



THE RUNWAY WAS EXCLUSIVE, SO WE REBUILT IT

*Reimagining the Runway: Care, Co-Creation, and the
Joyful Disruption of Racism and Ableism in Fashion.*

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Abstract

Reimagining the Runway explores how fashion can be reimagined as a site of relational care, co-creation, and inclusive representation particularly for IBPOC members (Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour) and individuals with disabilities. Grounded in autoethnography and informed by disability justice as a theoretical foundation, this work draws from my lived experience as a Black woman, model, and designer.

I critically reflect on my participation in fashion shows, my personal history of racial and cultural conformity, and my evolving role within the industry not only as a designer or artist, but as a visionary, co-dreamer, and organizer engaged in meaningful work.

Through intentional interviews with disabled and IBPOC fashion community members, I engage in careful conversations that inform the textures of this research. Taking up the role of curator is not simply as a selector of objects, but as one who co-dreams structures of belonging, I position myself within a methodology of fashioning disability and racial justice. This framework will provide a means to radically rethink how bodies are read, styled, and valued on and off the runway.

I reframe the runway as a site not of spectacle or solution, but of possibility. A place where designer, model, and maker intertwine into one another, and where fashion becomes an embodied call toward interdependence and joy.

The research inquiry of this study is: *How might it become a space of shared authorship and healing? How can we co-create a culture where disabled and racialized individuals are not only welcome but deeply celebrated?*

The outcomes of this research will take the form of a reflective autoethnographic MRP and a final creative production: a *Reimagined Runway* show. This show will center will people I have recruited across creative spaces including photographers, stylists,

designers, and individuals with disabilities bringing together a diverse community of participants. Reimagining the Runway fosters a space of belonging where individuals are not only seen but heard, valued, and celebrated through this experience.

The research will examine their thoughts and emotions as they move through a fashion environment designed with care, co-creation and joy at its core.

Keywords

Fashion, Modeling, Disability Justice, Black Justice, Racism, Ableism, Belonging, Celebration

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This work exists because of all of you.

Dedication

I want to first dedicate this to my younger self. I hope you think I'm cool, but more than that, I hope you know this: even in moments when you felt unseen, out of place, or unsure of where you belonged, you were never without possibility. Growing up being timid and often unable to see yourself reflected in the spaces around you, did not mean you were limited. It meant you were still becoming. I want you to know that there is no star in the sky you cannot reach. You are capable of more than you were ever made to believe, and more than you have even begun to imagine.

You belong in rooms, you belong in spaces, and you are allowed to take up as much of them as you need. Step boldly. Speak fully. Take what is yours.

I also dedicate this work to my family who risked so much to build a life in a country where safety, stability, and opportunity could exist for the generations that would follow. Coming here in the 1990s meant leaving behind familiarity and stepping into uncertainty, all in the hope of creating something better for a future family they had not yet even met.

That sacrifice carries forward in everything I do. I owe so much of this journey to you. I hope you know that what I achieve is not mine alone. It is shared. I carry you with me in every space I enter, and I will continue to do so always.

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Introduction

1.1 Background

The fashion industry holds significant power in shaping cultural norms and influencing how society perceives identity, representation, and inclusion. As a highly visible and trend-setting platform, it has the potential not only to reflect society, but also to drive meaningful change across media, culture, and accessibility.

Despite growing conversations around diversity and inclusion, the fashion and modeling industries continue to fall short when it comes to representing individuals with disabilities and often fail to consider the intersectional experiences. This persistent gap in visibility points to deeper systemic barriers that limit participation and access for disabled models on mainstream runways. In a world where media and fashion play powerful roles in shaping cultural norms and public perception, the exclusion of disabled bodies and BIPOC individuals reinforces harmful stereotypes and contributes to social invisibility.

1.2 Problem Statement

The exclusion of disabled individuals from mainstream fashion is not just a reflection of industry oversight, it is a reinforcement of broader societal exclusion. Fashion plays a powerful role in shaping perceptions of identity and normalcy. When disabled bodies are consistently left out, it sends a message about who is considered visible or valuable in society. This lack of representation has real consequences. It can negatively impact the self-esteem and identity of disabled individuals, denying them the validation that comes from seeing themselves reflected in public media. Beyond the social and psychological effects, this exclusion of disability representation can also showcase missed economic opportunities for the industry. Disabled consumers make up a significant portion of the population globally and their absence from fashion campaigns and runway spaces limits the industry's market potential while stifling innovation in adaptive and inclusive design (for eg: debilitating pressure sores for a wheelchair user, a major oversight that highlights a lack of inclusive thinking at the design stage).

1.3 Purpose: Why is this Significant?

The fashion industry holds power in shaping cultural norms and influencing how society perceives identity, representation, and inclusion. As a highly visible and trend-setting platform, it has the potential not only to reflect society, but also to drive meaningful change across media, culture, and accessibility. Despite growing conversations around diversity and inclusion, the fashion industry lacks in its support, representation and showcasing of individuals with disabilities. This persistent gap in visibility points to deeper systemic barriers (for eg; a one size fits all approach) that limit participation and access for disabled models on mainstream runways. In a world where media and fashion play powerful roles in shaping cultural norms and public perception, the exclusion of disabled and BIPOC bodies reinforces harmful stereotypes and contributes to social invisibility.

As a Black woman, model, and designer, I reflect on my participation in fashion, my personal history of racial and cultural conformity, and my shifting role within the fashion industry.

My goal is to reveal systemic barriers and imagine more inclusive, accessible possibilities for the fashion runway. Rather than treating the fashion system as something to be fixed or solved, this project investigates how fashion might be refashioned through the lens of disability justice. Additionally, introducing a political

and aesthetic framework that challenges normative beauty standards while *reimagining* how bodies are read, styled, and valued on and off the runway.

1.4 Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study's examination of how fashion can be reimagined through the lived experiences and creative agency of BIPOC and disabled individuals. The research positions the runway as both a visual and structural system shaped by power, access, and representation.

Each question focuses on a key area: how lived experience can inform inclusive design, how existing fashion systems produce inclusion or exclusion, and how shifting models into co-designer roles can challenge dominant power structures.

R1: How might the lived perspectives and needs of BIPOC and/or disabled models and fashion designers guide the redesign of runways and garments in ways that support greater inclusion?

R2: In what ways do current fashion practices, organizational structures, and environments (such as including runways, backstage spaces, and production processes) shape the experiences of inclusion or exclusion for BIPOC and/or disabled designers and models?

R3: What possibilities emerge when BIPOC and/or disabled models take on the role of co-designers actively shaping the runway, styling, and presentation of their own bodies, and how does this shift challenge dominant power structures in fashion?

2. Literature Review

2.1 This section reviews the work of artists/critics/writers including Charmaine Nelson, Sarah Baartman, Ben Barry, Octavia Butler, etc to examine how systems of racism and ableism shape representation, access, and authorship within the fashion industry, particularly in runway contexts. Drawing from interdisciplinary scholarship in critical race theory, disability studies, and visual culture, this section explores how bodies are made visible, controlled, and valued. It also considers emerging approaches to care, co-creation, and inclusive design as potential disruptions to dominant fashion systems. Together, these perspectives provide a foundation for reimagining the runway as a site of agency, belonging, and collective authorship.

2.1.1 Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*

Piepzna-Samarasinha frames collective access as community-based care, radical and reciprocal love rather than charity mapping practices like care webs, disability-led design of events, and access intimacy.

This text frames runway as a shared infrastructure of care and it justifies co-design workshops and flexible interview access.

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's work on disability justice foregrounds the importance of collective care, interdependence, and the recognition of marginalized bodies within community spaces. Their vision of care webs situates disability justice beyond inclusion, it's also about reimagining structures of belonging and survival.

When applied to the fashion industry, this lens reframes runway participation not as a form of tokenistic diversity but as part of a larger political and cultural movement. For IBPOC disabled models, participation in fashion shows becomes an act of visibility and survival, challenging how bodies are read, styled, and valued in mainstream contexts.

2.1.2 Charmaine A. Nelson *Racism, Eh?*

Nelson's Canadian anthology grounds my critique of racialized spectatorship, fetishization, and the colonial archive of Black women's bodies. Bringing Baartman into conversation with runway

gazes clarifies how racism and ableism co-produce “readable” bodies and why counter-aesthetics (joy, hybridity, prosthetic glam) matter (Nelson, 2004). Charmaine Nelson’s *Racism Eh?* (2019), particularly her chapter on the *Hottentot Venus*, situates Black women’s bodies in a longer history of racial and sexual commodification. The historical hypervisibility of Black women as exoticized objects contrasts sharply with the invisibility of Black disabled women in contemporary fashion. This juxtaposition reveals how racism and ableism intersect to dictate which bodies are considered “marketable” or “fashionable.” Her analysis offers an essential historical grounding for understanding current runway exclusions.

Nelson’s work provides critical historical grounding for understanding how racialized bodies are constructed, displayed, and controlled within visual culture. In *Racism, Eh?*, particularly her discussion of the *Hottentot Venus*, Nelson traces the colonial commodification and hypervisibility of Black women’s bodies, positioning them as objects of spectacle within institutional spaces such as museums (Nelson, 2019). This history reveals how Black femininity has been shaped through external gazes that define identity from the outside.

As Nelson (2019) asks, “*What happens when identity is spoken for you?*” (p. 43). This question is particularly generative when extended to contemporary fashion contexts,

where models especially those who are racialized and/or disabled often have limited control over how their bodies are styled, framed, and interpreted. It raises critical concerns around authorship, autonomy, and representation.

This reflection leads me to examine how the fashion industry exerts control over models with disabilities, as designers, stylists, and institutions actively curate and mediate aspects of their identity. This dynamic suggests that inclusion alone is insufficient if it does not also account for agency. The intersection of racism and ableism continues to shape which bodies are rendered visible, how they are read, and under what conditions they are allowed to exist within fashion spaces.

2.1.3 Sins Invalid (*Performance Project & Disability Justice Principles*)

Sins Invalid advances a disability justice aesthetic centering queer, trans, Black and brown disabled artists and articulates the widely used “10 Principles of Disability Justice” (intersectionality, leadership of those most impacted, anti-capitalist politics, cross-movement organizing, wholeness, sustainability, cross-disability solidarity, interdependence, collective access, and collective liberation). Their praxis links sensuality, performance, and political education, offeris a template for runway as an emancipatory stage where “sexy” and “disabled” coexist and flourish. This strengthens my argument that inclusive runway design must be disability-led and that joy/pleasure are methodological, not ornamental (Sins Invalid, 2023). The principles of Sins Invalid

centering queer, disabled, and BIPOC artists further ground this methodology. Sins Invalid reframes disability not as deficit but as a site of sexiness, desirability, and creativity. Their performances resist pity narratives and instead celebrate disabled embodiment as art, fashion, and performance. For my work, their praxis offers a blueprint for reimagining the runway as a performance space where hybridity and disabled bodies are not hidden but highlighted with joy and desirability.

2.1.4 Crippling Masculinity: *Designing Fashion Utopias (Tangled Art + RM, TMU)*

This exhibition/research project demonstrates disability-led fashion as practice: adaptive garments, performance, and public runway events that reconfigure aesthetics, embodiment, and access. It offers precedents for co-produced shows, accessible backstage design, and documentation strategies evidence that blurring roles (designer/model/organizer) yields new aesthetics and publics (Tangled Arts, 2023).

Figure 1

Poster by Ben Barry



What would you do if you weren't afraid? [Poster]. Ben Barry. (2024).

<https://v1.benbarry.com/project/facebook-posters>

Figure 2

Crippling Masculinity Exhibition by Ben Barry



'Crippling Masculinity,' is an exhibition unravelling how Disability, Deaf, Mad Identified Men, Masculine Identified and Non-Binary People express and navigate their identities through clothing in their everyday lives. (2024). . <https://www.torontomu.ca/the-creative-school/news-events/news/2024/01/-crippling-masculinity--exhibit-explores-intersectionality-of-di/>

The *Crippling Masculinity* project (Toronto Metropolitan University, 2022) demonstrates how fashion shows can embody disability justice principles. This project actively redefines masculinity through adaptive and hybridized fashion. Their methodology of co-design (working directly with disabled participants to shape fashion artifacts and runway experiences) exemplifies how the industry might be refashioned at scale. This resonates with *Reimagining the Runway's* co-creation and shared authorship between designers, models, and organizers.

2.1.5 *Kindred* Embodied Memory, Trauma, and Care: Octavia Butler

Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) offers a critical lens for understanding how histories of racial violence and exclusion are inscribed on the body. The novel follows Dana, a contemporary Black woman who is repeatedly transported back to the antebellum South, where she must navigate the violence of slavery while ensuring the survival of her white ancestor. Dana's body becomes a living archive of trauma, her repeated injuries including the loss of her arm, highlight how oppression leaves lasting scars that shape identity, agency, and belonging (Butler, 1979). *Kindred* resonates with the methodological use of autoethnography and embodied memory. Just as Dana's body holds the tension of past and present, my reflections as a Black woman, model, and designer situate personal experience within larger systemic narratives of racism and ableism in fashion. Butler's focus on the relational dynamics of survival and care,

and how Danamust care for herself and others under conditions of violence. This aligns with my role as a “curator of care” reframing fashion as a site where collective access and interdependence are prioritized.

2.1.6 Soul Style: *Black Women Redefining the Color of Fashion*

Building on critiques of racialized representation in fashion, *Soul Style: Black Women Redefining the Color of Fashion* further examines how Black women use style as a form of self-definition, resistance, and cultural expression within an industry that has historically marginalized them. The text positions fashion not only as aesthetic practice but as a political and embodied space where identity is actively constructed and reclaimed. As the authors emphasize, Black women have continuously “redefined what fashion can mean beyond dominant Western ideals of beauty and taste” (Thomas, 2000, p, 3).

This perspective is particularly significant within the context of this research, as it directly responds to my lived experience of growing up with limited racialized representation within mainstream fashion media and visual culture. The absence of bodies that reflected my identity contributed to a narrow understanding of who fashion was “for,” reinforcing feelings of distance from spaces such as runway culture and editorial fashion. In contrast, encountering representations of Black women reclaiming

style as visibility and power underscores the importance of seeing oneself reflected in high-fashion and media spaces (Thomas, 2000, p, 53). This emphasis on visibility informs the foundation of the reimagined runway show within this project which seeks to create a space where participants are not only seen, but actively centered and represented through their own creative agency.

2.1.7 Sami Schalk *Bodyminds Reimagined*

Schalk's concept of the bodymind and their Black feminist disability lens theorize runway embodiment as relational and shaped by oppression's psychic stress. Bodymind justifies reading styling, movement, rest, and access as inseparable from racialized/disabled experience. (Schalk, 2018).

2.2 In this section various themes are explored based on the literature around race, disability, fashion, and spectacle.

2.2.1 Racialized Bodies, Control, and Historical Violence

Scholarship on racialized bodies reveals how systems of power have historically constructed Black and Indigenous identities through violence, control, and imposed meaning. Nelson (2019) highlights how Black bodies have been framed within dominant narratives that position them as deviant, excessive, or "other," reinforcing narrow definitions of what is considered normative or acceptable. These constructions

extend beyond historical contexts and continue to shape contemporary understandings of desirability and legitimacy within industries such as fashion. This is further reflected in cultural texts that examine the lived realities of enslaved women, where bodies were both hypersexualized and stripped of autonomy. As one account notes, enslaved women were deeply sexualized and silenced, while simultaneously subjected to conditions in which their identities and bodies were controlled by others (Nelson, 2019, p. 80). Such histories reveal how racialized women were denied ownership over their own bodies, existing instead within systems that commodified and regulated them.

Acts of resistance within these narratives are critical. As articulated in the statement, *"I'm not willing to bet my body parts on your view of the world"* (Nelson, 2019, p. 80), there is a clear refusal to accept externally imposed definitions of identity and value. This assertion of bodily autonomy challenges dominant frameworks that seek to define marginalized individuals through limiting and often violent perspectives. Contemporary fashion systems actively perpetuate these historical dynamics, maintaining authorship and control as central concerns. The persistence of normative standards raises important questions about what constitutes a "typical" model body, and how racialized and disabled bodies are positioned in relation to these ideals. Much like the racialized "monstrous" body constructed in other institutional contexts, fashion

continues to regulate which bodies are considered acceptable, desirable, or marketable.

2.2.2 Roots, Displacement, and Cultural Negotiation

Scholarship on diasporic identity highlights “roots” as a contested site of belonging shaped by migration, memory, and cultural dislocation. Nelson (2019) describes how individuals across diasporic contexts actively search for cultural origins as a way of reconstructing fragmented identity, noting that “millions of people...are searching for roots” (p. 183). This search reflects not fixed origin, but an ongoing negotiation between inherited culture and lived absence.

Nelson (2019) further demonstrates how cultural identity is shaped through movement, sacrifice, and resettlement, where migration is often framed as a trade-off between loss and long-term survival (p. 176). These dynamics illustrate how belonging is produced through displacement rather than stability. Within diasporic experience, cultural identity becomes partially inherited and partially constructed, mediated through language, memory, and intergenerational transmission. In this context, “roots” function less as origin points and more as evolving systems of connection and disconnection that shape how identity is understood across time and space.

