

# SENSORY NOURISHMENT IN FASHION DESIGN PRACTICES

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## BACKGROUND

Clothes are the most intimate artefacts that touch our skin. Every day our moving bodies are shaping and being shaped by what we wear. Dominant design practices do not always consciously consider the sensations that unfold during this dynamic mutual shaping and their influence on how the wearer feels, both physically and emotionally (van Dongen, 2019). Such considerations are particularly pertinent for neurodivergent individuals who experience the sensations in our environments at amplified and often unbearable levels, affecting their focus, self-regulation and anxiety (Gaudion, 2015). The participants in my research can become overwhelmed by problematic clothing sensations. This causes undue stress on the body as it responds by fight or flight; resulting in distraction, anxiety and mood swings that disable the person’s interactions with the world around them.

My practice-based PhD research asks: how can fashion designers consciously craft sensations for, and with, wearers with diverse sensory needs?

To answer this question, I have collaborated with 30 neurodivergent participants who are in full-time employment or mainstream education. They are on the autism spectrum and/or have been diagnosed with ADHD.

## PROBLEM

Little is written about this phenomenon in academic literature. Research on the autism spectrum is most often presented from the perspective of the observer. The voice of neurodivergent individuals and their lived sensory experiences is glaringly absent. In addition, within the fashion industry the success of clothing design is, in general, measured by sales figures at the point of purchase. The lived experiences that happen after are rarely examined (Fletcher & Klepp, 2017).

Furthermore, dominant fashion design practices are traditionally static in their conception of clothing. Visual impact is prioritized over the practice of wearing. Thus, fashion research often fails to consider the connection between people’s clothing, their everyday routines and “how the body and the senses play a vital role in such routines” (Skjold, 2018).

## METHODOLOGY

My research seeks to fill in these blank spaces by taking a phenomenological approach to get to the essence of the neurodivergent participants’ lived sensory experiences with clothing. The project then seeks to translate these experiences into my design practice.

In the first half of my research, I conducted wardrobe interviews by visiting participants in their homes to examine their existing clothing. We borrowed from sensory ethnographic practices which Sarah Pink (2009) describes as “not so much to study other people’s sensory values and behaviours, but to collaborate with them to explore and identify these”.



*Fig 2: A Wardrobe Interview.*

## INSIGHTS

In the beginning my main line of inquiry was “*how do you want your clothes to feel?*”. This placed a focus on material properties. Through the guidance of my participants, I began to tune into the kinaesthetic - tactile - sonic reciprocal dialogue between the material properties and the moving body. The first outcome from the wardrobe studies has been this shift to design with the dynamic moving body. This way of designing considers clothing as an act of dressing, an act of wearing, a series of dynamic actions.

The second outcome is that whilst my participants have revealed individual physical sensory needs, they have a desire to access universal emotional experiences. I had started by considering comfort as a physical property of clothing. But comfort is more than simply soft materials or a lack of constraint. It is being able to comfort yourself at times of great discomfort. It is being comfortable within yourself. It is being comfortable with how you are socially presented: “the embedded meanings so implied, can be a source of ease and calm – or its reverse” (Twigg, 2010). Comfort is a balancing act between the physical, social and emotional.

The third outcome inextricably weaves together the first and second outcomes. Movement is an important part of self-regulation; a release of energy that improves focus and concentration. When discussing physical comfort, movement was always embedded in the participants’ reflections. For example, “I want to be able to climb trees. I’m not necessarily going to climb a tree, but I’d like to feel that it’s a possibility.”

Further unpacking this relationship between physical comfort and movement, clothes should provide the freedom to move through their day free from distractions, free from restrictions. Physical freedom facilitates emotional freedom. This shifted my line of inquiry to “*how do you want to feel in your clothes?*”. It is these feelings that will measure the success of the design outputs in the second phase.

## CONTINUED WORK

The second phase of the research takes a design-driven approach. Currently I am working with four of the participants to design a garment each that finds the balance between their physical and emotional needs in a

particular everyday context. Together we are exploring how to design for and with the tactile, sonic and kinaesthetic senses through my fashion design practice.

The anticipated outcome is a series of iterative prototypes whose contribution is less about the final product but more indicators of a way of working. As we begin to test the prototypes in context we see clothes as an interface between us and our external environment. They can connect, protect, but also disconnect us from our environment. The melody of the clothing components and choreography of the moving fabric must be in harmony with both the wearer’s external environment but also their internal emotional state. This will be illustrated at the conference through a series of sound recordings and garment artefacts.

As I begin the final year of my PhD, I approach clothes as instruments that my participants can play, tuning the intensity of the sensory experiences that will support their emotional and physical needs in that particular moment. Our ambition is that a sensory approach to design practices can develop clothing, and other products, that are tools for inclusion. They offer punctuation in an often-over-stimulated world. The long-term goal is to extrapolate these ways of working into industry in collaboration with established fashion brands, post-PhD.

## REFERENCES

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