CHALLENGES VISUALLY IMPAIRED STUDENTS FACE IN ACQUIRING FASHION SKILLS: A CASE STUDY AMONG VISUALLY IMPAIRED TRAINING INSTITUTIONS IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT
Purpose: This study explored the challenges visually impaired (VI) students face concerning fashion skill acquisition.
Design/Methodology/Approach: The research design was based on qualitative. The combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques was chosen to ensure a diverse participant pool, capturing a range of perspectives on what visually impaired students face concerning fashion skill acquisition. Thematic analysis was employed to uncover patterns and themes, contributing to a rich understanding of the subject matter.
Findings: The findings revealed that the visually impaired are challenged by barriers to enrolment in fashion programmes, the cost-intensive nature of training, lack of sight, lack of skilled teachers and perceptions about Students with Visual Impairments (SVI) in Fashion. The study initiates further stakeholder discussions regarding designing a simplified inclusive curriculum to accommodate individuals with visually impaired and interested in enrolling on fashion courses.
The Research Limitation: Purposive and snowball sampling techniques may introduce selection bias, as participants are recruited based on specific criteria and through referrals. This may result in a sample that is more inclined to share similar perspectives, potentially overlooking the diversity of experiences within the visually impaired student community.
Practical Implication: Implementation of these practical measures can contribute to breaking down barriers and ensuring equal access to opportunities in the field of fashion for all students, regardless of visual ability.
Social Implication: Inclusive fashion education for the visually impaired has the potential of developing such individuals socially and economically thereby relieving the government of potential financial burden and reducing the social exclusion that the visually impaired experience.
Originality/ value: The novelty of studying visually impaired students regarding fashion skill acquisition lies in its potential to uncover unique challenges, innovative solutions, and opportunities for inclusivity in education and vocational training.
Keywords: Challenges, fashion, fashion skill, skill acquisition, visually impaired.

INTRODUCTION

An educational system that supports individuals with varying needs has been a crucial discussion over the years (Volker, Gupta & Brown, 2022). Disabilities vary in form and type. There are individuals with physical and mental impairments for which vision loss is considered a type of disability. However, Visually Impaired (VI) experience deficiency in understanding and conceptualising reality this should not necessarily marginalize individuals with visual impairments from pursuing their dream of interest. Vorapanya and Dunlap (2014) stated that providing every individual with education concerning quality instructions, intervention and support is a hallmark of inclusive education.

A report by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2002 noted that a lot of visually impaired people are unable to live independently due to a lack of training and labour-related skills. Additionally, most children living in developing nations lack access to education, which contributes to low self-esteem among those with visual impairment. This helps to explain why the visually impaired have such a high reliance rate. Even in the "civilized" world, this is true. Hence, vision impairment poses a large global financial burden with the annual global costs of productivity losses associated with vision impairment estimated between US$ 294.4 billion to US$ 635 billion (WHO, 2020).

In Ghana, several educational policies and interventions have been implemented yet very little seems to be realized when it comes to skill acquisition in Fashion for the VI. This was evidenced when the National Disability Services reported in 2012 that the educational system prevents young people with disabilities from achieving their full potential as well as leading lives of greater accomplishment and independence. Inadequate access to fashion/vocational education for students with disability generally results in students' diminished capacity for the rest of their lives leading to unemployment.

Thus, several educational policies aimed at implementing inclusive education in Ghana have been passed following the launch of the community-based rehabilitation programmes in 1992 which piloted inclusive education in ten (10) Districts. Legislative and policy frameworks including the 1992 Constitution which allows for Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education, the National Disability Policy of 2000, the National Disability Act of 2006, and the Ministry of Education Strategic Plan (2010-2020) provide the foundation in support for inclusive education (Nketsia & Saloviita, 2013). The Strategic Plan envisions the achievement of inclusive education by 2020 by addressing the issue of segregation against persons with disabilities in educational institutions. That is, this plan was to include students with disabilities in general education classrooms (general classrooms are those attended by students without disabilities where they learn the national education curriculum (Lalvani, 2015). The policy requires the Special Education Division of the Ghana Education Service to work to promote equal access to educational opportunities for people with special needs.

Inclusive schools have a collaborative and respectful school culture where students with disabilities are presumed to be competent, develop positive social relationships with peers, and are fully participating members of the school community (Jelas & Ali, 2014; Lamichhane, 2017).

Furthermore, a study by Bailey, Nomanbhoy, and Tubpun (2015) revealed that most teachers were generally positive toward inclusive education. These positive attitudes toward inclusive education were found to depend on a fully inclusive form of education where special educators are present (Siperstein, Parker, Bardon, & Widaman, 2007). Thus, to meet the unique educational needs of disabled pupils in regular schools, modification in assessment procedures, creative placement practices and individualized educational programmes specifically designed are essential ingredients to assist pupils with special needs in overcoming barriers to learning.

