# Disability and Fashion Inclusion: Exploring Barriers, Needs, and Practice in Relation to the Self and Well-being

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# CHAPTER 4

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**Abstract**

The clothes one wears not only supports the individual's physical comfort and protection needs but also, when considering fashion, plays a powerful role in one's sense of self. For many disabled people, however, adequate clothing choice remains limited, which can negatively impact their well-being when psychological, social, or functional fashion needs are unmet. As such, this chapter applies various psychological theories to explore the complex intersection of psychology, fashion practice, and adaptive apparel research to understand garment-related, retail, and representation barriers to broader fashion inclusion, as well as the possible impact of this exclusion on the self-esteem and self-perception of people with disabilities. After discussing how potential discrimination or constructions of difference around disability may influence fashion inclusion, further research is explored on how needs like a healthy self-image and self-empowerment for disabled people can be fostered through fashionable and comfortable adaptive apparel, empathic design practices, and authentic representations. Future research recommendations are finally discussed for the role that psychology can play (e.g., managing ethics in inclusive design projects, understanding fashion creativity as therapy, mitigating bias in interpreting results) in supporting more meaningful and comprehensive fashion inclusion that considers the well-being of diverse individuals with disabilities.

**Introduction**

People with disabilities have long been excluded from the fashion industry (Foster, 2021) despite some evidence showing that disabled consumers' clothing choices can influence perceptions of self (Chang et al., 2014; Lamb, 2001). This chapter aims to provide a better understanding of how fashion exclusion and inclusion can impact the sense of self for different people with disabilities, as well as how applied psychology can support a more inclusive fashion industry. Different psychological theories will be used to understand the relationship between fashion and the self among disabled consumers and how better representation and accommodation in fashion can impact identity, self-esteem, and self-empowerment. The wider context of social perspectives on disability will be explored to assess potential causes of discrimination towards disabled fashion consumers and how this may influence the self-perception of some people with disabilities. Additionally, contemporary adaptive apparel research will be reviewed for recommendations on clothing design and practice that address consumers' needs for comfort, connection, and independence. From there, reflections will be made on how psychologists can actively contribute to research and apparel design that promotes genuine inclusion of consumers with disabilities and has a positive impact on their sense of self and well-being through fashion.

**The Intersection of Disability, Fashion Psychology, and Clothing Inclusion**

While *disability* has been defined through many lenses in the literature, the biopsychosocial model used by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2001) is applied in this chapter. In this model, disability is described as manifesting from a combination of clinical, personal, social, and environmental factors. This veers away from the traditional medical model, in which disability is considered to exist within the individual and a "cure" is sought (Shakespeare, 2018). The biopsychosocial model acknowledges that several factors,

such as available resources, personality, and social stigmas, affect how an individual experiences disability. The resources available are often linked to how environments, services, and products are designed and for whom, as this shapes who can access and use them, ultimately determining who can participate and feel included (Holmes, 2018). As in the different models that frame disability, language used within the literature on disability and inclusion varies. Following the varying terminologies in contemporary disability-centred research, this chapter uses both *people with disabilities*, frequently adopted as person-first language (McBee-Black, 2022) and *disabled people*, which is acknowledged as identity-first language and points to people being disabled by societal barriers (Shakespeare, 2018).

Just as in the rest of this volume, in this chapter the term *fashion industry* refers to the network of designers, manufacturers, and retail brands who create and sell trending clothing and accessories. *Fashion* can manifest when clothing goes beyond function and aesthetics to achieve social significance (Loschek, 2009), tying into our aspirations and sense of self (Sams & Black, 2013). As highlighted in Chapter 2 (Çili & Khadaroo, this volume), developing an understanding of one's sense of self often relates to one's knowledge of their various qualities on different levels, such as physical, active, social, and psychological. This is usually experienced over time and progressively as one moves from one developmental phase to another, for example through childhood and when transitioning to adolescence (Hart & Damon, 1986). Self-understanding (i.e., knowing who we are based on self-perceptions) is often key to one's identity (Damon & Hart, 1991) which, in turn, is closely linked to dress and fashion. In fact, Carroll (2014) refers to fashion as an art used to protect, decorate, and transform the wearer in the way that they choose and as a means for self-expression that can boost well-being and satisfaction in their life, whether or not they experience disability.

