

## A Qualitative Exploration of the Firm Resources for Adaptive Apparel Brands/Businesses

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**Introduction.** Adaptive apparel is apparel or shoes made to accommodate specific disabilities or illnesses by providing functional options that make dressing easier without sacrificing trends, style, and aesthetics (McBee-Black & Ha-Brookshire, 2020). Adaptive apparel utilizes design features such as (a) placing access points with easy-to-use closures at seam openings, (b) removing seams and pockets from the back of garments to ensure wheelchair users do not acquire pressure sores, and (c) fabric that supports body temperature regulation and sensory sensitivity. In general, adaptive apparel is clothing designed for people with disabilities (PWDs) who are the largest minority group in the world (McBee-Black & Ha-Brookshire, 2020).

**Literature Review.** In 2022, about 1.2-1.85 billion people, or 15% of the global population, will live with a disability (Donovan, 2020), which means PWDs are an emerging market larger than the population of China (Donovan, 2020). Moreover, PWDs contribute \$21 billion of disposable income to the marketplace (Yin et al., 2018). However, despite the impact PWDs have on the population and the economy, their apparel needs have been ignored in the apparel marketplace until recently (McBee-Black, 2021). Many entrepreneurs have established adaptive apparel businesses to serve the needs of this community. These brands/businesses strive to build resources to become competitive in this market. Firm resources are the available factors or inputs such as assets, capabilities, organizational values, firm attributes, information, and knowledge owned or controlled by a firm (Barney et al., 2011). Resources can be tangible and intangible (Shibin et al., 2020). Although many adaptive apparel brands/businesses were established in recent years, there is a dearth of literature focusing on the firm resources for these brands/businesses. Existing literature on adaptive apparel focuses on function to satisfy the apparel needs and wants of PWDs (Freeman et al., 1985; Lamb & Kallal, 1992)—highlighting the clothing and textile challenges of PWDs, including ease of dressing, manipulating closures, fit, freedom of movement, and comfort (Dallas & White, 1982). Therefore, it was necessary to understand the firm resources possessed by adaptive apparel brands/businesses. To fulfill the aim of this study the following research question will be answered:

**RQ:** What are the firm resources for the adaptive apparel brands/businesses, and how do these resources assist in achieving competitive advantage?

**Theory.** The Resource-Based Theory (RBT) was used as the study's framework to understand the firm resources possessed by adaptive apparel brands/businesses. RBT focuses on the business's internal resources and attributes to determine how any specific business differentiates

itself from other businesses and achieves sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Shibin et al., 2020; Swazan & Das, 2021).

**Method.** Given the lack of research on the adaptive apparel sector, a qualitative approach was found appropriate for this study (Merriam, 2002). Qualitative interview was used as the data collection process, which followed a semi-structured format to identify the firm resources of adaptive apparel brands and to analyze how these firm resources help brands achieve and sustain competitive advantage. The interviews were conducted with eight disability advocates and entrepreneurs representing seven adaptive apparel organizations and brands. The researchers used both deductive and inductive coding to establish codes. Deductive coding was used to test the theories and concepts established in existing research. Inductive coding allowed new themes to emerge from the interview data that would not be found through deductive coding (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). Analysis of the interview data resulted in the emergence of two themes/resources. They are (a) business owner's skills and characteristics and (b) formal business planning. The themes consisted of 7 subthemes that revealed answers to the study's proposed research questions.

**Results.** For adaptive apparel business entrepreneurs, their connection to disability can serve as a motivating factor when entering the adaptive apparel space. Further, their position within the disability community can serve as a resource advantage when marketing to other PWDs. The first theme demonstrates the motivation, knowledge, and networking skills that serve as firm resources. The second theme reveals how formal planning like business collaboration, educating consumers, applying new marketing strategies, and connecting mainstream and adaptive apparel enabled these adaptive apparel brands/businesses to achieve competitive advantage.

***Business Owner's Skills and Characteristics.*** For adaptive apparel entrepreneurs/advocates, who are also PWDs, being a part of the disability community brings a sense of motivation, as was found by the study's findings. One participant suggested that their experience as a PWDs helped them identify the apparel challenges facing other PWDs and lead them to launch their adaptive apparel business, "I have short fourth toes ... and I wouldn't want to change my experience at all. I mean that's what led me to adaptive fashion." Many adaptive apparel entrepreneurs/advocates also gained design knowledge through education, training, and collaboration. One participant suggested that their design degree helped them innovate and explore the adaptive apparel marketplace. "My doctoral degree was focused on adaptive clothing primarily, but it was also a little bit of assisted technology." Additionally, four entrepreneurs/advocates shared that they always try to find PWDs through social media groups, disability websites, and online blogging to build a strong PWDs community where everyone can openly share their life experience, "The whole point of our blog was to create a platform for newly diagnosed or people who wanted to share their opinions on their particular health condition."

**Formal Business Planning.** Adaptive apparel entrepreneurs/advocates, who created a collaborative relationship with other adaptive apparel brand/businesses, tend to have a higher success rate. One participant mentioned that their collaboration with other adaptive apparel brands/ businesses helped them to grow and succeed, “it was a good space for me and the brand that we partnered with Slick Chicks for this content”. Adaptive apparel entrepreneurs/advocates who are active on their social media and other online platforms regularly post about their products. One participant who handles her business media shared that she publishes a story behind each of their products so that people can learn more about disability and normalize adaptive apparel “We want to tell stories of disabled people and celebrate what they are doing”. Finally, adaptive apparel entrepreneurs/advocates try to connect adaptive apparel with mainstream apparel to appeal to a diverse consumer. One participant who has established a connection between these two segments suggests that clothing is for all, “as you can imagine, what would work for the disability community also works for mainstream”.

**Discussion & Conclusion.** The study provides new evidence on the firm resources of adaptive apparel brands/businesses and how these resources assist them in achieving competitive advantage. The study result has major implications and contributions. The business owner's motivation, education, and experience were the most important resources for adaptive apparel brands/businesses, as these resources helped to implement formal business planning. The study findings on business resources may help all individual adaptive apparel brand/business owners to identify the necessary skills and plannings for achieving and sustaining a competitive advantage in this sector. Future research is recommended to find the relationship between owner characteristics and the failure/success of these businesses.

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