

# Study highlights need for affordable, accessible adaptive clothing for people living with disabilities

June 15 2016, by Sheena Rice

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The U.S. clothing industry is a multi-billion dollar industry, but for the millions of Americans with disabilities and their families, a lack of options in the apparel industry presents daily challenges. Now researchers from the University of Missouri are looking at the relationship between apparel and marginalization for people with disabilities. Allison Kabel, assistant professor of health sciences in the School of Health Professions, found that the lack of adequate, accessible apparel created barriers for people with disabilities from engaging in their communities. She identified the need for innovation in design, production, distribution and sale of adaptive clothing.

"While it may be an afterthought for some, clothing and appearance are not trivial," Kabel said. "What we wear matters in how we participate in our communities. Job interviews, court appearances, team sports and formal events are just a few examples of times when standards for appropriate dress exist. For people with disabilities, the lack of adaptive clothing is not just a burden, it is a barrier for community participation."

Kabel and Kerri McBee-Black, instructor of textile and apparel management in the College of Human Environmental Sciences, analyzed interviews from a focus group on the topic of clothing and how clothing impacted their lives. The key findings from this study identified apparel-related barriers for people with disabilities that fall into three basic categories: mechanical and functional barriers, cultural barriers, and

sensory sensitivity barriers.

The mechanical aspects of getting dressed were found to be a significant challenge for people with disabilities and their caregivers. Zippers, buttons, shoe laces and fabric texture often present challenges for those who live independently. Others reported problems when trying to find clothes that fit. In one example, a child with Down syndrome had to have her clothes attached with safety pins to prevent them from falling off, due to a mismatch between her body proportions and current clothing industry sizing.

Cultural issues present other obstacles for caregivers for people with [disabilities](#). A female caregiver for a male stroke victim from South Asia struggled to care for him when he lost his ability to put on or take off his own shoes or socks due to nerve damage. This was due to cultural prohibitions around the touching of feet. Focus group participants also identified challenges from trying to dress children of all ages with sensory sensitivities, particularly those with disorders along the autism spectrum.

"Participants of the focus group had no shortage of examples to highlight apparel-related barriers in their day-to-day lives," Kabel said. "In many cases, the only options are custom-made [clothing](#), which is not accessible due to high costs. Affordable clothes that can be mass produced are necessary to address specific apparel-related barriers identified in our research."

The study, "Apparel-Related Participation Barriers: Ability, Adaptation and Engagement," recently was published in *Disability and Rehabilitation*.

**More information:** Apparel-related participation barriers: ability, adaptation and engagement. *Disabil Rehabil*. 2016 Jan 5:1-9. [Epub

ahead of print] [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26731674](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26731674)

Provided by University of Michigan

Citation: Study highlights need for affordable, accessible adaptive clothing for people living with disabilities (2016, June 15) retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-06-highlights-accessible-people-disabilities.html>

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