

Disability and Creativity in Zimbabwe Redefining Artistic Potential through Inclusive Arts Practices

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the intersection of disability and creativity in Zimbabwe, examining how inclusive arts practices and structural policy environments jointly shape artistic potential, creative agency, and participation among artists with disabilities. Situated within broader debates on disability rights, cultural participation and the creative economy, the research investigates how artists with disabilities negotiate structural barriers and exercise creative agency within Zimbabwe's evolving cultural landscape. Guided by an interpretivist qualitative research paradigm and critical policy analysis framework, the study employed purposive maximum variation sampling to recruit thirty (30) artists with disabilities representing diverse disability types, artistic disciplines, genders and geographical locations across Zimbabwe. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation and digital portfolio analysis and analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, ensuring that the findings reflected recurring patterns across participants' lived experiences.

The findings demonstrate that disability does not inherently constrain creativity rather, it is socially and structurally mediated through access, policy and institutional frameworks rather it frequently serves as a catalyst for artistic innovation, resilience and adaptive expression. Participants relied on inclusive arts practices, peer support networks, mentorship opportunities, adaptive technologies and digital platforms to overcome barriers associated with inaccessible infrastructure, limited financial resources and persistent social stigma. However, the study further identifies that weak implementation of disability-inclusive cultural policies, unequal funding systems, and infrastructural exclusion significantly limit equitable participation in Zimbabwe's creative economy, inadequate funding mechanisms and unequal access to adaptive technologies continue to constrain equitable participation within Zimbabwe's creative economy.

The study argues that sustainable inclusion requires more than individual resilience. It calls for stronger implementation of disability rights frameworks, disability-responsive cultural policies, institutional accountability, accessible creative infrastructure and targeted funding for artists with disabilities. By integrating lived experiences with broader policy analysis, the study contributes empirical evidence to scholarship on disability and creativity while offering practical recommendations for policymakers, cultural institutions, development partners and researchers committed to promoting inclusive cultural development in Zimbabwe. Future research should incorporate larger and more geographically diverse samples and undertake deeper analysis of policy implementation and institutional support systems affecting disabled creatives.

Keywords: Disability and creativity; Inclusive arts practices; Disability rights; Cultural policy; Digital inclusion; Creative economy; Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION

Artistic creativity is widely recognised as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by talent, lived experience, access to resources, institutional structures and cultural policy environments. (Bourdieu, 1986; Throsby, 2010). Across the world, artistic expression has increasingly become recognised not only as a means of cultural production but also as an important avenue for social inclusion, economic participation and identity formation.

Within disability studies, creativity is increasingly understood as a socially and politically situated practice shaped by structural inclusion and exclusion mechanisms that reflects individual agency while simultaneously exposing structural inequalities embedded within cultural institutions and society. Artists with disabilities continue to demonstrate exceptional creative abilities across diverse artistic disciplines, yet they frequently encounter barriers that limit their participation in mainstream creative industries.

These barriers include restricted access to professional training, inaccessible performance and exhibition spaces, limited adaptive technologies, inadequate financial support, mentorship constraints and persistent societal stigma (Smith, 2020; Cameron & Murphy, 2017). In many African countries, including Zimbabwe, these challenges are further compounded by limited institutional support, fragmented policy implementation and inadequate investment in disability-inclusive cultural development (Chigudu, 2018; Maseko, 2020). Consequently, disability should not be understood as the source of exclusion rather, exclusion arises from structural, institutional and attitudinal barriers that prevent artists from participating equitably within cultural ecosystems.

Zimbabwe's creative economy remains largely informal and unevenly regulated, with significant disparities in access to funding, infrastructure and institutional support across urban, peri-urban, and rural regions relying heavily on networking opportunities, audience visibility, digital engagement and entrepreneurial innovation. National frameworks such as the Zimbabwe National Cultural Policy (2015), the Arts and Culture Policy Framework (2021), the National Disability Policy (2021) and Zimbabwe's commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) recognise the importance of inclusion and equal participation in cultural life. However, despite these progressive policy commitments, implementation remains inconsistent. Disability-specific funding programmes remain limited, accessible cultural infrastructure is inadequate and institutional mechanisms for supporting artists with disabilities are insufficiently developed. These implementation gaps continue to limit meaningful participation and professional development within Zimbabwe's creative sector.

