Bridging Cultures: Using Culturally Inclusive Case Studies to Engage and Empower Graduate Students in Fashion Education

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Abstract

As inclusivity becomes both a strategic priority and a contested ideal within the global fashion industry, educators face an urgent mandate to prepare future professionals to navigate and challenge entrenched inequities. This paper explores the use of culturally inclusive case studies as a pedagogical intervention to advance equity, engagement, and applied learning in graduate-level fashion education. Drawing from graduate curricula of the subject institution, a New York City-based private college focused on the business of fashion and lifestyle, it highlights case studies featuring brands led by individuals from historically underrepresented groups. These cases are embedded in project-based learning across disciplines such as marketing, sustainability, and global supply chain strategy, offering students complex, real-world examples of how identity intersects with power and business decisions. Grounded in theories of culturally responsive teaching and case-based learning, this study analyzes student reflections and classroom outcomes to demonstrate how inclusive case materials foster empathy, critical analysis, and cross-cultural fluency. Ultimately, the paper argues that inclusivity in fashion education should move beyond mere representation to a reimagining of curricular frameworks centering intersectional identities and lived experience as sources of innovation, not exceptions to it.

Keywords: Inclusive; Disability; Case Studies; Fashion-education; Sustainable.

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Introduction

Despite the fashion industry's celebrated evolution in diversity-focused branding, the sector continues to struggle with structural inequities that limit authentic inclusion in both education and industry practice. In the context of fashion studies, authenticity can denote cultural self-expression, market positioning, or institutional legitimacy, each carrying different political implications. Here, 'authentic inclusion' refers not to a static ideal but to a contested process of negotiating belonging and representation. Similarly, diversity is used in this paper through an intersectional lens that encompasses race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and ability. While these categories are not interchangeable, their interdependence requires attention. Alternative definitions of diversity, such as those emphasizing cognitive difference or demographic proportionality, are recognized, though the focus remains on structural inequities across intersecting identities. Further, the terms BIPOC (Black Indigenous People of Color) and people of color are used intentionally to reflect the solidaristic power of collective identity categories while also acknowledging their contested and context-dependent meanings within fashion education and pedagogy. Catwalks and campaigns have grown more visibly diverse, yet leadership ranks, design teams, and pedagogical content remain overwhelmingly homogenous. As the *UK Fashion DEI Report 2024* reveals, just 9% of executive roles in the British fashion sector are held by people of color, and only 11% of "power roles" such as CEO or creative director include racially diverse individuals despite 46% of London's population identifying as ethnically diverse. This dissonance between outward-facing representation and internal decision-making power has created what the report calls a "twin reality": progress in marketing optics without corresponding structural reform. This contradiction extends into fashion education, where curriculum design and classroom materials often reflect dominant norms and market logics. While graduate programs increasingly espouse diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as institutional values, they often fail to challenge the exclusionary assumptions embedded in case studies, textbooks, and assessment frameworks. As a result, students are not only underexposed to diverse narratives, but also underprepared to critically assess how identity, power, and positionality shape business decisions in the global fashion landscape.

This paper addresses this critical gap by exploring the strategic use of culturally inclusive case studies as a pedagogical intervention in project-based graduate learning. It argues that inclusive cases, those that center brands founded, owned, or operated by individuals from historically underrepresented groups, can serve as vehicles for engaging students with the complexities of identity, ethics, and equity in the fashion industry. This approach draws on both culturally responsive pedagogy[1] and case-based learning theory,[2] which together support the development of empathy, analytical skills, and cultural fluency. The research is situated within the graduate curriculum of the subject institution, a New York City-based fashion business school whose graduate school integrates inclusive case studies into disciplines ranging from fashion marketing and luxury brand management to sustainability and global supply chain strategy. Instructors in this context have designed and implemented project-based learning modules that feature intersectional business narratives, spotlighting, for example, Indigenous-owned sustainable brands, adaptive fashion startups led by founders with disabilities, and queer and BIPOC fashion cooperatives. These narratives function not merely as "representation" but as disruptions of normative frameworks in fashion education, challenging students to rethink metrics of success, innovation, and ethical leadership. While case studies have long been used to simulate real-world business decision-making, culturally inclusive cases introduce an added dimension: they ask students to consider how ability, race, gender, class, and culture affect the choices available to entrepreneurs, the risks they face, and the values that guide them. In doing so, these cases help surface what is often obscured in traditional business education: the lived realities behind market forces.

1. Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995); Geneva Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2018).

2. Katherine Merseth, *Cases in Educational Administration* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1991).

The research is guided by the following questions:

- How do culturally inclusive case studies function as a pedagogical tool in graduate fashion education?

- What impact do these case studies have on student engagement, empathy, and critical thinking?

- How can inclusive narratives, particularly those involving disability and intersectionality be effectively integrated into fashion business curricula?

This paper hopes to contribute to the growing scholarship on inclusive pedagogies in creative industries and responds directly to calls for systemic change outlined in the *UK Fashion DEI Report 2024*, which urges educators and employers alike to stop treating DEI as an aspirational ideal and start treating it as an operational imperative. Through qualitative data, including student reflections, classroom observations, and assignment outcomes, this study illustrates how inclusive case studies not only broaden representation but transform how students interpret, analyze, and design fashion futures. In doing so, it offers educators practical strategies for embedding equity into the DNA of their curricula, advancing the structural transformation of the fashion industry from within by educating the next generation of fashion industry leaders.

