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Beyond barriers: A narrative review of disability and fashion

S. Venkatesan *

Department of Clinical Psychology, All India Institute of Speech and Hearing, Mysore: 570006, Karnataka, INDIA.

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Abstract

Objectives: Fashion serves as a powerful tool for self-expression; however, mainstream fashion narratives often neglect the experiences of people with disabilities. This review explores the evolving relationship between fashion and disability, emphasizing how individuals use clothing to assert identity, agency, and inclusion.

Method: This study conducts a narrative review by analyzing existing literature on fashion accessibility, adaptive clothing innovations, and the socio-cultural significance of fashion for individuals with disabilities. The review synthesizes findings across various disciplines to provide a holistic perspective on inclusion in fashion.

Results: The analysis highlights how fashion can challenge stereotypes, enhance self-confidence, and contribute to a more inclusive industry. Although adaptive fashion has gained traction, several barriers persist, including limited representation in media, inadequate market availability, and entrenched ableist attitudes. People with disabilities creatively modify mainstream fashion to meet their needs, showcasing resilience and ingenuity.

Conclusion: Fashion has the potential to be a tool for empowerment rather than exclusion. The review underscores the need for designers, brands, and policymakers to actively contribute to a more equitable fashion landscape. It calls for further research, advocacy, and industry initiatives to ensure that fashion becomes truly accessible and representative for all.

Running Title: Fashion Statements of People with Disabilities: A Narrative Review

Keywords: Adaptive fashion; Disability representation; Inclusive design; Fashion accessibility; Identity and self-expression; Social perceptions; Clothing modifications; Mental Health

1. Introduction

A fashion statement (FS) expresses personal style and individuality through clothing and accessories, conveying messages about the wearer's personality and beliefs (Entwistle, 2015). Key aspects of FS include individuality, cultural influences, and the context of wear, ranging from casual to formal attire (Barnard, 2014). Examples of FS include vibrant colors for visibility, sustainable fashion for environmental awareness, and vintage styles for nostalgia. Ultimately, FS communicates deeper meanings beyond mere clothing (Brueggemann, 2013; Brown, 2011).

The term "fashion statement" encompasses various expressions like style declaration, fashion expression, and wardrobe choice, each with subtle distinctions. Fashion trends signify popular styles, while personal style reflects unique preferences. Trendsetters influence fashion, and fashion assertions express strong beliefs about clothing choices (Thomas, 2019; World Health Organization, 2001).

* Corresponding author: S. Venkatesan ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9814-7577

Research on fashion and disabilities is limited. Historically, people with disabilities (PWDs) have faced marginalization in the fashion industry, leading to under-representation (Dunn and Andrews, 2015). Stereotypes suggest that PWDs lack interest in fashion, resulting in minimal resources for inclusive design. The industry often overlooks the specific needs of PWDs, complicating the creation of functional yet stylish apparel (University of Kansas, 2020). Cultural norms and beauty standards further exclude PWDs, with weak advocacy for inclusion and a focus on mainstream trends rather than disability-inclusive fashion. Collaborative efforts among designers, scholars, and advocates are essential for improving representation and challenging stereotypes (Lee, Syed Alwi, and Gambetti, 2024; Foster, 2021; Ayachit, 2017).

2. Review of Literature

This narrative review explores the FS of PWDs, identifying trends, addressing barriers, promoting inclusion, and enhancing understanding of existing literature. Fashion and disability rarely intersect, with adaptive clothing often perceived as non-fashionable. However, contemporary designers increasingly seek to blend functionality and style for wheelchair users (Kearney, 2020). Accurate portrayals of disabilities in media are critical for social perceptions (Gordon, 2019). Socially conscious fashion brands are now accommodating diverse identities, challenging past oppressive notions in the industry (Reddy-Best, Streck, and Gordon, 2022).

Myths hinder the representation of PWDs in the fashion industry. A common myth is that PWDs lack interest in fashion, undermining their individuality. Another misconception is that adaptive clothing is purely functional and lacks aesthetic appeal. While functionality is essential, many designers create stylish adaptive wear that meets both practical and fashion needs. The belief that PWDs must conform to traditional beauty standards overlooks their unique styles (Haines, 2021). Lastly, the notion that the fashion industry is inclusive of PWDs is inaccurate; representation in media and runway shows remains insufficient (Smith and Jones, 2022). Addressing these misconceptions is vital for fostering an inclusive environment where PWDs can express their FS confidently. In "The Intersection of Fashion and Disability: A Historical Analysis," Annet-Hitchcock discusses how societal attitudes toward disability have shaped fashion trends, revealing the marginalization of PWDs. The chapter advocates for representation and inclusion, urging the industry to embrace diversity and create accessible fashion (Hitchcock, 2023).

2.1. History

Historically, fashion has evolved significantly, reflecting cultural shifts. The first sleeve cut was created for a noble military figure after he lost his arm. Ancient Greece featured garments like the chiton, while the toga in Rome symbolized citizenship (Hodge, 2012; Harlow and Laurence, 2002). The Middle Ages popularized the surcoat, and the Renaissance introduced the doublet (Hunnisett, 1990; Arnold, 2000). The 18th century showcased intricate gowns and coats (Levey, 1991; Cunnington and Cunnington, 1990). These examples illustrate the progression of fashion and its reflection of societal changes (Thanhauser, 2022).

In early Indian history, clothing was diverse, beginning with simple garments in the Indus Valley civilization. Women wore draped textiles, while men donned loincloths. The Vedic period featured the dhoti and sari, while the Mauryan period introduced more elaborate garments (Wright, 2010; Thapar, 2002; Chakrabarti, 2006). The Gupta period is noted for luxurious textiles, and the British colonial era brought fusion styles (Kulke and Rothermund, 2004; Dutta, 2015; Ali, 2008). These examples highlight the evolving nature of fashion in early Indian history and its consideration for inclusion. Academic interest in clothing for PWDs has grown over decades. A study by Esmail et al. (2020) found that half of the publications on this topic emerged from fashion literature, shifting from concealing disability to embracing it. The evolution of academic interest reflects broader societal changes and awareness of disability rights. Early research focused on clothing needs, highlighting challenges in finding suitable options (Kumar and Gupta, 1998).