Nelson (2019) also reflects on migration and sacrifice, noting that many individuals leave their home countries with the expectation that “short-term sacrifices

would be outweighed by long-term benefits” (p. 176). This perspective resonates deeply within diasporic experiences, where movement is often shaped by survival, opportunity, and the pursuit of a different future. In reflecting on this, it becomes clear that such sacrifices are not abstract, but lived and embodied across generations. Within my own context, this understanding is grounded in familial histories of migration and resilience. The decision to leave one’s home in search of opportunity reflects a willingness to endure uncertainty and hardship in pursuit of long-term stability. These experiences shape how identity, belonging, and visibility are understood and inform how participation in spaces such as fashion is navigated.

2.2.3 Racialized and Sexualized Bodies as Visual Spectacle

Schalk on visual culture demonstrates that racialized and gendered bodies have historically been constructed through regimes of spectacle, eroticization, and institutionalized viewing that position them as objects of interpretation rather than autonomous subjects. Nelson (2019) situates this within colonial visual histories, noting that Europe repeatedly projected “forbidden sexual desires and fears” onto colonized geographies, constructing Africa, the Americas, and Asia as sites of exaggerated sexuality and fantasy (p. 229). This “imaginary geography” functioned to frame racialized bodies as simultaneously exotic, dangerous, and consumable within Western visual culture.

These historical constructions persist in contemporary forms of racialized viewing, where Black and Indigenous bodies continue to be read through frameworks of excess, novelty, or spectacle. Nelson (2019) describes how Black individuals in colonial and postcolonial spaces were often perceived as “objects of novelty, pleasant funny creatures” within everyday encounters, revealing how racial difference is continually produced through gaze and interpretation (p. 230). Such readings reflect a broader system in which racialized bodies are not simply seen, but actively constructed through institutional and social narratives that shape perception itself.

This logic extends to the hypersexualization of Black women’s bodies within historical and literary contexts. Nelson (2019) documents how enslaved women were “deeply sexualized and silenced,” while simultaneously denied bodily autonomy under systems of ownership and control (p. 80). Within these narratives, the body becomes a site of both violence and inscription, where identity is externally imposed and continuously regulated. The assertion “I’m not willing to bet my body parts on your view of the world” (Nelson, 2019, p. 80) signals a refusal of this imposed interpretive authority, foregrounding bodily autonomy as a form of resistance against systems that commodify racialized embodiment.

These dynamics are further reinforced through cultural representations that aestheticize and eroticize racialized bodies within landscapes of colonial fantasy. Nelson (2019) highlights how imagery such as Niagara Falls was historically gendered and sexualized,

with narratives of “naked, native women going over the waterfall” circulating through postcards, tourism materials, and artistic depictions (p. 229). Such representations reveal how racialized femininity was constructed as part of a broader colonial visual economy that linked nature, sexuality, and conquest. These narratives continue to inform contemporary visual culture by shaping how femininity, danger, and desirability are read onto bodies.

Within fashion systems, these historical logics are reproduced through aesthetic frameworks that continue to regulate which bodies are deemed desirable, legible, or marketable within visual culture. The runway, as a highly curated space of display, often echoes these colonial viewing practices by positioning certain bodies as central spectacles while marginalizing others. Reimagining the runway therefore requires critically disrupting these inherited visual regimes and reframing the body not as an object of consumption, but as an agent of meaning, authorship, and embodied presence.

2.2.4 Disability, Ableism, and Fashion Systems

Schalk on disability, embodiment, and knowledge production challenges dominant ways of understanding the body by reframing disability as a complex and situated mode of being. Within this framework, Madhu Dubey’s reading of slave narratives suggests that meaning is often constrained by dominant “historical modes of

knowing,” and that truth can only emerge when those inherited frameworks are disrupted or abandoned (Dubey, as cited in Nelson, 2019, p. 36). This call to “unlearn” established interpretive systems becomes particularly significant when applied to fashion, where visual norms, aesthetic standards, and ideas of the “ideal body” are often taken as natural rather than constructed.

Extending this logic into fashion systems, disability can be understood as a site that exposes the limits of dominant aesthetic knowledge. To “unlearn” the fashion industry is to critically question the visual hierarchies that determine which bodies are deemed desirable, functional, or visible within runway culture. This process opens space to imagine fashion beyond inherited media representations shaped by television, advertising, and social platforms.

Schalk’s disability studies framework further complicates reductive interpretations of embodiment by arguing that reading disability solely as metaphor risks erasing its material and lived dimensions. Instead, disability must be understood as a “shifting constellation of literal and metaphorical depictions” that shape ethical, narrative, and political meaning (Schalk, 2018, p. 41). This perspective is critical for fashion systems, where disabled bodies are often either rendered invisible or aestheticized in ways that detach them from lived experience. Within a reimagined runway context, disability cannot function as symbolic diversity alone but must be

recognized as an embodied and structural condition that reshapes how fashion itself is designed, accessed, and performed.

This understanding is further deepened through Butler's depiction of embodied transformation and survival. In *Kindred*, Dana's act of killing Rufus is framed as a moment of paradoxical liberation, where she "gains more by killing Rufus than she ever did by saving him," despite the physical and emotional cost of survival (Butler, 1979, p. 53). This narrative underscores how bodily autonomy and resistance are often achieved through painful rupture, highlighting the relationship between embodiment, agency, and systemic violence. Within disability frameworks, this resonates with the idea that bodily experience is shaped not only by limitation but also by acts of survival.

These dynamics are further complicated by historical constructions of mental illness and racialized deviance, where disability has been used as a mechanism of social control. Nelson (2019) highlights how psychiatric frameworks have historically conflated racialized political resistance with pathology, noting that associations between Black liberation movements and perceived mental instability led to incarceration and social exclusion (p. 64). This demonstrates how disability is not a neutral medical category but a socially constructed system that has been used to regulate racialized bodies and suppress forms of collective resistance.

2.2.5 Fashion Systems, Size, and the Regulation of the Body

Fashion history reveals how industry standards have actively excluded bodies that fall outside narrow ideals of thinness, reinforcing size-based hierarchies within visual culture. *Fashion Before Plus-Size* traces how the fashion industry was constructed around a limited body type, positioning larger bodies as deviations rather than as part of the normalcy. "Fashion did not fail to include plus-size bodies; it was never designed for them in the first place" (Peters, 2023). This exclusion reflects a broader system in which bodies are not simply presented, but regulated through design, production, and representation practices that define what is considered fashionable or acceptable. These standards continue to shape contemporary runway spaces, where size inclusivity often remains limited or tokenized. The absence of diverse body sizes reinforces the idea that only certain bodies are worthy of visibility and aesthetic value. Within this framework, larger bodies become either invisible or hypervisible as exceptions, rather than integrated into the fabric of fashion itself. Reimagining the runway requires disrupting these size-based hierarchies by expanding who is seen, how garments are designed, and what is considered desirable within fashion systems.

2.2.6 Spectacle, Visibility, and the Commodification of the Body

Debord's (1967/1994) *Society of the Spectacle* argues that modern life is mediated through images that transform social relations into representations, where visibility becomes a form of control. Within the spectacle, individuals do not simply exist; they are displayed, consumed, and interpreted through systems shaped by capitalism and media. This process distances people from their own lived experience, as identity becomes something to be viewed rather than embodied. Debord states, "the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images" (Debord, 1967/1994, p. 12).

These dynamics are evident within fashion systems, where the runway operates as a site of spectacle that prioritizes image over lived reality. Models are positioned as visual commodities, and their bodies are styled, framed, and circulated to align with dominant aesthetic standards. The spectacle does not merely present the body; it constructs it as an object of consumption, reinforcing existing hierarchies of race, ability, and desirability.

Within this context, reimagining the runway requires a shift away from spectacle as passive consumption toward embodied presence and authorship. By centering participant agency and lived experience, the runway can move beyond image production and become a space where bodies are not simply seen, but actively define how they are represented.

3. Methodology

“She wears her culture like couture. Tailored in confidence, draped in history, and styled with a freedom no trend can define.” (Duane Thomas, 2000).

3.1 Research Approach: Autoethnography

This study adopts an autoethnographic approach to examine how race, disability, and representation shape experiences within fashion runway spaces. Autoethnography positions lived experience as a valid source of knowledge, allowing the researcher to connect personal narrative to broader cultural and systemic structures.

This approach is particularly relevant to this research as it is grounded in my own experiences navigating fashion as a model shaped by racial conformity and limited representation. Growing up, lack of representation influenced how I understood belonging within fashion, often reinforcing who is seen as “fit” for the runway. Through autoethnography, these experiences reflect broader systems of racism and exclusion within the industry.

In this study, I occupy the role of both researcher and participant, while also engaging others as collaborators whose lived experiences contribute to the research. By incorporating participant perspectives alongside my own, this approach allows for a

collective storytelling process that highlights how individuals experience and reimagine fashion spaces.

3.2 Research Design: Co-Design + Practice-Based Approach

A co-design approach was chosen to disrupt traditional hierarchies within the fashion industry where creative authority is often concentrated among a limited group of designers, stylists, and decision-makers.

This study brings together individuals from diverse creative backgrounds and typically positioned behind the scenes such as photographers, makeup artists, and emerging designers into a shared space of collaboration. These voices are rarely centered within runway contexts, despite their integral role in shaping how fashion is produced and experienced.

Participants are invited to image and design their own runway. This approach creates an opportunity to surface perspectives that are often overlooked. It shifts the focus from passive participation to active authorship allowing individuals to reconfigure fashion spaces based on their lived realities.

3.3 Methods of Data Collection

- Field notes (fashion shows, sessions)
- Co-design sessions

- Runway production process
- Participant reflections (informal conversations, feedback)

3.4 Research Design

This study used a participatory co-design research approach to explore how runway and fashion spaces can be reimaged to be more inclusive for IBPOC individuals and people with disabilities. A participatory framework was selected because it centers participants as active contributors rather than passive subjects. Instead of researching people from a distance, participants were invited to help shape the experience and influence the final runway event.

The project was grounded in principles of collaboration, accessibility, and participant agency. These values guided all stages of the study including recruitment, interviews, co-design activities, the runway presentation, and post-event reflections.

3.5 Participant Recruitment

Participant recruitment began early in the research process. Individuals were invited from a range of creative and community backgrounds, including photography, hairstyling, makeup artistry, fashion, and design. Many of these individuals typically work behind the scenes within creative industries rather than in visible modeling roles.

This study additionally recruited IBPOC participants and individuals with disabilities, including those with and without prior modeling experience. Participants did not need professional fashion knowledge or runway experience to take part. Individuals who had never modeled before were welcomed.

This recruitment strategy was purposeful and aligned with the goals of the study: to “flip the script” by shifting visibility toward those who are often positioned behind the scenes. The runway became a space where these individuals can be centered and publicly seen.

3.6 Consent and Ethical Procedures

After participants were confirmed, each individual received an informed consent form outlining the purpose of the study, participation activities, confidentiality, and voluntary involvement.

The study examined exclusion within fashion spaces and explored how more inclusive runway experiences could be collaboratively designed. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time and that accommodations and personal boundaries would be respected throughout the project.

Signed consent forms were collected before data collection began.

3.7 Research Procedure

The study was completed in four stages.

Stage 1: Co-Design Activities

Participants first took part in a collaborative co-design session before the runway event.

During this session, participants were asked to sketch or describe their ideal runway experience. They were invited to imagine what the runway should look and feel like based on their own identities, preferences, and access needs.



Figure 4: Co-Design Session. Photograph by Stephanie Myers. (2026).

Participants considered elements such as:

- lighting
- music
- stage or no stage
- room layout and spacing
- pacing and timing
- emotional atmosphere
- the role and personality of the MC, DJ, or host
- accessibility and sensory needs



Figure 5: Co-Design Session. Photograph by Stephanie Myers. (2026).

Participants were given creative control and encouraged to choose all elements of the experience. Sketches and visual ideas were collected as research data and also used as prompts for group discussion.

Follow-up conversations explored why participants designed certain elements, how their choices reflected identity or lived experience, and what changes were needed to make runway spaces more inclusive. Participants also discussed consent in styling, personal boundaries, cultural clothing, mobility devices, and how designers should respectfully work with models.

The session concluded with future-focused reflection. Participants shared what they wanted future runway spaces to look like and what systems within fashion would need to change.



Figure 7. Visual Mapping Activity. Photograph by Stephanie Myers. (2026).



Figure 8. Introducing Next Activity. Photograph by Stephanie Myers. (2026).



Figure 9. Note taking with participant Vikas. Photograph by Rajibir Singh. (2026).

In **Figure 7**, Participants were provided a map and floor plan layout image of the Great Hall venue so they could understand the runway space they would be designing. This visual reference helped them better imagine the environment supporting their sketching process and allowing them to more effectively plan the overall look and feel of the show.

The purpose of this activity was to position participants as lead designers and ensure the final runway experience reflected the voices of everyone involved. It was

intended to give each participant a meaningful role in shaping the event to ensure on show day, everyone could recognize their ideas and identities within the runway experience.

Stage 2: Pre-Show Interviews

Participants then completed semi-structured interviews conducted either in person or virtually. These conversations explored participants' relationships to fashion, identity and expectations for the runway event.

The interviews also provided an opportunity for participants to share lived experiences and identify barriers commonly present in fashion spaces.

3.7.1. Pre-Show Interview Questions

Section 1: Opening & Warm-Up

1. Can you describe your relationship with fashion in your everyday life? Why?
2. How do you define fashion in your own words? Why?

Section 2: Identity & Clothing Choices

3. What types of clothing make you feel most like your best self? Why?
4. When you think about being seen by others, what clothing feels most true to who you are? Why?

5. How do you decide what to wear when you want to express your identity to the world? Why?

Section 3: Representation & Visibility

6. What does representation mean to you, particularly in fashion contexts? Why?

7. Have you felt represented or misrepresented in fashion media or on runways?

Can you share an example and explain why it stood out?

8. Why is it important, or not important, for you to see people like yourself represented on the runway?

Section 4: Participation in the Show

9. You are invited to model in clothing that expresses who you are. What outfit are you considering, and why?

10. What message, feeling, or story do you hope your outfit communicates to the audience? Why?

11. Is there anything you need to feel comfortable, supported, or empowered during the show?

Section 5: Expectations & Accessibility

12. What do you hope to experience or feel by participating in this show? Why?

13. Are there any access needs or supports that would help you participate fully?

Stage 3: Runway Presentation

A participatory fashion show was then organized and presented. Participants were invited to walk the runway in one or more looks, which could include:

- Self-styled looks, where participants selected clothing that represented their identity.
- Designer-styled looks, where participants wore curated outfits prepared in collaboration with others.

The inclusion of both walks was intentional. It allowed the study to compare how participants experienced walking in clothing they selected for themselves versus clothing chosen by someone else. This comparison explored how styling influences confidence, comfort, and agency along with identity, expression and emotional response.

Participants were encouraged to reflect on questions such as how they felt in each look, whether they felt accurately seen, and whether one styling approach created a stronger sense of authenticity or control.

This comparison was important because many traditional fashion spaces place styling decisions in the hands of designers rather than the models themselves.

By including both experiences, the runway became a way to examine how representation changes when participants are given authorship over their appearance versus when identity is interpreted externally.

Accommodations were considered throughout the event process including mobility needs, pacing, backstage support, and participant comfort. These accommodations provided agency to the participants.

Stage 4: Post-Show Interviews

Following the runway event, participants completed post-show interviews. These reflective conversations explored emotional responses, confidence, identity expression, accessibility, audience interaction, and overall impressions of the experience.

Participants were also invited to discuss what worked well, what could be improved, and how fashion spaces might become more inclusive in the future.

3.7.2 Post-Show Interview Questions

Section 1: Immediate Reflections

1. How do you feel after participating in the show? Why?
2. What was the most meaningful or memorable moment for you, and why?

Section 2: Clothing Choice & Self-Expression

3. Why did you choose the outfit you wore today?
4. Do you feel your outfit expressed what you intended? Why or why not?
5. Did wearing this outfit influence how you saw yourself? Why?

Section 3: Representation & Identity

6. Did you feel represented during the show? If so, how and why? If not, what was missing?

7. What did it feel like to see yourself, and others, on the runway? Why?

Section 4: Runway Environment

8. How did the atmosphere, audience, and setup affect your comfort and confidence? Why?

9. What, if anything, could have made your participation feel more accessible or supportive? Why?

Section 5: Co-Design & Future Vision

10. What would you like to see more of on runways in general? Why?

11. What changes or additions would improve this show if it were repeated? Why?

12. How would you envision a future runway that fully represents you and your community? Why?

13. Would you be interested in participating in a future runway experience? Why or why not?

3.8 Data Collection

Data for this study included:

- Pre-show interview
- Post-show interview
- Notes from co-design sessions
- Researcher observations during the runway event
- Participant feedback on accessibility and representation

These multiple sources allowed for a richer understanding of participant experiences before, during, and after the intervention.

3.9 Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. Interview transcripts, observations, and participant feedback were reviewed multiple times to identify recurring patterns, meanings, and experiences.

Codes were first developed from repeated ideas in the data. These codes were then grouped into broader themes related to (for eg; identity, accessibility, styling, community)

The final themes were used to understand how participation in the runway experience shaped participants' perspectives and experiences.

3.10 Participant Demographics

A total of 12 participants took part in this study. Participants were intentionally recruited from diverse and creative backgrounds. The sample included individuals with experience in fashion and media industries, participants from behind-the-scenes creative roles, and individuals with little or no prior runway experience.

