



Clothing-related barriers experienced by people with mobility disabilities and impairments[☆]



Allison Kabel^{a,*}, Jessica Dimka^b, Kerri McBee-Black^c

^a Department of Health Sciences, University of Missouri Columbia, 511 Clark Hall, Columbia, MO, 65211, USA

^b University of Michigan School of Public Health, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

^c Department of Textile and Apparel Management, University of Missouri Columbia, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 February 2016

Received in revised form

29 August 2016

Accepted 31 August 2016

Keywords:

Disability

Human factors

Textiles and apparel

Social participation

ABSTRACT

Clothing-related issues can create barriers to social participation and other desired activities for people living with disabilities and their families. The purpose of this study was to identify clothing-related barriers people living with disabilities and their families are facing. An online survey was administered to people living with disabilities and parents/caregivers, resulting in a sample of 113 participants indicating mobility impairments. Survey results indicated that the clothing needs of people living with disabilities and impairments are not being met, the lack of appropriate clothing prevented individuals from fully engaging in social activities and relationships, employment or everyday life events. The design fields and apparel industry could play a vital role in helping people with mobility disabilities navigate these barriers.

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Approximately 30 million Americans report living with mobility challenges and impairments, defined as difficulty walking or the need to use crutches, walkers or wheelchairs (United States Census Bureau, 2012). People living with disabilities and impairments often face a deficit of clothing and shoe choices to fit the activities in which they would like to engage. This lack of appropriate clothing leads to barriers in community participation (Watson et al., 2010). Environmental barriers to participation, including those that complicate the use of assistive mobility devices within the built environment, have been extensively documented (Brown et al., 2012; Carlson and Myklebust, 2002; Kayes et al., 2011; Kirchner et al., 2008). Clothing-related barriers, however, are often overlooked, or exist in the shadows of more prominently documented environmental barriers, such as transportation or building accessibility (Brown et al., 2012). The purpose of this study was to learn specific details about the clothing-related barriers that prevent or complicate full community participation for people living with mobility disabilities and impairments through the use of an online survey.

Previous research on the experiences of people living with

mobility challenges has touched upon the relevance of apparel issues in the context of community engagement (Authors, 2016). The impact that ergonomically designed clothing could make upon the lives of people who use wheel chairs has also recently been explored (Wang et al., 2014). The documentation of barriers and facilitators for participation in physical activity programs have showcased the importance of participation for overall health and well-being, as well as the need for advocacy to improve participation for people with mobility challenges (Brown et al., 2012; Kirchner et al., 2008). However, the clothing and apparel needs of people living with disabilities and impairments are still not being met.

1. Methods

This study on mobility and clothing related barriers was approved by the university Institutional Review Board [IRB protocol #1210290] prior to data collection. We administered a survey intended for persons living with disabilities and impairments and/or parents or caretakers. Parents and caretakers were included because some members of the priority population are unable to fill out an electronic survey, or are underage. In these cases, the end user of the product and the consumer are not necessarily the same individual, which is significant from a design perspective. For example, a parent buys the apparel product for a child with a

[☆] This work was supported by the Mizzou Alumni Association under the Richard Wallace Faculty Incentive Grant Award.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: kabela@health.missouri.edu (A. Kabel).

disability.

A link to the survey was distributed via social media and the internet (Twitter, Facebook and faculty webpages). The survey was launched in March, 2014 and remained open until May, 2014. Respondents who completed the survey and provided appropriate contact information received an electronic gift card. This contact information and any other potentially identifiable information were removed from the surveys before analyses were conducted. Survey completion was estimated to take 30 min or less for most participants, and no follow-up obligations were required.

The survey was administered through [Qualtrics.com \(2014\)](#) and included 35 questions presented to all participants, as well as a maximum of 19 follow-up questions depending on their answers. In addition to demographic questions, respondents were asked both closed and open-ended questions about their opinions and experiences with clothing issues related to their disability. For example, the survey included questions about clothing-related barriers to respondents' willingness or ability to engage in social activities; issues with finding, trying on and purchasing clothing; and specific clothing difficulties such as manipulating zippers or required customization. A thematic analysis was used for the open-ended questions.

Descriptive statistics of closed questions are presented, along with supporting responses from the open-ended responses to provide context. The results discussed here emphasize three themes that indicate how clothing-related barriers may prevent people with disabilities and impairments from attaining a desired quality of life and/or seeking or maintaining healthy practices and behaviours.

