

# Capturing the sensory experiences of everyday clothing: a methodological review

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## Abstract

Clothes are both immediate and ubiquitous. They mediate every part of our daily interactions yet there is limited research into how their sensations shape people's everyday experiences. The aim of this paper is to discuss possible tools to explore the sensory lived experiences of people and their everyday clothing. A phenomenological and participatory approach is prevalent throughout. The paper describes and reflects on the author's observations with methods that emerged when working with a person on the autism spectrum who could become overwhelmed by the sensations of his clothing. These are contextualized through a literature review of pivotal publications from two groups of researchers. The first is the so-called wardrobe network, dominated by anthropologists and ethnologists. They are committed to practice-oriented design research focused on how people's way of knowing about their clothing is ingrained in their daily routines. The second group are practice-based fashion researchers under the umbrella of sensory fashion. They borrow from sensory ethnographic methodologies, complimented by their expertise in material qualities and clothing construction. An overarching theme between the two groups is the body's role in both sensing clothing and communicating tacit knowledge. The paper discusses wardrobe study methodologies that include garment-led interviews and performative engagement with garments. It also discusses the use of diaries as a supplement to attune both the researcher and the participant to their own sensory ways of knowing. The paper concludes by speculatively considering how these tools could be used in the future. Firstly, in the author's PhD research to foster the necessary trust to build a narrative with participants on the autism spectrum about their lived sensory experiences. Secondly, in the wider fashion industry to shift the dominant visual practice to one that considers the engagement of all the senses and the complexity of everyday life.

## Keywords

Sensory experiences  
Everyday clothing  
Sensory ethnography  
Wardrobe studies  
Autism spectrum

## Introduction

Clothes are the most intimate artefacts that touch our skin. They touch every part of our lives therefore their sensations shape our everyday interactions. Clothes are so ingrained in the mundane everyday that we are rarely prompted to think about how they enhance or limit the way we feel and move and as such influence our interactions with the world around us.

The aim of this paper is to review possible tools to explore the sensory experiences of wearers and their everyday clothing. The purpose of the review is not to critique the effectiveness of existing methods, rather it is about learning and borrowing from different disciplines. People's wardrobes say a lot about who they are and their daily practices. Bodies have deeply personal ways of processing sensations. By examining both together we can gather valuable knowledge about individual lived experiences.

In this paper I will describe and reflect on my own observations with methods that emerged in a pilot study with a wearer on the autism spectrum who had a particular sensitivity to clothing. These are contextualized through a literature review that is not exhaustive, but rather a "purposive sample" of pivotal literature (Randolph, 2009). It spans anthropology, ethnology and fashion design research that captures participants' everyday sensory experiences, everyday experiences with clothing and/or sensory experiences with clothing.

## Background

This methodological review will address the question: which tools can be used to investigate sensory lived experiences with everyday clothing? I will begin by explaining the background to the formulation of this question. It is purposefully descriptive to provide the reader with the necessary background to contextualize my reflections on methods in the later sections. I describe my experiences with a pilot study, which enabled me to explore and learn first-hand the sensory experiences of everyday clothing with someone on the autism spectrum. In addition, I explain how this experience subsequently motivated both further in-depth PhD research of the subject and a review of existing methods across several disciplines.

## Pilot study & PhD motivation

In September 2019 I began a 5-month design project to develop a therapeutic textile intended for users on the autism spectrum. I presented a plan for 5 participatory design workshops to local autism societies to recruit participants. I did not recruit any participants. Feedback led me to understand that people were wary of an unfamiliar space with unfamiliar tasks where they were subjects of an investigation.

Coincidentally, I was introduced to Herman, a teenage boy

on the autism spectrum. Herman's mother invited me to spend time in their family home. As I laid out early prototypes for testing, she commented that Herman probably wouldn't like them because the materials are quite rough. She explained that he only likes very soft fabrics, describing how the wrong sensory input can be very overwhelming for Herman, causing great anxiety that hinders his ability to do everyday tasks.