Theoretical Frameworks and Considerations

As the fashion industry becomes more complex, multicultural, and ethically scrutinized, graduate education must evolve to reflect not only changing market realities but also the imperative for structural equity. This section synthesizes four intersecting theoretical frameworks, culturally responsive pedagogy, case-based and experiential learning, intersectionality, and disability studies, arguing that inclusivity in fashion education must be both intentional and transformative.

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), rooted in the works of Ladson-Billings and Gay, offers a framework for teaching that centers students' lived experiences, cultural identities, and community contexts. Ladson-Billings positions CRP around three key commitments: academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. Rather than treating cultural diversity as a barrier, CRP positions it as a pedagogical resource, urging educators to affirm students' identities and empower them to critique inequitable systems.[3]

Gay expands this by asserting that CRP is not merely about what is taught, but how it is taught.[4] Her approach emphasizes learner-centered instruction, dialogic exchange, and high expectations supported by scaffolding tailored to students' cultural strengths. In fashion education, this requires dismantling dominant cultural standards that shape case studies, branding frameworks, and labor models. CRP thus becomes a method of resistance and reimagination, equipping students to navigate and transform the industry with cultural fluency and critical awareness.

Although CRP affirms diverse identities and challenges exclusionary curricula, it may also risk reinforcing group boundaries. Mounk cautions that when identity categories such as race, gender, or culture are emphasized too heavily, individuals may come to view one another primarily through group membership rather than shared humanity.[5] This dynamic can reduce empathy across differences and contribute to polarization. For fashion education, the challenge lies in affirming identity while also fostering cross-cultural dialogue so that inclusion strengthens collective learning rather than fragmenting it. Case-based and experiential learning complement CRP by enabling students to apply theoretical insights to real-world contexts. Merseth introduced the case method as a tool to cultivate professional reasoning, exposing learners to complex, ambiguous situations that require ethical and contex-

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3.   Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers*; Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching*.

4.   Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching*.

5.   Yascha Mounk, *The Identity Trap: A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time* (New York: Penguin Press, 2023)

tual decision-making.[6] Kolb's experiential learning theory (ELT) further supports these strategies by outlining a four-stage learning cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.[7] In fashion education, ELT is particularly effective when embedded in project-based assignments. When integrated CRP and ELT strategies create pedagogical spaces where fashion students develop both technical competence and ethical insight. The theoretical lens of intersectionality, articulated by Crenshaw,[8] is vital for understanding how power operates across race, gender, class, and embodiment in the fashion system. Historically structured around white, cisnormative, and thin ideals, fashion institutions continue to marginalize bodies and identities that deviate from normative aesthetics.[9] Even as marketing materials become more diverse, the UK Fashion DEI Report[10] highlights that such visibility has not translated into equitable leadership or meaningful inclusion. Friedman et al. arts-based research on "fashionably fat" embodiments explores how fat, queer, and racialized individuals navigate representation through dress, positioning the body as a site of resistance and expression.[11] Similarly, Topaz et al. document the underrepresentation of racialized designers in fashion leadership, emphasizing the systemic nature of aesthetic exclusion.[12] Ahmed critiques the dominant idealization within fashion curricula and advocates for a decolonial feminist pedagogy that centers non-Western and intersectional knowledges.[13] Incorporating intersectional narratives into case studies and classroom materials enables students to interrogate not only who is seen in fashion but who has power, voice, and authorship. Intersectionality thus pushes educators to shift from representational inclusion to structural transformation. Building on this, bell hooks'[14] [15] [16] work in critical pedagogy highlights the necessity of linking intersectional analysis with practices of engaged pedagogy. hooks emphasized that classrooms must be spaces of dialogue, discomfort, and care, where marginalized voices are not only represented but empowered to reshape collective knowledge. Disability studies adds another critical layer to inclusive pedagogy. Garland-Thomson[17] frames disability as a socially constructed identity shaped by aesthetic and material norms. Her critique of the "normate body" highlights how fashion reinforces ableist ideals by excluding disabled people from both representation and design processes. Guffey[18] argues that truly inclusive design must be anticipatory, not retrofitted, and challenges ableist structures in garment development and retail environments. The shift from medical to social models of disability, as discussed by Ross-Gordon and Procknow, is essential for fashion education.[19] Rather than pathologiz-

6. Katherine Merseth, *Cases in Educational Administration* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1991.

7. David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984).

8. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," University of Chicago Legal Forum (1989): 139–167.

9. Ruoyun Wei, "Fashion and Intersectionality," in *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, Vol. 637 (Paris: Atlantis Press, 2021).

10. UK Fashion DEI Report, *The State of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the UK Fashion Industry* (Fashion Roundtable, 2024)

11. May Friedman, Andrew Evans, and Ben Barry, "Intersectionality Gets Fashionably Fat: Queer, Disabled, and Racialized Embodiment in Sustainable Fashion Media," *Art/Research International A Transdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 8, no. 1 (2023): 173–204.