Often persons with disabilities are not considered potential members of the workforce, especially in the fashion field. Inadequate access to fashion/vocational education for students with disability generally results in students' diminished capacity for the rest of their lives leading to "*unemployment, lower levels of health, social isolation, and a lifetime of disadvantage*" (Commonwealth, 2016). This has been an issue for decades. It has been estimated that the global financial cost of loss of productivity associated with vision impairment in 2018 was $410.7 billion (range $322.1 billion to $518.7 billion), of which $43.6 billion (range $34.4 billion to $54.5 billion) was due to blindness and $367.1 billion (range $287.7 billion to $464.2billion) was due to moderate and severe vision impairment (MSVI). This overall productivity loss amount represented 0.3% of the combined Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the 21 Global Burden Disease (GBD) regions in 2018 (Marques, et al. (2021). Perception, fear, myth, and prejudice continue to limit understanding and acceptance of disability in workplaces and even those who have their businesses are stigmatized and harassed. The forgoing discourse motivated the researchers to conduct this study to ascertain the challenges visually impaired students face in their quest to enrol and acquire fashion skills.

THEORIES UNDERPINNING THE STUDY
Conceptualizing Visual Impairment

Several definitions and conceptualisations of what constitutes visual impairment exist in academic literature. According to Omede (2015), Visual Impairment is a condition where people experience vision loss that cannot be fixed with glasses, contacts, or other methods. Amin et al. (2021) defined it as complete vision loss (blindness) or partial vision loss. According to World Health Organization (WHO) (2020) studies, about 2.2 billion people are living globally with some sort of vision impairment (either near or distance) even though there could be an intervention to prevent at least 1 billion or almost half of these cases. Thus, persons with visual impairment correspond to about 28.24% of the world's population, with almost 18.9 million children under 15 years of age. In developing nations, 7% to 31% of childhood blindness and visual impairment are preventable. Nevertheless, more than 190 million (3.8%) people aged 15 years and older have significant difficulties in functioning, often requiring healthcare services. However, statistics from WHO (2020) show that there are approximately 26.3 million people with visual impairment live in Africa. Out of this, 20.4 million people have low vision and 5.9 million are estimated to be blind. It is estimated that 15.3% of the world's blind population resides in Africa.

However, it has been estimated that 40.1% of Ghana's 737,743 disabled people are blind or visually impaired (GSS, 2014). Evidence shows that, in twelve (12) out of the sixteen (16) regions, over four (4) in every ten (10) individuals with disabilities are visually impaired. Out of the 288,868 school-aged individuals with visual impairments, only 6.5% have attended second-cycle education while 40.1% have never had formal education (GSS, 2014). This means that in Ghana, almost 260,000 people with visual impairments do not complete secondary school. As a result, most children with visual impairments are left behind in mainstream classrooms and are visually invisible. This could be due to a lack of suitable economic and educational resources to meet the requirements of visually impaired children (Ocloo & Subbey, 2008). Unlike in the industrialized world, where inclusive education has been practised for a long time, the concept of inclusive education in Ghana is on the outskirts.

Theoretical Framework

The Social Models of Disability (Oliver, 1983) and Theory of Justice (Rawls, 1971)

The social model of disability considers the environment that has disabled the individual, not the condition (Oliver, 2023; Griffiths, 2022 & Avoke, 2002). The selection of the social model of disability was to explain how it relates to and influences societal contribution to the education of children with disability. One of the theories of this study is inclusive education. In contrast to discriminatory educational systems, inclusive education is rooted in the idea of a "just and fair society," according to Armstrong et al. (2010). According to scholars like Tirussew (2005) and Asrat (2013), inclusive education develops from social justice and human rights. As a result, international human rights declarations like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) all strongly endorse the idea of inclusive education (2006).

Another theory governing the study is the theory of justice. There are many different theories of justice. One of the thinkers who created the Theory of Justice in 1971 is John Rawls. Hey and Beyers (2011) and Humpage and Fleras (2001:39) presented three social justice models. The first is the distributive model of social justice, which is based on the principle that scarce resources should be allocated fairly among all people. The retributive model of social justice is the second type. According to Hey and Beyers (2011), the retributive model is about punishing or rewarding people based on their performance. The term "market-individualism" is frequently used to describe the punitive approach to social justice. Again, Humpage and Fleras (2001) claim that this kind of model also addresses compensating people who have received unfair treatment in the past. The re-cognitive paradigm of social justice is the final one. This social justice framework values variety. According to Humpage and Fleras (2001), the re-cognitive model of social justice is distinct from distributive and retributive justice since it takes diversity seriously, accepts the collective rights of groups, and supports indigenous methods of self-expression.

