

# **INCLUSIVITY IN FASHION DESIGN AND SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY FINALLY FASHION PROJECT**

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## Abstract

Finally Fashion is the concept that led us to carry out exploratory research, in a classroom context, to answer questions posed by creating new products. The questions reveal, as a starting point, a need for fashion design to intervene.

Finally Fashion stands for Finally Fashion and represents an ongoing search by a group of three wheelchair users with reduced mobility to find new products that are not unlike those usually found on the market and that follow trends. This social sustainability project seeks to include groups that, given their characteristics, are often on the margins of society in general.

The challenge was set by a group of Fashion Design and Production students from Lusófona University, who sought to adapt garments already on the market to the needs of this type of consumer.

In the first phase, the results were very satisfactory, and some of the questions raised regarding the project were resolved. However, they are still being studied for realising and testing prototypes later. The ideas proposed by the students were presented to the group (client), and essential input was received from the user to improve the proposals in the prototype realisation phase.

The students showed a very high level of interest in realising the project, which made it possible to show the broader scope and relevance of fashion design to the community from a perspective of inclusivity and social sustainability.

**Keywords:** Social Sustainability; Fashion Design; Modelling; Inclusivity.

## INTRODUCTION

Fashion is a cultural expression and a form of self-expression that often excludes people with special needs, such as those who use wheelchairs. The Finally Fashion project has emerged as an innovative response to this gap, proposing the creation and adaptation of garments that meet these individuals' needs and stylistic preferences.

In this article, we explore the development process of this inclusive fashion design project, from conception to the preliminary results achieved.

It was proposed to a group of fashion design students this work aims to improve the participants' technical and creative skills and promote inclusion and diversity in the fashion world.

The greater the awareness of social issues, the more opportunities there will be - inside and outside the market - to promote change in the field (Fletcher, 2014).

It is important to consider education for the next generation of fashion design talent. One guest lecturer a year at a top design school is not enough. Brands, however, can pressure fashion design schools to consider the topic more carefully and incorporate it into the educational curriculum (O'Connor, 2019).

The Finally Fashion project was created and thought up by people with reduced mobility, where Finally Fashion means Finally Fashion for people with reduced mobility. People with reduced mobility move around in wheelchairs, but the level of mobility difficulties is different for each person.

The aim of this project in the classroom was to challenge Fashion Design and Production students to think about and develop alternatives, in line with trends, for the clothing consumer for this niche market/for this specific consumer, with a

focus on people in wheelchairs. Based on social sustainability, for a fashion based on values, questioning unrealistic and often unethical stereotypes of beauty.

Despite the difficulties of this challenge along the way, the initial results have proved promising, highlighting the significant potential of the Finally Fashion project to transform the fashion industry in a more inclusive and accessible way.

## METODOLOGY

The research methodology adopted for the Finally Fashion project was designed to comprehensively address the complexities inherent in creating inclusive clothing for wheelchair users. This approach was structured based on a mixed methodology, combining non-interventionist elements in the literature review with interventionist approaches in the phase of proposing new garments and the practical execution of the project.

The first stage of the research consisted of a comprehensive literature review on inclusive fashion, adapted design and the specific needs of wheelchair users. Scientific articles, books, technical reports and other relevant sources were analysed to understand the current state of knowledge and identify gaps in the literature.

This phase did not involve direct interactions with the study participants, but rather a critical analysis and synthesis of existing information.

Based on the insights gained from the literature review, an intervention proposal was drawn up that aimed to create adapted garments for three individuals in wheelchairs.

A group of Fashion Design students was invited to take an active part in the project, involving them from the planning stage to the execution of the practical stages.

In this interventionist phase of the methodology, the three wheelchair users were involved as active participants, providing insights, feedback and collaborating in defining the specific needs of the adapted garment.

During the execution phase, the student groups worked in collaboration with the wheelchair users to develop ideas and test some prototypes.

Participatory design and co-creation were used to ensure that the users' preferences and needs were adequately incorporated into the final proposals.

The results were evaluated based on criteria of functionality, comfort, aesthetics, and user acceptance through meetings with all the participants, where the contributions and suggestions that each individual proposed for improving the project were collected.

