

“Can’t wait to see you on our new home:” Comparing Adaptive Posts on the Zappos Adaptive and the Combined Zappos Facebook Pages

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

Keywords: social media, content analysis, people with disabilities, engagement

The e-commerce retailer Zappos initially debuted its adaptive product category in 2017 (Zappos, 2023). Its adaptive department (or “featured shop”) offers apparel, footwear, and accessories for people with disabilities (PWD) who have difficulties with dressing. By 2019, the firm had established a standalone Facebook page, Zappos Adaptive, to market these products. According to Jablon-Roberts and McCracken (2023), this page was a site of awareness building of both products and issues relevant for the disability community, dialogue between the very present Zappos social media team and commenters, and greater visibility of PWD in media. Intended for a specialized market, engagement on the page was considerable. However, the Zappos Adaptive Facebook page became inactive on December 16, 2022; after that date, all adaptive-themed posts were slated to be published on the general Zappos Facebook page. The messaging during the final few days of the Zappos Adaptive Facebook page promised that this strategy would “share adaptive products with an even wider audience” (November 21, 2022).

This study is a content analysis of the adaptive-themed posts in the first year of the combined Zappos Facebook page and a comparison of that data to the findings from a previous study that examined the last year of the Zappos Adaptive page (Jablon-Roberts & McCracken, 2023). The study’s research question is:

RQ: How do the captions, visuals, and user engagement on adaptive-related posts compare between the Zappos Adaptive Facebook page and the newly combined Zappos Facebook page?

Literature Review: Approximately 27% of adults currently live with some type(s) of disability (Centers for Disease Control, 2023). As a longstanding marginalized group in society, PWD and their dress-related needs and wants have historically been relegated to the periphery by the apparel industry, but in recent years, the availability of adaptive dress products has greatly increased (McBee-Black et al., 2021). Social media marketing has become an accepted part of the marketing mix of business firms, who utilize it for not only generating sales, but perhaps even more importantly, for relationship development and loyalty building with those in a company’s target market (Shen & Bissell, 2013). Among social media platforms, Facebook is still extremely popular, with three billion monthly users of the site worldwide (Schaeffer, 2024). The internet, with its various platforms, has long been characterized as an especially suitable medium to inexpensively reach a niche or specialized target market that may be widely dispersed geographically (Anderson, 2006). In addition, social cognitive theory states that people are influenced by the media they consume and even more by people whom they perceive to be similar to themselves (Rudy et al., 2010). For all these reasons, Zappos using Facebook to reach consumers of adaptive apparel would seem to be ideal.

Method: Content analysis was employed to examine all posts and comments from the combined Zappos Facebook page for one year, starting the day after the company merged all adaptive-themed posts into the combined Facebook page. The content analysis included both text and imagery. Initial coding of a selection of posts and comments by both researchers yielded an inter-coder agreement of 95%. At that point, the remaining posts and comments were divided up between the two researchers. Data were analyzed with constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and the researchers met regularly to discuss any issues or questions that arose. Results were then compared to data from a previous study (Jablon-Roberts & McCracken, 2023) that investigated the last active year of the Zappos Adaptive Facebook page.

Results: In the last year of the Zappos Adaptive Facebook page (December 17, 2021 to December 16, 2022), 222 posts were made focusing on adaptive products and people with disabilities (PWD). (Hereafter, these posts are referred to as “ZA posts.”) Between December 17, 2022 and December 16, 2023, Zappos posted 498 times to their combined Facebook page (hereafter referred to as “combined posts”). Only 28 of those posts (5.6%) were related to adaptive products or PWD (hereafter referred to as “adaptive combined (AC) posts”).

The AC posts shared many similarities with the ZA posts (Jablon-Roberts & McCracken, 2023). In both sets of posts, the most promoted brand was BILLY, a company selling footwear with zippers that flip over the upper so wearers can place their feet directly onto the footbed and zip the upper back on, and the most featured people were White adult women without visible disabilities. The vague descriptor “easy” was the most common adaptive quality identified in captions in both sets of posts as well.

