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Fashion, Work and Disability

Background

Clothing is a product that we wear on a daily basis; as such it is an intimate environment that is in closest proximity to our bodies (Watkins, 1995: 15). It can function in many ways, for example, as a system to provide comfort (e.g. cooling and heating); as a delivery mechanism (e.g. for communication and medication), and as protection. In addition to function, clothing acts as a fashion item with aesthetic and transformative powers. Fashion is a term applied to the prevailing style at a given time, and as such, is in a constant state of change (Tate, 2004: 64). “Keeping up” with fashion is important as a validation of one’s awareness of these changes. Disabled women, who require functional clothing, also need to show that their identity is more than just their disability and as such, fashion provides an outward expression of that identity. Wearing fashionable clothing can also compensate for perceived physical deficiency due to disability, and to disguise or conceal a disability (Kaiser, Freeman & Wingate, 1990: 144). In addition, people with disabilities will make personal adaptations to clothing in order to appear “normal” (Freeman, Kaiser & Wingate, 1985: 45). In fact, one could

argue that the fashionable aesthetic purpose of clothing can be more important than the functional, which reinforces the need for studies that look beyond purely functional components of clothing and add fashion as a necessary dimension. Research has shown that consumers with disabilities actually react negatively to clothing when functional features are noticeable (Wingate, Kaiser & Freeman, 1986: 37). Nisbett & Johnson (1992) found that for female students with a disability, wearing unfashionable clothing can be detrimental when others are forming impressions of their mental competence. In light of these findings, more research should be carried out to suggest improvements to the current availability of fashionable clothing for people with disabilities.

As a niche market, employed women with disabilities are increasing in number, due to legislation (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990) and the support of employers who are willing to adapt the physical work environment. Clothing is also part of an environment; therefore, clothing accommodations should be made as readily available, but this has not been the case in the ready-to-wear clothing market. Clothing with accommodations for disability is available in limited variety from specialized channels, mostly websites (Disability Resource Directory, 2008), but not in the traditional “brick and mortar” channels. To compound the problem, the clothing consumption patterns of employed women differ from those of non-employed women. It has been suggested that employed women look for convenient and time-saving shopping options, place greater value on fashion, and place greater emphasis on combining flattering looks with suitability for work (Rabolt & Drake, 1985-6: 11). They obtain information about suitable

clothing from opinions and attitudes of friends; professional information provided in literature and in person; general information from marketers, and visuals from TV and magazines. The literature demonstrates that a need exists for fashionable, flattering, functional clothing that is suitable for the workplace, available in well-marketed and easily accessible shopping channels. Some companies, such as WheelieChix in England design, promote and sell fashionable, aesthetically pleasing and functional women's clothing for consumers in wheelchairs (www.wheeliechix.com, 2008), but no research exists which looks at combining fashion flair with workplace-appropriate attire for the disabled working woman.

Methods

Many studies have explored functional aspects of clothing design for women with disabilities, but few have attempted to blend functional with fashionable/aesthetic aspects and also incorporate opinions from working women with multiple types of disabilities. In the current study, it was important to gather information about current clothing issues facing these consumers so that solutions could be formulated. The researchers assumed that similar needs for work-appropriate clothing would exist for women with multiple types of disabilities, and also that the fashion aspects of clothing items would play an important part in the responses. The researchers also wanted to find immediate solutions in the current ready-to-wear market that might address specific problems, thereby accommodating an inclusive approach to identify non-stigmatizing items to form a functional and fashionable working wardrobe.

Fifty-five working women with a variety of disabilities responded to open-ended questions that were mailed out and posted on disability support group websites and discussion forums in the United States. The questions asked respondents to relate specific problems they experienced with current clothing and/or accessories that they typically wore to work. All women self-identified as working or intending to return to full-time employment. Their responses were coded and arranged into categories that were related but somewhat exclusive. These categories included: materials, construction and design features, accessories, and retail availability. The profile for the sample showed a variety of physical challenges, either as a 'named' disability or as problems with specific areas of the body. Roughly half were wheelchair users; 20% had multiple sclerosis, 15% had numbness in hands and fingers, 10% had issues with temperature control, 10% had bladder difficulties and 10% had balance problems. The responses showed that overall, women were most concerned about alleviating pressure points in clothing; wearing clothing made from natural fibers; building aesthetic qualities into clothing, and having fastenings that are easy to handle. Specific items which received the most requests for improvements included trousers, pockets and shoes. Generally, the women were asking for more choice in affordable clothing, which is suitable for work and sold in accessible retail environments.

