

THE POWER OF FASHION FOR EVERY BODY:
THE EMERGING MARKET OF ADAPTIVE APPAREL FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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By

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THE POWER OF FASHION FOR EVERY BODY:
THE EMERGING MARKET OF ADAPTIVE APPAREL FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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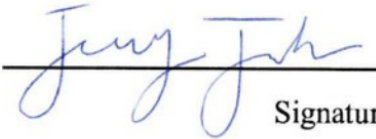
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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the reasons some apparel companies are engaging with the emerging adaptive apparel space, while other companies seem to misunderstand this critical and meaningful market. Adaptive products - designed specifically with functional features for people with disabilities - have been gaining popularity with brands such as Tommy Hilfiger, Victoria's Secret, Target, and more hopping on this trend to empower this community through clothing that meets specific needs. The disabled community is the largest minority group in the U.S. at 13%. This adaptive apparel space not only fulfills an underserved market need and attracts new consumers but is also a new avenue for companies to engage with existing consumers through a new inclusive voice. Through three interviews with major brands in the categories of full, limited, and zero engagement in the adaptive apparel market, the research question of why some apparel companies choose to engage in the adaptive market, while others de-prioritize this market will be analyzed.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to send a thank you to the generous interview participants who shared their company's beliefs and experiences in the adaptive apparel market. Their honesty, insights, and perspectives provided me with meaningful information to complete this thesis. A special thank you to the companies wanting to create adaptive products with authenticity and inclusivity. And, most importantly, thank you to the community of people with disabilities for their grace and patience with the fashion industry slowly bringing them this needed change.

"I am a one-handed guy, living in a two-handed world."

- Chris Ruden, *Runway of Dreams: A Fashion Revolution Model 2023*

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1 Introduction

Have you ever thought about getting dressed from a wheelchair? Have you ever thought about how you would put on a bathing suit without the use of your arms? Have you ever tried to pull on a sock or underwear without using your hands? Did you know that 13% of Americans live with disabilities and face these challenges every day (McBee-Black & Ha-Brookshire, 2019). The disabled community is the largest minority on the planet yet is significantly underrepresented and underserved in the fashion industry (NRF Retail's 2023 "Building the Adaptive Category - From Inclusive Intent to Action" Panel Video). Differently abled people are left to confront these obstacles of dressing every morning and night with sub-adequate help from apparel companies (Mc-Bee Black & Ha-Brookshire, 2019).

Tasks as 'simple' as putting on underwear or socks are taken for granted by able bodied people and brands. There is a lack of awareness that leads to a lack of availability of apparel offered by brands that meets the needs of kids and adults with disabilities. When in need of assistance to get dressed, people with disabilities must ask for help from a friend, family member, or caregiver - decreasing their sense of independence and wasting excess time (McBee-Black, 2022). Similarly, if you are a person with a disability, most apparel offered to meet your specific needs is not the same as that for able-bodied people, furthering the 'difference' this community experiences every day.

Adaptive products are developed to support people with limb differences, in wheelchairs, sensory challenges, dexterity issues, prosthetics, and more. A product qualifies as adaptive based on its specifically designed features, for example, substituting buttons with velcro or magnets. Updating from the classic clothing techniques, like snaps and zippers, a whole new customer base

can be represented in the fashion industry, creating a sustainable, incremental, and profitable business opportunity (Kabel et al., 2017).

Clothing is supposed to make people feel good in their skin - adaptive product lines can help make this a reality for people with disabilities. According to the CDC, one in four adults - 61 million Americans - live with a disability (Mallon, 2023). Companies such as Victoria's Secret, Kohls, Target, Tommy Hilfiger, and more have accepted the challenge and opportunity of entering the adaptive market by manufacturing functional products and have thrived! The benefits have included incremental revenue, strong profit margins, and an inclusive message that elevates their entire brand position with all consumers - abled and disabled (McBee-Black, 2022).

Although adaptive apparel gained traction in the mid-2010s, the market did not earn its significance until 2020 and 2021 (McBee-Black, 2022). It is known that clothing barriers exist for people with disabilities, however this challenge can be diminished with the creation of a variety of adaptive products (McBee-Black, 2022).

“The relationship between apparel and marginalization for people with disabilities... is powerful yet often invisible” (Kabel et al., 2016). The adaptive market is incremental, sustainable, and profitable while also being inclusive, empowering, and transformative. Sometimes, it is the simplest things, such as adding magnets instead of buttons, that make the biggest impact and difference (Robinson, 2018).

This study will analyze why some retail companies choose to engage in the adaptive apparel market, while others de-prioritize this opportunity. To better understand the reasons why retail brands decide to venture into the adaptive market or not, I interviewed three major fashion companies each within the category of full engagement, limited engagement, and zero engagement.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews relevant academic literature that provides background on the adaptive market and the opportunities it can bring. Section 3 introduces the methodology used to collect and analyze data from three qualitative interviews concluding in a comparative case study. Section 4 covers the Findings. Section 5 comments on the importance of this adaptive apparel realm from different perspectives. Section 6 will include recommendations regarding the adaptive apparel market. Lastly, Section 7 will contain concluding remarks.

2 Literature Review

“A disability is any condition that makes it more difficult for a person to do certain activities or interact with the world around them” (Poonia & Pinki, 2020). This umbrella term of disabilities consists of conditions or impairments that can be developmental, cognitive, mental, intellectual, physical, sensory, or a combination. Due to these factors creating limitations on activities faced every day by this community of people with disabilities, finding clothes easy to put on and off independently is rare. Apparel designed for this consumer, “... must allow for greater freedom and independence when worn, [and] it must also be fashionable” (Poonia & Pinki, 2020). There is a major gap in this niche market, called adaptive apparel, that has been untouched, until recent years. This isolation felt by people with disabilities in functional and fashionable apparel stems from a, “... lack of visibility for people with disabilities, a lack of centralized research on adaptive clothing, and a lack of will from the fashion industry” (Indiano, 2019). Having the option to choose from a dresser full of clothes to wear helps people feel more confident in their bodies, independent in their lives, and creates ease for dressing and undressing (Perrella, 2013).

Ableism reinforces the negative stigma around the disability label, as it, “...creates a divide between the ideal (i.e., non-disabled) and inferior human body (i.e., disabled)” (Mihelcic, 2022). Whether designed for able-bodied or disabled bodies, adaptive clothing improves the functionality so all body types and abilities can be put on and worn easily. For the consumer living with a disability, adaptive apparel pursues the endeavor of adding value and independence to their lives through a wider variety of stylish clothing. Despite the inclusive and empowering purpose the adaptive apparel market holds, these functional and fashionable products are not

widely available for purchase due to the minor, yet growing number of retail companies engaging (Kosinski, 2019).

2.1 A Gap in the Fashion Industry for People with Disabilities

There is a major gap in apparel for people with disabilities in the fashion industry. To prove this inequity, there are more clothing lines for pets than for the consumer living with disabilities (Indiano, 2019). Historically, the adaptive styles this community has been offered have been very bland, ordinary, medical and not created for style or aesthetic, and similarly not from mainstream, fashion-forward companies. For a style to be deemed fashion-forward, it must have not yet gained popularity in the fashion industry from society but is predicted to become trending in the near future (Blumer, 2007). Although adaptive products have existed minimally in smaller retail shops, they have consistently lacked an emphasis on fashion and chosen to focus on functionality – making the clothes less exciting and appealing (Farha & Hall, 2021).

2.2 Adaptive Apparel Consultant Emerges

In 2014, Mindy Scheier founded the Runway of Dreams Foundation to help apparel and footwear brands understand the power of making adaptable fashion (NRF Retail's 2023 "Building the Adaptive Category - From Inclusive Intent to Action" Panel Video). Runway of Dreams shares a mission to, "... raise awareness, educate consumers, advocate for industry change, develop the next generation of design innovators and provide access to fashionable adaptive apparel" (Runway of Dreams, 2024).

To launch the adaptive fashion revolution, Scheier also started Gamut Management - the first company with the mission to make brands realize the power of creating adaptive products. (Gamut Management, 2024). In 2017, there were zero mainstream companies producing

adaptive clothing that worked for and with the community of people with disabilities (McBee-Black, 2022). The disabled community is underrepresented in fashion apparel. With the goal of wanting society to be made aware of the importance of the inclusion of people with disabilities, Scheier created these two adaptive apparel consultants (NRF Retail's 2023 "Building the Adaptive Category - From Inclusive Intent to Action" Panel Video).

2.3 Returning the Power of Self-Expression to People with Disabilities

Humans are naturally prone to constant comparison to determine self-worth, whether the traits contrasted are values, looks, skills, or abilities. Christine Mihelcic, author of a dissertation on the stigma surrounding disabilities confirms this habit by addressing that, "... part of an individual's self-worth stems from comparisons with other individuals' personal traits" and "When considering disability, individuals may derive meaning from their own individual impairment" (Mihelcic, 2022). Agreed upon by PhD scholars, Neenu Poonia and Pinki, due to the reality that clothing can supply a powerful sense of self-expression, personal taste, and a form of adornment, it is essential for the apparel to be, "... comfortable, appealing to the eye, trendy, easy to put on/take off, accessible to all those who are disabled, safe and able to adapt to the wearer's physical needs" (Poonia & Pinki, 2020). The purpose of these adaptations in apparel are to improve the quality of life through independence and return the power of self-expression through fashion to this community (Poonia & Pinki, 2020).

