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# Comfort in clothing: fashion actors and victims.

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# Comfort in Clothing: Fashion Actors and Victims

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## Abstract

Fashion psychology is an emerging discipline, recognising the potential of clothing to enhance well-being in an era when mental health issues are increasing in the Western world. Well-being is important to the individual and on a wider societal level, with the Office for National Statistics monitoring the well-being of UK inhabitants and the World Health Organisation stating that depression will be the most common health issue in the world by 2030. As comfort is a key aspect of well-being, this study explores meanings associated with comfort and discomfort in everyday, non-elite clothing. Comfort in clothing can be physical, physiological and psychological, and the psychological comfort gained from clothing is identified in literature as under-researched. Psychological theory was explored, revealing individuals perform multiple identities, dependent on the reaction of others and filtered by previous, lived experience. Fashion was found to be a recognized method of communicating identity in the social space and research suggests the physical response to psychological constructs or meanings associated with certain garments can be used to change or enhance mood. As psychological comfort can only be measured subjectively, this study employed an interpretive paradigm and qualitative methodology. In keeping with fashion's location within visual culture, participant-produced visuals, described as a form of photo elicitation were collected, accompanied by short narratives. Fashion Management students, as a key informant sample, were briefed to create photographic fashion images styled on a 'Comfort in Clothing' or 'Discomfort: Fashion Victim' theme, accompanied by 100-word narratives, providing rich data. The study was longitudinal, over a three-year period, to negate the influence of short-term fashion trends and groupthink. Multimodal textual analysis was used to explore comfort and discomfort associated with clothing and fashion in the participant-styled images and narratives. Four identities emerged; the private self, the unrestricted self, the body-conscious self and the confident self.

Keywords: comfort, clothing, dress, identity, well-being

## Introduction

Well-being is important to the individual and on a wider societal level (Evans et al., 2015). The Cambridge Dictionary (2018: np) definition of well-being is, 'the state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy'. However, levels of happiness in Western societies have remained static for the past fifty years and rising mental health issues are identified as a global concern (Burnham, 2012). The recent emergence of the Positive Psychology discipline (Lomas et al., 2014) provides empirical evidence for the use of positive interventions to improve well-being, with Masuch and Hefferon (2014: 227) establishing that clothing could be used to manage well-being, describing it as a 'rich source of positivity in participants' lives'. This led the researcher to explore how every day, non-elite (Craik, 1994)

clothing and fashion might provide psychological comfort, identified as under-researched by Kamalha et al. (2013). Psychological theory was explored, revealing individuals perform multiple identities in different social spaces, dependent on the reaction of others (Cooley, [1902] 2009) and filtered by previous, lived experience (Mead, 1967; Goffman, [1959] 2002). Clothing and fashion was found to be a recognized method of communicating identity in the social space (Wilcox et al., 2009; Rudd and Lennon, 2000) and the theory of Enclothed Cognition (Adam and Galinsky, 2012) suggests the physical response to psychological constructs or meanings associated with certain garments could be used to change or enhance mood (Pine, 2014). Similarly, Masuch and Hefferon (2014) posit that dress practice can be used to manage mood, befriend the body and negotiate selfhood. Corner (2014: 4) stresses the importance of fashion to the self, stating that, '[f]aster than anything else, what we wear tells us the story of who we are – or who we want to be. Fashion is the most immediate and intimate form of self-expression', placing fashion at the forefront of the communication of identity and associated psychological comfort or discomfort.

### **Comfort**

Pineau (2008: 271) states that 'comfort corresponds to everything contributing to the well-being and convenience of the material aspects of life'. Steele (2001: 24) describes comfort as a 'relative concept', which was not considered important for many centuries. Comfort, in products ranging from corsets to furniture, became a valued property in the nineteenth century; corset advertisements of that time usually highlighted comfort as a feature. In 1887 Amelia Jenks Bloomer stated that women's dress should focus on function, comfort and health, with aesthetics being a secondary consideration. This links to the Aesthetic Dress Movement, which advocated simple and elegant silhouettes with unrestricting undergarments (Design Museum, 2015). In the 1920s, Chanel's jersey flapper dress liberated women by 'enabling them to move more freely and more comfortably, and even to get dressed and out of the house more quickly, than previous fashions' (Barnard, 2014: 61), hinting that the time-poor consumer (Bauman, 2012) is not a new phenomenon. In more recent times, Pine's (2014) research found that 52% of respondents dressed to be comfortable. Retail analysts have found that the use of comfort as a fashion marketing strategy tends to target the mature consumer, but that research suggests almost a quarter of female consumers aged fifteen-twenty-five prioritize comfort over style (Clements, 2015). Clothing comfort can be categorized into three areas, physiological/ergonomic, sensorial/tactile/physical and psychological (Kamalha et al., 2013). Physiological comfort is concerned with the thermal regulation of the body (Bye and Hakala, 2005). Aspects of physical comfort include moisture sensations such as clamminess, dampness, wetness, stickiness and clinging, and pressure sensations relating to garment fit, such as being tight, loose, lightweight, heavy, soft or stiff (Kamalha et al., 2013). Peck and Childers (2003) describe comfort as a controlled and conscious outcome-directed, instrumental factor related to consumer purchase goals, however this definition neglects psychological comfort considerations.