12. Chad M. Topaz, Hans Zane, and Ari Aubrecht, "Race- and Gender-Based Under-Representation of Creative Contributors: Art, Fashion, Film, and Music," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, Vol. 9 (2022):

13. Tanveer Ahmed, "Towards a Decolonial Feminist Fashion Design Reading List," *Journal of Art Libraries*, Vol. 41, no.1 (2022).

14. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994),

15. bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003)

16. bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (New York: Routledge, 2010)

17. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Feminist disability studies," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol.30, no.2 (2005): 1557–1587.

18. Elizabeth Guffey, "Selwyn Goldsmith's Designing for the Disabled, 2nd ed. (1967): Flawed, Dated, and Disavowed, Yet a Classic with Enduring Value", *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation*, Vol. 6, no.4 (2020).

19. Jovita Ross-Gordon and Greg Procknow. "Adult education and disability," in *The handbook of adult and continuing edu-*

ing bodily difference, the social model views disability as a result of systemic barriers. This framework calls for curricular practices that examine how design, marketing, and labor practices exclude consumers and creators with disabilities. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offers a practical extension of this theory. Rogers-Shaw et al. advocate for multiple modes of engagement, representation, and expression, which support neurodivergent and disabled students without requiring formal disclosure.[20] In fashion classrooms, this can include adaptive technologies, flexible assessments, and sensory-aware learning environments. Inclusive fashion education must also consider intersectional disability. Garland-Thomson warns against tokenistic representation that centers only a narrow subset of differently abled bodies.[21] Without acknowledging race, gender, and size, disability inclusion becomes partial and exclusionary. As such, case study selection and classroom facilitation must center disability not as an add-on, but as integral to the ethical reimagining of fashion systems.

Connecting Theory to Educational Goals

The integration of culturally responsive pedagogy, experiential learning, intersectionality, and disability studies supports four essential educational goals in fashion business education: empathy, equity, applied knowledge, and power analysis. Empathy is cultivated through culturally responsive pedagogy[22] and experiential case work that centers marginalized voices. These pedagogies humanize business decisions, training students to design and lead with care and accountability. Equity is achieved when curricula disrupt dominant narratives and embed multiple ways of knowing. CRP and intersectionality challenge epistemological hierarchies[23] while UDL ensures inclusive access across cognitive and physical differences.[24] Equity becomes a function of both who is represented and how learners are empowered to participate. Applied knowledge is grounded in experiential learning theory[25] and strengthened by case-based methodologies that develop analytical and strategic thinking. Real-world assignments and simulations allow students to apply complex theory to dynamic, interdisciplinary fashion contexts. Finally, power analysis, drawn from intersectionality and disability studies,[26] equips students to interrogate how fashion reproduces or resists structures of exclusion. Case studies serve as tools for analyzing privilege, visibility, and agency. Together, these goals prepare students not only for industry success but for ethical, equity-oriented leadership in a global fashion system.

Case Study Selection and Pedagogical Integration

Culturally inclusive case studies serve as both pedagogical tools and corrective interventions in fashion business education. In the graduate curriculum of the subject institution, case selection follows three criteria: representation, intersectionality, and strategic complexity. These cases are embedded across courses in marketing, sustainability, luxury branding, entrepreneurship, and global supply chains as foundational elements of a curriculum centered on inclusion and cultural competence. Beyond representation, their design ensures alignment with curricular goals and real-world complexity through a values-based framework that emphasizes rich, multidimensional narratives, equipping students to cultivate equity-focused insights, ethical reasoning, and applied professional skills. To ensure that inclusive case studies function as more than superficial representation, each was selected through a rigorous framework emphasizing leadership identity, global relevance, and strategic complexity. This intentional pro-

cation, (London-New York: Routledge, 2020), 392–400.

20. Carol Rogers-Shaw, Davin J. Carr-Chellman and Jinhee Choi, "Universal Design for Learning: Guidelines for Accessible Online Instruction," *Adult Learning*, Vol. 29, no. 1 (2018).

21. Garland-Thomson, "Feminist Disability Studies."

22. Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers:* Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching*.

23. Ahmed, "Towards a Decolonial Feminist"; Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection".

24. Rogers-Shaw, Carr-Chellman, and Choi, "Universal Design for Learning."

25. Kolb, *Experiential Learning*.

26. Garland-Thomson, "Feminist Disability Studies."

cess allows students to critically engage with businesses that reflect the realities of a diverse and evolving fashion industry while navigating real-world challenges that require ethical decision-making and applied analysis.

Each selected case centers a business founded, led, or creatively directed by individuals from historically excluded groups, including BIPOC, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities. By foregrounding these perspectives, the curriculum actively disrupts the dominant narrative that industry leadership is neutral or monolithic. These case studies intentionally shift the frame from deficit to asset, presenting these leaders not as outliers, but as originators of new industry models.