2.4 Increasing Functionality in Adaptive Apparel Products

There exist many obstacles and barriers that people with disabilities face on a daily basis surrounding the lack of independence and self-expression through fashion. The small-scale substitution of buttons to velcro or magnetic features are some of the small techniques to make a

product more universal. Due to disability context and information being nascent, apparel companies have recognized they struggle to create authentic adaptive products with legitimacy, or without direct insights from this consumer (Mihelcic, 2022).

From her experience raising a son with muscular dystrophy, former fashion designer Mindy Scheier advocates for retailers wanting to create adaptive products to focus on the three categories of, “... (a) magnetic closures; (b) adjustable pant legs, sleeves, and waistband; and (c) the flexibility of donning and doffing using different points of entry” (McBee-Black, 2022).

2.5 Fashion and Retail Brands Currently Producing Adaptive Apparel

Some mainstream brands currently creating adaptive products include Tommy Hilfiger, Victoria’s Secret, Adidas, Target, and Kohl’s. These major retailers share a similar inclusive and purpose driven attitude regarding adaptive apparel - all believing the market is sustainable, incremental, profitable, and the right thing to do (NRF Retail’s 2023 “Building the Adaptive Category - From Inclusive Intent to Action” Panel Video). Despite the strides the adaptive market has made in popularity since 2020, these products are still only sold online, which limits the total possible representation of the business (McBee-Black & Ha-Brookshire, 2019).

2.6 Why Companies Seemingly Do Not Participate in the Adaptive Market

From analyzing academic literature to discover why some apparel companies are not engaging in the adaptive market, three main themes surfaced. First, there is a lack of awareness of the adaptive apparel market. However, through more awareness, education, and connections, this market can grow tremendously (NRF Retail’s 2023 “Building the Adaptive Category - From Inclusive Intent to Action” Panel Video). The fashion industry is overlooking this consumer’s substantial market size and spending power (McBee-Black & Ha-Brookshire, 2019).

The second reason companies are choosing not to commit to the adaptive market is due to the limited knowledge of the market's potential profitability. Although companies are concerned about this lack of information, there are brands currently making adaptive products and thriving. An example of this is Adidas Accessories President, Laura Jenks. Jenks spoke about her company's invaluable journey creating the first adaptive backpack with Gamut Management and how they "...entered this space to bring change to the consumer and industry and have found it is an incremental consumer, space, ... and ultimately sales and revenue" (NRF Retail's 2023 "Building the Adaptive Category - From Inclusive Intent to Action" Panel Video).

The last reason retailers hesitate to enter the adaptive market stems from their priorities ranking other social initiatives higher. Now more than ever there is an expectation from customers for companies to behave ethically in the fashion industry specifically (Diddi & Niehm, 2016). Through the increased use and influence of social media, consumers today are exposed to much more information, "... regarding corporate behavior through various information sources including direct experience, mass media, social media, and word of mouth" (Diddi & Niehm, 2016). It has been tested across many platforms that consumers tend to gravitate towards spending their money on socially involved and ethically conscious brands - proving corporate social responsibility brings a more loyal customer base, as it evokes a feeling of connectedness and empathy (Liu & Xu, 2021). Even with the advent and importance of marketing inclusivity, equity in larger sized apparel and genderless apparel have taken priority over adaptive apparel (Grassi, 2022).

3 Methodology

In my study, I sought to find the reasons some apparel companies are deciding to join the adaptive apparel market, while others seem to de-prioritize this market. To answer the research question, I designed a comparative case study in which I interviewed three categories of companies in the adaptive apparel space: full, limited, and zero engagement. “Comparative case studies are the best way to approach an underexplored field because this approach not only allows researchers to build coherent narratives but also endows them with the resources to make inferences and draw conclusions about greater issues in their field” (Chohan, 2019).

For the purpose of understanding the reasons behind companies’ commitment to the adaptive apparel market and discovering the underlying rationales and nuanced motivation that would not be apparent in quantitative surveys or analyses, I chose to collect qualitative data. A qualitative approach is valuable because it gave me access to trustworthy and relevant evidence directly from major firms in the fashion industry. Archival and interview data is summarized in the table below. For confidentiality reasons, the names of the companies are pseudonymized.

Summary of Data Sources
Archival Data
16 websites and articles documenting technical information, events, and issues.
5 videos documenting how and why companies engaged in the adaptive market.
9 scholarly journals and reports containing technical information.
Semi-Structured Interviews
3 interviews were conducted between January 19 and January 29, 2024. The interviews were over Microsoft Teams and lasted between 30-45 minutes.
Participants included senior managers and directors of purchasing, design, and merchandising at three national retail companies.

3.1 Data Collection: Comparative Case Study

Using a comparative case study format (Eisenhardt, 1989; Chohan, 2019) enabled me to conduct a detailed and in-depth analysis of three different perspectives, increasing the depth and credibility of my findings. The main format for gathering data was in the form of interviews with companies in the three categories of levels of commitment. The interviews were conducted virtually - over Microsoft Teams - as the interviewees were not within a feasible travel distance. The interviews were between 30 and 45 minutes, with the average length of 35 minutes. I excluded companies who do not create apparel lines in my potential options. Conducting interviews with brands in different stages of developing this adaptive market opportunity helped illustrate multiple perspectives on the reasons whether or not to create functional adaptive apparel products. After the interviews, I transcribed the audios through the application Descript and extracted themes carefully by comparing the responses.

3.2 Comparative Case Study Set Up

I followed a semi-structured interview format, with set questions to lead to conversation and guarantee a steady flow, while also allowing topics to flow freely if needed. I developed three sets of interview questions, one for each category of firm I studied. To collect comprehensive data for comparative analysis, interview questions covered eight categories of information: category of commitment, company, motivation to participate, parts in adaptive market they exist in (adult, kids, etc.), outcome of previous efforts, role of adaptive product lines in company, customer engagement, processes for product development, processes for decision making, attitudes/beliefs about the adaptive market, and financial data (profitability, costs, etc.), as seen in the table below. Sample interview questions included: (1) What role does your

adaptive line play in your company and its culture? (2) How did you engage with your customer base while creating these adaptive products? (3) What is the biggest negative seen by your company for not entering this adaptive market?

	Setup for Comparative Case Study		
Category	Non-Participants	Limited Participants	Full Participants
Companies			
Motivation to Participate			
Parts of Adaptive Market they Exist in (category: adults, kids etc.)			
Outcomes of Previous Efforts			
Role of Product Line in Company			
Customer Engagement			
Processes for Product Development			
Processes for Decision Making			
Attitudes/Beliefs about Adaptive Market			
Financial Data (costs, profitability, etc.) (resources to re-engage or enter market or increase product lines)			

3.3 Interviewees Criteria

The criteria for the companies selected to be interviewed can be classified in three groups: full engagement, limited engagement, and zero engagement in the adaptive apparel market. To be qualified as full engagement, the company must have already designed, developed and sold adaptive apparel products and be considered committed to the mission of empowerment for people with disabilities. Limited engagement is defined as brands creating and manufacturing one or only a few functional items, yet not focused on, prioritizing, or evolving their line revealed by lack of growth, absence of marketing and multiple product categories that are still missing. These companies have not realized the full potential and opportunity of this market; however, they understand the need for change. Lastly, the final category includes brands with

currently zero engagement in the adaptive market who have never created nor desired to develop or sell adaptive apparel products. The table below shows the list of companies I determined qualified in each level of commitment.

Sample Categorization of International Retailers		
Full Engagement in Adaptive Market	Limited Engagement in Adaptive Market	Zero Engagement in Adaptive Market
Victoria's Secret	Adidas	Lululemon
Kohl's	Nike	Calvin Klein
Tommy Hilfiger		Old Navy
Target		Levi's
French Toast		
Cat & Jack		

3.4 Companies Chosen for Comparative Case Study

The three companies I chose to interview for my comparative case study to answer my research questions of why some companies engage or not engage in adaptive apparel lines are all major international retail brands. To protect the identities of individual participants and protect companies' competitive data, I have pseudonymized the three companies and their representatives. To remain anonymous, the companies will be referred to the following:

- The company with limited engagement: "Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear"
- The company with full engagement: "John's Department Store"
- The company with zero engagement: "Yoga Attitude Apparel"

3.5 Data Analysis

After conducting interviews with three apparel companies that offered unique and diverse views on the adaptive market, I analyzed the data through comparisons. The themes, similarities,

differences, and patterns from their responses to my questions about creating adaptive products and how they view the market provided analysis for my study (Eisenhardt, 2021). By focusing on decision-making within the company throughout the interviews, I was able to identify reasons why some companies choose to engage in the adaptive market while others opt out. Using thematic analysis, I generated a table of themes for clearer connections for the reader (Chohan, 2019).

