro, 2017 on skiing; Shove and Pantzar, 2005 on Nordic walking). For example, in the practice of Nordic walking, a type of sport walking assisted by sticks similar to ski poles, the shape of the poles is strictly connected with the movement of the body, the (negative) imagery traditionally associated with the act of walking with a cane, clothing conventions, the users' spending power, the technologies available for the manufacture of poles, predominant design, walking styles and rules and so on. However, not in the sense that the shape of the poles is the result of all these factors, but rather in the sense that all these factors evolve together, each being the result of the constraints imposed by the others.

The typical structure of practices is apparent in many other areas of consumption, daily life and work: Playing music, cooking, attending a religious ceremony or voting are all practices. A highly distinctive case of practice is, for instance, the fashion show. In fact, it involves various interdependencies among the general layout of the catwalk, the gait of the models, the bodies of the models, the clothes displayed, the conventions of the fashion system with respect to sizes, current fashion trends, social hierarchies internal to the fashion industry and communication technologies.² A fashion show is a form of action that conforms with a set of constraints imposed not by a single entity, for example, an authority, but by the multiplicity of human and non-human stakeholders in the practice itself. Authorities (such as the *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture* in Paris), despite their privileged position, are in their turn parts of practices and must respond to the constraints that the practices impose.

This is reflected in individual actions. Like institutional authorities, and like technical objects, humans are also part of practices rather than governing them. Mastering a practice does not mean being its master. In Andreas Reckwitz's terminology, individuals are 'carriers' of a practice, and this means that they carry patterns of bodily behaviour with routinized ways of understanding, knowing how and desiring. The important aspect is that these conventionalized bodily and mental activities are elements and qualities of the practices in which the individual participates, not qualities of the individual (Reckwitz, 2002: 250). Of course, in practice too, compliance with those constraints entails that people can distance themselves from them and change the course of action. In their role as carriers, individuals must interpret the behaviour that the given set of constraints make possible or desirable. They therefore do not replicate predetermined courses of action but create actions compatible with the majority of the constraints imposed by the practice (Bourdieu, 1990: 55).

This means that in every practice there is a constantly unstable balance between factors of change and factors of inertia. This balance determines the path of development of the practice itself. Alan Warde (2005: 139–141) identifies among the main factors of change, for instance (1) the activity of the people who engage in a particular practice, constantly adapting to situations, improvising and experimenting and (2) the pressure of capital, which in pursuit of profit forces people to take up new practices or to modify their habitual ones. The practice itself responds to these pressures with a resistance generated by various factors of inertia. One of the main causes of inertia is the central importance of routines, habits and tacit knowledge in the performance of practices. Another powerful source of inertia is the fact that many dispositions of the actors engaged in a practice are embodied: The affected gait of the models on the catwalk is the result of hours and hours of exercises and constrictions, and also an embodied habitus difficult to deconstruct when, as sometimes happens, the fashion show director decides to abandon the privileged setting of the central walkway (Wissinger, 2015: 59–79). Finally, the things involved in a practice resist changes by the mere fact of existing, since

they are produced by an industrial system that has invested capital in their manufacture and are made in that particular way.

Although I do not share the opinion of those critics who maintain that practice theory is unable to explain social change (Turner, 1994: 78–100), I hold that the theory's greatest importance for the study of the thin ideal is its capacity to take account of the inertia factor in human actions. Inertia does not signify immobility; rather, it derives from the bond that every new action necessarily has with an array of actions, relationships and objects that pre-exist it. This bond acts in two main ways. It does so in the form of routines, habits and conventions produced by reciprocal expectations of behaviour within the community of practice – what Barry Barnes describes in terms of 'alignment' (Barnes, 2001: 25) and Joseph Rouse in terms of 'mutual accountability' (Rouse, 2007: 669). Or it acts in the form of embodied experience that reflects the weight of the past on the individual himself or herself. Bourdieu (1990: 81–82) well shows that those engaged in a practice react not so much to what they actually see – that is, an ever-changing world around them – as to what they fore-see – that is, what their *habitus*, which results from their history as practitioners of that practice, induces them to see in advance. They therefore react to a worldview deeply rooted in history.³