### **Psychological Comfort**

Psychological comfort is related to the wearer's values, roles and social being, the internal self-consciousness and self-satisfaction. Kamalha et al. (2013) note the influence of person attributes such as cultural/religious/political beliefs, values, personality, body image and personal interests. Clothing attributes include fashion, style, aesthetics, design, colour and texture. Environmental attributes, such as occasion, location, climate, social-cultural settings and norms were also found to affect levels of psychological comfort. Table 1 provides an overview of clothing comfort models:

Table 1 Clothing Comfort Models (adapted from Kamalha et al., 2013)

AUTHORS	Fourt & Hollies (1970)	Pontrelli's Clothing Comfort Model (1975)	Sontag's Clothing Comfort Triad (1985)	Branson & Sweeney (1991)	Lui & Little 5Ps model (2009)
CONCEPTS	Notes the relationship between clothing, person and environment	Describes Physical elements and Psycho-physiological elements, filtered by 'stored person modifiers', such as personality, preferences, lifestyle, previous experience, influences/ prejudices and anticipation/ expectations	Comprises: Person attributes Clothing attributes Environmental attributes	Describes the wearer's 'filters' such as previous experience, anticipations and influences	Notes Physical, Psychological, Physiological, Psychophysical and Psycho-physiological, focusing on the mind-body connection

Consensus can be seen among the authors in Table 1 on the relationship between the environment, clothing and the person (Sontag, 1985; Fourt and Hollies, 1970). Branson and Sweeney (1991) and Pontrelli (1975) agree on the importance of previous experience, anticipations and influences, linking to the concept of lived experience in identity theories (Mead, 1967; Goffman, [1959] 2002). Lui and Little's (2009) model posits that psychological feelings that arise from garment/body interaction can only be measured subjectively, unlike the scientific, objective measurements of physical and physiological comfort.

### Discomfort

Discourse on the discomfort of dress is not a contemporary phenomenon. In, 'A dialogue between Fashion and Death', poet and philosopher Leopardi personifies Fashion as one who persuades and forces, 'all genteel men to endure daily a thousand hardships and a thousand discomforts and often pain and torment and I even get some of them to die gloriously for love of me' (Corner, 2014: 106). Corner (2014) explains how a constant feature of female dress across history is that of constraint. Examples of physically restrictive clothing include foot binding in China and tightly laced corsets in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. There are records that suggest some women complained corsets or stays were uncomfortable however the idea that 'one must suffer for beauty' (Steele, 2001: 25) was commonplace. Corsetry became linked with valued aristocratic attributes such as discipline, self-control and being upright and proud, compared to the bent bodies of the physically working lower classes. Those in favour of corsets (usually those selling them), flipped the comfort/discomfort discourse, highlighting the psychological discomfort of body dissatisfaction and the comfort gained from looking good in the right corset. While it may seem that the twenty-first-century is more relaxed and free in terms of dress practice, Corner (2014) argues that diet and exercise are modern means of fashion constriction.

Whitehead and Petrov (2018: 1) note that dress practice can be used to threaten 'the comforts of an accepted social order', describing the 'adornment rituals' (2018: 4) of contemporary

Western society's fashions as horrifying. Examples include fashions for tattoos, piercings, toxic cosmetics and items of clothing that physically distort the body. Sociologist Entwistle (2003) describes dress as a second skin which one is only conscious of if something is not quite right, whether that is poor fit on the body or poor fit to the social space (i.e. physical or psychological discomfort). Almond (2014) agrees, identifying discomfort or physical pain experienced while wearing clothing that distorts the body and psychological pain, from deprivation, marginalization, undervaluation, embarrassment and prejudice, that leads to use of fashion for self-re-creation. Whitehead and Petrov (2018) note that freedom of self-expression, linked to psychological comfort, is often valued more than physical comfort.