However, there was a drastic difference in levels of Facebook user engagement. The 222 ZA posts earned a total of 277,183 likes and 11,311 shares, while the 498 combined posts earned 13,561 likes and 938 shares. For the ZA posts, 6,572 comments were analyzed, compared to 6,529 comments on the combined posts. In sum, more than double the posts on the combined page earned less than 5% of the likes that the ZA posts earned, 8% of the shares, and not quite the same number of comments as the ZA posts. These figures show that the Zappos Adaptive Facebook community was much more engaged than the Zappos Facebook community as a whole.

Engagement with the 28 AC posts was slightly higher than the combined posts in general, but still extremely low in comparison to the ZA posts. In the ZA set, each post had an average of 1,249 likes and 51 shares; the combined posts averaged 27 likes and 2 shares per post; and the AC posts averaged 69 likes and 4 shares per post. ZA posts had an average of 32 comments per post, while AC posts only garnered an average of 5. However, there were no troll comments on the AC posts, while 23% of the ZA comments were coded in that category (Jablon-Roberts & McCracken, 2023).

In terms of models, on the ZA posts, Facebook users most engaged with an Asian woman with two prosthetic legs and a Latinx girl in a wheelchair (Jablon-Roberts & McCracken, 2023). Zappos did not feature these models in the AC posts. In fact, none of the featured models in the AC posts was of Latinx ethnicity and only one was Asian; 81% of the models were White compared to 65% of the ZA models. Of the AC posts, Facebook users most engaged with models who were White women, one in a wheelchair and one with no visible disabilities.

Conclusion: While the stated goal of integrating the Zappos Adaptive feed into the combined Zappos Facebook page was presented positively in the days leading up to the change, in actuality, posts that featured PWD or any kind of adaptive theme on the merged combined page were exceedingly rare. Moreover, user engagement with adaptive content declined precipitously after the merger. The Zappos Adaptive community seemingly did not follow to the combined Zappos page, perhaps because per social cognitive theory, they were looking to see themselves reflected in the posted imagery and did not. The merger of the two pages would also seem to be contrary to widely accepted principles of developing and retaining customer loyalty through social media (Shen & Bissell, 2013). Firms with both general and specialized target markets may well need to consider strategies on how best to cultivate and develop relationships with those two groups as separate entities, time and resources permitting.

References

- Anderson, C. (2006). *The long tail: Why the future of business is selling less of more*. Hyperion.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2023, May 15). *Disability impacts all of us*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html>
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine Publishing Company.
- Jablon-Roberts, S., & McCracken, A. (2024). Adaptive fashion on social media: A content analysis of posts and comments on the Zappos Adaptive Facebook page. *International Textile and Apparel Association Annual Conference Proceedings* 80(1). <https://doi.org/10.31274/itaa.17274>
- McBee-Black, K., Lee, Y.-A., Morris, K., & Michaelson, D. (2021). Mapping adaptive apparel scholarship in the clothing and textiles discipline. *International Textile and Apparel Association Virtual Annual Conference Proceedings*, 78(1). <https://doi.org/10.31274/itaa.13283>
- Rudy, R. M., Popova, L., & Linz D. G. (2010). The context of current content analysis of gender roles: An introduction to a special issue. *Sex Roles*, 62: 705-720. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-010-9807-1>
- Schaeffer, K. (2024). *5 facts about how Americans use Facebook, two decades after its launch*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved February 19, 2024 from <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/02/02/5-facts-about-how-americans-use-facebook-two-decades-after-its-launch/>
- Shen, B., & Russell, K. (2013). Social media, social me: A content analysis of beauty companies' use of Facebook in marketing and branding. *Journal of Promotion Management*, 19, 629-651. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10496491.2013.829160>
- Zappos. (2023). *Zappos Adaptive*. <https://www.zappos.com/c/adaptive>