These are not feel-good stories of representation; they are rigorous case studies that present real-world dilemmas. Selected cases must challenge students to navigate tensions between values and growth, authenticity and scale, innovation and equity. This complexity is critical for avoiding tokenism and for cultivating students' capacity to lead with nuance, adaptability, and integrity. Each case invites ethical inquiry, strategic critique, and market analysis. This multi-criteria framework ensures that students engage with businesses that are not only diverse in identity but dynamic in operation. The cases help students cultivate critical consciousness, develop empathy, and apply interdisciplinary knowledge to socially relevant challenges in the global fashion system.

Pedagogical Rationale

The pedagogical approach guiding this case study integration is grounded in experiential learning theory,[27] culturally responsive teaching,[28] and intersectional equity frameworks. These cases move students from abstract ideals to applied complexity, requiring them to navigate the messy realities of business and ethics in tandem. Rather than learning about "diversity", students engage with power, resistance, and systems design. Each case is scaffolded through multi-modal assessments including reflective essays, strategic memos, stakeholder mapping, frequent presentations, and reflective peer feedback. Rubrics emphasize not only content mastery but empathy, systemic thinking, and ethical decision-making. This pedagogy equips students with the tools to lead inclusively and to challenge exclusionary industry structures from within. By grounding the curriculum in lived experience, cultural insight, and market relevance, the Institution's graduate program redefines what it means to be prepared for leadership in fashion. Students are equipped not only with technical knowledge, but also with the critical thinking and cultural fluency necessary to lead in a rapidly evolving, global industry. These case studies create space for business education to be rigorous, relevant, and transformative by centering diverse voices and real-world challenges that mirror the complexities of the fashion marketplace.

Inclusive Cases in Action

The implementation of culturally inclusive case studies is most impactful when embedded not only as instructional content but as a structural and evaluative component of the learning environment. This section examines two such case-based interventions, one centered on the real-world Victoria's Secret[29] and the other built around Inventaire, a proprietary fictional case series developed by the faculty at the author's institution. Together, these cases illustrate how inclusive pedagogy can cultivate student understanding of brand strategy, intersectionality, ethical leadership, and justice-oriented business innovation across distinct functional domains within graduate fashion education. Inventaire is a fictional fashion company developed as the foundation for a series of original case studies designed by the author for use across multiple graduate programs at the subject institution. While the company itself is fictional, the strategic dilemmas and operational challenges it presents are grounded in real-world, timely, and complex issues facing the contemporary fashion industry. Inventaire's founding team is composed of two

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27.   Kolb, *Experiential Learning*.

28.   Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching*.

29.   Aurélie Bardey and Upasana Mehdiratta, "Consumer Behavior and Identity: How Lack of Inclusivity Lost Victoria's Secret Its Lingerie Crown," in *Fashion Business Cases* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

fictionalized characters, a neurodiverse queer South Asian creative director and an Afro-Latina operations strategist with cerebral palsy, whose identities and leadership philosophies shape the company's mission, operations, and challenges.

The Inventaire series was developed to fill a curricular gap in inclusive business scenarios by offering faculty and students nuanced, interdisciplinary challenges that reflect industry realities. Case installments span topics such as ethical sourcing, adaptive design, market entry strategy, brand voice development, inclusive team management, and equitable funding. The cases are embedded throughout the graduate programs, offering students multiple opportunities to engage with Inventaire from marketing, operations, supply chain, and leadership perspectives. Further, the Inventaire cases draw on traditions of fabulation and speculative case writing in the social sciences.[30] This approach allows for the design of scenarios that foreground intersectional leadership identities often absent in existing case libraries. Fictionalization permits exploration of emerging dilemmas without proprietary restrictions and enables curricular flexibility across programs. However, it also raises questions of verisimilitude and transferability, requiring transparency about its pedagogical aims. One case, featured in the Global Fashion Supply Chain Management program, challenges students to assess Inventaire's procurement strategy for a new line of adaptive, gender-fluid apparel made from biodegradable, certified regenerative materials. Students are tasked with evaluating the feasibility and ethical implications of sourcing from a network of small-scale artisan suppliers in the Global South who specialize in plant-based textiles, while also maintaining transparent labor practices and meeting the design requirements of non-binary consumers with varying mobility needs. This specific case required students to balance logistical realities with inclusive design mandates and sustainability goals. As part of the exercise, students conducted supplier risk assessments, evaluated certifications for textile innovation (e.g., Cradle to Cradle, OEKO-TEX, GOTS), and proposed sourcing models that center co-development with local producers rather than extractive purchasing. Students were also introduced to frameworks from disability justice and design justice movements to evaluate how traditional supply chain structures exclude differently abled and gender-diverse consumers by failing to accommodate product needs or represent them in procurement strategy.

