

BLENDING FASHION AND FUNCTION: EVOLVING CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS OF
ACTIVEWEAR

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BLENDING FASHION AND FUNCTION: EVOLVING CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS OF
ACTIVEWEAR

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As more consumers are looking for activewear that serve dual functions, there are more opportunities for designers to focus on this idea. Additionally, as the fashion industry moves towards a more sustainable way of designing, there are still opportunities for designers to make change in the activewear market. The purpose of this study was to better understand what design practices should be implemented in activewear design based on consumers' evolving needs and shopping habits. It was also considered that consumer shopping habits and lifestyles are changing quickly due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Within this study, the following questions were explored: (1) What factors influence current consumers perceptions of activewear and their purchase decisions? (2) What are current consumers' activewear design preferences? (3) What type of sustainable activewear designs can be developed considering current consumers activewear preferences? Following a focus group, responses were used to create a collection of sustainable activewear. Overall, the goal of the study was to present examples of sustainable activewear designs that are suited for meeting the needs of today's consumers. Results can suggest how design processes can be adjusted to create more options for consumers as activewear needs and lifestyles change.

BLENDING FASHION AND FUNCTION: EVOLVING CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS OF ACTIVEWEAR

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

Activewear is a very broad term and clothing defined as activewear can be used as staple pieces in a wardrobe rather than just being purchased with the intention of working out or participating in sports. Many consumers are beginning to shift their thinking surrounding activewear as people are beginning to dress more casually than they have in the past (O’Sullivan, Hanlon, Spaaij, & Westerbeek, 2017). Because consumers are taking part in this idea of more casual dressing, there is also the need from consumers for clothing that is more practical and comfortable while also still remaining stylish. As a more diverse market is beginning to take shape, more consumers are looking for activewear pieces that vary in color, material, and style to suit their needs and preferences (Yip, 2020). This leads to a great pressure on designers to create activewear that is functional while also keeping an emphasis on innovative design and style (Yip, 2020). Because of the popularity and increase in sales within the activewear market in the past several years, many fashion brands are looking to alter their design focus to include more activewear pieces. On the other hand, there are also activewear brands that are looking to include more high-end design features in their garments in order to appeal to the needs and wants of their customers (Yip, 2020). Although several researchers have begun to look at consumers changing perception of activewear, there still could be more research done surrounding the dual function of activewear when worn as everyday clothing. There has been a shift in consumers thinking surrounding health and fitness and their clothing needs are changing because of this shift. Many consumers are looking for clothing that can easily transition in different situations, such as a

garment that can be worn to work and transition to something that can be worn to the gym without having to change completely (Watts & Chi, 2018). Additionally, there has been little research done on what sustainable design practices can be best implemented when it comes to activewear.

Significance of the Study

Research findings will show if there is a shift in how consumers are wearing activewear and if they would be more likely to purchase an activewear or loungewear piece that can be worn in other situations, rather than just buying clothing that is specifically for working out or exercise. There will also be a greater understanding on how the global COVID-19 pandemic is affecting consumers buying habits and what is available to consumers to purchase. As many consumers are taking part in working remotely and learning online, there will likely be an even greater shift in how people are dressing in everyday situations. Studies being conducted surrounding consumer purchase behavior considering lifestyle changes brought on by COVID-19 are showing that sales for fashion tops is increasing while sales for pants and skirts have decreased in sales at just about the same rate (COVID-19, n.d.). Overall, there will be a better will understanding of consumers needs in regard to activewear, what influences their purchasing decisions and whether or not sustainable activewear is something that consumers are looking for within the activewear market.

Key Terms and Definitions

Activewear- Activewear is defined as clothing that is designed to be worn with the intention that the wearer is participating in a sport or exercise. Although this is the case, the term activewear is also used more broadly to describe clothing that can be worn by the consumer in casual and

leisure situations (O’Sullivan, Hanlon, Spaaij, & Westerbeek, 2017). This variance in definitions implies that activewear is a very broad term and clothing defined as activewear can be used as staple pieces in a wardrobe rather than just being purchased with the intention of working out or participating in sports. Within this study long and short sleeve t-shirts, sweatshirts, crop tops/sports bras, leggings, shorts, and sweatpants that are constructed using activewear materials will fall under the category of activewear. It may also be referred to throughout this study as “loungewear”.

Functional Design- Functional design takes into consideration the consumers’ needs when a product is being developed and is also known as user-centered design. User-centered design can be defined as “a philosophy based on the needs and interests of the user, with an emphasis on making products usable and understandable” (Morris & Ashdown, 2018). In order to address a functional design problem, it is important to consider who the user is, what the product is being used for, the environment in which the product will be used as well as any other specific uses of the product (Watkins & Dunne, 2015). Additionally, anatomy and the body should be considered in functional design, as the human body will give designers a better idea of how clothing should be designed and ultimately worn (LaBat, 2019). When the human body is considered in functional design, there will be a better understanding of how the garment will fit and what materials should be used based on the environment and movements of the body.

Sustainability- Sustainability is a term that can take on many different meanings and can be defined in a myriad of ways, leading to it often being misunderstood (Farrer, 2011). First and foremost, it has become a word that is interchanged with “recycling” and the “environment”, but it is also a term used to describe the need for social change and making sure that people are taken care of (Farrer, 2011). Perhaps a clearer definition was developed as a part of the Brundtland

report in 1987 which defined sustainable development as ensuring that current development does not have a negative effect on future generations allowing them to prosper in terms of their own development (Brundtland, 1987).

Extended Sizes- Within this study, this term refers to women's clothing that is sizes 18 and above. This may also be referred to as "plus-sized" clothing or "curvy".

CHAPTER II LITERATURE REVIEW

Revolution of Activewear Design Style

Historically speaking, activewear is a facet of the fashion industry that has been around for quite some time. With new technology emerging in the late 1800s and early 1900s, athletes competing in professional sporting events were looking for clothing that helped them perform at their best. This led to these athletes trading their everyday clothing for high performance activewear that was made from materials that were conducive to the sport they were taking part in (Salazar, 2008). Although activewear or sportswear was becoming more common beginning in the early 1900s, it had not yet become a part of the everyday consumers' wardrobe. Activewear was confined only to the wardrobes of athletes and those who took part in professional sports. Additionally, what was being worn by these athletes was more uniform in design and had not yet been created to be clothing that was overtly fashionable. It functioned solely as clothing that was practical and served the wearer only in terms of performance and functionality within a sport or specific exercise (Salazar, 2008). Beginning in the 1920s, there was a shift in thinking and people began to care more about their personal health and well-being. This is when the term

activewear was coined and began to take on a more general definition as the clothing being designed for exercise and was not specific to a certain sport or exercise (Yip, 2020).

Furthermore, there was an additional boom in activewear design starting in the 1950s and forward through the 1980s when many synthetic fabrics, such as nylon, acrylic and polyester were being created and commonly being used for clothing (Yip, 2020). Something that started out as a type of clothing specifically for athletes and team sports, activewear is quickly becoming a staple in the majority of consumers' wardrobes.

This trend of activewear as everyday clothing is leading to a major shift in the fashion industry. Recent studies show that activewear is one of the only clothing categories within the fashion industry that is seeing a growth in sales, rather than a decline (Yip, 2020). In recent years, activewear and sportswear garments are becoming more closely related to high end garments rather than being on opposite ends of the fashion spectrum. Not only are brands starting to pick up on this and create activewear styles that are more fashionable in general, but they are also collaborating with high end brands to really emphasize the importance of high-end fashion and activewear coming together (Salazar, 2008). Puma, Nike, and Adidas are brands that started out very focused on sportswear and clothing specifically designed for the customer who is looking for workout wear, but they have begun to create more fashionable clothing that can be worn as everyday wear. This can be seen in collaborations with high end brands and activewear brands such as the collaborations between Puma x Balmain or Prada x Adidas. With these collaborations, consumers are seeing that activewear can be high end and fashionable leading to a change in the way consumers are purchasing and ultimately wearing their activewear. Overall, there has been a shift in the way that clothing is designed. High end designers are borrowing

from activewear design trends and activewear is becoming higher end through the materials and finishes used (Salazar, 2018).

Influences on Consumer Purchasing Decisions

For many consumers, it is very important that not only is their activewear stylish, but it must be practical and functional for its intended purpose. Because activewear is designed with the intention that it is to be worn in work out or exercise situations, it must have design attributes that help it to function in this way. It is important in terms of functional apparel design that designers conduct research and involve consumers in the process in order to truly understand what they are looking for in a product (Morris & Ashdown, 2018). A recent study that explored female activewear consumption, showed that function, color, size, fit, and price were many of the features that consumers were looking into when shopping for activewear (Zhou, Hanlon, Robertson, Spaaij, Westerbeek, Hossak & Funk, 2017). Of these features, some were more important to consumers and outweighed other features in terms of importance (Zhou et.al.,2017). Overall, these were the main features that consumers were looking for and should be the designers primary focus when creating activewear clothing.

