

Crippled Fashion & Its History, Representation, and Failures

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Disabled people have been essentially erased from our mainstream fashion, however, when we look into the history of disability fashion, we find that, because adaptive clothing wasn't always available, disabled people would alter their clothing to fit their needs; for example, a person with hearing aids might sew a carrier into their bra, or buttons would be replaced with something easier for the individual to do up themselves. Yet, our power as a collective is growing, with more disabled fashion influencers rising to fame than ever before, adaptive clothing brands, and subcultures of disability fashion growing. Still, however, ableism and the negative perception of disabled people persists.

Popular disabled fashion influencers have risen to fame in different ways, however, a common denominator is the presence of social media. While influencers often receive bad reps due to their negative effects on the self-esteem and perception of youth, disabled fashion influencers tend to open doors in representation and advocacy that were previously closed, especially in the eyes of disabled youth who are exploring self-expression and identity.

Faduma Farah is a Black Muslim paraplegic living in London, and became disabled after contracting meningitis. After becoming a wheelchair user, she noticed her fashion choices were very limited due to the cuts of shirts, and therefore, she was no longer able to express herself with the vibrancy that, as a Somalian, she valued. She helped to develop adaptive clothing that included side-pockets instead of front-pockets, hidden seams in jackets allowing for more movement, and more, all at an affordable price, culminating in Faduma's Fellowship, not only a brand, but an adaptive wear show at London's Fashion Week.

Another disabled fashion influencer also rose to celebrity status in a similar way - Sinéad Burke. She is an Irish disability activist with dwarfism. She is passionate about fashion, and began a blog at 16 years old to document her struggles with fashion as a little person who could

not find age-appropriate and trendy clothing for her size. In 2019, she became the first little person to attend the Met Gala, and was featured on the cover of British Vogue. As she wrote in an article about fashion in reference to Crip Camp at the Oscars, “For me, clothes can be armor, a protective mechanism that I use to shield myself from being the object of strangers’ attention. But, I also use clothes to translate who I am, and to mediate my personality to the masses. Clothes touch our skin, we have an intimate connection to what we wear, and in most parts of the world, we have a legal obligation to get dressed,” (2021).



Image description: A three-part grid with various disabled fashion influencers. On the left is Aaron Phillip, a Black woman with blonde, short hair, and a black dress with various flowers on it, in a wheelchair. On the top right is Faduma Farah, a Black woman with an orange hijab, black shirt, and navy pants on in an electric wheelchair. On the bottom right is Sinéad Burke, a white woman with dwarfism; She has brown short hair, a blue dress with various dots on it, and is standing.

Aaron Phillip is a 20-year old Black trans-disabled model with Cerebral Palsy signed to Community New York, a model agency that prides itself on diversity and inclusivity. She first began modeling at sixteen or seventeen, mostly on her social media, where she spoke about the boundaries she faces as a disabled and trans fashionista. With her Community New York debut,

she is the first Black, trans, and disabled model to be represented by a major modeling agency. She also is the first model to debut exclusively for a major brand as a wheelchair user (New York Fashion Week 2021) and has skyrocketed in following over the last year, despite the pandemic. As she said, "The fashion industry has only known one type of body, and one type of marketable figure for so long," Philip previously told CNN. "(But) now we're entering this time, and this climate, where all types of bodies want to be pushed forward and celebrated -- not only celebrated, but be seen as desirable and marketable."

While fashion is subjective, viewers often base their opinions on the appearance of who is wearing it, both in their body and how they're acting. If your outfit is uncoordinated but you're radiating confidence, you'll be praised repeatedly for your boldness; trends like Y2K and grunge have trickled back into the mainstream through the help of apps like Depop, which encourages users to consider more sustainable fashion options like thrifting and buying second-hand clothing. These trends, as well as vintage clothing, have become a niche of their own on TikTok and other social media, where users often gain popularity for their unique styles that some hate and others love. Clara, who posts under the username @tinyjewishgirl, is one of these creators. With 771.1K followers and over 70.8 million likes total, she has curated a platform where she is both praised and scolded in her comments for her bold mix of prints, colors, and accessories. Yet, the overwhelming reaction, despite if you like or dislike her outfits, is that she is someone who takes control of fashion to express her individuality. Yet, her account, and those like it, paint the double standard that is in place for those with intellectual disabilities or mental illness. For people who fit this category, especially unhoused folks, their outfits become a false sense of danger for the public. Their outfits are used to determine the state of their mind - if they are wearing black and brown outfits with holes in them, it's fine, a perfectly acceptable thing for an

unhoused person to be wearing. Yet, if an unhoused person with a mental disability is wearing a colorful outfit, perhaps mixing and matching the patterns or piling on the accessories that make life fun, they are “crazy” and a threat to the passerby walking by. Disability becomes a weapon in the world of fashion, another excuse to stereotype and suppress seeing disabled individuals as anything other than objects of pity and despair.