Several participants who identified as disabled brought important perspectives related to accessibility, embodiment, and representation. Participants also represented a range of cultural identities, including Black, South Asian, Indonesian, and White/Caucasian backgrounds.

The participant group included the following profiles:

1. Monika – White/Caucasian female. Canada’s first model with Down Syndrome.
2. Jemuel – Black male with no prior fashion or runway experience. He has experience in photography and creative image-making.
3. Zuva – Black female working as a fashion stylist with experience in styling and fashion production.
4. Amy – White/Caucasian disabled female who worked as a toy maker, educator, and film/television actress.
5. Yuki – Disabled individual with experience as a model and film actress.
6. Rowan – White/Caucasian male with a background in photography.

7. Nora – Participant of Indonesian descent who identified as disabled. She is a jewelry artist and hockey player.
8. Tafara – Black male with experience in fashion production, styling, and creative direction.
9. Kirubel – Black male with no prior fashion experience. He described strong interests in academic reading and scholarly pursuits.
10. Vikas – Participant of Indian descent who uses a wheelchair and had mild experience in fashion.
11. Ayana Lewis – Black female with no experience in modelling but a keen interest. Helps out at local fashion shows.
12. Uchenna – Black female with experience in makeup artistry, poetry and dance.



Figure 10. Founder/Host of Reimagining the Runway, Delina, speaking to audience. Photograph by Omolegho. @omo.film (2026).



Figure 11. Opening speech. Photograph by Shiyama. (2026).

3.11 Researcher Positioning

As the organizer and researcher, I held an active role in recruiting participants, facilitating sessions, producing the runway event, and conducting interviews. Because of this close involvement, reflexivity was important throughout the study.

3.12 Thematic Analysis

3.13 My Body, My Story: Navigating Race, Identity, and Fashion



Figure 12. *Summer Day*. Photograph by Shrice. (2025).



Figure 13. *DVD Camcorder*. (2004).

This section draws on personal narrative to situate my positionality within broader systems of race, migration, and representation. The following account reflects formative experiences that have shaped my understanding of belonging, identity, and visibility within cultural and fashion spaces.

Welcome to my family life and up brining.

Well, hello there. My name is Delina.

You're probably wondering who I am.

Great question. I've lived in the suburbs basically my entire life. I grew up with a loving family, yet I was sheltered.

Growing up the youngest, the bar was set.

All I had to do was look up at my siblings (figuratively and literally) and I'd know where to go.

They paved the way.

When I was younger, I was given everything I needed to succeed.

It was a luxury, and even at such a small, innocent age I knew this was something not to be messed with, but rather used in the best way.

Understanding my parents' history involving the challenges and hardships they faced to build a life in Canada, I felt a deep responsibility to make the most of this opportunity.

The opportunity of, well, being **here**.

Being in the land of *Freedom* as they say. The land of sacrifice, blood, sweat, and tears.

Our home country is corrupt and led by unruly leaders who show zero remorse towards their people, not even in the slightest. Education was not existent, and healthcare is out the door. My parents knew if they stayed there, their future family would crumble.

At this point you're probably wondering why does family play such a key role in your decision making? Why do your parents influence you so deeply?

Well, I'll tell you why.

I come from a family of scholars, high achievers, and go-getters. I've been watching them throughout my life, so striving for success is something I've practically only ever known.

My parents were also teachers, so it's almost inevitable that I follow their lead and do the best I can in all my academics.

Now my parents. They came to Canada but not in the way you think.

In my home country, raising a family with the same opportunities available in Canada is simply not possible. Eritrea is governed by a regime marked by corruption and oppression, led by a dictator whose actions disregard fundamental human rights and decency.

My parents took incredible risks and made profound sacrifices to escape Eritrea. They undertook this journey with courage and hope, not only for their own future but for the future of their children, including me and my siblings, who had yet to be born.

If you get caught escaping, is the. It's either jail or the unimaginable.

From staying in refugee camps and being separated for years at a time waiting for a sponsorship approval, and after continent hopping, they've eventually found their way back to each other and grew as one.

Their determination led them to Canada, a decision made to provide a life filled with possibility and freedom.

Whereas in Eritrea? Education was not existent, and healthcare is out the door. My parents knew if they stayed there, their future family would crumble.

So, after hearing their life story, their triumphs, hardships, and what it took to get here, why don't I do the best I can while I'm in this country? I was given the opportunity, why not seize it?

It only pushes me to do the best I can.

Nowadays, kids my age are risking their lives escaping my country. Either by boat crossing the Mediterranean Sea, or simply in the middle of the night passing through military at dawn.

Hearing my parents' story, sadly, I can see that things would've be much different if things didn't go according to plan.

Instead of holding a pencil, I'd be holding a machine gun. Big difference between Canada, and my heritage of a country Eritrea. It's simply stark.

I always want to make my parents proud. I want them to know their fruits of their labor paid off.

So, **Who Are You From** you may wonder? **I'm from my parents** who obtain a culture filled with togetherness and triumph.

A culture filled with music, coffee, hearty meals and times for solidarity.

We're also from a culture that comes with sacrifice, blood, sweat, tears, and a drive for justice.

I will continue to make it a priority to put ahead my best dedication in the tasks I undertake.

Representation (Moving)

So, boom, years later.

We made it. We're settled in Canada.

Five years old. What an innocent age, isn't it? In my case it was too innocent, considering the fact you can see in my eyes. So vulnerable, so timid, yet so eager to learn about this world.

I come from a very loving family. We're go getters, and we'd like to presume that way. Mom can put a smile on anyone's face she comes across, and Dad will stop at nothing to fight for what is right. I guess this makes me a kind person with a strong force. Handy combination...I think.



Figure 14. Moving Day. (2006).

The year was 2006. Autumn, might I add. Early mornings. The air was muggy yet felt like home. It was sometimes foggy and the grass would be a little wet. Heading off for school, I'd see the same crossing guard every morning. Received the same smile. Sometimes, I think it would get bigger than the day before. I didn't smile back. I thought looking up at her would be enough. The timidness was real. "One of these days you should really smile back, or at least say thank you." Mom said. Parents would take turns walking me. I was 5 years old, what did I know about courtesy and respect? I just wanted to head to school, see my friends, eat my crackers and have nap time. Oh kindergarten, how I miss you.

Every morning, I'd see the same sign on our front lawn. I wasn't sure why it was there, or what it meant. I didn't really bother to ask. I kinda liked our lawn without a man's face on it (realtor), but I didn't give it much thought or say. Our lawn was cute. Surrounded by mini plants and trees. On sunny days, it would sometimes look like the color of the flowers have changed. It would smell like summer.

But then, the days got shorter.

The stress in my household increased. Not to mention the boxes, oh, so many boxes. What was going on? Everything was fast paced. I haven't seen my parents act like this before. There was no anger or worry, but I could sense change. It was coming, and fast.

School was finishing quicker. The energy around me was different, yet wholesome. Teachers and students would crowd me and only me and I wasn't sure why. I was handed various paintings and drawings from peers (I didn't know a stick figure could be so sweet), and hugs that felt a little tighter as each person went by. I distinctively remember my teacher's hug. She crouched down to my height which seemed like a challenge, but she fought through it anyway. Flattered. Going in for the hug, I could smell her coffee breathe she indulged that morning. It felt like home.

I didn't question any of it though. I guess that's the natural greediness that comes along with being five.

The house was getting emptier by the day. Random men coming into the house performing different tasks. I kinda just went with the flow. This was all happening behind the couch while I was watching cartoons. Not a care in the world.

I didn't fully comprehend what was going on. I didn't bother to ask questions, but remember, highly observant.

I knew something was really going on when one day I came home from school and the couch was missing.

What was I gonna do, watch cartoons on the floor?

Yup, you guessed it. Moving day.

4:30 AM. Yes, you read that right.

That truck, oh that truck. Sitting on my driveway all intimidating and big. Ready to take all my things and go.

Dad was the driver. I thought you'd need a special license of some sort to operate a vehicle like this but hey, what did I know. I'm five.

We arrive. New town. New house. The sky was gloomy, but the sun was peeking through. Silver skies and it smelled misty. Mom was at work but was coming later. As I walk in, I felt in could do a million somersaults. It was so empty, yet I knew it was full of much possibly and adventure.

But when there's a new house, there's most likely always a new school.

I'm still in kindergarten. I left halfway. I'm still thinking of my friends from my previous school, but their faces are starting to become a blur.

I remember the first day. The classroom looked completely different from my old one. It was bigger, white walls, big windows. Maybe that's what happens when you move to a town that's known to be a bit on the pricey side. Things are brand new. Rejuvenated.

My dad holds my hand and walks in the classroom with me. I'm welcomed by a big smile from my new teacher, and a bunch of little ones like myself staring with big eyes, forming a circle around me. I guess this makes me "the new kid." I'm fine with it. I saw an episode on Caillou where there was a new kid and everyone was nice to them, so I'm good, right?

This is where it all begins.

Middle School Life

Middle school marked a quiet but profound turning point. I left behind the friends I had grown with. Not by choice, but by circumstance. A new school was built closer to home eliminating the need for a bus ride and making the transition feel inevitable.

Still, inevitability does not soften departure.

I remember what it meant to leave familiarity behind and step into a space that felt entirely unknown. Middle school is already a time layered with emotion, uncertainty, and self-discovery; to begin again in that environment without grounding was something I struggled to put into words.

In this new space, I quickly became aware of difference. I was the only person of colour in my class. That reality did not announce itself loudly, but it settled quietly into how I saw myself, how I moved, and how I imagined my place in the world.

Lack of representation began to shape my understanding of possibility.

I internalized, in subtle and unspoken ways, that there were spaces I might not belong in simply because I had never seen someone who looked like me there.

I questioned things I had never questioned before: why my hair did not blow in the wind like the others, why it took longer to care for in the mornings, why it did not fall flat in the rain during recess. I noticed that my parents were the only ones dressed in cultural clothing during school events. These moments, small in isolation, accumulated into a quiet but persistent awareness of difference.

Looking back, this period feels like a whirlwind. Being a preteen already trying to make sense of the world, while carrying questions of identity and belonging without the language to fully articulate them.

At this point I recognized the deep importance of representation.

Seeing oneself reflected in spaces of visibility is not superficial; it shapes what one believes is possible. This realization continues to inform my work today.

It is one of the reasons I incorporated a Poet to speak about “Black Hair” into my reimagined runway show, collaborating with a student artist to create space for storytelling that speaks to lived experience.

In doing so, I aim to create what I did not have at that age.

A space where identity is not questioned but affirmed; where voices are not hidden, but heard, and where the little girl I once was can finally see herself fully and unapologetically reflected back.

Representation matters. It’s so crucial especially for the younger generation.

You know why? Because when a little girl with two curly pom poms on her head watches a Black Lady fly into outer space, she knows she can do it too.

It would’ve helped the little girl in me.

So, what’s the point in all of this? This entire project. To prove that change is possible, that we can take a stand, and we can reach every star in the sky.

These experiences demonstrate how personal and familial circumstances profoundly shape one’s understanding of identity, opportunity, and belonging. Growing up within a context marked by sacrifice and limited representation instilled a heightened awareness of structural inequities and the conditions that define who is seen and supported.

At the same time, these circumstances function as a source of motivation rather than limitation. They underscore the importance of transforming lived experience into action using personal history as a foundation for resilience and change. This perspective

reinforces the belief that structural barriers are not immovable, and that individuals can actively reimagine and reshape the spaces they occupy.

Within the context of this research, this translates into a commitment to creating fashion environments that expand possibility, affirm identity, and challenge exclusion grounded in the conviction that one's starting point does not define the limits of where they can go, but rather the depth of what they are capable of transforming.

This shift marks a transition from a sheltered, formative perspective to a critical engagement with broader systems positioning personal experience as a lens for analyzing and responding to structural inequities rather than as an end in itself.

3.14 Data Collection and Analysis: Co-Design Runway Session Findings

"Even though we can't have our show outside, why not bring outdoor elements in?"

(Uchenna, 2026).

This section presents findings from the participant co-design sketching session. During this activity, participants were invited to draw and describe their ideal runway environment. Sketches and verbal explanations were used as visual and narrative data. The purpose of this session was to understand how participants would reimagine fashion spaces when given creative control. The findings directly informed the final runway presented on show day.

Analysis of the sketches revealed four recurring themes: celebration of identity, accessibility and comfort, nature and transformation, and collective inclusion.

3.15 Celebration of Identity Through Atmosphere

Many participants imagined the runway as a joyful and expressive space rather than a formal or exclusive one.

One participant initially expressed a desire for an outdoor-themed runway, despite the event being scheduled in an indoor venue.



Figure 15. Vine Decor in Great Hall. Photograph by Delina. (2026).

This input played a central role in shaping the runway experience. One model expressed a desire to embody a “flower princess,” which inspired the development of an outdoor garden-themed runway. To ensure that all participants felt seen and heard, I integrated their ideas into the overall design by incorporating natural elements such as vines, flowers, and petals placed along the walls and runway surface.

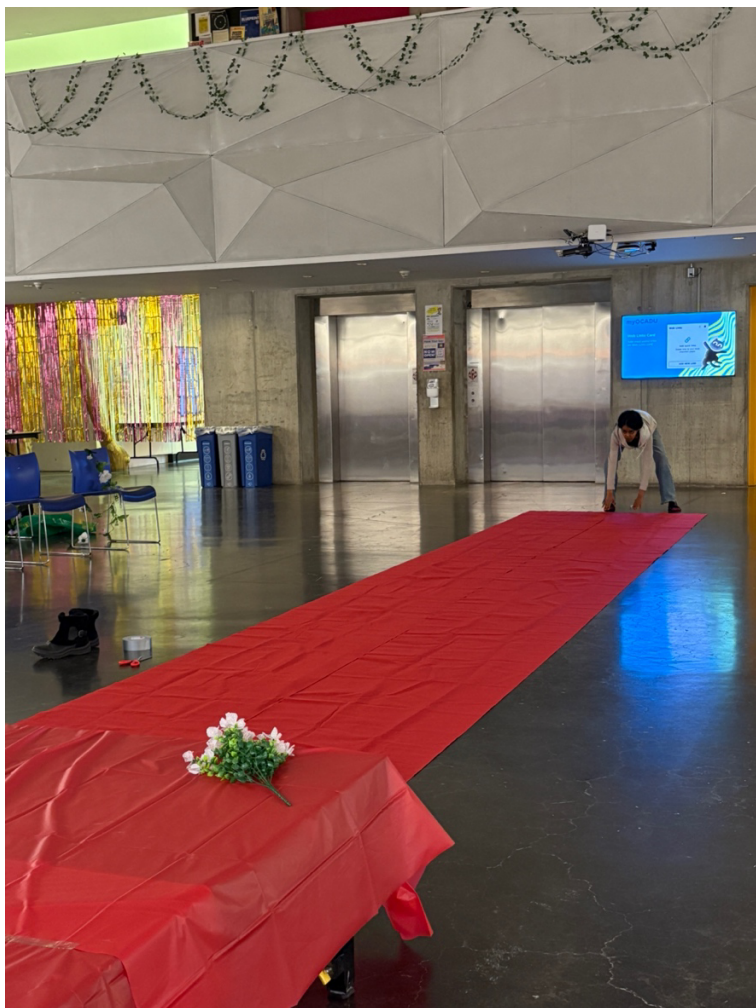


Figure 16: Straightening out carpet. Photograph by Sophia. (2026).

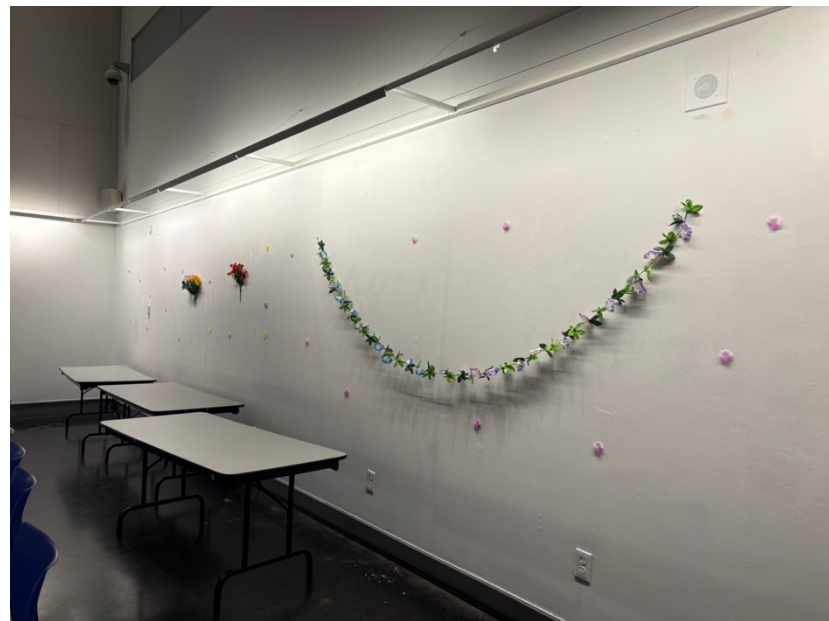


Figure 17: Smiley face decor. Photograph by Delina. (2026).



Figure 18: *Placing the flowers.* Photograph by Sophia. (2026).