The 2000s saw increased focus on disability studies in India, advocating for inclusive design practices (Sharma, 2006). Recent research explores innovative design approaches and technology integration in adaptive clothing, emphasizing collaboration among designers and disability advocates (Rao and Mehta, 2015). This growing interest underscores the necessity for continued research to meet the clothing needs of PWDs, promoting inclusion and dignity in fashion. Academic journals like *Fashion Theory* and *The International Journal of Fashion Studies* started to feature articles on this important topic (Wong, 2021; Kearney and O'Connor, 2020; Duffy, 2018; Verma and Singh, 2010; Pullin, 2009).

Research on FS among PWDs has evolved, reflecting changing societal perspectives. Early studies focused on practical aspects, often overlooking fashion's aesthetic roles (Rosenblum, 2006). By the late 1990s, scholars began critically assessing the connection between fashion and disability (McGowan, 2019). Qualitative studies gained traction in the 2010s, exploring fashion-related lived experiences and the empowering potential of adaptive clothing (Kwan, 2020).

Social media has also amplified visibility and community engagement, reinforcing fashion's significance in identity for PWDs.

2.2. Historical and Contemporary Models of Disability and Fashion Statements

Historically, disability was viewed through a medical lens, limiting fashion options to functionality (Barnes and Mercer, 2010). Early adaptive clothing lacked aesthetic appeal, focusing solely on practicality. Today, disability models prioritize inclusion and empowerment, emphasizing fashion's role in self-expression. Brands like Zappos and ASOS now offer stylish adaptive designs for diverse needs. Advocates like Molly Burke promote inclusion through her style and collaborations, showcasing fashion's power for PWDs to express their identities confidently (Friedman, 2018).

In India, the traditional medical perspective has shifted toward social inclusion, recognizing fashion as a means of self-expression. Brands like Kanya create stylish adaptive wear, blending functionality with aesthetics (Dutta, 2020). Nirmala, a woman with a mobility impairment, collaborates with designers to showcase her unique style, illustrating how inclusive fashion allows PWDs in India to express their individuality (Kumar and Singh, 2021).

The Supreme Court of India has established guidelines for fair representation of PWDs in media, preventing stereotypes and discrimination. Companies like Lemon Tree Hotels actively hire PWDs, while architects advocate for universal design in infrastructure. Startups like BleeTech develop assistive technologies. Although the RPwD Act mandates public accessibility, enforcement remains inconsistent, prompting advocacy for inclusive strategies in education and beyond (Solomatina, 2024; Suradkar and Chanana, 2024).

3. Need, Rationale, and Justification

The study of fashion statements (FS) among PWDs is crucial for several reasons. First, it addresses a significant gap in understanding how PWDs express their identity and individuality through fashion. Historically, the fashion industry has often marginalized disabled individuals, perpetuating stereotypes and limiting their representation. The rationale for this study lies in recognizing clothing as a powerful medium for self-expression and empowerment. By exploring how PWDs navigate fashion, we can gain insights into their experiences, preferences, and challenges, thereby promoting inclusion within the fashion industry.

The justification for this research is rooted in the need to advocate for adaptive clothing options that cater to diverse bodies and abilities. As society progresses towards greater inclusion, understanding the fashion choices of PWDs can inform designers, marketers, and policymakers, fostering a more equitable environment. This study not only enhances visibility for PWDs but also contributes to broader discussions on body positivity and diversity, ultimately challenging societal norms and promoting acceptance.

3.1. Aims

This narrative review aims to:

- Gather existing literature on how PWDs utilize fashion to express their identity and individuality.
- Examine efforts made to advocate for greater representation and inclusion of PWDs in the fashion industry, addressing historical marginalization.
- Collect insights on informed design practices that can guide designers and marketers in creating adaptive clothing options tailored to diverse bodies and abilities.

3.2. Objectives

- To Identify, analyze, and evaluate available literature on fashion preferences and choices among PWDs.
- To Understand the unique styles and expressions of PWDs, including the challenges they face in accessing and utilizing fashion, such as market barriers and their current representation in the fashion industry, and how these factors impact their self-perception and societal acceptance.
- To gather literature advocating for or promoting adaptive fashion that accommodates diverse needs, raises awareness about the importance of body positivity within fashion discourse, seeks to challenge societal norms, and promotes acceptance. Additionally, engage stakeholders such as designers, marketers, and policymakers in discussions about the findings to foster a more equitable fashion environment for PWDs.

3.3. Method

This research review employed a mixed-methods approach involving several steps. A literature review was conducted to gather and synthesize existing studies on fashion and disability, utilizing databases like JSTOR, PubMed, and Google Scholar. Keywords such as "fashion and disability," "adaptive clothing," and "disability representation in fashion" were used alongside peer-reviewed articles, books, and credible online sources to analyze themes, trends, and gaps. Qualitative analysis aimed to capture personal narratives from PWDs through interviews or focus groups, using open-ended questions about their fashion choices and challenges. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes, while case studies showcased specific fashion statements from individuals or groups with disabilities, highlighting their context, cultural significance, and impact. Content analysis examined media representations of fashion and disability by reviewing fashion magazines, social media, and advertisements featuring PWDs to evaluate their influence on public perception and self-expression. This mixed-methods approach integrates both quantitative and qualitative data for a holistic understanding. Qualitative data analysis software NVivo was utilized for coding and theme identification (Kuper, Lingard, and Levinson, 2008).

3.4. Operational Definitions

In the realm of fashion, adaptive fashion stands out as a vital concept tailored specifically for PWDs or unique physical challenges. This clothing category is thoughtfully designed with features like adjustable closures and sensory-friendly fabrics, ensuring that wearers can dress independently and comfortably. At its core, adaptive fashion embodies three key characteristics: it boasts a functional design that includes elements such as magnetic fasteners and elastic waistbands, making dressing easier; it maintains an aesthetic appeal, allowing individuals to express their personal style; and it is user-centric, developed with valuable input from those with disabilities to ensure both practicality and comfort.

Moving beyond adaptive fashion, is inclusive design—a philosophy that seeks to create products and environments accessible to a diverse array of users, regardless of their age, ability, or background. This approach emphasizes the importance of understanding the varied needs of all potential users, integrating insights into the design process to eliminate barriers and foster participation. Key characteristics of inclusive design include a focus on user diversity, which considers the different abilities and preferences of individuals; a commitment to accessibility, ensuring that products can be easily used by those with disabilities; and an iterative process that involves continuous feedback from users to refine and enhance the design.