Materials

In regard to materials, many suggestions were made about fabrics and specific types of fibers. Participants requested fabric that is soft and breathable (most of them preferred cotton); they did not want synthetics because of heat and sensitivity (increased

discomfort, mainly in multiple sclerosis patients). People who have disabilities are usually more sensitive to temperature changes and so certain shirts and trousers made of special textiles that help regulate temperature, rather like that used for Underarmor®, would work in theory, but might not, however, have practical applications for the working woman, unless it was used in a fashionable style of garment. Another solution would be to dress in layers, which are easy to put on and take off, according to adjustments in body temperature.

Participants specified that comfort is a necessity for wheelchair users. They would like to have fabrics that are comfortable yet fashionable and appropriate for the workplace. They specifically asked for fabrics that do not wrinkle over the course of the workday and at the same time require little care and maintenance. Looking at new technology (synthetic/natural fiber blends and fabrics treated with wrinkle resistant finishes) would allow women to remain presentable in their line of work. Many companies now carry lines of products made from wrinkle resistant fabrics, as most consumers appreciate the ease of care associated with the product. Chico's, a popular woman's store in the U.S., has a line called 'Travelers', targeted towards women who need clothing which will travel easily in a suitcase, but this type of line would work equally well for women who remain seated for long periods of time in a wheelchair.

Participants were also adamant that 'slippery' fabrics are not useful for wheelchair use; therefore a matte or textured fabric would work best in these cases. Reich and Otten (1987) suggest the following choices in fabrics for users of orthoses; tight weaves and

firm knits because they do not snag as easily as other constructions or develop runs and tears. Also, they suggest lightweight fabrics for people with joint problems-because they do not inhibit range of motion. Women in the current study requested comfortable fabrics, but there were multiple interpretations of the word comfort. Typically, fabric comfort can be determined by a number of factors, such as heat retention, moisture absorption, static build up, hand or texture, among others. Tight specifications and standards in fabric and garment testing by companies seeking to attract this market would help maintain a level of comfort acceptable to individual consumers.

Design and Construction

Much of the feedback related to design focused on the functional aspects of clothing. Women were concerned about alleviating pressure points caused by seams; by fabric bunching, wrinkling or being inappropriately heavy; the design and location of zippers; the location of embroidery and pockets on the back of clothing which rubbed and irritated the skin. To alleviate some of these problems the following suggestions are made: designers could prevent skin damage at pressure points by incorporating features to keep fabric in place and prevent garments from shifting; using a smooth seam construction or seamless construction, such as seamless knitting technology; reducing or eliminating bulk; finding alternatives to zipper fastenings; eliminating tags or embroidery from areas which are in direct contact with the skin, and eliminating back pockets from lower body garments.

Many women mentioned a need for clothing which would adjust for swelling, and go over orthoses, braces or prostheses. To add room for these devices, width could be added to clothing. There are already styles of clothing which could accommodate these needs, such as bootcut or wideleg pants, longer wide-hemmed skirts and loose-fitting blouses and jackets.

There was also a need for durability in clothing. There are problems with finding durable clothes when the wearer has to remain seated for long periods of time (in a wheelchair), wears out clothing at the knees (amputees), and wears out sleeves and armpits (from using crutches). Specific reinforcement in locations which require this extra durability could be built in, especially if the reinforcement is designed discretely and/or fashionably.

Participants made design requests relative to specific items of clothing. Twenty-five requests were related to pants, skirts (ten), dresses (twelve), jackets (nine), bras (five), tops (fifteen) (blouse, shirt, tee, tops, sweaters), and jeans (three) (the complaint in this case was that there are no appropriate styles available for purchase). Requests for specific appropriate business clothing pieces included availability of matching separates, long dresses, suits made for wheelchair users (jackets which are shorter in front), dress slacks, clothing that "looks" professional and put together (no gaping at neckline or stomach, no mismatched outfits, no need to wear tennis shoes with a suit or dress), dresses that drape elegantly when seated and loose fitting dress socks.

Size and fit was an issue for many respondents. They felt that larger and also petite sizes were needed. Many concerns about modesty seemed to be related to garment fit. The length of current tops and jackets were not considered appropriate – they needed to be shorter in front and longer in back; they also felt that trousers should have a longer inseam and be higher in the back, with wider waistbands, cuffs and legs, and skirts and dresses should be longer (both professional and casual dresses).

In light of these problems, the following trouser options were found on the Internet that give examples of appropriate solutions through a mass market format. First, New York and Company's "West End Avenue Wide Leg Pant" (www.nyandcompany.com/nyco/, 2008), featuring an elastic waistband and stretch material for ease of wear, donning and doffing. A poly/rayon/spandex blend material makes them machine washable and less likely to wrinkle when transitioning from wheelchair to walker. The wide leg is not only stylish, but can easily accommodate leg braces and swelling. A design suggestion would be to make the trousers in a higher rise; helping to ease fears of showing undergarments while seated.