According to Arneson (2008), Rawls created the justice theory in response to utilitarianism's inaccurate portrayal of individuals from diverse backgrounds or neglecting the disparities between/among/among individuals. According to a different argument, utilitarianism encouraged

an unequal distribution of resources throughout nations, according to the National Pro Bono Resource Centre (2011). People with fewer privileges had their rights ignored by utilitarianism. The lower-class society suffered as a result of giving upper-class individuals additional rights. The National Pro Bono Resource Centre (2011), Hey and Beyers (2011), Arneson (2008), and Terzi (2010) all assert that Rawls' theory of justice incorporates two principles. They are social equality and liberty (freedom). The second principle contends that social and economic inequalities should be avoided to include the underprivileged and share resources equally, while the first principle promotes the right to freedom that every citizen or individual should possess. This philosophy of justice holds that people with any impairment, including those who are blind, can enjoy their freedom and gain from social and economic opportunities. To put it another way, Rawls' theory of justice serves as the cornerstone for pursuing social justice, which enables marginalised people to access social services like education. Terzi (2010) emphasises that while Rawls' theory of justice does not explicitly address education; it is flexible enough to include newer developments like educational disparity.

Although Rawls' idea of social fairness is widely accepted, it has also come under fire. It was criticised by the National Pro Bono Resource Center (2011) for emphasising governmental frameworks or formal procedures that are put in place not for the benefit of individuals but rather of society as a whole. The centre then looked into the research of additional academics like Miller and Sen. Miller, emphasising the unequal allocation of resources within society more than other social justice theorists. Sen's perspective on social justice highlights each person's inherent abilities and ability to be inclusive of others (The National Pro Bono Resource Centre, 2011:8).

The debate above demonstrates the various perspectives held by Western academics on social justice, but what does social justice entail? Although researchers have varied definitions of social justice, they all agree that it has to do with fairness, equality, freedom, and/or democracy (Eugene, Provenzo & Provenzo, 2008; Hey & Beyers, 2011; Humpage & Fleras, 2001; Jost & Kay, 2010; Kridel, 2010). According to Eugene et al. (2008), the term "justice" and the concept of "just society," which serve as a model framework for societal evolution, are derived from the Greek words "just" and "fair," respectively.

The idea of social justice has emerged as a crucial necessity in the sphere of education, claim Eugene et al. (2008). High-achieving students have a better chance of being accepted, given status, and being included in society, the authors argue by providing examples of the relationship between a learner's economic standing and their academic performance. They emphasise the importance of social justice in the education of citizens in this way. Eugene et al. (2008) posited that the disparities in the children's backgrounds have inspired researchers to look for ways to lessen inequality. These two arguments suggest that academics are aware of the disparities that underprivileged students experience and the value of education in reducing marginalisation. Additionally, when the learning environment is set up so that various learner groups can receive a "fair" education, it is possible to state that students from diverse backgrounds, such as those who are blind, can benefit from educational offerings.

It must be noted that the challenges faced by visually impaired individuals, such as issues in formal education and a lack of exposure, contribute significantly to the emergence of a skill gap. These challenges act as antecedents, shaping the outcomes for visually impaired individuals and resulting in limited skills (Al-Refi & Al-Gashany, 2017). Formal education barriers represent a significant challenge for visually impaired individuals. The traditional education system may lack the necessary accommodations and resources to cater to their unique learning needs. Issues such as inaccessible learning materials, updated curricula, and a shortage of educators trained in supporting visually impaired learners contribute to a restricted educational experience.

Consequently, the challenges in formal education act as a foundational obstacle, hindering the acquisition of essential skills and paving the way for the development of a noticeable skill gap. Lamichhane (2023) underscores this indirect influence, emphasizing how a structured educational approach contributes significantly to overcoming obstacles related to formal education, exposure limitations, and the scarcity of qualified personnel experienced by the visually impaired community.

Challenges

Previous studies have demonstrated and corroborated the challenges students face in fashion skill acquisition. Recently, Belova (2023) conducted a study very close to the direction of this study. He investigated issues of fashion accessibility for people with visual impairments and had the experience of teaching personal stylists to work and interact with visually impaired people within the "Blind Fashion" project. The project was aimed at helping blind participants select the appropriate clothes and look attractive. The article investigates the existing problems and possible solutions, explains the major differences in consulting blind and sighted people and what to consider when working with this category of clients.

Studies in fashion skill acquisition for the visually impaired seem minimal in the literature however, other scholars channelled their research on Information Communication Technology (ICT) as a way to address challenges visually impaired students face in accessing education in general. A study by Eguavoen (2016) reported that Information Communication Technology (ICT) is essential to the growth of all knowledge and skill-based activities across all facets of life. Also, ICT has completely changed the way that information is accessed, handled, and taught by introducing new teaching and learning approaches (Tom & Swart, 2020; Mikre, 2011). More especially, students with visual impairments are becoming increasingly interested in using computer-assistive technologies as their use in the school setting has improved the quality of life for visually impaired learners (VILs) (Tom & Swart, 2020). Moreover, the use of ICT is essential in everyday activities such as email correspondence and online banking, among others (Bhowmick & Hazarika, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research design using focus group discussions aims to provide insights into what visually impaired (VI) students face concerning fashion skill acquisition. The combination of

purposive and snowball sampling techniques is chosen to ensure a diverse participant pool, capturing a range of perspectives on what visually impaired students face concerning fashion skill acquisition.