2. Results

At the time the survey was closed, a total of 240 surveys had been initiated. Of these, 84 surveys were either fully incomplete or likely products of spamming, and were excluded. Twenty-eight of the surveys were unfinished, but contained enough relevant information to remain in the sample. For this paper, we restricted analyses to the 113 surveys in which respondents indicated mobility challenges, with or without disabilities in other categories. This sample comprised 81 participants with mobility disabilities or impairments, 9 caretakers, and 23 participants who are both caregivers and live with disabilities or impairments themselves.

[Tables 1–3](#) indicate the demographic breakdown of these respondents. Note that, in [Tables 1 and 2](#), the data for surveys completed by caregivers only reflect the care recipients' sex and race/ethnicity. All other categories in these tables, as well as the information in [Table 3](#), are the values reported for the individual completing the survey.

Three trends became apparent when we analysed these data: apparel-related aspects of social engagement and relationships, apparel-related health care and safety concerns among people living with disabilities and impairments, and factors that may affect an individual's ability to achieve and maintain sufficient levels of health-promoting behaviour. Quantitative results for survey questions reflecting these trends are reflected in [Table 4](#) and discussed more below.

Table 1
Reported sex of participants indicating mobility challenges.

	Male	Female	Other
Persons Living with a Disability	27	52	2
Caregivers	2	7	0
PLWD/Caregiver	8	15	0

2.1. Social engagement and relationships

Approximately half of the respondents reported that they declined to participate in an activity or event because they lacked or were unable to wear appropriate or acceptable clothing. Two-thirds of these individuals indicated this was 'sometimes' or 'routinely' a problem. Examples of declined or missed activities included banquets, weddings, funerals, school dances, baseball games, gym classes, and graduation.

In some cases, declining to participate in important activities had long-lasting negative impacts on relationships, as in the case of one respondent who did not attend her best friend's wedding and stated 'she never forgave me.' Further, such decisions may mean that the lack of appropriately designed clothing contributes toward people with mobility challenges missing out on important cultural milestones, and reinforces feelings of isolation or difference. A quote from one participant exemplified this isolation when she commented on the unavailability of disability-appropriate formal wear: "when I was in High School I didn't go to [Homecoming] because I didn't have shoes or [a] dress to wear. I couldn't dance anyway."

Similarly, 54 of 106 (50.9%) participants reported that they or their care recipient missed out on something due to a lack of appropriate clothing, while 60 of 97 individuals (61.9%) reported that problems with clothing or shoes made it difficult to carry out everyday activities. Further, 67 out of 104 (64.4%) participants indicated that apparel issues have made them feel embarrassed or humiliated, with more than half of these participants stating it was 'sometimes' or 'routinely' a problem. Again, such feelings may contribute to feelings of depression or isolation, leading to further health complications.

The lack of attractive, functional clothing can be detrimental to overall well-being if individuals are unable to present themselves according to personal standards. For example, one caretaker said:

Although my mother is [in] a nursing home where everything frankly has no style, this is not her norm. She always dressed very well until it was too difficult to find clothes that fit and are functional. She has to be dressed in bed as her mobility is so bad. Things tear so you don't want to spend lots of money for something to be ripped but all she can now wear are loose t-shirts and baggy pants which just make her feel worse.

Additionally, while not as frequently reported as other concerns, cultural and religious clothing-related barriers may prevent people with disabilities and impairments from seeking appropriate assistance with apparel-related issues. Ten participants indicated prohibitions against having an aide help them dress, for reasons such as modesty, a desire to be independent, or reactions to specific types of clothes. For example, one participant stated 'I belong to the church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and I have special underwear that people might not feel comfortable seeing.'

2.2. Employment, safety and seasonal appropriateness

Several questions addressed how clothing design concerns related to issues of health and safety, including questions about employment, which can be an indicator of financial resources and access to health insurance options. Of 106 participants who answered questions about employment barriers (see [Appendix A](#), question 15), 49 individuals (46.2%) expressed concern over required clothing, with nearly half of these individuals reporting such concerns were 'sometimes' or 'routinely' an issue. Concerns were split between finding appropriate interview clothing and finding suitable occupation-specific clothing such as uniforms,

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