Like walking the catwalk, dressing is a human practice, but not in the same way. Walking and running are everyday general human practices, but walking the catwalk and Nordic walking are different and more special. All these are actions that depend on the socio-material setting in which they take place: that is, they are expressions of a practice and its internal organization. But in the case of the fashion show, as well as Nordic walking, the practice has some additional features. For example, it requires special and dedicated training; it cannot be learned simply by living. It takes place at a particular time clearly demarcated from the rest of the day. Its performance requires suspension of all or almost all other practices of the same kind (one either walks the catwalk or does Nordic walking). It establishes a community of practitioners whose primary social bond consists in the practice itself, not in other interests or affective relationships. In a sense, such practices may be considered distinct 'entities' (Shove et al., 2012: 7): circumscribed fields of action and demarcated social spheres easily recognizable through some signs (Warde, 2014: 291).

Using a well-known terminological distinction drawn by Theodore R. Schatzki, and partially altering its meaning, I shall call entities of this kind 'integrative practices' (Schatzki, 1996: 98), contrasting them with 'dispersed practices' (Schatzki, 1996: 91), which are distributed across many domains of human life. While walking is a dispersed practice, walking the catwalk is an integrative one. In the case of integrative practices, according to Schatzki (1996), particularly important roles are performed by 'explicit rules' (precepts and instructions) and 'teleoaffective structures' (ends, beliefs, emotions) (p. 99). In fact, it is evident that whereas everyday walking does not normally have rules or particular purposes, and does not arouse

particular emotions, walking the catwalk involves joining an entity in which these things are important.

Fashion – namely, the western industrialized vestimentary system focused on the cultural and communicative dimension of the product and its consumption (Crane, 2000; Wilson, 2003) – is something much more complex than just participating in or attending a fashion show. If nothing else because wearing clothes is not limited to a set time of the day. Life *is* dressed. Therefore, wearing clothes is not reducible to an integrative practice. However, things change if we consider also dispersed practices. The fashion system is a social sphere that comprises not only the production or the consumption of fashionable clothes, but both of them, as well as all other production and cultural processes that enable the functioning of the system, like marketing, retail and communication. Joanne Entwistle and Don Slater (2012) have shown that the ‘product’ of fashion in the strict sense – the ‘look’ – is the result of a construction process that involves a variety of actions and actors on both the production and consumption sides. The ‘look’ is a heterogeneous assemblage of elements resulting from a wide range of relations and practices involving diverse actors. It is not something that can be produced in one place and then sold or transmitted to passive consumers, because the practices of consumption – shopping practices, lifestyle choices, conversations about style – also contribute to produce it. Besides fashion designers, brands, fashion companies and fashion victims, common consumers, magazine audiences, buyers, managers, stylists, visual merchandisers, photographers and so on are also protagonists of this system. Fashion is an industry able to supply consumers with clothing that meets their sophisticated needs for social relations. Clothes that are ‘means by which bodies are made social and given meaning and identity’ (Entwistle, 2015 [2000]: 7) and that consequently help the actor in ‘putting on his show’ (Goffman, 1959: 28) in everyday interaction. As a conceptual category, fashion differs from mere clothing because it involves actions not primarily aimed at the material functionality and durability of the object, but at the immaterial functionality and durability of that object’s meaning. It therefore includes activities concerned with the production chain, the various forms of consumption and the flow of communication, because all of them contribute to the generation of meaning.