This approach reinforced the intention that participants were in control of their experience and that the runway was a space for authentic self-expression.

Another participant proposed incorporating graffiti-style protection imagery onto his body. Although technical resources were limited, we adapted this idea by introducing projected visuals onto the walls as participants walked. An initial consideration to project onto a white runway was dismissed due to concerns about harsh lighting affecting participants' comfort and visibility.

Each model was also assigned a personalized song to accompany their walk, allowing them to communicate their identity and persona nonverbally to the audience.



Figure 19: Nora's Runway Moment. Photography by: Jotam @litehour. (2026).



Figure 20: Nora's Runway Moment. Photograph by Omolegho. @omo.film (2026).

In Figure's 19 & 20, Nora presented her hockey persona to the audience. This adds a distinctly personal and authentic dimension to her runway performance.

Additionally, one participant suggested beginning the show seated among the audience before transitioning onto the runway.



Figure 21. Moment where host (Delina) is attempting to find models in crowd. Photograph by Enitan Bello. (2026).

In **Figure 21**, an idea was implemented during the introduction where the audience was invited to “find” the models as they emerged from within the crowd.

This moment emphasized inclusivity and reinforced the concept that the runway is an accessible space, one where everyone belongs and has the potential to participate.

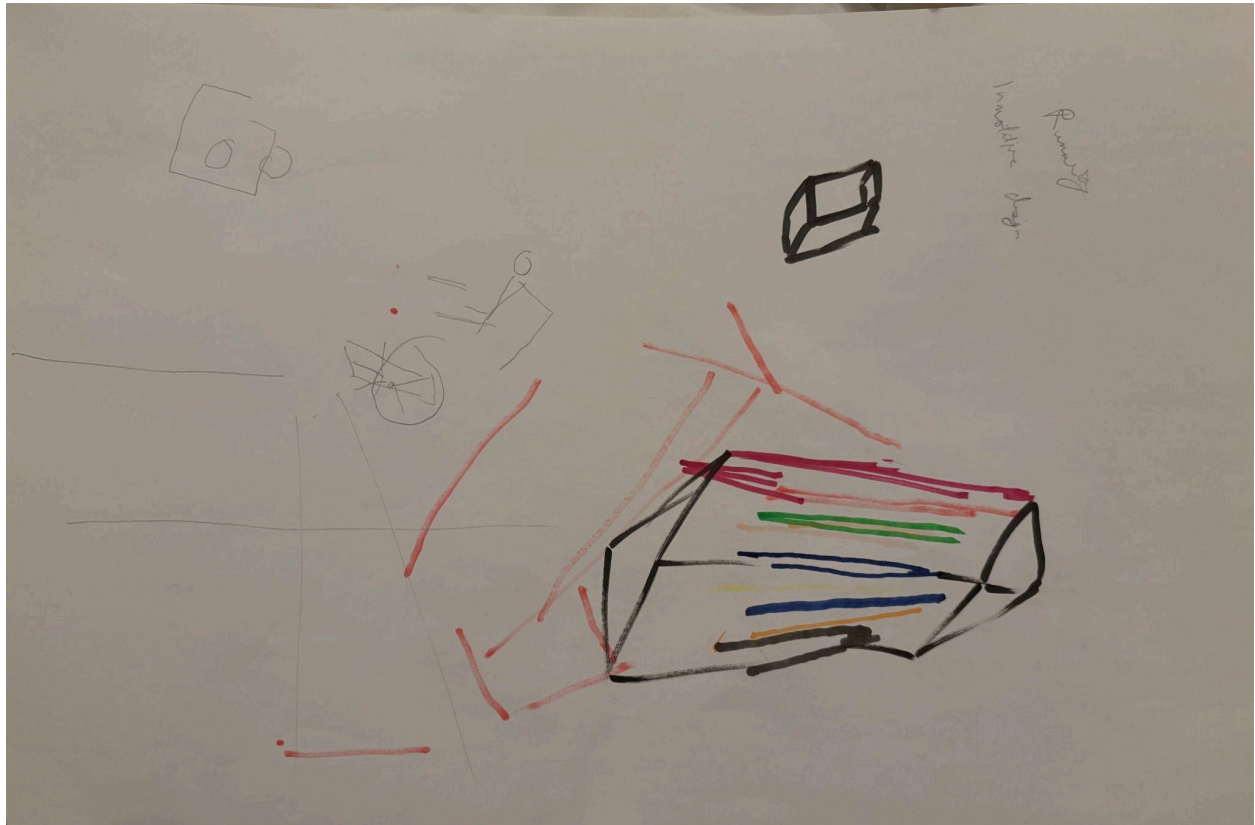


Figure 22. Vikas' Sketch during Co-Design. Photograph by Delina. (2026).

In **Figure 22**, Vikas, who is blind, created this sketch to express his vision for the show carefully adding colors to communicate how he imagines the space and atmosphere. Rainbow-colored lights shine on Vikas as he's out on stage shifting the mood and enhancing the visual rhythm of performance. Red carpet lighting lines the boundaries of the runway, similar to guiding lights, clearly outlining the stage and helping define the performance space.



Figure 23: Jemuel's Sketch (Digital) during Co-Design. Screen capture by Jemuel. (2026).

Jemuel proposed a *Graffiti Culture Runway* in **Figure 23** using bold colors, urban textures, and personalized light shapes. This concept reflected cultural pride and self-expression. Uchenna also emphasized identity through music and movement by suggesting that each model choose their own song and walking style.

These ideas influenced the final show by encouraging participant-led styling, music, expressive movement, and a more celebratory tone.

Each participant's ideas regarding ambience were valued and implemented to it's highest degree given limitations in budget and space.

Accessibility and Comfort Beyond Traditional Runway Design

Several sketches challenged the narrow structure of traditional runways.

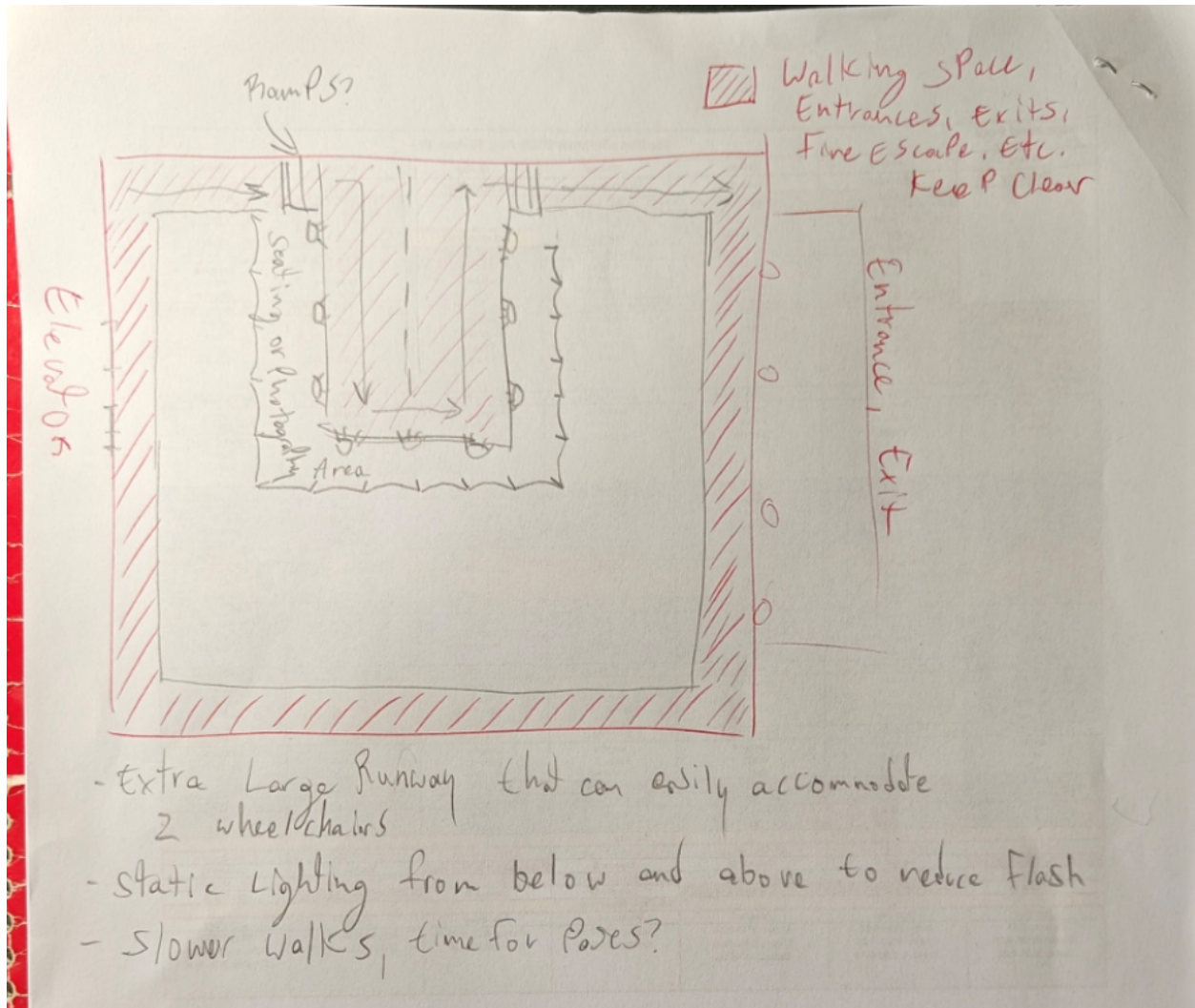


Figure 24. Rowan's Sketch during Co-Design. Photograph by Rowan. (2026).

In **Figure 24**, Rowan proposed a spacious runway with soft lighting and enough room for two wheelchairs. His concept focused on calmness and reducing sensory overwhelm.

Figure 25 demonstrates Zuva envisioning a multi-level stage with platforms that allow participants to pose, stand, or move in different ways rather than only walking in a straight line.

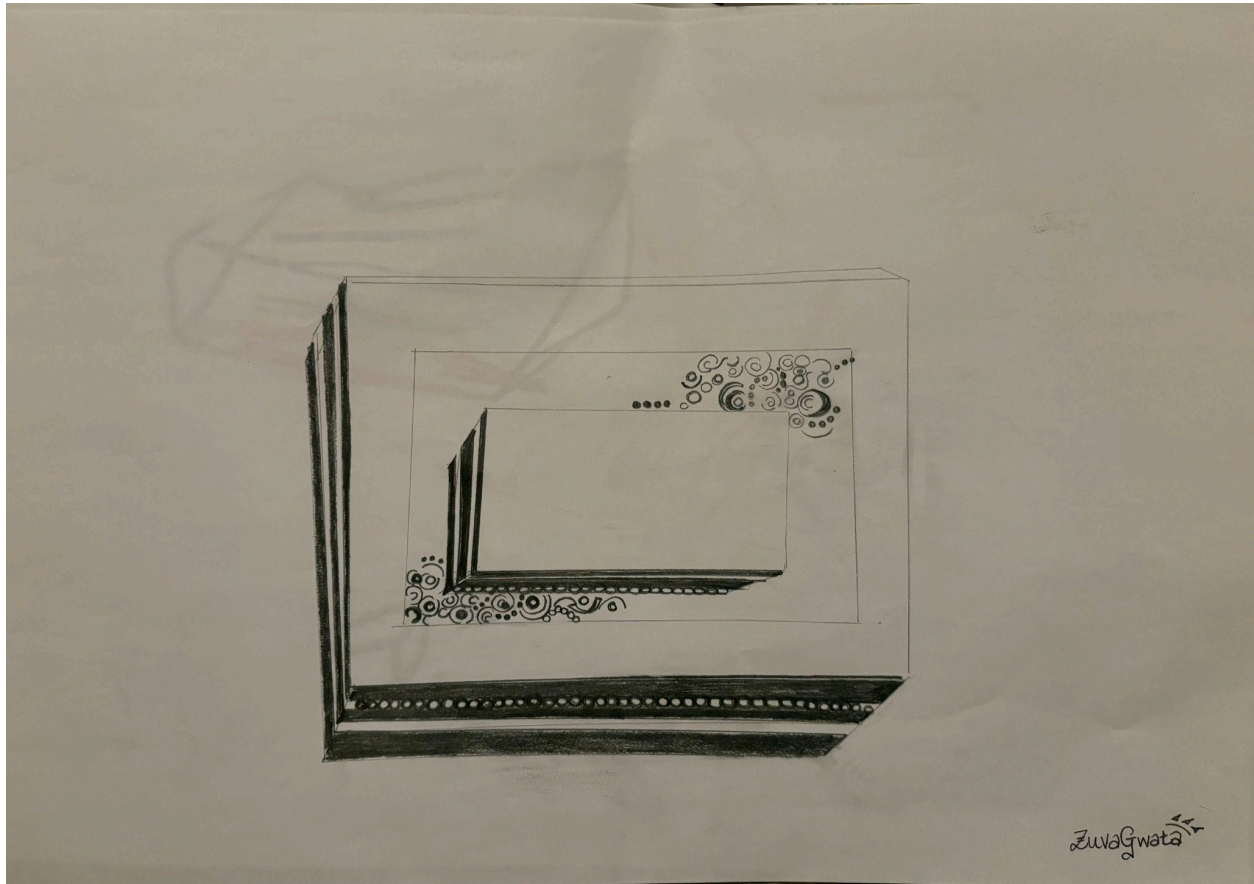


Figure 25: Zuva's Sketch during Co-Design. Photograph by Delina. (2026).

Vikas later added the idea of a rotating accessible stage with railings so models could be viewed from all sides without needing to travel long distances.

These findings showed that accessibility involved more than ramps or entry points. Participants emphasized pacing, space, lighting, and multiple ways of moving.

Though elaborate platforms and stages were not implemented at this time, the final runway allowed individualized entrances and participant-centered pacing.

3.16 Nature, Beauty, and Transformation

Some participants used natural imagery to reframe beauty and representation.

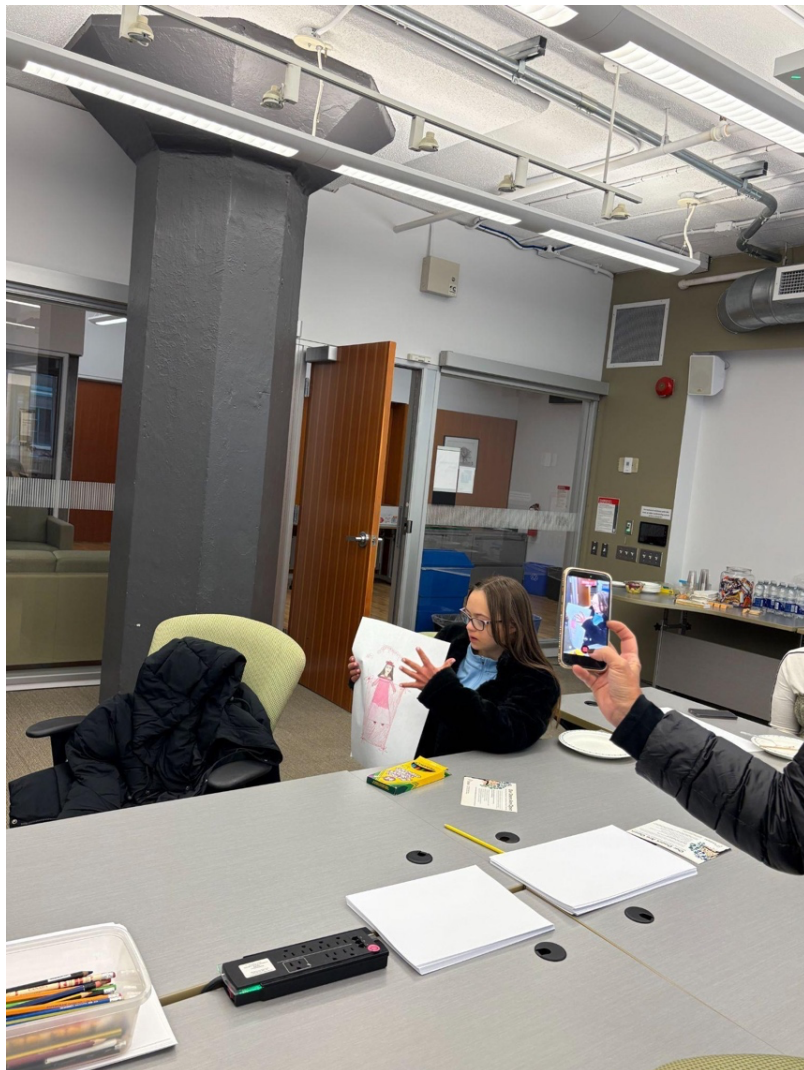


Figure 26: Monika sharing her drawing during our discussion period in Co-Design Session.

Monika designed a flower-themed runway filled with floral decorations. She explained that butterflies and flowers symbolize transformation and beauty, adding that people “deserve to feel beautiful.” Tafara similarly proposed bringing outdoor elements indoors through plants and natural textures.



Figure 27: Monika's Flower Princess. Photographed by Monika. (2026).

These concepts suggested that beauty should be understood as growth, change, and uniqueness rather than fixed appearance. On show day, floral visuals, elegance, and softer aesthetics were incorporated to create a welcoming environment.