Indeed, Herman's physical repulsion with the prototypes was immediate. He screwed up his face and jumped back as he touched it and quickly pushed it over to his mother. The displeasure it caused was etched across his face. Herman left the room. Sometime later he returned and presented me with his mother's cashmere sweater and told me "I want it to feel like this". His eyes lit up as he pressed it against his cheek. He placed the sweater in my hands and encouraged me to feel how fine and soft it was. This moment completely shifted my research approach; both in mindset and methodology. Ultimately it also shifted the direction of the design project.

During this first visit I realised that I had to forgo any prepared line of questioning. Instead, I sat down with Herman for a conversation about his sensory experiences with everyday clothing and how they influenced his everyday interactions. I learned that he was in many ways a regular 13 year-old boy; he has a very high IQ, attends a local school and is part of the local swimming club. But Herman's sensory profile is different to his classmates. He is extremely sensitive to textures, particularly food and textiles. He has never liked human touch. He has had to become resourceful in finding ways of accommodating his sensory issues but with clothing his options are limited. I noted that Herman only wore variations of a brushed cotton hoodie and jersey sweatpants each time I visited. Autism does not define Herman, but it does present challenges in his everyday life:

"I can't wear tight elasticated socks, they have to be loose otherwise I feel trapped at my ankles."

"I want to wear jeans. I try to wear them to get used to them because I want to wear the same things as my friends but they are just too stiff, I can't relax. I only ever wear soft jogging bottoms. But look ...I found some soft jogging bottoms with a denim print! "

"Waterproof clothing is the worst, it's not so much the textures in this case it's a combination of things and when they all merge together ... it's so stiff to move in and it's not breathable so I get sweaty. And the squeaking noise the fabric makes when I move ...ahhh. Then I have to listen to the rain splashing on the fabric and the more I move and the more it rains the squeaking noise turns into a squelching noise and everything combined is just too much."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Quotations are paraphrased from a conversation where Herman's mother also interjected to encourage descriptions and prompt reminders of events. The conversation also switched between Norwegian (the participant's mother tongue) and English (the researcher's mother tongue) as some descriptive words and feelings are difficult to translate.

I visited Herman's home three times to collaborate on building a narrative around his everyday activities, his sensory experiences and his wardrobe preferences. We developed a very fluid dialogue through tangible objects. Herman would leave the room and return with clothing or other objects: a padded pillow, a stress-ball, a sheepskin rug, and even a dog. He would show me how he liked to use them for sensory stimulation; which elements worked for him and which didn't. Herman was showing me how he wanted to communicate. Through the performative interaction with the objects he could express felt experiences that could not be articulated with words.

In the design development phase I presented Herman with a series of textile samples to review. Without any prompting, Herman started to touch them cautiously under his fingertips. If this initial interaction determined the sample was not irritating, he picked it up and squeezed it in his hands. Then he rubbed the samples over his arm. If he found it to be extremely pleasurable he would rub it along his cheek and smile. At times he picked up a sample, stretched it to watch how the material responded, attempting to explain what it was he liked or disliked about the material. When choosing his favourite sample he would narrow his selection by repeating the exercises, comparing samples in different hands. I observed the richness of information emanating from his body language and facial expressions. My interpretation of his ranking of samples, based on his bodily expressions, were then verified verbally by Herman.

This is the motivation for a 3-year practice based PhD that sets out to explore how the sensory engagement of people on the autism spectrum can inform fashion design practices. The PhD intends to take a phenomenological approach to study the sensations as they are experienced and perceived by the participants. The goal is "to arrive at the essence of the lived experience" (Randolph, 2009). The first phase of the investigation is to gather knowledge on the participants' experiences with the existing everyday clothing in their wardrobe.

## Literature gaps

The sensory experiences and emotional responses described above are personal to Herman. However, further conversations within autistic communities revealed that many can become overwhelmed by their clothing's sensations. This is not a new discovery, yet a digital search for *autism AND clothing* (10. Feb 2021) only turned-up publications on "novel clothing", "therapeutic clothing", "smart clothing" "special needs wearable solutions". This literature was excluded from my review as it does not attend to the experience of everyday clothing.

