

A Case Study Exploring Adaptive Apparel Design Innovations as Key Competitive Resource for the Adaptive Apparel Market

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People with disabilities (PWD) make up nearly 13% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017) and contribute \$21 billion of disposable income to the marketplace (Yin et al., 2018). Despite the potential for apparel to accommodate PWD's needs and the fact that PWD are a substantial portion of the U.S. population with significant spending power, PWD are often overlooked and ignored by the apparel industry (Hall, 2019; Hammett, 2019).

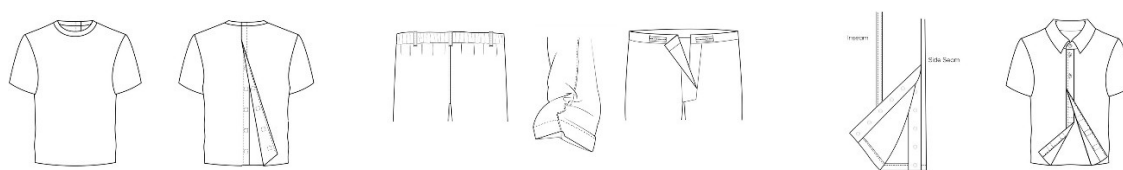
However, the interest in PWD as a viable market has been slowly changing. The recent interest to begin serving PWD with adaptive apparel to address the market's unique apparel needs seems to align with the 2016 partnership between Tommy Hilfiger® and Mindy Scheier, founder of the non-profit Runway of Dreams (RoD), to launch the first-of-its-kind mainstream fashion-forward adaptive apparel line for children. Scheier, who became an adaptive apparel advocate after she could not find mainstream fashion-forward apparel for her son, who lived with a rare form of muscular dystrophy, researched the PWD market and used that research to develop adaptive design innovations. Therefore, this research study aimed to explore the development of the first-of-its-kind mainstream adaptive apparel line for children by collaborating with an adaptive apparel advocate and an apparel brand.

To achieve this goal, the study used the resource advantage (RA) and first-mover advantage theory to conduct a case study investigating the lived experiences of Mindy Scheier as she collaborated with an apparel brand to launch the first-of-its-kind mainstream adaptive apparel line for children. Data sources used included semi-structured interviews, direct observation, and archival records. Overall, 191 pages of documents, 88 images, 65 pages of field notes, and 149 pages of published articles were reviewed, coded, and analyzed. Coding was conducted in three phases, with constant comparison to the research questions and theoretical frameworks guiding the study. Ultimately, over 20 revisions were conducted until the researcher felt the model was a good fit to explain the data and answer the research questions. The research also deployed seven stages of protocol to support the study's trustworthiness, including member checks, field notes, and thick descriptions. The data results revealed two themes "I am going to educate the entire industry," and "You mean no mainstream brands have done this before?"

"I am going to educate the entire industry."- This theme addressed Scheier's journey from "mom

mode,” trying to find mainstream fashion-forward apparel options for her son, to adaptive apparel advocate conducting a year-long research study to determine the best adaptive apparel design innovations (see Figure 1) for the disability consumer. Scheier’s research led to developing three categories of adaptive design innovations that addressed the most significant apparel barriers for most of the disability population she researched. The adaptive design innovations included closures that were easy to manipulate, adjustability of the apparel item to accommodate various disabilities, and ease of dress features that included entrance points at the shoulder and back for ease of donning and doffing.

Figure 1: Mindy Scheier’s Adaptive Design Innovations



“You mean no mainstream brands have done this before?” – This theme demonstrated how Scheier took these adaptive design innovations to the industry by collaborating with Global Brands Group (GBG). Through this partnership, Scheier refined her adaptive design innovations to be incorporated into the existing supply chain of GBG. Through her partnership with GBG, Scheier was introduced to Tommy Hilfiger® (TH). TH ultimately agreed to produce an adaptive children’s wear line based on Scheier’s adaptive design innovations because they were “blown away” by her research and innovations. Scheier posited that the brand agreed to the collaboration so quickly because of her data and the adaptive design innovations she developed, and her partnership with GBG. She explained, “Because we came through Global Brands... this...happened so fast. I primarily worked with the tech team at Global Brands and the Tommy team who does licensing.”

The results of this case study revealed that Tommy Hilfiger®, using key resources (Hunt and Morgan, 1996), which were unique, rare, and difficult to imitate (Hunt, 2011), entered a new market segment, adaptive apparel, as a reactive innovation by utilizing the adaptive design innovations created by Scheier through her PWD advocacy and market research. Further, the study highlighted Scheier as the catalyst that allowed Tommy Hilfiger® to capitalize on a firm's first-mover advantage. This is recognized within the adaptive apparel market. Tommy Hilfiger® was the first mainstream apparel firm to enter the adaptive apparel market by introducing easy to

don and doff apparel utilizing magnetic closures and adjustable hems, and flexible entry points for children. These design features were borrowed from Scheier's research and adaptive design innovations. Competing firms eventually used the same adaptive features, seemingly learning from Tommy Hilfiger's® successes and failures and positioning them as pioneers in the mainstream adaptive apparel movement (Bahadur, 2016; Barney, 1991; Davidson, 2018; Novellino, 2016).

Further research is needed to explore the advocate's perspective in launching the first-of-its-kind mainstream adaptive apparel line for children. A multiple case perspective, including GBG and the apparel brand, would also benefit future research. Also, future research could investigate whether a first-mover advantage was accomplished by tracking the adaptive apparel line's success for Tommy Hilfiger® since the 2016 launch of their first-of-its-kind adaptive apparel line for children. A review of the brand's sales and marketing of the children's, men's, and women's adaptive lines could be included.

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