

Future Fashion Perspectives: A workshop advancing inclusivity through human-centered design

Elizabeth Kealy-Morris^{1*}, Kerri McBee-Black², and Jo Gooding³

¹ **Manchester Fashion Institute, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK**
e.kealy-morris@mmu.ac.uk

² **Textile and Apparel Management, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO, USA**
mcbeeblackk@missouri.edu

³ **StyleAbility, Durham, UK, info@styleability.co.uk**
*Facilitator

ABSTRACT

Research indicates that people with disabilities (PWDs) can feel ignored by apparel brands and retailers and these obstacles can add to what is often a stressful experience of aspiring to dress stylishly. While some apparel brands have developed mainstream adaptive apparel for PWDs, not all brands use a human-centered design (HCD) focus when researching and designing apparel for the consumer with disabilities. There remains a lack of critical dialogue related to inclusive human-centered apparel for marginalized fashion consumers. This workshop will enable a much-needed cross-discipline discourse between leading international apparel and textile scholars, designers, and merchandisers attending the IFFTI conference regarding this overlooked area of global fashion markets.

The workshop will be led by three distinguished scholars who are international leaders in the field of inclusive human-centered apparel and dressing practices of PWDs. Utilizing action research and participatory research methods, a rich discussion will be led to explore four topics aligned to both IFFTI's 2025 discursive themes and critical areas of importance for developing inclusive fashion practices: ethical fashion enquiries with underrepresented consumers; listening to communities of consumers; utilizing creative technologies for change; and establishing future directions for apparel knowledge and practice. Participants will engage in collaborative activities to facilitate carefully considered dialogue related to this thematic exploration to collectively provide provocations / interrogations / questions / challenges / opportunities / concepts on rigorous next steps in inclusive and adaptive apparel practice.

The facilitators will produce a position paper synthesizing the workshop's key findings, interrogations, and recommendations. The paper will propose next steps needed to develop this key emergent area of the international fashion system to include research, scholarship, pedagogy, design, practice, production, supply, and marketing.

Keywords: People with disabilities; adaptive apparel; inclusive design; inclusive apparel; human-centered design; action research; collaborative research; participatory research.

WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES

The workshop will provoke a rich discussion to explore four topics aligned to both IFFTI's 2025 discursive themes and critical areas of importance for developing inclusive fashion practices: ethical fashion enquiries with underrepresented consumers; listening to communities of consumers; utilizing creative technologies for change; and establishing future directions for apparel knowledge and practice.

Ethical fashion enquiries with underrepresented consumers

Workshop activities will highlight how adaptive clothing can be a tool for empowerment, enabling people with disabilities (PWDs) to express themselves through their wardrobes and live more independently. Human-centered design (HCD) principals will be introduced and explored to develop appreciation for the importance of designing clothing that meets the needs of all individuals, with a focus on empathy.

Listening to communities of consumers

The workshop will critically examine the current state of the adaptive apparel industry and consider how mainstream fashion industry can improve by focusing on real-world impact for all consumers. Case studies of research projects that are providing platforms for PWDs to share their experiences with clothing will be introduced to consider what works, what doesn't, and how academic research and the fashion industry can work together to better meet these underserved consumers' needs.

Utilizing creative technologies for change

Participants will develop awareness of biases built into design led by Artificial Intelligence machine learning and be introduced to generative AI's current ethical and exclusionary nature in current fashion innovation. The provocations inherent in digital fashion innovation will be explored through opening a dialogue regarding the relationship between digital fashion technologies and the human body and case studies will be shared of current fashion-based research with objectives to influence machine learning in order to recognize asymmetry in body shape and mobility difference.

Establishing future directions for apparel practices

The workshop will lead a collaborative discussion to identify long-term goals and research priorities to advance the field of inclusive fashion and adaptive apparel for PWDs and develop a plan for the future to bring together designers, advocates, and industry leaders to find common ground and work toward shared goals for more inclusive fashion practices.

NARRATIVE STATEMENT

This workshop is a unique opportunity for IFFTI 2025 participants to dive deep into the intersection of fashion, inclusivity, and innovation. Attendees will explore how dynamic apparel practices are transforming the purpose of fashion through critical discourse on design innovation, ethical opportunities, and empathy-driven corporate responsibility. With a focus on collaboration, participants will connect with industry experts and advocates while gaining practical tools—including design frameworks and strategies—that can be immediately applied to their work. Together, we'll inspire fresh ideas and forge a path toward a more inclusive, equitable, and purpose-driven apparel industry.

The global demand for adaptive and inclusive apparel is rapidly growing, with millions seeking clothing that addresses their specific needs. Inclusive fashion is more than just design—it tells a powerful story of empowerment, diversity, and progress. Human-centered design empowers professionals to create solutions rooted in the real needs of their users. By participating in this workshop, attendees will gain practical knowledge on how to embed these principles into their creative processes, resulting in designs that are not only functional but deeply impactful.

Brands that embrace inclusivity and align with ethical, socially conscious values earn trust, loyalty, and admiration from socially aware consumers, particularly younger demographics. This workshop provides practical guidance on crafting authentic narratives that connect deeply with audiences, while also advancing broader goals of equity, sustainability, and positive social change. Inclusivity is no longer optional; it is a key driver of success for forward-thinking brands aiming to stay relevant, competitive, and aligned with the values of today's consumers.

Designing for diverse needs sparks new ways of thinking and pushes creative boundaries. Workshop participants will explore fresh perspectives, discover emerging technologies, and brainstorm transformative solutions that balance style and functionality. This process opens pathways for innovation, inspiring attendees to think beyond conventional design norms. Participants will leave the workshop as part of a movement toward a more equitable fashion industry, with a deeper understanding of how their work contributes to ethical practices, social equity, and environmental sustainability

WORKSHOP OUTCOMES

The workshop aims to deliver both immediate, actionable insights and long-term contributions to inclusive fashion practices. Key outcomes from the workshop include:

Network and Partnership Building

The workshop is an opportunity to expand and strengthen an international adaptive apparel coalition led by the facilitators. By fostering connections among designers, researchers, educators, and advocates, the workshop seeks to elevate the visibility of apparel needs for PWDs. Participants will be inspired to prioritize diversity, accessibility, and inclusivity in their work. A key aspect of the session will involve identifying actionable steps for ongoing collaboration and collective efforts to drive meaningful change.

Knowledge Sharing and Research Insights

Through guided discussions and presentations, participants will gain a deeper understanding of the barriers faced by underrepresented communities in fashion. Insights into consumer needs, current trends, and technological advancements will be shared, drawing on academic research and real-world case studies. The knowledge developed during the workshop will enrich participants' professional networks, pedagogy, research, and practices, equipping them to address challenges in inclusive fashion with innovative and informed solutions.

Position Paper: A Call to Action

The facilitators will produce a position paper synthesizing the workshop's key findings, interrogations, and recommendations. This document will advocate for greater commitment to inclusive fashion practices across the global apparel industry and propose actionable next steps. Topics will include advancing research, scholarship, and pedagogy; designing and producing inclusive garments; enhancing supply chain processes; and improving marketing strategies to champion diversity and accessibility.