The relationship between fashion and the body is complex and somewhat ambiguous. What clothing means to someone is quite subjective in nature and is often linked to

physiological, psychological, philosophical, and socio-cultural factors (Roach & Eicher, 1973). During "body-fashion interaction" (Boultwood & Jerrard, 2000, p. 301), individuals may unconsciously connect to their sense of self and use fashion to reflect who they perceive themselves to be while simultaneously creating an identity that they present to the outside world, often influenced by social expectations, beauty ideals, and other psychosocial needs. They may therefore use clothing to express who they are (i.e., the actual self) and/or who they would like to be (i.e., the ideal self) (Guy & Banim, 2000). This is important because, as Suganya et al. (2024) explains, the relationship between consumers' psychological well-being and their perceptions of both their actual and ideal selves is significant and impacts fashion self-esteem. Furthermore, some qualitative findings suggest that when people have a clear sense of who they are and aspire to be, have relatively high self-esteem, and are conscious of what they choose to wear to reflect their broader sense of identity, the impact on well-being is mostly positive (Scott, 2018).

Psychological literature also points to other functions of clothing that are important both on a personal and social level (for a review, see Çili & Khadaroo, this volume). For example, Cox and Dittmar (1995) suggest that what we wear can be a way to express individuality as well as group membership. Women, in particular, can be preoccupied about their choice of clothes in the context of social interactions and how they feel they are perceived by others. This also impacts their satisfaction with their clothing (Cox & Dittmar, 1995). Building on this research, authors like Tiggemann and Lacey (2009) have revealed that clothing plays an important role in appearance management for women regardless of age. In their study of female clothes shoppers aged 18 to 55, clothing emerged as an important tool for assurance purposes (e.g., boosting one's self-confidence) and for camouflaging real or perceived physical flaws.

Extrapolating the above findings to disability communities, the potential of clothing to make disabled people, especially females, feel good about themselves should not be neglected. If clothing choice is limited for people with disabilities, so are opportunities for them to positively support their well-being and identity through fashion. This is why there is a need for *fashion inclusion,* which in this chapter will refer to widening mainstream fashion representation and design to include consumers with disabilities so equal opportunities are available for self-expression, identity construction, and social belonging through clothing choice. In addressing fashion inclusion, much of the research reviewed in this chapter focuses on *adaptive apparel*—clothing designed specific to certain functional disability-related needs (McBee-Black & Ha-Brookshire, 2020), like trousers for wheelchair users that have side openings for dressing while seated. A recently published systematic literature review on adaptive apparel concluded that while there have been advances in addressing the needs of disabled fashion consumers, more must be done to increase social acceptance and empowerment of people with disabilities (Rana et al., 2024). From a psychological perspective, we argue that doing so can indeed help disabled fashion consumers build a positive sense of self through both positive self-concept and social acceptance. This is key for their social identity, which subsequently can pave the way for positive well-being. It is therefore of utmost importance to promote adaptive apparel design and conduct research which can give us a better understanding of the specific psychological needs of people with different types of disabilities, as well as the barriers they face when it comes to engaging with fashion.

**Barriers to Fashion Choice and Disability Representation**

At the time of writing, an estimated 1.3 billion people around the world are experiencing disability due to the intersection of physical (e.g., paralysis, limb loss), cognitive (e.g., dementia), or sensory (e.g., visual impairment) health conditions, and restricting environmental or personal factors (WHO, 2023). Despite their vast number and the fact that disability can impact us all, people with disabilities continue to face ongoing barriers to essential resources like accessible housing, political rights, and healthcare access (Shakespeare, 2018), which can inhibit quality of life and full social participation. These barriers remain intact, in part, when disability-related needs are overlooked in areas like urban planning, education policy, and the design of our everyday spaces and products (Holmes, 2018), including clothing. While support and activism for disability inclusion in the fashion sector (and more generally) have increased in recent years likely through social media use and shifting generational attitudes (Annett-Hitchcock, 2023), it appears that widespread fashion exclusion of those with disabilities is still largely present and continues to impact belonging and well-being in these communities.