Data was retrieved from twenty- (27) visually impaired students through Focus Group Discussion (FGD) whilst the six (6) Fashion and Special Education Lecturers were interviewed. Data from the interview and FGD were coded and transcribed. The data was further analysed through NVivo software version 14. Focus group interviews were conducted, in person with the aid of an assistant who mainly supported with the technical aspects of the interview session (audio recording). Two interview guides were developed and used separately for the FGD for the visually impaired and the interview for the Lecturers. The questions in the interview guide covered reasons for visually impaired students' inability to enrol on fashion-related programmes.

Thematic analysis was employed to uncover patterns and themes, contributing to a rich understanding of the subject matter. The themes generated from the coding framework were grouped into sub-themes based on similarities in responses and discussed. The themes that emerged were presented and discussed in line with the literature. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality, were prioritized throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Challenges Visually Impaired Students face in Fashion Skills Acquisition
The study sought to gather the views of study participants on the challenges visually impaired students face in enrolling and acquiring fashion skills. To illustrate the challenges, data was analysed in line with themes from the literature reviewed. Themes that emerged relate to barriers to enrolment in fashion schools, cost of training, lack of sight, lack of skilled teachers and perceptions about students with Visual Impairments (SVI) in Fashion.

One of the challenges that SVIs face in acquiring fashion skills is their inability to enrol in fashion schools. Enrollment in fashion schools is an essential step towards acquiring fashion skills. The inability of SVIs to be enrolled in fashion schools means their chances of acquiring skills in fashion are limited. These challenges were found in participants' responses to result from several barriers. The barriers to enrolment of students with VI in fashion schools were communication barriers, forced to read general reading courses due to their condition and lack of qualified facilitators to teach VI students in practical fashion courses, enrolment in fashion school expenses, lack of equipment for teaching students with VI, lack of facilities and lack of skills and resources. Other participants noted that barriers to enrolment in fashion schools were no inclusion in practical education for SVI in secondary and tertiary institutions in Ghana. Others were unaware that fashion schools admit SVI and some other participants noted that schools only admit sighted students. The training would be complex even if they were admitted to fashion schools. These views of participants are explained further with quotes.

Communication Barriers

Fashion Lecturers who participated in this study noted that because of the communication gap between them and students with disabilities, teaching students with VI fashion skills will be difficult. Instead, they advocated that students who are partially impaired should first be taught fashion skills so that they can become trainers of those who have full impairments. Since they are on the same level, communication would not be a problem for them. The views of some participants are captured in the following quotes:

"Once we are not able to understand their language, I don't know how we are going to communicate whatever skills we have for them. I always believe that if they prepare their people who are partially impaired and can understand the things, we do for them; they can transfer that knowledge to those who are impaired. Because they will have their means of communication. For the skills I think they can just absorb it once they come to their level whatever you teach them, they can apply it" (**FL 1, Personal communication).**

Another lecturer added her views which are captured:
"If I am to train you, it is all about what I will tell you and you follow the instructions. If I am not able to tell you for you to know what I mean. As for them, they can only hear but they won't understand what you are saying. Experts handling them especially those in their field who understand their language is also a challenge. Facilities and technology to assist them are also factors". We don't have the technologies to help them" (**Personal communication FL 2).**
Considering the responses from the participants presented so far, it could be deduced that communication is a major barrier to SVI.

Curriculum Gap

SVI complained of the nature of the school curriculum which inhibits their direct admission into Fashion-related training schools. This was evidence as statements shared by some participants were in line with this. Sampled statements are as follows:

"*There are no opportunities for me to enrol in fashion school. Immediately the system finds you disabled then they will push us to do general reading courses. The regular schools place the visually impaired mostly into General reading courses other than practical courses. The schools feel they are deficient to handle us in practically oriented courses*" (**FGD 2,** 25th January, 2023).
"*Most of the courses I was introduced to were reading courses. I was even given orientation on fashion skills acquisition. Maybe because of my condition, they just pushed me to read programmes that are reading oriented or perhaps there no accommodation in place for us to learn practical skills like sewing*" (**FGD 5, 13ᵗʰ July 2023**).