Collective Inclusion and Belonging

Participants also reimagined who fashion spaces are for. In **Figure 28**, Uchenna proposed that models begin seated in the audience and walk from their seats to the runway.

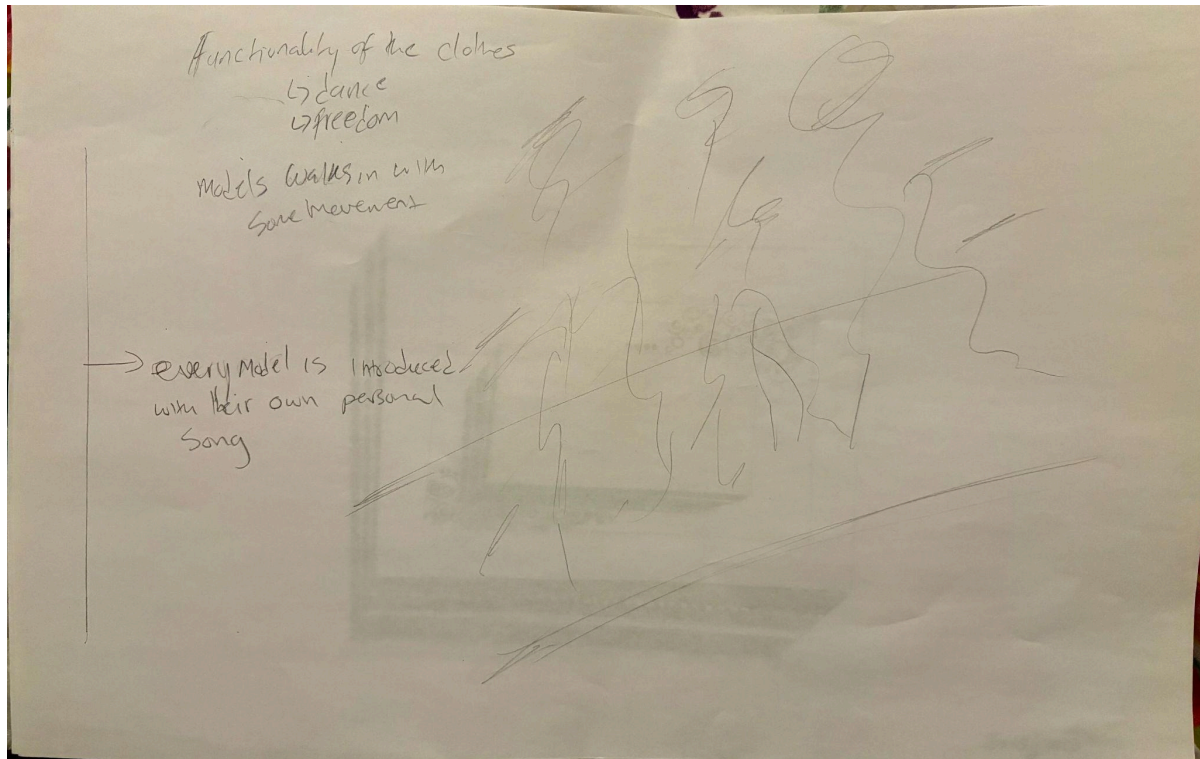


Figure 28. Uchenna's Sketch during Co-Design. Photographed by Delina. 2026.

This symbolized that fashion belongs to everyone, not only selected insiders. Multiple participants also suggested a shared finale where all models returned together for a group celebration and photo.

This idea strongly shaped the final event. The runway concluded with a collective finale that centered community over competition and visibility over hierarchy.

Figure 29 & 30. Venue of Reimagining the Runway. Photographed by Nya Jones. (2026).



Figure 31. Venue before guest arrival. Photographed by Delina. (2026).

4. Findings

Theme 1: *Identity Agency Through Self-Styling*

Theme 2: *Embodied Confidence and Public Visibility*

Theme 3: *Tension and Negotiation in External Styling*

Theme 4: *Accessibility Beyond Physical Space*

Theme 5: *Community Representation and Inclusive Futures*

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings from a series of pre- and post-interview sessions conducted with participants following their involvement in a participatory runway experience. The findings draw on participant reflections gathered before and after the show, with a focus on how individuals articulated identity, embodiment, representation, and accessibility through fashion-related experiences. Attention is given to how participants described their everyday dressing practices, navigated social and environmental constraints, and later reflected on their experiences of walking the runway engaging with styling processes and interacting with audiences and peers. Across the dataset, recurring patterns emerge in how participants understood clothing as both a personal and social tool, as well as how these meanings shifted through participation in the runway intervention.

The findings are organized into five interconnected themes that trace both continuity and transformation across participant experiences. Together, they illustrate how identity was increasingly understood through self-styling practices, how confidence became tied to embodied presence and public visibility, and how externally imposed styling arose strong feelings between personal identity and representation.

“The experience was empowering” (Jemuel, 2026).

4.2 Runway Reimagined: This is Our Show

“Support for small businesses like mine helped us grow” (Nora, 2026).

I was overwhelmed with both gratitude and shock at the number of students from OCAD University who came together to bring this show to life.

From the very beginning, my intention was for the event to be student-led, while also expanding beyond the traditional “walk and observe” runway format to include poetry, music, and other forms of expression that deepen engagement. I have long felt that students often do not receive the recognition, visibility, or institutional support their creativity deserves.



Figure 32 & 33. (Left, Singer Mya opening act, right, Yaser, MC host). Photographed by Krish. @krishphoto.ca. (2026).

For that reason, I was intentional and selective in my outreach. I wanted the performers, singers, poets, designers, and contributors to be affiliated with OCAD so that the event could function not only as a runway show, but as a platform to spotlight the immense artistic talent that exists within the student body.



Figure 34. (Enitan Bello performing poetry titled "My Hair") Photographed by Krish. @krishphoto.ca. (2026).

As an art and design institution, OCAD holds an extraordinary concentration of emerging creativity and innovation. To be able to create a space that celebrated this talent through my project only deepened my commitment to continue this work.

The simple act of reaching out, inviting participation, and asking who wished to contribute proved profoundly powerful. Students responded with generosity and a willingness to share their gifts. Even the fashion designers featured in the show were OCAD students, and together we further envisioned extending their visibility beyond the runway itself.

In the days following the event, we discussed curating an exhibition in the Great Hall, where mannequins would display their garments and designers could distribute business cards to promote their brands and creative practices. *Reimagining the Runway* began to generate momentum beyond a single evening.

Importantly, I never viewed this as *my* show alone. I made this clear in my opening remarks: this was a collective achievement. It was built through collaboration, trust, and the coming together of diverse talents across the OCAD community. Even the vendors were students, and one of the runway models also participated as a vendor, embodying the multidimensional creativity present within the space.



Figure 35 & 36 (Left vendors and henna art, right Louis singer closing act) Photographed by Jotam. @litehour. (2026).

Reimagining the Runway became a model of what is possible when community, artistry, and inclusion are centred. In this space, everyone won.

4.2.1 Let's Meet Our Performers

The evening opened with a heartfelt performance by Mya D. Rojas, whose voice set the tone for the night with *Human* by Christina Perri and *This Is Me* from *The Greatest Showman*.



Figure 37. Mya Performance. Photographed by Arpit @arpitdoesphoto (left image) & Omolegho @omo.film (right image). (2026).

Through these songs, Mya gently invited the audience into a space of vulnerability, self-acceptance, and courage reminding everyone the simplicity of being.



Figure 38: Louis Performance. Photographed by Arpit @arpitdoesphoto (left image) & Jotam @lighthouse (right image). (2026).

Closing the night, Louis brought the show to a powerful and personal end with two original songs, *Taste* and *Dear You*. His performance carried a sense of reflection and honesty leaving the audience with a lasting feeling of connection and introspection.

In preparing for the show, both singers were guided by its core themes of inclusion, belonging, and self-expression. Each artist thoughtfully selected pieces that spoke directly to these values, using their voices to reinforce the message that we are enough as we are, and that there is strength in showing up fully and truthfully.

Before the runway began, Enitan Bello delivered a deeply moving original spoken word piece titled *My Hair*.



Figure 39. (Enitan Bello performing poetry titled "My Hair") Photographed by Krish. @krishphoto.ca. (2026).

Her work explored the complex relationship between identity, culture, and internalized narratives shaped by colonialism and societal standards. Enitan described how her hair became something taken, renamed, and burdened by imposed meanings. No longer just hair, but a site of control, expectation, and misunderstanding.

Enitan challenged the language used to describe Black hair, questioning who defines terms like "messy," "tough," or "unprofessional," and exposing how these standards are rooted in systems that were never made for her.

Her piece moved toward reclamation.

My Hair ultimately called for a return to truth: a recognition that identity does not need permission to exist, and that beauty, in its most honest form, cannot be confined by external standards.



Figure 40. MC host Yaser sharing Opening Remarks. Photographed by Arpit @arpitdoesphoto (left image) & Jotam (right image) @lighthouse. (2026).

Alongside me, student MC Yaser Ibrahim co-hosted the evening with a calm and grounding presence that carried throughout the room. His warmth, attentiveness, and genuine care for others created a welcoming atmosphere for both participants and audience members.



Figure 42. Humour on stage and sentimental moments. Photographed by Krish. @krishphoto.ca. (2026).

As an active and engaged member of the OCAD University community, Yaser consistently shows up for others making him not only a strong host but a meaningful presence in the space.

The event also featured student vendors whose work added depth and creativity to the experience.



Figure 43 & 44. Student Vendors. Photographed by Arpit @arpitdoesphoto (2026).

Ray (left) shared her intricate henna artistry offering a beautiful form of cultural expression within the space.

Nora, a disability artist (right) showcased her handmade jewelry and even stepped away from her table to model in the show embodying both creator and participant within the runway itself.

Each of these students represents the depth of talent within OCAD University.



Figure 45 & 46. Singers of Reimagining the Runway. Photographed by Arpit. @arpitdoesphoto. (2026).

Creating space for them to share their craft was intentional. This project centered Reimagining the Runway as a collective act of bringing artists together in one space to be seen, supported, and celebrated.

4.2.2 Let's Meet Our Designers

Willa Crowder, Alessandro Cerasuolo, and Nile X are student designers from OCAD University who contributed original runway pieces grounded in sustainable design practices.

Their work collectively explored the floral theme through thoughtful material selection, upcycling approaches, and expressive garment construction.

IZ Adaptive is an adaptive clothing brand that supported the project by providing accessible garments designed for individuals with physical disabilities.



Figure 47. Founder of IZ Adaptive (Izzy Camilleri, right) and Anthony Lue (left).
<https://izadaptive.com/pages/the-story-of-iz-adaptive> . (2026).

Founded by designer Izzy Camilleri, the brand focuses on functional, inclusive design that prioritizes dignity, comfort, and modern aesthetics.



Figure 47 & 48. Introducing the designers of Reimagining the Runway. Photographed by Jotam @lighthouse. (2026).

Each designer brought a distinct perspective, yet together they reinforced a shared commitment to environmentally conscious fashion and concept-driven storytelling.

4.3 Theme One: Identity Agency Through Self-Styling

"I chose a suit because it is clean, chic, versatile" (Gwata, 2026).



Figure 50. Zuva Gwata's Self-Styled Walk. Photographed by Jotam @litehour. (2026).

A central theme across the interviews was identity agency through self-styling where participants described clothing as a powerful means of controlling how they were seen and expressing who they were on their own terms.

Rather than viewing fashion as superficial, participants framed self-styling as closely tied to confidence and autonomy. Kirubel explained that his self-styled outfit

made him feel “more confident” because he “had control over it all,” while Zuva similarly shared that wearing her own clothing felt “more natural and expressive” because it reflected who she truly was. These responses suggest that confidence was not produced simply by the garments alone, but by the ability to author one’s own image.

For many participants, self-styling also allowed them to communicate identities that are often misunderstood, stereotyped, or erased. Kirubel’s interview was particularly powerful in this regard. For instance, he explained that as a tall Black man, people often expected him to dress in a particular way, such as “street style” or like an “NBA player type of look.” Instead, he chose a shirt, tie, and overcoat to challenge those assumptions. He hoped to “shatter” any pre-judgments by presenting himself differently than expected.

Participants also used self-styling to communicate culture, disability pride, comfort needs, and personal joy demonstrating that identity agency is multidimensional.

Yuki chose an outfit connected to “a culture I am personally connected with,” highlighting clothing as a form of cultural belonging. Nora wore her power hockey uniform to show there is “strength and power in people with disabilities,” reframing

disability through pride rather than limitation. Likewise, Vikas emphasized loose clothing, adaptive fastenings, and his smart glasses, noting they made him feel “more confident,” revealing that accessibility and style were inseparable rather than oppositional.

In contrast, Rowan embraced bold aesthetics, describing “loud” outfits that intentionally drew attention, showing that agency could also mean claiming visibility rather than minimizing it.

Together, these accounts demonstrate that inclusive fashion is beyond placing diverse bodies on a runway. It allows individuals to shape their own representation. Self-styling mattered because it enabled participants to align identity, body, and public image in ways mainstream fashion spaces have often denied.

4.4 Theme Two: Embodied Confidence and Public Visibility

“Very difficult to be ignored when you’re in a wheelchair.” (Yuki, 2026).



Figure 51. Yuki’s Self-Styled Moment. Photographed by Jotam @litehour. (2026).

A second major theme across the interviews was embodied confidence, empowerment, and visibility where participants described the runway as a space that

transformed how they felt in their bodies and how they understood being seen by others.

Many participants entered the show feeling nervous or uncertain, yet left feeling proud, liberated, and affirmed. Jemuel explained that he was anxious beforehand, but afterward felt “so free” and “confident” realizing the experience “wasn’t bad” once he stepped onto the runway. Similarly, Kirubel described leaving the stage with a “rush of adrenaline” mixed with “happiness” and a sense of accomplishment after being vulnerable in front of an audience. These responses suggest that confidence was produced through participation itself, and not fixed beforehand.

Visibility became empowering when participants were met with encouragement rather than judgment. Audience applause and collective support played a crucial role in transforming fear into pride. It helped participants feel celebrated rather than scrutinized.

For disabled participants in particular, public visibility carried deeper social significance because it challenged histories of exclusion from fashion spaces. Nora described seeing herself and others on the runway as “very empowering,” adding that she was “rolling on the runway not just for myself, but to show others the possibilities of disabled lives.” Vikas similarly shared that walking in a fashion show in person made

him feel “more proud and more confident,” especially after previously only seeing such spaces on television.

Yuki noted that the most meaningful part of the event was meeting other disabled people and connecting with their community demonstrating that empowerment was also relational rather than purely individual.

Across participants, the runway became a symbolic site where marginalized bodies were not hidden, pitied, or tokenized, but celebrated for simply being who they are. These accounts reveal that inclusive visibility matters because being seen positively in public space can build confidence and expand who is imagined as belonging in fashion.

4.5 Theme Three: Tension and Negotiation in External Styling

“Collaboration between model and designer can elevate outfit” (Kirubel, 2026).



Figure 52, 53 & 54 Getting Ready Backstage. Photographs by Talulah Chan. (2026).

A third theme that emerged was tension and negotiation in external styling where participants reflected on the emotional complexity of wearing clothing chosen by someone else. In the pre-show interviews, many participants emphasized comfort, personal taste and the desire to represent themselves authentically suggesting that control over styling was already important before stepping onto the runway.

Post-show responses confirmed that while designer styling created opportunities for experimentation, it could also produce discomfort, uncertainty, or feelings of misalignment.

Zuva shared that walking in her own clothing felt “more natural and expressive,” whereas being styled by someone else was “uncomfortable at times” because it did not fully align with how he liked to portray himself. Similarly, Kirubel explained that his self-styled look felt more confident because he knew the image he wanted to present, while the designer’s outfit created “anxiety” and uneasiness because he had to surrender some control.

These accounts showcase clothing chosen by others can disrupt the connection between identity and appearance, especially when participants feel misunderstood or unable to communicate feedback.

At the same time, participants’ post-show reflections also revealed that external styling became a process of growth and collaboration. Kirubel noted that although the designer’s look was outside his comfort zone, he ultimately felt “liberated” after wearing something he never would have chosen himself. Rowan similarly stated that while they felt more stylistically confident in their own clothes, the second walk felt

easier physically because the first walk had allowed them to practice, and the styled look felt like “playing a different character.”

These reflections suggest that external styling sometimes enabled experimentation with new identities or forms of embodiment. Rather than a simple opposition between self-styling and designer styling, participants described a spectrum between autonomy and collaboration.

This theme highlights that inclusive fashion must move beyond imposing designer visions onto models and instead foster dialogue, consent and shared authorship.

4.6 Theme Four: Accessibility Beyond Physical Space

“I would like a certificate so I can do more fashion shows like Runway of Dreams in USA” (Vikas, 2026).



Figure 55. Vikas' Self-Styled Moment with Father. Photograph by Yang @mitoyager. (2026).

A fourth theme that emerged was accessibility beyond physical space where participants demonstrated that inclusion in fashion settings involves far more than ramps or wheelchair entry. In the pre-show interviews, several models already identified access as connected to preparation and emotional comfort. Vikas for example requested the opportunity to rehearse beforehand so he could “see or feel it

how it is," showing predictability and orientation were essential forms of access. He also emphasized the importance of having his father present, describing him as his "backbone," highlighting how support networks can be central to participation.