Another important concept is universal design, which aims to create products and environments that are inherently accessible to everyone. This design philosophy advocates for a proactive approach, where accessibility is considered from the very beginning rather than retrofitted later. Universal design strives for inclusion, accommodating the needs of a broad population, and emphasizes simplicity and usability, ensuring that products are intuitive and easy to use for all.

In the context of materials, sensory-friendly fabrics play a crucial role in the comfort of individuals with sensory sensitivities, such as those on the autism spectrum. These specially designed materials prioritize softness, featuring comfortable textures that minimize irritation. They also promote breathability, allowing for air circulation to enhance comfort, and often incorporate minimal seams to reduce the potential for discomfort caused by traditional stitching.

Lastly, functional fashion emerges as a category that prioritizes practicality while maintaining a stylish appearance. This type of clothing is designed for versatility, enabling wearers to engage in various activities without sacrificing comfort. Key characteristics include a multi-use approach, ensuring garments can adapt to different scenarios; a comfort-driven focus, which often incorporates stretchable materials and adjustable features; and a commitment to being stylish, balancing functionality with contemporary fashion trends to appeal to a wide audience.

Together, these concepts form a comprehensive understanding of how adaptive fashion and inclusive design contribute to a more accessible and representative fashion industry, promoting comfort, style, and dignity for all individuals.

3.5. Procedure

This narrative review adhered to the PRISMA framework (Table 1; Figure 1; Page et al., 2021; Moher et al., 2009), systematically examining fashion and disability through a structured bibliographic search across major academic databases until May 2025. The review aimed to explore various aspects of fashion in PWDs, including their meanings, characteristics, types, sources, dynamics, measurement, benefits, applications, and negative aspects. The search utilized Boolean operators and focused on original research articles in English from databases including PubMed, Google

Scholar, JSTOR, PsycINFO, and the Web of Science, employing terms such as "adaptive fashion," "disability representation," and "inclusive design." Screening involved title and abstract reviews, followed by full-text assessments to ensure relevance. Peer-reviewed sources were prioritized, while newsletters and dissertations were excluded.

Firsthand accounts and interviews were incorporated to capture diverse lived experiences. A comparative analysis was conducted to highlight gaps in current literature and propose future research directions. This structured methodology ensures a comprehensive and unbiased review of how fashion functions as an avenue for self-expression and inclusion for PWDs. Literature was categorized systematically, detailing author(s), year of publication, study design, sample size, population characteristics, key findings, and limitations, contributing to evidence-based decision-making in this critical area of research.

To synthesize findings, a PRISMA flow diagram documented study selection, ensuring transparency. Firsthand accounts and interviews were integrated, highlighting lived experiences and identifying gaps in the literature. Comparative analysis proposed future research directions. Literature details—including author names, study design, sample size, and key findings—were systematically organized in Excel, with EndNote and Zotero used for reference management. Bias minimization included inter-observer reliability checks ($r = 0.96$), and effect sizes were analyzed using Cohen's guidelines (Cohen, 1992).

Since the review involves secondary data analysis, ethical approval was unnecessary, although included studies had institutional clearance (Venkatesan, 2009). Ethical concerns in fashion studies for PWDs include representation without tokenism, informed consent, and equitable access to adaptive fashion. Cultural sensitivity in fashion statements is critical, avoiding misrepresentation (Beauchamp and Childress, 2019). Heightened ethical considerations are necessary to prevent exploitation (Fisher, 2013), and confidentiality must be maintained regarding participants' identities (McLaughlin, 2018). This six-month review process aimed to enhance understanding of fashion's role in inclusion and self-expression for PWDs.

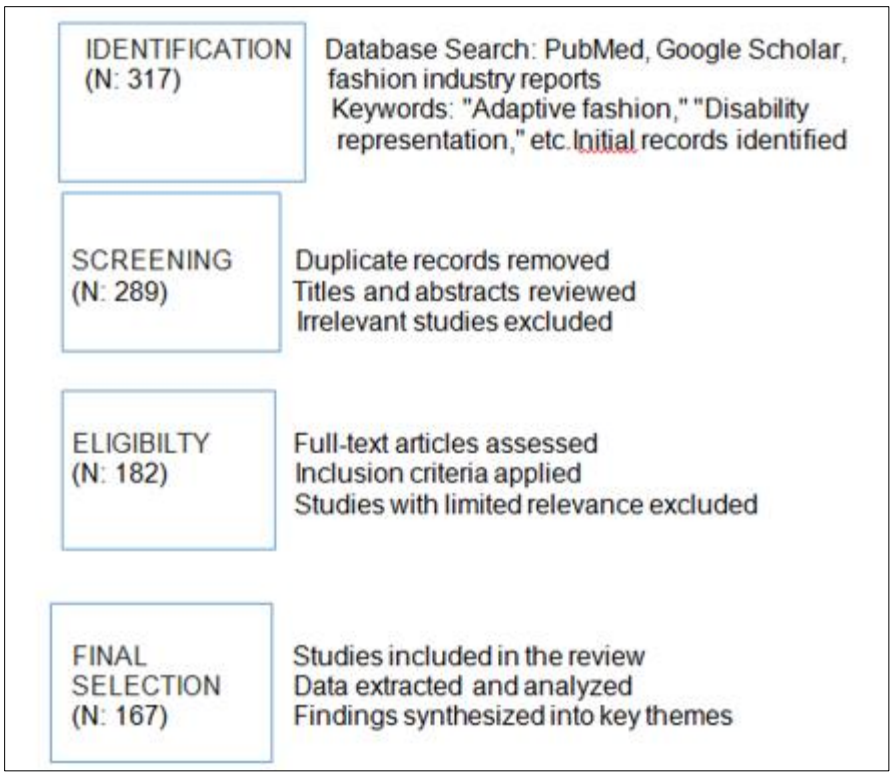

Figure 1 Flow Diagram Representation of the Research Procedure

4. Results

This section provides a detailed analysis of FS made by PWDs, organized into quantitative and qualitative aspects such as timelines, themes, journal titles, publication years, age groups, gender, and religious considerations. It covers studies conducted in India, highlights contributions from the National Institute of Design, and examines theories related to fashion in PWDs. Additionally, it explores under-researched aspects of fashion, personal narratives, cultural significance, and the impact of fashion on self-esteem and confidence, while addressing barriers to accessibility, economic factors, community initiatives, and innovations in adaptive fashion within the framework of universal design.