4 Findings

In 2017, there were zero mainstream companies producing adaptive clothing that worked for and with the community of people with disabilities. Stated by PhD author McBee-Black, the disabled community is underrepresented in fashion apparel. As a result of their intellectual or physical impairments, taking on or off clothes is a challenging task. In a dissertation about inclusive designing, author Kosinski agrees that not only does this community struggle with the act of dressing themselves, but they also have difficulty finding apparel that is functional and stylish.

Creating products that fit the adaptive category is simpler than companies may expect. Reiterated by PhD scholars, Poonia and Pinki, there are many challenges people with disabilities endure on a daily basis from the task of dressing and undressing themselves. With innovation at the forefront, apparel companies have constructed remedies to solve each of the disabled subsets through specifically designed technology. Replacing buttons with velcro, zippers with magnets, and making a longer inseam or wider leg are only some of the adaptations made to ensure complete functionality and easy access with these products, mentioned by authors Kabel, McBee-Black, and Dimka.

The community of people with disabilities will always be a market; it is not a fickle market, it will not shrink, as it represents 13% of Americans - believed by PhD professors McBee-Black and Ha-Brookshire. Major retail brands such as Tommy Hilfiger, Victoria's Secret, Kohls, and Target, and more have entered this portal of adaptive apparel and believe in this inspiring and profitable market. Some companies realize the business opportunity and inclusiveness these products bring, however some firms are still unaware or uncertain, as

announced during NRF Retail's 2023 "Building the Adaptive Category - From Inclusive Intent to Action" Panel Video by Mindy Scheier.

People with disabilities are underrepresented in the fashion industry. Differently abled people - no matter the age - want to wear clothing that allows them to fit in with their peers. This rings especially true for kids in middle school who desperately wish to wear the same shoes or clothes as the 'cool kids'. Oliver Scheier - who lives with muscular dystrophy - agrees by saying in an interview with press journalist Leanne Italie, "It's all about opportunity and the chance for people like [him] and people [his] age to express themselves through fashion like an able-bodied person. It says a lot about who, "... [he] is on the inside, and adaptive clothing allows [him] to do that". However, these dreams of being an 'ordinary' teenager with the same jeans as their peers may not be a possibility with a limb difference - but does it have to stay this way?

4.1 Comparative Case Study Format

This comparative case study will consist of analyzing six themes extracted from the three interviews conducted. I interviewed three national fashion apparel brands in search of reasons their companies do or do not engage in the adaptive apparel market. For confidentiality and to not expose competitive advantages, the names of the interviewees and brands will be withheld. The formatting of this section is as follows for each point: (1) an introduction for context to the main theme, (2) a section explaining each of the companies positions on the point and, (3) a summary of all three perspectives.

Table of Summarized Themes

Companies	Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear	John's Department Store	Athletic Lifestyle Apparel
Issues			
Economic Perceptions			
Believes the Adaptive Market is Profitable	Yes	Yes	No
Believes in Price Equity for Adaptive vs. Other Lines	Yes	Yes	No
Operational Considerations			
Fears Reputation Impact from Joining Adaptive Market	No	No	Yes
Partakes in other Social Initiatives (size, gender, etc.)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Company's Current Adaptive Apparel Options			
Sells Adaptive Products Currently	Yes	Yes	No
Sell Adaptive Products at Retail	No	No	N/A
Social Perception			
Believe it is the Right Thing to Do	Yes	Yes	Yes
Against Financial Gain as an Incentive for Joining Adaptive Market	Yes	Yes	No

4.2 Point 1: The Adaptive Apparel Market is Serving a Specific Need

Adaptive fashion designer Mindy Scheier said during the NRF Retail's 2023 Adaptive Category Panel, "Inclusion is not an initiative, it is a business opportunity". The adaptive market is currently seen by some business leaders as white space. Through a process of evaluating existing products to address the unmet needs of disabled consumers, approved by author Donny Kelwig, the white space is viewed as an opportunity where businesses can innovate products or services. Due to adaptive apparel being relatively new, with the first platform for educating and

assisting companies in this market - Runway of Dreams - commencing in 2014, an exact figure for the net sales size of the adaptive market is still unknown.

The adaptive apparel market presents more advantages than showcasing inclusivity and support to an underrepresented community in the fashion industry. According to writer Ryzhkov, this new market brings a profitable business opportunity due to the “... growing market demand, limited competition, enhanced customer loyalty, collaborative opportunities, and product diversification potential”. Through catering to the unique needs of the population of people with disabilities, businesses have the ability to join and represent an underserved market, as well as make a positive social impact. The addition is both profitable and incremental.

Apparel companies have the opportunity to recognize this critical consumer need and further their net sales while positively impacting and changing the lives of people with disabilities, affirmed by author Kelwig. During a TedTalk in 2017, Mindy Scheier urged society to fully understand the need for this adaptive market by highlighting that there are 1 billion people in the world who experience some type of disability and, “If 10 percent of that billion experience clothing challenges, that’s an enormous amount of people that may not be as confident, as successful or even as happy as they could be”. Scheier is confident that this opportunity is significant, available, and open for brands to utilize for growth and meaning.

Underrepresented Product Categories in Adaptive Apparel

There are apparel categories that remain missing for the community of people with disabilities, such as bathing suits, formal attire, sports teams' uniforms, and more. Author Italie is aware that parents of children with disabilities have expressed great concern and anxiety around their kids aging out of kid’s adaptive lines because, “Suddenly they’re in the junior section and

there's nothing". There is an imbalance in the growing availability of kid sizes and styles being produced in contrast with adaptive options for adults which are much fewer.

In line with PhD authors Kabel, Dimka, and McBee-Black, adults with disabilities should not have to decline an invitation or an event because they are unable to wear the appropriate or assigned clothing. After conducting a survey to uncover the clothing related problems people with disabilities face, Kabel, Dimka, and McBee-Black found that, "Examples of declined or missed activities included banquets, weddings, funerals, school dances, baseball games, gym classes, and graduation" are common. Quality of life should not have to be sacrificed because there is a gap in the fashion industry for people with disabilities. Solutions exist to close this gap, yet consumers are waiting.

Adaptive apparel company Unhidden advocates for this nearly untouched market that, "... has the right to take part in fashion, expression and self-identity" because "Why design something only one body type can wear?" (*Unhidden, 2024*). Unhidden has realized the gap in adaptive products, despite the fashion industry missing out on, "... a massive market with incredible spending power".

As voiced in the NRF Retail's 2023 Adaptive Category Panel, once companies comprehend the meaningful and inspiring opportunity adaptive apparel can bring to their customer base, net sales, and overall brand reputation, adaptive clothing will be universal. Retail stores already engaging in the adaptive market are proof of success from this invaluable, powerful journey through adaptive products.

Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear

During the interview, Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear - being a major athletic apparel and footwear corporation - proudly shared their strong beliefs surrounding inclusion and complete acceptance of all body types. This brand noted their primary goal of inclusion in the promise that they will, "... be there for every athlete, for every body". This philosophy stems from the belief that adaptive apparel has incremental and true intrinsic value to their brand as essentially their statement suggests that no athlete should be left out of their product portfolio. Their authentic and transparent approach as the brand enters the adaptive market was combined with their pride in their company's, "... statement of impossible is nothing". Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear stands true to their mission proven by their inclusive company values. This retailer - being the second largest sportswear manufacturer in the world - believes that through an inclusive approach to sport they, "... have the power to change lives and can lead in the fashion and athletic space over [their] competitors". Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear has limited engagement with adaptive apparel yet understands the positive impact their brand can make on the lives of people with disabilities through creating adaptive apparel and accessories. The adaptive market is an inherent part of their corporate mission statement. With authentic desire to proceed in the adaptive market space, Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear is beginning to focus more on the disability realm.

John's Department Store

John's Department Store fits under the 100% engagement in the adaptive apparel market category and takes a positive view on the market. John's Department Store is one of the top national fashion retailers, with a range of kid's adaptive apparel available on their website. During the interview, while discussing the adaptive market, they shared only advantages and

benefits experienced thus far from their adaptive product lines. This brand currently carries 114 items online for the Kids Adaptive category - which was shared with immense pride. However, John's Department Store is not yet satisfied with their work. Although they have, "... found [their] sweet spot at this point based on feedback from guests and analyzing what the guest is looking for and what they are not", they informed me that they, "... obviously will continue to evolve with the market and the trends". John's Department Store accepts that the adaptive apparel market is filled with opportunity, profits, and transformational influence. This company proudly accepts the market leadership role it holds for producing clothes for people with disabilities and while they continue to grow their adaptive line, they also remember the, "... foundational pieces that guests rely on [them] to carry". John's Department Store recognizes the sustainability the adaptive market carries and is honored to be a supporter. Their example supports the argument that adaptive apparel is incremental, profitable and sustainable for the future.