This position was confirmed by a Lecturer who added that because of their specific learning needs, most of the time the admission committee of various departments of tertiary institutions advise SVI to read programmes that are reading-oriented. The view is expressed in the following quote:

"*Due to the unique learning requirements of students with visual impairments, admission committees in various departments of tertiary institutions typically recommend that these students pursue programs that prioritize reading as a core component of their academic experience. This recommendation stems from the understanding that individuals with visual impairments often rely heavily on alternative methods of accessing and comprehending written content, such as braille, audio materials, or assistive technologies. Therefore, academic programmes that emphasize reading skills can be better tailored to accommodate the specific needs and challenges faced by students with visual impairments, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and accessible educational environment for all*" **(Personal communication, FL4).**

Lack of Qualified Facilitators to Teach SVI in Practical Fashion Courses
Interviewees mentioned a challenge that relates to access to qualified experts to teach fashion skills to VI. Sampled statements shared include:

"*In many schools, there is a lack of trained facilitators to assist visually impaired students, both in general reading courses and specialized fields like fashion. The absence of qualified teachers in fashion schools poses a significant challenge for visually impaired students. Without dedicated instructors who understand their unique needs, these students may struggle to receive proper guidance and education in fashion. Therefore, admitting visually impaired students into fashion schools could be challenging due to the shortage of qualified teachers to support them effectively. This highlights the need for investing in the training of educators who can provide inclusive support for visually impaired students pursuing their passion for fashion*" **(FGD 2, 25th January, 2023).**

Other Lecturers shared their views on this barrier and is presented as follows:
"*Considering my visual impairment, I'm apprehensive about pursuing a fashion education. Recalling my past rehabilitation experiences, where a single facilitator handled our weaving class, I fear a similar situation in fashion school. My major concern is that instructors might prioritize sighted students, hindering my progress. This reluctance arises from a lack of support I've encountered. I'm hesitant to dive into fashion education and emphasize the need for an inclusive and accessible learning environment tailored to my specific needs. To overcome these concerns, I aim to find programs that prioritize inclusivity, ensuring I receive the necessary support to pursue my fashion passion*" **(Personal communication, FL 3).**

"*I don't think there are even the personnel to teach students with visual impairments or to train them in fashion skills. That is the main reason they are not admitted into such programmes*" (**Personal communication, FLV 1).**

Lack of Facilities/Equipment/Resources for Teaching SVI
"*I will say to my knowledge, I have not come across sewing machines that made specifically for the Visually Impaired because that is the basis of Clothing and Textiles. I have not come across cutting equipment for Visually Impaired so I don't know, Measurements and all that so when it*

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comes to the teaching them of that fine but when it comes to the practical aspects, I don't know how feasible that will be because I have never come across of any of the equipment made specifically for them" (**Personal communication, FL1).**

"*I think the main reason is because of the equipment they use because you can't teach Clothing and Textiles without this practical aspect. It is a practical-oriented course so it comes to the theory I am telling the Visually Impaired, then that can easily be done. As much as possible I have not come across books in Clothing in Braille even talking about the equipment, the sewing machines, the scissors, the needle, and thread so I think that is the main challenge. We do not have the equipment. If they are existing, I don't know about them*".

Participants expressed concerns about their inability to enrol in fashion-related schools due to a lack of essential skills, resources, and support for visually impaired individuals. They stressed the need for assistive tools, exposure, and materials, which are currently unavailable. The common sentiment among these participants is that the absence of these vital resources may hinder their success in pursuing fashion-related education and careers. The views of some of the participants are captured in the quotes as follows:

"*I lack the basic skills and resources to enable me to enrol because without these I think it will be difficult for me to enrol into fashion-related fields*" (**FGD 1, 25th January, 2023).**
"*I also think it will be difficult for me to learn because I do not have the exposure. And mostly for a visually impaired to learn a particular skill, there is the need to have assistive tools and, in most schools, we lack resources so I don't know if this will be possible with fashion*" (**FGD 2, 25th January, 2023).**

"*Materials and other resources for training visually impaired are not available so I feel the same problem will occur if I enrol into fashion fields*" (**FGD 3, 27th January, 2023).**
"*The resources for training visually impaired are not available so I feel the same problem will occur if I enrol into fashion fields*" (**FGD 4, 27th January, 2023).**

Enrolment in Fashion School Expensive
Participants expressed concerns about the potential cost and lack of support for SVIs to be enrolled in fashion schools. They fear that the financial burden of enrolling in such schools could be prohibitive to their successful enrolment. Additionally, they think that their parents may not want to invest their money to pay their fees in fashion schools because of their condition. Some quotes are captured to reflect their concerns:

"*I feel it will be expensive. I also think my parents may think I cannot do it so they won't encourage me to do it*" (**FGD 3, 27th January, 2023).**
"*I feel it will be cost involving and I will need assistance which the schools may not have that to support me*" (**FGD 4, 27th January, 2023).**

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Teachers emphasized that the substantial expenses associated with educating learners and students with disabilities, especially those with visual impairments, could dissuade many schools from admitting individuals interested in pursuing fashion-related courses. The additional support and resources required to facilitate the learning process for visually impaired students often place a significant financial strain on educational institutions. These expenses may encompass specialized equipment, accessible materials, trained personnel, and adaptive technology, all of which are crucial for ensuring an inclusive and equitable learning environment. The financial burden is often a deterrent for schools, and as a result, they may be hesitant to offer courses related to fashion to visually impaired students. This reluctance can lead to limited access to educational opportunities and may perpetuate inequalities in the field of fashion education. Advocating for increased accessibility, affordability, and inclusivity in educational settings is essential to break down these barriers and empower visually impaired individuals to pursue their passion for fashion-related studies.

