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No Tommy, Tweed doesn't Mix with Teen Spirit: The Intersection of Body Positivity and Fashion for Physically Disabled Teenagers

Introduction:

The fool who posits that “beauty doesn’t matter” is in for a rude awakening in the 21st century. In this world, physical attractiveness defines our value; personhood is reduced to a straight nose and clear skin. Younger populations concerned with their social status but lacking the physical traits to Snapchat with the hot, “cool kids” on a Friday night, resort to other methods of improving their attraction. Confidence offers a ticket to the popular table and; fashion is a visible way of expressing oneself and establishing a confident character. It is unimportant whether the confidence worn with a pair of tie-dye jeans is initially genuine, because the wearer can grow to possess it. It’s a “fake it till you make it” world for able bodied social climbers. Meanwhile, physically disabled teenagers lack options beyond funeral and work attire. Disabled teenagers are unable to engage in confidence dressing or find joy in clothes because silks, sparkles, and frayed denim are confined to able bodied consumers who can shimmy into a pair of jeans or squeeze into a tube top. Access to adaptive fashion intersects with body image; disabled youth cannot express their individuality with current, monotonous adaptive fashion collections, thus damaging their body confidence.

I would like to specify several components of my argument before I continue. Firstly, the argument I present does not apply to all teenagers living with a physical disability, because some find their confidence in other ways such as engaging and connecting with disability culture. Nonetheless, for teenagers who do not experience social support, expressive fashion is a way to

establish confidence in oneself without the need of others' approval. Additionally, I would like to underline that my argument focuses on the gap in adaptive fashion for teenagers. Adolescence is an integral time for establishing a relationship with one's body. While most teenagers can turn towards fashion as a tool for body acceptance, physically disabled teenagers cannot do the same, given the currently characterless adaptive fashion designs.

Disability and Body Image:

Disabled individuals who choose to document their body image, report significantly more negative attitudes about their bodies than able-bodied subjects. A study examined the body image experiences of people who acquired a spinal cord injury, and found that all subjects reported negative ideas about their body image (Bailey et. al., 2019). The subjects discussed their efforts in improving their physical attractiveness through fashion and other mechanisms, to offset the attraction that they believed to have lost from their disability. These subjects sought to fulfill what Riva Lehrer deems simple beauty, or beauty that "conforms to cultural norms"(Lehrer, 2). Simple beauty counters an informed beauty, which is constituted by a holistic identity—physical, intellectual, emotional— in which people fall in love. Informed beauty is abstract by nature, and alien to modern people. The majority of able bodied communities surrender to the simple beauty standard, and use clothing to achieve it.

While simple beauty, as defined by being able bodied, is inherently unattainable by disabled communities, disability does not take away from one's desire to be beautiful (Groer, 2019). Beauty ideals are impossible to ignore in a world of Instagram posts discussing "how to get a six pack in six weeks", especially during adolescence. During teenage years, when people develop hormones and sexual desires, beauty devolves to equates with one's sex appeal, or

simple beauty, instead of their emotional, informed beauty. Disabled teenagers struggle to be sexually desirable by hegemonic able bodied influencers and, as a result, are at a particular risk of developing poor body image.

Fashion and Body Image:

Fashion choices, or a lack thereof, affect confidence and body image, especially during the emotionally vulnerable years of adolescence. Teenagers encounter various bodily changes that spawn negative body image ideas and destroy self confidence. Clothes, however; offer armor against the difficulties and an opportunity to embrace physical changes through clothes that flatter widening hips or growing breasts. Disabled bodies are left behind in the fashion industry because adaptive fashion lines focus on the practicality of the design rather than the appeal of the product. The impact is tremendous for teenage disabled teenagers who are restricted in their options for self expression and promoting body confidence.

The fashion industry promises customers that their products possess transformative powers– bum-sculpting, tummy-tucking, breast-enhancing abilities– thus generating a corporeal norm. From the foundation of a normal physique arises a “super body” that is restrictive by design; inaccessible to marginalized identities such as the physically disabled. The tall, long-legged, thin bombshell ideal for women cannot be attained by someone in a wheelchair because the norm upon which the desirable is constructed, is able bodied. Additionally, “many fashion and beauty products still operate with the undercurrent of ‘fixing’ something” (Brown, 2019) when they design both standard and adaptive products. Disabled bodies are isolated in social environments, and; and fashion designers try to solve this problem by making disabled people adapt to the world around them. Fashion designers ask disabled people to “blend in”

using minimal, unflattering adaptive fashion designs that hide, not illuminate their individual beauty. In silencing and secretizing their disability, fashion houses perpetuate the notion that disabled bodies are lesser than abled bodies.

Having adaptive clothing is showing that bodies are accepted. “Clothes that fit properly increase confidence and independence,” said Alette Coble-Temple, a psychology professor at John F. Kennedy University in California and a disability rights-activist. (Brown, 2019) Fashion houses that offer unique and appealing adaptive clothing, such as *Adaptations by Adrian* and *Izzy Camilleri Adaptive Designs*, send a message of acceptance and, more importantly, inclusion to disabled communities. In this message, disabled bodies are not told they need to be “fixed”, but rather that the fashion community will adapt its designs **for** disabled people. Here, disabled people are recognized, honored, given enough value that fashion designers would create designs for their particular bodies.