Function. Functionality is a design attribute that is very important to consumers and greatly influences their purchasing decisions when it comes to activewear (Zhou et.al.,2017). Function can encompass many different design features and can take on a different meaning for each consumer. Overall, it is important that with activewear that the fabric and design is conducive to exercising and working out. Additionally, garments intended for activewear should also be durable, versatile, and comfortable to meet the needs of the consumer (Yip, 2020). Consumers are looking for activewear that uses innovative fabrics that have features such as multi-way

stretch and wicking properties as well as design activewear specific features including pockets on leggings and comfortable straps on workout tops (Zhou et.al.,2017).

Color & Pattern. As with any fashion product, consumers are drawn to specific colors and patterns when it comes to their activewear clothing (Zhou et.al.,2017). It is typically the first attribute that a customer notices when shopping for activewear. If the color and pattern is something that they like, a consumer is then more likely to consider whether the product will work for them overall.

Size & Fit. Size and fit are also important when designing activewear and can be the determining factor for customers when deciding whether or not to buy a product (Zhou et.al.,2017). Consumers are also likely to consider size and fit when deciding whether or not to purchase from a certain brand. If a consumer feels that they are not being represented in terms of fit within a particular brand, whether that is because of their particular body shape or size range the brand is offering, they are not likely to buy from that brand (Zhou et.al.,2017).

Price. For many consumers, activewear is typically overpriced or not worth the expensive price tag for the features that are integrated into the design (Zhou et.al.,2017). Additionally, many consumers are willing to pay for certain brand names and will associate a price with who is designing the clothing rather than if the garment is really worth the amount of money they are spending (Zhou et.al.,2017). This is also a factor that consumers are not willing to compromise as much on as they feel that they should be able to find stylish activewear that suit their needs at a reasonable price point.

These attributes and more, are the main aspects that influences consumers when purchasing activewear. On the other hand, features such as versatility, durability, comfort, and

style are what make activewear so appealing for consumers to wear in everyday situations. This leads to more consumers buying activewear not only for the purpose of exercise or physical fitness, but also for everyday tasks such as running errands or even going to work. Because of this, more consumers are looking to purchase activewear that is not only functional, but stylish and trendy. As designers are looking for new and innovative design methods to keep consumers interested in their products, this something that they can focus on and create activewear clothing that better suits changing needs of consumers.

Activewear Design Practices

When designing activewear, there are certain design elements that are used to ensure that the garment is suitable for its intended purpose. Designers must consider what elements of activewear design are most important to consumers and fit their lifestyle and activewear performance needs. Some common design features of activewear garments includes clothing that is lightweight and allows for easy movement and using fabrics that are appropriate in varying temperatures that wick moisture (Cole, 2016). This should be considered for all types of activewear garments that can range from workout tanks and sports bras to leggings and cycling shorts (Yip, 2020). For each type of garment, there are also specific attributes that help it to function in the proper way, keeping the wearer comfortable and provide them with the proper amount of performance needed (Yip, 2020). Ensuring that activewear is functional and practical for the consumer is very important within activewear design. Furthermore, it should also be considered that activewear is beginning to borrow design trends from more fashionable items as well and the design elements used should reflect that blend of fashion and function (Sokolowski, 2018).

Key decisions are made in the design stage of product development such as decisions on cost, appearance, materials, and textiles used, performance, and quality (Lisa G. Curwen, Juyeon Park, and Ajoy K. Sarkar, 2012). Therefore, designers have a huge role in determining whether an end product will be suited for a diverse and growing activewear market. Activewear design can be achieved in a myriad of ways, but arguably the most important design elements that make activewear function in the proper way are the materials and sewing techniques used when executing a design. Proper fabric selection is crucial when designing activewear and will help to distinguish the product as functional or not.

Knit or Woven Fabrics. With any type of design, a designer must first choose if the garment they are designing would work best with a knit or a woven fabric. Although there are some instances where a woven is used in activewear design, because of the nature of the products a knit or stretch fabric tends to be more suited to the design (Fehr, 2018). It is also important to consider that especially with activewear design, knit and woven fabrics cannot be interchanged within a design and the fabric type should be determined from the start (Fehr, 2018). An example of this would be, when designing leggings that are form fitting to the body, a knit fabric must be used in order to ensure that the wearer has full range of motion and could stretch and move easily.

Athleticwear Fabric and Fiber Types. When selecting a stretch fabric, it is important to look for certain characteristic and product names that are specific to activewear design. Supplex, Tactel, Lycra, CoolMax and Dri-Fit are all names of fabrics that have been specifically created with the purpose of being used in activewear design (Fehr, 2008). More generically, when deciding on what fabric type to use, fabrics labeled with names such as elastane, spandex, wicking, and sport are designed with activewear use in mind as well (Cole, 2016). As for fiber

type, it is typical of activewear fabrics to be made from synthetic fabrics rather than having a natural fiber content. The synthetic fibers that are typically used are polyester and nylon and are used to create garments that are conducive to the customer that is looking for high performance and durable activewear that is used for exercise and sport.

Characteristics of Stretch Fabrics. Of the many types of stretch fabrics that exist, it is important for activewear designers to carefully select stretch fabrics that are functional for activewear pieces. Again, the stretch fabric that is chosen should be breathable and durable in order to extend the lifestyle of the garment. It is important for designers to consider whether the garment needs to stretch in order to properly form to the wearer's shape or if the fabric needs to allow for easy movement and repetitive motions, if so, then a stretch or knit fabric should be considered for the design (Cole, 2016).

As far as activewear design is concerned, there are also garment attributes that the designer should consider that are specific to creating activewear pieces. The consumer and wearer of these garments are typically purchasing activewear with the intention of working out or exercising in this clothing. Therefore, the designer must consider what the garment will be used for and what environment that clothing is being worn in. Repetition of movement, range of motion needed, and environmental considerations are all sport-specific attributes that the designer must consider (Fehr, 2008).

Repetition of Movement. This describes the series of movements that is performed when working out or taking part in a sport (Fehr, 2008). Activewear design should consider that the wearer will be performing repetitive movements in the clothing that will cause stress on the fabric and seams of a garment (Cole, 2016). Seams and fabrics should be considered more so in areas where there are greater amounts of a repeated motion to ensure that not only the garment

has far more durability, but also that the wearer can remain comfortable free from chafing and rubbing of fabric against the skin (Fehr, 2008).

Range of Motion. Activewear design should also consider the extreme movements made by the wearer that is not typically considered when designing clothing. Different types of exercise require various movements from the arms and legs that may need to be considered when designing seam and fabric placement. Gussets and panels are often used in activewear design in order to ensure that the clothing offers a wide range of motion even if stretch or knit fabrics are used to help with this as well (Fehr, 2008).

Environment. Environment is an aspect of design that should be considered when creating activewear as there is a large variety of situations in which activewear can be worn (Fehr, 2008). It should be considered if the wearer is using their activewear for outdoor exercises, like running or cycling, or if they typically exercise in a gym or studio, such as for yoga or weightlifting. It is up to the designer to choose materials that will ensure that the wearer will be comfortable during their chosen exercise. Therefore, it should be considered whether material should be for warmth, cooling, moisture wicking, etc. in order to be conducive to the wearer's environment (Cole, 2016).

Multi-Purpose and Sustainable Attributes of Activewear

Within activewear design, it is important for designers to acknowledge that many consumers are looking to purchase activewear for dual purposes. The majority of consumers are not only looking for activewear that serves the purpose of working out but can also be worn in other situations. Additionally, the duality of activewear pieces, and being able to wear them for more than one purpose, inherently makes the product more sustainable. Additionally, as

sustainability is becoming an increasingly important topic of discussion, consumers these days are looking for products that are sustainable thus having less of a negative impact on future generations. Arguably, activewear and sustainability are two of the most significant trends in the past several years based on changing consumer habits and indicate the direction in which the fashion industry is heading (Reis, Ribeiro, Miguel, Lucas, Pereira, Carvalho, & Silva, 2018). Therefore, designers have a great responsibility to listen to the needs of the consumer and create activewear pieces that have sustainable design attributes. This can be done by implementing sustainable practices at various stages of the design process while also continuing to design functional and practical activewear that suits the needs of consumers.

The fashion industry is known to greatly impact the environment in a negative way and although the fashion industry is moving towards a more sustainable future, there are still opportunities for change and growth (Armstrong & LeHew, 2015). Because of this, it is important that we examine different aspects of the fashion industry to determine where there is room for change. Activewear that serves dual functions could be inherently more sustainable because consumers then have the opportunity to wear a garment in more than one situation rather than just for exercise or working out. There is an opportunity for designers to create clothing that is versatile and as a result encourages consumers to buy less and instead wear garments that they already have in their wardrobe just styled differently to suit more needs. Additionally, because activewear is becoming more versatile and innovative in terms of design, there are many sustainable design practices that could be implemented when creating activewear while still keeping the functionality of the garment intact. Sustainable design practices could include low water textile treatment techniques such as textile printing, zero-waste patternmaking garment construction, reusing/recycling materials, etc. (Fletcher, 2008). Additionally, activewear clothing

items could be designed specifically as multiple wear or multiple use garments to further encourage sustainability and the concept of “less is more” among consumers.