Bauman (2012: 73) describes the contemporary world's abundance of seductive and addictive choice as 'too wide for comfort', noting that 'everything in a consumer society is a matter of choice, except the compulsion to choose' (2012: 74). This choice-overloaded consumer emerges in the work of fashion researchers (Crewe, 2017; Jenss, 2016; Corner, 2014; Damhorst et al., 2005). Crane (2000: 6) references 'the complex range and multitude of simultaneously 'fashionable' styles of clothing and personal appearance', noting that choice leads to confusion for the consumer. Crewe (2017: 5) attributes the decline of historical and fixed ideological identities, such as gender, class and age to the evolution of this freer fashion system, describing 'reflexive individualized consumption' as a requirement when creating self-identity. Crewe (2017) notes that human actors increasingly inhabit multiple spaces, which necessitates greater choice. Thus, more choice and fewer fixed identities provide greater freedom for the consumer. However, Crewe (2017), Corner (2014) and Bauman (2012) agree that increased choice leads to higher risk for the consumer, meaning that even simple, utilitarian purchases have become bewildering. Consumers can therefore be described as casualties of the fashion system, a normative capitalist force (Thompson, 2017; Corner, 2014) legitimizing addictive behaviours. As early as the nineteenth century, those seen as enslaved by fashion were referred to as fashion victims, with Whitehead and Petrov (2018: 17) likening fashion victims to zombies, due to their 'unthinking consumption'. Ahmed (2015) states that fashion brands now need to engage with consumers on a deeper level, to provide fulfilment and meaning.

## **Summary**

The use of clothing in the construction and communication of identity is well-established, however identity in the contemporary world is increasingly complex and fragmented, leading to anxiety. The psychological aspects of comfort gained from dress practice are identified as under-researched and of increasing importance in the search for positive interventions to enhance mental well-being. This research aims to explore the subjective experiences of and attitudes towards comfort in clothing of choice-overloaded Generation Z (Pike, 2016) female fashion consumers and to determine how the concept of psychological comfort can support identity formation and psychological well-being.

## **Methodology**

Given fashion's 'transnational flows, ongoing change, diverse webs of meaning, and material consequences for people and the planet' (Kaiser and Green, 2016: 161), it can be described epistemologically as a socially constructed phenomenon (Carson et al., 2001). This suggested an interpretivist ontological worldview was relevant to this study, exploring subjective meanings based on actors' individual perspectives and contexts, with the researcher gaining understanding and knowledge through an inductive approach and qualitative methodology (Creswell, 2014; Marshall, 1996). Inductive research commences with data collection,

aiming to develop or build theory at a micro level, limited to small numbers of people and using qualitative research methods (Kawamura, 2011). Brennen notes that qualitative research can be ambiguous and contradictory, as well as enlightening, and that it can be used to understand people's experiences and in turn, human relationships, describing it as 'interdisciplinary, interpretive, political and theoretical in nature' (2017: 4). Similarly, May (2002), in relation to interpretivism, posits a Socialist approach, whereby micro level detail such as the examples and responses of individuals can be used to establish social explanation. Silverman (2005) states that qualitative research can be an appropriate method for exploring everyday behaviour, providing a rationale for the use of qualitative methods in this research as dress practice is an ordinary, everyday occurrence in Western culture.

The researcher takes an active role and is a subject of interpretive research (Brennen, 2017), necessitating explanation of the researcher's background and previous experience. For this study, the researcher's 'frame of reference' (Carson et al., 2001: 7) includes involvement with fashion on multiple levels, including idiographic/biographical knowledge from wearing clothes daily; educational/pedagogical knowledge from having studied and taught fashion-related subjects; and experiential knowledge from having worked in the fashion industry for several years. This knowledge is a posteriori, or empirical, gained through experience and experimentation, using sense organs like seeing, touching and listening (Wodak and Meyer, 2016; Mida and Kim, 2015). Thus, the researcher's fashion knowledge aligns with Silverman's (2005: 41) advice to conduct research in 'familiar territory'. Blaxter et al. (2010) agree, stating that there is a requirement for the researcher to have a familiarity and understanding of the background, history, issues and existing studies in the discipline, to provide context to the research.