Furthermore, I do not approach the sensory experiences of wearers on the autism spectrum as special, but rather amplified universal experiences. Pauline van Dongen (2019) argues that fashion practices often "overlook the fact that the way we feel and act, both physically and emotionally, is greatly affected by what we wear." Many people become irritated, and thus distracted, by uncomfortable clothing

(Skjold, 2018, Burcikova, 2021). Fashion research has been dominated by historical garments of special significance focusing on their visuality (Skjold, 2018). There is agreement that the traditional visual methods and language used, in both fashion research and practice, lacks attention to the felt experiences of clothing (Burcikova, 2017, van Dongen, 2019, Stasiulyte, 2020). There is also a glaring lack of writing in fashion theory pertaining to a suitable methodology that seeks to gather knowledge on these felt experiences, in particular how garments live their lives with consumers (Klepp & Fletcher, 2017). Skjold (2018) further highlights a gap in fashion research into the connection between people's clothing, their everyday routines and "how the body and the senses play a vital role in such routines".

## The wardrobe network

Between 2008 - 2013 a so-called *wardrobe network* of anthropologists and ethnologists emerged with a shared interest in "the materiality and physical storage of dress objects, and an interest in the way the objects are handled, worn, acquired and discarded by their wearers in the wardrobe" (Skjold, 2018). The network was committed to practice-oriented design research that focused on "exploring more deeply how people's competences and knowledge in relation to (clothing) are temporally ingrained in their daily routines and aspirations" (Skjold, 2018). Within this network I have reviewed publications by Ingun Grimstad Klepp and Kate Fletcher (2017) who were motivated to understand people's wardrobes in order to contribute to more sustainable fashion consumption. In addition, I have spoken with my colleague Mari Bjerck (2017) about her experiences researching the wardrobes of women working in male dominated manual occupations. Bjerck subsequently introduced me to Else Skjold's research, which I feel particularly aligned with because of her motivation to learn how her "respondent's sensory apparatus played a part" in selecting garments in their wardrobe (Skjold, 2018).

The distinction between the *wardrobe network* and those discussed in the next section are that they are not educated in clothing's materiality and construction. On the other hand, there is a great deal that fashion can learn from their ethnographic methods that are not part of fashion design education (Burcikova, 2021).

## Emerging sensory fashion methodology

Building on Skjold's "sensory anchoring" (2014), in the last few years a small group of practice-based fashion researchers and theorists have slowly emerged under the umbrella *Sensory Fashion*. They prioritise sensory and emotional engagement with clothing with the aim to challenge the visual nature of fashion and its representations.<sup>2</sup> The most recent contribution is Vidmina Stasiulyte's artistic PhD research (2020) which completely removes the visual side of clothing to explore how they are experienced through sound, tactility and movement. Within this group Mila Burcikova (2017, 2019, 2021) combines sensory ethnography, narrative enquiry and her own

<sup>2</sup><https://fashionprofessorship.artez.nl/activity/uncommon-senses-iii-2021/>

fashion design practice to study women's lived experiences with clothing through the lens of sustainability. Her *Emotionally Durable Clothing Model* (2021) includes the themes of *sensory experiences* and *enablers*, supporting my hypothesis that clothing design that attends more carefully to the wearer's sensory experiences can better enable their everyday interactions. Many of the methods used by Burcikova, and the other researchers in this group, draw heavily on anthropologist Sarah Pink's writings (2009, 2012, 2013) which discuss how the agency of the senses of both informants and researchers can contribute valuable insights into how the everyday is experienced.

## Review of Methodology

In this review I have paid particular attention to methods that engage multiple senses, respect the intimate nature of the participant's lived experiences and are committed to the co-fabrication of knowledge. I have classified them into two groups: wardrobe studies and everyday diaries. I also identified two prevailing themes: a collaborative mindset and a way of looking that gathers a holistic view of how garments are ingrained in daily practices before probing deeper into particular sensory qualities and emotional responses. I discuss these themes before introducing the specifics of the methods because their presence is essential to the success of the methods. Finally, I briefly discuss reflexive sensory autoethnographic activities that were identified throughout.

