



Key functional and symbolic values of activewear designed for active aging women

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Recommendations by The National Council on Aging (2016) suggest that mature adults engage in at least 150 minutes of moderate-intense aerobic physical activity a week, and Sun, Norman, and White (2013) report that between 20-60% of adults over 50 were meeting these recommended guidelines. This showcases the sizable market of aging adults who are participating in physical activity. However, the active aging population, particularly women, are likely wearing activewear that is optimized for young people. Many activewear manufacturers do not prioritize the functional or socio-cultural needs of active aging women even though they are a sizeable market segment (McCann, 2016). Activewear designed with younger consumers in mind may not align with regular physiological changes that occur during aging such as changes in posture, height, weight, fat distribution, muscular strength, body stiffness, and coordination (LaBat & Ryan, 2019). Likewise, aging women's aesthetic preferences may be different from younger women. Overall, there is a void in the market for activewear explicitly designed for active aging women that can support physical activity in later life (McCann, 2016).

This study is framed by seminal work by Rosenblad-Wallen (1985), who provided a model of functional clothing design in which they purport "the value of a product is created in its relation to man and the actual environment or the socio-cultural environment" (p. 280). Product success is, therefore, predicated on how well both social symbolic messages and functional use-values are considered in the product design for a given market. According to Rosenblad-Wallen, functional use-values entail protection from the climate/environment and providing physical comfort in movement, fit, pressure on the body, friction against the body, tactility, and weight/load. The symbolic values (also described as the non-material values) address self-esteem, state of mind, group membership, decoration, fashion, and respectability (Rosenblad-Wallen, 1985). In this model of design, apparel products must have definite attributes that fulfill not only the wearer's goals but also their values. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the functional and symbolic value placed in activewear products for women aged 50 and older. This study contributes to the research by identifying key functional and symbolic values of activewear that may be used develop products support active aging.

Methods

Data were collected through 14 semi-structured interviews with physically active women over the age of 50. The research team employed a purposive sampling method for this study to ensure a homogenous group of participants that could speak to shared experiences (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). The IRB-approved interview guide was developed following Rosenblad-

Wallen's (1985) functional and symbolic values of dress and was expanded with questions that emerged from recent academic and popular-press sources. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researchers concluded data collection when no new information was discovered, and data saturation was reached (Saldana, 2016). The data were analyzed using thematic analysis and progressed in two stages, open coding using *a priori* codes (e.g., functional, symbolic), followed by selective coding, which included coding for the final themes listed in this analysis (Saldana, 2016). Throughout the coding process, the researchers open-coded for emergent themes that were not in the initial codebook (Saldana, 2016).

Results and Discussion

The participants were from the Midwest and the Western United States and ranged in age from 50 to 78. Four participants were retired, while the other women worked full-time. Participants in this study reported being physically active at least three times a week and doing activities ranging from stretching to walking, running, aerobics, yoga, weightlifting, and group classes. Overall, there were 15 functional values and seven symbolic values of activewear identified by the women in this study. The functional values were *protection from the climate/environment, safety, fit, range of motion, thermal comfort, donning/doffing, pressure on the body, support, fabric performance, layering, storage, no friction, tactility (texture), quality, and flexible in use*. The symbolic attributes identified by the women in this study were *self-esteem, group membership, fashion and aesthetics, decoration (color and textile prints), modesty, and motivation and reasons for working out*. Of the 22 values identified in this study, 14 values were also identified by Rosenblad-Wallen (1985). These values could be understood as “universal” values of dress. For example, every apparel consumer, regardless of age, values garments that *fit* their body well. Even though some attributes cross-over, researchers and designers should consider the unique meanings given to these values by women aged 50 and over. Because, the participants were in no way satisfied with the *fit* of activewear. All of the participants in this study were dissatisfied with the fit of nearly every product type (sports bras, pants, tank tops, and shorts) because these items did not reflect “changes in [their] shape” (Christie).

The key unique functional and symbolic values that emerged from this data and have not otherwise emerged in previous studies were *donning/doffing, layering, storage, quality, flexible in use, modesty, and motivation and reasons for working out*. These values may be of particular interest to researchers and practitioners because they appear to be distinct to this demographic. Regarding *donning/doffing*, the participants valued products that make getting dressed/undressed easier, “especially when you’re sweating and stuff. It’s tough” (Lisa). *Layering* garments helped the women maintain thermal comfort, particularly those who have experienced changes in metabolism (slowing and want warmer) or hormone changes (menopause and hot flashes). *Storage* (i.e., pockets) was important to hold Kleenex, hats, gloves, flashlights, phones, and other essentials. The women in this study appreciated *quality* garments that were durable because they kept garments they liked until it fell apart for fear they would not be able to find a comparable

garment. This phenomenon was closely related to fit. The participants valued *modest* activewear. Tracy noted, “being an older person wearing leggings is almost like wearing nothing. I’m not comfortable wearing leggings with a crop top at my age”. The women also valued garments that were *flexible in use* that they could wear for a range of activities such as playing with grandkids, using the stairs over the elevator, and walking to stores. These activities were in addition to their workout routines. Lastly, the women valued activewear that reflected their *motivations and reasons for working out*. For the women in this study, a big part of being physically active is doing daily activities that were not necessarily associated with the gym or working out. These physical activities contributed to their overall identity or who they are as a person.

Conclusion

Overall, the purpose of this study was to explore the functional and symbolic value placed in activewear products for women aged 50 and older. In this study of 14 women aged 50-78, we identified several unique functional and symbolic values of activewear. Future studies should validate these exploratory findings with more substantial and more diverse samples before making generalizations. Still so, the insights gained in this study are valuable to develop age-specific activewear that promotes physical activity into later life.

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