Within the United Kingdom (UK), disability rights organisation Leonard Cheshire (2019) and online magazine Disability Horizons conducted a survey on disability representation in British fashion with 206 participants who identified as living with a disability or long-term health condition. Revealing dissatisfaction, 75% of the respondents replied that their needs were not met by high street fashion, with much clothing deemed inaccessible due to inadequate fits, cumbersome buttons or zippers, and uncomfortable seams. Clothing that some participants had seen from specialised adaptive apparel retailers was described as untrendy and expensive, and a lack of suitable clothing was suggested as limiting opportunities to remain on-trend and express oneself through fashion. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, clothing is a powerful tool for self-expression for all consumers. Chang et al.'s (2014) study on dress behaviour and clothing selection among young American women

with disabilities supported the importance of self-expression for disabled people as participants used clothing choice to express their personality and social identity. As disabled people experience fewer opportunities for positive self-worth than their non-disabled peers (Dirth & Branscombe, 2018), it is crucial to make fashionable adaptive apparel more widely available to equally support their identity expression and other psychosocial needs.

Kabel and colleagues (2016) researched how apparel-related barriers of inadequate clothing design or lack of choice can increase experiences of disablement and negatively impact well-being for people with disabilities. Identifying limitations in ready-to-wear clothing for disabled consumers, the authors found that common functional barriers (poor fits, difficult fastenings, bothersome fabric textures) reduced their participants' comfort and ease-of-dressing. Apparel-related barriers also arose relating to sensory sensitivities, as mentioned by some parents who had children on the autism spectrum with hypersensitivities to dressing or tactile sensations (e.g., clothing seams or tags). One research participant indicated that her child avoided certain social activities like team sports when "unacceptable" (uncomfortable) uniforms or restrictive-feeling belts were required. Kabel et al. additionally point out that certain cultural expectations about the way one should present oneself may be unmet due to a lack of apparel choice like appropriate formal attire for dining out or attending weddings. Apparel-related barriers faced by consumers with disabilities, as such, appear to be multi-faceted and directly impact social participation and quality of life. Fashion design inclusion must therefore consider social and psychological factors alike.

The fashion barriers that people with disability face, however, are not just linked to inadequate clothing or limited clothing choice. They often come from physical barriers in retail spaces and portrayals of disability in fashion media. Dodds and Palakshappa (2022), for instance, identified retail-related barriers for different disabled shoppers in New Zealand: restrictive changing rooms, slippery floors, counter or display heights that are too high, and

overly taxing drives to or walks around stores. Exploring disability representation in fashion media, Foster (2021) assessed 50 *Teen Vogue* online editorials from 2018 to 2019 that touched on aspects of disability (e.g., identity, culture) and identified patterns and narratives for framing disability through a modified inductive, open-coding process. He concluded that while an emphasis was evident towards more empowered disability representation in this fashion media outlet, overall efforts towards fashion inclusion seemed, at times, short-lived and slow moving. Foster furthermore proposed that certain portrayals were limiting, such as describing shopping obstacles faced by disabled consumers as a personal challenge to overcome rather than suggesting retailers can improve accessibility. Findings such as these are important to note, as other researchers have argued that disability representations can impact how those who identify as disabled feel about themselves. In their survey of perceived valence of media portrayals with 359 Americans with disabilities, Zhang and Haller (2013, p. 329) argue that negative mass media representations (e.g., disabled people as "ill victims") created a "disabling environment" that could influence self-perceptions of being disabled and contribute to lower self-esteem. Success stories of those with disabilities, however, appeared to have a positive effect on identity. Psychological research shows that a positive disability identity is achieved with a positive impact on self-esteem and well-being when self-identification (i.e., as a person with a disability or as part of a disability group) is present (e.g., Bogart, 2014; Nario-Redmond et al., 2013). However, because of stigmas associated with being disabled, disability self-identification is often difficult (Bogart et al., 2017). More can be done to understand how fashion accessibility and various disability representations (or lack thereof) in fashion media may impact disabled consumers' self-perceptions and self-esteem.

**Psychological and Social Implications of Fashion Exclusion/Inclusion**

***Effects of Fashion Availability and Use for People with Disabilities***

Some evidence suggests that the stress of finding adaptive fashion and using clothing for self-expression can have a significant impact on people with disabilities. Recalling her own personal experiences of disability and fashion marginalisation, for instance, Kealy-Morris (2023) delves into the psychological impact of fashion exclusion. In an autoethnographic account, she describes the identity ambivalence and trauma she experienced as a child in the United States (US) when fitted for a brace for a spinal curvature at age 11. She further recounts the anxiety she felt when unable to find ready-to-wear garments that fit over her brace and matched social and peer expectations. Based on this influential experience, she introduces the term *body dressing work* to denote the extra effort required "to actively seek, test out, and find clothing that enables individuals to fit into social settings" (Kealy-Morris, 2023, p. 158). Kealy-Morris' notion of body dressing work raises a critical point concerning the disproportionate amount of attention, time, and energy that is required by individuals with disabilities to secure a sense of belonging through fashion and what impact that may have on their emotional well-being.

