



A Comparison of Gender Differences in Clothing Needs Assessments for People With Mobility Impairments

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Background and Research Purpose

In the United States, 61 million adults live with a disability. In other words, 1 in 4, or 26%, adults in the United States have some type of disability. Within this group, 13.7% suffer from mobility issues that cause serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs (“Disability Impacts All of Us,” n.d.). Elflein (2019) reported that ambulatory impairment is the most common type of disability in the United States. A mobility impairment is defined as “a disability that affects movement ranging from gross motor skills, such as walking, to fine motor movement, involving manipulation of objects by hand” (“What Is a Mobility Impairment?” n.d.).

Previous studies have investigated issues related to disabled people’s social appearance and shopping barriers for younger generations (Chang et al., 2014; Lamb, 2001; MacDonald et al., 1994; O’Bannon et al., 1988). However, little research has focused on people with mobility impairments in various age groups regardless of gender. Therefore, the purpose of the current study is twofold: to identify clothing needs assessments for people 18 and older with mobility impairments and to compare clothing needs assessments across genders.

Method.

The study was designed to understand mobility-challenged consumers’ needs, especially for adaptive clothing. In-depth personal interviews were conducted over the phone and in person with 5 men and 5 women, at their convenience, who live with a disability such as spinal cord injury (SCI), spinal bifida (SB), multiple sclerosis (MS) or clubfoot. Male consumers who participated in the study were between 26 and 63 years old. Female consumers ranged from 21 to 65 years old. Individual interviews lasted 30 minutes to 1 hour.

The functional, expressive, and aesthetic (FEA) consumer needs model proposed by Lamb and Kallal (1992) was applied to identify the clothing needs of the various age groups for male and female consumers with movement impairments. The interview questions were modified from 2 previous studies in clothing conducted by Bye and Hakala (2005) and Kidd (2006).

Results and Discussions.

This study found many similarities and a few differences in terms of the FEA clothing needs among men and women with mobility impairments. Most participants, regardless of their gender, perceived that there is a lack of appropriate clothing for people with disabilities. In other words, the participants believed that the current market should provide more accessible clothing options that meet their needs at economical price points. All the participants in this study pointed out that, ideally, adaptive clothing should enable them to have a body image that feels “average/normal.” The majority of the participants indicated that they shop for clothes online. They preferred online shopping because of personal mobility difficulties and a lack of accessibility (e.g., fitting rooms to try clothes on) due to their disability.

For both men and women, the most important functional needs criteria were improvement of donning and doffing and comfort. Interestingly, personal preference for appropriate fit and sizing was linked with functional need, which means the market should make suitable clothing in various fits and sizes available to customers with disabilities. Across genders, most participants preferred clothing with fewer and less bulky seams. Additionally, pocket placement and improved pocket functionality are key design attributes for designers and manufacturers to investigate. Furthermore, clothing made from low-maintenance and washable materials maximize the functional requirements of consumers with mobility impairments.

In terms of expressive needs criteria, all the participants stated that appropriate clothing should help them feel good about themselves; as a result, the positive feeling would help them represent who they are. From an aesthetic perspective, participants of all genders preferred small patterns or small amounts of pop-up colors on their clothes. Furthermore, all of the participants mentioned that it is important for adaptive shoes to be easy for them to put on and take off.

Unlike functional and expressive needs criteria, participants’ preferences for aesthetic elements, such as colors and styles, were distinguished by gender. For example, the women who participated in the study preferred a variety of colors ranging from bright to dark and from warm to cool. In contrast, the men preferred neutral colors such as black, navy, and gray. The men also favored elbow patches to protect their elbows from rubbing on the arms of their wheelchairs and to prevent fabric from tearing out over time.

Conclusions and Implications.

This study demonstrates that there are similarities and differences in the clothing needs of men and women with mobility impairments. The FEA needs model, in combination with in-depth personal interviews was beneficial for this study and facilitated an understanding of the participants’ special needs

associated with physical and psychological aspects of clothing. Furthermore, the findings yielded valuable design criteria that could be an asset to industrial professionals and clothing companies. Almost all the participants strongly believed that, to stay up to date on trends, their suitable clothing should be improved in terms of functionality and style. Therefore, to meet the expectations of consumers with special needs, industrial professionals should accommodate their diverse clothing needs.

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