Students' reflections revealed two core themes. First, students acknowledged that inclusive sourcing requires deeper engagement with producers as co-creators rather than mere suppliers. As one student wrote, "This case totally shifted how I think about supply chain transparency...it's not just about where stuff's made, it's about who actually has power in the process". Another added, "Digging into this case made it clear. You can't treat sustainability and equity like add-ons but you gotta built it in from the jump". Second, students reflected on the lack of representation of people with disabilities and gender-diverse consumers within conventional sourcing frameworks and design pipelines. As one student noted, "Fashion's always hyped-up innovation, but no one really asks *who* it's for. This assignment made me realize design still defaults to the 'normal' consumer way too much". Another wrote, "I'd never thought about sourcing being non-binary and not just in who the product's for, but in how it's actually developed and made. That blew my mind a little". By using Inventaire as a through-line across programs, students not only gain repeated exposure to inclusive strategy but are also challenged to apply those values in distinct functional contexts, marketing, merchandising, sourcing, and leadership, deepening their critical thinking and reinforcing the centrality of justice-based innovation in contemporary fashion. This integration affirms Inventaire's value as more than a fictional case study: it is a curricular framework that enables faculty to teach across silos and build student capacity for equity-oriented decision-making across the fashion value chain.

Victoria's Secret, founded in 1977, became one of the most dominant lingerie brands in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, shaping global ideals of femininity through its televised fashion shows and advertising. Its cultural significance rests on its ability to define and disseminate a particular aspirational image of beauty. The Victoria's Secret case[31] was selected for its resonance with key themes

30. Delphi Carstens, "Toward a Pedagogy of Speculative Fabulation," *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning*, Vol. 8, no. SI (2020).

31. Bardey and Mehdiratta, "Consumer Behavior and Identity."

in fashion branding and public relations: aspiration, representation, identity, and consumer backlash. Students examined the brand's historical market dominance, critically analyzing the cultural and ideological signals embedded in its visual campaigns, runway shows, and product offerings. Students also evaluated the strategic consequences of exclusion particularly the brand's resistance to evolving social norms around gender, body image, and race. The case functioned as both a prompt for applied strategic thinking and a mirror through which students could reflect on their own values, assumptions, and lived experiences. It also served as a gateway for examining contemporary alternatives such as Savage X Fenty, whose inclusive branding practices, ranging from product design to casting, have challenged and redefined industry standards. As a point of clarification, this case study was written before Victoria's Secret began adopting more inclusive practices in 2021, culminating in the 2024 brand campaign, which featured more diverse representation in both runway shows and advertising. Albeit, most students felt that these changes were driven more by market pressure than by a genuine commitment to inclusion.

To structure engagement with the case, students were assigned a semester long project with weekly or bi-weekly deliverables. Students were required to:

- Analyze the visual identity, brand equity, and consumer segmentation of Victoria's Secret.

- Identify the role of exclusionary practices in shaping the brand's aspirational narrative and eventual alienation of key demographics.

- Propose a revised branding strategy that centers inclusivity, intersectional awareness, and long-term market relevance.

- Contrast Victoria's Secret with an inclusive brand of their choosing (e.g., Chromat, Savage X Fenty) to support their strategic recommendations.

- Complete a written reflective memo connecting the case content to their personal worldview and understanding of inclusive branding.

A key goal of the assignment was to assess students' ability to recognize and apply intersectionality in brand analysis. The grading rubric was designed around four equally weighted criteria:

1. Analytical Depth (25%): Ability to critically assess the brand's strategic positioning and the sociocultural dynamics influencing its decline.

2. Intersectional Awareness (25%): Engagement with how disability, race, gender, body size, sexuality, and other identity dimensions intersect in shaping brand meaning and consumer experience.

3. Strategic Creativity (25%): Innovation, feasibility, and coherence of the revised brand strategy, including inclusive messaging, design, and leadership implications.

4. Critical Reflexivity (25%): Insightfulness and vulnerability in the student's reflection on how their identity, assumptions, or lived experiences shaped their analysis.

This rubric model operationalizes intersectionality as a core evaluative dimension rather than a peripheral learning objective. It signaled to students that equity considerations are not only ethical and personal but academically and professionally essential.

Generating and Analyzing Student Feedback

The study's qualitative data draws from three sources: (1) voluntary short reflections (250–400 words) submitted by students, (2) selected course assignments analyzed with permission, and (3) classroom observational notes. Participation in the reflective component was elective, and all student responses were anonymized. Analysis followed a multi-stage coding process, beginning with open coding, then grouping into broader themes, and finally axial coding to identify relationships and shifts in perspective. Thematic analysis was conducted through qualitative data analysis (QDA), beginning with open coding to identify key ideas and sentiments. Codes were then grouped into broader themes. Axial coding refined these categories by examining relationships between themes, revealing shifts in perspective and

critical consciousness. This structured QDA approach ensured rigor, transparency, and reliability in interpreting student insights. Emergent themes included:

1) Rethinking Aspiration: Students critiqued former ideals of femininity, success, and desirability that they once accepted uncritically. Through the lens of the Victoria's Secret case, they confronted how cultural norms embedded in branding can shape self-image, aspirations, and notions of worth, especially for those growing up exposed to narrow archetypes of beauty and identity. Many students reflected on how the brand's highly stylized representations of "the ideal woman" had subtly informed their own expectations about gender presentation, attractiveness, and consumer identity, often at the expense of self-acceptance and authenticity. The assignment prompted a re-evaluation of what it means for a brand to be aspirational. Students began to distinguish between aspiration based on exclusivity and unattainability versus aspiration rooted in empowerment, relatability, and belonging. Several shared that they once admired Victoria's Secret not because they saw themselves reflected, but because they had internalized the brand's authority over what was considered feminine, sexy, or successful. In contrast, brands like Savage X Fenty were praised not only for their inclusivity but for expanding the emotional and cultural vocabulary around what aspiration could look and feel like. Exemplified by the following anonymized quotes:

