



Susan Rothman Kolko

ADAPTIVE FASHION

How People with Disabilities
Experience Clothing

Fashion and Personal
Style Studies

Collection Editor
JOSEPH H. HANCOCK II

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Advance praise for
Adaptive Fashion

Kolko has crafted a groundbreaking, essential look at the world of adaptive fashion from the perspective of entrepreneurs and designers who clearly see the intersection and importance of inclusivity, accessibility, empathy, and mental wellbeing and how the time for fashion forward thinking is now.

—Janeane Bernstein, EdD, Founder of Outside the Box, author of *Better Humans - What the Mental Health Pandemic Teaches Us About Humanity*

A must read for anyone passionate about creating a truly inclusive and equitable fashion industry. This book is a call to action for designers, brands, and consumers alike, urging us to re-think how we define beauty, style, and accessibility.

—Brenda Cooper, Costume designer and Emmy Award Winner *The Nanny*,
author of *The Silhouette Solution*

There is finally a book acknowledging that adaptive apparel design should be included in the vocabulary of all fashion studies. The physical and emotional benefits of stylish, well-fitting clothes should be accessible to all, and through Susan Kolko's research, this underserved market is brought forward.

—Lorrie Ivas Professor Fashion Design & Merchandising Santa Monica College,
author of *Pencil to Pen Tool: Understanding & Creating the Digital Fashion Image*.

This book serves as a reminder that the development of personal style is an important part of identity, and applies to everyone. Making this analysis part of a fashion curriculum will add

yet another dimension to any designers understanding of the customer.

—Ilse Metchek, President of California Fashion Association

Susan Kolko has opened a new perspective for people in the fashion industry, as well as disability activists. Adaptive Fashion stimulates innovative thinking about the aesthetics, functionality, and marketing of fashion. It is well-researched and full of great information.

—Susan Nero, PhD, Professor Emerita Management Studies
Antioch University Los Angeles

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Abstract

Adaptive Fashion introduces readers to this new field in clothing design and fashion by exploring disability and special needs, some recent creative developments in meeting those needs, the relationship between self-image, appearance, and fashion, and some essential business considerations in market development. Case studies, vignettes, and personal stories throughout illustrate the experiences of designers, marketers, people with disabilities, and their caregivers, enabling readers to gain both professional and personal insights into this special fashion field. Keywords and study questions are included in each chapter. The author, Susan Rothman Kolko is a professor in the Fashion Design and Merchandising program at Santa Monica College. She believes that if advocates plant the seeds, policymakers, industry leaders, and consumers will grow the roots, and that adaptive fashion will become both accessible and affordable for all.

Keywords

ableism, accessible, adaptive apparel, adaptive clothing, adaptive fashion, adaptive space, adaptivewear, dexterity, disability, ease of dressing, impairment, inclusive, magnit, paralympics, Runway of Dreams, social model, Universal Design, VA clothing allowance, Velcro™, wheelchair, Easywear

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Preface

Why this book? Why this title? Why this topic? Who is involved?

As a college professor who has taught fashion merchandising for over 30 years, it has become apparent to me that there is a category of clothing that is currently very underrepresented in both fashion design and production. Over the past 15 years, academics in this field have stressed the importance of sustainability, technology, ethical business practices, and the green scene in the world of fashion. Vegan leathers, recycled and upcycled clothing, made in the United States, and production waste have been the focus of education for future designers and merchandisers. I myself have been stressing the importance of these values in my own classes. I am also aware that current events, projects, discussions, and field visits leave students with lasting impressions, and pave the way for career decisions, and in the direction of business strategy.

I was initially inspired by my mother, who taught disability at the School of Social Welfare at UC Berkeley. We had many conversations about disability, aging, and fashion, and what it meant to have to adapt to sizing changes, address comfort needs, and try to avoid dependence on others. During COVID-19, my classes were on Zoom, and I invited my mother to speak on fashion and disability to my students. She did not know too much about high fashion, but, more importantly, she knew about optimizing the functioning of people with disabilities. Students were interested and open to the topic, and by the end of the class, they were

considering ways to incorporate adaptive clothing into their designs and business plans. During the next couple of years, I started to really explore the role fashion plays in disability, and realized that I wanted to learn more. I also decided this was also the time in my career to contribute a piece of work that would inspire learners, provide essential information, and advocate for an important unmet need.

In December 2021, I started interviewing anyone and everyone possible who had a connection with, or was involved in, the field of disability fashion. Of course, there were some designers and brands with whom I was unable to connect, but I am confident that I have been able to interview a well-rounded group of fashion disability advocates to prepare myself for creating this book. Designers, merchandisers, consumers, community representatives, policymakers, and people both with and without disabilities have all been essential components of this project, and it is my hope to create a piece of literature that promotes inclusivity, accessibility, and acceptance, and encourages further development in the field of adaptive clothing and fashion.