Yoga Attitude Apparel

Yoga Attitude Apparel is a multinational men's and women's fitness and lifestyle apparel company with zero engagement in the adaptive market at this time. Yoga Attitude Apparel is aware of this fashion inequity for this group who holds massive spending power and still chooses not to support. This brand understands that "... because it's serving a specific athlete's needs, there is marketing there" however, in terms of trying to commercialize that opportunity, "[they] don't know. That's where it's going to get really controversial". The combination of concerns surrounding costs, resources, and potential PR damage have kept this retailer from engaging in adaptive apparel. This company is an example of a brand more focused on managing potential downside risks than on the opportunity to make a positive impact. Yoga Attitude Apparel is slow

to accept and understand the successes other athletic retailers have experienced after entering the adaptive market.

Summary

Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear and John's Department Store share similarities in their optimistic perspective of the adaptive market, while Yoga Attitude Apparel holds a completely opposite attitude on engaging. The main connections found between Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear and John's Department Store are based on the emphasis of inclusion through their brand's culture - considering the importance of creating adaptive apparel for this underserved community. Both companies acknowledge the positive impacts that can be made by producing apparel that is functional and made for all bodies; the adaptive consumer is a consistent part of their target market, it is therefore necessary. Lastly, these two retailers - having already at least one adaptive product being sold - expressed a commitment to evolving the adaptive lines with market fashion trends, because if it supports their target consumer, it is the right thing to do for them and for their businesses.

The most crucial differences between Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear and John's Department Store towards Yoga Attitude Apparel were the beliefs, behaviors, and level of engagement in the adaptive market. Yoga Attitude Apparel currently does not manufacture any adaptive products, which amplifies their skepticism on the profitability aspect. Simply put, this company prioritizes revenue and a conservative PR approach above social impact and being a socially responsible brand, whereas the other two brands rank inclusivity highest.

4.3 Point 2: Adaptive Apparel can be Achieved

The idea is simple: make clothing with adaptive solutions that are easy for people with disabilities to put on and still look identical to other clothing, and a brand creates equity. In an interview with writer Jada Jackson, adaptive fashion label Kintsugi founder Emma McClelland proved this overcomplication felt by companies hesitant to enter the adaptive market by stating, “[They] don’t have to make huge changes to make clothing more inclusive. It’s just small tweaks here and there that can make a world of difference”. Through a TedTalk in 2017, Mindy Scheier discovered three categories that were most affected: closures, adjustability, and alternate ways of getting on and off the body - opposed to the traditional way of over your head.

These new adaptive products and techniques are successful and helpful because they have been researched, created, and tested very closely with the community of people with disabilities. Some companies want to get involved with this new market, however, are not involving the actual consumers – people with disabilities – at the table to understand what they want.

It was said in an article with Forbes by author Cheryl Robinson, that when trendsetters started to realize that it is the, “... simplest things that make the biggest impact and the biggest difference”, there was a new understanding of and confidence in this need to represent and support this community of people with disabilities. Robinson highlighted that the saying, “... we all put our pants on one leg at a time” actually does not apply to everyone. Reiterated in an interview with Mindy Scheier, this is an outdated mindset, just as the continued use of the apparel technology invented in the 13th century of the button and buttonhole. Buttons are extremely challenging for people with disabilities, specifically with limb differences or limited dexterity motion and flexibility. As a result of this difficulty, Scheier discovered the act of adding a magnet behind a button to simulate a normal buttoned-up shirt, but with added functionality and never at

the expense of appearance. Simple innovations like this prove more universal designs in clothing that works for all bodies can be influential on the life of a person living with a disability.

Companies fear the extra costs of production due to the adaptive devices needed to make the product more functional, however this is a misconception. Many designers and business leaders assume these great cost additions because of the insertion of new technologies. However, writer and fashion designer Jackie Mallon stated that it is important for apparel brands to realize adaptive clothing is less about recreating the clothes from scratch, as much as simply, "... making the same product more wearable for more people". It is the conversion of a button to a magnet, a snap to a zipper, a tag and seam filled interior to a seamless, soft material that increases wearability. As shown in the fashion show after the NRF Retail's 2023 Panel, these modifications are straightforward, yet have powerful effects on the everyday tasks of a person living with disabilities.

Aesthetics and fitting in socially is equally as important as functionality for this community (*Vargas, 2023*). Convinced by this research, author Denic agrees this emerging adaptive market has many positive impacts as it, "...has evolved into a symbol of commission and inclusivity". Adaptive apparel is more than sewing fabrics together, it has the power to do so much more, as, "Fashion holds the key to a vital lifeline. Clothing can be transformative. [And] Clothing equals confidence" (*Scheier, 2017*).

Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear

Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear has focused on creating adaptive products for the seated athlete - meaning the wheelchair bound consumer. Even though this is a new audience this company is producing for, their priorities have not strayed, as adaptive wear is still, "...

collaboratively designed for function, fit, feel, and performance”. Taking on this new role of making clothes specifically for the seated position, there was a request for zero irritation and to ease dressing and undressing. This brand explained the feasible nuances in products such as, a breathable mesh to help with sweat, a shorter rise in the front with a higher rise in the back for coverage, seam splits up the side for movability, and a loop at the base of the neck to help with pulling over the head. All of these adjustments were an easy and necessary fix after consulting with the consumer. Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear is even looking to expand “... past seated wear to more universal products to meet a larger disabled community versus just wheelchair users”. There were few obstacles experienced in developing the new patterns and fit solutions. This motivation to expand in the adaptive space proves the attainability of creating these products.

John’s Department Store

Manufacturing adaptive products should not be considered a difficult task. John’s Department Store agrees with this point of view, as they immediately wanted to bring equity to the community of people with disabilities through fashion. With already having experience creating kids’ apparel, they were able to easily adjust closures, patterns, and other details to cater to this consumer. John’s Department Store considers this new target consumer as an opportunity to evolve as a business, stay with the trends, and bring confidence through fashion to another community in the world without significant risk to creation timelines or production practices. As stated directly from the company, they have “... completely bought in on [their] strategy to serve the guest and bring joy and style to their lives through [their] apparel without increasing costs or minimizing the garments”!

Yoga Attitude Apparel

Yoga Attitude Apparel does not believe adaptive apparel is easily achievable due to the unique requirements in manufacturing and stocking. The interview consisted of the representative listing reasons why making functional products would actually be a disadvantage in the long run. The act of "... having to disrupt your own operating process to reset machines to go to each extreme end of the scale" was enough to discourage this brand. Since this retailer owns everything they make and because an adaptive apparel line crosses styles and colors in sizes that go from 0-20, "... [they] start getting this inventory pile up, which companies don't like". Due to this perception of too great a warehouse space demand and endless inventory issues, Yoga Attitude Apparel is focused on the negatives, as they described not as, "... skepticism, but a very passive approach to something... because you're making a pretty specific product". In regard to answering about ethics in the interview, the representative said, "... is it the right thing to do to avoid [making adaptive products] because of having to sit on a ton of inventory? No. The right thing to do is to make what's needed". Yoga Attitude Apparel seemed to have some differences in views on being socially responsible versus profitable and reputable. Instead of embracing a new consumer and market to be unlocked, this risk averse athletic and lifestyle retailer shies away from the possible challenges and misses out on the opportunity to do good.

Summary

The adaptive apparel market is nascent and still in the process of emerging which explains the hesitance around the decision to join or not. Information on the benefits and minimal risk is not as available or proven as it will be in the future. Manufacturing is a critical component within the value chain of developing products in a business, which supports why companies have concerns entering a market without more data to rely on. However, as Athletes Unlimited

Apparel and Footwear and John's Department Store proved, brands can use the same factories, resources, processes, expertise, competencies, and logistics when making adaptive apparel. The barriers for entry are reasonably few.

No matter the uncertainty, Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear and John's Department Store have looked past the disparities of producing adaptive versus able-bodied clothing, for the inspiring outcome it brings to the consumer. These two companies have embraced the specificity and uniqueness that adaptive clothing brings and now experiencing the rewards, will not back down from the challenge. However, in contrast, Yoga Attitude Apparel has digested the inventory and PR concerns as a hindrance and is focused more on the negatives. Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear and John's Department Store share a positive and solution-driven outlook - seeing this market as an opportunity for growth - whereas Yoga Attitude Apparel expressed reluctance about disrupting their current processes and refuses to take a chance.

4.4 Point 3: Producing Adaptive Apparel is the Right Thing to Do

There are two main challenges that come with clothing for people with disabilities - the independence aspect and the inequity. Not being able to dress yourself without assistance from a friend, parent, or caregiver can lower levels of independence and self-esteem. Revealed in a TedTalk is an example of this commonly deprioritized issue from Mindy Scheier's son Oliver. Oliver struggles dressing himself every day, as it is "... a nightmare for him". Getting dressed everyday was a, "...constant reminder of what he could and could not do". With his biggest desire being to "...wear jeans to school like everybody else", his mother saw an opportunity through the gap in adaptive apparel.