4.1. Timelines

The decade-wise frequency distribution reveals notable trends in the data. The earliest paper included, titled "Clothes Maketh the Man: The Psychological Significance of Clothing in a Residential Treatment Setting for Adolescents," discusses how mood fluctuations can significantly influence clothing choices (Joseph, 1973). Another early publication, "The Social Identity Theory of Inter-Group Behavior" (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), asserts that individuals derive their identity from group affiliations, including disability status. The number of publications on fashion vis-a-vis disabilities is increased drastically (Table 1) by two to three times during the post 2020s (N: 72) from the 2010s (N: 48) and 2000s (N: 20).

The topics of study has covered historical evolution of clothing, fashion as means of communication, clothing and identity formation, impact of social norms on fashion, accessibility and inclusive fashion in the 1960s. Contrast this with ongoing interest of researchers on themes like artificial intelligence, ethics, media and adaptive fashion for PWDs (Table 1).

Table 1 Decade-wise Frequency Count and Distribution of Publications

Decade	Years	N	Key-themes	Topics of Study
1970s	1970-79	1		
1980s	1980-89	1		
1990s	1990-99	8	Fashion as identity and social expression	Historical evolution of clothing
				Fashion as a medium of communication
				Clothing and identity formation (Davis, 1992)
				Impact of social norms on fashion
2000s	2000-10	20	Accessibility, representation, and technology	Inclusive fashion design and accessibility
				Relationship between fashion and identity
				Fashion technology and e-commerce
				Cultural heritage and material culture
				Body image and representation in media
2010s	2011-20	48	Disability studies and adaptive fashion	Adaptive fashion for PWDs
				Psychological impact of clothing on PWDs
				Intersection of fashion with social work and ethics
2020s	2021+	72	Fashion advocacy, technology and sustainability	Inclusive education and economic opportunities in fashion
				Representation and empowerment through fashion (Sharma, 2013)
				Adaptive clothing as a tool for inclusion
				Representation in fashion media and brand responsibility
				Fashion activism and disability inclusion

				Psychological impact and fashion therapy
				AI-driven fashion design and body scanners for accessibility
				Sustainability and inclusion in fashion
				Cultural perspectives and community-led design approaches
Total		167		

The data presented in the table 2 offers an insightful breakdown of various publication types. Journals, including Fashion Theory, Disability and Society, Journal of Fashion Studies, and Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management, collectively account for 23.34% of the total publications. Books and book chapters contribute significantly, with books making up 26.67% and chapters adding 9.33%. However, the largest portion falls under "Others," which constitutes 40.67%, highlighting a diversity in publication formats beyond traditional academic outlets. This distribution reflects a balanced engagement with scholarly and non-scholarly works, indicating a broad scope of contributions to fashion and disability discourse**.**

Table 2 Distribution of names of journal and types of publication types

Publication	**Name**	**N**	**Percent**
Journal	Fashion Theory	10	6.67
	Disability and Society	9	6.00
	Journal of Fashion Studies	9	6.00
	Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management	7	4.67
Books		40	26.67
Chapters in Books		14	9.33
Others		68	40.67
Total		157	100.00

X^2; 113.5; dF: 6; **p-value < 0.001 (HS)**

4.2. Keyword Analysis

Key themes emerging from the keyword analysis include fashion, clothing, and inclusion, indicating a strong interest in the intersection of apparel with identity and accessibility (Table 3). The term "fashion" appears 50 times, underscoring its societal role and impact. The acronym "PWD" is mentioned 42 times, highlighting concerns regarding adaptive clothing and inclusion. The presence of "India" and "Inclusion" emphasizes a contextual focus on the Indian fashion landscape and efforts to bridge accessibility gaps. Additional keywords such as "History" and "Identity" reflect an interest in how clothing shapes perceptions across cultures and eras. Gender-specific concerns are indicated by the mention of "Women" 10 times. Keywords like "Research," "Advocacy," "Dressing," and "Future" suggest a scholarly approach to the subject, portraying fashion as a tool for empowerment and transformation.

Table 3 Frequency Counts of Top 15 keywords on FS and PWD in this literature search

Keyword	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Fashiom	50	13.45
Clothing	26	7.00
PWD	42	11.30
Adaptive	19	5.12
Research	15	4.05
Design	15	4.05

Inclusion	13	3.50
india	13	3.50
History	11	2.96
Identity	10	2.69
Women	10	2.69
Dressing	7	1.89
Future	7	1.89
Review	7	1.89
Advocacy	6	1.62

X^2; 86.23; dF: 14; p-value < 0.001 (HS) indicating that keyword frequencies deviate significantly from a uniform distribution, showing distinct preferences in keyword usage

4.3. Types of PWDs

Fashion significantly impacts self-expression for PWDs across various age groups. Children often favor bright colors and playful designs that reflect their personalities (Davis, 2020). Adolescents may focus on trends while advocating for inclusion (Smith, 2021). Adults typically prioritize functionality alongside style, balancing professional attire with personal flair (Johnson, 2019). Older adults often seek comfort but increasingly desire fashionable options that reflect their identities (Brown, 2022). Overall, fashion serves as a powerful means of self-identity and empowerment for PWDs at any age (Choudhury, 2024).

Fashion choices among PWDs also vary by gender, reflecting diverse identities and societal expectations. Women with disabilities face unique challenges, balancing the desire for stylish clothing with the need for adaptive features (Kearney, 2020; Carroll and Kincade, 2007). Many brands are recognizing this demand by creating inclusive collections that empower women to express their individuality (Thompson, 2021). Ethnographic saris with 3-D printed fasteners for women and velcro-assisted dhotis for men illustrate the growing emphasis on practicality (Miller, 2019). There is a movement advocating for fashionable adaptive apparel for both genders, emphasizing personal expression (Ranade and Sharma, 2025; Jones, 2022).

Religious beliefs also shape fashion choices for PWDs. For example, Muslim women with disabilities seek adaptive clothing that aligns with modesty while ensuring comfort (Ali, 2021). Designers are increasingly creating stylish hijabs and garments to meet these needs (Khan, 2022). Similarly, Jewish PWDs may look for clothing that respects cultural traditions and functionality (Levine, 2020). This highlights the importance of adaptive fashion brands recognizing religious considerations to enhance personal expression (Goldstein, 2021).