   • "I didn't even realize how much my idea of beauty as a teen was shaped by Victoria's Secret. Back then, I legit thought *that* was the blueprint for female worth". (Student #3)

   • "This assignment really called me out! I didn't notice how often I thought how exclusivity with a brand being cool or high-end". (Student #8)

   • "It totally shifted my perspective. Now I care way more about brands being real and inclusive than trying to look flawless". (Student #11)

2) The Cost of Exclusion: Many cited surprise at how deeply consumer trust eroded when Victoria's Secret ignored calls for inclusion. Students initially viewed the brand's image as a byproduct of outdated aesthetics or weak marketing, but upon closer analysis, recognized a broader pattern of institutional resistance to change. The case study revealed how exclusion, particularly when embedded in leadership decisions, casting, product design, and public statements, accumulates reputational damage over time, eroding brand equity and consumer loyalty. Students noted that the brand's refusal to adapt was perceived not as neutrality but as active marginalization. Several reflections indicated a newfound understanding that inaction in the face of evolving cultural values is itself a strategic choice one that communicates which consumers are prioritized and which are rendered invisible. Students also grappled with the tension between brand legacy and accountability, questioning whether a company so firmly rooted in exclusivity could meaningfully pivot. Exemplified by the following anonymized quotes:

   • "I assumed they lost sales to digital brands but it's clear now that their exclusionary strategy directly damaged their relevance". (Student #14)

   • "I used to think inclusivity was just about marketing optics. This case helped me see it's actually a core driver of consumer loyalty". (Student #6)

   • "Consumers remember when a brand makes them feel invisible and they don't forgive it easily". (Student #7)

3) Inclusive Branding as Strategy: Reflections noted that inclusion was not just morally compelling, but essential for long-term brand loyalty. Students moved beyond the binary of diversity for ethics versus branding for profit to explore how the two are interlinked; how genuine inclusion enhances not only social responsibility but also market positioning, relevance, and customer lifetime value. Through the elements of the case study, faculty invited students to think of branding not as neutral aesthetics but as value-laden strategy, where decisions about representation, product development, and leadership composition directly influence consumer trust, emotional connection, and brand advocacy. Many students expressed a shift in how they conceptualized inclusivity from a

performative campaign element to a foundational brand logic. They noted that brands like Savage X Fenty succeed not because they merely feature diverse models, but because inclusivity is embedded at every level of the business model from supply chain to storytelling. In contrast, Victoria's Secret was perceived as reactive and inconsistent, which undermined credibility. Students observed that when inclusion is treated as an afterthought or a seasonal theme, it not only rings hollow but risks alienating a broad and increasingly intersectional consumer base. Exemplified by the following anonymized quotes:

- "I used to think they just got beat out by online brands, but now I see it, being exclusionary totally wrecked their vibe and relevance". (Student #14)

- "I thought inclusivity was just a PR thing, but this case made me realize it's actually what keeps people coming back to a brand". (Student #6)

- "People don't forget how a brand made them feel. If you make them feel invisible, they're out, and they're not coming back". (Student #7)

Several students described shifts in personal perspective, articulating how the assignment caused them to reconsider both their own consumer behavior and their assumptions about professional branding success. Others noted the dissonance between classroom theories of inclusivity and what they observed in mainstream marketing practices. Importantly, a subset of students identified the absence of disability inclusion as a critical gap in the Victoria's Secret brand narrative. These reflections noted that while body size, race, and gender identity were beginning to be addressed in mainstream branding discourse, disability remained marginalized or invisible. Exemplified by the following quotes:

- "Even now, I never see anyone using a mobility aid in these campaigns. That kind of silence says everything". (Student #17)

- "So many brands still push this ableist 'ideal,' and Victoria's Secret didn't even pretend to question it". (Student #3)

- "If you're not designing with disabled people in mind from day one, it's not real inclusion, it's just disability-washing". (Student #23)

This gap sparked class-wide dialogue about the difference between visual diversity and structural inclusion, reinforcing the need to expand intersectional analysis to account for disabled bodies and access-centered design.

Classroom Dialogue and Observational Notes

During in-class discussions, students engaged in robust debate over what constitutes "authentic" representation, the difference between inclusion and tokenism, and whether legacy brands can reclaim relevance without fundamentally restructuring their leadership and values. The instructor maintained observation notes capturing moments of emotional resonance, generative discomfort, and peer-to-peer challenge. One particularly impactful exchange occurred when a student questioned the ethics of nostalgia in branding, whether brands like Victoria's Secret deliberately evoke past ideals that exclude marginalized consumers. This led to an extended conversation on collective memory, trauma, and the politics of brand storytelling. Exemplified by the following quotes:

- "Their whole brand was built on a fantasy that only fit a tiny group of people and now that fantasy's falling apart". (Student #17)

- "Yeah, nostalgia marketing hits but if it's built on leaving people out, maybe it's not worth holding onto". (Student #9)

- "We seriously need to ask: when we hype up these legacy brands, who are we actually remembering and who's getting erased?" (Student #22)

Pedagogical Insights

Both the Victoria's Secret case and the Inventaire series proved to be highly effective instructional tools, enabling students to bridge theoretical frameworks with applied strategy across branding, sourcing, and leadership. These cases invited students to confront real-world complexities while centering voices and experiences often marginalized in traditional fashion business curricula. By designing assignments and assessment rubrics through an intersectional lens, each case affirmed that inclusive and justice-oriented business practices are not peripheral considerations, but foundational to ethical, strategic leadership in the contemporary fashion industry.