## A collaborative mindset

One method used to approximate a person's sensory experience of someone is "empathetic embodied engagement of researchers" (Pink, 2012: 43), for example blindfolding. However, Pink cautioned that there is an innate knowledge and value of experience that can be lost. Stasiulyte discussed the richness of her conversations with visually impaired participants that uncovered unexpected connections between the sound of clothing and their everyday activities (Högskolan i Borås, 2021). One participant wore a polyester jacket and walked vigorously in the city to create a means of echolocation. This experience could never have been imagined through the researcher's empathetic embodied engagement. Furthermore, Burcikova (2021) argues that the complexity of people's everyday "necessitates taking the time to listen and reflect on the many entangled aspects of their lives." Skjold (2018) considered her informants as her "teachers". Pink (2009) similarly described the aim of sensory ethnography as "not so much to study other people's sensory values and behaviours, but to collaborate with them to explore and identify these." The methods reviewed cultivate a collaborative mindset that facilitates the participants as "everyday experts in their own life" (Fletcher & Klepp, 2017).

## Fast-looking vs slow-looking

Another red thread running through the literature is best

described by arts educator Sister Corita Kent (2009) as two ways of looking, namely *fast-looking* and *slow-looking*. Recently I was invited by another researcher to open my kitchen cupboard and select my favourite cup. I selected a tall narrow mug over a wide open cup, made from porcelain rather than clay. This is *fast-looking*. By probing deeper into the cup's sensorial qualities, I became aware of the combination of the smooth delicate tactility of the porcelain against my lips and the sensation of very hot tea against the back of my throat. If the cup were too wide the tea cools faster and therefore the sensation lessens. This is *slow-looking* and prompts reflection on the emotional response to these sensory experiences, for example the hot tea is soothing when I am stressed.

## Sensory elicitation through material objects

Pink (2009: 93) advocates for "the use of material objects to elicit responses or evoke memories and areas of knowledge". The cup example illustrates her observation that thicker descriptions are produced in the presence of the tangible physical object. In the same way that I was invited to open my kitchen cupboard, Klepp and Fletcher's wardrobe studies methodology invites participants to open up their wardrobes. In their 2017 book they collate the experiences of other researchers, and their own, with this methodology. Throughout this publication it is evident that the physical presence of items of clothing prompts semi-structured dialogues by reminding the participant of specific details, experiences and emotions (Twigger Holroyd, 2017). I will next discuss the use of two material objects for sensory elicitation: wardrobes and diaries.

## Wardrobe studies

Pink (2009: 96) places great significance on the location of participant interviews and how they offer opportunities "to learn about both others' embodied ways of knowing and their verbal narratives and ways of defining sensations, emotions, beliefs, moralities and more". Burcikova (2017) reflected that the presence of her participant's "whole wardrobes and other personal objects often triggered conversations and narratives that would hardly have been possible in a situation removed from the home environment (...and) also enables researchers to observe and explain daily practices in context." This is aligned with how comfortable Herman felt in his own home with the close proximity to his wardrobe and the opportunity to demonstrate his objects in the context of some of his everyday practices. Klepp & Bjerck (2014) also noted that "the term wardrobe may be taken literally or metaphorically". In Bjerck's PhD research (2017) some participants stored their uniform at work and carried casual clothes in their car, and it was the contrast between these wardrobes that provided the key insights.

## Garment-led interviews

Amy Twigger Holroyd (2017) asked participants to select two regularly worn and two rarely worn items of clothing, a few days before she visited their home. Burcikova (2017) requested the newest and oldest items of clothing but reflected that she benefited from not asking participants to select the garments until her arrival. She believes this allowed her to hear “not only about successful and ‘loved’ garments but also about those that failed to satisfy” Burcikova (2021). Skjold (2018) also cautioned that pre-selection may result in the omission of what becomes mundane to participants through everyday repetition. She favoured “clustering” whereby the participants categorised the entire contents of their wardrobes into different piles based on occasions of use. The garments are further sorted into sub-categories in a manner that resonates with Herman’s selection method of textile samples.

Trine Møller, Louise Ravnløkke and Anne Louise Bang (2016) used *Tangible Dialogue Tools (TDT)* to mediate semi-structured interviews with a particular focus on sensory engagement. Textile objects established a dialogue between researchers and participants that revealed “non-verbal, unconscious or not yet formulated experiences, emotions, preferences, values and unmet needs” (Møller et. al, 2016). For Klepp & Fletcher (2017) garment-led interviews ensure the conversation is less about abstract issues and “more narratives of individual garments and specific events.” On the other hand, Twigger Holroyd (2017) used this method as an ice-breaker to broaden into the participants’ macro perspective of fashion, explaining that “once people get talking, their attitudes and feelings tend to emerge, unprompted, in the course of the conversation.” The pilot study suggested that this method could work both ways: discussing one object together with Herman prompted us to probe its specific material qualities, yet the conversation also revealed Herman’s concern that he wouldn’t fit in with his classmates.