When fashion choice is less restricted, some research points to positive experiences for disabled consumers such as self-empowerment through the use of clothing. For example, Chang et al. (2014) found that for some participants clothing selection was related to positive self-efficacy, that is, their perception of their abilities to accomplish specific tasks like being able to overcome challenges in life (related to disability) and feeling self-confident. One participant explained that as her confidence and sense of self-efficacy grew after health challenges, she became more emboldened to express her personality through dress. Additionally, the authors found that clothing items were sometimes used as symbols of victory, with colourful clothing for example used to express triumph over difficult health-related moments. This finding is interesting as it fits in the narrative of how clothing can be

used to empower the self in different ways when readily available to meet the needs of different people with disabilities. Another study by Liskey-Fitzwater et al. (1993) compared female adolescents with and without scoliosis (a physical condition where the spine bends to the side, or spinal curvature). These authors found that those with scoliosis scored lower on using clothing to enhance self-concept. Overall, these mixed findings imply that the relationship between clothing, the self, and well-being is rather complex for people with disabilities. However, if a positive self-concept is fostered, supported both individually and socially—even through opportunities to select and wear clothing that matches who and how individuals perceive themselves to be—people with disabilities have a better chance of benefiting from fashion inclusion.

### Stigma, Discrimination, and the Role of Fashion

In a societal context, Davis (2013) contends that the marginalisation of disability may result from a construction of normalcy with many aspects of human existence like intelligence, height, and body shape subjectively ranked from below to above average according to arbitrary standards. Martínez-Bello et al. (2023) furthermore suggest that constructed social inequalities are maintained by the differentiation of certain groups in the media, such as when imagery of people with disabilities disproportionally focuses on personal struggles or "impairment". Pointing to a similar differentiation traditionally seen between apparel designed for disabled and non-disabled consumers, Lamb (2001) argues that how clothing is made and sold to disabled consumers (if coming strongly from a clinical perspective) may perpetuate discrimination against this group—discrimination occurring when people are singled out and not treated fairly like others because of individual differences that can include disability status (Kite et al., 2022). From a symbolic interactionist perspective, social interactions contribute towards the emergence of the self-concept such that

how someone perceives others to view their self is often internalised. If this is negative (e.g., stigmatised) and the self is perceived to be subjected to discrimination, it threatens the self-concept with the person potentially experiencing a torn identity (Goffman, 1963). Notably, a meta-analytic review of the relationship between perceived discrimination and psychological well-being concluded that perceived discrimination has significant negative effects on psychological well-being (Schmitt et al., 2014).

To reduce potential fashion discrimination and a differentiation of disabled consumers, Lamb (2001) recommends inclusive clothing design (i.e., creating products that are equally accessible for a wide range of disabled and non-disabled individuals alike). Carroll and Kincade (2007) investigated this possibility of inclusive clothing based on the shared office attire needs of nine US women with various physical disabilities, but they received feedback from six manufacturers that a proposed garment design was too costly to produce or incompatible with the brands' image and sales operations. As the authors report, however, these manufacturers were already producing similar styles, so their feedback may have been biased by the knowledge that the garment in question was for disabled women. They conclude that more understanding is needed to challenge preconceptions in the fashion industry that it is too complicated to incorporate disability-related needs in apparel – a claim corroborated in McBee-Black's (2022) more recent case study on Tommy Hilfiger's adaptive line, which is described in the next section. A question is thus raised of whether the needs of disabled people in fashion are often dismissed based on preconceptions surrounding the complexity of skills needed for clothing design, or whether there is some form of bias towards this group that leads to it being seen as *too niche* to cater for. Hopper (2013, p. 91) stated that while fashion designers seem to address the needs of celebrities and high-profile businesswomen rather effortlessly by creatively modifying their outfits and "distorting the normal human silhouette" (e.g., tight-fitting clothing), such creativity is less commonly used

to address the dress needs of women with disabilities. This is puzzling since in both cases the skills required are similar. As such, fashion inclusion for disabled consumers remains a challenging goal to achieve.