Post-show reflections further demonstrated that accessibility includes backstage comfort, communication and spaces that respect diverse bodily needs. Yuki would have preferred a "bigger changing area" and later noted that "a quiet and private space for lying down would also have been nice." These comments are significant because they draw attention to often-overlooked aspects of event design: rest, privacy, and the need for spaces where participants can regulate fatigue or discomfort.

Nora raised another key dimension of access by recommending closed captioning on the projected screen. Her feedback illustrates that communication accessibility must be considered alongside mobility access.

In contrast, Vikas reflected that the event felt "comfortable" and "best," reminding us that accessibility is experienced differently depending on individual needs. It is not a single feature but an ongoing practice of anticipating diverse ways individuals can fully participate as themselves.

4.7 Theme Five: Community Representation and Inclusive Futures

“I felt like I was the same as everyone” (Jemuel, 2026).



Figure 56. Final Waterfall. Photographed by Jotam @litehour. (2026).

Our final theme demonstrates where participants imagined fashion spaces that reflected everyday people, diverse bodies, and collective belonging rather than narrow industry ideals. Using both pre- and post-show interviews participants repeatedly challenged traditional ideas of who is considered “model-worthy” and instead

emphasized inclusion, authenticity, and visibility for communities often excluded from mainstream fashion.

Monika strongly articulated this perspective, stating, “We are all beautiful and should be able to model if we want to,” while also noting that “we are all unique and that is what makes us all so beautiful.” Her comments reject hierarchical beauty standards and reposition differences as valuable rather than deficient.

Similarly, Kirubel stated that he wanted to see “more real people in these shows,” including people of “all walks of life, all body shapes, sizes, differently abled people,” emphasizing that runways should reflect the actual diversity of society rather than a manufactured image of what a model is “supposed” to look like. These responses reveal a collective desire to move fashion away from exclusivity and toward social realism.

For our disabled models, community representation also meant challenging the historical invisibility and tokenization of disability in fashion. Nora expressed that she would love to see “more models with disabilities on mainstream runways,” noting that even in 2026 representation in “billboards, magazines, general media, and fashion is still limited.” She further stressed that disability should be represented in “empowering

and liberating” ways rather than through harmful narratives such as charity or “supercrip” stereotypes.

Yuki echoed this by stating they wanted to see “more different bodies and mobility aids because we just don’t have enough.” Vikas described the runway as “a place to be heard,” where “all type of disability people” could gain a platform and be recognized in the community. Everybody’s feedback collectively positions the runway not merely as a site of display, but as a social space where belonging can be publicly affirmed.

Reimagining the runway, therefore, means shifting fashion from elite spectacle toward community-centered representation accompanying local voices and diverse embodiments at its core.

4.7.1 Self-Styled Wals Versus Designer-Styled Walks



Figure 57 & 58. Zuva Gwata's Self Styled (left) & Designer Styled (right) walks.

Photographed by Yang (left image) @mitoyager & Jotam @litehour (right image). (2026).

4.7.1 Self-Styled Wals Versus Designer-Styled Walks



Figure 58 & 59. Monika Myers' Self Styled (left) & Designer Styled (right) walks.

Photographed by Yang (left image) @mitoyager & Jotam @litehour (right image). (2026).

4.7.1 Self-Styled Wals Versus Designer-Styled Walks



Figure 60 & 61. Vikas' Self Styled (left) & Designer Styled (right) moments.

Both Photographed by Jotam @litehour. (2026).

4.7.1 Self-Styled Wals Versus Designer-Styled Walks



Figure 62 & 63. Rowan's Self Styled (left) & Designer Styled (right) walks.

Both Photographed by Jotam @lighthouse. (2026).

4.8 Summary of Findings

The findings of this study reveal *Reimagining the Runway* was beyond a fashion show; it became a participatory social space where identity, embodiment, accessibility, and representation were actively intertwined. Across the pre- and post-interview data, participants consistently described fashion not as superficial appearance, but as something deeply connected to autonomy, belonging, and public visibility.

The five themes (identity agency through self-styling, embodied confidence and visibility, tension in external styling, accessibility beyond physical space, and community representation) collectively demonstrate that inclusive fashion must move beyond simply placing diverse bodies on a runway. True inclusion requires giving participants a voice, a choice, comfort, and authorship over how they are represented.

One of the most significant insights from the study was the contrast between pre-show expectations and post-show reflections. Before the event, many participants expressed uncertainty, nervousness, or practical concerns around styling and how they would be perceived. Yet after participating, many described feeling empowered, proud, liberated, and deeply affirmed. This shift suggests that inclusive creative spaces can produce meaningful emotional transformation when people are welcomed simply as they are. Participants who may have entered cautiously often left with increased confidence, new connections, and a sense of accomplishment.

Reimagining the Runway needed a place to shine for a variety of reasons.

Mainstream fashion continues to privilege narrow ideals of beauty, ability, race, and size leaving many communities underrepresented and/or misrepresented.

Participants repeatedly called for more disabled models, real bodies, mobility aids, racial diversity, and authentic stories in fashion spaces. Several participants noted that seeing wheelchair users or adaptive fashion on a runway was something they had never witnessed before. This absence is telling. *Reimagining the Runway* responded directly to that gap by creating a space where those historically excluded from fashion were centered rather than accommodated as an afterthought.

What makes this project especially meaningful is that it was not only asking “who belongs on the runway?” it asks “*who gets to define the runway?*” It says “you are welcome here, and you have the power to design your own runway experience.” They did just that and beyond.

Through self-styled looks, community vendors, and participant reflections, the event challenged conventional power structures in fashion and proposed a more relational human-centered alternative. It demonstrated that runways can be spaces of care, creativity, and collective empowerment rather than exclusivity.

In doing so, the project offers a compelling model for what the future of fashion can become, emphasizing it’s time to look at the bigger picture.

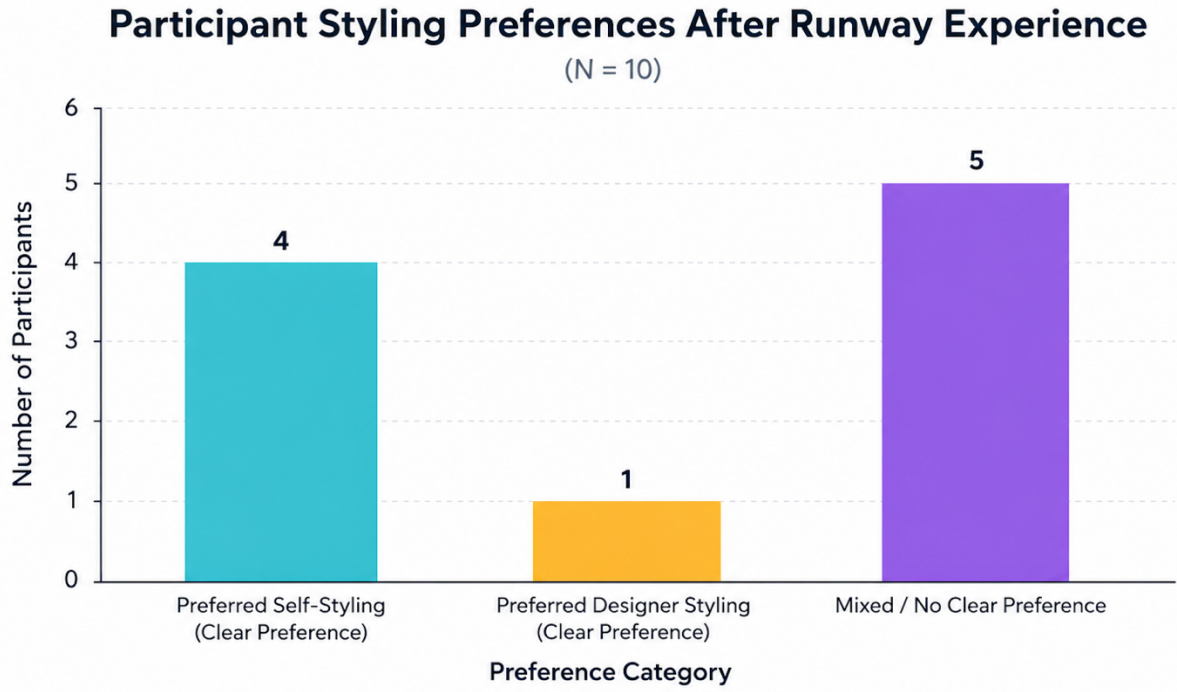
5. Discussion

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore how runway spaces might be reimagined through the lived perspectives of BIPOC and disabled participants. The findings suggest that fashion spaces are never only about clothing. They are also about power, visibility, identity, and belonging. *Reimagining the Runway* demonstrated that when participants are invited to shape the environment, styling, and presentation of their own bodies, the runway shifts from exclusion to a site of affirmation.

Across this data, participants described emotional change, increased confidence, and stronger feelings of connection after the event. They also identified ongoing barriers within mainstream fashion, including narrow beauty ideals, inaccessible environments, and limited control over representation.

The discussion below addresses each research question in relation to these findings.



Note. Based on post-interview data from 10 participants. Categories reflect participants who explicitly expressed a clear preference for self-styling, designer styling, or showed mixed / no clear preference.

Figure 64. The bar chart illustrates participant preferences for self-styling versus designer styling following their participation in Reimagining the Runway.

5.12. Designing From Lived Experience: Inclusion as Practice

(RQ1)

The first research question asked how the lived perspectives and needs of BIPOC and disabled models and designers might guide the redesign of runways and garments toward greater inclusion.

The findings show that participants offered practical and deeply informed design knowledge rooted in everyday experience. Their ideas extended beyond aesthetics and focused on what inclusion feels like in practice. Participants requested

wider spaces, softer lighting, room for wheelchairs, sensory consideration, flexible pacing, and multiple ways of entering or moving through the runway. Others emphasized adaptive garments, magnetic closures, and clothing that respected bodily autonomy.

These recommendations demonstrate that inclusion is best developed with people rather than for people. Participants did not ask to be inserted into existing fashion systems unchanged. They imagined entirely different systems built around dignity, access, and self-expression. Their perspectives reveal that those most excluded from fashion often hold the clearest insight into how it can improve.

5.13 Hidden Barriers in Fashion Spaces: How Exclusion Is Produced

(RQ2)

The second research question addresses how current fashion practices, organizational structures, and environments shape experiences of inclusion or exclusion.

COMMON THEMES IDENTIFIED ACROSS PARTICIPANT DATA






THEME	DESCRIPTION	KEY INSIGHTS FROM PARTICIPANTS	IMPACT
 Identity Agency Through Self-Styling	Participants expressed that choosing and styling their own outfits allowed them to express their authentic identity and feel like themselves.	<i>"Walking in my own styled outfit allowed me to feel visible."</i> – Zuva <i>"Only I know how I want to dress me."</i> – Yuki <i>"Self-styled outfit made me feel more confident."</i> – Kirubel	Self-styling increased confidence, comfort, and a sense of control over how participants were represented.
 Embodied Confidence and Visibility	Participants described feeling more confident, seen, and celebrated on the runway when they were supported and affirmed.	<i>"The experience was empowering."</i> – Zuva <i>"Audience cheering made me feel brave."</i> – Jemuel <i>"Felt powerful showing myself fully on the runway."</i> – Nora	The runway became a space for empowerment, visibility, and emotional transformation.
 Tension in External Styling	Some participants felt that designer styling did not align with their identity, leading to discomfort or feelings of misunderstanding.	<i>"Being styled was uncomfortable."</i> – Zuva <i>"Designer's choice gave me anxiety."</i> – Kirubel <i>"Felt somewhat misunderstood."</i> – Zuva	When styling was not participant-led, it led to identity misalignment and reduced confidence.
 Accessibility Beyond Physical Space	Participants highlighted needs beyond physical access, including sensory comfort, rest spaces, clear communication, and adequate facilities.	<i>"Overstimulated."</i> – Yuki <i>"Bigger changing area."</i> – Yuki <i>"Closed captioning would help."</i> – Nora <i>"Bigger stage so everyone can see."</i> – Jemuel	Inclusive fashion requires attention to sensory, communicative, and emotional accessibility.
 Community and Representation	Participants valued seeing diverse bodies and building connections within a supportive community.	<i>"Most meaningful was meeting other disabled people."</i> – Yuki <i>"Rare to see and experience."</i> – Kirubel <i>"More representation of different abilities."</i> – Zuva	Community connection and representation created belonging and affirmed participants' identities.

Figure 65. The table above highlights common themes emerging from pre- and post-interviews, supported by participant quotes that ground the findings in lived experience.

Participants described exclusion as something produced through many small and large systems. These included inaccessible backstage areas, limited changing space, bright lighting, narrow beauty standards, tokenistic representation, and the assumption that designers should hold final authority over styling decisions. Some participants also described being stared at in public, feeling judged, or feeling unseen within mainstream media.

These findings suggest that exclusion is not only physical. It is emotional, procedural, cultural, and symbolic. A runway may be technically accessible while still making participants feel anxious, rushed, objectified, or misrepresented. Similarly, representation may exist visually while lacking authenticity or power-sharing.

This study therefore supports a broader understanding of accessibility. Inclusion must address atmosphere, communication, preparation, respect, and control over self-presentation. Without these elements, diversity risks becoming performance rather than meaningful change.

5.14 When Models Become Co-Designers: Shifting Power on the Runway

(RQ3)

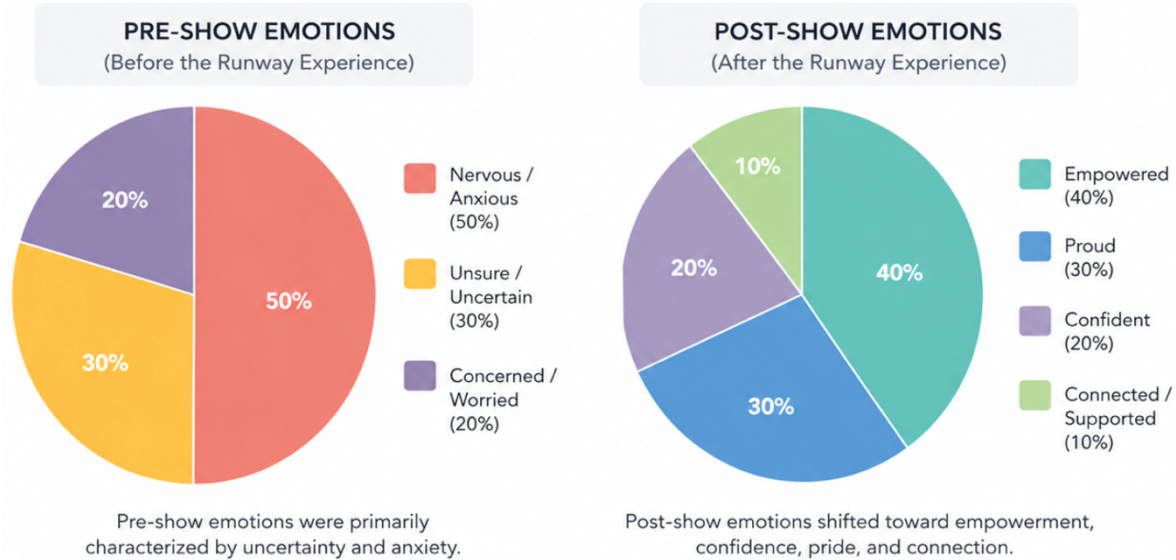
The third research question asked what possibilities emerge when BIPOC and disabled models become co-designers of the runway, styling, and presentation of their own bodies.

The findings strongly suggest that co-design changes both experience and power. Participants repeatedly described feeling more confident, comfortable, and authentic when walking in self-styled looks. Many noted that choosing their own clothing allowed them to feel seen as themselves rather than interpreted through someone else's lens. In contrast, externally styled looks sometimes created discomfort, anxiety, or identity misalignment.

Emotional Shift: Before vs. After the Runway Experience

Based on Participant Reflections (N = 10)

Participants described a clear emotional transformation after taking part in *Reimagining the Runway*.



Key Insight

The inclusive environment of *Reimagining the Runway* fostered emotional transformation, moving participants from uncertainty to empowerment and belonging.

Figure 66. The pie chart illustrates the emotional shifts experienced by participants in *Reimagining the Runway* with each percentage representing the proportion of participants who expressed a given emotional category.

This shift is significant because mainstream fashion often places creative authority in the hands of designers, producers and/ or institutions. In this project, participants were not passive bodies displaying someone else's vision. They became authors of their own image and contributors to the runway itself.

As an autoethnographic intervention, this project also reflects my own desire to question inherited fashion hierarchies. I wanted to flip the script by centering those

usually behind the scenes or excluded altogether. What emerged was not chaos or lack of professionalism. Rather, it was joy, care, creativity, and stronger representation. The study suggests that when power is shared, fashion does not lose value. It gains humanity.

5.15. Let's Hear From our Models: Comparing Runway Realities

"I had my hands in my pockets, didn't know what to do first walk" (Jemuel, 2026).



Figure 67 & 68. Jemuel's First (left) & Second (Right) walk. Photographed by Jotam @litehour. (2026).

Jemuel later reflected that, after experiencing how fun, vibrant, and encouraging the crowd was, he felt much more confident during his second walk and began dancing down the runway (**Figure 68, Second Walk**).