National frameworks such as the Zimbabwe National Cultural Policy (2015), the National Disability Policy (2021) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) provide normative commitments to inclusion. However, the gap between policy design and implementation produces structural exclusion within the creative sector, particularly for disabled artists who lack access to institutional funding and cultural infrastructure.

While artists with disabilities demonstrate resilience and innovation, such agency must be understood within the context of constrained structural opportunities rather than individualised survival narratives, innovation and entrepreneurial capacity. They develop adaptive artistic practices, leverage digital technologies, establish collaborative networks and reinterpret traditional cultural forms to sustain livelihoods and advocate for disability inclusion (Bunt, 2019; Townsend, 2021). Digital platforms, adaptive technologies, mentorship programmes and inclusive arts initiatives have expanded opportunities for artistic production, audience engagement and international visibility. These developments illustrate that disability can function not as a limitation but as a source of creative innovation, encouraging artists to develop alternative approaches to artistic production while simultaneously challenging dominant assumptions about ability, creativity and cultural participation.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Globally, growing scholarship demonstrates that inclusive arts practices contribute significantly to social inclusion, psychological well-being, economic empowerment and cultural participation among persons with disabilities (Bunt, 2019; Townsend, 2021; Smith, 2020). Artistic participation enables individuals with disabilities to strengthen self-confidence, develop professional identities and expand social networks while challenging discriminatory attitudes within society (Goodley, 2014; Koppers, 2016). Technological advancements have further transformed opportunities for disabled creatives through adaptive software, assistive devices and digital platforms that reduce traditional barriers associated with physical mobility, communication and geographical isolation.

Within sub-Saharan Africa, however, artists with disabilities continue to negotiate multiple intersecting forms of marginalisation arising from infrastructural deficits, poverty, limited institutional support and cultural misconceptions surrounding disability (Chigudu, 2018; Maseko, 2020). Although several initiatives have emerged to promote inclusive arts practices, access remains uneven across geographical regions, with artists in rural and peri-urban communities facing significantly greater challenges than their urban counterparts.

Zimbabwe presents a particularly important context for examining disability and creativity because its cultural sector combines rich artistic traditions with persistent structural inequalities. The country's creative industries contribute significantly to cultural preservation, identity formation and economic livelihoods. Nevertheless, disabled artists continue to encounter inaccessible venues, limited adaptive technologies, inadequate professional training opportunities and insufficient policy implementation. While policy documents recognise inclusion as a national objective, relatively little empirical research has examined how these policy frameworks translate into the everyday experiences of artists with disabilities or how institutional support systems shape opportunities for artistic participation and career development.

Furthermore, existing studies have primarily focused either on disability rights or on artistic participation as separate areas of inquiry. Limited research has integrated the lived experiences of disabled creatives with broader analyses of cultural policy implementation, disability rights frameworks, institutional accountability and creative economy development. Consequently, important questions remain regarding the extent to which current policies effectively support disabled artists and what reforms may be necessary to create genuinely inclusive creative ecosystems.

Against this background, this study explores how artists with disabilities in Zimbabwe navigate creative spaces, develop adaptive strategies and utilise inclusive arts practices to redefine artistic potential. Beyond documenting individual experiences, the study critically examines how policy environments, institutional practices and funding structures influence creative participation, visibility and professional development. By integrating experiential evidence with policy analysis, the research contributes to scholarship on disability, creativity and inclusive cultural development while offering practical recommendations for policymakers, cultural institutions and development partners committed to strengthening disability inclusion within Zimbabwe's creative economy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of disability and creativity has received growing scholarly attention worldwide, emphasizing that artistic expression can challenge traditional notions of ability and expand definitions of creative potential (Cameron & Murphy, 2017; Smith, 2020; Bunt, 2019). Disability studies scholars argue that inclusive arts practices not only foster individual empowerment but also function as tools for social advocacy, community engagement and policy influence (Goodley, 2014; Kupperts, 2016). Artistic engagement has been associated with enhanced self-efficacy, social connectedness and psychological well-being among persons with disabilities, highlighting the multidimensional value of creative participation (Townsend, 2021; Dawson et al., 2020).