**Fashion Practice for Disability Inclusion**

*The Evolution of Adaptive Apparel*

Adaptive apparel research in the 20th century began exclusively with an aim towards rehabilitation and self-help (Carroll, 2010), with most research on adaptive clothing prior to the 1980s entrenched in the dominant medical model of disability in the US and UK (Lamb, 2001). Within this model, as Lamb (2001) points out, the medical community was asked to advise on functional adaptations needed in clothing from a clinical view of dressing and rehabilitation. It was not until the end of the 20th century that adaptive apparel research began to look towards full social participation and associated psychological needs (e.g., self-expression, belonging) as desired outcomes that should inform fashionable adaptive clothing design (Carroll, 2010).

At the time of writing, a limited number of mainstream fashion brands (e.g., Kohl's, Primark, Tommy Hilfiger) sell ready-to-wear adaptive apparel designed with additional openings, simpler fastenings, or sensory-friendly materials that do not cause irritation. Tommy Hilfiger's Tommy Adaptive line, for example, is available for both children and adults. It has received positive press and has been the case study subject in adaptive apparel research articles (e.g., McBee-Black, 2022). This line includes styles for wheelchair users, such as trousers with a high back rise and adjustable hem lengths which are suitable for a seated posture. Certain garments feature accessible fastenings, like magnets or Velcro, and "internal pull-up loops" for dressing that can be done one-handed or with reduced grip. Large-scale retailers Target in the US and Marks & Spencer (M&S) in the UK have also

launched adaptive clothing ranges. Target and M&S's adaptive apparel lines offer children's wear with sensory-friendly designs that have flat seams and no tags for less skin irritation. Many of Target's styles also have hidden abdominal access points for specific medical needs, like gastrostomy tube (G-tube) feeding which involves delivering food and drink directly to the stomach. A range of small-to-medium enterprises focusing on underserved disabled consumers have also emerged. *Unhidden*, for instance, offers sustainably designed adaptive fashions with fits suitable for wheelchair users, easy-open fastenings like poppers, and hidden access points for ports, tubes, or colostomy bags.

As the above examples show, a recurring consideration in contemporary adaptive apparel design research is an emphasis on the need for simpler ways of dressing (Wang et al., 2014; Watkins & Dunne, 2015). In fact, Azher et al. (2012), through their co-design of garments for three women with arthritis in Pakistan, found that making garments easier to take on and off seemed to positively impact the women's sense of personal independence and self-confidence. Although more research is needed in this area, these exploratory design research findings strongly suggest that adaptive apparel not only addresses needs in comfort and dressing but can also support one's psychological well-being, autonomy, and confidence.

### *Collaborative Participation and Empowerment*

For more impactful fashion inclusion of people with disabilities, Lamb (2001) advocates for direct participation of those with disabilities in the clothing design process itself, suggesting that experiential knowledge can help address consumers' unmet functional and psychological needs. This type of collaboration may facilitate more accurate representation and enable participant empowerment in the process. In their case study of the design of a Paralympic wheelchair athlete's shooting jacket, Hobbs-Murphy et al. (2024) highlighted not only the need for collaboration between the designers and participant but also

how increased points of communication appeared to enable the wearer in feeling connected to the resulting garment. Kidd's (2006) case study on the creation of special occasion wear for four young US women with spinal curvatures similarly calls attention to an empathetic design collaboration (i.e., visual aids for communication, flexible scheduling). The author state that the participants seemed to leave the project with a sense of ownership, suggesting the impact of having one's needs heard and supported.

It is evidenced, especially in clinical settings, that being part of a shared decision-making process has a positive impact on individuals' well-being and health outcomes (Carrotte et al., 2021). Although much less is known in terms of the impact of shared decision-making in a fashion context empirically, from a psychological perspective it may be argued that disabled consumers can equally benefit from having their voices heard when taking part in the creation of fashion products. Consumers with physical disabilities can feel invisible when their needs are not well understood (Felizardo et al., 2018). While it may be that fashion brands are generally unaware of the needs for (and importance of) clothing inclusion for people with disabilities through the aforementioned stigma or slow exposure to adaptative apparel (Esmail et al., 2021), knowledge of these clothing needs appears well-defined for the consumers themselves. For example, Annett-Hitchcock and Xu (2015) conducted qualitative research on the role of a virtual peer support community in the shopping experiences of people with spinal cord injuries. In that space, according to the authors, consumers appeared very confident in how they valued and expressed differences, with a strong understanding of their own personal clothing needs. Yet, they still experienced difficulties in finding ready-to-wear fashion that met those needs. Giving people with disabilities more opportunities to have direct input in adaptive apparel design (and research), in line with the above arguments, may positively impact designers and disabled consumers

alike, as both groups can enjoy that sense of empowerment when creating the right product –
one that works for designers *and* consumers.