### **Method: Multimodal Textual Analysis**

Wodak and Meyer (2016) describe research involving a mix of image and text as multi-modal. Bauman states that '[i]n a consumer society, people wallow in things, fascinating, enjoyable things' (Bunting, 2003: np). A variety of object and narrative research projects, including Miller's 'The Comfort of Things' (2009) and Spivak's 'Worn Stories' (2014), were explored as inspiration for this research. Similarly, Sheridan and Chamberlain (2011) tested the use of things in social science research; in studies where interviewees were asked to bring an object with them, the object prompted previously forgotten experiences, offered proof of the past and enhanced both memory and narrative. Mida and Kim (2015) note that objects can be primary evidence of cultural views and society, and that beliefs can be presented less self-consciously in objects. Spivack describes clothes as 'a rich and universal storytelling device' (2014: 7). Linked to this, Brennen (2017: 2) discusses a cultural materialist view, which posits that all artifacts of material culture, including current fashions, 'are produced under specific political and economic conditions', and that cultural artifacts can be used in textual analysis to provide insights about society at a specific time and place in history. Brennen (2017) also describes language as a basic element of human interaction and a medium of meaning creation which is socially shared. A mix of image and narrative aligns with Rose's (2001) assertion that while visuals can be powerful on their own, they are more often presented alongside some form of text. Participants were asked to create a photographic fashion shoot inspired by a 'Comfort in clothing' or 'Discomfort: fashion victim' theme, with an accompanying narrative of approximately 100 words. Thus, these multi-modal, image and narrative elicitations provided personal and individual data, linking to Bauman's (2012) description of contemporary society as being highly individualised.

## **Sample**

Brennen (2017) states that qualitative research should be narrowed to a specific geographic region, time-period and group of people, to ensure the research topic is not too large for a single study. As the research concerned meanings, conventional implicature (Jaworski and Coupland, 1999), requiring contextual knowledge of the meanings, references and identities discussed, suggested the research be constrained to participants currently living in Scotland. This reflected the researcher's own cultural background, therefore minimized ambiguity and enabled interpretation based on cultural consistency (May, 2002), such as shared language and norms. The study was limited to females, as the researcher is female, females tend to prioritise clothing purchases compared to males (Intel, 2015) and womenswear accounts for the largest clothing market share in the United Kingdom (UK) (Keynote, 2015). Almond (2014) posits women suffer more through fashion, describing how male designers such as Christian Dior encased and restricted the female form whereas female designers such as Jean Muir designed clothing that is physically comfortable to wear. Similarly, Ruggerone (2016) notes that women are more affected by clothes than men, with the UK's current cultural and societal values leading to anxiety around appearance. The all-female sample comprised of stage 4 BA(Hons) Fashion Management students, recognising them as Generation Z choice-overloaded fashion consumers. This use of key informant sampling (Marshall, 1996) was deemed appropriate given the centrality of fashion and clothing to the research and made use of the students' styling skills to provide unique and visually rich data. One hundred and thirty-nine images and narratives were gathered; fifty-eight from the 2015 cohort, forty-seven from the 2016 cohort and thirty-four from the 2017 cohort. The longitudinal time-period enabled comparison between cohorts to enhance the reliability of the research, described as the 'constant comparative method' by Silverman (2005: 214). As the students from each cohort knew each other, gathering the data across three years also aimed to overcome elements of groupthink and mitigate influence of short term trends. The mean age of the participants was twenty-one.

## **Coding and Analysis**

Descriptive coding (Richards, 2009) was used to anonymise participants. Topic coding (Richards, 2009) provided a first stage to the analysis of the primary data. Words, sentences or paragraphs from the narratives were labelled and collated into categories, allowing key themes to emerge. Initially, these themes were 'in vivo' (Richards, 2009), named using words from within the narratives. Concurrently, a semiotic analysis of each image was conducted, categorising by colour, clothing style, location, props, model pose and facial expression. The images provided a rich source of additional data that demonstrated depth of feelings, lived experiences, priorities and concerns. Analysis of each in vivo theme in conjunction with the analysed images and the literature reviewed led to themes being reduced and developed into overarching frameworks related to the formation and communication of identity within this sample of fashion-focused participants.

## **Results and Discussion**

The largest clothing category to emerge from the data, across all 3 cohorts, was knitwear. This was not unexpected, as the physical and physiological aspects of comfort related to knitwear are well documented. In addition, knitwear was on-trend for the duration of the data collection so should have been at the forefront of the fashion students' thoughts, given their knowledge of fashion forecasting. Finally, the data collection period (October-December) is traditionally associated with knitwear in the fashion calendar. In line with Kamalha et al. (2013), some participants did acknowledge the physiological comfort of knitwear, using words such as warm and cosy in the narratives. Binary to this, many of the images showed