This experience highlights how strongly audience atmosphere, environment, and overall energy can influence a performer's confidence and expression. In traditional fashion shows I have participated in, we are often expected to maintain a

neutral expression with a typically quiet audience, as the focus is on presenting and “selling” the designer’s brand in a controlled and marketable way.

In contrast, *Reimagining the Runway* created a space where participants could define their own rules and fully embrace the moment without those constraints. The environment was lively, supportive, and filled with positive energy. Through my research, I observed that this had a clear impact on participants’ performances.



Figure 69 & 70. Kirubel’s First (left) & Second (Right) walk. Photographed by Jotam @litehour. (2026).

During their first walk, many were unsure of what to expect which affected their confidence. However, by the second walk, the cheerful and encouraging responses from the crowd helped them feel more at ease, resulting in greater confidence and even moments of spontaneous dancing.

This suggests that if the environment had been silent or less engaging, the participants' experiences/performances may have been significantly different.



Figure 71. (Photographed by John Fuzz @john_fuzz), Figure 72. (Photographed by Tony @tonysphotos416), & Figure 73. (Photographed by Frank J. @doitwithlight).

Delina walks in runway typically with a serious expression, reflecting the conventional expectation of neutral facial expressions within traditional fashion settings.

5.16 Reflexive Discussion: Visual Narrative, Disconnection, and Reimagining Space

Last summer term, I created a visual piece titled *Island of In-Between* in my *Inclusive Art, Design & Community* course taught by Herman Clark, which explored themes of identity, displacement, and the often-unspoken pressures of racial conformity. This work framed the self as existing within a liminal, in-between geography, emphasizing how visual storytelling can articulate internal and emotional states that are difficult to express through words alone.

I titled this piece “The Island of In-Between” because that’s exactly how I felt: stuck between who I was, who I thought I needed to be, and where I belonged, unsure where I fit.

Being a preteen is already an emotionally complex stage, but navigating that alongside racial isolation made the adjustment even more difficult.

In order to try and blend in, I began straightening my hair every morning using a flat iron, sometimes even a hot comb, damaging my natural texture in the process. I did it not for style, but out of a silent pressure to conform.

I believed that by changing parts of myself like my hair, my clothes, etc could help me find a sense of belonging.



Figure 74. Island of In-Between Poster. Own Work. (2025).

This perspective informed my approach to the runway as more than a performative space; rather, it became an embodied, intersectional narrative environment.

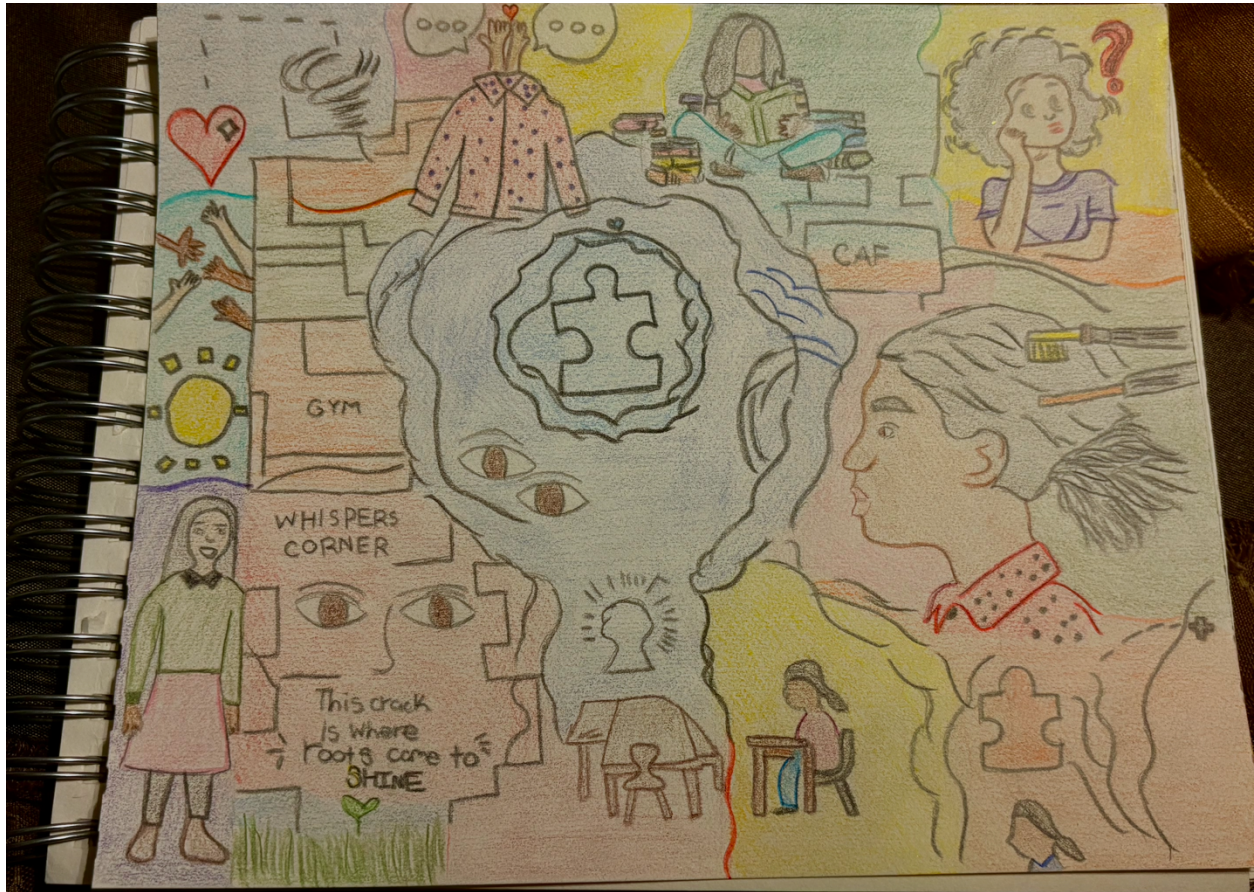


Figure 75. "The Unwelcome Map". Drawn from *Inclusive Design, Art, & Community* (2025) Course.

Drawing from this, I conceptualized the runway as a site that resists forcing individuals to "fit" predefined structures. This idea connects to another project, *Empty Chair*, which interrogates whether marginalized individuals are invited to occupy space (or are excluded from it) and why.



Figure 76. Rather than embracing my curls as a middle schooler, I carried the quiet belief that I didn't see them reflected around me, so mine too should remain hidden. (2014).



Figure 77. This figure illustrates the shift from concealing natural curls during early adolescence to later embracing and accepting them as part of personal identity and self-expression.

In this context, the “chair” becomes not merely a symbol of absence, but a site of historical and structural inquiry, as well as a space for imagining alternative, more inclusive futures.

Guided by these frameworks, I reimagined the runway through a co-design process with participants, positioning it as a space intentionally created for those who have historically been excluded. Participant feedback reinforced this intention, with one individual noting that the experience felt as though it was “designed for those who deserve it.” This response underscores the runway’s role as both an expressive platform and a call for change.

Ultimately, this work seeks to establish connection as its central thread, bringing individuals together to share their stories, identities, and experiences on a larger, more inclusive platform.

5.17 Embodying Agency Through Self-Styling: A Reflection on Carnival, Power, and Creative Liberation.

Having participating in runway shows, I became deeply familiar with the sense of glitz, glamour, and professional care that accompanies being styled and prepared backstage.

When I began organizing *Reimagining the Runway*, I intentionally sought to recreate this experience for my participants. To do so, I hired makeup artists and

stylists, ensuring that each individual felt supported, polished, and valued. This approach was rooted in my desire for participants to not only present themselves with confidence, but to experience the same level of dignity and aesthetic elevation that I had come to associate with professional fashion environments.

Personally, I have grown accustomed to designer-led styling contexts, where creative direction is externally guided and professionally executed. I am drawn to these settings for their polish and the opportunity they provide to experiment with diverse looks under expert direction. However, through this research, I have come to more critically understand an alternative perspective: for many participants (particularly new to modeling) the act of self-styling is not simply a preference, but an assertion of autonomy. The desire to maintain control over one's image, especially in unfamiliar or high-pressure environments, reflects a broader need for self-definition and agency.

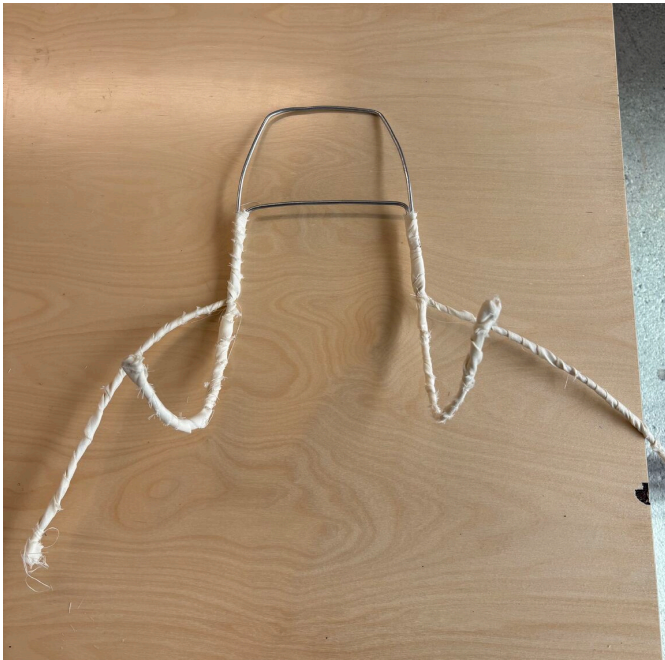


Figure 78 & 79. Costume Building. Photographed by Victoria. (2025).

This tension between external styling and self-styling resonates deeply with my own experience. During a summer course last year, *Carnival Architectonics* at OCAD University, I was invited into a radically different creative process. Tasked with designing and constructing a carnival costume from scratch, I confronted my lack of technical skills, particularly in sewing. Yet, through collaboration and experimentation, I produced a garment that became entirely my own.



Figure 80 & 81. Preparation & Parade Day Photographed by Emmy (left image) and Victoria (right image). (2025).

This process was not merely technical but profoundly transformative. Carnival, grounded in the historical traditions of post-emancipation Afro-Caribbean communities, has long functioned as a site of resistance, storytelling, and cultural affirmation.

Engaging in this lineage through the act of making allowed me to experience firsthand the emancipatory potential of creative expression. Incorporating the red,

blue, and green of my Eritrean heritage into my design, I translated identity into material and movement. Self-presentation became inseparable from selfhood.



Figure 82 Eritrean Flag. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/flag-of-Eritrea> Figure 83. Own Image.

Walking in the final parade evoked a sense of liberation distinct from any designer-styled experience. It was not only the visibility that felt empowering, but the authorship and knowledge that I had shaped how I was seen.



Figure 84. Parade Day. Marching Through Butterfield Park. Photographed by Victoria. (2025).



Figure 85. Parade Day. Marching Through Butterfield Park. Photographed by Victoria. (2025).

This moment illuminated a critical insight: while professional styling can elevate and support, self-styling can transform.

It offers participants a powerful means of reclaiming narrative, embodying identity, and engaging fashion as a political act. Through this research, I recognize that both modes of styling hold special value.



Figure 86. Parade Day. Marching Through Butterfield Park. Photographed by Victoria. (2025).

5.18 Reclaiming the Crown: Hair, Identity, and the Politics of Visibility in *Reimagining the Runway*

Within *Reimagining the Runway*, the inclusion of a spoken word performance by Enitan Bello, titled “My Hair,” became a pivotal moment of reflexive engagement, both for the audience and for myself as curator and participant. Her piece interrogates the assumed neutrality of hair, reframing it instead as a site of historical inscription and cultural tension.



Figure 87. Enitan's Poetry. Photographed by Yang @mitoyager. (2026).

Her provocation, that “my hair was never just my hair,” lingers as both a poetic assertion and a critical lens through which I reconsider my own lived experiences.

In curating this segment, I sought to invite a moment of pause and introspection. Hair, often dismissed as aesthetic or superficial, emerges here as a powerful medium through which identity is negotiated and expressed. Bello’s performance gestures toward the ways in which language, institutions, and societal norms impose meanings onto Black hair constructing it as excessive, unkempt, or in need of control.

These narratives are not abstract; they echo deeply within my own upbringing. I was repeatedly told that my hair was “too much,” too loud, too unruly. It was something to be managed, subdued, or altered to fit within an unspoken standard.

This internalization of external critique shaped my early relationship with self presentation. Instructions to slick it back, tie it down, or chemically alter it were framed as necessary acts of refinement.

Yet, through my evolving engagement with modeling and creative direction, I have begun to resist these prescriptions, not as an act of defiance alone, but as a reclamation of agency. My decision to center hair within the show (both visually and thematic) reflects this shift.



Figure 88, 89, and 90. Valentine's Day, Spring & Yorkville Hair Shoot. Photographed by Shantel. (2025).

I do not position this as retaliation, but rather as articulation. Through the runway I assert that hair is not merely an accessory to identity but an extension of it, capable of carrying memory and true intentions.

To ask, as Bello does, *“whose standards do we speak of?”* (Bello, 2026) is to disrupt the assumed universality of beauty norms and to challenge the authority that defines them. In this context, hairstyling becomes a form of artistry, one that traverses texture, form, and cultural significance.

This message holds particular urgency for those who have yet to encounter affirming representations of themselves. Hair, in this sense, is a form of expression to be made visible on one’s own terms; aiming to foreground hair as dynamic and unapologetically present.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the show was one of the most eye-opening experiences.

I am honoured to have had the models who were brave enough to go out of their way and be part of a revolutionary study that has rarely been explored in this way. Giving others the agency to design their own experience and to participate in something so vulnerable was deeply meaningful. Their willingness to step forward, be seen, and trust the process speaks volumes about who they are and where we are heading through this research.



Figure 91. Crowd Standing for Closing Act. (2026).

Figure 92. Stylist helping model Monika Myers.
Photographed by Krish @krisphotoh.ca

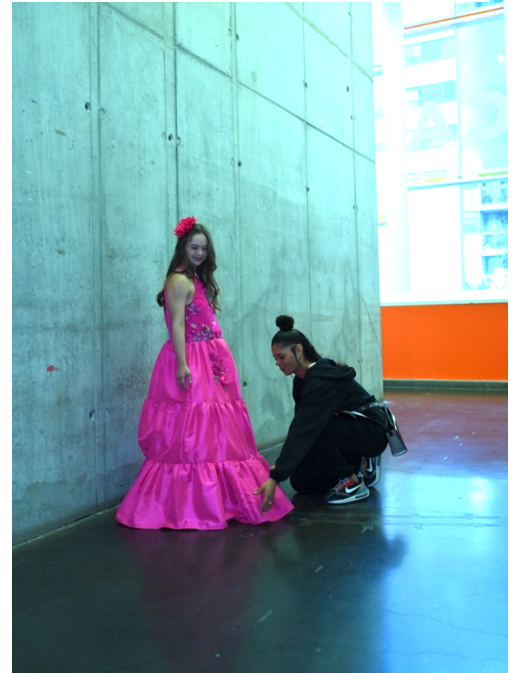


Figure 94. Delina speech. Photographed by April
@arpitdoesphoto



Figure 93. Wonderful support from some old friends. Photographed by Arpit
@arpitdoesphoto



Figure 95. Fan of lights
from crowd. (2026).



Figure 96 & 97. Post-Show Smiles. Photographed by Jotam @lighthouse. (2026).

As a result, my findings conclude why shows like this must continue to happen. The impact of the audience, the power of choice, and the ability to control how one is represented all play a major role in how people are seen on stage and how they see themselves afterward.

What this project revealed is that representation is never just about visibility. It is about dignity. It is about being invited into spaces that once felt closed and being met with celebration instead of judgment. Shifting from being observed to being

understood. When participants were given authorship over their clothing, movement, and presence, many described feeling confident, proud, and free.

This study also demonstrated that fashion spaces can no longer afford to remain attached to narrow ideals of beauty, ability, race, gender, and body type. The runway has long acted as a gatekeeper of who is considered desirable, valuable, or worthy of attention.

Figure 98. (Vanessa, left) & Figure 99. (Monika, right). Photographed by Jotam @litehour. (2026).



Reimagining the Runway challenged that tradition by proving that real people, real stories, mobility aids, diverse bodies, and underrepresented identities do not weaken

fashion. They strengthen it. They bring humanity back into an industry that too often privileges image over lived experience.



Figure 100. Photographed by Omolegho @omo.film & Figure 101. Photographed by Jotam @litehour. (2026).

The audience response further confirmed this need. Cheering, encouragement, and emotional support became part of the show itself. For some, it was the first time seeing people who looked like them or moved like them represented in that kind of public spotlight. That matters. Seeing possibility can transform self-belief.



Figure 102. Delina's Explanation of Study. Photographed by Peter (2026).

As both researcher and model, this project changed me as well. It reminded me that design has the power to heal, to question systems, and to build new futures. It showed me that when communities are trusted as co-designers rather than passive subjects, they create something far richer than what institutions often imagine alone.



Figure 103. A Big Thank You. Models, Stylists, Designers on stage for massively deserved recognition.

Reimagining the Runway concludes. Photographed by Jotam @litehour. (2026).