**The Role of Psychology in Fashion and Disability Inclusion**

Resolving the issues described above in order to make fashion and the fashion
industry more inclusive of people with disabilities requires collective efforts from multiple
stakeholders. For example, fashion media and advertising will need to make their depictions
of disability more accurate and less stigmatising. Retailers need to make their physical spaces
and digital platforms more accessible to users with different needs, for example wheelchair
users and visually impaired or deaf consumers. Designers and manufacturers need to design
and produce garments that address both the functional and the psychological needs of
disabled consumers. A review of adaptive apparel design recommendations is outside the
scope of this chapter. Multiple authors (e.g., Cho et al., 2020; Kidd, 2006; McBee-Black,
2022; Poage, 2022; Watkins & Dunne, 2015) have already discussed different practices that
can be used when designing for people with different types of disabilities, for example to
ensure that garments are easy to don and doff, suit various body shapes and positions (e.g.,
wheelchair users, individuals with spinal curvatures), accommodate wearers' braces or
medical aids, and do not restrict mobility. We believe that all these changes—including those
at the design, marketing, and retail level—would benefit from psychologists' input. In the
remainder of this chapter, we discuss how we envisage this input.

*Understanding Underrepresented Consumer Perspectives*

To support the empowerment and well-being of disabled consumers in fashion, we
contend that psychologists can play an active role in collaborations with designers, fashion
industry professionals, and researchers to understand the clothing-related needs of people

with disabilities from a psychological perspective. As Cho et al. (2020) conclude, even if the intentions of designers or researchers of adaptive apparel are well-meaning, it is possible for the needs of those who have experienced disability to be misinterpreted when translated into designs. It has also been suggested that when working towards disability inclusion, certain methods intended for empathy-building may actually risk perpetuating misperceptions of disability (Holmes, 2018). For example, disability simulation is meant to replicate disability experiences of daily living or using products for non-disabled practitioners, but its effectiveness in understanding authentic experiences is open to debate (Holmes, 2018; Silverman et al., 2015). When immersed in a disability simulation (performing tasks while blindfolded to simulate living with a visual impairment), Silverman et al. (2015) observed that non-disabled participants appeared to suddenly experience new barriers without time to adapt. The authors suggested that participants seemed to imagine what living with a disability might be like rather than experiencing the actualities of daily living with a long-term disability. To help mitigate potential bias in interpreting user needs, we emphasise that psychological research methods can provide a useful addition to understanding diverse disability perspectives within inclusive (clothing) design or research.

The balance of power and dynamics between designers, researchers, and participants can be vital to effective inclusion research so participants feel empowered to contribute and express their needs (Hodson et al., 2023). Holmes (2018) argues that the motivations behind research or projects aimed at promoting design inclusion can influence how underserved individuals are represented or treated. If inclusive design comes from a place of charity or pity, for example, a mindset of "benefactor-beneficiary" may ensue and potentially discriminatory stereotypes may remain upheld (Holmes, 2018, p. 77). Therefore, psychologists may be influential inclusion research partners in framing research aims and methods that take into account participants' agency and perspectives. Psychologists with

robust ethics training and research experience are also in a good position to avoid, minimise, or handle ethical issues emerging in the course of research (e.g., participants experiencing distress), thus protecting participants' well-being.