A view of one of the participants is quoted as:
"*Apart from this maybe it could be that they see it as more money consuming where they need to buy this, try this out and you know disability is related to poverty in a way, so they have difficulties in getting funds. So, I think that could also be another issue*" **(Personal communication, FLV 6).**

Stereotype and Biases
The results recorded stereotypes and biases as the most referenced challenge faced by the visually impaired to enrol on fashion-related programmes. Participants explicitly attributed the inability of the visually impaired to enrol on fashion programmes to the stereotypes and biases received from society. The participants shared their views in this regard:

"*I think the basic thing is the fact that fashion requires the use of sight quite most and so they feel that if they can't see or have limited vision, it will affect the rudiments with these skills. That is what I believe is the major reason why they don't enter that area*" **(Personal communication, FLV 5).**

Perception plays a significant role in shaping the opportunities and experiences of students with SVIs in society, particularly when it comes to acquiring skills in the fashion industry. Through interviews conducted, it became evident that negative perceptions surrounding the abilities of SVIs act as a significant barrier, impeding their progress in acquiring fashion skills. While some participants acknowledged the potential of SVIs to acquire these skills, the prevailing sentiment among the majority was that it would be an arduous task for them. Among the interviewees, there were varying viewpoints regarding equipping SVIs with fashion skills. Some lecturers expressed support, considering it a commendable idea that would empower SVIs with employable skills.

According to them if the SVI has interest in acquiring fashion skills and is supported with technology SVI can do well in the field. However, others doubted its feasibility, citing the lack of sight as a major hurdle for SVIs and emphasizing the challenges they would face. Additionally,

some individuals believed that Ghana lacked the necessary technological infrastructure to assist SVIs adequately, suggesting that the country was not yet prepared to facilitate their inclusion in the fashion industry. These negative perceptions have detrimental consequences for the development and inclusion of SVIs in the fashion industry. It is imperative to challenge and transform societal attitudes towards SVIs and their capabilities. By doing so, we can foster a more inclusive society that recognizes and harnesses the potential of every individual, regardless of visual impairments. The views of participants are expressed:

"*ooow me I think it is a laudable idea if they can train them to acquire skills which they can use, improve upon to earn a living in future. I think that one will be great. Since it will make them self-reliant because we see a lot of them on the street begging for alms. So, they are trained, and they have the skills, and they can use the skills to earn a living, I think it is good*" **(Personal communication, FLV 1).**

"*eeerrrhhmm I foresee that especially those who have a low vision though I have not seen one enrolling into such training before but I know a VI who is a Fashion Designer. And I believe they can do especially the low vision*" **(Personal communication, FLV 6).**

A similar sentiment was expressed by a Lecturer as:

"*It will be very helpful because when it comes to Fashion or Clothing, everybody wears something and if it is a Visually impaired person and he or she knows that he or she can get somebody who can interpret what he or she wants like any of us do they will be interested to learn*" **(Personal communication, FLV 4).**

Another participant added:
"*In my view, I think the majority of the thing will be out of interest. So, if the VI student is interested, I think interest deals more with things that are with skills I think if the individual has an interest, then I think where there is a will there is a way. So, if the student has interest in it, my view is that, that student can learn it and do it well. That said, there could be challenges because in the first place you need to see before you will be able to stitch or sew or put something on others. But we use other senses like the tactual sense to be able to feel that this cloth is this, this the flower, this a rough or smooth. They may have deficiency in colour and colour combinations but with that, they can also rely on people who see to be able to tell them about what the colour is. There could be adaptations. I also know that there are mobile phone Apps that can be used. An App like the Cash Reader and some software that when you use it on the phone, and you show it to the cloth it can tell you the colour of the cloth or if you show it to the price side it can mention it for you. So, with the use of assistive devices it helps. The only challenge is that a lot of VI who may not be very endowed and those who are not exposed to assistive technology may not rely on that and that will make the learning difficult for them. However, if you have a VI student who is very technology inclined, I think that person can do wonders when it comes to Fashion*" **(Personal communication, FLV 5).**

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The primary barrier preventing visually impaired individuals from entering the field of fashion is the visual nature of the industry itself. Fashion heavily relies on sight, and many believe that limited or no vision could hinder one's ability to grasp the fundamental aspects of the profession. This perception is a significant deterrent, as it leads to doubts about their capacity to master the essential skills of the trade. However, it's important to challenge this assumption by promoting inclusive practices, offering adaptive resources, and highlighting the potential for creativity, innovation, and tactile experiences in fashion, which can be equally valuable and accessible to individuals with visual impairments.

