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Rare fashion—Research report on art-based public welfare advocacy practices of visually impaired youth

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Abstract. Within contemporary public-welfare communication, visually-impaired youth are frequently confined to stereotyped labels of vulnerability and passivity, while their aesthetic needs and willingness for self-expression are largely ignored. Taking the "Rare Fashion" public-welfare practice initiated by Team Xiaoyin as the research case, this paper adopts whole-process participant observation, in-depth interviews and questionnaire survey to analyze the defects of traditional charity narratives and the "aesthetic invisibility" suffered by visually-impaired youth. The study sorts out the project's design logic, implementation procedures and practical effects, and summarizes its existing limitations. Findings show that art-driven inclusive fashion can transform visually-impaired young people from passive recipients of charity into active subjects of discourse. Fashion and aesthetic appreciation are not exclusive privileges for sighted groups. This youth-led practice provides practical references for barrier-free aesthetics and innovative public-welfare communication.

Keywords: visually-impaired youth, rare fashion, inclusive aesthetics, art-based public welfare, stereotype dismantling

1. Introduction

With the evolution of inclusive public-welfare philosophies, societal concern for disabled communities has gradually shifted from material-oriented support toward spiritual respect and social inclusion. Nevertheless, representations of visually-impaired people across mass-media outputs, short-video content and traditional public-welfare events remain highly homogenized. Most public-welfare productions tend to amplify hardships, deficiencies and helplessness, attracting public attention and online traffic via tragic narratives. Such practices perpetuate one-sided public perceptions of visually-impaired individuals over time.

Traditional disability charity has long relied on pity-oriented storytelling, which easily solidifies social stigmatization and limits the self-development space of minority groups [1]. Art and fashion, by contrast, have proven effective tools to reshape public cognition and empower marginalized youth through aesthetic expression [2]. Society is trapped in ocularcentric prejudice, which presupposes that aesthetic experience must rely on visual perception [3].

Against this social backdrop, visually-impaired young people's demands for aesthetic fulfillment, self-presentation and emotional articulation have been chronically neglected. Society widely assumes that visually-impaired persons cannot perceive beauty, comprehend fashion or engage in artistic creation.

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Consequently, this demographic is largely excluded from fashion and artistic systems, giving rise to an "invisible deprivation of aesthetics".

The public-welfare practice carried out by Team Xiaoyin is built upon the innovative concept of "Rare Fashion". Breaking free from conventional charitable frameworks, it rejects sensational depictions of suffering, sympathy-seeking strategies and the exhibition of physical limitations. Rooted in one visually-impaired young woman's genuine life story, personal aesthetic preferences and growth trajectory, the project constructs exclusive fashion expressions for visually-impaired communities via costume styling, stage performances, narrative storytelling and on-site advocacy. It invites the public to reassess the diverse identities of visually-impaired youth.

This research bears practical significance: it breaks rigid narratives entrenched in traditional public-welfare work and explores new avenues where art and fashion empower minority voices. It delivers authentic, actionable and referential practical cases for inclusive fashion, barrier-free aesthetics and youth-led public-welfare communication.

2. Research background and status-quo analysis

The vast majority of existing public-welfare outreach targeting visually-impaired communities suffers from monotonous storylines, fixed perspectives and partial depictions. Conventional charity often frames visually-impaired persons as passive, powerless figures waiting to be saved. Communications overwhelmingly centre on their struggles in daily life, mobility constraints and survival-related hardships.

While such narratives can swiftly mobilize public goodwill and secure donation resources, they generate long-term adverse consequences. Constant exposure to tragic public-welfare messaging solidifies a biased mindset among the public: visual impairment equals vulnerability, imperfection and dependency. The public only notices perceived "deficits", overlooking individuals' personalities, hobbies, talents, aesthetic pursuits and aspirations.

Modern fashion systems are heavily sight-dependent. Garment displays, aesthetic judgements and runway presentations revolve fundamentally around "seeing". Mainstream fashion industry has constructed structural barriers that keep visually-impaired participants outside fashion discourse [4]. Society generally takes for granted that fashion exists for visual consumption; only sighted people are qualified for aesthetic appreciation, outfit coordination, runway performance and creative production. As a result, visually-impaired groups are completely sidelined from the fashion sphere. Few members of the public envision that visually-impaired youth may cultivate dressing preferences, stylistic attitudes and pursuits of self-image. Even without visual sight, blind individuals negotiate self-identity and normalcy through appearance management based on tactile and bodily sensation [5]. Tactile, auditory and somatic sensations are rarely acknowledged as foundations for complete, sophisticated and distinctive aesthetic systems.

Compared with material hardships, contemporary visually-impaired youth grapple more with the exclusion in aesthetic and identity expression. They hope to be seen as independent individuals with unique personalities and preferences, rather than merely as a group requiring assistance. This is the core starting point of the Rare Fashion project.

3. Research methods

This study uses three main research methods: participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and questionnaire survey.

First, participant observation. The research team joined the whole preparation and implementation process of the Rare Fashion project. We recorded the design of costumes, rehearsal of runway shows, and on-site feedback from audiences, to observe how visually impaired participants understood and expressed their own fashion ideas.

Second, semi-structured in-depth interviews. We interviewed visually impaired young participants, project organizers and some audience members. The interview topics covered their understanding of beauty, feelings about the fashion show, and changes in public perception after watching the activity.

Third, questionnaire survey. Questionnaires were distributed to audiences before and after the activity. We collected data to compare changes in their understanding of visually impaired groups and measured whether the activity helped reduce stereotypes.

4. Project implementation and findings

The Rare Fashion project does not focus on showing suffering. Instead, it takes the personal story of a visually impaired young girl as the core. The design of clothing combines tactile texture, comfortable cutting and personal preferences, following user-centered garment design principles for visually-impaired end-users [6]. The runway performance uses voice description, tactile experience and body expression, not only visual display.

From the interview and questionnaire results, we found two major changes. First, for visually impaired young participants, this project offered them a chance to express themselves. They could show their personality and aesthetic preferences, instead of being described by others. Second, for the audience, most respondents changed their previous fixed impression. They realized that beauty is not only about vision, and visually impaired people also have independent aesthetic needs.

However, the project also has limitations. The scale of this activity is small, and the influence is limited to a local range. In addition, the production cost of customized clothing is relatively high, which makes it hard to replicate rapidly in more regions.

5. Conclusion

Traditional charity communication often uses pity as the core, which easily locks visually impaired groups into the identity of "the weak". The Rare Fashion project explores an alternative path: using fashion and art to build inclusive aesthetics.

This study proves that fashion is not only for visual enjoyment. Tactile sense, sound and physical feeling can also become the carrier of aesthetic expression. Disabled-centered sensory perspectives can enrich the connotation of fashion aesthetics [7]. Art-driven public welfare can turn minority groups from passive recipients into active speakers.

This youth practice provides a usable reference for barrier-free art and innovative public welfare. In the future, similar inclusive fashion activities can be promoted with lower cost, to help more people recognize the diverse aesthetic needs of disabled youth.

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