Fashion selections among PWDs are influenced by various factors, including accessibility requirements, individual style, and the availability of adaptive clothing. Those who use wheelchairs or have limited mobility often seek garments that are easy to wear. Brands specializing in adaptive fashion offer features such as magnetic closures, Velcro fastenings, and stretchable fabrics to enhance comfort and independence. For individuals with visual impairments, clothing that incorporates tactile elements like braille enables them to identify colors and patterns through touch, thus promoting self-expression. Apparel designed for amputees typically includes adjustable fits and seamless designs to accommodate prosthetics. People with dwarfism require clothing tailored to their proportions for optimal fit and comfort, while some designers specifically create adaptive lines for shorter individuals. Additionally, individuals with cerebral palsy or autism may favor sensory-friendly garments made from soft, non-irritating materials. The adaptive fashion sector is progressing, with major brands increasingly embracing inclusive designs (Rana, McBee-Black, and Swazan, 2024; Singh and Rane, 2024; Hyun-shin, 2007).

PWDs often struggle with tasks such as dressing, undressing, fastening shoelaces, and buttoning clothes. Recommended adaptive fashion alternatives include zippers, Velcro fastenings, magnetic buttons, and longer openings in the back for ease of wear. These garments should be durable, affordable, and easy to put on and take off, featuring minimal fasteners (Kusuma et al. 2024). Dressing and undressing can be particularly challenging for people with movement disorders like Parkinson's disease, necessitating clothing designed to accommodate their limited mobility. Such options are also beneficial for wheelchair users and those with poor motor skills (Rana, McBee-Black, and Swazan, 2024; Srikanth and Nimala, 2024).

Fashion significantly impacts individuals with mental illnesses, influencing self-expression, inclusion, and psychological health. Research suggests that clothing choices can act as a therapeutic tool, aiding in the management of anxiety and depression while reflecting personal identity. The relationship between fashion and mental health is complex, offering both positive and negative effects (Smith, 2021; Kearney, 2020b; Jones, 2019). Clothing can provide comfort and uplift mood, but it can also worsen anxiety and body dysmorphia (Mairura and Kim-Vick, 2025). Studies indicate that fashion may serve as "garment therapy," providing relief for those experiencing anxiety and fostering mental health awareness (Bhardwaj, 2024; Kalitanyi, 2021; Hendriksma et al., 2020). Fashion reflects cultural norms and societal views, impacting how individuals with mental health issues are perceived (Scapp and Seitz, 2010). Engaging with fashion allows individuals to confront stigma, reclaim identities, and share their narratives.

Clothing choices can express personal identity and emotional states, enabling individuals to assert autonomy and challenge mental health stereotypes. Many find empowerment through fashion, using their style to narrate stories of resilience. The concept of "enclothed cognition" suggests that clothing can influence thoughts and feelings (Adam and Galinsky, 2012). Recognizing the link between fashion and mental health, some brands promote awareness through specialized clothing lines (Smith, 2021). However, fashion can also perpetuate harmful stereotypes, highlighting the need for inclusive practices that celebrate diversity and enhance mental well-being (Jones, 2019). As awareness increases, the influence of fashion on mental health is likely to grow, fostering greater acceptance and understanding.

Psychiatric disorders can shape clothing choices, reflecting emotional states and cognitive functions. For instance, individuals with bipolar disorder may opt for bold and unconventional attire during manic phases, while displaying neglect for appearance in depressive episodes (Patel and Singh, 2025; Moody, Kinderman, and Sinha, 2010). Those with schizophrenia might wear disorganized clothing due to sensory challenges. OCD can lead to rigid dressing habits focused on symmetry and cleanliness. In depression, clothing may appear dark and unkempt, mirroring low energy levels. Autism spectrum disorder often results in preferences for soft fabrics to enhance comfort. Clothing choices can serve as non-verbal indicators of emotional states, assisting mental health professionals in assessing mood variations (Efremov, Kertakova, and Dimitrijeva-Kuzmanovska, 2021). Understanding this connection can inform therapeutic interventions that integrate fashion psychology, ultimately improving self-esteem and emotional well-being (Ribar and Bratko, 2020; APA, 2013; WHO, 2019).

4.4. Indian Studies

Research on the fashion choices of PWDs in India is gaining momentum, revealing unique challenges and identity expressions. Studies explore how PWDs navigate fashion in urban settings despite societal barriers (Gupta and Sharma, 2021) and how young disabled women use clothing to confront stereotypes and assert their identities (Rao, 2022). The role of social media in shaping these choices is emphasized, providing platforms for sharing experiences and fostering community, while highlighting the need for a more inclusive fashion industry (Mehta and Iyer, 2023). Other studies focus on the emergence of the digital fashion industry by disabled consumers (Nakić and Bogović, 2019; Chang, Hodges, and Yurchisin, 2013), recruitment and entrepreneurship for the deaf (Venkatesh and Sridhar, 2018), and the growing demand for adaptive clothing (Wu, Jiang, and Zhang, 2023; Khare, 2014; Childers and Kaufman-Scarborough, 2009).

4.5. The National Institute of Design (NID)

The National Institute of Design (NID) in India has made significant strides in research and initiatives aimed at modifying designs for PWDs (Raveendran, 2009). NID emphasizes inclusive design by creating accessible products and environments through collaborative projects that identify specific needs. The institute incorporates inclusive design principles into its curriculum, preparing students to address the requirements of PWDs in their careers. NID conducts research and workshops on assistive technologies, involving hands-on projects where students and faculty collaborate with PWDs to develop effective solutions. Furthermore, NID organizes exhibitions and awareness campaigns to promote inclusive design and foster dialogue among designers, policymakers, and the public (Kumar and Gupta, 2020; Patel and Sharma, 2021; Joshi and Verma, 2019; Chaudhary and Rao, 2022).

4.6. Theories

Various theories explore how fashion can empower PWDs, challenge societal norms, and enhance self-esteem. Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive identity from group affiliations, including disability status. PWDs may use fashion to assert their identity and confront stereotypes, fostering belonging within the disability community and society (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Self-Expression Theory emphasizes personal style as a vital form of individuality, helping PWDs counter negative societal views on disability (McNeill, 2017). Body Image and Identity Theory examines how perceptions of one's body influence identity and self-esteem, with fashion serving as a means to reshape body image (Grogan, 2008). The Disability Studies Perspective analyzes how societal attitudes affect PWDs' experiences with

fashion, allowing them to resist prevailing norms (Davis, 1995). Lastly, the Cultural Studies Approach investigates how culture influences fashion choices, enabling PWDs to challenge cultural narratives surrounding disability (McRobbie, 2000). The **emotional three-level theory** examines emotional labor across three hierarchical levels: company (organizational support), department (supervision), and employee (acting styles and self-efficacy). It explores how these factors interact to influence service quality and customer loyalty (Deng, Shen, and Ji, 2024).

