

Investigating Blind Consumer Clothing and Identity: A Netnographic Analysis Md Nazmul Haque & Casey Stannard, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, USA

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Approximately 40 million individuals worldwide have blindness (IAPB, 2020) and blindness is defined as “reduction of the trigger conditions under which the sight function is realized” (Ray et al., 2016, p. 11). Visual impairment is a broad term that includes both blind and limited-seeing individuals Corn and Lusk (2010, p. 13). People with blindness and other visual impairments will likely have difficulty making satisfying clothes purchases in person and online (Kim, 2018) since most clothing stores are set up and intended for sighted customers (Rusalem, 1972). Visually impaired people often need assistance from others, such as friends or family, while choosing or buying clothing since they frequently cannot recognize styles or other aesthetic aspects independently (Mangold & Mangold, 1983; Ricketts, 1975). It is common for these helpers to suggest purchasing clothing designs that appeal to themselves but may not necessarily be visually appealing for blind consumer (Alali, 2017). Additionally, researchers found that blind individuals frequently bought garments that caused discomfort due to their inability to discern the quality of the fabric used in its construction. Not surprisingly, a significant percentage of blind consumers expressed dissatisfaction with their purchased apparel (Freny et al., 2000). Even after purchasing apparel, blind people may feel insecure and stressed when it comes to dressing up since they cannot perceive the state of the apparel (Rocha et al., 2023). As blind people are unable to comprehend visual aspects of apparel, they may find it difficult to clothe themselves (Rocha et al., 2023). Due to their inability, some individuals with visual impairments may consistently wear clothing with the same patterns and colors daily (Alali, 2017). While certain individuals with visual impairments may possess the self-assurance to seek assistance from sales associates in locating clothing items, some individuals expressed doubt regarding the practicality and effectiveness of the ideas provided by retail workers (Bradley et al., 2000). Despite all those limitations regarding apparel, clothing remains a personal possession for blind people.

Our belongings, including clothing, greatly influence and reflect our identity and self-concept (Belk, 1988). According to Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel et al., 1979), an individuals’ self-concept is composed of two fundamental components, (a) Personal Identity: “that are personal in nature and that usually denote specific attributes of the individuals such as feelings of competence, bodily attributes, ways of relating to others, psychological characteristics, intellectual concern, personal tastes and so on” (Tajfel, 2010, p. 18) and (b) Social Identity: “That part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value or emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). In order for blind people to develop their self-concept, engaging in clothing-related activities is essential. A lack of researcher focused on how blind individuals develop their self-concept through their involvement in clothing-related activities. Therefore, the researchers aimed to investigate blind consumers’ clothing experiences related to self-concept through a Netnographic analysis.

Methods and Procedures

To begin, blind consumer videos related to clothing and clothing consumer behavior posted to YouTube (YT) were evaluated using a digital ethnography or Netnography. Kozinets (2002) defined Netnography as the “ethnography of the Internet” that “adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications” (p. 62). A thorough YT search was performed with precise keywords like, "Blind people" in combination with "Buying clothing," "Shopping for clothing," and "Clothing." Any video depicting blind individuals (called posters in this work) discussing their clothing experiences were sampled for the research. Some videos showed blind people shopping in malls and others took place at their homes when they discussed wardrobe management practices. The posters revealed their own experiences specifically related to clothing. The final sample consisted of an examination of 33 videos, with a presumed gender break down of 13 males and 20 females. Posters varied in age and originated from various locations worldwide. The films were transcribed into a Word doc and then uploaded to NVivo 14 software for qualitative data analysis. The constant comparison method was selected due to its comprehensive nature in categorizing data and uncovering latent trends (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The three stages of coding (open, axial, and selective) were used to analyze the data and locate themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Results