Natural plant or insect-based dye techniques. Natural plant or insect-based dyeing is a sustainable method that uses bark, flowers, roots, cochineal and other plant and insect materials in order to dye textiles. Minerals such as alum, copper and iron can also be used for this type of dye method (Kadolph and Casselman, 2004). This technique eliminates the use of chemical dyes by replacing it with dye powders made from objects found in nature. One company that is starting to implement natural and plant-based dyes in their clothing is Patagonia (Patagonia, 2020). Their Clean Color experiment aims to find natural and plant-based dyes that can replace the typical chemical dyes used their company. By replacing typical dyes with plant-based alternatives, such as dyes from beetles and herb and fruit waste, Patagonia is hoping that their initiatives encourage other companies and designers to rethink their dye choices in the future (Patagonia, 2020).

Zero-waste patternmaking. Zero-waste patternmaking is a design technique in which fabric waste is eliminated, or greatly reduced, during the production of the garment that is being created (McQuillan, 2019). This is done throughout the design process and can be done through fabric manipulation and the patternmaking process. Because there are not many examples of current activewear companies utilizing this sustainable design technique, it is an area that can be explored more and as a result new and innovative design techniques could be discovered through this thesis project. Zero-waste patternmaking can be used when developing oversized or loose-fitting t-shirts, tank tops and dresses that will be created in response to the survey that is being conducted by the researcher.

Re-using and Recycling Materials. This technique is ideal for clothing and textiles that are being discarded at the end of their life, therefore being able to be reused. This can be done through collecting and reselling, repurposing, or recycling the garment or textile (Fletcher, 2008). Although recycling textiles is a fairly easy and beneficial solution to combat fabric waste if no other option are available, it should not be seen as a long-term solution as it will not solve greater issues of sustainability (Fletcher, 2008). This process can be utilized at the design stage, by using fabrics that have already been recycled and manufactured as such or ensuring that the fabric being used in the design process is recyclable and can be discarded in the proper way when scraps are made after cutting the patterns needed. One brand that is committed to designing sustainable activewear is Girlfriend Collective. They are dedicated to giving their customers sustainable t-shirts, sports bras and leggings that are made from recycled materials as well as creating other fabrics from recycled water bottles (Girlfriend, 2020).

Multiple Use or Multiple Wear Garments. This sustainable design technique would focus on creating clothing that is specifically designed with the idea that the product can function in multiple ways. This increases the life span of the product and would include ways that the consumer can modify, reverse, or use the garment in a different way. Some examples of this would be a jacket that is reversable or a garment that can be worn in casual or formal situations because of the material that was utilized. As consumers are becoming increasingly concerned with the environment, this would be an ideal method to explore because high-performance activewear fabrics could still be used in the design process, yet the multi-functionality of the garment would ultimately discourage over consumption. A recent study conducted showed that consumers respond positively to multi-use or transformable design and these consumers indicated that they would keep a transformable garment in their wardrobe rotation longer

because of the versatility it provides (Vehmas, Raudaskoski, Heikkila, Harlin, & Mensonen, 2018). By designing multi-use activewear garments, it would be possible for consumers to buy less clothing, but at a higher quality and usability. This design method is conducive to activewear specifically because of the durability and long use design that is already incorporated into the products (Reis, Ribeiro, Miguel, Lucas, Pereira, Carvalho, & Silva, 2018). Throughout this thesis project, there will be an exploration of designs that makes it possible for their wearer to style garments so they can be used or worn in multiple ways. This will ensure that all garments produced will have a longer life cycle because of the multiple use aspect of the garment.

One goal of the research design portion of this study is to find what sustainable practices designers can best implement within the activewear market. This will help current and future designers better understand what sustainable design processes work best for this type of clothing and how design processes can be adjusted in order to create more sustainable activewear options for consumers. Within this study, the following research questions will be explored:

(R1) What factors influence current consumers perceptions of activewear and their purchase decisions?

(R2) What are current consumers' activewear design preferences?

(R3) What type of sustainable activewear designs can be developed considering current consumers perceptions of activewear and their purchase decisions as well as their activewear preferences?

CHAPTER III METHODOLOGY

Focus Group

A focus group of six participants was conducted in order to gain a better understanding of consumer shopping habits and preferences when it comes to activewear. This allowed for the researcher to obtain more in-depth knowledge of how consumers are using activewear pieces in their wardrobe as well as how this is evolving over time as consumers' lifestyles change. Participants were contacted via email (see appendix B) and were all contacts of the researcher. Participants selected as part of the focus group indicated that they purchase women's activewear to be worn by themselves, regardless of gender, although all participants identified as female. Ideally, participants were individuals that care about purchasing sustainable clothing for their wardrobe and would like to see more sustainable options in the category of activewear. Upon receiving IRB approval, the focus group consisted of questions regarding the participants' purchase intentions when buying activewear clothing, how they use their activewear products, what design features and garment types they are looking for when shopping for activewear and how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their buying and using habits when it comes to activewear (see appendix A for full list of questions). Additionally, participants were shown pictures and examples of activewear and asked their opinions on a given product or idea. If at any time participants did not feel comfortable answering a question, they were given the option to decline to answer or exit the focus group at any time.

Research Design Practice

Following the focus group, the researcher used the information learned from consumers to create a small women's activewear collection. This collection consists of sustainable activewear garments that use design techniques researched and have attributes that are most important to consumers based on answers recorded during the focus group. The collection offers a wide variety of activewear pieces including tops, sports bras, shorts, yoga pant, etc. in order for

the researcher to gain a wider range of knowledge and to test design techniques on different style garment types. Additionally, based on results of the focus group, sustainable practices were explored and implemented throughout the collection. This was done by creating multi-use or multi-wear garments and using natural fibers when applicable. The collection of clothing will also be designed in various sizes in order to gain more insight on what design features work best when designing with women of different sizes in mind. By doing this, it will be known if a design needs to be altered in order to accommodate different sizes in order to ensure the wearer is comfortable in the clothing. Sample sizes for the garments included sizes 2, 4, and 8. Although this does not include any plus size garments, it was taken into consideration that the garments should include design features that would potentially be conducive to plus sized garment had they been made such as high waistbands with thick, wide waistbands in pants and padded bra tops. As for the timeline of this thesis project, the bulk of the study took place from December 2020 to April 2021. The focus group was conducted first in December 2020 through February 2021 followed by the research design project that directly correlates with the results of the focus group that was be designed and constructed in February 2020 through March 2021. Overall, the goal is to learn more about the changing function of activewear for consumers and how design techniques can be altered to better fit consumer needs specifically in terms of sustainability. Furthermore, the proposed outcome of this study is to better understand whether sustainability is something that consumers are concerned with and whether it can be implemented more in activewear design. Additionally, the researcher will be left with a better understanding of the changing nature of activewear and the ever-evolving consumer perceptions of the functionality of activewear as a whole. This study will help future designers to improve activewear design

techniques and more easily follow trends as the activewear market shifts based on consumers' needs and changing lifestyles.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Data Analysis: Focus Group

Various virtual focus groups were conducted with a total of six women, ages 21 to 40. As a requirement to participate, these women must shop for women's activewear or loungewear clothing for themselves. In order to better understand what consumers within this age group are looking for in terms of activewear design and functionality, women from various backgrounds and lifestyles were chosen to participate in the focus groups. Four separate virtual focus groups were conducted. This was done so that participants could be grouped with others that they knew personally in order for them to feel more comfortable and open answering the questions.