4.7. Fashion as a Form of Expression

Fashion serves as a significant form of expression for PWDs, allowing them to convey identities, challenge societal norms, and affirm their presence in a visually oriented culture. Clothing choices can reflect personal narratives and foster belonging (McCulloch, 2020). Inclusive fashion promotes self-esteem and confidence, empowering individuals to express their uniqueness (Kearney and Ritchie, 2021; Kearney, 2021). The rise of adaptive clothing lines has further empowered PWDs, enabling them to engage with fashion on their terms (Bennett, 2022).

4.8. Cultural Perspectives and Significance of Fashion

Fashion plays a pivotal role in the lives of PWDs, serving as a medium for self-expression and identity formation. It challenges societal norms and promotes inclusion, allowing individuals to assert their uniqueness. Moreover, fashion can catalyze social change, raising awareness about disability issues and fostering acceptance (Kearney, 2019). Representation of PWDs in fashion media helps dismantle stereotypes and encourages broader societal engagement (Smith and Jones, 2021; 2019). Ultimately, fashion serves as a powerful tool for empowerment and advocacy, enabling PWDs to navigate cultural spaces more freely.

4.9. Impact of Fashion on Self-esteem and Confidence

Fashion significantly influences the self-esteem and confidence of PWDs by providing a means to express identities and challenge societal perceptions. Clothing that is stylish and functional empowers PWDs, fostering belonging and acceptance in diverse social contexts. When individuals can choose outfits that reflect personal tastes, they often experience increased self-worth, positively impacting overall mental health. Moreover, representation of PWDs in fashion media shapes societal attitudes, with positive portrayals inspiring individuals to embrace uniqueness and reject stigmatization. Initiatives prioritizing inclusion enhance visibility for PWDs and encourage the fashion industry to broaden its scope, leading to a more inclusive society (Thompson, 2022).

4.10. Barriers to Fashion Accessibility

Despite advancements in the fashion industry, significant obstacles remain that hinder accessibility for PWDs. A major challenge is the lack of inclusive design, which often overlooks the unique needs of PWDs, resulting in a scarcity of stylish yet functional options. Mainstream fashion frequently reinforces stereotypes and fails to represent diverse body types, negatively impacting self-esteem. Physical barriers in clothing design, such as traditional zippers and buttons, can pose difficulties for individuals with limited dexterity, leading to frustration and exclusion. Retail environments often lack accessible fitting rooms and displays, complicating the shopping experience. Economic factors also play a critical role, as adaptive clothing is often more expensive than standard apparel, making it less affordable for many. Societal attitudes towards disability can create stigma, discouraging PWDs from expressing themselves through fashion. Addressing these barriers is crucial for creating an inclusive fashion landscape that empowers PWDs and enhances their self-expression (Smith and Jones, 2021).

4.11. Community Initiatives and Their Impact

Community initiatives in India focused on fashion accessibility for PWDs are making a significant impact. Organizations like The Ability People raise awareness about adaptive fashion, facilitating workshops that teach designers how to incorporate inclusive practices (Singh, 2021). Another initiative, Fashion for All, collaborates with local artisans to produce affordable adaptive clothing, ensuring that PWDs have access to stylish and functional apparel (Verma, 2020). These community efforts provide practical solutions and foster a sense of belonging among PWDs, encouraging engagement with fashion and expression of identities. By emphasizing inclusion and representation, these initiatives are gradually transforming the Indian fashion landscape, promoting acceptance and understanding within society.

4.12. Innovations in Adaptive Fashion

Adaptive fashion is increasingly recognized as a vital means of self-expression and empowerment for PWDs, enhancing confidence, self-esteem, and personal style (Table 4; Koda and Nakamura, 2020; Singh, 2020; Harrison, 2022; 2019). Designers are now creating clothing that accommodates physical needs while also reflecting individual style, which boosts the self-esteem of PWDs (Baker, 2020). In India, innovations in adaptive fashion are transforming the clothing

experience for PWDs (Kumar, 2022). Designers like Shubham Soni, Ashima Bhan, Joe Ikareth, Soumita Basu, Parul Sachdeva, and Saakshi Mahnot have launched startups focused on inclusive clothing that enhances comfort and usability. For example, Soni offers garments with magnetic closures to assist those with limited dexterity. The Director of NIMHANS, Bengaluru, announced the launch of Adaptive Clothing on World Occupational Therapy Day to meet the needs of individuals with various impairments. Additionally, the use of sustainable materials is gaining popularity in adaptive fashion, promoting eco-friendly practices while meeting diverse needs (Mehta, 2021).

Table 4 Key Features of Adaptive Clothing

Feature	Description	Examples
Easy Closures	Magnetic buttons, Velcro, or zippers that are easy to operate.	Shirts with magnetic closures, pants with Velcro straps.
Adjustable Fits	Clothing that can be resized or adjusted for comfort and ease of wear.	Elastic waistbands, adjustable hems, and straps.
Sensory-Friendly Fabrics	Soft, breathable materials that reduce discomfort for sensory-sensitive individuals.	Clothing made from cotton, bamboo, or seamless designs.
Functional Design	Garments designed for ease of movement and practical use.	Wide neck openings, side openings for easy dressing.
Stylish Aesthetics	Fashionable designs that allow for personal expression.	Trendy colors, patterns, and styles that appeal to all.

4.13. Branded Adaptive Clothing

Some case studies of specific brands and individuals in India who have successfully navigated the fashion landscape, focusing on adaptive fashion for PWDs are as follows. Tommy Hilfiger Adaptive Line: Features magnetic closures and adjustable hems, allowing individuals with limited dexterity to dress independently, enhancing their confidence and self-esteem. This line features minimalist designs and practical elements, including wrist loops for easy wear, pants with wider leg openings to fit braces and orthotics, seams that open for prosthetic use, and magnetic zippers that allow for one-handed fastening. The collection includes garments such as jackets, dresses, shirts, t-shirts, and pants. Another brand, Silverts, has developed adaptive clothing aimed at seniors, the elderly, and PWDs, offering visually appealing, mobility-friendly blouses and sweaters, along with wheelchair-compatible side-opening pants and shoes to promote dignity and ease of dressing, significantly improving the daily experience.