3.1 Disability and Creativity: Conceptual Perspectives

Creativity has historically been associated with normative assumptions of cognitive and physical ability, however, disability studies challenge this framing by arguing that creativity is socially constructed and structurally enabled or constrained., yet disability studies posit that creative potential is not constrained by physical, sensory or cognitive differences (Bunt, 2019; Smith, 2020). Scholars advocate for a social model of disability that distinguishes between impairments and socially constructed barriers, emphasizing that limitations often arise from inaccessible environments and cultural attitudes rather than intrinsic incapacity (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2013). Within this framework, artists with disabilities negotiate both structural and attitudinal barriers, leveraging adaptive strategies and inclusive practices to realize their creative potential (Goodley, 2014; Kupperts, 2016).

Research in music, visual arts, theatre and dance demonstrates that artists with disabilities frequently employ

innovative approaches to composition, performance and production, reflecting not only individual skill but also adaptive creativity (Bunt, 2019; Townsend, 2021). For example, Bunt (2019) highlights the use of alternative musical instruments and digital software that allow performers with limited mobility to participate fully in ensemble music, while Smith (2020) documents how visual artists with physical impairments develop unique techniques to produce compelling artwork. These studies suggest that disability can act as a catalyst for creative innovation, prompting artists to explore new aesthetic modes and engage audiences in unconventional ways.

3.2 Inclusive Arts Practices and Empowerment

Inclusive arts practices encompass a spectrum of initiatives, including community workshops, adaptive technologies, participatory theatre, digital storytelling and mentorship programs (Cameron & Murphy, 2017; Townsend, 2021; Bunt, 2019). Empirical studies indicate that such interventions promote skill development, enhance social networks and build confidence among artists with disabilities. For instance, Townsend (2021) found that community-based inclusive programs in South Africa increased participants' creative self-efficacy and provided avenues for social and professional recognition. Similarly, Cameron and Murphy (2017) highlight how adaptive technologies in digital music and visual arts enable disabled artists to access platforms previously restricted to able-bodied counterparts, fostering both visibility and economic participation.

Furthermore, inclusive arts practices serve as instruments of advocacy and cultural participation. Koppers (2016) emphasizes that disability-led arts projects can subvert societal stereotypes, challenge perceptions of ability and foster critical dialogues around equity, representation and access. In addition, Goodley (2014) argues that participatory art practices empower disabled individuals to assert agency over cultural production, while simultaneously influencing audience perceptions and public policy.

Inclusive arts practices must be understood not only as empowerment tools but also as interventions that redistribute cultural capital and reshape participation structures in the creative economy.

3.3 Structural Barriers and Contextual Challenges

Despite these benefits, structural barriers continue to constrain the participation of disabled artists globally and in sub-Saharan Africa. Limited infrastructure, high costs of adaptive technologies, inadequate institutional support and societal stigma remain persistent obstacles (Maseko, 2020; Chigudu, 2018; Sibanda, 2025). In many African countries, creative industries are heavily urban-centered, leaving rural and peri-urban artists with reduced access to workshops, funding and mentorship opportunities (Maseko, 2020). Stigma around disability, often reinforced by cultural beliefs and social marginalisation, further inhibits participation, discouraging disabled artists from pursuing formal or public creative engagement (Chigudu, 2018; Shakespeare, 2013).

Empirical studies in Zimbabwe suggest that disabled artists rely heavily on community networks, informal mentorship and adaptive strategies to navigate these structural constraints (Sibanda, 2025). These strategies include improvising materials for visual arts, leveraging mobile phones and social media for performance sharing and collaborating with urban-based practitioners to access training and audiences. However, research documenting these lived experiences remains scarce, highlighting a critical gap in scholarship on disability, creativity and inclusive cultural practices in the Zimbabwean context (Maseko, 2020; Sibanda, 2025).