The sum of the activities involved in the generation of meaning through clothing is not ascribable to integrative practices. Of course there are niches of this kind in the fashion system, as we have seen in regard to fashion shows. But fashion as such lacks those explicit rules and teleoaffective structures that, as said above, characterize integrative practices. And yet opening the wardrobe and deciding what to wear, adapting one’s bodily movements to the clothes that one is wearing, buying clothes and selling them, arranging a shop window and so on are all actions typical of a socially constituted practice (Entwistle, 2015 [2000]: 11). It is impossible to be fashionable without practising the social game of fashion. I therefore suggest that in fact fashion can be analysed through the lens of practice theory. It can be considered a wide-ranging dispersed practice distributed across several domains of social life, although it may also include some examples of integrative practices.

As a (dispersed) practice, fashion has a number of features that are typical of practices, and which help explain certain manifestations of fashion, including its loyalty to the thin ideal.

The thin ideal

It has been repeatedly pointed out that care of the body has become a defining feature of contemporary society, late-modern or postmodern. In this society, in fact, the external appearance of people has acquired important weight in the definition of identities and roles, and in the construction of social distinction (Featherstone, 1991; Foucault, 1980; Lipovetsky, 1980). This has contributed to bringing the pursuit of thinness to the centre of attention in women's everyday lives and consumption. Particularly, it widely influences two forms of consumption today commonplace: food intake (diets, more or less recognized and formalized) and choice of clothing (normally aimed, among other things, to create a silhouette as slender as possible). Recognized in such behaviours is the thin ideal's exercise of 'tyranny' (Chernin, 1981) over women's lives – so much so that a large amount of feminist literature has extended the concept of the female body's enslavement to this phenomenon besides the 19th-century corset (Bordo, 1993: 22; see also Steele, 2001).

One of the factors that make the thin ideal socially hegemonic⁴ is indubitably its dominance in the culture industry. The hegemony of the thin ideal is especially evident in the visual media that devote a great deal of space to the construction of narratives (cinema, television, magazines): They generally relegate non-slim bodies to niche products or marginal and exceptional roles (Schooler et al., 2004; Seifert, 2005). Since the 1950s, indeed, there has been a progressive 'slimming' of the bodies represented in advertising, television programmes, fashion shows, beauty contests and in the pages of *Playboy* (Garner et al., 1980; Morris et al., 1989; Silverstein et al., 1986; Voracek and Fisher, 2002). In some cases, fat bodies are simply removed – as happens, for example, in mainstream fashion magazines (Peters, 2014: 49–50).

Although the connection between the thin ideal and the imagery proposed by the culture industry is obvious, some scholars have suggested that the origin of the thin ideal is much older and deeper-lying. The inquiries by Susan Bordo (1993) into the cultural origin of anorexia, for example, have shown that the thin ideal cannot be reduced to the imagery compulsively proposed by the media and passively absorbed by the female public. On the contrary, such imagery was able to impose itself during the 20th century because it was functional to the reproduction of a set of meanings of the female body consistent with the patriarchal vision of the role of women in society. Female thinness is not imposed by the 'system' on fragile and acquiescent women; rather, it is actively sought by women and men because it expresses shared cultural meanings about the social role of women, meanings that thus become embodied.

Another view that helps re-locate the ideal of thinness in the context of the fashion system is provided by Entwistle and Slater (2012). They combat the

stereotype of the girl victim of size zero imagery because of the images of models' bodies that saturate the perceptual space. On the contrary, she is engaging with

body values through everyday dress practices; social networks and peer relationships and competition; regulatory structures (e.g. school or workplace dress codes, formal and informal); leisure spaces, practices and regulations; complementary commodities and aesthetic forms (e.g. the relationship between music cultures and fashion); domestic and familial dynamics; retail structures; aesthetic genres such as modelling competitions and reality TV formats; and on and on and on. (Entwistle and Slater, 2012: 29–30)

It is therefore necessary to go beyond the idea that the fashion industry is 'a whimsical and capricious enemy' of women (Bordo, 1993: 46). But to overcome this prejudice against the fashion industry, it is necessary to understand how the practice of fashion constrains both the industry and female consumers to consolidated expectations of behaviour which include the thin ideal. Practice theory can aid understanding of how the thin ideal arose in the fashion system (next section) and has become a fundamental factor of inertia over time (subsequent section).