Participants were asked the questions as a group and could then respond on their own, but also build off of the other participants responses. With many of the questions, one participant would give an answer and it would allow for the second participant to elaborate on what the first person had said. It should also be noted that if a participant was having difficulty answering a question or giving feedback, giving them suggestions or examples of what participants of the previous focus group had said prompted them to give more feedback. This was also helpful for two of the participants that had to participate on their own and were not able to build off of another participant's answer. Of the participants, two are current graduate students, two are recent college graduates working full time and two are mothers with multiple children working either part or full time. Therefore, there was a wider range of ages and lifestyles among the women that participated.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

| | <i>Gender</i> | <i>Age</i> | <i>Race</i> | <i>Employment</i> |
|----------------------|---------------|------------|-------------|-------------------|
| <i>Participant 1</i> | Female | 21-29 | White | Full time |
| <i>Participant 2</i> | Female | 21-29 | White | Full time |
| <i>Participant 3</i> | Female | 21-29 | White | Student |
| <i>Participant 4</i> | Female | 21-29 | Asian | Student |
| <i>Participant 5</i> | Female | 30-39 | White | Full time |
| <i>Participant 6</i> | Female | 40-49 | White | Part time |

The purpose of conducting the focus group was to gauge consumers feelings towards the current activewear market as well as what types of activewear garments they would like to see more of when shopping for activewear. Additionally, it was asked how these women are using and wearing the activewear or loungewear that is in their own wardrobe and if the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is affecting their shopping or user habits when it comes to activewear. The focus group was conducted in three parts. Firstly, women were asked a series of questions regarding their activewear shopping habits such as how often they are shopping for activewear and what types of garments they are typically purchase. Following that, questions were asked regarding their user habits surrounding activewear that they already own such as how often they workout or exercise and if they wear their activewear only for the purpose of working out. Lastly, questions surrounding the changes to shopping and user habits participants have personally experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic were asked. This was done to get an

idea of what women are typically looking for when shopping for activewear as well as to get a better sense of how they are using their own activewear garments after purchasing them. For the second portion of the focus group, participants were shown sample garments designed by the researcher and asked what they would add to or modify in order to increase the likelihood of them purchasing the garments shown. By doing this there was a better sense overall of what these women are shopping for and by showing them existing examples, they were able to better express what they thought could be added or modified to enhance the garments. Lastly, participants were shown images of two options for the fabrics, colors, and patterns that would be used in constructing the final garments of the activewear collection. They were then asked to indicate which of the two palettes they were the most drawn to and could see themselves wearing as part of an activewear garment. The color, fabrics and print that was chosen the most by participants would then be used in the final activewear collection created based on the focus group.

Part One: Questionnaire

Shopping Habits

How often do you purchase activewear or loungewear? When asked about their specific shopping habits when it comes to activewear, most participants said that they are shopping for activewear often, with a few of the participants indicating that they browse for activewear garments nearly every day even if they are not planning to purchase anything at that time. Participant one said, “I can say that I shop daily. But, as far as actually buying that is probably about once or twice a month, sometimes less.”

Table 2. Purchasing Frequency

| | <i>Purchasing Frequency</i> |
|----------------------|--|
| <i>Participant 1</i> | About every six months, sometimes less |
| <i>Participant 2</i> | Twice a month |
| <i>Participant 3</i> | Every six months to one year |
| <i>Participant 4</i> | Once or twice a year |
| <i>Participant 5</i> | Every six months |
| <i>Participant 6</i> | Once a month |

As far as the other participants asked, all indicated that they shop for activewear roughly every six months to one year because this suits their own personal needs. It was indicated that the quality and durability of the activewear that they are purchasing helps them to purchase less frequently. Participant three said, “I tend to buy one thing and wear it a lot...then once that one is at the end of its life, then I get another one.” This was a commonality among participants and many of the woman indicated throughout the focus group that they would rather purchase less products, less frequently. Because of this, it is also important that what they are purchasing is durable and functions for its intended purpose.

What types of activewear garments do you typically shop for? Typically, the women interviewed said that they are looking for mostly yoga pants, leggings, and sports bras as well as a few participants indicating that they also shop for sweatpants, sweatshirts, and workout tank tops. Many participants indicated that they are looking for more basic activewear bottoms that are comfortable for wearing at home but may also be worn out. Participant four said, “I usually

like yoga tops. I usually care less about the bottoms or I will have darker color leggings to wear, but for the top I like to have more variety”

From the answers provided, it can also be inferred that these women are looking for more variety when it comes to their activewear tops, as those garments in their wardrobe are being worn more often in various situations. Not only are these women looking for basic activewear bottoms that can be worn as mix and match pieces with other garments in their wardrobe, but they are also looking for activewear garments that are stylish and can be dressed up or down depending on the occasion they are wearing it for.

Table 3. Garment Types Purchased

| | <i>Garment types</i> |
|----------------------|--|
| <i>Participant 1</i> | Leggings, yoga pants, sports bras, t-shirts |
| <i>Participant 2</i> | Sweatpants, bike shorts, leggings, sweatshirts |
| <i>Participant 3</i> | One-piece outfits, all-in-one or matching sets |
| <i>Participant 4</i> | Yoga tops, joggers |
| <i>Participant 5</i> | Sports bras and leggings |
| <i>Participant 6</i> | Leggings and tank tops |

Is function, design, fit, brand, price, etc. most important when shopping for activewear?

Additional questions were asked surround shopping habits prompting participants to think about whether function, design, fit, price, brand, etc. is most important to them when shopping for activewear. Although responses were varied for this question, many participants indicated that function and price was important to them, but they also usually look for all of these elements

when shopping for activewear. Of all of the participants, only one woman indicated that she does not typically consider the function of the garment when shopping for activewear. This is because although she purchases activewear, she does not typically use her activewear for exercise as often as she uses it for loungewear. Therefore, there is less of a need for her activewear to have function for exercise or working out. For the women who use their activewear for working out and need their activewear garments to function for multiple purposes, function and fit were more important attributes.

As for price and brand, many participants indicated that purchasing brand name activewear was not as important for them and additionally many indicated that they would not spend more on an activewear garment just because it was made by a well-known brand unless they knew that the quality was on par with the price. Although this is the case, many of the participants said that they typically shop from the same brand repeatedly if the quality or design is something that they like from that particular brand. It was also mentioned by a few participants that they would like to see more feminine activewear, so they are typically repeatedly purchasing from brands that cater to this aesthetic.

Table 4. Design Features

| | <i>Important features</i> |
|----------------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>Participant 1</i> | Price, function, fit, and design |
| <i>Participant 2</i> | Price, brand, and design |
| <i>Participant 3</i> | Function and fit |
| <i>Participant 4</i> | Function, fit, and design |
| <i>Participant 5</i> | Price, function, and fit |
| <i>Participant 6</i> | Fit, price, and function |

Do you typically find that activewear brands carry your size? When asked this question, many of the women indicated that they have no problem finding their size when shopping for activewear. When asked, one participant said that she finds extended sizing more easily now than in the past. She had previously found it more difficult to find her size in every brand because she is right on the cusp of plus- size or extended sizing, but she feels that activewear brands are becoming more size inclusive as a whole. She also noted that garments offered in extended sizing are becoming more stylish and there are more garment options when she is shopping. One aspect of shopping she felt could still be improved when it comes to activewear is whether or not the garments offered in an extended size are designed taking into consideration the additional needs of the women shopping for these garments. For example, including a wider waistband on leggings or wider straps on sports bras for more coverage and support. She said of activewear brands that she likes to see that “they have something that is actually made for my

size, not that it is my size". So, in the future she would like to see more thoughtful and well-designed pieces for women that need to shop extended size activewear.

Because many of the participants indicated that they do not need extended sizing and have no trouble shopping for their own activewear garments, they were then asked a follow-up question. They were asked if they are noticing more inclusive sizing, or extended sizing, offered by activewear brands as a whole even if it is not something that they shop for themselves. Although some of the women indicated that there is still room for improvement for brands to offer more options for extended size clothing, they are seeing more and more options for activewear clothing for all body types.

How important are design features such as tunic tops, high waisted pants, pockets, adjustable straps, detachable pieces, etc.? Because of the nature of the question all participants had varying answers and responses when asked. Although this is the case, all participants indicated that they look for high waisted activewear bottoms when shopping because they felt that they are more flattering and are more conducive to the types of workouts that they are typically doing. Secondly, participants answered that functional pockets and adjustable straps were somewhat important to them. Pocket placement and pocket type was something that they look for when shopping for activewear and the functionality of the pocket was important to them. Many participants indicated that they would like to see more pockets on women's garments that are at least big enough to hold their cell phone and keys so that it does not fall out of their pocket when they are exercising. Additionally, a few participants said that they prefer a hidden pocket, whether the open in along the seam line in a garment or in the case of a jacket the pocket is hidden inside, for a simplified look to their activewear.

One design feature that participants do not typically look for but were interested in seeing more often in activewear design is detachable pieces. In regard to this, participant one said that this is not something that she had seen often in activewear garments, but she would be willing to try it as long as it was not difficult to remove pieces of the garment. In addition to this, it would be imperative to her that the garment stays together easily when a piece is reattached and that the removeable portion is not a hinderance when she is active or working out. Participant three indicated that this is something that she would definitely like to see more of and would try given the opportunity.

I don't specifically look for that, but I have been noticing...not just activewear brands but a lot of brands...having convertible pieces now and I am really interested in buying some kind of convertible piece. So, I would be interested in that for activewear.

Lastly, participant four said that this is something that she is seeing more when she is shopping for activewear and that she is willing to pay more for multi-functional or adjustable garments. Her reasoning behind this is that if the garment that she is purchasing can be worn in multiple ways, she would have to purchase less activewear and for her the higher price would be worth it to her.

I have been seeing more multi-functional pieces for activewear, especially with jackets. Even though its priced higher, I think that I am interested.