Susan Rothman Kolko, M.A. Organizational Management



Introduction

From the beginning of time, clothing has been an important part of the development of culture. Early humans used animal skins and natural resources to protect and embellish their bodies, primarily to provide a barrier between themselves and whatever element they might encounter, and to communicate some sort of group identity. From weather to symbolic rituals, clothing has addressed the most basic of human needs. Clothing is considered a “soft good”, meaning that it is made of either natural or human-made fibers, processed into cloth materials, and sewn or manufactured into finished goods. “Soft goods” can be found not only in clothing but also in interior design, and as components of many other products. Historically, cloth and fabrics were mostly used to provide a barrier between human skin and the outside world. Culture dictated the appropriate style, purpose, and use of the clothing. Over time, clothing became an important indication of social status, religion, gender, and culture. As civilizations developed, so did individual styles that represented culture. Most fashions were reflective of natural resources and lifestyles that were valued in the population’s geographic region. Fibers, colors, patterns, and accessories became a form of identifying culture. It was not until fourteenth-century Europe that tailoring and trimmings began to make clothing individualized and form-fitting. A short while later, Renaissance clothing was designed to be suitable for unique occasions as well. The costs related to wardrobe ensembles became representative of class distinction. In

the nineteenth and twentieth century, human-made fibers and machinery provided advanced production efforts that helped to lower costs and make clothing styles available to the masses.

The demand for clothing that satisfies needs, from basic to extravagant, will continue to be a multi-billion-dollar global commodity as long as humanity exists. From Third World cultures to advanced technological societies, from thrift to haute couture, and from recycling to luxury, clothing plays an important role in identity, and access to fashionable clothing should be an equal opportunity for all.

This book has been researched and written to fill a gap in the fashion industry—a gap in both the design and the marketing of clothing for a significant section of our population—people with disabilities—who need clothing designed for their special needs, clothing which supports a positive self-image, and clothing which is on trend with contemporary styles. The apparel industry has the skill set, and the toolbox, to facilitate the development and marketing of adaptive clothing. The goal of this book is to create awareness of both the needs of people with disabilities for functional, affordable clothing, and the opportunities these needs create for fashion businesses to develop and market a new clothing category.

The production of this specialized clothing, titled “adaptivewear”, requires specific expertise and knowledge in both design and marketing, and in the special, specific needs of people with a wide variety of disabling conditions. As with “plus” and “petite”, large and small, and niche market specialties, adaptive clothing is increasingly permeating ever-broader areas of the apparel

industry, where special attention can be given to the design and provision of functional products for a previously underserved segment of the population. Cost factors, social acceptance, and understanding of specific needs have made the adaptive category of clothing a challenge to traditional business models. Case studies, included in each chapter, provide the reader with the real-life experiences of designers, producers, marketers, and, of course, users of adaptivewear fashions.

This book will explore and discuss the various elements essential to the development of clothing adapted to serve special needs. It begins with an introduction to the world of disability, and with a brief history of disability and the disability rights movement, which, like civil rights and the women's movement, served to bring attention to the challenges faced by this societal group, and to create changes in laws and practices to support equal rights and opportunities for people with disabilities. People with disabilities themselves, their caregivers, families, medical advisers, educators, and community advocates have played an essential role in drawing attention to the inequities, the potentially dehumanizing effects of disability, and the rights of people with disabilities to the same opportunities as non-disabled people. As a result of this advocacy, new standards have been set, both in the United States and globally, for physical environment, education, job opportunities, and basic income levels. "People First" language was developed, to define first personhood, and then disability—so, not a "disabled person", but a "person with a disability".

The major groupings of disabilities, such as mobility limitations, dexterity, and vision limitations, are explored, with discussions of the specific adaptations that can enable ease of clothing selection, dressing and undressing, and other special adaptive needs. Businesses and individuals who have designed and marketed this clothing share their stories, both their challenges and their successes.

As all are aware, clothing is an essential element in an individual's personal self-image. Clothing itself is a basic human need, but many people desire to go beyond meeting just that simple need, and prefer clothing, which is fashionable as well as functional, and well-designed. Several types of clothing adaptations will be included, with accompanying discussions and case studies to illustrate design and methodology.

The book includes a special section on the social model of disability, which currently has superseded the previously dominant medical model. The role of fashion, fashion that moves beyond the simple functionality of adaptivewear and into current trends in style and materials, is an essential element in the social model, and the stories included here will serve as examples of the development of fashionable clothing for people with disabilities.

Clothing also plays an essential role in the development of individual self-image and has a strong influence on the way the individual is perceived by others. The challenges that supporting positive individual images has presented to the industry, not only in design but also in marketing—especially in terms of fashion, choice, cost, and market accessibility—will be explored,

presented, and discussed through the stories of innovators in the field.