Adaptive apparel brand, Unhidden led by people with disabilities refuses to let the gap in the fashion industry continue through their empowering mission statement, “Say goodbye to the medicalised, uncomfortable, outdated accessible clothing you know, and witness the revolution of fashion - adaptive fashion that is colourful, stylish and can be worn by *any* body”.

In order for firms to grow and profit, they must earn trust from their consumers, proposed by educators said by respected scholars Banker, Ma, Pomare, and Zhang. Also believed by authors Diddi and Niehm, there has been an increased trend of consumers expressing their personal ethical values through their purchasing choices. It has been reported that customers have started, “... boycotting companies that are reported as having poor CSR performance, and demanding that companies communicate CSR activities effectively”. Confirmed again by author Jada Jackson, companies already engaging in the adaptive market hope that other retailers soon realize this consumer need for inclusive fashion as it is, “... not just the right thing to do, it’s the right thing for business as well”.

Price Equity for Adaptive Apparel

Designing adaptive products is the first step of including this community, next is accessibility. Agreed upon by journalist Anna Haines, ensuring the target customer is financially able to purchase the clothes is equally as important. Brands that exist in the adaptive market already either understand this marketing point or are too profit-oriented and raise the prices incredibly high. The adaptive market should not be seen by brands as a captive market to exploit, expressed by author Daisy Jordan. A healthy outlook on selling adaptive products is the retailer Target. Based on their website, Target’s adaptive kids’ clothes are priced either the same as or with a small increase above their able-bodied Cat & Jack kids' line. A kids two pack long sleeve

shirt in the adaptive line is sold for \$11.50, while one Cat & Jack kids' long sleeve is priced at \$10. Similarly, a Cat & Jacks' boys jean is \$20, while the adaptive boy's jean is sold for \$22. Equity prevails. Companies should encourage equity in the prices of adaptive products as equity is the purpose of the adaptive category in the first place.

Price Inequality Still Exists

Despite the success Target has seen from pricing these two categories similarly, not all companies share this philosophy. Tommy Hilfiger created the first mainstream adaptive clothing line in 2016. The difference in price from their website between their able-bodied versus adaptive clothes showed the biggest disparity, as a classic women's hoodie is \$89.50, while a women's adaptive classic hoodie is higher at \$99.50. A second item from Tommy Hilfiger has a \$10 increase over its able-bodied version; their men's sweat short at \$69.50 as compared with the adaptive sweat short at \$79.50. As verified from prices at Target, adaptive products do not have a valid reason to be more expensive than able-bodied clothing.

An article regarding competitive pricing in the adaptive apparel space touches on the recent trend of these products being outrageously expensive - leaving the target consumer unable to purchase. Author Allie Funk describes how, "...having the words adaptive, accessible, or medical associated with a product is enough to jack the price up five, ten, or even fifty times or more". This unfair practice has the chance to continue because there is a limited number of apparel choices for the community of people with disabilities, that without other options, they have no choice than to pay these inflated prices. Concurring with Funk, the panelists at the NRF Retail's 2023 conference also believe consumers should not experience inequity in price for equity in access.

Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear

This international retailer spoke very highly about joining the adaptive market. Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear believes in empowering their audience through sport, so allowing all types of bodies the ability was the right thing to do. This brand voiced with enthusiasm that the adaptive apparel market is, "... highly viable and truly feels inclusive". Many times throughout the interview the representatives wanted to reiterate the fact they are, "... not just doing this for the kudos". This company feels a strong attachment to this market from an inclusivity lens, rather than a financial gain lens. This foundation was proven through a quote in the interview summarizing that although there is probably a financial upside, Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear does not think that financial gains should be, "... the incentive because if [they] focus on the return on investment, it's going to dilute [their] ability to build as much product as possible because [their] going to be thinking about productivity rather than the fact that this is really at the heart of [their] mission statement about enabling everyone to participate in sport". Consistent with this approach, Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear plans to price their adaptive styles the same as non-adaptive, as any increase in cost could be perceived by this community as discriminatory. The company's position on any social initiative line, whether inclusively sized or adaptive, is that they need to be priced as their like styles, even if there is a loss in margin. Keeping their consistent inclusive mindset on entering the adaptive market, Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear think it should "... be about social purpose first and if [they] get some dollars from it, great". This brand's priorities are ranked with inclusivity and equity first, profit second.

John's Department Store

This brand is extremely consumer input based - taking these considerations seriously and adjusting as needed to provide a better suited product no matter the cost. The representative was proud of their company's approach being, "... guest-centric as [they] lead all brand principles and assortment decisions with the guest needs first". Possessing this customer-first mentality played a vital role in their decision to enter the adaptive market, as they realized they were not fitting the needs of a large minority group and desperately wanted to change that. Similarly, the items they offer to this new consumer are priced at the same level as the able-bodied items, with only very few exceptions. John's Department Store wants there to be no further obstacles, such as price or features, to keep their young customers from purchasing what they need. This brand strives for every kid to be able to, "... find not only what they are looking for, but what they need within [their] assortment to live their best lives possible". John's Department Store's "... culture is built on community - diversity, equity, and inclusion is a pillar of who we are and what we do. Adaptive goes hand in hand with this". When asking the favorite part of joining this market so far, the interviewee's face immediately lit up as they explained when they receive videos and letters from customers, "... seeing how [their] product truly puts a smile on their face and brings joy to their lives, that is what it is all about".

Athletic Lifestyle Apparel

When asked what the beliefs and attitudes towards the adaptive apparel price equity were, Yoga Attitude Apparel answered with, "Everyone believes it is the right thing to do". Although the brand agreed it is the most equitable thing to do for an underserved community, there was still passiveness regarding entering the market. Yoga Attitude Apparel has yet to work through other

obstacles and therefore did not have a concrete answer to how they would price adaptive styles, if and when they launched.

Summary

Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear and John's Department Store experience the same strong aspiration to be a brand of inclusivity and ensure their approaches include price equity. All three companies know creating adaptive products is the right thing to do, however all minus Yoga Attitude Apparel have turned their desire to be equitable into a consistent cost model for consumers. They understand the importance of equal access and offering equal pricing is part of that commitment. Yoga Attitude Apparel is also the only brand that did not mention a commitment to community building in the interview.

Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear and John's Department Store fully believe this new consumer belongs in their corporate culture and from servicing them, it reflects positively on their brand's values. They also regard supporting this community by creating adaptive products as a corporate social responsibility. Both brands can be profitable in this space at the same pricing structure as their regular lines and do so while making the company better. Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear and John's Department Store see this space as incremental, even a lower margin is more profit than not offering at all. The adaptive market is profitable and inspires the teams of these two companies to be part of something that is making the lives of people with disabilities better.

4.5 Point 4: Lack of Awareness & Other Obstacles

There is a lack of awareness and understanding of the need and opportunity by fashion brands to create adaptive apparel. Brought to light in an interview with Mindy Scheier, this

community of people with disabilities is one of the few groups that everyone may become part of at some point in their lives, which illustrates the need for a more accepting fashion industry. In a Ted Talk in 2017, Scheier believed she needed to, “... educate the industry of the enormity of this population and the fact that these were consumers that simply weren’t being considered”. Fashion brands may have been unaware of the exclusion of people with disabilities in the past, yet due to society’s motivation to create a more diverse and inclusive world, things might change. Observed by authors Liu and Xu, if apparel companies ignore this population with the same passion for fashion and spending power as their past consumers, they're sending a message that, “... people with disabilities don’t matter”. The world may not yet be aware that the adaptive apparel market is a business opportunity, but the community is growing louder (*NRF Retail’s 2023 “Building the Adaptive Category - From Inclusive Intent to Action” Panel Video*).

Other Social Initiatives Overshadow Adaptive Products

According to author Fox-Suliaman, companies are choosing to focus on other social initiatives, such as size inclusivity (offering an extended size range for taller and wider bodies) and gender inclusivity (eliminating a restrictive men’s and female identity to clothes or departments). Corporate social responsibility issues within a company have become a driving force for consumers and public opinion. Although all inclusivity initiatives are beneficial, the more movements companies take part in, the wider consumer base, loyalty, support, and profit can be made.

Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear

In the case of Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear, the idea of joining the adaptive market did not stem from North America’s knowledge of the underserved community of people

with disabilities. The notion of participating in this market started because the 2024 Olympics were approaching and while this brand already widely supports the Olympic athletes, they thought, “... but how are [they] supporting our Paralympians?”. Since that critical question was asked, the adaptive products first started as a “... promo thing to be able to try out with athletes”, till they questioned whether they could make it a business opportunity, except they did not, “... really know what the business opportunity actually [was]”.

There was a lack of awareness about adaptive apparel combined with an already extensive gender and size inclusive product initiatives already in place requiring focus and effort. Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear has been making uniforms for special needs athletes for decades; the idea to create styles specific to these athletes, also sell them to other athletes and then market this focus as a social purpose never crossed their minds. Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear is releasing adaptive apparel at retail in Fall of 2024. They are proud to have tapped into the realm of Paralympic athletes. However, they expressed the many perceived challenges entering the disability space, such as it, “... requires a lot of investment and consumer insights from a lot of different people” to ensure transparency throughout the entire process of creation and development of adaptive apparel.