Upper body garment options, also found on New York and Company's website include "City Stretch and City Style" vests, a trendy choice for the professional woman. These vests hit at the high hip, which would be appropriate for wheelchair users requesting shirts and jackets that are shorter in the front. They can be easily slipped on and off over a dress, blouse or t-shirt, pulling an outfit together for work or leisure. They are also an alternative to a jacket which can make wearers too hot or limit mobility. An easy

modification is adding hook and loop closures under the buttons to maintain the look without the effort.

Another option would be Ann Taylor Loft's "Long Sleeve 5-Button Shaker Cardigan", and "Short Sleeve Bolero Cardigan". The Shaker cardigan is a textured sweater with large buttons, making it easier for people with less sensation in their fingers to fasten, and the bolero has no closures. Both have shorter torso lengths. A shawl collar on the bolero draws attention up to the face and elongates the body, appropriate for seated wearers, and comes in large and extra large sizes, another request. The Shaker cardigan features a rayon/nylon blend for comfort, drape and durability, while the bolero features a soft mostly cotton blend for comfort. As previously mentioned, women preferred natural fibers or natural/synthetic blends in their garments.

Other style features, which could be adjusted from existing styles such as the button front blouse, can be adapted for use by people with disabilities. The button-front shirt has a front opening that uses buttons that can be troublesome for people who are not in control over their hand movements. If they kept the button look on the front of the shirt and instead used Velcro or some other fastening to attach the shirt it would give the appearance of a regular blouse. This would work the same for pants, where a zipper could be replaced with Velcro for easier fastening. Also, placing the closures in the front of the garment instead of the back would make it easier for people with finger and hand numbness to manipulate.

Other suggestions included an opening in the inseam of trousers to prevent having to disrobe while using the restroom; lace or details near the face to attract attention up; no additions to sleeve cuffs (catch in wheelchair) or on trousers back pockets (pressure points). Paralysis patients need clothes that fasten in the front to make fastening easier for caregivers. Other closure suggestions include eliminating buttons and zippers; using faux Velcro button closures (with attractive buttons visible on the exterior); using front closures only; and an elastic/stretch waist. One design feature that was mentioned in all clothing pieces (shirts, pants, sweaters, skirts, dresses) was the need for practical yet fashionable and discretely placed pockets. Finally, three women mentioned stomach support (or lack thereof), and one suggested a Lycra panel for greater support.

Accessories

There were twenty-three responses in this category, and nineteen out of the twenty-three related to shoes. Participants with Multiple Sclerosis experienced numbness, balance, swelling and stamina problems, so they discussed a need for shoes that will adjust to swelling and remain supportive. Also, many of the women wore orthoses, and require shoes to fit over or around them. Some of the participants wore an ankle-foot orthosis so they wear athletic shoes or Crocs® (to accommodate swelling and balance issues), but these alternatives do not coordinate with dress or business attire.

Participant needs included the following: boots; dress shoes; feminine flats with Velcro straps and without buckles; smooth flat supportive soles; no heels; comfort; no pressure points; greater size range (4.5-12) and wide widths for occasional swelling (D through EEE). Many simply wanted greater availability of “cute” shoes.

Shoes are evidently a priority for the participants. The study was focused on clothing, so the interest in shoes as a fashion item was unanticipated, but should not be overlooked. Making shoes more “fashionable” might be more of an issue since current fashions in shoes usually means trendy styles that are sometimes uncomfortable even for the most physically able person. However, companies could incorporate aspects of these shoes into more functional designs. Some current available options as seen on websites featured boots and shoes to keep women looking stylish (www.wgsn.com, 2008). Plain flats combined traditional details with a twist. Marc Jacobs added a higher front panel onto loafers, Undercover and Bill Blass used “kiltie fringe” and Vivienne Westwood employed leather tassels. Companies could consider making flats more supportive by using different materials to construct them, allowing the shoe to have a stylish look yet be supportive for the consumers’ needs. Chelsea-style boots and shoes included wide elastic side panels and pulls to get them on easily. The elastic provides stretch which can adjust to swelling and leg/ankle braces. The ‘60s style flat boot, also featured on the WGSN website, has zippers down the side and come tall or short. The addition of a large decorative zipper pull would make it easier to put the boots on while adding a personal touch. The classic Mary Jane shoe comes in a variety of flat styles. Elasticized straps or disguised hook and loop under pretty buckles could keep shoes on and offer easy wear options for all women.