the knitwear styled with bare skin. These images were either taken in a studio setting (see Fig.1 and Fig.4), or at home, usually sitting on the bed (see Fig.2). Thus, **the private self** emerges, an identity symbolised by models on their own, blinds shut and curtains drawn. Knitwear, despite its proven warmth credentials, is not for wearing outside or in social settings. For most of these participants, knitwear is a form of loungewear, associated with home and relaxation, described by several 2015 participants as ‘me-time’. The wearer is not on show, finding relaxation in the privacy of the home environment (see Fig.3), described by P10 as the ‘most genuine self’ and by P48 as a place ‘where I am not worried about how I look’. This agrees with Holliday’s (1999) identification of home as a safe haven for comfort dressing and Entwistle’s (2003) concept of the home-appropriate body. This private persona identity was also clad in nightwear, again in all three cohorts but more so amongst the 2017 participants. P121 states ‘Pyjamas... are garments rarely seen by the outside world; there is comfort in those moments of being our authentic selves’. P121 uses hyperbole to describe pyjamas as the ‘heroes of home comfort’. Several participants used emotional words (Saldana, 2016) such as joyful and delight when describing arriving home and changing out of everyday clothes into pyjamas, with P138 noting ‘there is no better feeling’. This aligns with Baron’s (2013) pleasure-invisible category of dress, where pleasure-inducing pampering or self-care is involved and appearance is not judged.



Fig.1



Fig.2



Fig.3



Fig.4

Many participants placed emphasis on loose, oversized knits, ‘being able to move without restriction’ (P57), establishing a second identity, **the unrestricted self**. Participants used words such as freedom and ease. The unrestricted self is associated with simplicity, with P139 stating ‘[t]he outfit is uncomplicated’. P132 styles her oversized knitted jumper with ‘minimal makeup’ and ‘hair hanging naturally’ (see Fig.5). P10 notes that ‘[c]omfort is not extravagant or over-the-top, it is rather undemanding.’ It is worth noting that the person attributes (Sontag, 1985) of the student participants include busy and complicated lives, balancing study, part-time work, family, friends, relationships and social media and the environmental attributes see them inhabiting multiple spaces (Crewe, 2017). Thus, the unrestricted self seems to focus on uncomplicated dress practices, using clothing that can span both private and public settings, in line with Baron’s (2013) duty-visible category, where dress requires an element, but not an excess of personal care. In terms of psychological comfort, the preference for oversized clothing could signify decreased mental well-being, as Pine’s (2014) research found that people tend to wear baggy tops when feeling low. However, loose and oversized were often used in conjunction with words conveying softness against the skin, visualised via teddy bears, furry cushions and blankets, highlighting the importance of physical comfort (Kamalha et al., 2013) to the participants. The unrestricted self was represented by several other types of clothing including activewear, lingerie and nightwear; notably all tend to be in direct contact with the skin. For example,



Fig.6 features yoga clothing and a model in a yoga pose, demonstrating how clothes can move with the body.



Fig.5

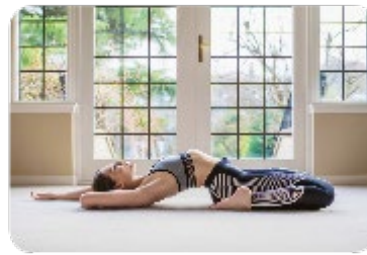


Fig.6

Similarly, P94 features activewear to signify ‘freedom of movement while working out’. Freedom of movement is a phrase used by several participants, mainly in relation to activewear or models in the images being active rather than static, as shown by Fig.7’s dancer. Interestingly, bare skin, prevalent in the private self, is also present in the unrestricted self. P62 describes a pair of ripped, loose fitting jeans, chosen ‘to expose the skin’ (see Fig.8). Fig.7’s dancer has bare legs and feet and P125’s model has bare legs, binary to the accompanying narrative’s emphasis on warmth and the chunky knit and blanket as signifiers of warmth in the image. In a more extreme narrative, P107 describes the ‘instant relaxation the individual feels when escaping from the imprisonment clothing offers’, translated into an image where the model is loosely draped in a silky dressing gown (see Fig.10), suggesting that bare equates to freedom. Using similar language in a completely different context, P87 locates the unrestricted self on the street, stating ‘[t]hey wear loose clothes to signify a physical and psychological release from restraint or confinement’ (see Fig.9), rejecting Corner’s (2014) notions of restrictive female fashion.



