



FUNctional Design: Exploring Design for Disability in a Childrenswear Course

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Introduction. Design for disability within the clothing and apparel industry represents a small and often overlooked market. Traditionally, the fashion industry has focused on a narrowly defined retail customer; one based on contemporary societal ideals of beauty: young, attractive, and physically healthy (Carroll, 2015). For an individual with disabilities, fashion and dress choices are limited and can impact how he/she is perceived and accepted by others. As dress is considered an integral component of self-expression and personal development beginning in childhood, physical constraints coupled with limited dress options can negatively impact personal development and social mobility with peers. However, the concept of the disabled body as a source of stigmatization and limited self-expression through dress is changing (Hall & Orzada, 2013). Fashion and apparel courses provide a unique opportunity for students to expand their understanding and appreciation of retail customer diversity and also to apply the social psychological aspects of dress in an applied context. An experimental course in childrenswear was offered which combined fashion and functional design with design for disability for real users. This studio course extended the core apparel design curriculum to include both functional and adaptive design, children as a target market, and knitwear. The capstone was a co-design for disability project in which students were tasked with holistically addressing the clothing-related needs for a specific pediatric user.

Purpose. The aim for the capstone project was for apparel design students to extend their critical thinking and design skills, while applying class concepts to actual clients. Students do not often have the opportunity to design and construct garments for “real people.” Rather, fashion students often fall in the trap of designing for themselves. While it is important for apparel design students to develop an aesthetic sensibility, it is essential that they learn to design for diverse target customers. The goal for this project was to (1) introduce undergraduates to the concept of fashionable and functional clothing for users with disabilities, (2) experience working with actual clients, and (3) apply social psychological design considerations to childrenswear. The purpose of this presentation is to explain the project guidelines, to offer strategies for student engagement, to reveal individual student outcomes, and to share instructor insights.

Implementation. The childrenswear course was organized by market category: infant, toddler, girls, boys, tween, and junior. The format for the course included lectures, demonstrations, field trips, in-class studio assignments, and design projects. Projects reflected each market category and related to the specific design decisions that reflected social psychological development of children, from infants to teens. For each project, students conducted design research via interaction with actual users and buyers (parents/caregivers), assessed current product assortment, and applied design thinking & modernization to children’s apparel design. The co-design capstone project was presented to the apparel design students with the instructor

providing detailed guidelines and instructions. Starting with a lecture and discussion on design for disability, the instructor prompted the students to consider apparel design for disability with innovation and a user-centered approach. A guest lecture from an individual with disabilities helped to engage students fully with the project significance and impact. Each apparel design student was paired with a child with disabilities. This child and his/her family were fully engaged in the design process, and were treated as a “co-designers.” The intention of the co-design project was to address “clothing for the disabled” in a modern and holistic way, and for this reason was guided by the FEA Consumer Needs Model (Lamb & Kallal, 1992). The design brief was to create an ensemble which addressed clothing-related challenges of the child (functional), expressed the child’s personal style or personality (expressive), and looked like a quality, commercial-ready garment (aesthetic).

Outcomes. The students met with their assigned children and families three times. Prior to the initial meeting, students emailed the family questionnaires requesting clothing-related information that addressed both function (issues with comfort, fit, closures, styles, etc.) and fashion (color, fabrics, child interests, etc). At the first meeting, students conducted in-depth interviews using questionnaire responses as guidance, and took the child’s measurements. Information gathered at this interview was used as design inspiration for the students. Annotated color sketches and flats were emailed to the families for feedback and approval. Samples were made and students held fitting sessions with their “co-designer” to gain more feedback and to ensure project success and met expectations; these fitting sessions were key to students understanding the reality and complex diversity of “disabled consumers.” The project concluded with garment delivery, follow-up interviews, and a fashion show presentation.

Conclusion. As a result of the course approach, learning activities, and combination of pedagogical methods, students reported feeling confident working on their individual co-design projects. Students were innovative and user-centered, and project concepts and outcomes reflected the diversity of their child participants. Examples included princess-themed gowns supporting self-care and sports-themed separates addressing head control. Outcomes reflected a high level of student engagement with this assignment, further evinced by family self-reports. This experimental childrenswear course proved successful in multiple ways. Students learned new market categories, applied social psychology to the design process, and worked with real clients all critical experiences for professional development. The co-design project was an especially meaningful experience for the students. Design for disability offered an apparel challenge with immediate and visible impact to real users.

References:

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