The practice of fashion and the origins of the thin ideal

Considering fashion as a practice yields better understanding of how the thin ideal has taken hold of the fashion industry. We will see that this particular aspect of current consumer culture is partially due to technical constraints internal to the production system.

In the field of fashion, thinness imposed its tyranny after the industrialization of clothing manufacture (Wissinger, 2015: 108–140). This took place after the Second World War, when *haute couture* began to give way to ready-to-wear. For some specific types of clothing (coveralls, uniforms, leisurewear), and especially in the United States, the industrialization process had already begun between the wars. But in most other countries, including Italy and France, until the mid-1900s civilian clothing for everyday use continued to be largely home-made or produced by craftworkers – neighbourhood tailors and seamstresses. It was only at the beginning of the 1950s that industrial mass production came to predominate (Lipovetsky, 1987; Paris, 2006).

A technological device enabled imposition of the thin ideal concomitantly with fashion's industrialization: the clothes sizing system. By this, I stress that it was not so much the choices of fashion designers or companies that determined the tyranny of thinness as the advent of the concept of size and its use in the production and sale of clothes. The *ideal* of thinness was rather a consequence of the new *practice* that prevailed in fashion in the second half of the 20th century in connection with the introduction of the clothes sizing system. In the world of *haute couture*, very little use was made of the sizing system. The tailoring of a suit does not need adjustment to a size, because the measurements are taken directly on the body,

and the garment, be it draped or tailored, is adjusted to the body that will wear it. In fact, in the world of *haute couture* thinness has never been a dominant value (see Mears, 2011: 182–183; Wissinger, 2015: 109). Thinness became imperative with the rise of the sizing system concomitantly with the transition to mass production.

The clothes sizing system has been interpreted as a means to facilitate purchasing in a context of mass production (LaBat, 2007). In fact, the purchasing processes that had consolidated over time in the consumption of handmade garments lost functionality with the spread of the practice of buying ready-to-wear clothes. But this function of the sizing system linked to consumption is not the only one. I propose looking instead at the production side, where there is a more evident link between industrialization and the spread of the sizing system. The main advantage of the latter, in fact, is that it facilitates standardization, and it does so in several ways: (1) it stabilizes measures, and therefore the operations of machinery and the storage, distribution and sale of goods, thereby reducing costs; (2) it rationalizes the use of fabric, thereby reducing waste; (3) it simplifies the variability of the product (limiting it to a finite number of patterns corresponding to the number of sizes), thereby facilitating changes to it and (4) it simplifies the design process because it allows the creation of patterns by simple algorithmic derivation from a single original pattern designed on a basic size.

I want to draw attention to this last point, because here we enter the domain of practices. For all four of the reasons listed above, the standardization produced by the sizing system provides the industrial production of clothing with considerable economic advantages. But the algorithmic derivation of other sizes from a single original pattern has consequences of another type. It sets an upper limit on the applicability of the sizing system to larger bodies. This limit is due to the fact that compared to a slim size of one's choice, the change in body size of the majority of women follows a proportional trend only up to a certain point. Until size 12, if one reproduces the original pattern increasing all measurements proportionally (i.e. algorithmically), one can acceptably clothe a large portion of the population concerned. Beyond size 12, however, body measurements very often vary in a no longer proportional manner: more on the flanks, or on the buttocks, breasts or stomach (Grana and Bellinello, 2004). From size 12 upwards, it becomes almost impossible to standardize the drop between measurement of girth at chest and secondary measurements (waist, hips). In short, beyond size 12, technology – that is, the technique of proportionally increasing measurements from size to size – exerts its agency by imposing perceivable constraints on human actions. Production in series is thus made much more complicated by questions not only of economic accounting but also of professional practices. If a designer is devoted to plus-size fashion, for example, she or he must 'reinvent' his or her creation several times. She or he must also pay especial attention to the relationship between the garment and the body that wears it, renouncing the use for the fitting and the catwalk parade of so-called 'clothes-hanger models' of sizes 2 or 4 – models whose bodies do not strain the clothes that they wear. Ultimately, many high-fashion

designers must comply with the principles of wearability (Volonté, 2012) which partly restrict the creative freedom on which they today base their professional activities.