The combination of a non-interventionist and interventionist methodology in the realisation of the project allowed the students who took part in the project to gain a better understanding of issues related to the creative fashion process, especially those more closely linked to inclusive fashion.

## **INCLUSIVE DESIGN IN FASHION: CLOTHING FOR PEOPLE WITH REDUCED MOBILITY**

Despite the emphasis on inclusivity in Fashion, the understanding is quite limited, applying to race, gender, sexuality, age, size, and religion, but rarely to one's physical abilities (Farra, 2021).

According to Sinéad Burke, an educator and activist continually seeking to make Fashion more inclusive, she says that Fashion has the power to change how society views people regarding inclusive Fashion (BoF, 2018).

According to O'Connor (2019), more than one billion people, or 15 per cent of the world's population, have some form of disability, according to the World Bank Group. In the UK, almost 20% of working-age adults have a disability, according to British disability equality charity Scope. However, disabled people are still very much excluded from Fashion and its trends despite having a global purchasing power of over 1.2 trillion dollars, according to a report by the Return on Disability Group. This figure reaches 6.9 trillion dollars when families, parents and carers of people with disabilities are also taken into account (O'Connor, 2019).

Education for inclusion and acceptance of others is an issue that must be taught and experienced at an early age. Framing the idea that children with disabilities are not a taboo but an integral part of our society is something that has improved a lot in recent years, but there is still a lot of work to be done. The focus now has to be on dolls, models, actors and actresses who represent all parts of our society. Mattel's doll brand is doing this very well (see Figure 1), and more companies should endeavour to do the same (Palta, 2022).

In 2019, Mattel added dolls to its doll collection that reflect permanent physical disabilities, including a doll with a wheelchair and a prosthetic leg.

As a fashion journalist, Emily Farra (2021) says that she has never heard a designer mention how their collection could appeal to someone with limited use of their arms or how a pair of trousers would work for people with a prosthesis. Farra also questions whether fashion show producers have considered the sensitivities of people with epilepsy and visually impaired people when designing their lighting. Because we rarely see people with reduced mobility during fashion weeks, whether at the show itself, in the audience, or backstage, there is often no consideration of how the shows and collections can relate to them.



# 2019

**Fig. 1** Mattel dolls that reflect permanent physical disabilities.  
Available at; <https://shop.mattel.com/pages/barbie-diversity-evolution>.

The mainstream fashion industry has long ignored people with disabilities and reduced mobility.

Gwilt (2020) argues that while practicality and usability are valued needs, people also require Fashion that can, for example, generate emotional wellbeing, encourage independence, and provide security. Few fashion garments generate all these qualities, but designers have the opportunity to fulfil genuine human needs that are sometimes neglected in the fashion industry. To do this, a series of steps must be considered when designing garments to meet needs (Gwilt, 2020).

The market is expected to grow to 400 billion dollars by 2026. Target, Nike, and JC Penney have introduced adapted products and online commerce platforms such as Juniper

Unlimited, which stocks a few dozen small brands for people with reduced mobility. Although these are essential steps towards meeting customers' needs with reduced mobility, the clothes tend to be more functional than fashionable; when it comes to luxury ready-to-wear, there is practically nothing (Farra, 2021).

However, it can be pointed out that the paradigm may be changing: the Portuguese streetwear brand Duarte, at ModaLisboa in October 2022, included a surfer with a prosthetic leg. Hugo Rocha walked and skated at the end of the Duarte fashion show.

## “FINALLY FASHION”

This academic project results from a collaboration with Sandra Manuel, Gerson Rodrigues and Jorge Lopes, who developed clothing prototypes aimed at people in wheelchairs during the Entrepreneurship and Training Workshop for People with Motor Disabilities held in June 2021. The course description identified the aim of empowering people with motor disabilities to stand out in the labour market, using entrepreneurship, laboratory and communication classes. This would result in a viable project with a functional prototype.

The project's scope and its authors' willingness to share are the primary justification for introducing this challenge by lecturers and students in the Fashion Design and Production course at Lusófona University. Regarding the creative and technical side, this project requires an in-depth functional analysis and questioning of the normative canons that first-year degree students are still acquiring. What could be seen as premature was taken as an opportunity to get students to think beyond the glamour of modeling and to be aware of the many different types of clothing in which fashion designers can work.

