

New study shapes understanding of adaptive clothing customer needs

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With the growth of the niche adaptive clothing market come new challenges for retailers, including making the process of online shopping more inclusive for people with varying degrees of disability as well as

expanding the functionality and aesthetic appeal of individual garments.

In a new study published in *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, University of Missouri researchers have mined [online reviews](#) to understand the perspectives of adaptive [clothing](#) customers. The researchers identified two main challenges for adaptive clothing consumers.

- Customers said product offerings were inadequate and didn't meet their specific needs.
- Access to the few products that do exist was limited.

"When designing clothing for people with special needs, it's important to consider functionality as well as fashion, style and self-expression," said Li Zhao, an assistant professor in the Department of Textile and Apparel Management. "The people who depend on these garments each have unique needs, so their feedback is invaluable."

Zhao and her team of researchers mined [customer](#) reviews from three companies—Amazon, Silverts and IZ-Adaptive—that manufacture adaptive clothing ranging from high-end items to casual wear. Through collocation analysis (the process of identifying closely affiliated with one another), topic modeling and sentiment analysis, the researchers found that on average, consumers who include people with disabilities, caregivers, and friends and family indicated that the retailers' websites were not user-friendly and didn't have features that aided accessibility.

Further, the general trend among consumer reviews indicated that adaptive clothing garments were limited in design and functionality as well as in aesthetic.

"Consumers talked a lot about the fit because they cannot go to physical stores to find the products and try them on," Zhao said. "First of all, it's

not convenient for some of those consumers; and second, those products are not even carried in brick-and-mortar stores. So, if they must shop online, what are some keywords to search to find an appropriate retailer? For example, on Amazon, there's so many different types of products. And then how do they know if this product is good? It's not like they're some established big name brands where the quality and sizing are known. For this group of consumers, a lot of things are new to them."

This study filled a gap in the research in that it examined customer experiences not only with adaptive clothing garments but also with navigating an ecommerce environment. Zhao and her team also provided useful guidelines to help retailers design products that are useful to people with a range of disabilities.

"When most people think about adaptive clothing, they think about garments in terms of function, but these consumers are human beings and their needs extend beyond that," Zhao said. "They want to be confident, and they also need professional garments that they can wear in the workplace. But do we have those products available is the question."

In this study, researchers suggest that retailers try to better understand the needs of the people for whom they're making adaptive clothing garments. For example, developing a more accessible and user-friendly website experience that differentiates garments based on categories and/or features. Additionally, this study illustrates a need for retailers to develop more advanced technology to address sizing, fabric, style, color, fit and the function of each [garment](#).

"It is vital to consider every part of your web design or every aspect of the customer shopping journey and consider how you can think differently as to be inclusive for this group of consumers," Zhao said. "I think that's something we really want to find out from customer reviews and feedback in the future."

More information: Muzhen Li et al, It is about inclusion! Mining online reviews to understand the needs of adaptive clothing customers, *International Journal of Consumer Studies* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/ijcs.12895](https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12895)

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