Hence, there is a strong disincentive, and not just an economic one, to produce clothing in series over size 12. With industrialization, the fashion industry restricted itself, through its own technological development, within a limited range of body shapes. The imagery of thinness seems to be more the consequence of this fact than its cause. It is not the thin ideal, appearing out of nowhere, that induced the fashion industry to limit itself to slim sizes. On the contrary, the thin ideal grew up together with a fashion industry that was technologically discouraged from producing fat sizes, and consequently developed appropriate practices. This happened in two main ways. First, an industry that has a strong incentive to produce slim sizes logically develops a communication functional to its objectives and therefore focused on slim sizes. Second, in a system based on the standardization of sizes, having a standard body becomes an increasingly important professional requirement for models (Soley-Beltran, 2012). The industrial fashion system has thus begun to promote its products and its brands through the uniform representation of slim bodies: the bodies on which the garments are modelled and for which they are produced. As a consequence of practices within the fashion industry, the cultural landscape has begun to be populated by images of women decidedly thinner than most women. Those images and the related collective imagination constitute a considerable part of the culture of slenderness prevalent in late-modern society.

In summary, we can no longer consider the thin ideal as a cultural frame that invades the world of fashion, or which the fashion industry appropriates and then reinforces for commercial purposes. Instead, it has developed along with the practice of fashion, intertwined with a variety of elements (technology, people, tastes, images) which jointly determine what it means to practice fashion today. The culture of slenderness is difficult to comprehend if we forget that it is a hybrid of symbolic values and technological constraints. It is precisely as an element of the fashion practice that the thin ideal has gained the tyranny that it exerts over human lives inside and outside the fashion system.

Inertia of the thin ideal

The foregoing inquiry into the origins of the tyranny of thinness in fashion also induces reconsideration of the reason for its persistence. If the thin ideal is not something that the fashion industry could arbitrarily appropriate, even less is it something that can be undone at will. In other words, the fashion industry does not pursue the thin ideal based on a simple calculation of interest – otherwise it would be hard to understand why it continues to do so in a society where the spending capacity on cultural products by the fat part of the population has gradually increased. The practice of fashion, like all practices, evolves slowly on the basis of a sticky dialectic between factors of change and inertia factors, and the thin ideal is part of that dialectic.

Of course, fashion thrives on change. The concept of fashion itself implies the idea that a style is bound to end very soon and be replaced by a new style in the cyclical sequence of trends. But this change which makes fashion what it is requires conventions and routines, shared ways of doing things, habits and alignments among the various actors involved.

As regards the thin ideal, one of the main ways in which it has stabilized over the years in the practice of fashion is through the segregation of plus-size clothing. Segregation is done in two ways: the exclusion of sizes larger than 12 from straight fashion (that of the fashion weeks) and the removal of fashion content from clothing larger than size 12. In other words, the current fashion system is based on a split between the world (companies, shops, magazines, customers) of sizes smaller than 12 and the world (companies, shops, customers) of sizes larger than 12. The two worlds have little in common (few companies, few shops, though many customers). The former is concentrated on the creation of *fashion* items: that is, clothes enriched with an immaterial content that enables customers to construct a satisfactory representation of the self in everyday social interaction (Goffman, 1959). The latter – apart from certain exceptional cases like the Elena Mirò brand – instead aims to create mere *clothing* using simple ruses to conceal the body rather than enhance it.