Fig.7



Fig.8



Fig.9



Fig.10

A further identity, initially related to oversized knits emerged; **the body-conscious self**. The body-conscious self focused on the psychological comfort gained from oversized tops worn when body confidence was low. For example, P98 states that an oversized jacket ‘completely hides the model’s figure’, noting that a ‘negative body image creates the need to mask the body with oversized clothing’ (see Fig.11). The body-conscious self was also present in narratives and images featuring the colour black as a slimming colour (Eisman, 2006), and the classic little black dress. P131’s narrative states that ‘women, particularly young women turn the body project into a full-time occupation with their focus being on the thin ideal’, rejecting the current body positive zeitgeist (Sastre, 2014). This narrative is

accompanied by an image epitomising the thin ideal (see Fig.12). Several participants agreed with P31's assertion that '[t]he pressure to look perfect is felt more than ever'. P76 states that '[t]oday's society is constantly exposed to advertisements and products that focus on an idealised image'. As the participants have studied marketing and advertising subjects, their knowledge of idealised imagery is not unexpected and it is clear from the findings that it causes them anxiety. Their focus on the thin ideal suggests the body positivity movement is still niche rather than norm, aligning with Foucault's assertion that bodies are self-disciplined according to the time and space they find themselves in (Mida and Kim, 2015). The focus on the body moves from camouflage (Picardie, 2015; Craik, 1994) to control in P107's narrative, describing the 'fit and structure of a bra to make you feel safe'. P81 contrasts the physical discomfort of wearing a corset with the psychological comfort gained from the changed body shape, described by P96 as 'unnatural body modification' linked to 'unrealistic pressure laid on women's physical appearance'. P79's narrative also focuses on control, stating '[t]he restriction of movement which the waist trainer conveys is a reflection of today's celebrity culture, and how the media present body image in a constraining manner, emphasising the requirement to be slim, to conform', again ignoring the body positivity movement prevalent in recent fashion media. In the accompanying image, the waist trainer is worn on top of a comfortable, loose white shirt, shaping both the shirt and the body underneath, a visible statement of control (see Fig.13). P2's image (see Fig.14) shows the body uncomfortably controlled with Spanx shapewear and a waist trainer, the dark background, uncomfortable pose and strained facial expression signifying discomfort. This narrative describes the wearer as an actor, wearing a costume required to 'play a role convincingly', aligning with Entwistle's (2003) research that posits dress as a means of controlling and managing bodies in social settings.



Fig.11

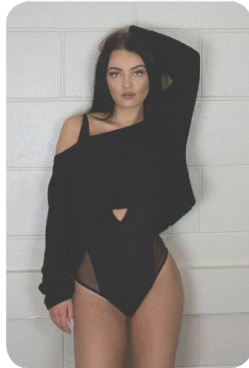


Fig.12



Fig.13



Fig.14

P31 visualises the body-conscious self as a 'vulnerable woman, who has become a victim to the pressures of the fashion and beauty world; willing to put her body through pain and discomfort in order to make herself feel accepted and comfortable in the real world' (see Fig.15). The image uses a jagged black crime scene outline to define the body as a fashion victim (Almond, 2014); the model lies motionless and devoid of emotion as she is manipulated by external, faceless agents. Thus, the body-conscious self is a public persona, using fashion and clothing binaries to camouflage or control the body, with the goal of fitting in with a desired community identity. P81 confirms the influence of the public, stating that people believe that 'others judge them', suggesting that Cooley's ([1902] 2009) Looking Glass Theory remains pertinent today and correlating with Bauman's (2012) assertion that having a common identity offers security in contemporary society.



Fig.15

Another public persona emerged from the data through the theme of confidence, providing psychological comfort that P61 describes as ‘exactly how she wants to feel when going on a night out’. This aligns with Guy and Banim’s (2010) aspirational or strived-for self, the ‘woman I want to be’. Many participants agreed that **the confident self** prioritises psychological comfort, often enduring physical discomfort to do so. P61’s narrative states that ‘specific garments aid confidence and psychological comfort yet are uncomfortable to wear’. In the accompanying image the model wears a classic, fitted little black dress and high heels. Linked with high heels, the confident self is often described by the participants as sexy. P1 asserts ‘[m]agazines are particularly guilty of presenting the conformist ideology that women should be in heels, with accentuated legs, sexy poses, confident attitudes’. This narrative is accompanied by an image of high heels and a bruised foot on a grotty pavement, surrounded by darkness, the bruises and background signifying discomfort and the fashion victim theme (see Fig.16). Similarly, P14’s ‘scene from the night before’ (see Fig.17) shows the ‘extreme, contradictory emotions of adoration and resentment that a woman can have for high heeled shoes’. Cards and alcohol are used to signify addictive behaviour, red is used to connote both sexiness and danger with the skull emphasising the danger. The shiny glitter-ball and patent shoes signify the glamour and debauchery of a night out. The narrative continues the contradiction, noting positives that the heels ‘make the wearer walk taller and appear more confident’. P23 agrees that heels are uncomfortable to wear but also notes their ability to boost self-esteem and confidence. Thus, this is intentional dress (Rudd and Lennon, 2000), where the participants manage their appearance to meet cultural ideals and normative expectations, gaining respite from the anxiety of individualistic choice (Bauman, 2012).



