

Social Media and Disability Community: Exploring How Disability Advocates and Influencers Promote Adaptive Apparel Using Instagram and Twitter

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Introduction. With the rise of social media, a new opportunity for product promotion and influence has emerged. Apparel brands and retailers use social media outlets, like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Tik Tok, to engage with influencers who may have the power to leverage their consumers. (Han et al., 2021). Literature has explored the role of marketing and promotion within the apparel industry, focusing on areas such as marketing of apparel brands sustainability efforts and marketing of apparel brands (Zhao et al., 2018), supply chain transparency (Modi & Zhao, 2020), identifying fashion influencers for brand and product promotion and marketing (Han et al., 2021), and the influence of social media marketing on customer satisfaction (Yang et al., 2020). However, these studies have primarily focused on traditional apparel consumers, not underrepresented consumers like people with disabilities (PWDs). Therefore, there remains a gap in the literature focusing on using social media as a marketing and promotion tool for PWDs within the adaptive apparel marketplace. Thus, this study aimed to understand how social media is used as a marketing and promotion tool for PWD consumers within the adaptive apparel marketplace and explores how disability advocates and influencers use social media to promote adaptive apparel.

Theoretical Framework. While research suggests consumers use social media to build interconnectedness within personal networks, the role of personal consumer networks within the disability community often lacks discussion. Communities are defined as a “body of persons of common and especially professional interests scattered through a larger society” (Merriam-Webster, 2023). Lave and Wenger (1991) posit that CoPs are networks of participation for members to develop identity and engage in shared knowledge as a source of informal or formal learning. For this study, the researchers are expanding on Lave and Wenger’s (1991) research and suggesting that CoPs exist to promote and market products and share common knowledge within the social media virtual environment for PWDs.

Furthermore, while CoPs support promoting and marketing products for PWDs, social capital enables participants to work together to pursue shared objectives effectively. However, the role of social media as a moderator of social capital needs more discussion and attention in the literature. For this study, the researchers define social capital in a virtual social media environment as physical and social norms facilitating information exchange and knowledge sharing through continuous engagement built on trust, mutual experiences, and shared understanding. However, what remains unknown is whether social media is used as a marketing and promotion tool for PWDs within the adaptive apparel marketplace. Therefore, the researchers aimed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do apparel brands, PWD consumers, influencers, and advocates promote and market adaptive apparel using social media and social media campaigns?

RQ2. What role has social media had in the adaptive apparel movement by promoting and marketing fashion events?

Method. The study was completed in two Phases. Phase I was a qualitative study with semi-structured interviews with PWDs, disability advocates, and disability influencers using Instagram. Eight individuals representing seven organizations and brands were interviewed. All interviews were conducted using Zoom web conferencing. In addition to the interviews, the researcher reviewed the Instagram posts of all participants to gain an in-depth and holistic perspective. Field notes were used during the interviews that became a part of the research journal. Seven Instagram pages, ten field notes, and 111 interview transcriptions were reviewed, coded, and analyzed. To answer RQ2, phase II utilized collocation analysis to examine word co-occurrence patterns in Twitter data (Xiao & McEnery, 2006), concentrating on bigrams and trigrams. We collected user-generated content from Twitter, highlighting adaptive clothing and a highly influential event—the Runway of Dreams (RoD) fashion show during New York Fashion Week (NYFW) in September 2022. We extracted all tweets containing the hashtags #adaptiveclothing, #adaptiveapparel, #adaptivefashion, #rethinktherunway, #Afashionrevolution, and #runwayofdreams during three weeks around NYFW, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the discourse related to this event.

Results. For RQ1, five themes emerged from the data – Community, Stronger Together, Meeting the PWD Consumer Where They Are, Increasing Awareness and Building Community, and Storytelling. Community explores the connection PWDs experience through social media, allowing PWDs to find others with disabilities to learn about adaptive products and gain a trusted source for information. Social media can also be a way to build a community. When asked if they look to social media influencers to promote adaptive apparel, or apparel in general, many users said they “look to the ones that look more like me for ideas.” Further, many engagers and influencers look to social media as a method for sharing content that will enhance disability awareness and advocacy.

For RQ2, we categorized the common features in Twitter data into three themes: Diverse Disability Communities, Empowerment and Support, and Inclusive Fashion Initiatives. First, several disability communities emerged from the data, with frequent mentions of “little people, little man/woman, dwarf,” signifying a significant discussion community on Twitter. Additionally, another disability community focused on “limb loss, amput, limb loss aware.”. Second, an intriguing theme centered around Twitter users promoting “embrace your difference, making a difference,” where users shared their feelings to encourage PWDs to embrace their uniqueness and advocate for themselves. The third theme highlighted that influential events provided opportunities for PWDs to form communities, actively engaging in discussions and expressing appreciation for such fashion events. Alongside these primary themes, users also discussed fashion styles and product features catering to their needs. The results indicate that social media has become an essential platform for PWDs to share and express their feelings. Runway of Dreams has successfully promoted adaptive clothing, attracting significant public attention, and social media has helped RoD reach a broader audience of PWDs.

Overall, the findings from this study support the aim of this study. Specifically, the findings suggest that virtual social networks allowed PWD consumers, influencers, apparel brands, and advocates to benefit from sharing personal information and building a sense of knowing each other (Liu et al., 2016). Interestingly, the findings from this study suggest that brands and organizations build stronger connections with potential users and engagers through virtual social network connections. Suggesting that for PWDs and the organizations and brands that engage with PWDs, the virtual social network is an opportunity to gain trust and build connections.

Implications and Future Research. The findings from this study suggest that additional research should be conducted exploring the use of social media by PWDs and the disability community. Further, apparel brands and retailers should explore how to use social media more effectively when engaging PWDs to gain trust and build brand loyalty.

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