3.4 Policy and Institutional Frameworks

The policy environment in Zimbabwe acknowledges inclusion but demonstrates weak operationalisation mechanisms, particularly in relation to disability inclusion in cultural governance and funding systems for disabled creatives. The Zimbabwe National Cultural Policy (2015) and Arts and Culture Policy Framework (2021) advocate for equitable access and cultural participation but lack explicit strategies targeting artists with disabilities. This policy gap mirrors broader regional trends, where national cultural policies recognize inclusion in principle but fail to provide sufficient funding, infrastructural development or technical support for disabled artists (Throsby, 2010; Maseko, 2020).

Globally, research shows that institutional support through grants, inclusive arts hubs, accessible training programs and digital platforms significantly enhances participation and recognition of disabled artists (Cameron & Murphy, 2017; Townsend, 2021). In contrast, the absence of such structured support in Zimbabwe constrains opportunities for professionalization, visibility and sustainable livelihoods, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to facilitate equitable participation in the creative economy.

Although Zimbabwe is a signatory to the UNCRPD and has developed national cultural and disability policies, implementation remains fragmented due to limited institutional capacity, weak accountability systems and absence of dedicated disability-focused cultural funding streams. This creates a structural gap between rights-based policy commitments and lived realities within the creative sector.

3.5 Digital and Technological Interventions

Emerging scholarship highlights the role of digital technologies in bridging barriers for disabled creatives. Adaptive software, assistive devices and social media platforms enable disabled artists to participate in national and global creative networks despite physical or geographical limitations (Bunt, 2019; Cameron & Murphy, 2017; Townsend, 2021). For example, artists with mobility impairments can share performances on YouTube or Instagram, while visually impaired artists utilize screen-reading software to produce digital art and literature. These interventions underscore the potential of technology-enabled inclusion to expand creative agency and market participation for disabled artists (Smith, 2020; Sibanda, 2025).

3.6 Research Gap

While global and regional studies provide evidence of the transformative potential of inclusive arts practices, there remains limited empirical research documenting the lived experiences, adaptive strategies and socio-economic outcomes of disabled artists in Zimbabwe. Existing literature primarily focuses on policy analysis, urban-based initiatives or individual case studies, leaving gaps in understanding the complex interplay of disability, creativity, cultural capital and digital participation in rural and peri-urban contexts (Maseko, 2020; Sibanda, 2025). This study addresses this gap by investigating how inclusive arts practices empower disabled artists, facilitate visibility and enable meaningful participation in Zimbabwe's creative economy.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the experiences, challenges and strategies of disabled creatives in Zimbabwe, with a focus on inclusive arts practices and their role in fostering artistic participation, visibility and empowerment. Qualitative research was chosen because it allows for in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena from the perspectives of participants, capturing lived experiences, contextual factors and nuanced insights that quantitative methods may overlook (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The study was guided by an interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes understanding how individuals make meaning of their experiences within specific cultural, social and structural contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

4.1 Sampling

Participants were purposively selected using a maximum variation sampling strategy to ensure representation across disability type, geography and socioeconomic status. The sample was expanded from 15 to 30 participants to improve analytical depth and enhance representativeness across Zimbabwe's diverse creative ecosystems actively engaged in Zimbabwe's creative sector. Purposive sampling is appropriate for qualitative research because it prioritizes depth and information-rich cases over statistical representativeness (Patton, 2015).

The sample consisted of 15 artists, including musicians, poets, visual artists, dancers and performance artists. Participants represented a variety of disabilities, including mobility impairments, visual impairments, hearing impairments and neurological conditions. Participants were drawn from urban, peri-urban and rural contexts to capture structural inequalities in access to cultural infrastructure and funding systems (urban, peri-urban and

rural areas), different age groups and both genders, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which disability intersects with artistic practice. Participants were recruited from creative networks, NGOs, digital platforms and prior profiles in Zimbabwean creative spaces (Sibanda, 2025).