Unfortunately, this perceived lack of information and time came with an added complexity. Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear agreed Gamut Management would be a great next step to deepen their understanding and footprint in the adaptive market, however that would be in the hands of the Global Product Managers at their headquarters located in another country - far away from the Gamut team. The ability to tap into the resources of Gamut Management and Runway of Dreams was viewed as critical yet challenging for this company. This brand was honest about the obstacles of not possessing the resources, awareness of how, or

bandwidth to be able to fully commit at this time. Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear's global team is stretched with the current initiatives, commercial and social. They stated that, "Someone is going to have to be super passionate about this at the global headquarters to want to take on an extra project and earn the seal, the consumer, and the business". With the time and effort already being given to other social initiatives and daily business processes, Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear currently does not predict a future of creating more adaptive products.

John's Department Store

John's Department Store had done extensive research on the adaptive apparel market and expressed how the challenges to entry were outweighed by the many significant benefits it can bring to the community of people with disabilities. John's Department Store did launch inclusive sizing prior to adaptive apparel as it presented itself as a larger market. Concerns about not being viewed as inclusive were less the driver to engage than the desire to be complete for all their consumers. This retailer is the most successful out of the three brands interviewed in this study, as they have the most products released in their kid's adaptive line. John's Department Store was committed to constant research with kids living with disabilities to better their adaptive line, while simultaneously achieving respect from their size social initiatives.

Yoga Attitude Apparel

This recurring theme of retail companies seeing more obstacles than positives holds true at Yoga Attitude Apparel as well. The concerns of not having enough time in their product process to 'do it right', combined with inadequate research on how to join the adaptive market as a social initiative also exists within this brand. When asked why they had not joined the adaptive

market yet, it was blamed on their product creation lead times being long and, “... the insights not really coming up in the way [they] go about insights... it came out of a more specific need”. Although they admit to seeing other retailers be successful in the adaptive apparel market, because there was inadequate selling data to confirm the size of the opportunity, it was not seriously considered. There was a major concern of the market size opportunity it would bring and, “... what a business would forgo to try and capitalize on that opportunity, remains to be seen for sure”. Yoga Attitude Apparel highlighted they, “... want to do the right thing and be inclusive, but there is not a lot of information and knowledge about this market yet”, which has been the biggest obstacle in deciding to enter.

Summary

This is the first instance where Yoga Attitude Apparel has aligned with some of the obstacles regarding adaptive apparel as Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear and John’s Department Store did. Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear and Yoga Attitude Apparel shared similar challenges of insufficient time, focus, resources, or consumer and sales information to fully engage or even test this emerging market. Both these athletic retailers fear the uncertain market size and unconfirmed scalability. There are also concerns of this new social initiative not being worth the effort because there are too many other initiatives they were already tackling and investing time into.

Unfortunately, a lack of desire to spend more time researching this new market was a theme across more than half of the companies interviewed. However, John's Department Store found enough time, reason, and information to justify the advantages found in fully emerging in the adaptive market, while engaging in other social initiatives, which suggests its validity.

4.6 Point 5: How to Ensure Authenticity and Protect against Risk

With the intent to end the lack of representation in the creation development process, Mindy Scheier invented the Gamut Seal of Approval - which acts as a promise and responsibility from the company to create the best product for the consumer living with disabilities (*NRF Retail's 2023 "Building the Adaptive Category - From Inclusive Intent to Action" Panel Video*). Through this addition of tight knit focus groups and dialog with the target consumer base, companies have learned to avoid buttons, zippers, hooks, or any closures that require two hands and replace them with alternative solutions.

As discussed in the NRF Retail's 2023 Adaptive Category Conference, in 2022 Adidas earned the first Gamut Seal of Approval for the Adaptive Backpack that launched at national retailers in the summer of 2023. Through Adidas's promise to, "... make the best product for the consumer [they] are speaking to", the entirety of the three striped team felt the immense responsibility to provide the, "... best product that these kids would not only use, but love". Working closely with Laura Jenks, President of Agron, Inc, Scheier advised Adidas on the process to include firsthand representation from the community of people with disabilities. To ensure authenticity in the backpack, Adidas started by listening to the adaptive customer and invited them in every step of the development and design process. Adidas is honored to have gained the Gamut Seal of Approval - a seal that is "... loud and proud on the tag of the product".

How Corporate Social Responsibility Applies

With inclusivity movements eliciting much praise and press, companies have become eager to showcase their corporate social responsibility initiatives to the public. However, reviewed by authors Lim and Lee, customers sometimes doubt and question the brand's commitment to social responsibility. Identical to the dangerous greenwashing phenomenon,

adaptive washing also exists. Adaptive washing occurs when retailers create a line of products featuring people with disabilities for the purpose of showing their company ‘cares about all people’, when in reality they produce products that miss the mark for the targeted disabled consumer. In short, they are faking it. Reiterated by writer Funk, companies that are adaptive washing are using the position as a marketing stunt. Heyla Mohammadian, founder of Slick Chicks an adaptive underwear company, is strongly against adaptive washing as in an interview with Haines for Forbes, she says it is clear, “... which companies are really trying to understand their customer, as opposed to who is just trying to check the inclusivity box”. Some apparel brands recognize this empowering, invaluable opportunity, while others still need convincing this is a strategic and profitable choice.

To encourage brands to authentically engage in the adaptive market and to dispel potential concerns, Scheier advocates during an interview with Eric Tash on YouTube that the development process for adaptive clothing is very similar to the creation of able-bodied clothing. It is a methodology that companies should be following for designing any product, not just adaptive apparel, as “... it is the end consumer having a voice in how it’s developed” that makes the difference because, “... you have to have the voices from as many different people as possible”. Companies have the opportunity to make an impact and change the lives of people with disabilities through functional apparel without excessive changes in their creation processes. It is within their means to be authentic, be inclusive, and be successful.

Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear

During the interview, it was made clear Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear had a desire to continue learning more about this adaptive market in order to ensure authenticity in both the products and the messaging. Specifically for this brand, there were no fears of creating the

products unauthentically because they were utilizing the needs and voices of the target consumers - the Paralympians. This company, although not using Gamut Management due to a lack of time and resources, sincerely wishes to collaborate in the future to keep learning. Being international, Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear partners with a smaller exclusive licensed company that focuses on the brand's accessories in the United States, such as socks, backpacks, hats, bags, and underwear. Observing the success their accessories portion of the company is doing from the use of Gamut Management and Runway of Dreams, the brand connected the security of Gamut in ensuring against adaptive washing. The accessories part of the company created the first ever product to earn the Gamut Seal of Approval - providing the consumer full confidence that this adaptive backpack and sock was made for and by them. Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear is confident and not concerned about social backlash, due to their Gamut Management approved approach.

John's Department Store

John's Department Store also mentioned the importance of corporate social responsibility and made sure to work intimately with the target consumer throughout their journey of creating adaptive products to ensure authenticity. Inviting people with disabilities into the creation process as a crucial step to make sure the team was, "... hitting all the standards within the garments". John's Department Store worked with a group of "... super guests that [they] continue[d] to work and innovate with based on their feedback because the guest is intertwined in everything [they] do". The company was positive this decision to include the consumer in the full operation contributed directly to their immense success shown from launching their adaptive line and protected them from potential down-side risk of being challenged as inauthentic.

John's Department Store maintains a very promising position in the way they approach this new space to avoid negative repercussions. This brand wants to learn from and embrace their inevitable mistakes - as entering a new market with little research is a major endeavor - in order for this community of people with disabilities to achieve equal representation. Entering the adaptive market is a learning experience across several corporate functions, yet this company was aware they were, "... going to get some of it right and at times fall short, but it is important to reflect and continue to improve and still strive towards that goal". No matter the uncertainty, John's Department Store focused on the irreversible impact they could make possible through fashion and made it their goal to, "... continue to learn and lean into the space providing the guest irresistible options and at an affordable price that fulfills their needs", and that is exactly what they have done.

Yoga Attitude Apparel

The majority of this interview was filled with reasons explaining Yoga Attitude Apparel's many fears of joining the adaptive apparel market. This logic was focused primarily on preserving the brand's reputation or otherwise stated, the concern that joining this market could result in a negative impression of their corporate social responsibility. The representative described the company as extremely "... passive" because their persona is to, "... shy away from anything that has to do with controversy or having to take a stand to avoid people". An example given for a previous encounter being passive on a pressing world issue was making Pride products in June. Yoga Attitude Apparel - despite having a large gay population internally - added rainbows to products without advertising as a company that stands for equal marriage rights. Due to this fear of taking a public stance, they were accused of rainbow washing - same

idea as greenwashing or adaptive washing - which has caused more reluctance in their desires to join the adaptive market, as they feel carries the same dangerous possibility.

