



Adaptive fashion on social media: A content analysis of posts and comments on the Zappos Adaptive Facebook page

Sara Jablon-Roberts, Johnson & Wales University and Arienne McCracken, SUNY Oneonta

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In 2017, the internet retailer Zappos introduced an adaptive category to its website (Zappos, 2017, 2023), and in 2019, the dedicated Facebook page for Zappos Adaptive launched. This page was actively maintained until mid-December 2022, when adaptive-themed posts were folded into the main Zappos Facebook page (Zappos Adaptive, 2022). Zappos's adaptive category and its subsequent marketing efforts on Facebook are indicative of the growth of the adaptive apparel market. They may also be seen as part of the societal movement towards greater inclusion and diversity, even though people with disabilities (PWD) remain a marginalized group overall (Kosinski et al., 2018). Therefore, these social media communications may yield insights into society's changing zeitgeist.

Literature Review

The target market for adaptive apparel is not insignificant. PWD comprise approximately 13% of the U.S. population (Erickson et al., 2021). Working-age PWD have substantial spending power, with an overall discretionary income of almost \$21 billion (Yin et al., 2018). Other potential users of adaptive apparel are those with chronic health conditions and the elderly, a group that is growing as the Baby Boomers move into retirement age (Colby & Ortman, 2014). The increasing focus on and availability of apparel for PWD has been widely examined in the clothing and textiles field (see McBee-Black et al., 2021). Consumer sources also seem to see the value in exploring this topic, like Haines (2021), who focused on the importance of greater inclusion and visibility of PWD in the apparel industry. Specific to this research, Touchette et al. (2015) investigated of themes of play in apparel firms' Facebook pages, and Li et al. (2023) examined online reviews of adaptive apparel purchases, but little scholarly attention overall has been paid to the ways in which adaptive apparel is depicted on social media.

Method

The researchers sought to learn about the nature of Zappos Adaptive's Facebook posts and how they were received. To that end, content analysis and the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) were employed to examine Zappos Adaptive's final year of Facebook posts and attendant comments – 222 posts and 6,572 comments in all, from December 17, 2021 to December 16, 2022. After archiving all posts and comments via screenshot, the researchers coded both visual and textual elements of a portion of the posts with their comments to create an initial codebook, working to negotiate any questions or discrepancies, and eventually arriving at an inter-coder agreement of 92.3%. The remaining

posts and comments were then divided up evenly between the researchers, with periodic meetings to discuss questions and themes.

Results

Of Zappos Adaptive's 222 posts, 74% (n=165) featured photographs of people, 18% were product images, and the remaining 8% were graphics promoting a holiday or Zappos event. Two-thirds (n=150) of the Zappos Adaptive posts advertised footwear, 19 (9%) showcased apparel, 7 (3%) promoted accessories, and 6 (3%) advertised more than one category. The most highly promoted brand was Billy Footwear (n=23), a company that is highlighted on the Zappos Adaptive website for their shoes with zippers that allow the top of the shoe to flip over so wearers can place their feet directly onto the footbed and zip the upper back on.

Of the 165 posts featuring images of people, 46% showed individuals with visible disabilities, the most prevalent being people in wheelchairs or motorized scooters (n=40) and people with prosthetic limbs (n=26). The most frequently seen model was an Asian woman with two prosthetic legs (n=10), who was often photographed with a Black man in a wheelchair (n=8) in promotions for Reebok. A Latinx girl in a wheelchair was very popular, appearing in eight posts for a variety of brands.

Zappos Adaptive's text was often vague about the adaptive qualities of the products promoted, with "easy on and off" being the characteristic identified the most (n=79; n=30 when there was no additional adaptive information given). Upon further examination, easy on and off generally referred to footwear without shoelaces. The second most common adaptive quality was even more vague: "easy dressing" (n=39; n=12 on its own). The concepts most emphasized were *style* (mentioned in 37 posts), *comfort* (n=30), and sport and play (n=30), which supports the conclusions of Touchette et al. (2015).

In terms of comments, similar to Li et al.'s (2023) findings, posters were concerned with both function and aesthetics. When consumers focused on a product that Zappos promoted, they tended to comment on or ask about *design*, *color* options, *comfort*, *cost*, *sizes* (particularly if a pictured child's product came in adult sizes and vice versa), and whether the product would work with a *specific disability*. Overall, Facebook users asked 104 *questions* and discussed *positive experiences with the product* (e.g., "Finding these shoes were the best thing EVER! He can even put them on and take them off by himself and he still looks like he's stylin"). Another type of frequently seen comment was coded as *I wish* (e.g., "I wish they had these when I was young."). Zappos Adaptive representatives were also actively posting, responding to user comments and questions 1,626 times, providing 25% of the visible comments.

Unfortunately, Facebook users commented on other factors as well. The post with the highest number of comments (n=532) featured a man wearing Adidas slip-on shoes similar in aesthetics to the Crocs clog. One hundred and six comments were negative about the design ("They look like duck feet"),

and 37 comments were negative in more targeted ways (e.g., racism, toxic masculinity [“If I’m going to wear those, I might as well pull a Bruce Jenner”], body shaming). The post with the highest number of *targeted negative comments* (i.e., trolling) (n=187) was the one promoting Black History Month. This post received 410 comments overall. However, only 212 of them were visible. Across all 222 posts analyzed, Facebook showed that there was a total of 7,136 comments but only 6,572 comments were visible, the remaining presumably having been hidden or deleted by the Facebook user, Zappos, or Facebook itself.

Of the ten posts with the most engagement, measured by adding user likes, comments, and shares, all featured footwear. There were ten depictions of people, nine of which were people of color, and eight of which were female, including the Asian woman, seen twice, and the Latinx girl, seen five times. All ten people had visible disabilities.

Conclusions

Greater availability and, indeed, visibility of adaptive dress options for PWD was clearly appreciated by a majority of the Facebook users who commented on Zappos Adaptive’s posts. The researchers frequently found comments applauding the existence of a given product that made dressing easier for PWD, as well as heartfelt mini-testimonials from current users or caregivers of users of a promoted product, and posts were shared or linked to another user 11,647 times. Unsurprisingly, however, trolls were also in evidence. Their activity expressed racism, sexism, homophobia, fatphobia, and even gatekeeping as to who is allowed to be called a PWD. However, the 2,464 generalized positive comments, such as the word “amen” or the heart emoji, could be read as a result of the outreach efforts of the Zappos Adaptive Facebook page to increase visibility of various disabilities to the wider Facebook audience.

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