Reboundwear is recognized for its ultra-soft, easy-to-wear clothing, which incorporates multiple zippers to accommodate various medical needs, including wound sites and surgical ports. Slick Chicks offers innovative adaptive underwear designed to empower PWDs, featuring hook-and-eye fasteners at the waistband for seamless transitions in and out of clothing, regardless of physical limitations. Zappos Adaptive Footwear offers shoes with easy-entry designs and adjustable straps, improving accessibility for individuals with mobility challenges, making them feel stylish and comfortable. Other notable adaptive clothing brands include Optivus, Bealies Adaptive Wear, Unhidden, and Able2wear (Jun, 2024; Bhandari, 2023). Vocational training programs aimed at rehabilitating PWDs within garment manufacturing are gaining traction in our country (Chahal, Sekhri, and Mathur, 2017). Factors influencing the adoption of adaptive clothing include cost, availability, customization options, sizing, and fabric types.

In India, the adaptive clothing sector is rapidly evolving to address mobility and accessibility issues through innovative designs. Local brands like Suvastra Designs and Haxor incorporate features such as magnetic closures and sensory-friendly materials. Kanya, a brand that creates stylish adaptive wear for women with disabilities, features designs that incorporate traditional Indian aesthetics while ensuring functionality. Their garments allow users to express their individuality and cultural identity comfortably. Nirmala's Collaboration is a woman with a mobility impairment with designers to create custom outfits that reflect her personal style. BleeTech is a startup which develops garments with easy closures for individuals with limited motor skills. Velcro fastenings, hook-based zippers, and elastic panels, ensuring practicality, functionality, aesthetics, ease of wear, mobility, dignity, and independence. The demand for adaptive fashion is driven by the need for functional yet stylish clothing that accommodates various disabilities. Research also highlights the psychosocial benefits of adaptive clothing, showing its positive impact on confidence and self-expression. As awareness increases, it is anticipated that more brands will enter this market, leading to a more inclusive fashion landscape (Priya, 2024; Poonia and Pinki, 2020).

4.14. Representations in Media and Advertising

The representation of PWDs in fashion media and advertising has been inconsistent over time. For example, Zalando, a European online fashion retailer, launched the “We are Different” campaign featuring models with disabilities to promote the message that fashion is inclusive of all abilities. This initiative aimed to challenge stereotypes and enhance inclusion within the industry. Similarly, Nike's "The Ability to Be" campaign focuses on adaptive sportswear, emphasizing empowerment and the belief that everyone can achieve their athletic goals. ASOS has also introduced an adaptive clothing line, featuring PWDs to highlight style, comfort, and functionality, thereby normalizing their presence in the fashion world. Aerie's "Aerie Real" campaign showcases models with disabilities, promoting body positivity and encouraging individuals to celebrate their uniqueness. Fenty Beauty, established by Rihanna, sets a precedent for inclusivity by featuring models of all abilities, advocating for self-expression and confidence. Collectively, these efforts contribute to greater acceptance and representation of PWDs in fashion (Ferguson and Kearney, 2020).

In India, several advertisements have emerged that promote fashion for PWDs. Boohoo, an online fashion retailer, launched an inclusive campaign featuring PWDs, showcasing fashionable clothing options that cater to diverse needs while emphasizing accessibility. Designer Nishad Tiwari highlighted his adaptive clothing collection in advertisements, focusing on stylish yet functional designs that foster self-expression and confidence. The Ability People initiative showcased adaptive clothing crafted by local artisans, promoting inclusion in fashion and sharing real stories of those benefiting from these designs. Model and activist Aditi Gupta has collaborated with various brands to promote adaptive fashion through social media campaigns, emphasizing stylish choices for PWDs. Additionally, Kanya initiated an advertisement campaign blending traditional Indian wear with modern designs, illustrating that fashion can be both beautiful and functional for PWDs (Leccia and Conti, 2021).

Fashion transcends mere clothing; it serves as a form of self-expression. The Shakti Masala advertisement, which features PWDs as central figures, exemplifies the rise of inclusive marketing in India (McBee-Black and Ha-Brookshire, 2020; Burns, Mullet, and Bryant, 2016). It portrays PWDs actively participating in family and community settings, normalizing their presence in everyday life. By highlighting their skills and contributions, the advertisement promotes empowerment and challenges stereotypes (Timokhovich, Filenko, and Filenko, 2022; Dwyer and Jackson, 2003). This portrayal resonates with Indian cultural values surrounding family and food, advocating for inclusion. Overall, it fosters unity and encourages acceptance of diversity, marking a significant advancement in PWD visibility within Indian advertising.

Vistaar, a clothing brand, launched an advertisement featuring models with disabilities in fashionable adaptive clothing, reinforcing the message that fashion is inclusive for all abilities. HDFC Bank highlighted PWDs in their advertising campaigns to promote services tailored for them, focusing on empowerment through their "We Are All Different" campaign, which celebrated PWD achievements and advocated for equal opportunities (McBee-Black, 2024). Nihar Naturals released a heartfelt advertisement featuring a mother with a disability, celebrating her nurturing role while using their hair oil. Tata Tea's "Jaago Re" campaign included PWDs to raise awareness of their rights. Dove India's "Real Beauty" campaign embraced diversity, promoting self-acceptance and body positivity for all. These initiatives reflect a growing movement toward representation and inclusion for PWDs in India.

The Shakti Masala advertisement featuring PWDs can be linked to fashion statements in several ways: by showcasing PWDs, the advertisement promotes inclusion in fashion, challenging traditional beauty standards and highlighting diverse body types and abilities. The representation of PWDs empowers individuals to embrace their uniqueness, encouraging self-expression through fashion. The advertisement challenges stereotypes associated with disability, illustrating that fashion and personal style are not constrained by physical ability. Fashion often mirrors cultural narratives; by including PWDs, the advertisement contributes to a broader cultural dialogue about beauty and acceptance. Fashion serves as a powerful medium for self-expression, allowing PWDs in the advertisement to convey their identity and individuality through clothing and style. The advertisement may present innovative ways to style clothing that accommodates various needs, merging practicality with aesthetics. By featuring PWDs, the brand connects with a growing trend of diversity in marketing, appealing to consumers who value brands that support social causes. This ad aligns with a shift in the fashion industry toward more inclusive practices, reflecting evolving consumer attitudes. The Shakti Masala advertisement not only promotes its product but also serves as a platform for advocating inclusion in fashion. By highlighting PWDs, it encourages broader acceptance of diversity in beauty and style, making a significant statement within the fashion landscape (Baker, 2022; Cunningham and MacDonald, 2018; Kearney and McKenzie, 2020; Kumar, 2019; Tate, 2021).