DIY Adaptive Fashion:

Adaptive fashion pieces are priced without consideration of their target audience. Not only are the designs antiquated and unappealing, but also, they are unaffordable for the majority of disabled people who make significantly lower average wages than their able-bodied counterparts. Disabled people who require adaptive clothes but cannot splurge on \$75 adaptive jeans can refashion able-bodied clothing to fit their bodies and save money. Especially for people who acquire a disability later in life and do not want to pay for a new closet, DIY adaptive clothes are a great and economic option for living comfortably. Bearing in mind the financial benefits, I wanted to make an adaptive outfit using my own clothing and minimal supplies. The purpose of this DIY project was to apply my knowledge of adaptive fashion techniques and

guidelines to a realistic situation that someone with a disability might face if they were not in the financial position to buy new clothes.

To begin I rummaged through my suitcase of tie-dye yoga pants and neon sports bras before accepting it was probably time to pay Target a visit. I had never shopped for clothes at Target but I expected the prices to be reasonable, given my friends' feedback. I started in the full-priced section and made it through a t-shirt rack where every flimsy, polyester option exceeded my price range. Onto the sale section! I tried to shop for my personal style because I have an affinity towards clothing with dramatic necklines and uncomfortable structuring. I didn't want to go easy on myself for this project by sacrificing style for the sake of accessibility. I picked out a black high-necked, unshaped tunic dress for a respectable \$14 price tag. At home, I used the materials I had to refashion the dress in an adaptive way. My family is not very artistic, therefore, all I used was duct tape. In a way, however, I think this is more representative of the tools and materials that an average lower to middle class person has access to; chances are, that if a disabled person is not in the financial position to purchase adaptive-specific fashion, they would likely not have a myriad of DIY materials. That is to say, I embraced my empty craft box and got to work. The dress I picked was by no means "sexy" or "youthful" because that is not my personal style. Nonetheless, it was overly conservative in the high neckline and the buttons on the back made it difficult to throw over my head. I decided to adjust the neckline by folding in the turtle-neck-like fabric and creating a square neckline without buttons, which makes the dress easier to slip over the head. My next step was to eliminate the puffy long sleeves, which obstructed my mobility and added to the maidenly look of the dress. I pushed the long sleeves back into the dress, leaving only the loose, short flutter sleeves. Another option would be to cut

the long sleeves and tie the sleeves together to create a belt. Unfortunately, my kiddie-scissors were not strong enough to puncture the polyester shield of this dress, but I think this would be a more youthful design. I chose not to modify the length of the dress because if I were to sit in a wheelchair, the dress would hit short enough to reveal my lower legs without exposing my private parts to the world— an ideal length. I would also want to play with the color of the dress. I only had access to water colors but it would be fun to repaint the dress a brighter color or add some white paint splatters for a pop of color. I am satisfied with the result of my dress because I completed the refashioning with consideration of cost and limited materials. The dress is not completely different from the original, but it is now adaptive and I think it is exciting that I can create an adaptive dress using my knowledge of the topic and minimal access to resources at home. I look forward to rocking my newly-styled dress in the summer!

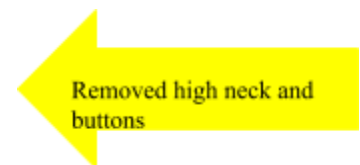
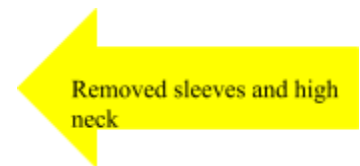


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Conclusion:

Nowadays, the public erroneously praises fashion houses for their inclusive campaigns. Certainly, designers are improving their plus size collections and including more diverse models on the runways. With media outlets emphasizing the progressively inclusive body size and racial diversity in fashion, it seems that all marginalized identities are being recognized. Regardless, physically disabled bodies are left behind. A few Tommy Hilfiger adaptive collections cannot conceal the inaccessibility of mainstream fashion for disabled consumers.

“It’s no different than plus sizes, petites and maternity,” Scheier said. “If you can find clothes for dogs, but not for people with disabilities, that is not right.” (Groer, 2019)

This affects more than one’s aesthetic; a lack of adaptive fashion directly intersects with negative body image. In neglecting the disabled community, fashion houses disregard an entire identity and decide that they are not worthy of self expression in fashion. As a result, disabled communities are silenced and shackled to bland, overpriced clothing, thereby maintaining the notion that physically disabled people are unsightly, and undeserving of being attractive or happy in their bodies.

Clothes are more than the fabric we chose to cover our bodies with; they are tools of expression with immense social and personal implications. Fashion houses need to understand that functionality is not enough to constitute inclusive adaptive fashion. Adaptive fashion is inclusive and adequate when a disabled high schooler and her friend can go to the mall and pick out the same skimpy miniskirt– one with a zipper and other with velcro.

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