Market considerations are an essential aspect to consider in providing adaptivewear that is both functional and fashionable. The apparel industry has taken on the responsibility for meeting these special needs, but retailers, brands, and designers have observed slow increases in sales despite their business efforts. Research has been done in this area, with a focus on statistics that address the sizable number of people with disabilities. All potential consumers of clothing designed for special needs have been included here, as research on trends assists in the understanding and addressing some of the potential causes of marketing challenges, as well as some potential methods and resources to address these. Marketing efforts can increase awareness of the existence of this special resource, and accessibility can enable greater exposure to potential purchasers. Today's marketing has already begun to increase awareness about this growing market segment, the demand for products, and the potential for increased business opportunities. Again, the stories of people who have developed brands and markets will illustrate their routes to success and inspire creativity and exploration.

The final section, which supplements the previous discussions, shares stories of notable people with disabilities and their experiences with clothing and fashion. It also includes a listing of additional educational resources and programs that will enable readers to continue to explore and develop skills in both design and marketing to this special segment of the population.

It is hoped that this book can serve to educate, to create awareness of the need for functional, affordable, and fashionable clothing for people with disabilities, and to expand the interest and the opportunities for growth of this new clothing category within the fashion industry.¹

Part I

Understanding the adaptive clothing market

It is essential to consider several key factors in designing and marketing clothing to meet the specific needs of people with disabilities. The first of these is awareness of the major developments in the field of disability and accessibility, which will be addressed in the first chapter. The next chapter presents the groupings of specific conditions which require a variety of clothing adaptations. These adaptations enable individuals to function optimally in society, minimizing differences and enhancing function. Case studies included in this chapter provide personal insights and illustrate some of the specific ways in which clothing challenges have been addressed.

1

The disability movement and adaptive clothing

Introduction

It is important to be aware of the history of disability in order to understand how current laws, policies, and advocacy affect the everyday living experience of people with disabilities. Understanding the disability rights movement, with its emphasis on equal rights, ethics, inclusivity, accessibility, and affordability, can provide a practical framework for both present and future decision-making related to adaptivewear and the apparel industry. History has shown that every law has several interpretations; hence, amendments and court systems are often needed. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (the ADA) specifically develops laws related to disability and accessibility but leaves some decisions to the American people for interpretation, which may be affected by both the free market and the capitalist economy. Disability is still often stigmatized as a potential cause of business losses, as marketing and store accommodations require extra effort and planning, and extra funds, which must then be

absorbed into business and community budgets. The integration and acceptance of people with disabilities into the societal system, and all of the accommodations and expenses that this has incurred, has initiated a paradigm shift in the American psyche, and in the American economy. Clothing is necessary for survival, while fashion is not. However, in our society, clothing does not define who we are: fashion or fashionable clothing does. As an example: A poorly assembled garment given to a person with a disability at the time of discharge from a hospital that must be worn due to a new disabling condition, serves its purpose, and meets the basic clothing need. However, that garment, associated with so many negative impressions, can create an identity for that wearer that can develop into a lifelong “I am less, I need help” self-image.

Now, over 30 years since the passage of the ADA, the field of disability, and society’s knowledge and understanding of the challenges and needs disability can create, continues to broaden, and clothing, related to survival and mental health, has become a topic of awareness and may even be linked to sustainable business practices.



Figure 1 IZ Adaptive

Learning objectives

Upon completion of this chapter, the reader will be able to:

- Identify major developments and laws related to the disability movement;
- Analyze societal changes that have occurred as a result of the disability movement;
- Judge the implications of these changes related to disability and fashion;
- Assess the special considerations and thoughts behind the development of adaptive clothing;
- Identify key figures leading to the development of adaptive clothing; and
- Make reasonable predictions regarding the future of the category of adaptive clothing

A. Disability and the disability rights movement

From the earliest recorded history to post-war America until the mid-1950s, people with disabilities were considered different and inferior to others in some way. As a result, many people with disabilities were hidden away, separated from the general society in large institutions, where they were kept isolated and received minimal care and attention. Parents who had given birth to a child with disabilities kept that child at home, hidden from others. Children with disabilities were often considered shameful, a punishment visited upon the child due to the parents' or the child's misbehavior. Formal education was generally not possible for these children. If a disability impeded what was considered "normal" day-to-day functioning, people with disabilities were treated as medical patients, categorized and "labeled" according to their medical condition only. If they were unable to function in mainstream society, or posed a threat or burden to others, they were placed in facilities, segregated from the rest of society, and provided with minimum care and very marginal conditions. These conditions prevailed until the 1970s, when, with more awareness of the rights of people with disabilities, these large, isolating institutions were closed.