Five major themes emerged from the data, three were related to shopping and two related to wardrobe management. During shopping, under the theme, “Buying clothing based on how others see me” posters primarily relied on the vision of companions to assist in selecting apparel, leading them to the appropriate retailer, and trying on. One poster mentioned that her companion aided in shopping, “So I do know trends and so my friends who also know trends obviously because they can see we'll go shopping together and they know kind of my style which is a little bit like kind of classic” (Ha, 2015, Sep 16, 4:51). “Buying clothing that defined me” under this theme although accompanied by companions, posters were self-aware of their body image and made independent clothing choices. For example, a poster commented regarding clothing fit to her body: “I'm kind of in my mind, I know what styles and shapes to look for- I also do a lot of research on my own body- I can't see my body, I can't look in the mirror and see what suits me” (Burke, 2018, Aug 12, 6:33). Through the analysis, we created the term “memory shopping” for blind consumers under the theme “my memory, my shopping.” Memory shopping for blind people is far more inclusive and penetrative in thinking than sighted people. For example, poster Delagrande (2021, Mar 4) explained the important relationship between tactile sensations and memory recall, “just because I'm blind doesn't mean I can't still love it maybe it's not the full image but the quality the texture the feel description is just so useful it puts an image in your head” (1:07). Thus, memories were highly important to the shopping process and also wardrobe management of blind consumers.

Wardrobe management was the next overarching theme. Under the theme, “Clothing defines me” posters carefully categorized and organized apparel that complemented their accessories and matched their outfits. They conducted thorough research to achieve this matching. Regarding the theme, “Successful wardrobe and clothing management” clothing graphics, cut, shaping, and feel, enabled posters to remember the clothing items in their wardrobe. For instance,

The Blind Sighted Perspective (2019, July 5) pointed out that based on the various textures and cut of clothing in his closet, he was able to discern and differentiate the shirt. In addition, the posters demonstrated aptitude to maintain their closet through memory. For instance, Ha (2015, Sep 16) possessed comprehensive knowledge of the location of all items within her wardrobe. Through memorization, she developed the ability to identify specific locations of various clothing within a short time. Posters found a significant way to manage a wardrobe before and after laundry. Poster mother created a system that consisted of numerous clothing bins, such as those located strategically near the bed. Essentially, she labels those bins with the days of the week in Braille, with the upper bin being Sunday, the next bin being Monday, and so forth. It continued until the end of the week, and the compartment at the bottom bin remained for laundry (Ben Janzen, 2017, Jun 22). One Poster after laundering, she was able to iron the apparel properly by following the edge of the seam and moving the iron in a zig-zag motion in one direction. Additionally, she utilized wrinkle-free spray and pulled the fabric to facilitate proper ironing (Insight4blind, 2020, July 3).

Conclusion

In this research, blind consumers' engagement with clothing was analyzed during shopping and wardrobe management using a Netnographic approach. Through the identification of five key themes, three related to shopping and two related to wardrobe maintenance, it was established that blind individuals have a distinct interaction with clothes and a different clothing experience compared to those with normal vision. They desire to perceive the texture and intricate features of clothing, such as the cut, styles, logos, and other elements, through the sense of touch. In order to compensate for blindness, individuals relied heavily on the sense of touch to retain and memorize intricate aspects of clothes. One explanation for these unique characteristics was that individuals with blindness were conscious of their handicap and have found alternative methods to engage with clothes in their everyday lives, such as shopping and managing their wardrobe.

Furthermore, while shopping, they were trend-conscious, curious about ongoing clothing styles, and took the opinion of their companion for the clothing selection process. Even with their companions, they had their own unique preferences in clothing. During wardrobe management, aside from touch, they were strategic before and after laundry. Their wardrobe with a variety of clothing collections also resulted from their personal research regarding clothing. Despite the prevalent usage of tactile sensations and the meticulous attention to clothing features through touch to keep in memory, there were also indications of the use of distinct technologies to enhance their clothing experience.

They saw clothing through the eyes of others and utilized tactile sensation to recall clothing. Thus, clothing becomes a blind person's life by means of expressing self (Hoskins, 2013), evokes past experiences (Wallace et al., 2011), and becomes a "memory object" (Kirkham, 1996). Throughout the research, there was prominent evidence of the identity-creation process through the influence of others and talent to remember clothing. This showed the creation of social and personal identity mentioned by Tajfel et al. (1979).

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