Practical Strategies for Educators

Advancing equity in fashion education through culturally inclusive case studies demands intentional instructional strategies, collaborative structures, and institutional commitment. This section outlines evidence-based practices for educators aiming to embed intersectionality, disability inclusion, and global perspectives into their teaching using case-based methods. These strategies recognize the ongoing need to challenge the dominant epistemologies while leveraging technology and pedagogy to foster inclusive and critically engaged learning environments.

One of the most consequential decisions educators make is the selection of instructional materials. Culturally inclusive case studies must move beyond superficial representation toward authentic narratives that reflect the complexities of identity, power, and economic practice. Educators should prioritize cases that: (1) are authored by, centered on, or co-developed with individuals from marginalized communities; (2) highlight systemic barriers and community-centered strategies; and (3) present ethical dilemmas, trade-offs, and ambiguities rather than "hero stories".

For example, TomboyX, a B Corp-certified LGBTQIA+ size- and gender-inclusive brand, provides a rich context for examining how brands navigate ethical marketing, customer segmentation, and inclusive product design while resisting the commodification of identity.[32] Similarly, the fictionalized Inventaire case series models how real-world dilemmas, from racialized marketing backlash to inaccessible supply chain models, can be explored through applied learning. Cases featuring disabled founders or adaptive fashion innovators should be prioritized, aligning with calls to normalize disability within narratives of innovation rather than as inspirational exceptions.[33]

Importantly, the sourcing process must be iterative and transparent. Educators should vet cases with advisory groups, including scholars from the disability community and BIPOC experts, and assess for bias, tokenism, or erasure. Students should also be invited to critique or co-curate case selections, promoting democratic learning environments and accountability in material sourcing.[34] Assessment practices can align with inclusive pedagogy goals. Embedding intersectionality into rubrics enables educators to evaluate how well students engage with the social, cultural, and ethical dimensions of fashion, not merely their technical execution. Criteria might include:

- Critical reflexivity: Does the student analyze how power and identity shape fashion systems?

- Contextual empathy: Does the project reflect a deep understanding of the case subject's lived experience?

- Complexity and nuance: Does the student avoid overgeneralization and recognize tensions between ideals and practice?

Rubrics can also reward students for citing non-dominant sources, incorporating multiple stakeholder perspectives, or reflecting on their positionality. These elements operationalize intersectional theory in

32. Friedman, Evans, and Barry, "Intersectionality Gets Fashionably Fat."

33. Garland-Thomson, "Integrating Disability."; Guffey, "Selwyn Goldsmith's Designing for the Disabled."

34. Rogers-Shaw, Carr-Chellman, and Choi, "Universal Design for Learning."

measurable ways, ensuring that inclusion is not an "extra credit" dimension but a core academic standard.[35] Inclusive pedagogy flourishes in interdisciplinary contexts. Co-teaching models that pair faculty from diverse disciplines and/or pair academic faculty with practitioners, offer students a multifaceted understanding of the fashion system. For instance, sustainability instructors might collaborate with marketing faculty to explore the ethical communication of sustainable adaptive fashion products. Case discussions may address how brand narratives shift when examined through both environmental and disability justice lenses.[36] One initiative at the subject institution embeds brand collaborations into graduate coursework to foster inclusive, real-world learning. In a recent collaboration, students worked with a queer-owned intimates brand dedicated to adaptive, body-sovereign design for gender-diverse consumers. To deepen students' understanding of the brand's target consumer, the graduate marketing professor partnered with an undergraduate faculty member specializing in queer studies. This co-teaching model enriched student perspectives on inclusive branding by grounding marketing strategies in the lived experiences and identities of LGBTQ+ communities. Cross-listed courses between fashion and disability studies, sociology, business ethics, or digital humanities foster deeper connections between theory and practice. These collaborations also model the kind of cross-functional teamwork increasingly demanded in the fashion industry, where marketing, design, compliance, and strategy teams must align equity goals. Faculty development programs should offer resources and incentives for co-teaching, especially when labor is inequitably distributed in the integration of IDEA (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, & Access) content.[37] Digital storytelling, such as using video interviews, podcasts, or interactive timelines, humanizes case subjects and provides students with multi-sensory entry points into complex issues. For instance, students might create a multimedia narrative around a fictional fashion entrepreneur, who uses a wheelchair, navigating access barriers in global trade, building visual and oral literacy alongside content analysis. Such methods are especially effective for neurodivergent learners or students with alternative learning preferences, aligning with UDL principles.[38] When used critically, AI and storytelling can support the democratization of fashion education content and delivery.