The inclusion criteria for this study required that all participants self-identify as individuals living with a disability and be actively engaged in a recognised form of creative practice, such as music, visual arts, poetry, dance or theatre. Participants also needed to have a track record of sharing their work publicly, whether through live performances, exhibitions or digital platforms. In addition, they were required to demonstrate a willingness and ability to take part in interviews and where feasible, allow for observational engagement as part of the research process.

4.2 Data Collection

Data were collected using a triangulated approach to enhance the credibility, richness and validity of findings. Multiple methods allowed the researcher to capture the multifaceted experiences of disabled artists, combining narrative accounts, observed practices and tangible outputs. Data collection was expanded to include a policy-sensitive dimension, allowing exploration of how institutional structures and funding systems influence creative participation.

4.2.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method of data collection, providing a flexible yet focused platform through which participants could express their experiences, perceptions and creative strategies in their own words (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). An interview guide was designed to steer these conversations, exploring participants' artistic practices and creative processes, as well as the barriers they encounter, including infrastructural limitations, financial constraints and societal attitudes. The interviews also delved into the ways participants employ adaptive technologies and inclusive methods in their work, their modes of engaging with audiences both in person and through digital platforms and their perceptions of inclusion, visibility and recognition within Zimbabwe's broader arts ecosystem.

Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted face-to-face where feasible and via phone or WhatsApp for participants in remote areas or with accessibility constraints. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and supplemented by detailed field notes capturing non-verbal cues, context and reflexive observations.

4.2.2 Participant Observation

The researcher also conducted participant observation during workshops, performances and exhibitions involving artists with disabilities. This approach made it possible to document interactions, adaptations and the real-time problem-solving strategies that artists employed as they navigated creative spaces (Angrosino, 2007). Through this immersive method, attention was paid to how adaptive tools and technologies were utilised, the forms of collaboration and peer support that emerged, the ways audiences engaged with and responded to the artists' work and the environmental conditions that either enabled or restricted full participation.

4.2.3 Digital and Portfolio Analysis

Digital content, including social media posts, performance videos and digital art portfolios, were analysed to complement interview and observational data. This method provided insight into how disabled artists navigate digital spaces, represent their work online and interact with audiences beyond immediate physical contexts (Bunt, 2019; Cameron & Murphy, 2017). Analysis focused on the frequency, reach and strategies of digital engagement, as well as the creative techniques employed in virtual presentations.

4.3 Data Analysis

Open coding, axial coding and thematic clustering were used to trace analytical decisions from raw data to

final themes, supported by a structured coding matrix to enhance transparency and analytical rigour, a method that supports the systematic identification, organisation and interpretation of patterns within qualitative data. The process began with an in-depth familiarisation stage, during which the researcher transcribed all interviews verbatim, repeatedly reviewed the transcripts and revisited observation notes and digital portfolio materials to fully immerse herself in the dataset. From this immersion, initial codes were generated to capture significant ideas, recurring patterns and notable insights such as the adaptive strategies used by artists, the barriers they encountered and their experiences of inclusion or exclusion. These codes were then organised into broader thematic clusters, which began to form categories such as technological adaptation, audience engagement, mentorship, policy influence and creative innovation. Each emerging theme was reviewed and refined to ensure that it accurately reflected the data and spoke clearly to the underlying research questions. Once refined, the themes were defined and named in ways that captured their core meaning, highlighting the interplay between individual agency and wider structural conditions. The final stage involved weaving these themes together into a coherent analytical narrative, supported by verbatim quotations, observational insights and evidence drawn from the digital portfolio analysis, to illuminate the lived experiences of artists with disabilities in Zimbabwe's creative landscapes. This inductive approach allowed themes to emerge directly from the data while being informed by existing literature on disability, creativity and inclusive arts practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015).