### *Self-Esteem and Empowerment through Fashion Creativity and Inclusion*

It is now increasingly recognised that many women with disabilities can experience body image concerns and low self-esteem (e.g., Moin et al., 2009; Nosek et al., 2003; Taub et al., 2003), and there is evidence suggesting that through fashion and the creativity that it embodies many of these women can embrace fashion to cope with these issues (Kalitanyi, 2021). In fact, Son et al. (2015) reported that fashion can positively impact body image and psychological well-being when used therapeutically. As such, building a relationship with fashion and creativity is important for people with disabilities (and women in particular) to enhance self-esteem, self-empowerment, and overall self-image. Following this argument, further psychological research on what using fashion for emotional well-being means and looks like for various disability communities is needed for practitioners and designers to provide more opportunities for fashion to be used for "therapeutic" purposes in these communities. Artistic creativity has also recently been recognised as a form of empowerment for disabled people (Benzon et al., 2022). This suggests that there are avenues for the fashion industry to explore that allow more creativity for people with disabilities to experiment with fashion and benefit from it. Furthermore, with recent attention drawn to the importance of personal clothing style, how it relates to the self, and its well-being implications (as detailed in Çili and Khadaroo and Khadaroo and Alloub in this volume), psychologists can also assist people with disabilities to create a personal clothing style and enjoy the creativity that fashion offers to make them feel good about themselves.

Some research has suggested that the extra effort required to find suitable fashion products and satisfaction through dress gives some disabled consumers a "strong appreciation of the importance of style, fashion, [and] image" (Annett-Hitchcock & Xu, 2015, p. 141). This connection between the effort required to achieve fashion inclusion and the impact on self-image (Kealy-Morris, 2023) can be further researched from a psychological perspective to understand how availability and relationships with adaptive clothing can impact feelings of self-empowerment and self-confidence for different people with disabilities. Instead of relying only on participant qualitative accounts of their experiences, psychologists can apply objective ways of assessing these factors and any change they might undergo over time. New psychological research should also account for differences in experiences and outcomes, depending on the type of disability. This is key to identifying subtle differences that can influence well-being outcomes within these groups.

### Fashion Representation for a Positive Self-Image

In addition to supporting the unmet clothing-related psychological needs of disabled consumers, further research could assess how representations of disability in fashion media reflect and/or impact self-perceptions among those who identify as disabled. As previously discussed in this chapter, medicalised views of disability may not only reinforce potential social and industry biases that fashion cannot or need not accommodate disabled consumers but can also impact how people with disabilities see themselves (Foster, 2021; Lamb, 2001). Within a healthcare context, Hayes and Hannold (2007, p. 369) argue that, when "people with disabilities [are] tied to historical perceptions of the medical therapeutic process", they are confined to a passive and powerless "sick role". In this medical model, as suggested by the authors, people with disabilities are objectified and seen as in need of correction to have a "normal" role in society. Within this argument, it may be that medicalised views of disability

in fashion (and elsewhere) can increase body image issues in disabled people and negatively impact their body esteem.

Some attention has been drawn to using imagery to empower this group by emphasising that being disabled is more of a human experience rather than being "less able" than others (Garland-Thomson, 2002). This is a potential lens to explore for more healthy representations of people with disabilities in fashion. Battisti and Dalvit (2023), on this point, conducted an in-depth qualitative critical visual analysis and ethnographic content analysis of Instagram self-representations of models with disabilities in South Africa. They argue that this social media platform can be a good tool for exposing traditionally marginalised and stigmatised bodies. Their small sample of five ethnically diverse women were found to experience self-empowerment by sharing their authentic self, securing affirmation, and role modelling. However, these qualitative findings are exploratory in nature with limited scope for generalisation. Further psychological research is recommended on the potential impact of authentic and non-differentiating imagery of diverse people with disabilities within multiple fashion media outlets for the empowerment of disabled consumers and broader awareness.

**Conclusion**

As discussed and evidenced in this chapter, disabled people are often neglected as fashion consumers, leaving many clothing-related needs (e.g., self-expression, self-empowerment, belonging) unsatisfied. By recognising how fashion representation and availability affects the self, identity, and well-being of different disability communities, the fashion industry can make strides towards more meaningful inclusion. While mainly small-scale studies have laid a foundation for emerging adaptive apparel research, further qualitative and quantitative work is needed across broader populations and more specific apparel sectors, such as office and formal wear, to ensure that unmet psychological needs for

clothing inclusion are supported. More research on the needs and perspectives of adaptive apparel within different cultural, geographical, and social contexts can also help to understand the intersection of clothing, disability, and fashion more globally. Furthermore, future research explorations of disability and fashion needs can also consider the intersection with other areas of diversity like race, gender identity, age, or socioeconomic status, as well as the shifting complexities of disability over the lifespan. As this chapter suggests, collaborations between psychologists, fashion designers, and other fashion professionals can support a more inclusive fashion industry that genuinely understands disability communities and allows them to benefit from fashion and dress like all other consumers.

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