Soldiers returned from wars with all kinds of physical and mental conditions, and they and their advocates found the conditions for those who needed care to be unacceptable. The voices of the wounded, who had served in the US military, their families, and their communities began to advocate for better care and accommodations. It was felt that these veterans, who had sacrificed

with both body and mind for their country, were owed care and consideration, post-war and as long as needed, sometimes for their entire lifetime. In 1946, the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) was formed, and it still serves as a sounding board for veterans and all people with disabilities regarding healthcare, benefits, rights, and research. The PVA has been directly involved as an advocate, both in legislation and in ensuring benefits. Along with other organizations like the World Institute on Disability, National Council on Disability, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of People with Disabilities, and The ARC (Association of Retarded Citizens) and others, it has served as one of the key resources for change. The US Constitution itself was used as the framework by which lawmakers and disability advocates created amendments and outlined the legal rights to treatment for people with disabilities.

An eminent early leader of the disability rights movement, Ed Roberts, who was diagnosed with polio at 14 years of age, was a major force in the deinstitutionalization of people with disabilities. He was the first student in a wheelchair to attend UC Berkeley, and, finding that no dormitory could accommodate his needs, was forced to live in the university's hospital. He founded the Independent Living Movement, co-founded the World Institute on Disability (WID), and was one of the most influential figures working to change legislation and promote a new social world of acceptance for people with disabilities. The Ed Roberts campus at UC Berkeley stands today as a fully accessible campus for students with and without disabilities to gather and learn. Other disability rights advocates include Justin Dart, who founded the American Association of People with Disabilities

and was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and Judy Heumann, who organized sit-ins in support of the passage of laws for people with disabilities. They were also active in the passage of the ADA (see below).

Significant issues in disability rights have been addressed through both court cases and laws focused on ensuring justice and rights. Landmark court cases have been used as a “sounding board” for new policies, and for procedures that protect the rights of people with disabilities.

B. Major disability rights court cases

These cases, listed in order of dates resolved, have had a major impact on the lives of people with disabilities. As can be seen, four of the six cases are related to education, and to the rights of children with disabilities to public education with accommodations to meet their needs with individualized programs, supporting the key role that education has in the lives of all people. The Olmstead case supported deinstitutionalization and the development of community support systems, while the United Airlines case addressed correctable vision.

- **Brown v Board of Education**, (1954), a case addressing segregation that is also used in an effort to mainstream people with disabilities into the community at large.
- **Mills v Board of Education of District of Columbia** (1972), which stated that public schools cannot exclude people with disabilities from education.
- **Southeastern Community College v Davis**, (1979), which outlined the laws of reasonable accommodation.

- **Sutton v United Airlines** (1999) focused on the definition of disability, and what that definition meant for the workplace, through the process of considering the use of corrective glasses to enable required visual acuity.
- **Olmstead v L.C.** (1999), which determined that people with mental illnesses have the right to live in the community, rather than in institutions.
- **Andrew F. v. Douglas County School District** (2017), which determined that public schools must offer individualized programs for students with disabilities.

C. Major disability laws

Disability laws seek to address discrimination, affirmative action, and the rights of people with disabilities. As can be seen, the original Rehabilitation Act addressed disability specifically, a category that was not included in the landmark Civil Rights Act. It served to motivate and inspire advocates and leaders of the disability rights movement and, 17 years later, resulted in the passage of the American with Disabilities Act, the signature law which currently guides programs, institutions, employers, and others in meeting non-discrimination standards. Building on the court cases listed above, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act moved laws and policies regarding the education of people with disabilities from the individual state level to a more inclusive, federal level.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 requires affirmative action in the workplace, and assures that people with disabilities cannot be discriminated against in programs that receive federal funding. The Rehabilitation

Act is often compared to the Civil Rights Act. The Civil Rights Act addressed discrimination based on race, religion, color, sex, and national origin. The Rehabilitation Act focuses on disability specifically, and has laid the groundwork for the American with Disabilities Act

The Education of all Handicapped Children Act of 1975, now called the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act**, ensures that children with disabilities have the same access to education in all public-school systems.

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all aspects of public life. The ADA has created increased accessibility for people with disabilities, as well as increasing social awareness for the non-disabled.

Two key advocates for the passage of the ADA:

- Judy Heumann – Judy was diagnosed with polio at an early age and has been in a wheelchair her entire life. As a disability rights advocate, she played a significant role in the signing of the ADA, leading protests, and sit-ins, and speaking at events all over the country. She has dedicated her life to advancing rights and promoting policies and legislation that protect people with disabilities both in the United States and internationally. She has served under the presidencies of Clinton and Obama and, with Ed Roberts, co-founded the World Institute on Disability.²
- Justin Dart Jr – Referred to as “the father of the ADA”, Justin has polio, and, in a wheelchair, has traveled the country to gather information and data in order to compile statistics