However, a project of this kind is only feasible and makes sense if it is done in collaboration with the people it is aimed

at. A fashion designer is mistaken if he thinks that all he has to do to carry out this type of project is changing clothes in a wheelchair, just as a video game designer is doomed to failure if he thinks about the accessibility of his game without including people with the differentiating characteristics he wants to achieve in the process. Any creative project aimed at people with disabilities and deaf will have to consider a participatory approach in which they are involved and intervene in the different stages of development. Only them will be able to identify and convey their real needs, helping to foresee problems and point out solutions in the embryonic stages that avoid precious wasted time in producing complex prototypes and can stimulate the creative in the search for technical and aesthetic solutions outside the norm.

According to Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba (2018), this type of approach is based on a participatory/collaborative paradigm, where the tension that occurs in the continuum between objectivity and subjectivity ontologically characterises action research work.

In this case, the involvement of wheelchair users in the production process of a clothing prototype for people with reduced mobility lends a dual charge of objectivity/subjectivity that will benefit the creative process of the aspiring fashion designer. The contribution will be as objective as, for example, the confrontation with the misfit of the idea of a movement inaccessible to the wheelchair user; it will also be a subjective act because that demonstration cannot be read as universal but rather as the need of an individual who will necessarily be different from another with varying body motor characteristics.

## EXPERIMENTAL PROJECT FINALLY FASHION

Initially, the project was presented to the students to meet the niche market represented by people with reduced mobility. This became the focus of the project's development,

highlighting their main concerns and difficulties in their day-to-day lives, mobility, and wellbeing.

This first approach aimed to clarify the students' doubts about the very countenance of the body of a person with reduced mobility, specifically in a wheelchair. They explained how clothing can make all the difference to their physical and psychological wellbeing, namely to the quality of life of these people and those around them. They also alerted the students to the need to be careful with the type of stitching, the amount of fabric accumulated in certain body areas, and details that could facilitate their mobility.

Finally Fashion project aimed to develop and idealise an outfit (at least two garments) for people with reduced mobility. It was taking into account four stages: research and development of the mood board, the definition of the concept, choice of the target audience (man, woman or child), then analysis and development of trend research according to the chosen season, and choice of materials.

Subsequently, adapted garment designs were developed, moving on to the choice of final garments and the development of the technical drawing of the selected garments. Finally, the students prepared a written record of all the stages carried out, duly attached and organised in the respective portfolio, which later served as a presentation to the team present and to people with reduced mobility.

When the students got to the stage of developing the technical sheet and the flat design of the garment, they found it difficult to understand details such as the details adapted to the physical conditions of a group with reduced mobility, adapting the garments to the body of those who wear them and, above all, keeping details that make all the difference in a garment, but which might have to be altered to be easier to use in everyday life.



**Fig. 2** Presentation of work developed for people with reduced mobility. Source: Archive Fashion Lusófona.

one is included in this network of what is called “being fashionable”, to provide physical and psychological wellbeing through garments that make them feel better, more comfortable and, in a way, elegant and included in society.

At the end of this work phase, there was a final presentation of the proposals developed by the students (see Figure 2).

## CONCLUSIONS

The work developed is about inclusion, about the creation and importance of body positivity and inclusivity in today's market and observing what improvements are yet to be made.

The aim of this study was to work on the development of inclusive clothing that allows people of different genders and age groups with various physical limitations to have access to fashion trends and naturally fit into the social environment.

The students who carried out this work identified colourful, functional, constructive and technological solutions for some inclusive garments, produced to create a fashion image that increases the self-esteem and quality of life of people with reduced mobility.

In the process of developing a fashion design project, a deeper understanding of the creative process was added to the realization of inclusive fashion. The concern with the specific needs of a real “client” provided enormous technical, creative, and aesthetic growth, as well as an ethical and social vision aimed at a much more demanding public, given their specific characteristics.

Equipping students with a vision more geared towards small niches can be an important way of integrating them into the labour market.

Raising awareness in the fashion industry for the creation of specific designs and modelling, suitable for creating this type of garment adapted to the needs of this consumer.

Reflecting on the results is always positive, both in terms of raising awareness among young designers of an important reality in the community and among fashion users, and in terms of giving a greater meaning to the term fashion, which is sometimes somewhat devoid of useful or utilitarian content.

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