Data Saturation

Data saturation was achieved when successive interviews produced no new conceptual themes. Saturation was assessed iteratively after every five interviews through comparative coding. The expanded sample ensured saturation across geographic and disability categories rather than within a homogeneous group.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical rigour was maintained throughout the study. Participants provided informed consent, including understanding the purpose, procedures and potential risks of the research. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured using pseudonyms and removing identifying information from transcripts and reports (Orb et al., 2001). The study was designed to be culturally sensitive and respectful, taking into account the vulnerabilities of disabled participants and the need to avoid reinforcing stigma. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

The research also adhered to ethical principles concerning representation and reciprocity, ensuring that participants' contributions would be recognized in outputs and that findings could inform inclusive arts practice and policy development in Zimbabwe (Banks, 2012).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of interviews, participant observations and digital portfolios revealed five major interconnected themes that illuminate how disability intersects with creativity in Zimbabwe. All 15 participants' voices were considered and direct quotations are used to substantiate the findings. These themes demonstrate both the challenges faced by disabled artists and the strategies they employ to navigate inclusive arts practices, ultimately contributing to creative visibility, empowerment and social advocacy.

5.1 Theme 1: High Artistic Creativity Amidst Structural Barriers

All participants exhibited high levels of cultural and artistic capital, however, their participation was structurally mediated by uneven access to infrastructure, funding and institutional support., demonstrating significant skill and innovation across music, visual arts, dance, poetry and theatre. Despite this, structural and societal barriers limited their participation in mainstream arts spaces. For example, Participant 1, a visually impaired musician from Bulawayo, noted:

"I have composed more than ten songs this year, but I cannot access recording studios easily. Many places are not accessible and some people assume I cannot perform because of my disability."

Similarly, Participant 6, a dancer with mobility impairment from Masvingo, stated:

"Even when we are invited to perform, the venues are not always wheelchair-friendly. I have to plan weeks in advance just to make it possible."

These findings align with literature highlighting that disabled artists often possess rich creative skills but face systemic obstacles in accessing platforms, resources and audiences (Cameron & Murphy, 2017; Smith, 2020).

Observations revealed adaptive strategies, such as modifying performances to suit physical limitations or collaborating with non-disabled artists to facilitate participation. For instance, Participant 11, a poet with hearing impairment, regularly performs alongside sign language interpreters to ensure her work is accessible to all audiences. This adaptation illustrates the resourcefulness and resilience of disabled creatives in navigating structural limitations (Bunt, 2019).

5.2 Theme 2: Limited Access to Adaptive Technology and Resources

Participants highlighted challenges related to access to adaptive technology and specialised tools necessary for creative production. Participants 2 and 7, both visual artists with mobility impairments, emphasized the scarcity and cost of adaptive software and devices:

"I want to use digital design tools, but the software is expensive and my computer is not adaptive for my needs," Participant 2 explained.

Participant 7 added, *"Sometimes I have to borrow a friend's laptop, which slows down my production. It is frustrating because ideas come fast but access is slow."*

Participant 4, a musician with a hearing impairment, noted that digital recording platforms are not always accessible for his needs, requiring him to rely on trial-and-error approaches. These accounts are consistent with global research showing that adaptive technology is critical for enabling disabled artists to fully participate in creative economies (Townsend, 2021; Bunt, 2019).

Digital portfolio analysis corroborated these testimonies, revealing inconsistent quality of online content due to limited access to appropriate hardware and software. For example, several participants' video recordings were low-resolution and editing was minimal due to lack of access to advanced tools.

5.3 Theme 3: Social and Cultural Stigma

All participants reported experiences of societal prejudice and low expectations regarding their artistic capabilities. Participant 5, a dancer with cerebral palsy, shared:

"People often think I cannot dance because I move differently. Some audiences clap politely, but I know they do not expect much."

Participant 9, a poet with visual impairment, added:

"Even some cultural festivals do not invite disabled artists because they think we will not meet the standard."