In practice, this segregation occurs at different but complementary levels which I can only briefly describe here (cf. Volonté, in press): (1) plus-size clothing is made by specialized companies, while few straight fashion companies produce plus-size clothes as well; (2) the plus-size brands are niche brands – the mainstream brands do not produce plus sizes; (3) in general, the designers who work for mainstream fashion refuse to design plus-size collections, and if they do design such collections, they do so anonymously; (4) the distribution system of plus-size clothing is physically separate, being largely relegated to city suburbs, provincial towns and the Internet; (5) plus-size clothing is almost entirely obscured in fashion communication, while for plus-size clothes there exist few niche communication channels and (6) plus-size customers do not like entering straight shops, not even to glance around, because they are embarrassed when the shop-assistant sends them away or directs them to the plus-size section (Gruys, 2012; Peters, 2014).

These forms of segregation are mutually connected and act upon each other in a manner that cannot be directly ascribed to the subjects. They dominate the subjects and form a network of conditions which entail the exclusion of overweight bodies from fashion practice. The analysis of a situation of plus-size fashion consumption will make clear how this happens in everyday life.

Kjerstin Gruys (2012) has conducted ethnographic observation on the employees of a plus-size clothing store. Through her account, the inertia of fashion practice with respect to the thin ideal becomes visible in various ways.

First, there emerges the agency of numbers: the threshold between a size 12 and a size 14 defines a distance (and erects a barrier) much greater than that between two adjacent sizes in general. This distance/barrier is not established by a particular subject, but by the practice itself through the behaviour of its actors, from

companies to designers and customers. Subject to the distance/barrier are the companies, which produce brands specialized in plus-size clothing. Subject to it is the store, which has an equivalent assortment of items. Subject to it are above all the customers, who classify themselves in a category defined in opposition to what they name 'thin' (i.e. size 12 or less).

Second, this brings out the inertia of language. Heedless of the rhetoric used by the store to evade the thin-ideal versus fat-aberrant opposition (e.g. the claim 'clothing for real women'), the customers referred to themselves with terms such as 'big', 'full-figured', 'curvy', 'thick' and 'chubby'.

Third, apparent here is a characteristic feature of integrative practices: that of establishing communities of persons complicit because they are equally expert, to various degrees, in the game to be played. In this case, the community comprised not only the store's customers but also the salesgirls, because they too were plus-size. In fact, the store tended to hire overweight staff for the frontstage work because customers clearly preferred to interact with women with their own 'problems' when discussing the purchase of a dress. Such communities are formed on the basis of not just formal skills that can be verbalized, but primarily of emotions, experiences and tacit knowledge.

Finally, there is the agency of objects. The company allocated fat employees to the frontstage work and slim ones to the backstage work (the stockroom). This different allocation depended, in part, on anticipation of customers' expectations and also, in part, on the physical arrangement of the spaces, because the physically narrow design of the stockroom shelves made it difficult for fat employees to carry out backstage tasks.

The segregation of plus-size clothing should not be understood as the impossibility for fat bodies to find space within the fashion system. In recent decades, there have been several cases in which mainstream fashion has explored the 'curvy' world, for example, through special issues of important magazines (*Elle* April 2010; *Vogue Italia* June 2011), using decidedly plus-size testimonials (Kim Kardashian for Balmain since 2014) and admitting plus-size brands to fashion weeks (Elena Mirò in Milan in 2005). However, these have always been 'explorations' mostly restricted to the sphere of communication, and which have not affected the system of fashion production, distribution and consumption. The incidence of non-thin bodies in the mainstream fashion magazines is still less than 10%, and in some cases approaches 0% (my survey, 2016). Kim Kardashian's body in the Balmain advertisements is obviously photoshopped; the Elena Mirò brand has been removed from the Milan fashion week after only 2 years of presence.