How important is sustainable design when it comes to activewear? For many of the participants, sustainability is something that they care about, but they feel that sustainable activewear options are difficult to find therefore they do not shop for sustainable activewear often. For others, cost is what stops them from typically purchasing sustainable activewear.

Those participants indicated that they will typically only purchase a sustainable option if the price a garment is comparable to its non-sustainable counterpart.

I think that it is as important to me in activewear as it is for anything else for me personally. I know that since there is more synthetics used in activewear, it may be a higher priority for other people. I think that durability is important, so if I buy it, I want it to last a really long time and be sustainable in that way. But if I were faced with “this one uses recycled polyester” and “this one doesn’t” I would choose the recycled polyester even if there was a slight price difference.

When asked if price were a deciding factor, it was answered that they would choose a more sustainable option if the price were comparable to the non-sustainable option, but they would not pay a large amount more for sustainable activewear products. One participant saying, “If I have two things that I am looking at side by side that are comparable, I’ll pick the one that is more friendly to the environment for sure.”

Additionally, participant four said that the more she is educated about sustainability, the more she looks for sustainable garment options for her own wardrobe. Though she also says that activewear is one category that she does not typically know what her sustainable options are.

I used to not consider or look to see what was on the care label to see what kind of material, I would purely look for aesthetics. But now I think having more natural materials and environmentally better choices, I will look for those. But I also think that I am less knowledgeable, especially with activewear fabrics, what is more sustainable. I know there are a lot of synthetics.

If/when you work out, what types of exercises do you typically do? When asked what types of workouts and exercises these women typically do, there was a broad range of answers among them. Walking, weightlifting, and yoga are some examples of exercises that are typically done by the women interviewed, with yoga being the exercise that the majority of the women listed as what exercise they most enjoy doing. Although most of the exercises and workout types listed were lower impact, indoor exercises, some women indicated that they also exercise outdoors by running or walking.

Table 5. Types of Exercises

| | <i>Exercises</i> | <i>Indoors or outdoors</i> |
|----------------------|---|----------------------------|
| <i>Participant 1</i> | Yoga, strength training and, weightlifting | Indoors |
| <i>Participant 2</i> | Cardio, treadmill, and light weightlifting | Indoors |
| <i>Participant 3</i> | Yoga, Pilates and, light weightlifting | Indoors |
| <i>Participant 4</i> | Yoga and stretching | Indoors |
| <i>Participant 5</i> | Yoga or aerobic classes, stationary bike, and walking | Indoors or outdoors |
| <i>Participant 6</i> | Treadmill and aerobic classes | Indoors or outdoors |

Do you wear activewear exclusively for working out? When asked this question, many of the women indicated that they mix and match activewear pieces with other garments in their wardrobe that may not necessarily be activewear. Because of this, many of the women indicated throughout the focus group that there is not much of a difference between the loungewear and activewear in their wardrobe. Of the participants, only two of the women answered that they exclusively wear activewear for working out. When asked their reasoning behind this, one participant said that she does currently wear activewear exclusively for working out but would wear loungewear in everyday situations. She also indicated that she would be open to wearing elevated activewear clothing that could be dressed up in certain situations. The second participant that said that she wears activewear exclusively for working out said that she does not typically wear activewear or loungewear often in everyday situations unless it is a garment like a t-shirt or sweatshirt. Because of this, she would be more open to purchasing elevated activewear tops, rather than activewear bottoms like leggings or yoga pants to be worn in everyday situations.

In what situations do you typically wear activewear or loungewear? As with other questions asked, this answered varied among the participants based on their lifestyles and work situations. While some participants indicated that they are essentially wearing activewear or loungewear garments the majority of the time, there were also other participants that only wear activewear for workout purposes. It was also noted that a few participants said that they will wear activewear on their “off days” or “lazy days” in which they are spending more time at home. Overall, it was also said by the majority of participants that if they were not spending so much time at home, they would not typically be wearing activewear or loungewear as often.

Has COVID-19 changed the way that you shop for activewear? When asked whether participants shopping or user habits in regard to activewear had changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of participants indicated that they are not only shopping more for activewear, but they are also wearing it more often. Some indicating that they are wearing activewear and loungewear the majority of the time, if not at all times, and not just for working out. Because of this, they have felt that it is necessary for them to purchase more activewear and loungewear to suit their changing needs.

Has COVID-19 changed when you wear activewear? For the majority of participants, they indicated that they are wearing activewear more because of COVID-19 with many participants saying that they wear almost exclusively activewear bottoms at this time. This was especially true for participants that are staying at home more often whether it is for work or school.

Yes, I would not have started working out as much as I do now if I hadn't started working from home back in March. I was working from home; I had the time then and I was finally able to start working out and being serious about it. So then I wear workout clothes several times a week because I do my workouts several times a week. As far as yoga pants, I wore yoga pants for everything... on the weekends...now I can work from home and I don't have to wear dress pants, so I wear my yoga pants all day long.

Although this is the case, many participants said throughout the focus group that they do not think that they are necessarily wearing more activewear when they go out in general. This is unless it is for an occasion such as running light errands or if the activewear garment is something that can be dressed up or down for different situations.

After conducting the questionnaire portion of the focus group there is a better understanding of what participants are looking for and what they would like to see changed in the current activewear market. Overall, participants felt that they would like to see more stylish, variations of activewear tops and that basic, multifunctional activewear bottoms are what they are typically shopping for. It was also noted that any activewear pieces that simplify their wardrobe is also something that they would like to see. Some examples of this suggested by participants would be tank tops with built in bras, matching set garments or one piece looks.

Part Two: Samples

Samples

For this focus group, participants were shown two examples of activewear outfits that had been designed by the researcher. Participants were made aware that the samples shown were designed by the researcher and that they could be open when giving feedback in order to gain valuable information for the designer. Samples were made using fabrics that are similar to the weight and style of the proposed final garments but were mainly used to give participants a better idea of the silhouette and overall style of the garment. They were then asked if there would be anything that they would change or add to the design to make it more conducive for working out and increase the chances of them purchasing the product if it were a garment being sold by an activewear brand. Additionally, participants were asked what garment types they felt were missing from the collection and what they would like to see as a potential third activewear outfit. The feedback from participants will then be used by the researcher to create a final three look activewear collection.

Look One Sample



Figure 1. Look One Sample

The first sample that participants were shown, is a knit tank top and yoga pant set. The tank top features princess seams for a tighter, figure hugging fit. The yoga pants designed include a wide leg pant that is fitted through the hip and flares out towards the bottom of the pant. Additionally, a front seam detail was included for a more elevated look, similar to a pleat in the front of a dress pant. When shown this look participants responded positively saying that although this is not similar to anything that they currently have in their wardrobe they would be open to trying activewear garments such as this. One change that participants five and six would like to see in the final version of this look is a cropped version of the pant. With participant six saying, “that way you don’t have to worry about it dragging on the ground.” Participant five also

pointed out that she feels a cropped pant is more figure flattering in her opinion and it is easier for her to style with her shoes.

As a follow up question, participants were then asked if they would like to see this pant function in multiple ways. For example, a zipper or drawstring could be included at the hem of the pant so that the wearer could adjust the fullness or flare at the bottom of the pant. Overall, respondents indicated that they were in favor of this idea as long as the inside of the pant did not get uncomfortable or bulky with excess fabric. It is because of this that most participants felt that a drawstring was more user friendly and would be more comfortable for workout purposes.

For a variation on this look, a cropped sweatshirt may be added over the tank top. This piece features a high, turtleneck and flared long sleeves. When shown this look, participants gave positive feedback and liked this addition of this piece to the overall look. They felt again that this garment is not something that they would typically have in their activewear wardrobe, but they would be open to trying it for both working out and using as a piece that they can add to an activewear look to elevate it. Participant six expressed that she typically does not like higher necklines such as this one, therefore she would be more open to this garment if it included a center front zipper. Additionally, several participants expressed that they would rather have either a tighter sleeve or cuff on the cropped sweatshirt. This way, it would be more functional for them if they did decide to wear it for working out purposes.

Overall, participants felt that this is something that they could see themselves wearing and that it is different from what is currently offered within the activewear market. They also expressed that this would be a good piece to have in their wardrobe for when they would like to wear their activewear out in public for activities such as light errands or even going to dinner.

Some even expressed that they felt that this outfit could be worn with heels and accessories for a more elevated look.

Look Two Sample



Figure 2. Look Two Sample

The second look that participants were shown includes an open front sweatshirt, cropped tank top and jogger style pants with front seam. All pieces in this look are made from knit activewear fabrics. When asked for feedback, participants expressed that they could see themselves wearing this outfit and especially felt that they could see themselves wearing the pants. Although this is the case, participant four expressed that she would like to see the front seam changed and would eliminate it for a more simplified look. When asked if pockets should be included, participants expressed that bigger pockets are always a plus for them and that they

would like to see hidden pockets in order or avoid a “cargo” or extra baggy look for the pants. Lastly, it was asked of participants whether they felt that this look should include a sports bra or cropped top to go under the jacket or top. While some participants felt that they would wear a sports bra with this look because of the high waistline of the pants, many felt that it may be more practical to include a full-length top, possibly with a built-in bra included.