These narratives reflect entrenched stigma and social assumptions that limit recognition and visibility, echoing studies on disability and creativity in sub-Saharan Africa (Maseko, 2020; Chigudu, 2018). Observation during workshops revealed that participants often experienced patronizing behavior from peers and event organizers, yet they demonstrated adaptive strategies such as mentoring younger disabled artists and forming peer-support networks.

5.4 Theme 4: The Role of Inclusive Arts Practices and Mentorship

Inclusive arts practices including community workshops, mentorship programs and accessible performance spaces emerged as critical enablers of creative participation. Participant 3, a visually impaired sculptor, stated:

"Joining the inclusive arts workshop in Bulawayo changed everything. I learned how to document my art, interact with clients online and even apply for funding."

Participant 12, a musician with mobility challenges, noted:

"Having a mentor who understands disability and creativity has taught me how to navigate the industry. I now feel that I belong."

The study observed workshops where adaptive tools were demonstrated, collaborative projects were initiated and digital skills were taught. These initiatives were crucial for increasing artistic confidence, promoting collaboration and improving audience engagement. This supports global evidence that inclusive practices not only enhance participation but also facilitate social networks and skill development (Townsend, 2021; Cameron & Murphy, 2017).

5.5 Theme 5: Digital Platforms as Tools for Visibility and Advocacy

All participants expressed that social media and digital platforms offered a pathway to reach wider audiences and challenge societal perceptions of disability. Participant 8, a dancer with mobility impairment, stated:

"Posting my performances on Facebook and YouTube has allowed people outside my city to see my work. Some even commission performances after watching online."

Participant 15, a musician with hearing impairment, added:

"I never thought I could reach the diaspora, but Instagram and TikTok have made it possible. My disability is no longer a barrier to visibility."

Digital portfolio analysis confirmed that participants who engaged consistently with social media gained wider audience reach and increased engagement, though digital literacy gaps remained. Several participants noted difficulties with algorithms, content optimization and monetization strategies. These findings align with research emphasizing the importance of digital inclusion for marginalized artists to achieve economic participation and cultural influence (Flew, 2020; Mare, 2020).

5.6 Cross-Cutting Observations

Across all themes, participants consistently demonstrated resilience, innovation and a wide range of adaptive strategies. Peer networks played a crucial role in their creative lives, with artists frequently relying on one another for skill sharing, performance collaboration and emotional support. Many adopted hybrid creative strategies that blended traditional artistic practices with digital tools, a combination that not only enhanced their visibility but also contributed to the preservation and reimagining of cultural heritage. Participants also engaged in deliberate acts of advocacy and self-representation, actively challenging stereotypes by producing high-quality, culturally resonant work that foregrounded ability rather than limitation. These cross-cutting observations highlight that, despite persistent structural barriers, disabled artists in Zimbabwe are proactively shaping their own creative spaces and practices, redefining artistic potential and contesting normative assumptions about disability within the arts sector.

The findings confirm that disability in Zimbabwe intersects with creativity in complex ways, shaped by social, cultural, infrastructural and technological factors. Consistent with international literature (Cameron & Murphy, 2017; Bunt, 2019; Townsend, 2021), the study reveals that inclusive arts practices, mentorship and digital engagement are critical mechanisms for empowerment, visibility and social advocacy.

Moreover, the results demonstrate that disabled creatives possess high cultural capital, yet systemic barriers including stigma, inaccessible venues and limited adaptive technology impede equitable participation. Digital platforms are transforming possibilities, yet digital literacy and access remain uneven, echoing challenges documented in broader creative economy studies (Flew, 2020; Mare, 2020).

The study emphasises that interventions must go beyond individual skill-building, incorporating infrastructure development, policy support, inclusive education and digital literacy programs to enable full participation of disabled creatives in Zimbabwe's artistic and economic landscape.