Ultimately, this thesis argues that more shows like this are not optional. They are necessary for the young person who has never seen themselves reflected on a stage. For the disabled model who has been treated as an exception. Necessary for BIPOC creatives whose talent has existed without equal recognition. Necessary for an industry in urgent need of change.

The future of fashion must be accessible, collaborative, and honest. It must make room for many ways of moving, being, and simply belonging. This show was one beginning.

The runway has been reimagined.

Now, it must be rebuilt.

6.1 Future Study

While *Reimagining the Runway* demonstrated the transformative potential of participant-led and inclusive fashion spaces, it also revealed important areas for future growth. This study should be understood not as a finished model, but as an opening framework that can be scaled through greater resources, partnerships, and institutional support.

A key priority for future iterations would be securing technical infrastructure well in advance of the event. Earlier access to equipment, rehearsals, and production planning would allow for a smoother and more fully supported participant experience on show day. This includes obtaining reliable audio systems, projection screens, televisions, captioning tools, screen reader compatibility, interpreters, and other assistive technologies that ensure no participant or audience member is left behind. Accessibility must be embedded from the beginning.

Future studies would also benefit from stronger financial backing through sponsorships, grants, and partnerships with larger institutions. Limited funding shaped

what was possible within the present study. With increased resources, the runway could be hosted in a larger and more adaptable venue with spacious backstage areas, rest zones, sensory friendly environments, improved mobility access, and professional production support.

Another important direction would involve deeper collaboration with community organizations, disability advocates, BIPOC creatives, educational institutions, and industry leaders. Expanding the network of collaborators would allow the project to reach more participants, include wider forms of expertise, and create sustainable pathways for future events.

Given more time, future research could also include multiple runway cycles, longitudinal interviews, and participant follow-up to examine how experiences self-representation evolve over time. What begins as one empowering moment on a runway may continue shaping identity, career aspirations, and community connection long after the show ends.

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Appendix A: Data Collection Instrument

This study uses a flexible, participant-led, and co-design-based data collection approach grounded in embodied experience, identity, and relational fashion practices. As supplementary material, this section outlines the instruments used to gather qualitative data through co-design activities, semi-structured interviews, and reflective debriefs.

All participants are informed that participation is voluntary. They may skip questions, pause, or withdraw at any point without consequence. Participants are also reminded not to disclose information that may place them at emotional, social, or professional risk. The researcher will pause discussions if discomfort arises and will prioritize participant autonomy in determining the depth and direction of engagement.

1. Data Collection Structure

Data is collected through three primary instruments:

1. Low-fidelity runway prototyping (co-design activity)
2. Semi-structured interviews (pre- and post-show)
3. Facilitated co-design sessions and debrief discussions

2. Low-Fidelity Runway Prototyping (Co-Design Activity)

Participants create a visual or sketched representation of their ideal runway experience prior to the fashion show.

Participants design:

- Runway layout and movement flow
- Lighting, sound, and atmosphere
- Styling approach and designer presence
- Accessibility and sensory needs

Procedure:

Participants complete prototypes individually or in a group setting (in-person at OCAD University or via Zoom if needed). Sketches and visual materials are used as qualitative data and discussion prompts.

Purpose:

To position participants as primary designers of the runway experience, ensuring the event is shaped by lived experience, identity, and access needs.

3. Semi-Structured Interviews (Pre-Show & Post-Show)

Interviews are conducted in person or virtually. Participants may choose audio, video, or note-based documentation.

3.1 Pre-Show Interview**Focus:**

- Fashion and self-expression
- Identity and clothing choices
- Representation and visibility
- Comfort, access, and expectations

Purpose:

To document lived experience and inform co-design development.

3.2 Post-Show Interview**Focus:**

- Emotional and reflective responses
- Representation and embodiment on the runway
- Accessibility and environment evaluation
- Identity and belonging outcomes

Purpose:

To capture participant reflections following runway participation.

4. Two-Walk Design Debrief

Participants reflect on:

- A self-styled runway walk
- A designer-styled runway walk

Focus:

- Embodiment and emotional experience
- Agency and interpretation
- Comfort, visibility, and preference
- Power dynamics in styling and representation

5. Facilitated Co-Design Sessions (Group)

Participants engage in guided discussion and collaborative design based on interviews and prototypes.

Activities include:

- Sharing and discussing runway sketches
- Exploring accessibility and styling needs
- Discussing consent and embodiment in fashion
- Imagining future inclusive runway systems

Data is recorded through researcher field notes and participant explanations of design choices.

6. Co-Design Session Procedure Overview

Participants collaboratively reimagine the runway as active designers.

Researcher Role: Facilitator, curator of care, and documenter.

Session Flow:

- **Consent & Introduction:** Reaffirm voluntary participation and introduce co-design framing
- **Dialogue Prompts:** Identity, comfort, accessibility, emotional experience, and power dynamics
- **Prototype Creation:** Low-fidelity runway sketches (lighting, sound, styling, sensory design)
- **Reflection Sharing:** Participants explain design intentions and embodied reasoning
- **Styling Discussion:** Consent, cultural clothing, mobility, and designer interpretation
- **Future Visioning:** Participants imagine future inclusive runway systems

7. Interview Instruments (Summary)

Pre-Show Interview Topics

- Fashion and identity
- Clothing and self-expression
- Representation and media visibility
- Expectations and accessibility needs

Post-Show Interview Topics

- Emotional and embodied reflections
- Representation on the runway
- Accessibility and environment evaluation
- Future improvements and design vision

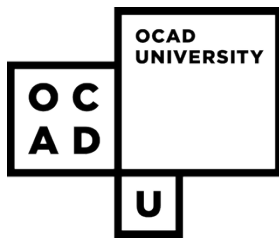
Two-Walk Debrief Topics

- Self-styled vs designer-styled embodiment
- Emotional and physical experience differences
- Agency, interpretation, and comfort
- Preferred mode of representation

Appendix B: Email Invitation

This email serves as an invitation to participate in a Master's Research Project (MRP) conducted within the Inclusive Design (INCD) program at OCAD University.

Participation is entirely voluntary and may involve interviews, co-design activities, and involvement in a participatory runway presentation.



Dear Participant,

I am writing to invite you to take part in a research study that is being conducted as part of my Master's Research Project (MRP) in the Inclusive Design (INCD) program at OCAD University.

My MRP explores the ongoing exclusion of disabled and IBIPOC models in fashion and runway spaces, which is often reinforced by the design of garments and runways that do not accommodate diverse bodies and identities.

Drawing from my own lived experience as a model, designer, and researcher within the fashion industry, this study examines how runway systems can shift when participants are positioned not only as models, but as co-designers of the runway itself.

Guided by participants' lived experiences, this research examines what current runway practices afford

and where they fail, to collaboratively identify more inclusive, dignified, and equitable design approaches that can inform future fashion practices.

And this is where you come in.

If you choose to participate, you would be invited to take part in all stages of the study, which include:

- A co-design process where you create a low-fidelity sketch or prototype of your ideal runway (including atmosphere, music, lighting, pacing, and accessibility considerations).
- A pre-show interview focused on fashion, identity, representation, expectations, and access needs.
- Participation in the fashion show, including a self-styled walk and, if applicable, a designer-styled walk.
- A post-show interview and debrief reflecting on your experience, emotions, agency, and the runway environment.

All interviews will be conducted in person whenever possible, or virtually if preferred. You will be able to choose whether you are comfortable with audio recording, video recording, or note-taking only, and your preferences will be respected at every stage.

If you are interested in learning more, or would like to receive the full information and consent form, please feel free to contact me. There is absolutely no obligation to participate, and you are welcome to take as much time as you need to decide.

Thank you for considering this invitation.

Warm regards,

Delina Yohannes

Master's Research Project Candidate

Inclusive Design (INCD)

OCAD University

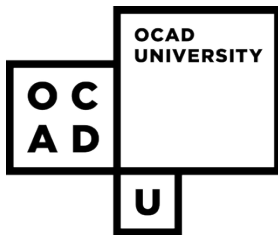
yohannesd@ocadu.ca

Appendix C: Consent Form

This consent form outlines participation in a Master's Research Project at OCAD University titled *Reimagining the Runway: Care, Co-Creation, and the Joyful Disruption of Racism and Ableism in Fashion*.

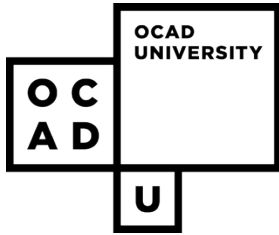
It explains the purpose of the study, what participation involves across interviews, co-design activities, and runway participation, as well as how data will be collected and used.

By signing this form, participants acknowledge that their involvement is voluntary and may be withdrawn within the outlined timeframe without consequence.



Delina Yohannes' Master's Research Project

Project Title: *Reimagining the Runway: Care, Co-Creation, and the Joyful Disruption of Racism and Ableism in Fashion*
Faculty of Design, OCAD University
Contact: yohannesd@ocadu.ca



Study Overview

You are invited to participate in a Master's Research Project (MRP) at OCAD University. This study involves a participatory fashion show, interviews, and co-design activities. Participation is grounded in care-based, ethical, and collaborative research practices that prioritize consent, safety, and participant agency throughout all stages.

Purpose of the Study

This research examines the exclusion of disabled and BIPOC models in fashion and runway spaces, particularly how garment and runway design can limit representation. The study seeks to collaboratively explore more inclusive, accessible, and equitable design approaches informed by lived experience.

What Participation Involves

If you choose to participate, you will be involved in the following:

1. Interview & Reflection

- Semi-structured interview about identity, embodiment, access needs, and fashion experience
- Conducted in-person or virtually
- Audio-recorded only with consent

2. Co-Design Activities

- Creation of runway sketches or visual concepts (paper or digital)

- Group discussion on runway design elements (e.g., accessibility, lighting, sound, pacing, atmosphere)

3. Runway Participation

- Participation in a fashion runway presentation (one or two walks)
- May include self-styling and/or designer-styled looks
- Accommodations and boundaries will be confirmed in advance

4. Post-Show Debrief

- Reflective interview on experience, accessibility, agency, and representation

You may skip questions, pause, or withdraw at any time.

Time Commitment

Participation will occur between February and April.

Total involvement is expected to be under 10 hours, depending on participant preference and availability.

Voluntary Participation & Withdrawal

Participation is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw without penalty within four (4) weeks of the start of data collection (February).

If withdrawal occurs within this period:

- All related data (audio, notes, visuals) will be deleted
- Your contributions will not be included in the study

After four weeks:

- Data may already be integrated into anonymized analysis and cannot be fully removed
-

Risks and Benefits

Risks are minimal but may include emotional discomfort when reflecting on identity, embodiment, or representation. Social visibility within a small creative community may also be a consideration.

There are no guaranteed personal benefits; however, participation may contribute to broader discussions on inclusive fashion design and representation.

Confidentiality

All data will be securely stored on OCAD University–approved, password-protected systems with two-factor authentication. Only the researcher will have access.

Data will be retained for one (1) year and then securely deleted.

Due to the public nature of a fashion show, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed. Participants may choose how they are identified:

- Full name
 - Pseudonym
 - Anonymous
-

Data Collected May Include

- Audio recordings (if consented)
- Interview notes
- Sketches and visual materials
- Reflections and participant feedback

Participants may review and request edits to their contributions prior to final submission.

Consent Statement

By signing below, I confirm that I understand the nature of this study and agree to participate.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

I consent to participate in this study

Attribution Preference

I consent to being identified by name

I prefer to remain anonymous

Audio Recording Consent

I consent to audio recording

I do not consent to audio recording (notes only will be taken instead)

Appendix D: Model's Song Choices & Projections

This appendix documents each model's selected music and accompanying visual projection themes for their runway moment. These choices were collaboratively curated to reflect individual identity, narrative and embodied expression within the show environment.

Model: Monika Myers

 **Song:** *Flowers* – Miley Cyrus

 **Projection Theme:** Flowers

Model: Jemuel Taylor

Songs:

- *I OBJECT (Clean)* – Daddy Phat Snaps
- *IDFWU (Clean)* – J. Cole

 **Projection Theme:** Graffiti

Model: Zuva Gwata

Songs:

- *Chiremerera* – Jah Prayzah
- Additional track (YouTube link pending confirmation)

 **Projection Theme:** Fire

Model: Tafara Gwata

🎵 Songs:

- *Say That (Clean)* – Destroy Lonely
- *Jumanji (Clean)* – Destroy Lonely

🎮 Projection Theme: Explosion

Model: Amy Lockwood

🎵 Song: *Meek* – Fabolous

🎮 Projection Theme: Beach Waves

Model: Yuki

🎵 Song: *Watashi no Ichiban Kawaiitokoro* – Fruits Zipper


🎮 Projection Theme: Cherry Blossoms

Model: Vanessa Leu


🎵 Songs:

- *Pink & White* – Frank Ocean

- Killah – Lady Gaga

 **Projection Theme:** Floral imagery (photographs of flowers taken and designed for her brand)

Model: Rowan Abraham

 **Song:** Any selected track


 **Projection Theme:** Jellyfish

Model: Kirubel

 **Song:** Superstar – Lupe Fiasco

 **Projection Theme:** Busy downtown street (urban movement)

Model: Ariam Ftiwi

 **Song:** *Baby* – Justin Bieber


 **Projection Theme:** Eritrean flag

Model: Vikas


 **Songs:**


- *Everybody (Backstreet's Back)* – Backstreet Boys

- *Espresso* – Sabrina Carpenter

 **Projection Theme:** Colourful polka dots

Model: Nora

 **Song:** Piece of You – Shawn Mendes

 **Projection Theme:** Powerhockey team identity (representing intersectionality within disabled communities)

Appendix E: Participant Acknowledgements

This appendix recognizes the students who participated in Reimagining the Runway.

These performance include the models, designers, signers, and poetry contributors.

Their participation was central to the development and realization of this project, offering their creativity, embodied knowledge, and artistic expression to collectively reimagine the runway.



Appendix F: "My Hair" by Enitan Bello

This appendix includes a spoken word piece performed by Enitan Bello during *Reimagining the Runway*. The work explores themes of identity, embodiment, and resistance, critically engaging with societal standards imposed on Black hair and the internalization of colonial and capitalist narratives.

As part of the runway' multi-sensory format, this performance contributed to the project's commitment to centering lived experience, cultural expression, and narrative agency within fashion spaces.

My Hair

By Enitan Bello

...movement - a change or development.

My hair was never just my hair

maybe it belonged to a little one from a time before the world I know now

but today, it isn't mine, just like it wasn't yesterday, or the day before that

My hair, my movement

Our hair, our movement

My hair's reality is not entangled with a movement because it is a union born of mutual desire,

but rather a product of harsh necessity

It is not mine, because what could've been just hair, no longer has such a privilege

It is not as it is with others

My hair was stolen from me

Given names it did not bear

Written into stories it knew nothing of

Bathed with lies and forced to be the core of every waking joke

Prepackaged as a burden so capitalism thrives from the insecurity, they've neatly curated and stored inside of me

Hours spent in the beauty supply store, to stock on products for a hair that grows not from my scalp,

but from a dark place that sells us tales of protective hairstyles

*And if I could speak to the hair I protect, it would tell stories about a light so strong
and blinding
only to conclude that it was all just fiction.*

*Our hair, our movement
Fueled by the hatred of a mind miles apart
A mind that invaded, stole, and destroyed*

*So when we say today, my hair doesn't fit my face, my hair is childish, my hair is tough,
my hair is messy
We utter words that come from a mind that isn't ours
To hold thoughts that were never yours to begin with
To internalise them and nurture them is a true sadness that many still struggle to
understand*

*Institutions demand we cut it, it is too hard to deal with, too tough to handle, too crazy
This language tells a story that already presented the default as anything but ours*

*When we think, and we say, and sometimes we do the saying before the thinking,
We must ask ourselves, what standard do we speak of?
Tough, as opposed to what
Messy, as opposed to what
Childish, as opposed to what*

*To say these things, is to assume that there is already a criterion, one that dictates to us
what is right and what is to be expected*

*So when our hair doesn't dance the way society demands, do we then say that we are
wrong, that it is wrong
Whose standards do we speak of?*

*My hair does not drop, it may if it wants to, but it lives, and so it grows out, and it
reaches for the sky
My hair will shrink, it decides when it wants to be full, and when it wants to cuddle a bit
closer to home*

*What is childish about the hair that comes from my scalp, what is rough about the coils
that live on my head,
What is crazy about a part of me that needs no one's permission to make itself seen.*

There is no default, only a lie, and you must first begin living the truth, to understand that you are the truth.

Appendix G: Research Ethics Board (REB) Approval

This appendix includes documentation of Research Ethics Board (REB) approval obtained through OCAD University.

REB approval is required for research involving human participants to ensure that all procedures adhere to established ethical standards, including informed consent, confidentiality, and participant well-being. The review process evaluates potential risks, data collection methods, and researcher responsibilities to protect participants and uphold the integrity of the research. Approval of this study confirms that it meets institutional and national ethical guidelines for conducting research with human participants.

Dear Susan Dr. Ashdown and Delina Yohannes,

The Research Ethics Board has conducted a delegated board review of your application titled 'Reimagining the Runway: Care, Co-Creation, and the Joyful Disruption of Racism and Ableism in Fashion.'. Your application has been approved. You may begin the proposed research. This

Figure 104. Microsoft Outlook. OCAD University. (2026).