

In Practice: Perceptions of User Involvement in the Activewear Industry

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Successful product development processes require considerable understanding of the continually changing needs of consumers. The product development literature reports that users are engaged mainly in the front end of the product development process as sources of inspiration and again during the latter part of the process as evaluators (Al-Zu'bi & Tsinopoulos, 2012). For inspiration, designers aim to gather information from users about their work in the context of their lives and culture. In the evaluation stage, users are typically asked to evaluate a sample or prototype. Within the field of functional apparel design, DeJonge (1981) explains that users are relied upon to clarify problems, pinpoint critical design considerations, and provide insight on their expectations. These methods are used to help the designer move beyond the apparent request of the client toward a more comprehensive picture of the problem (DeJonge, 1984). The literature is focused on how users are engaged in practice but does not address designer's attitudes in engaging users or the value of user involvement in the apparel product development process. This research explores these issues through industry interviews with apparel designers and developers who elaborate on their perception of the value of user involvement.

Methods and Participants Thirteen professionals employed in the active/outdoor apparel sector with three or more years of experience were recruited to take part in the study. All participants were recruited through purposive sampling procedures. Interviews gather a wide range of open-ended, qualitative data and are vital to understanding people's motivations, feelings and attitudes (Wengraf, 2001). The interviews, which were conducted via video conferencing, followed a semi-structured protocol and lasted between 50-90 minutes. Interviews were conducted between July - Sept. 2014 and were transcribed and qualitatively analyzed. Nine women and four men between the ages of 23-53 (average age of 36.15) consented to participate in the study. Study participants were geographically dispersed across the US, predominantly from the western US, with one participant was based Germany (Table XX). The participants had worked in the apparel industry an average of 9.11 years, and in their current position an average of 5.65 years.

Table 1: Interview participants

Company	# of Participants	Department(s)	Company Size (# of people)	Location
Adidas	1	Material Development/Sourcing	10,000+	Herzogenaurach, Germany
Black Diamond Ltd.	2	Apparel Development	100-499	San Leandro, CA
Kitsbow	1	Design	<10	Baltimore, MD
New Balance	1	Apparel Innovation	5,000-9,999	Boston, MA
Nike	3	Apparel Design, Apparel Innovation (2)	10,000+	Beaverton, OR
Ninox	1	Design, Production	<10	Boulder, CO
Smartwool	2	Performance Apparel Product Development (2)	100-499	Erie, CO
Spyder Active Sports	1	Product Development	100-499	Boulder, CO
Winds Enterprises	1	Product Development - R&D	100-499	Encinitas, CA

Findings Responses throughout the interviews emphasized that many of the research participants feel that involving users in the design and development process is important to enhance the subtleties of the product. For example, a developer at a mid-sized company commented, “it's the things where you think that you've figured everything out, and then within a week someone will come back and be like: ‘It was really awkward using this pocket for this purpose.’ it's that kind of thing that we couldn't get anywhere else. Through lab testing, you kind of miss the subtle differences like particular wear spots, or personal preference.” Users’ experiences bring value to the process, and users are considered experts in their own experiences; as a senior developer explained, “their insight and actual user expectation is important. . . I'm never going to play tennis at the same level as Roger Federer, he knows more than I'll ever know about what it feels like to be on Center Court at Wimbledon and what the expectations are.” Factors used in making a decision on whether to incorporate users in a project include the product newness, complexity, innovativeness, timing, and price-point. If a product is new, expensive, and/or complex the product will be tested with users, which reduces the uncertainty and risk. The type of users companies engage with is also related to the innovativeness of the product being developed. Users can be 1) professionals (e.g. Olympians, NBA); 2) semi-professional athletes (e.g., Master’s ski team), and 3) everyday consumers (e.g. athletes on high school teams).

The interviewees place a high value on user input at all levels, but in reality, they filter the actual application of users’ suggestions. As one interviewee states, “I think that there's definitely value in it, but at the same time you don't want someone who is not a designer driving the design process. I think there are certain things you know as a designer that kind of guide the product to where it is.” There is also a perception among the interviewees that user input is limited because users cannot foresee their future needs and, therefore, cannot work on the time cycle of apparel development, which can be up to two years in advance. Other issues that mitigate direct application of user feedback include practical reasons as well, for example, “to some degree, it’s a matter of making sure there’s consensus or making sure that feedback isn’t unique to an individual. . . you have to filter that out a little bit.” Designers rely on their intuition and expertise to filter user information and drive the product direction.

This research suggests that the designers and developers place value in users’ feedback, and user involvement is an important aspect of the functional apparel development process. User information is valuable to stimulate, validate, and authenticate ideas. However, designers continue to drive product concepts by applying a filtering process to user input because it can be “illogical” at times and difficult to pull out useful information. Designers have to address issues beyond the apparent request of the client toward a more comprehensive picture of the problem, as DeJonge discusses. Often a user will propose a solution to the wrong problem. The perception is that although users can provide valuable information, there is a transformation process, which only designers can do, to transform information from users to valuable knowledge.

References

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