Yoga Attitude Apparel, wanting to protect their reputation, is "... trying to stay in the middle so they don't piss people off and can still sell a bunch of [products]" felt like an extremely conservative position. This retailer will not try to be socially responsible in order to protect sales and their ideal pristine reputation. As the interviewee shared the list of concerns about joining the adaptive market, it became apparent to ask about if there were any thoughts of including the Gamut Management team. When asked if the retailer knew of these resources, they replied with, "I've heard of it, but can't tell you exactly what it is". The list given of their anxieties to enter without risking their credibility or the possibility of being accused of adaptive washing was extensive. Yoga Attitude Apparel fears they will come off as, "... trying to take advantage of fill in the blank, underserved culture" due to the changes in society, including "... cancel culture and other things that companies are so scared of".

Summary

It is clear across all three companies that corporate social responsibility is viewed as critical, priority, and challenging. What proved to be inconsistent is how adaptive apparel influences one's responsibility. For Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear and John's Department Store, adaptive products strengthen and complements their positions. In contrast, for Yoga Attitude Apparel adaptive apparel threatens it.

4.7 Point 6: Adaptive Apparel is a Niche Market

As much as the adaptive apparel market has evolved in the last decade, there is still much work to be done by willing companies to fill this gap in the apparel industry, PhD authors

McBee-Black and Ha-Brookshire debated. First, adaptive clothing is still not sold at retail, only online. This limits the size of the opportunity as the benefits of being able to try on the products in person are immeasurable. This in turn makes growth in sales more challenging. Proved by author Fox-Suliaman, having the option to test if the product will give the shopper sensory overload or allows them to put on the piece without help can accelerate conversion and instill confidence in the sale for all parties involved.

Melissa Koole with autism, feels discouraged about her shopping experience as she suffers from sensory sensitivities throughout her day. The last thing she wants to deal with is buying a piece of clothing online because the pictures show a soft material, to then wear it for the first time and realize it causes her gut/bowel issues to flare up. Before Mellissa leaves the house, she asks herself the same questions:

“Does this piece irritate [her]? Do[es] [she] have to wear it long [enough] that it will cause [her] pain? Can [she] take it off immediately after showing up at work? Based on how important the event is and [her] prediction of discomfort, [she can] make [her] decision” (*Fox-Suliaman, 2020*).

Having the ability to try on clothes before committing to them would save Mellissa the time needed to ask these questions and deliberate the answers for her wellbeing. These consumers appreciate the option to purchase adaptive apparel online, however as this market grows, bringing these products to brick and mortar stores would be a beneficial next step. The easier the consumer journey for people with disabilities, the more quickly the adaptive market turns from niche to commercial.

Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear

As positive as the conversation started with Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear, the tone descended when speaking of the niche nature of the adaptive market and how that brings hurdles for larger fashion companies. Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear is only selling adaptive products online, which limits the trial experience by new users and ultimately limits the scale of the market. The only account this company convinced to buy their adaptive products was Kohls.com, which they expressed was disappointing, because the opportunity to launch in stores such as Macy's and Dick's Sporting Goods and showcase more visibly the features and benefits narrowed the sales potential. Due to the absence of in-store marketing, this brand exclaimed that, "... this topic makes [them] sad to say, but brand health is kind of a barrier for [them]". Although there are disadvantages to this market being so specialized, Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear still, "... believe[s] in it" and will stand with this community no matter the size.

John's Department Store

Embracing the specificity the adaptive market brings, John's Department Store has a clear understanding of making an appropriate number of products for the size of the opportunity. The adaptive fashion line is not as broad as their other lines as the sales potential is smaller. This company recognizes that they must balance their investment with their revenue, ensuring the adaptive line can sustain this reduced yet meaningful volume. Instead of trying to create a line with hundreds of adaptive options, John's Department Store knew they had to, "... remain focused and make sure [they] [got] each item just right versus trying to cover everything". Being confident in which styles are most important to fulfill the needs of this new market, rather than producing hundreds of units that miss the mark in some areas, John's Department Store shows how to be successful and economical in managing the specificity of adaptive apparel.

Yoga Attitude Apparel

As revealed from earlier conversations around the adaptive market opportunity with Yoga Attitude Apparel, its niche nature proves to be another obstacle they are unwilling to overcome. When specifically asked if they view this as a market opportunity, they responded with, “Opportunity? In terms of like capitalizing on a business... No”. Yoga Attitude Apparel would require a larger market potential before considering entering. Adaptive apparel is inherently niche; however, niche as it is, there remain 13% of Americans who fit under this umbrella (*McBee-Black & Ha-Brookshire, 2019*). This straight to the point answer, consistent with their fears of brand reputation and passive behavior, proved enough to dismiss the idea of taking on the adaptive market. Yoga Attitude Apparel prioritizes revenue potential over social impact.

Summary

For the first time, all three companies share a similar perspective - that there is a cap on the size of the adaptive market. However, accepting this reality, the approaches between Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear and John’s Department Store, compared to Yoga Attitude Apparel are drastically different. Athletes Unlimited Apparel and Footwear is honest about their concerns regarding scalability in the market yet remain completely faithful and driven to support this underrepresented community. John's Department Store has not felt held back by the specificity in products or the revenue potential as they embraced the challenge and focused on the development of a smaller number of units to master. Lastly, Yoga Attitude Apparel continues to have a dismissive perception about the market’s profitability and worthiness.

5 Positions on the Problem

“Despite the prevalence of disability, disabled individuals are “vastly underserved” by organizations” (Mihelcic, 2022). As the adaptive apparel market has only begun gaining popularity during the last seven years, very limited research has been done on this topic. Ableism has negatively isolated and influenced organizations' treatment towards people with disabilities. These already limited products built for people with disabilities have not yet been adopted into mainstream retail, making it even more of a task for those in need to be made aware and purchase (Mihelcic, 2022). However, since the apparel industry has recently begun to grasp the meaningful size and spending power of the community of people with disabilities, the largest minority group in the United States (NRF Retail’s 2023 “Building the Adaptive Category - From Inclusive Intent to Action” Panel Video), a trend is developing for apparel companies to embrace adaptive apparel and establish a more inclusive approach in their businesses (McBee-Black & Ha-Brookshire, 2019).

Creating adaptive apparel lines for people with disabilities goes beyond the immediate need to make dressing a more independent and manageable task, it also constructs an intangible sense of belonging. The reality should be: I live with a disability, yet have the same access and options to fashion apparel and branded apparel as the able-bodied. Other scholars have also found a correlation between a higher quality of life and a feeling of belonging or acceptance in a group as, “...it’s quite clear that they just want to fit in, or they just want to feel regular like everyone else... they want to shop in the same places, and they want to wear the same clothes” agreed upon by a social entrepreneur in the adaptive apparel space (Mihelcic, 2022). Being offered the same choices in branded fashion apparel can help people with disabilities experience this equity and end the stigma of being ‘different’ (Mihelcic, 2022).

If the first step is achieved and fashion brands get involved in adaptive apparel, they must then ensure their product teams know how to design for the unique functional needs while still meeting the visual product consistency to the able-bodied versions. Another social entrepreneur highlighted why some apparel companies missed the mark when they decided to enter the adaptive market. These firms were creating a product that was built specifically for the consumer with disabilities, instead of for everybody. For example, when producing an adaptive shoe, a designer should keep the shoelaces in addition to the adaptive elements - even though they are unable to be tied, to provide the same look. This decision was purely aesthetic based to keep the promise for consumers to buy products that look like the original. (Mihelcic, 2022).

By inviting people with disabilities into the design and development processes, the community can ensure the clothes will genuinely suit their individual needs, while also being stylish. This was demonstrated in Mihelcic's dissertation, "Social Entrepreneurs in the Disability Space: How They Manage Stigma and Seek Legitimacy" as a business leader confidently voiced that they think, "...building that trust really stems from making sure they understand that [the target consumers] are the experts and [the companies are] not". Also mentioned in the paper, companies are understanding the privilege, yet critical responsibility they hold in creating adaptive products and have started using slogans like, "Designed by you, for you" on their websites to convey authenticity and trust with the consumer (Mihelcic, 2022).

Another inclusive approach to strengthen the importance of making adaptive wear more universal is Mindy Scheier. In 2014, Scheier founded Runway of Dreams Foundation to help apparel and footwear brands understand the power of making adaptable fashion (NRF Retail's 2023 "Building the Adaptive Category - From Inclusive Intent to Action" Panel Video). Runway of Dreams shares a mission that, "... empowers people with disabilities to have confidence and

self-expression through fashion and beauty inclusion. [They] raise awareness, educate consumers, advocate for industry change, develop the next generation of design innovators and provide access to fashionable adaptive apparel” (Runway of Dreams, 2024).

To launch the adaptive clothing fashion revolution, Scheier started Gamut Management - the first company with the mission to make brands realize the power of creating adaptive products (Gamut Management, 2024). Scheier desperately wanted people and more specifically, fashion brands, to be made aware of the importance of the inclusion of people with disabilities (NRF Retail’s 2023 “Building the Adaptive Category - From Inclusive Intent to Action” Panel Video).