More interesting seem to be developments on the consumer side, where technological progress has created the conditions that allow former fashion outsiders to take part in production of the fashion discourse (Pham, 2011; Rocamora, 2013). The proliferation of so-called 'fatshion' blogs seems finally to have given voice and visibility to fat people. However, the discourse of fatshion blogs still seems to be a counter-hegemonic one: on one hand, it disrupts racist hierarchies of beauty, and

therefore fragments the cultural landscape with respect to the hegemonic fashion discourse; on the other hand, however, its effective capacity to impact on the latter encounters 'formidable limitations' (Connell, 2013: 209) generated by the power of the thin ideal fuelled by the inertia of fashion practice.

The power of practices is perhaps most evident in embodiment: that is, when the practice is able to regulate people's bodies and acquire to its advantage the force of inertia that embodiment produces. In the case of fashion, an important contribution to the structuring of the thin ideal has certainly been made by the modelling industry. The focus on slim sizes by the production system has created a demand for slim bodies to use for fitting clothes, their display at fashion shows and the communication of products and brands through the media. During the 1950s and 1960s, the in-house mannequins of the high-fashion *maisons* were gradually replaced by freelance models, usually organized by agencies (Koda and Yohannan, 2009). The profession gradually became institutionalized, and the bodies of the models increasingly became the bodies of fashion: the bodies which fashion could not do without (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2012; Godart and Mears, 2009; Mears, 2011). They were, and increasingly are, ultra-thin bodies. For fitting or communication, these are now the only bodies available.⁵ It is thus all the more necessary for the design of collections to be based on those bodies. To be able to 'conceive' a collection in a size different from 4, designers should have available bodies different from size 4, but this is not the case.

Yet we cannot draw the conclusion that fashion's resistance to overthrowing the tyranny of thinness is the effect of the characteristics acquired over time by the modelling industry. Just as we cannot say that it depends on an ideal of the female body dominant in the media industry, nor that it is the consumers who refuse to include larger sizes in fashion. None of these explanations works because none of them acknowledges the complexity of fashion as a practice. The models are thin because the samples are designed and made in sizes from 0 to 4. But the samples are also made in those sizes because it is only for those dimensions that the agencies are able to supply a sufficient number of models (Czerniawski, 2015: 63). Ashley Mears (2011) has well described the crux of the matter thus:

When you ask designers why they make their samples in those particular dimensions, many answer with an appeal to tradition. Sample size is what they learned in design school, the size of their trusted mannequin on the shop floor, and the size of the models they expect agencies to provide. Producers certainly don't like the thought that their clothes may terrorize women into eating disorders, but they don't know how to change an entire system of fashion design either. [. . .] [O]ver time, conventions get 'locked in', and it becomes easier to *not* change them, even if we don't like them. Bookers and clients don't utilize the language of economics when explaining their work, but instead they understand that it's just 'the way things are done'. Like any convention, sample sizes exert inertia. (p. 184)

The resistance of the thin ideal today is due to the inertia of the practice of fashion. Every actor in the system must adapt to this ideal if they want to continue to work, because every other actor expects them to behave consistently with the thin ideal. This also applies to models, with the not-insignificant detail that this ideal is inscribed in their bodies, allowing or not allowing them to enter the profession and forcing them to exercise iron discipline on their corporeality (Wissinger, 2015: Ch. 4 and 5). By embodying the thin ideal, models, not because they are ontologically beautiful or desirable but because they are necessary for the functioning of the fashion industry, contribute greatly to the persistence of the thin ideal notwithstanding the change of economic interests in the sector.

Conclusion

The thin ideal is a characteristic feature of late-modern western societies, and it has been widely investigated by scholars. Many have identified a link between the thin ideal and the fashion industry concentrated on the promotion and sale of products for thin bodies, and on the simultaneous idealization of the slim body as a means to communicate products and brands. However, this link is normally treated as a characteristic feature of the capriciousness and unpredictability of fashion, or it is simply assumed as a matter of fact.

By drawing on practice theory, in this article I have tried to show that the inertia of the thin ideal is better explained by referring not to the fact that it is so widespread, nor to the will of any human actor, but to the fact that it has become part of a practice – the practice of fashion. This implies that the ideal of thinness has been incorporated into habits, routines, objects and the bodies themselves of those who engage in the practice. The inertia of the practice produces the inertia of its actors. This contributes to explaining the fact that the awareness of the harm caused by the thin ideal is not sufficient to defeat it.