Fig.16



Fig.17

Continuing the physical discomfort/psychological comfort binary, P11 created an image with a little black dress and knee high boots, describing it as coordinated and very ‘put together’. The narrative states ‘despite the physical discomfort, the attentively put-together look, portraying a completely different identity of myself, made me feel extremely confident’ (see Fig.18). Being elegant and fashionable, translated visually into smart and coordinated clothing, is also highlighted in Fig.19, and aligns with Pine’s (2014) findings that 73% of women dress up to feel confident.



Fig.18



Fig.19

Confidence in coordination was also gained from lingerie, with P44 stating ‘when a woman is wearing matching underwear, she feels quietly confident and feels she has her life together’. P50 agrees, stating ‘it’s what’s underneath that counts’, describing the bra as signifying the ‘foundation of the outfit’, adding to ‘inner confidence and a feeling of security’. This suggests internal motivations (Pine, 2014), rather than external motivations such as looking sexy or fashionable. A few participants related confidence to activewear, with P117 noting the ‘confidence and empowerment athleisure clothing can provide to the wearer’. This is evident in Fig.20’s powerfully-posed and almost intimidating group of girls, styled in a streetwear athleisure aesthetic, against an unsettling backdrop of rough seas and urban graffiti. This moves the confident self from mainly hedonic (Masuch and Hefferon, 2014), put-together, making-an-effort looks to a more functional or utilitarian context. Similarly, P117 locates her athleisure clothing in an industrial background to signify that ‘athleisurewear can be worn anywhere’, in line with Hancock’s (2016) assertion that the growth in activewear sales is due to versatility, as well as fashionability and comfort. P66’s image shows a close up of hiking boots (see Fig.21), accompanied by a narrative that explains she has problems with her feet, and that the boots ‘give her the support she needs and increase her confidence levels because she knows that they will prevent her from injuring herself’, another example of confidence gained via feeling safe.



Fig.20



Fig.21



## Conclusion

The aim of this research was to explore the subjective experiences of and attitudes towards comfort in clothing of choice-overloaded Generation Z female fashion consumers (Pike, 2016; Bauman, 2012) and to determine how the concept of psychological comfort gained from dress practice can support identity formation, using an inductive, theory-building approach. Data was gathered in the visually rich form of participant-produced photographic images and narratives, making use of fashion management students' specialist styling skills. Four identities emerged; the private self, the unrestricted self, the body-conscious self and the confident self (see Fig.22). All four placed the most importance on environmental attributes (Kamalha et al., 2013) such as location, occasion, social-cultural settings and norms. Person attributes focused on the body; bare, camouflaged or controlled. Camouflaged and controlled aligns with the work of Picardie (2015), Corner (2014), Pine (2014), Entwistle (2003) and many others. The participants' focus on bare skin was not reflected strongly in the literature reviewed but may be attributed to the fashion management students' exposure to and specialist knowledge of fashion media imagery in Western culture, which often does feature bare skin. Surprisingly, given that the participants were fashion management students, clothing attributes such as fashion, style, colour and texture were given limited attention, and usually in relation to the body rather than current trends. Two fashion trends were evident, that of knitwear and athleisure wear (Hancock, 2016).