Suggestions for Institutional Support

No single educator can transform curricula into isolation. Institutions must invest in structural support that allow inclusive pedagogy to thrive. Recommendations include:

- Professional development: Offer workshops on disability-inclusive design, intersectional pedagogy, and case method adaptation

- Inclusive syllabi templates: Provide institutional resources that scaffold diverse reading lists, case libraries, and learning outcomes aligned with social justice goals.

- Funding for case creation: Support faculty in developing original case studies that feature underrepresented leaders, including stipends for community co-authors or research participants.

- Feedback loops: Implement systems for students and external partners to assess case relevance, inclusivity, and impact, enabling iterative improvement and responsiveness.

As fashion education continues to evolve, these strategies ensure that inclusive case studies do not remain peripheral experiments but become central to the pedagogical architecture of graduate programs and serve as transformative opportunities for students. When embedded systemically, they shift the foundation of how business is taught, centering empathy, ethics, and equity as core learning outcomes. This reorientation not only prepares students to succeed in a diverse global marketplace but also positions them as agents of structural change within the fashion industry.

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35. Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers*; Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching*.

36. Garland-Thomson, "Feminist Disability Studies."

37. Ross-Gordon and Procknow, "Disability, Adult Education, and Inclusion."

38. Rogers-Shaw, Carr-Chellman, and Choi, "Universal Design for Learning."

Summary and Next Steps

This paper argued that inclusive case studies are not simply tools for improved representation; they are transformative interventions that reshape how students engage with power, identity, and strategy within the global fashion system.[39] Through the integration of culturally inclusive, intersectional, and disability-aware case studies into graduate fashion curricula, students do more than analyze market dynamics; they interrogate the ideological frameworks that underpin brand narratives and consumer cultures.[40] Inclusive case pedagogy moves students from passive recipients of industry norms to critical actors capable of imagining and enacting more equitable futures.[41] By embedding the fictionalized yet real-world-informed Inventaire case series and the Victoria's Secret case[42] into branding, marketing, and sustainability courses, this research demonstrates a replicable model of curricular innovation. These case studies, selected for their complexity and cultural relevance, offer empirical insights into how students internalize, resist, and reframe dominant branding paradigms.[43] Thematic analysis of student reflections, assignments, and classroom interactions revealed that inclusive case studies do not merely elicit academic performance, but they evoke personal reflection, critical consciousness, and affective engagement.[44] Students questioned long-held assumptions about aspiration, leadership, desirability, and consumer loyalty. They redefined inclusivity as not only a moral imperative but as a strategic competency essential to brand relevance and market success.[45]

This work contributes pedagogically by operationalizing intersectionality within course design, assessment rubrics, and reflective practices.[46] It also provides an empirical basis for how inclusive teaching materials cultivate applied knowledge, empathy, and power analysis across diverse student cohorts.[47] By integrating Universal Design for Learning principles[48] and aligning content with marginalized voices and bodies, including disabled, queer, racialized, and size-diverse entrepreneurs,[49] this paper offers practical curricular strategies that are academically rigorous, socially responsive, and transformative. As fashion education contends with increasing demands for relevance, equity, and transformation, educators and institutions must move beyond superficial commitments to diversity and instead reimagine their curricular frameworks through critical, inclusive lenses.[50] This involves questioning who is centered in course materials, how success is defined, and whose experiences are validated in the classroom. It also requires investing in professional development, inclusive assessment practices, and the co-creation of knowledge with communities historically excluded from fashion leadership.[51] Inclusive case studies are not elective enhancements but rather are foundational to preparing students for ethical leadership and transformative action in a complex global industry. The future of fashion education depends on our willingness to teach not just what the industry is, but what it can and must become.

39. Ahmed, "Towards a Decolonial Feminist"; Garland-Thomson, "Feminist Disability Studies"; Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching*.

40. Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex."; Friedman, Evans, and Barry, "Intersectionality Gets Fashionably Fat."

41. Gay, Culturally Responsive Teaching; Ladson-Billings, "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy."

42. Bardey and Mehdiratta, "Consumer Behavior and Identity."

43. Friedman, Evans, and Barry, "Intersectionality Gets Fashionably Fat,"; Wei, "Fashion and Intersectionality."

44. Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching*; Topaz, Zane, and Aubrecht, "Race- and Gender-Based Under-Representation."

45. Ahmed, "Towards a Decolonial Feminist"; Ross-Gordon and Procknow, "Disability, Adult Education, and Inclusion."

46. Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex"; Ladson-Billings, "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy."

47. Garland-Thomson, "Feminist Disability Studies"; Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching*.

48. Rogers-Shaw, Carr-Chellman, and Choi, "Universal Design for Learning."

49. Garland-Thomson, "Feminist Disability Studies"; Friedman, Evans, and Barry, "Intersectionality Gets Fashionably Fat."

50. Ahmed, "Towards a Decolonial Feminist"; UK Fashion and DEI Report.

51. Guffey, "Selwyn Goldsmith's Designing for the Disabled."; Ross-Gordon and Procknow, "Disability, Adult Education, and Inclusion."

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