To explain my point, I have set out two arguments.

First, I have shown that at the origin of the tyranny of thinness in western cultures, there is a technological development. I have shown that application of the sizing system to the manufacture of clothing produces a threshold at around sizes 12/14 between what is technologically suitable for treatment by the fashion industry and what is not. This fact has pushed the imagery promoted by fashion towards bodies thinner than the average of real bodies. This helps understanding the rise of the thin ideal not as a cultural change in people tastes but as a consequence of a change in the practice of fashion.

Subsequently, I have argued that because the thin ideal is part of the practice of fashion, it is more resistant than expected to change. To make this evident, I have mentioned the discussion on body standards in modelling. Thinness is not just a standard of perfection in people's minds – for instance, in the attitude of fashion designers towards the female body – it is also incorporated in the models' bodies, which are a very solid element in the process of fashion production. This makes it

especially hard for all protagonists of the fashion system to change their attitude and practices towards the standards to be pursued.

The contribution of fashion to imposition of the thin ideal has therefore not been marginal or occasional, but somehow inscribed in its evolution as a practice. Hence, by considering the thin ideal from the practice theory perspective, it has also been possible to furnish insights into the origin and persistence of that ideal. Must we be pessimistic about the possibility that the tyranny of slenderness will weaken in the near future? This is not the purpose of my argument. I think instead that treating the thin ideal as an element of a practice better explains its strength, offering insights for those responsible for policies or those who promote counter-hegemonic politics.

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Notes

1. Roughly speaking, a US size 4 corresponds to a size 6 in the United Kingdom, 34 in France and 38 in Italy. Sizes normally increase by 2 numbers in quite equivalent manner among the various national systems. However, such systems are abstract references, because each manufacturer uses a particular sizing system, usually patterned on its target customers.
2. See, for example, the study on the London Fashion Week by Entwistle and Rocamora (2006), who highlight a number of spatial, bodily and relational features typical of the fashion show practice, the outcome of which is reproduction of the hierarchy established in the fashion industry.
3. Although Pierre Bourdieu is one of the main sources of the theory of practices, I shall not draw on his theoretical framework, which conceives praxeology as 'a universal anthropology' (Bourdieu and Yamamoto, 1989). In Bourdieu's conception, the whole of human life is structured in the form of practice. Since the argument that I develop here holds regardless of acceptance of such an all-encompassing approach, I consider it epistemologically more prudent to refer to theories of the middle range, such as those proposed by Reckwitz (2002), Schatzki (1996) and Shove et al. (2012).
4. Yet, the prominence of the thin ideal should not induce one to believe in a generalized hegemony. Even if analysis is restricted to western societies – as in this article – significant differences emerge in the importance that the various classes give to personal presentation and in the practices that they pursue to lose weight (Bourdieu, 1984: 200–208; Polivy et al., 1986; Wooley and Wooley, 1982).
5. Of course, there are the plus-size models, some of whom (e.g. Crystal Renn) have even achieved celebrity status. However, also among models the segregation of the plus size operates. Models larger than size 8 are not handled by the straight-size

model agencies and must refer to agencies specialized in plus size or to specialized divisions of mainstream agencies. Most importantly, very rarely does even the plus-size fashion industry employ models larger than size 16 (Czerniawski, 2015: 63). This confirms that also the sphere of plus-size clothing is subjected to the hegemonic fashion discourse.

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Author Biography

Paolo Volonté is an associate professor of *Sociology of cultural processes* at the School of Design of Politecnico di Milano, where he is the vice-coordinator of the PhD Programme in Design. He is also co-editor of the *International Journal of Fashion Studies*. His main research topics are in the fields of fashion studies, design studies, and the sociology of knowledge.