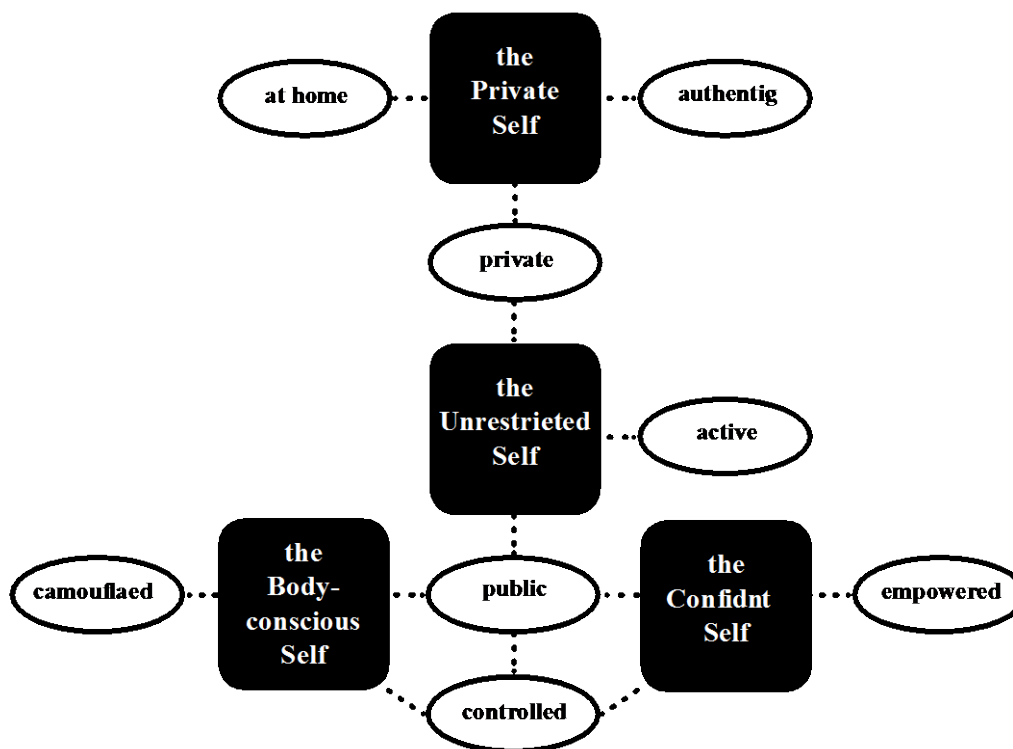


Fig.22 Female identities expressed through psychological comfort in clothing

**The private self** is an authentic identity, devoid of performance and linked to the security of home, aligning with Holliday (1999) and Baron's (2013) pleasure-invisible category of dress. This could be linked to the participants' student status, as many will be living away from their family home while studying, thus seeking security and comfort. A narrow range of clothing is utilised within this identity, comprising oversized knits, pyjamas and unstructured lingerie, physically and psychologically comforting. The focus on knits within the images could be attributed to the fashion management students' knowledge of knitwear trends,

prevalent during the data gathering period. **The unrestricted self** is both a private and public identity, linked to freedom, to move, to think, to be. The range of clothing employed is expanded to encompass activewear, streetwear and jeans as well as the oversized knits and nightwear, relevant to the variety of locations (Crewe 2017) and situations, but still simple and easy. While the private self is stationary, reading, drinking tea, lounging on sofas and beds, the unrestricted self is busy, moving and active. This identity focuses on the self, even when in public, seeming unconcerned with the judgement of others, happy to dress in an uncomplicated manner with loose hair and no makeup. It could be linked to the participants' student status, where study and part-time jobs perhaps negate the need for a more professional and put-together look. **The body-conscious self** also uses oversized clothing but this time is firmly located in the public space, aware of others and their potential judgement. In this identity, oversized clothing provides camouflage and protection. The body-conscious self is more complex than the first two identities; as well as utilising oversized clothing, psychological comfort is gained from the binary opposite of restrictive styles such as structured lingerie, fitted dresses, belts and high heels and the colour black is employed for its perceived slimming qualities. This links with the work of previous researchers around the clothed body (Picardie, 2015; Corner, 2014; Entwistle, 2003), suggesting this identity is applicable beyond the fashion management participants. However, this identity was visualised as a victim in the participants' images; poses were static, uncomfortable and unnatural and expressions were fixed or pained. It is likely that the focus on the fashion victim emerged due to the fashion management students' specialist knowledge of fashion history, media and semiotics. **The confident self** is also in the public domain, an actor on display (Goffman, 2002) using complex dress practices for hedonic or utilitarian purposes. For hedonic dress practice, physical comfort is relinquished and psychological comfort is prioritised - this identity requires effort, planning and coordination. This positive management of appearance is well established in female fashion consumers (Masuch and Hefferon, 2014) and is not specific to the fashion management participants. The confident self also emerged in activewear, offering utilitarian comfort that empowered the wearer in a variety of settings, confident in their ability to fit in and to perform as required. The focus on activewear reflects a cultural shift towards casual dress being acceptable in a wider range of settings (Hancock, 2016), but it could be argued that the fashion management participants could be more likely to find confidence in this look due to both their Generation Z age category and their trend awareness.

In conclusion, this exploratory research established ways that fashion and clothing can provide well-being in the form of psychological comfort related to private and public identities of choice-overloaded, multi-tasking Generation Z fashion management students. Existing literature suggests these identities could be applicable beyond the limited participant sample; this could be tested in further research. This research contributes knowledge to the study of everyday, non-elite dress and the psychological comfort gained from clothing, both identified as under-researched in the available literature. Finally, it utilises an innovative, key informant participant elicitation multimodal methodology, in keeping with fashion's place in visual culture.

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