4.15. Universal Design and Fashion Statements

Universal design is vital for promoting inclusion by ensuring that environments and products are accessible to everyone, including PWDs. In the realm of fashion, this approach enhances accessibility and self-expression, enabling PWDs to showcase their individuality and style. Essential features such as magnetic closures, adjustable sizes, and simplified fastenings improve usability (Kukiełko, 2024; Burgstahler, 2015). Adaptive clothing effectively combines practicality with aesthetics, offering stylish yet functional garments. For instance, clothing designed for wheelchair users often incorporates longer backs to enhance comfort (Feng and Hui, 2021; Elliott, 2020; Ghosh, 2019; Dimka, Kabel, and McBee-Black, 2017; Kabel, Dimka, and McBee-Black, 2017).

Many designers are now creating trendy adaptive clothing lines, allowing PWDs to make bold fashion statements while ensuring comfort and functionality (Kirkland and McClain, 2021). Fashion acts as a powerful tool for empowerment and identity, and universal design enables PWDs to select attire that aligns with their personal style, boosting confidence (Das, 2024; Harrison, 2019). By adopting this approach, the fashion industry challenges stereotypes, showcasing PWDs as fashionable individuals (Miller, 2021). The increasing demand for inclusive fashion encourages brands to embrace universal design, broadening their offerings (Thompson and Smith, 2022). Initiatives promoting inclusive fashion also raise awareness about the needs of PWDs, fostering a more accepting society (Jones, 2020). Universal design in fashion celebrates diversity by integrating accessibility with style.

4.16. Unstudied Aspects

Research concerning fashion for PWDs reveals several gaps that require attention. Key areas include how brands can adopt inclusive design principles to enhance accessibility and comfort, as well as how cultural perceptions and stigmas influence fashion choices among PWDs (Smith and Jones, 2020). The role of technology in creating accessible adaptive fashion remains under-explored; innovations such as 3D printing and smart textiles could significantly expand options for PWDs (Thompson and Garcia, 2022; Wright and Keith, 2014). There is limited documentation on consumer behaviors, market trends, cost constraints, and purchasing habits of PWDs, which could assist brands in tailoring their offerings (Patel and Lee, 2023). The representation of PWDs in fashion media and its influence on societal attitudes warrants further investigation (Nguyen and Brown, 2024). Additional areas for exploration include sustainability and ethical fashion for disabled consumers, fashion as a form of activism or a tool for advocacy and social change, and the role of fashion designers in promoting inclusion. These un-examined aspects highlight the necessity for further research at the intersection of fashion and disability to foster more inclusive practices within the fashion industry (Fortunati, Katz, and Riccini, 2003). There are many counterarguments to highlight the complexities and challenges associated with achieving full inclusion in the fashion industry (Table 5). Addressing these concerns requires a multifaceted approach, including economic incentives, innovative design solutions, cultural shifts, and a commitment to genuine inclusion from brands and stakeholders.

Table 5 Potential Counterarguments and Criticisms Regarding Full Inclusion in the Fashion Industry

Category	Counterarguments
Economic Viability	Cost Constraints: Producing adaptive clothing can be more expensive due to specialized designs and materials. Brands may hesitate to invest if they perceive a limited market size or lower profit margins. Market Demand: Skepticism exists about sufficient consumer demand for adaptive fashion, with some believing that most consumers prioritize mainstream styles over adaptive options.
Design Limitations	Aesthetic Concerns: Adaptive clothing is often perceived as sacrificing style for functionality, which may not appeal to fashion-conscious consumers. Complexity of Needs: The diverse needs of individuals with disabilities complicate the design process, raising questions about creating universally appealing designs.
Industry Resistance	Established Norms: Traditional beauty standards and norms influence the fashion industry, leading to resistance from brands to embrace inclusion for fear of alienating their existing customer base. Tokenism: Concerns exist that brands may adopt inclusive practices superficially, using models with disabilities without making substantial changes to their product lines.
Cultural Barriers	Societal Attitudes: Prevailing negative stereotypes and stigma towards disability can hinder acceptance of adaptive fashion, limiting the effectiveness of inclusive initiatives. Cultural Sensitivity: Brands may struggle to navigate varying cultural perceptions of disability and fashion while attempting to offer inclusive designs.

Accessibility Challenges	Retail Environment: Even with available adaptive clothing, retail environments may not be accessible to PWDs, deterring engagement with adaptive fashion. Online Shopping Limitations: Many e-commerce platforms are not fully accessible, lacking compatibility with screen readers or having complex navigation.
Sustainability Concerns	Environmental Impact: Increased production for adaptive fashion raises sustainability concerns. Critics argue that the focus should be on reducing overall consumption rather than expanding product lines.

5. Conclusion

The fashion industry possesses substantial potential to enhance inclusion and accessibility for PWDs through effective strategies. This includes designing adaptive clothing with user-friendly closures such as magnetic buttons, Velcro, and looped zippers for easier handling. Features like adjustable waists, adjustable straps, and custom tailoring can accommodate diverse body types. It is also crucial to utilize sensory-friendly materials to prevent discomfort from fabrics and seams for individuals with sensory sensitivities. To normalize inclusion, diverse models, including PWDs, should be prominently featured in campaigns and advertisements. Collaborating with PWDs during the design process ensures functionality and relevance. Moreover, shopping experiences can be improved with accessible fitting rooms, wider spaces, lower mirrors, and seating options. Online shopping platforms should prioritize accessibility through support for screen readers and simplified navigation. Promoting opportunities for designers and consultants with disabilities, alongside innovations like temperature-regulating clothing and AI-assisted dressing tools, can further advance inclusion. An inclusive fashion industry is both ethical and transformative, paving the way for a more equitable future.

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