For a variation of this look, the wearer could wear the sweatshirt backwards for an open-back top. When asked for their opinion on this variation, participants gave positive feedback with participant four saying, “anything that is dual-functioning or changes its look” is something that she would like to see more of the activewear market. This would also give users the opportunity to change up their look easily therefore requiring them to purchase less activewear pieces in the future.

Sample Overview

Following this portion of the focus group the design researcher found valuable insights and understanding into better meeting the needs of activewear garments. By showing participants options and examples of what could be done they were able to express their thoughts and opinions more easily. Participants felt that for the third look they would like to see a legging or bike short with a tunic or dress length t-shirt. Additionally, most participants indicated during the questionnaire portion of the focus group that leggings and t-shirt are activewear garments that they wear often and may wear for various situations. By including any of these garments, there would be more variety and participants feel that they could easily dress a tunic top up or down. Overall, participants would like to see more feminine, versatile, and stylish activewear in the market and this collection would give them that.

Part Three: Fabric, Color and Print Options

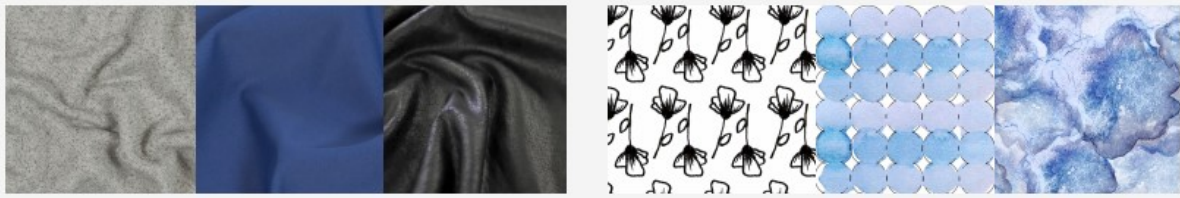


Figure 3. Blue Color Palette

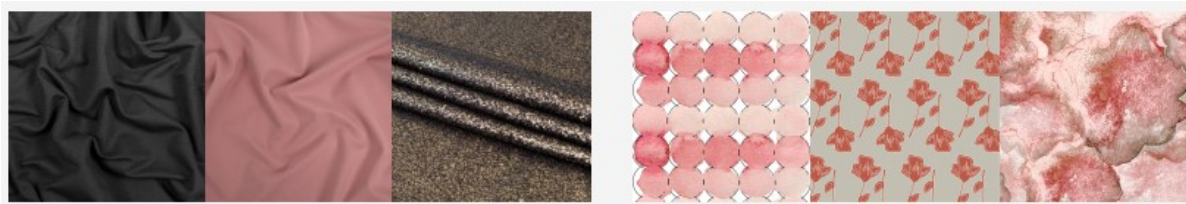


Figure 4. Pink Color Palette

For the last portion of the focus group, participants were shown two different fabric, color, and print combinations. These options were used as examples of what could be chosen by the designer for use in the fabrication of the final collection. This was done in order to gauge participants feelings on the combination of fabric textures, colors and if they would like to see printed fabric used throughout the collection. Overwhelmingly, participants agreed that the blue color palette that was shown to them was what they would prefer to see for the collection of activewear garments. Many participants noted that they liked the black and white floral print and blue abstract print included in the blue color palette.

Fabric, Color and Print Options Overview

Overall, participants felt that they could see themselves wearing activewear garments made from the fabrics in the blue palette and that the colors could more easily be incorporated into their current wardrobe. After receiving feedback from participants final fabric options could be determined more easily. Participants not only gave feedback on color and print preferences,

but also gave insight on preferences surrounding fabrics attributes such as weight, texture and activewear properties. Because of fabric availability, options shown may not be used in the construction of the final garments, yet feedback received as part of the focus group will allow the researcher to make a more informed decision regarding final fabrication choices.

Data Analysis: Research Design Practice

From the information collected as part of a focus group, a three-look collection of activewear garments was made. By using feedback given by participants of the focus group, the collection should ideally reflect current trends as well as needs addressed surrounding participants personal activewear consumption. Additionally, this collection will potentially address the needs of some consumers brought on by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The designer will also consider the fact that consumers are taking part in a more casual way of dressing in general therefore needs are changing in that regard as well. This can be executed by using both casual and elevated design elements throughout the collection as a whole.

The collection of activewear garments is made up of eight total garments that can be mixed and matched in order to achieve the three total looks or outfits. Additionally, all fabrics used in the construction of the collection are activewear or stretch fabrics making them conducive to working out or exercise. All fabrics chosen will give the wearer the ability to move freely and comfortably during exercise. Layering of garments is also used in order to provide extra warmth when necessary, but also provide the chance for the consumer to remove garments as many participants of the focus group indicate that they workout inside or in a gym. Fabric finishes, such as metallics and prints, were utilized in order to elevate the activewear pieces. This allows for each of the looks can be dressed up or down depending on the wearer's intention making them multi-use garments.

Look One



Figure 5. Look One

Table 6. Look One

| <i>Garment Type</i> | <i>Fabric</i> | <i>Content</i> | <i>Sustainable Features</i> |
|---------------------------|---------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>Tank Top</i> | Bamboo Jersey | 95% Bamboo, 5% Spandex | Natural Fibers |
| <i>Cropped Sweatshirt</i> | Modal Jersey | 73% Modal, 27% Polyester | |
| <i>Yoga Pants</i> | Modal Jersey | 73% Modal, 27% Polyester | Multi-functional |

Look One Flats

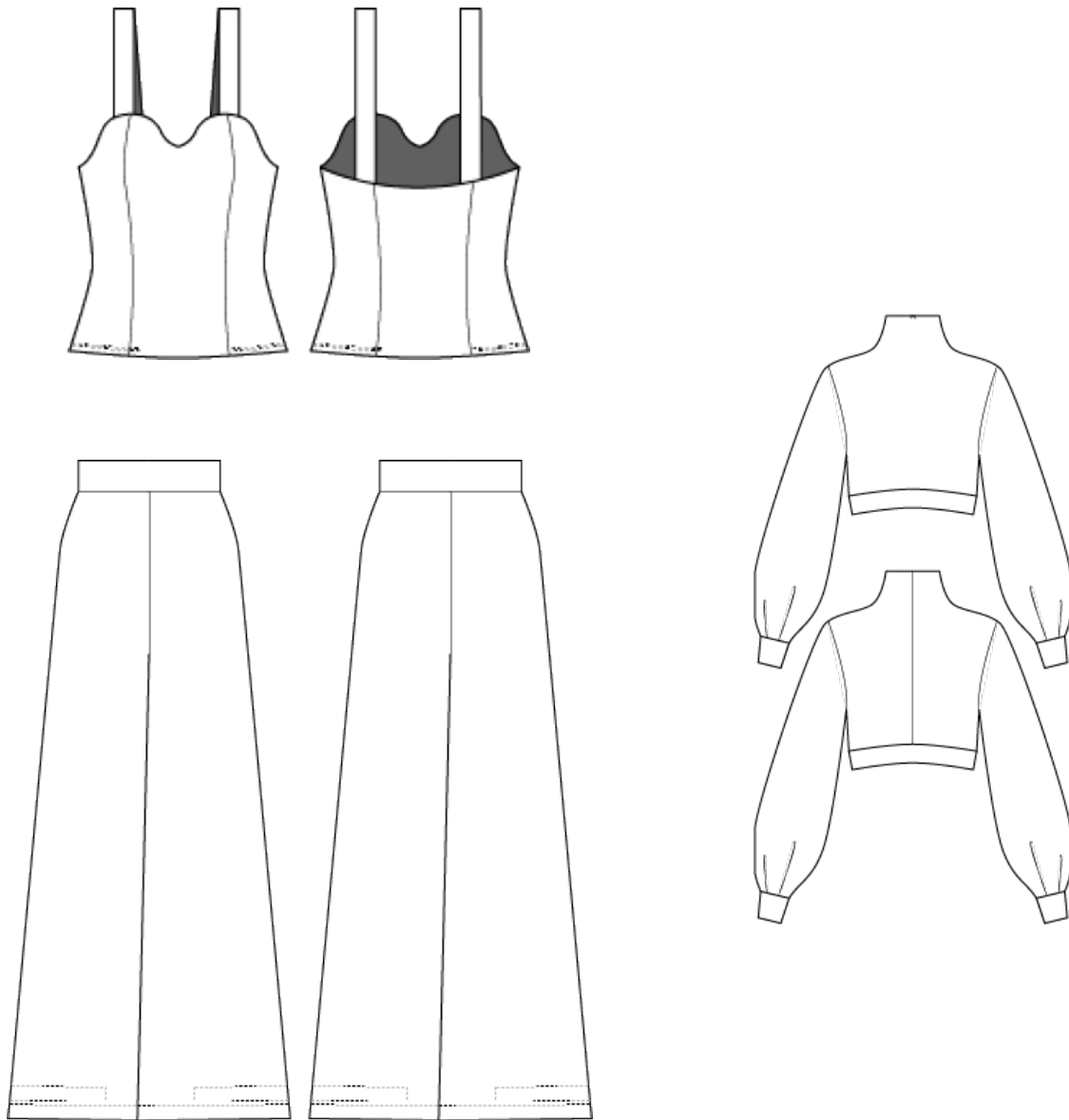


Figure 6. Look One Flats

Look Two



Figure 7. Look Two

Table 7. Look Two

| <i>Garment Type</i> | <i>Fabric</i> | <i>Content</i> | <i>Sustainable Features</i> |
|---------------------|---------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>Jumpsuit</i> | French Terry | 100% Cotton | Natural Fibers |
| <i>Sweatshirt</i> | French Terry | 95% Cotton, 5% Spandex | Natural Fibers |
| <i>Sports bra</i> | French Terry | 95% Cotton, 5% Spandex | Natural Fibers |