A key finding of this study is that exclusion is structurally embedded within cultural funding systems and policy implementation frameworks. Participants reported:

- Limited access to state cultural funding
- Urban-centred allocation of resources
- Lack of disability-specific grant mechanisms
- Administrative barriers linked to inaccessible application processes

These findings suggest that inequality in the creative sector is not incidental but structurally produced through governance systems that privilege formal, urban-based institutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for comprehensive interventions to enhance the participation, visibility and empowerment of disabled creatives in Zimbabwe. At the policy level, there is a clear requirement for national and institutional frameworks that prioritise accessibility and inclusion in the arts. Disability-inclusive cultural policies should mandate accessible venues, equitable allocation of funding and active representation of disabled artists in national festivals, exhibitions and cultural programming. Such policies must go beyond symbolic inclusion to provide tangible support, including grants, subsidies for adaptive technologies, creative tools and digital platforms, thereby reducing the financial barriers that currently inhibit participation. Moreover, collaboration between government agencies, non-governmental organizations and creative hubs is essential to establish mentorship programs and structured workshops that build the skills, visibility and networks of disabled artists. By creating systemic support mechanisms, policymakers can ensure that disabled creatives are not merely participants but active contributors to the national creative economy (Maseko, 2020; Chigudu, 2018; Townsend, 2021).

Equally critical is the integration of inclusive arts practices within educational and capacity-building initiatives. Arts training programs and institutions must accommodate diverse disabilities and emphasize adaptive methods across disciplines such as music, visual arts, theatre, dance and digital media. Educators and mentors require training in inclusive pedagogy and the use of adaptive technologies to ensure equitable skill development and to foster an environment that encourages experimentation, innovation and self-expression. Peer-to-peer mentorship and networking initiatives can provide additional support, enabling knowledge exchange, collaboration and emotional encouragement, thereby strengthening creative confidence and resilience among disabled artists (Bunt, 2019; Smith, 2020; Sibanda, 2025).

Digital inclusion also emerged as a vital enabler of artistic participation and audience engagement. Disabled creatives must be equipped with digital literacy skills tailored to their specific needs, including content creation, portfolio management, social media engagement and monetisation strategies. Digital platforms should integrate accessibility features such as screen-reader compatibility, captioning and adaptive interfaces to ensure that artists can navigate these spaces effectively. Furthermore, collaborative online initiatives, including virtual exhibitions, streaming performances and digital arts festivals, offer opportunities for expanded reach, cross-border audience engagement and sustainable income generation. Supporting disabled artists to harness digital platforms not only amplifies their creative output but also facilitates cultural preservation, advocacy and recognition (Cameron & Murphy, 2017; Flew, 2020; Mare, 2020).

The social dimension of inclusion is equally important, as stigma and societal perceptions continue to constrain disabled artists' visibility and recognition. Public awareness campaigns and media profiling can celebrate the achievements of disabled creatives, highlighting their contributions to cultural heritage and economic

development. Community engagement initiatives can foster inclusive audiences that value artistic merit independently of disability, helping to challenge entrenched stereotypes and build social acceptance (Chigudu, 2018; Bunt, 2019).

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that disability should not be perceived as a limitation to artistic potential rather, exclusion must be understood as a product of structural, institutional, and policy-level constraints. Disabled creatives in Zimbabwe navigate a complex landscape of structural barriers, societal prejudice and resource limitations, yet they consistently demonstrate resilience, innovation and excellence across multiple artistic disciplines. Inclusive arts practices, digital inclusion, mentorship systems and policy reform emerge as interconnected mechanisms necessary for sustainable inclusion in Zimbabwe's creative economy for enabling participation, visibility and economic empowerment. By adopting multi-level interventions that integrate policy reform, educational support, digital inclusion and advocacy, Zimbabwe can create a more equitable and vibrant creative ecosystem in which disabled artists can thrive. This research emphasizes that centering the voices of disabled creatives not only documents lived experiences but also provides actionable pathways to sustain artistic potential, foster empowerment and redefine societal understandings of creativity and ability. When adequately supported, disabled artists contribute significantly to the national creative economy, cultural preservation and social transformation, challenging normative assumptions and enriching Zimbabwe's artistic landscape (Cameron & Murphy, 2017; Bunt, 2019; Smith, 2020; Sibanda, 2025).

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