



Inclusive Apparel Design for Baby Boomer Women

Sandra Starkey, University of Nebraska, USA

Jean Parsons, University of Missouri, USA

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Growing older and dressing stylishly is often a problem, especially for women over the age of fifty who are interested in fashion. A disparity exists between how some older women would like to dress, what they feel is appropriate for their age, and the perceived options available in the U.S. market (Borland & Akram, 2007; Thomas & Peters, 2009). This is partly because older women, despite representing a growing and viable market category, are often overlooked by designers and manufacturers in the apparel industry (Szmigin & Carrigan, 2001; Thomas & Peters, 2009).

The focus of this research was to expand apparel design strategies using an inclusive design framework to accommodate broader markets, particularly aging women. Analyzing blogs by boomer women offered a unique and untapped perspective on aging women's clothing preferences. Through the blogs, vital information can be gained to allow designers to understand when and how an inclusive framework might be applied to creating clothing for this market. The following question guided the research process: What specific clothing characteristics do baby boomer women identify as important and how might their preferences be incorporated into inclusive apparel designs? In addition, while the framework mentions aesthetics, the resulting inclusive designs are predominantly functional, with little consideration given to aesthetics. This has been shown to contribute to a lack of product acceptance (Macdonald, 2004). For this reason aesthetics was included as an essential part of this research.

Inclusive Design and the Baby Boomer Market. The inclusive design framework provides a guide for designers when developing products for a range of consumer needs and offers the potential to do so without calling attention to individual differences. Therefore, for this study, it was critical to look at boomer women with a range of capabilities. The inclusive design framework is based on the seven principles of universal design, however four principles can be directly applied to apparel design. They are equitable use, flexible use, simple use and low physical effort. Garments that are equitable, cater to people that have diverse abilities and flexibility in use refers to garments that can satisfy a range of preferences. Garments that are simple to use require minimal knowledge or concentration when donning and doffing. Garments that require low physical effort can be worn comfortably and are easy to get on and off the body.

Method. Through the lens of the life course perspective and the continuity theory on aging eighteen fashion blogs written by women that fall in the baby boomer age range were analyzed using narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2006). A range of abilities were represented in the blogs. These included vision impairment, nerve and foot problems and three women relied on wheelchairs to help with mobility. Information from the boomer women through their blogs was evaluated to determine what apparel features they desired, and whether their clothing needs and wants can be best addressed through an inclusive design framework.

Results. The boomer women desired garments that were easy to fasten and, because some had dexterity problems, they opted for clothing with minimal closures. One blogger specifically mentioned magnetic clasps and oversized buttons as options. These components apply directly to equitable use and low physical effort. Versatility was a predominant theme and wardrobes comprised of a smaller quantity of mix and match clothing items were prized because they simplified the selection process. Bloggers also noted that chic, classic styles with easy shapes were essential. These features specifically point to the importance of flexible and simple use. Clothing made with soft and comfortable fabrics were mentioned frequently and while comfort was a primary goal, looking good was equally as important. Features such as special trims or construction details that added a unique element were valued, especially those that referenced current trends. Boomer women agreed that identifying and maintaining their personal style was imperative to successful aging. This theme was prevalent throughout the data and supports the need to consider aesthetics when designing inclusively.

In summary, the information obtained from the blog data supports the need to expand apparel design strategies and suggests that using an inclusive design framework may help designers accommodate broader markets such as baby boomer women. This serves as a starting point in the development of apparel prototypes designed specifically to satisfy multiple needs without calling attention to special requirements.

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