Look Two Flats

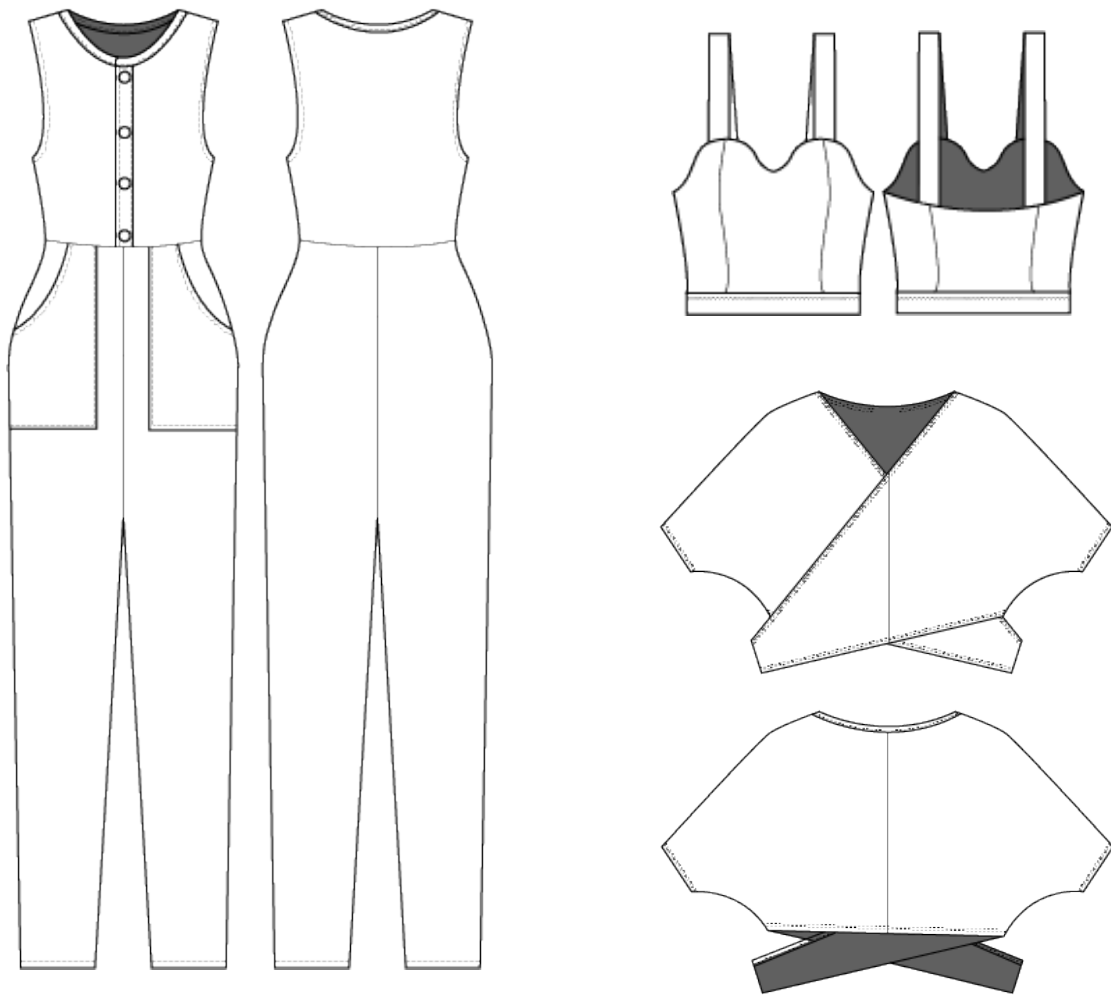


Figure 8. Look Two Flats

Look Three



Figure 9. Look Three

Table 8. Look Three

| <i>Garment Type</i> | <i>Fabric</i> | <i>Content</i> | <i>Sustainable Features</i> |
|---------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>Tunic top</i> | Modal Jersey | 73% Modal, 27% Polyester | Natural Fibers |
| <i>Bike Shorts</i> | Performance Tricot | 82% Polyester, 12% Spandex | |

Look Three Flats

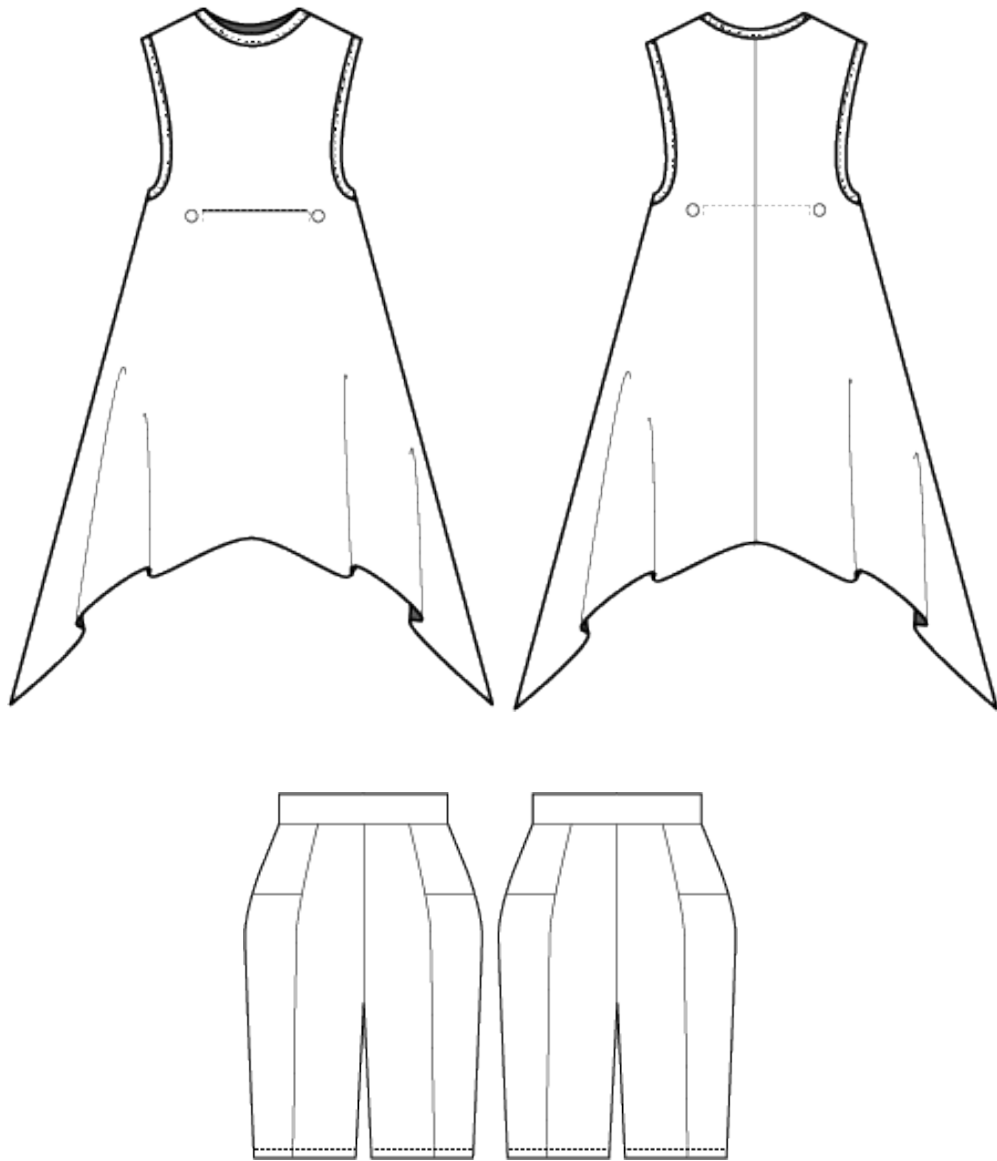


Figure 10. Look 3 Flats

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to better understand what design practices should be implemented in terms of activewear design based on consumers' changing needs and shopping habits.