## Performative engagement with garments

Garment-led interviews are initiated by the researcher, however many researchers noted that a participant-led performative engagement with the garments followed. Pink (2009: 127) observed that people tend to “stroke, feel, smell, visually show and as such engage sensorially” with objects during conversations. Skjold (2018) explains that this establishes a dialogue that includes the participant’s sensory experience of dressing and secondly negates the need of a professional fashion vocabulary. Klepp & Bjerck (2014) add that the body can feel when something is wrong but to a lesser extent can explain why. Burcikova (2017) concurs that this performative engagement “helps articulate what may first seem hard to put into words”. She supports my observations with Herman that “satisfaction with a piece of clothing becomes explicit through facial expressions as well as through the ways in which a garment is handled by its owner before any verbal comments have been made”.

Burcikova (2021) further reflected on the essentiality

of the participant engaging multiple senses to unveil contradictory perceptions, using the example of a jumper that is visually appealing but feels itchy against the skin. This is aligned with Herman’s conflict in the pilot study between looking like his peers vs ensuring physical comfort. Skjold (2018) had a similar insight when a participant pointed out the linen he had added to the inside of his scratchy wool trousers; appeasing discomfort on the inside whilst maintaining a social comfort on the outside. Burcikova (2021) argues that such valuable layers of information “are difficult to access through questionnaires and other purely verbal approaches”.

## Everyday diaries

A limitation with wardrobe studies is that the researcher does not observe first-hand the participant’s everyday interactions. Participant self-documentation offers methods for capturing these. The diary interview method is commonly used in ethnography whereby the participant records a diary as a supplement to pre and post interviews (Bartlett, 2012); a means of maintaining the engagement of participants between episodic visits (Hall, 2017).

Bartlett (2012) experienced that a diary’s effectiveness is limited by the participants’ self-motivation. Bjerck (2017) experienced that participants’ level of engagement with this method varies greatly and agrees with Bartlett that they should not be relied on as the only source of data. Nevertheless, both Bjerck and Bartlett found diaries to be an effective supplement to either support or refute complementary data. Burcikova (2021) corroborates that diaries “offer the benefit of comparing verbal accounts to observable behaviour”.

One benefit of self-documentation is that it is unobtrusive (Bartlett, 2012), granting “access to participants’ intimacy while preserving privacy” (Valle-Noronha and Niimimäki, 2017). Secondly, it allows participants to take control of the data gathering process by determining when, what and how to record in their diaries. In the pilot study I found that exploring the most comfortable means of personal expression is essential when working with participants on the autism spectrum. Bartlett (2012) reflected that this sense of ownership strengthened the connection between the research study and the participants. Diaries are traditionally written but technologies such as phone cameras and voice memos open up other means of documentation that can potentially provide a more dynamic and layered understanding of people’s lives. How participants assemble these words and images allows them to curate their experiences and shape their expressions (Pink, 2009, Bartlett, 2012).

Emma Hoette (2017) took a photo of herself every day before she left the house. Later the photograph acted as a visual prompt to notate her experience living in the clothing that day, and reflect on the effect it had on her “emotions, physicality and daily interactions”. Hoette explained that this method’s success lay in the satisfying completion of a daily

repetitive task that built awareness around her personal patterns of use. My initial conversations with potential participants on the autism spectrum have revealed the importance of such routines in their everyday life. Many have also expressed that part of their motivation in participating is the opportunity to recognise their own patterns around sensory inputs and preferences.

Similar to Hoette's daily photographic method, Hall's participants photographed their everyday lives and clothing purchases. However, these were not extensively analysed but rather used as a tool for "further elicitation of narratives" at her next wardrobe visit. Pink (2009: 93) explains that photo elicitation allows "the researcher to compare her or his subjective interpretation of the image with that of the research participant". She also recommends this method to evoke memories and knowledge that might otherwise be inaccessible. Arguably this would be enriched by the presence of the garments captured in the images, as Hall exemplified with her post diary wardrobe study.