This directly correlates with the rise (and failures) of adaptive fashion brands, especially those created by non-disabled people. With their promises to be sensory-friendly, include easy buttons and zippers, and create the perfect silhouette for wheelchair users, these brands sound amazing, but often fall short. Brand lines (since most adaptive fashion is not its own brand, but a subbrand of a larger brand like Tommy Adaptive of Tommy Hilfiger) often offer vastly different options from the typical clothing produced by the brand, with few colors, sizes, and styles. Options from these brands also tend to lack the ability to fully encompass the needs of disabled people, leaving for more to be desired within the field; if brands considered asking disabled people what we need, instead of assuming what we need, adaptive fashion would be a lot more popular. There also is the issue of accessibility - items like Nike’s adaptive sneakers are often bought in bulk by resellers, who then will (as the name implies) resell them for much higher prices, typically to non-disabled shoe collectors, limiting access to the already limited stock.

Fashionable mobility aids and assistive devices, however, challenge our perceptions of disability as something that is sad and boring. Instead, our disabilities and needs become glittery canes, colorful feeding tube pads, and wheelchairs with light-up wheels that resemble the summer carnival nearing dusk. Some may choose to opt for more everyday mobility aids, perhaps just because it fits their lifestyle (or to try and reduce the number of stares we get for existing as disabled people), but go all out for celebrations like weddings. This, in a way, is a

rejection of the pressure for wheelchair users to walk on their wedding day, spouted by inspirational viral videos where disabled folks cry from happiness, pain, and more as they traverse down the aisle. Instead, this recognizes that to be a wheelchair user doesn't take away from the worthiness of your love, but instead, that it is a device that can liberate you in the ways of making celebrations easier to access and participate fully in without concerns of falling, being in pain, or any of the other consequences of forcing a disabled body to work in a way that it has not been built. By accepting, and later, beautifying your mobility aid in such a manner, it becomes a part of you, embracing it as an extension of the love and glamour that weddings often consist of through our outfits, veils, jewelry, and more.

There are also specific subcultures of fashion that focus around disabled folks - for example, cripple punk which began on Tumblr in 2014 by Tyler Trehella. The late creator said of the movement, "Cripple punk is exclusively by the physically disabled for the physically disabled...Cripple punk rejects the 'good cripple' mythos. Cripple punk is here for the bitter cripple, the uninspirational cripple, the smoking cripple, the drinking cripple, the addict cripple, the cripple who hasn't 'tried everything'. Cripple punk does not pander to the able-bodied", This, therefore, means that cripple punk does not just exist as a fashion subculture, but as an attitude and stance that cripples, like myself, can take against the oppressive systems of ableism. Yet, I still find it important to note that Tyler, a disabled trans punk, fully embraced the fashion aspect of punk.



Image description: A three-part grid showcasing the cripple punk aesthetic. On the left is an unidentified white person with green, short hair, a black and red t-shirt with various graphics, black ripped jeans, and black boots in a blue wheelchair. In the middle is Aaron Phillip, a Black woman with pink hair, a purple silk tank top, black skirt, white socks, black boots, and rainbow gloves in a black wheelchair. On the right is Tyler Trehella, who began the movement; They are a white person with a fuzzy hat, cigarette in their mouth, jean jacket with pins, black jeans, and brown sneakers with a cane.

Ultimately, disabled people are just as fashionable as any other person, just as worthy of having clothes that make us feel confident and comfortable in our body, no matter how society may judge any deformations in our bodies. With people like Aaron Phillips and Faduma Farah gaining followings, I am looking forward to the future of our fashion, perhaps with more subcultures like cripple punk developing (and maybe even being represented in adaptive fashion, instead of the neutral oversized looks we get now). While we still face a lot of ableism within the fashion industry, especially within the judgement of personal expression, I believe we are on our way of creating a more accessible and inclusive future.

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