Handbags were another important accessory. Current wheelchair bags are useful, but they lack the style professional women seek. Some wheelchair bags attach to the chair

back or on the armrest. While the back-attaching type can store a lot of supplies, the armrest variety are more accessible. Fashion handbags from this fall combine accessibility and storage. The zip-round Base with a magnetic closure flap or hinge and large zipper pulls will carry tall items like file folders or simple day to day necessities, while the bottom zippered compartment keeps private items discreet and at hand. The fold-down is another current bag with the capability to expand or contract according to owner needs.

One accessory item receiving much attention was jewelry. Most women who mentioned jewelry had specific needs: coordinating pieces for work; smooth rings; and watches/bracelets that don't catch on wheelchair parts. Other comments specified which accessories work well, and which are not so useful. Earrings with hooks, not posts, were preferred because of problems with finger numbness. Necklaces are considered impossible. To overcome some of these problems, magnetic clasp necklaces and bracelets could make jewelry easier to wear. The magnets attract each other and close automatically; a simple tug and they come apart. Women with little manual dexterity could manipulate this type of closure. Some jewelry makers add clasps to their pieces. A number of patents have been developed that make fasteners easier for people with limited dexterity.

One other accessory that could add fashion flair to a working wardrobe would be a scarf. For the woman who likes to wear scarves with jackets, a loop on the inside of the jacket at the neckline provides an anchor, through which a scarf can be threaded before

the jacket is put on (Carroll & Kincade, 2007: 307). This alleviates reaching back or over the head for women who have limited arm mobility.

Retail availability

As noted at the beginning of this article, a number of alternatives exist for women with disabilities to acquire attractive and functional clothing. Websites that specialize in adaptive clothing can be found on the Internet, and women also have the option of having suitable styles altered to meet their requirements. However, many of the complaints about availability of clothing are focused on the fact that styles are not appropriate for the professional workplace, and alterations take time and are costly. Many clothing companies have the technology and the means to mass produce thousands of garments in a short amount of time, so it seems that guidelines could be developed to serve the consumer with disabilities. If one apparel company produced a fashionable line of clothing for disabled women who work, the results of this study suggest that it would be successful. Household income information collected from this sample show that just under 31% had an annual household income of less than \$25,000, while 20.5% had an income of over \$85,000. Between these low and high ranges, 19.7% earned between \$25,000 and \$44,900; 14.5% earned between \$45,000 and \$64,999, and 6.8% earned between \$65,000 and \$84,999. These types of income levels demonstrate the potential to purchase and it is now necessary to convince

apparel companies that there is evidently a consumer need to find the right garment (in comfort, price, look, feel etc.) in the right place at the right time.

Discussion and Limitations

The researchers assumed that similar needs for work-appropriate clothing would exist for women with disabilities as for able-bodied working women, and also that the functionality of clothing items would play an important part in the responses. Results show that there is a need for clothing and accessories that can be worn comfortably in the workplace, and are readily accessible in retail stores. The researchers also wanted to find immediate solutions in the current ready-to-wear market that might address specific problems, thereby accommodating an inclusive approach that would identify non-stigmatizing items to form a functional and fashionable working wardrobe. By searching websites of ready-to-wear stores, looking at trend services, and observing the marketplace, it is apparent that women with disabilities might find easily accessible options to augment their working wardrobe. This does not diminish the fact that designers and product developers could do more to appeal to women with disabilities in general.

This study was limited to a small (n=55) sample of women across the United States. The majority of the women were recruited via blogs, discussion forums and internet

support groups. This strategy would be encouraging for online retailers looking for new markets. However, the researchers feel that many other women were left untapped by this recruiting strategy. Another limitation would be that retailers with appropriate product offerings for the study were limited to those with an online presence, and served, for the most part, customers within the United States.

Conclusion and Future Directions

It is hoped that design suggestions from studies such as this will assist designers and merchandisers in understanding the needs of these customers and to learn that with relatively simple adaptations to product offerings, customer satisfaction is achievable. In addition, the suggested solutions currently available in the marketplace should be of use to women looking for immediate assistance in finding suitably functional and fashionable clothing and accessories. Further research should address a larger population of working women with disabilities and perhaps address the varying levels of the workplace, i.e, white collar, blue collar, formal, casual, etc., to determine varying needs. Also, age range, length of service and other demographic details could be more closely observed to provide companies with more specific market data. Retailers and manufacturers could be contacted to partner in a design and retail venture serving the needs of this population. In addition, a full-scale observation of the current retail market could bring about many more existing solutions of “inclusive” clothing and accessories which are currently available to working women with disabilities.

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