## Reflexive sensory autoethnography

Stasiulyte's PhD thesis includes excerpts from her own *sonic diary*: thick descriptions of what she hears in a day. For Stasiulyte this was a way to attune herself to her research topic. Pink (2009) advocates for this type of research preparation to be more "open and attentive to sensory ways of knowing". We are all experienced wearers of clothing, however, the subjectivity of sensory experiences should be acknowledged. For example, Herman described the sound of raindrops on his plastic coat as overwhelming whereas Stasiulyte (2020: 13) found them quietly rhythmical. The researcher's own diary can develop a form of reflexivity that examines their own sensory subjectivity and how their way of understanding the world is different from the participants' (Pink, 2009).

## Summary & Future Work

By contextualising a literature review of relevant tools with reflections on the methods that evolved during the pilot study, several important considerations came to light. Firstly there is great value in following both phenomenological and participatory methodologies. In this way I recognise the limitations of my own embodied empathy in understanding the sensory experiences of others. I see the participants as my expert informants and therefore the tools I select should facilitate a collaboration to elicit the essence of their lived experience. Secondly, in the pilot study I saw that real lives are dynamic<sup>3</sup> and sensory experiences are difficult to articulate verbally. With the exception of Møller et. al's *TDT*, the methods reviewed have not been used with participants

on the autism spectrum. Therefore I must explore these tools collaboratively with my participants, adapting them for their personal everyday practices and communication preferences.

Through the literature review I was reassured to learn that the ad hoc methods from the pilot study have significant overlaps with sensory ethnographic practices used by the *wardrobe network*. Wardrobe studies generally take the format of a researcher visiting the participating informant's home. However, the multitudes of a participant's daily routine should be considered: work, school, gym clothes. An instruction is given for the participant to select just a few garments from their wardrobe based on the knowledge the researcher hopes to obtain. In the context of my PhD I might request garments that evoke the most positive and negative sensory experiences. Participants should not only select garments with special stories but also their mundane everyday clothing. Garment-led interviews can prompt memories, emotions, embodied knowledge, and ultimately dialogues on the qualities that contribute to the participants preferences. A performative engagement with the garments could lead to a whole-body exploration of how their choices are informed by sensations. The participant's body language plays a large part in the researcher's observation. It is anticipated that emotional responses to these experiences emerge in the course of the semi-structured interview.

Diaries can be an effective supplement to a pre and/or post interview and participant observations. Participants can capture their everyday lived experiences, cultivating a sense of ownership in eliciting their own narrative. Keeping a diary can attune participants to their sensory experiences and everyday practices. In addition, it could also be an autoethnographic reflexive tool for the researcher to identify their own sensory biases.

These methods are complementary. A thick description can emerge from a performative engagement with a garment or a written description. A photograph or the handling of the garment can spark an emotional response. Diaries can be a gateway into the garment-led interview and vice-versa. Triangulation of semi-structured interviews, observed body language and self-documentation has great potential to elucidate the participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon being researched.

Through the literature review I discovered allies among the *sensory fashion* group, who borrow from sensory ethnography methodologies. Burcikova's methods resonated because, like me, she is a practice-based researcher. As designer-makers, we have the knowledge and vocabulary to probe deeper with participants into the specific details and material qualities that contribute to their sensory experiences. The dialogue becomes more of an exchange between experts with very different ways of knowing. Furthermore, Burcikova (2021) considers that her fashion practice gives her entry to an area that is not normally accessible to other researchers. I would add that by adopting sensory ethnographic methodologies we gain access to an area of people's lives that is not typically explored by fashion designers. Whilst I hope that

<sup>3</sup> The pilot study was conducted pre-pandemic. Some methods that involve entering another person's home and touching personal belongings should also be adapted to minimize possible infection spread.

the collation of methods in this paper is useful for other researchers, I also hope it introduces fashion designers to tools they have not yet considered. Sensory fashion methodologies are still in their infancy and I hope that my future PhD research can make a significant contribution.

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