With a chance to give people with disabilities, “... access to fashion that excites and empowers them” (Runway of Dreams, 2024), Gamut Management and Runway of Dreams kickstarted a wave of promising support and publicity. In 2023’s Runway of Dreams: A Fashion Revolution Show, 28-year-old model Jilian shares her story of starting a podcast talking about, “...living in a world that was not necessarily designed for [them]” (Runway of Dreams, 2023). Mindy Scheier and her team have transformed the fashion industry from what society has historically deemed, “... obsessed with perfections and aesthetics” (Fox-Suliaman, 2020) into a realistic, inclusive industry that does more than making clothing accessible to everyone, but has, “... made life accessible to everyone” (Runway of Dreams, 2023).

Gamut Management’s purpose is to assist brands in every step of entering the adaptive apparel market and the ability to stay in this space from marketing to product development, to every part of the value chain (NRF Retail’s 2023 “Building the Adaptive Category - From Inclusive Intent to Action” Panel Video). Gamut Management established its first partnership with Tommy Hilfiger in 2016. From then the number of apparel brands increased to eight

partnerships, and now at the end of 2023 it has reached a high of eleven brands joining the adaptive market. Gamut Management and Runway of Dreams are only getting started in their plans of revolutionizing the fashion industry and normalizing the conversation around looking and feeling confident in clothes authentically made for and by people with disabilities (Mindy Scheier and Eric Tash, 2023).

Fueled by the passion of Mindy Scheier and her team, Gamut Management and Runway of Dreams strive to educate, empower, and inspire fashion companies to get involved in adaptive products in the most authentic, caring way possible while also revealing the profitable, sustainable, and incremental aspects of this new market (NRF Retail's 2023 "Building the Adaptive Category - From Inclusive Intent to Action" Panel Video).

Adaptive, universal, fashionable, functional apparel - whichever approach is chosen - has the ability to change the life of a person living with a disability. Whether through a simple act of being able to independently get dressed in the morning, a small grin or boost of confidence added when putting on a pair of jeans that the other kids at school are wearing, or a way to be more in control of their lives, clothing made with and for the community of people with disabilities is transformative and should be standard issue by all major brands. There is a major gap in the fashion industry for people with disabilities which with the proper education and access can be closed by national brands (McBee-Black & Ha-Brookshire, 2019).

6 Recommendations

The gap in the fashion industry for people with disabilities is substantial, yet can be narrowed. Even given unlimited access to time and resources to manufacture adaptive apparel, some companies would likely continue to not engage out of a lack of information and awareness. As this study proves, the adaptive market is incremental, sustainable, and profitable. Though the findings in this study cannot provide an ultimate solution, it was able to uncover a possible driver of why many retail companies are not joining the adaptive apparel market. The limited amount of awareness, education, and proof surrounding the profitability of the adaptive market appears to be the biggest obstacle and therefore the best place to start. Despite the evidence in this study demonstrating the market being incremental and the right thing to do, brands are still hesitant due to the lack of information. The adaptive apparel market is so nascent, which can be perceived as an advantage for companies to unlock this untapped market, or as a disadvantage because of the limited guidance and data.

How can apparel companies overcome this gap of knowledge in the adaptive market to better represent this historically underserved consumer and community of people with disabilities? This section contains recommendations to increase the number of companies joining the adaptive apparel market and end this underrepresentation in the fashion industry. These suggestions come with the intent of reaching apparel brands and the hope of providing awareness of the many positives that come from entering the adaptive market.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a civil rights law, established in 1990 to prohibit discrimination against people with disabilities. The ADA protects people with disabilities in all avenues of life, from parking and voting to employment and transportation. At the government level, the ADA has awoken today's society and government officials of unique

needs that the community of people with disabilities live with every day. A common act set in place by this organization was the requirement for buildings to have ramps and curb ramps along accessible routes for easy access. Accessible - handicapped -parking spaces in parking lots is another well-known implementation to help better the lives of this overlooked community executed by the ADA (U.S. Access Board, 2024). These requirements, along with the many other standards the ADA has implemented, have created a sense of ease in so many realms of life for this community, yet where are the requirements by law for apparel?

To narrow the gap of branded fashionable and functional apparel for people with disabilities, the ADA should set in place an act at the government level that requires retailers to devote a certain percentage of their existing product lines to adaptive wear. It is known the specificity of this adaptive market; therefore companies do not need to produce hundreds of options. Starting slowly to master the unique features during the creation process, brands should only engage in producing around 10% of their lines as adaptive options to start. Companies should eventually commit 15% of their apparel lines to be adaptive wear. This participation level - consistent with the disabled population representation in the U.S. - can improve the lives of people with disabilities and eliminate inequalities, which is the ADA mission (U.S. Access Board, 2024). The ADA should provide thorough information, resources, statistics, and product creation solutions to allow fashion brands to quickly, easily, and successfully get up to speed with confidence and minimal errors. The techniques to build adaptive apparel are relatively simple and within the competencies of apparel manufacturers; the ADA's role is merely to make them aware of this and enforce their compliance.

Requiring retailers and fashion brands to join the adaptive market at a small scale can help end the lack of information and statistics around adaptive apparel and begin to build

reference manuals and success stories. Few things motivate brands more than happy consumers and financial success; once committed to the adaptive enterprise, although through a government mandate, the wheel can begin spinning. Companies will additionally experience the social benefit through empowering the disabled population, and through these inspiring adaptive products. The incremental revenue, the profitability, and the sustainability the adaptive apparel market offers should ultimately evolve adaptive apparel from an initiative brands must do to an initiative they want to do.

7 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to identify the reasons why some fashion retailers have chosen to engage in the emerging adaptive apparel market, while others have seemed to de-prioritize this opportunity. Through qualitative interviews with three companies within the categories of full, limited, and zero engagement, the results confirmed that although brands believe there is a need for this critical market segment and realize it is the right thing to do, there is too little information available which creates hesitance for entering. People with disabilities are unquestionably underrepresented in the fashion industry considering their meaningful size (NRF Retail's 2023 "Building the Adaptive Category - From Inclusive Intent to Action" Panel Video). Adaptive wear created by fashion brands has legitimate functionality - ensuring easier dressing and undressing to provide independence - without sacrificing style and aesthetics. Making a product more functional for the community with disabilities is achieved by substituting buttons and zippers with magnets and velcro, in many cases. Although brands have achieved success in the adaptive space and proven that it is an incremental, profitable, and sustainable business, other companies pause. Concerns of complexity and misrepresenting are keeping major national brands and retailers from solving this inequity and lack of access (Kabel et al., 2016). Branded adaptive clothing goes further than pieces of material stitched together, it enables apparel fashion brands to have a positive impact on the lives of people with disabilities (NRF Retail's 2023 "Building the Adaptive Category - From Inclusive Intent to Action" Panel Video).

Fashion provides the wearer the ability to express themselves freely and feel confident in their body. Adaptive fashion has the same powers for those with disabilities. Returning the power of self-expression of apparel to this community of people with disabilities extends this confidence to those who need it possibly most (Scheier, 2017). Ending the underrepresentation of

this consumer will help businesses soar in terms of social equity and incremental revenue, because “In a world focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion, [how] can fashion afford to exclude this community any longer?” (Unhidden, 2024). Hopefully one day “adaptive” will no longer be a special category in stores and instead just “fashion” (Haines, 2021). Having access to clothing that meets your physical needs and allows you to fit in with your peer group whether you have a disability or not should be a right, not a privilege (Italie, 2023).

Since 2016, a shockingly few companies are engaging in the adaptive apparel market, including Tommy Hilfiger, Target, and Victoria’s Secret, and more. This lack of emergence in the adaptive market stems from an absence of awareness and knowledge of how to create products designed to be more functional for this consumer group. Some retailers fail to view adaptive apparel as a market with a potential worthy of investment, assume costs to market to a new audience are high, and assume profit margins are lower than current products. Lack of awareness can be overcome (Scheier, 2017). A feasible suggestion could be through a mandated set of requirements for apparel companies to ensure adaptive needs are met, similar to what is provided through ADA laws, adaptive products must be created and then find their way to the community of people with disabilities.

Education around adaptive inclusivity and the community is minimal, even though “... there is not a company that doesn’t touch, directly or indirectly, people with disabilities. Including them is probably the greatest business move [they] could make in [their] entire career”, proving this adaptive market holds endless opportunity, growth, and sustainable sales (Mallon, 2023).

With help from mainstream fashion companies championing inclusivity and diversity by creating adaptive apparel, not only will the community of people with disabilities feel empowered and valued, but a sense of enrichment can be cultivated into how society views them. Then, maybe society will recognize that, “... difference doesn’t make [a person] weak, but unique” (Mindy Scheier and Eric Tash, 2023). Brands can change peoples’ lives through designing adaptive apparel, because it’s more than just making clothes when it has the power to craft a society that allows every person - no matter abled or disabled - the chance to live fully and independently and express themselves freely.

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