Participants who shared a different perspective added that the society's perception of people with disabilities and the Ghanaian culture would be a major hindrance to the SVIs in the field of fashion.

Their views are quoted in the narratives that follows:
"Me if you are my child, I will tell you stay off. We are a third world country. I say fight a fight you can win. Don't fight because you think it is your right. There are so many rights so what makes it. Even see how registration for ID cards is done in the country. People with disabilities struggle to get it. I wouldn't encourage any VI students to go into fashion. It is risky. We as a country we are not there yet" (**Personal communication, FLV 2**).

"*Well to be honest, the Ghanaian attitude and culture may not. It doesn't look like a typical Ghanaian company will open arms to the VI person to be in Fashion. That said, I also see that if you have a VI who is very talented and shows a lot of creativity, there could be. GTP could take up that person. So, it is a two-way affair. However, I think that our attitudes and our perception towards individuals with disabilities may limit their absorption into the system because we have prejudged them as people who "cannot". Who may not be able to function because they cannot see. And for that reason, it can affect thinking…… aaaa these people cannot see how I am going to let them design cloth and all that. That said, if someone is a VI person shows a lot of creativity, I think a company can absorb that person*" (**Personal communication, FLV 3**).

Lack of Assistive Technology/Equipment
The participants were of the view that sewing machines and cutting tools/equipment specifically designed for the visually impaired which raises a significant concern about how SVIs will acquire fashion skills seem not available. This lack of specialised equipment presents a barrier to the practical aspects of teaching fashion skills to SVIs. Without such equipment, it may be challenging to provide SVIs with the necessary hands-on training required to develop their fashion skills fully.

The view of one participant is captured as:
"*I will say to my knowledge, I have not come across sewing machines that are made specifically for the Visually Impaired because that is the basis of Clothing and Textiles. I have not come across cutting equipment for the Visually Impaired so I don't know, Measurements and all that so when it comes to teaching them of that fine but when it comes to the practical aspects, I don't know how*

feasible that will be because I have never come across of any of the equipment made specifically for them" **(Personal communication, FL 1).**

Another SVI added that she has not seen a sewing machine before so if there is no specialised machine design for them it will be challenging to acquire a skill in sewing. She opined as:
"I do not know how I can acquire a skill sewing with the sewing machines. I have not seen a sewing machine before but if there is no specialised sewing machine for us, I do not think it will be possible for us to acquire fashion skills" **(Personal communication, FL 3).**

Lack of Experience with Fashion Design
The statement shared by the participants from the FGD sessions indicated that they had no prior experience with sewing or any fashion design-related activities. According to the SVIs, they had no experience in bead-making, fascinator making, floral arrangement, macramé, hand needle, knotting and sewing machine. Expressing their uncertainty sheds light on the practical difficulties they faced in fashion skill acquisition. Without the ability to see, they lack the visual cues necessary to navigate the intricacies of sewing. This presents a significant challenge in acquiring and honing their sewing skills, as they require alternative methods or specialised adaptations to effectively develop skills in fashion design.

The quotes that follow reflect the sentiments shared by participants from Focused Group Discussions (FGD).

"Losing my sight has caused substantial hurdles in my life, notably in obtaining new abilities. I find myself unable to manage the complex functions of a sewing machine, construct sophisticated macramé designs, or craft floral arrangements. The absence of sight means I've lost out on important guidance for using a sewing machine. Probably my limited exposure to these activities is the cause for my difficulties, Nevertheless, I go on motivated to adapt and learn, finding alternative approaches that suit my unique perspective and ability" **(FGD 3, 27th January, 2023).**
FGD 4 added the following narrative:

"*Whenever it comes to threading the needle, I find it difficult. I must say, I'm not particularly adept at it. Instead, I usually resort to my younger sister for aid. When she's not around, I'll certainly find the assistance of whoever is available. It's not only threading; knotting and bead-making also evade me because of my visual impairment. My inability to notice specifics makes these exercises rather tough. However, I've learned to appreciate the beauty in asking for aid and finding innovative solutions for overcoming my limitations in the world of craft*" **(FGD 4, 27th January, 2023)**

A participant from FGD 5 shared:
"I find the sewing machine a bit complex to use because I have not been taught how it works. Also, the sewing machine contains a part where the thread is removed, and I cannot insert it in easily. So, with that in mind, I don't even go near it. The unfamiliarity with the machine's mechanisms

leaves me feeling somewhat intimidated. It's as if there's a daunting barrier preventing me from even attempting to operate it. I often wish I had received proper instruction on its functions, as this would surely make me more comfortable and confident in approaching the machine." (**FGD 5, 13th July 2023**).