Additionally, it was considered that consumer shopping habits are changing quickly due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the lifestyle changes associated with that. Finally, there was an exploration of some sustainable design practices and whether multi-use garments and natural fiber fabrics are applicable within the activewear market. Throughout this study, the following research questions were considered:

(R1) What factors influence current consumers perceptions of activewear and their purchase decisions?

(R2) What are current consumers' activewear design preferences?

(R3) What type of sustainable activewear designs can be developed considering current consumers activewear preferences?

For research question one, 'what factors influence current consumers perceptions of activewear and their purchase decisions', it was found in past studies as well as the focus group conducted as a part of this study that consumers are dressing more casually. It was also found that consumers are generally looking for activewear pieces that can be mixed and matched with other garments within their wardrobe. The idea of being able to dress a garment up or down depending on the situation in which they are wearing the garment was also appealing to participants of the focus group. It should also be noted that participants generally had more opinions and specific preferences when it comes to activewear tops. Activewear bottoms overall

seemed less important, and participants just wanted simpler bottoms that are versatile and go with many different garments in their wardrobe.

As for the second research question, ‘what are current consumers’ activewear design preferences’, it was found that many consumers are open to the idea of multi-use or multiple wear garment as this was not something that they are currently seeing on the market. It should also be noted that all women that participated in this study expressed the need for more “feminine” or “cute” activewear. This is something that they are not seeing much of within the current market and would like to see it more often. Many women expressed that if a brand were to offer this style of activewear it would greatly influence their purchasing decisions and they would repeatedly purchase from a brand offering feminine and functional activewear. Although this is the case, this cannot be generalized to say that all women prefer more feminine activewear and more research would have to be done in order to gauge the feelings of a broader spectrum of women.

Lastly, for research questions three, ‘What type of sustainable activewear designs can be developed considering current consumers activewear preferences?’ it was found that consumers are care more in general about finding sustainable options when shopping. Per focus group, sustainability is something that consumers are increasingly aware of and want when shopping. Therefore, it is up to brands to know what sustainable practices work for them and their consumers. For this study, the sustainable practices could be implemented through the inclusion of natural fiber fabrics and multi-use garments. Because this study was done on a small scale, fabric sourcing was a challenge and all fabrics used could not be completely sustainable. Additionally, it should be noted that participants only wanted to see multi-use garments if the

convertible portion of the garment was easy for them to use and did not affect the functionality or comfort of the garment.

Implications

Within this study, there was an exploration of activewear design and changes that could be made to the current activewear market in order to make activewear more conducive to changing consumer needs. As indicated in the literature review and this study, consumers are dressed more casually as a whole (O'Sullivan, et. al., 2017). This is also becoming more relevant as research is finding that COVID-19 is quickly changing consumer purchasing and user habits when it comes to activewear (COVID-19, n.d.). The activewear industry as a whole could benefit from receiving more consumer feedback and input when it comes to activewear design. As discovered through the focus group conducted, consumers have specific needs and wants when it comes to activewear. By listening to consumer needs and input, it was then possible to create an activewear collection that included design features focus group participants said that they would like to see in the activewear market. By doing this, it was possible to create a collection of activewear garments that consumers feel is both fashionable and functional.

Additionally, as found in both previous studies and this one, sustainability is becoming more important to consumers and this is something that could be explored further in the current activewear market (Armstrong & LeHew, 2015; Reis, et. al., 2018). Participants of the focus group indicated that sustainability within the category of activewear is not something that they are seeing within the market. They also felt that they are not educated on the subject and would like to know more regarding which fabrics they should look for and garment types they should purchase as sustainable options. Ideally, activewear brands should include more sustainable

options for consumers such as natural fibers or recycled fibers used in garment construction or through designing multi-purpose garments. Based on this study, multi-purpose garments are the sustainable design practice that could be implemented most easily into activewear design in order to ensure functionality and sustainability are both addressed within the design. This allows for the consumer to feel they can still shop for sustainable options while still getting functional and practical activewear. Additionally, brands that are currently implementing sustainable practices, such as multi-purpose garments, should advertise the clothing as such in order to ensure sustainability information is readily available for consumers as many consumers feel they are uneducated when it comes to sustainable options (Vehmas, K. et. al., 2018).

Limitations of the Study

Although this study aims to identify what consumers currently want and need from the activewear market, the results cannot be generalized to say that this is what all consumers are looking for in their activewear clothing. Additionally, because of the size and nature of the focus group, feedback obtained by the researcher is specific to this study and could potentially be different if other focus group participants had been selected. Because of this, a larger study in which more people ranging in various backgrounds, ages and ethnicities would be necessary to obtain more general knowledge on the activewear market.

Additionally, there was also a limit to the fabrics and supplies available to the researcher when creating the activewear collection for this study. Fabrics and materials were obtained from various sources within a certain time period. Therefore, some design ideas needed to be altered in order to make the best use of the fabrics and materials that were available at that time. Furthermore, this affected the sustainability aspect of the collection as not all sustainable

activewear fabrics were available for small scale production within the given timeframe of this study.

Recommendations for Future Research

As for areas for future research, more research could be done surrounding sustainable activewear and the current need for more sustainable choices within the activewear market as a whole. At the time of writing the literature review for this thesis, there was little to no literature on sustainable practices in the category of activewear and although it was explored on a small scale within this study, it could be researched further. Specifically, more research could be done on sourcing sustainable activewear fabrics and materials on a small scale. As many participants of the focus group indicated that sustainability is something that they are very passionate about, yet they do not typically see much sustainable activewear readily available for purchase.

Additionally, similar studies could be conducted on a larger scale in order to generalize consumers feelings more easily on the current state of the activewear industry and what it is lacking. Because of the size of the focus group conducted for this study in particular, only a small number of ideas and opinions could be used in creating the activewear collection. Additionally, by conducting similar studies with various designers, more creative ideas and design aesthetics could potentially be explored.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this two-part study was able to provide more insight into activewear design as a whole as well as consumer perception of the current activewear market. Additionally, there is a better understanding overall of the changing needs of consumers as a more casual way of dressing is being adopted by the majority of consumers. By conducting this study in two parts,

focus group followed by research design, it is shown that consumer input is necessary to design garments that suit consumer needs. Ideally, results of this study could be used as framework for future research surrounding the topic of activewear and changing consumer needs. Moreover, research findings provided in this study could potentially be used by the fashion industry as an example of user-based or functional design methods. Changing the way that consumer and user interaction is incorporated into activewear design practices could potentially give future customers more options in the activewear market.

Although the size of this study does not allow for the research to be applied to all consumers as a whole, it does give insight into what a small group of consumers would like to see more when shopping for activewear. As activewear brands expand and more brands enter the market, it should be taken into consideration that there is a growing need for sustainable activewear that focuses on user-centered design. Therefore giving consumers more of what they need as shopping habits and lifestyles increasingly change.

APPENDICIES

Appendix A
Focus Group Questions

Appendix A: Focus Group Questions

1. How often do you shop for activewear for yourself?
2. What types of activewear garments do you typically shop for?
3. Is function, design, fit, brand, price, etc. most important to you when shopping for activewear?
4. What do you typically look for when purchasing from an activewear brand?
5. Do you typically find that activewear brands carry your size?
6. How important are design features such as cropped tops, high waisted pants, pockets, adjustable straps, detachable pieces, etc.?
7. How important are sustainable design features such as natural fiber fabrics, zero-waste design, natural dyes, recycled fabrics, etc. when purchasing activewear?
13. How often do you work out?
14. If you do work out, what type of exercise do you typically do?
15. Do you wear activewear exclusively for working out?
16. In what situations do you typically wear activewear?
17. Has COVID-19 changed the way that you shop for activewear?
18. Has COVID-19 changed when you wear activewear?
19. What is your age?
20. What is your gender?
21. What is your ethnicity?
22. What is your current employment status?

Appendix B
Recruitment Email

Appendix B: Recruitment Email

Re: Blending Fashion and Function: Evolving Consumer Perceptions of Activewear

Hello!

My name is Katie Stoller, and I am writing to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a voluntary research study regarding consumer perceptions of activewear clothing. This study is being conducted at Kent State University as part of my Masters of Fashion Industry Studies thesis project.

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to participate in a one-to-two-hour long focus group along with other women who often shop for activewear. Participants will be asked multiple-choice and open-ended questions regarding demographics, shopping habits in regard to activewear, and user habits in regard to activewear.

If you would like additional information about this study, please contact me at kstolle1@kent.edu.

Thank you for your consideration, and once again, please do not hesitate to contact me if you are interested in learning more about this Institutional Review Board approved project.

Sincerely,

Katie Stoller
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Kent State University
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Kim Hahn, Ph. D.
Thesis Advisor, Professor
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