

Tattoos & 6-Inch Heels: A Visual Exploration of the Meaning of Clothing for Adults With Mobility Disabilities

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PURPOSE: Because people use clothing for self-expression as well as body covering, and most clothing is made for non-disabled people, it is important to explore how clothing impacts people living with disabilities (PLWD), beyond simply posing limitations with the physical act of dressing. Our study aimed to explore the meaning of clothing for people living with disabilities from a social model of disability perspective.

DESIGN: Researchers used Photovoice, a participatory action research methodology in which participants take photos in response to prompts pertaining to the research topic.

METHOD: 6 adult subjects were recruited via snowball sampling method. All participants identified as having a physical disability or significant motor impairment which impacts the occupation of dressing. Participants submitted photos and then participated in a focus group to discuss their lived experiences. The researchers used a two step analysis beginning with coding a transcript of the focus group followed by thematic analysis.

RESULTS: Four themes emerged: (a) the necessity for innovation and adaptation to mainstream clothing, (b) the need to choose between function and presentation, (c) feeling largely ignored by the apparel industry, and (d) using clothing to break barriers.

CONCLUSION: OT practitioners must take a client centered approach, which accounts for a client's desired social roles. Implications for OT practice: Given that dressing is an activity of daily living, our findings highlight the need for OTs working with PLWD to move beyond basic dressing function to incorporate client self-expression through fashion in assessment and interventions. There is a need for OTs to serve as advocates, collaborating with both the disability community and the apparel industry.

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