

Don't worry she'll put it in her faux-pocket: Gendered differences in pocket availability and function in childrenswear bifurcated garments

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Significance and Purpose

Popular press media and consumer social media posts have repeatedly expressed frustration with the lack of and limited function of pockets in girls' clothing (Robinson, 2018) yet published academic research has given little attention to this important childrenswear functional design characteristic. As all children need the ability to carry items so that their hands are free to play, a lack of pockets for girls can limit their ability to fully participate. Therefore, the aim of this research is to fill a gap in childrenswear design research by providing an analysis of the differences in availability and function of pockets for girls and boys within currently available in bifurcated garment retail assortments.

Literature Review

Children have very active lifestyles and engage in a variety of activities that are different from adults. It is recommended that children engage in a minimum of one hour of moderate to vigorous activity with a focus on these activities taking place outdoors (Centers for Disease Control, 2020). Therefore clothing that restricts this engagement in play can have negative effects on emotional and physical wellbeing (Copeland et al., 2009; Tongue et al, 2010). This need for garment functionality has been emphasized in apparel design instructional texts (Jaffe & Rosa, 1979; Joseph-Armstrong, 2010) and should be the priority of designers when designing childrenswear.

One of these important functional needs that children have is the ability to carry items. This need is fulfilled by the inclusion of pockets in garment design. Pockets provide children the ability to carry items providing personal autonomy and the ability to have their hands free to play (Robinson, 2018). Garment pockets should be large enough to hold items (e.g. rocks, small toys) and should be placed on the garment so that children can easily reach them (Perry, 1999). Multiple pockets and a variety of pockets that have different purposes are ideal for pant design (e.g. pants design to include front pockets, back pockets, and a cargo pocket). Additionally, the volume that the pocket will hold should be considered as patch pockets with pleats or gathers hold more than basic patch pockets (Perry, 1999). Pants with no pockets or faux pockets are less functional for children and have the potential to impede their independence by eliminating their ability to carry items. Based on the reviewed literature and the extant research gap, the research question was developed: In the current boys' and girls' ready-to-wear product assortment of pants for children, what is the difference in the (a) inclusion of pockets, (b) number pockets, (c) pocket types, and (d) the pocket placement.

Method

Product descriptions for 901 (416 girls; 485 boys) bifurcated garments (e.g. shorts, jeans, athletic pants, and casual bottoms) from the two largest discount department stores and the two largest childrenswear specialty retailers in the United States were evaluated (Kalyani, 2019; O'Connor, 2018; O'Connor, 2019). The text of the product descriptions regarding pockets was analyzed which included: pocket type, pocket quantity, and pocket location. This research is part of a larger study that examined function design characteristic availability in girls' and boys' apparel.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the product descriptions reveals stark discrepancies between girls' and boys' garments in the availability of pockets, number of pockets, location of pockets, and variety of pocket types. Analysis additionally revealed that girls' garments had fewer options in type, variety, and function of pockets providing them fewer opportunities to carry more items securely in comparison to boys' garments

Inclusion and Number of Pockets. Functional pockets were found on 279 (68.85%) out of 416 girls' garments, in contrast to 475 (96.9%) out of 485 on boys' garments. This resulted in 137 girls' garments with no pocket or only faux-pocket availability (31.15%) while only 15 boys' garments had no pockets (3%). Girls' garments had an average of 2 pockets per garment, where boys averaged 4 pockets per garment. Only 41.58% of girls' garments were found to have more than 2 pockets per garment, while the majority (88.45%) of boys' garments had more than 2 pockets. This finding aligns with popular literature that indicates that available pants are not meeting girls' functional needs (Robinson, 2018). This is in contrast to the reality that girls and boys have equal need for pockets (Perry, 1999; Robinson, 2018). It further contrasts with equal recommendations in girls' and boys' clothing for the need for multiple pockets (Perry, 1999). This lack of pockets negatively impacts girls' personal autonomy and freedom of movement in play (Robinson, 2018), which, in turn, can negatively impact their ability for active play (Copeland et al., 2009).

Pocket Types and Location. None of the girls' garments included cargo pockets, where 100 boys' garments did. Pockets with zippers were only available on 4 girls' garments yet 114 boys' garments had pockets with zippers that closed securely. Media pockets designed specifically to carry mobile technology were only available on 2 girls' garments in contrast to 51 boys' garments having this additional pocket. Additionally, at least 1 faux pocket was found on 52% of girls' garments, in comparison to only 1 faux pocket found on garments in the entire boys' sample. Wide discrepancies in design were also found in the location of pockets for girls and boys, with less than half (41.18%) of girls' garments having highly functional front pockets in comparison to over 75% (79.56) of boys garments. These findings are in contrast to the design literature that indicates an equal need for a variety of functional pocket types in easily accessible locations, for both girls' and boys' clothing (Perry, 1999)

Conclusions and Implications

Childrenswear designers are including fewer, less functional, and less functionally-placed pockets in girls' pants than in boys' pants. This research has uncovered troubling gender discrepancies in childrenswear design that leaves girls at a substantial disadvantage. Despite available knowledge on how childrenswear should properly be designed current market selections do not reflect it. Girls are already presented with numerous gender-based challenges in their daily lives (Babcock & Laschever, 2003). The clothes that they wear should not exacerbate these existing systemic issues any further. This research aims to serve as a wake-up call to childrenswear designers as to how their design choices affect girls' empowerment and autonomy. The current market selection comes up short in both the functionality and availability of pockets and many industry changes need to take place to ensure functional equity in apparel assortments for children. Academics can use this information to better train future apparel designers to create garments for girls that are not only pretty but empower them by providing the opportunities to carry needed items securely.

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doi:10.1108/13612021011061870