Discussion

The research findings shed light on the challenges visually impaired students (SVIs) face in acquiring fashion skills. These challenges encompass various aspects, such as barriers to enrolment in fashion schools, negative perceptions about the abilities of visually impaired individuals in fashion, lack of specialised sewing machines, and limited prior experiences with fashion design. This finding is consistent with previous studies conducted by Qaiser, Khan, and Tariq (2021) and Caron et al. (2023), which identified challenges in design thinking and skills acquisition among visually impaired individuals. Qaiser et al., (2021) highlighted obstacles to web accessibility, while Caron et al. (2023) emphasised challenges in skills acquisition.

The finding also established that there is limited access to fashion education due to enrolment barriers for the visually impaired. Again, communication barriers, lack of qualified teachers, and high enrolment fees are other challenges faced by the visually impaired in their quest to acquire fashion skills. This supports the findings of a study by Schneider, Ramirez, and Célio's (2017) which identified communication as a significant barrier in the fashion industry. The current study found that SVIs often face difficulties communicating their needs and understanding instructions due to a lack of accessible communication methods. This lack of communication channels hinders their learning ability and limits their access to educational opportunities (Schneider et al., 2017).

Additionally, negative perceptions about the capabilities of visually impaired individuals hinder their progress in acquiring fashion skills. This finding aligns with Fraser et al.'s (2019) findings on the impact of negative perceptions on people with visual impairments. Society often holds misconceptions about the abilities of visually impaired individuals, assuming that they are incapable of participating in creative fields such as fashion design. These negative perceptions can create barriers for SVIs seeking a career in fashion, leading to limited opportunities and discouragement.

Another significant challenge identified in the research is the need for more qualified professionals to teach fashion skills to SVIs. This finding is consistent with Belay and Yihun's (2020) study, which highlighted the shortage of qualified professionals as a significant challenge in the education of SVIs. The need for qualified teachers knowledgeable about fashion design and accommodating the needs of SVIs further exacerbates the difficulties these students face. With proper guidance and instruction from experienced professionals, SVIs may be able to develop their skills and fully explore their potential in the fashion industry.

In addition to the shortage of qualified professionals, the need for specialised sewing machines and cutting equipment further complicates the learning process for SVIs. This lack of necessary

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equipment aligns with the findings of previous studies that identified the absence of materials and equipment as barriers to the academic success of SVIs (Belay and Yihun, 2020; Sikanku, 2018). Traditional sewing machines and cutting tools are not designed with accessibility features that cater to the needs of visually impaired individuals. As a result, SVIs may need help effectively utilising these tools, hindering their ability to acquire practical skills essential for fashion design. Furthermore, the research highlights the participants' limited experience in fashion design and the absence of visual cues, making it difficult for them to grasp various techniques and activities. This lack of experience is a significant hindrance to their skill development. SVIs may have had limited exposure to fashion-related activities before pursuing formal education. This lack of prior experience can impede their understanding of fundamental concepts and techniques and their ability to visualise designs.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study reveal several needs of individuals with visual impairments concerning their enrolment in fashion-related programmes. Furthermore, the study initiates further stakeholder discussions regarding designing a simplified inclusive curriculum that can accommodate individuals with visually impaired and interested in taking up a vocation in a related field within fashion to realise their potential and aspirations.

The novelty of studying visually impaired students regarding fashion skill acquisition lies in its potential to uncover unique challenges, innovative solutions, and opportunities for inclusivity in education and vocational training. The research contributes to a broader narrative of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the context of skill development and empowers visually impaired individuals to participate more fully in the fashion industry.

Practical Implications

Addressing these practical implications involves a concerted effort from educators, policymakers, industry stakeholders, and advocacy groups to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for visually impaired students pursuing fashion skills. Implementation of these practical measures can contribute to breaking down barriers and ensuring equal access to opportunities in the field of fashion for all students, regardless of visual ability.

Social Implications

Addressing the challenges faced by visually impaired students in acquiring fashion skills goes beyond individual empowerment; it has far-reaching social implications that contribute to reshaping societal attitudes, fostering inclusivity, and promoting a culture of diversity and acceptance. By recognizing and addressing these challenges, society can work towards creating environments that enable visually impaired individuals to fully participate and thrive in the field of fashion.

Recommendations

Students with visual impairments (SVI) need to be provided with appropriate educational programmes with necessary individualised adaptations and accommodations delivered by qualified professionals with high competencies. Educational leaders' knowledge, support, and expectations are perceived to impact multiple factors associated with programme or training success and student outcomes. Hence, educational leaders are encouraged to demonstrate readiness to support individuals with impairments.

There is a need for institutions that train the visually impaired to create awareness and opportunities for visually impaired students so that those interested in acquiring some basic skills will be motivated to enrol in short courses that can support their living. The Department of Special Education should liaise with the Fashion Department to develop semester courses that can help visually impaired students undergo to help address the skill gap needs of individuals with visual impairments.

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