

MAGAZINE › JUNE 2022 › CLOTHES

Comfort or style?

Fashioning ourselves to fit the post-pandemic world

Todd Robinson

7th June 2022

“In everyday life dress is the insignia by which we are read, and come to read others,” writes sociologist Joanne Entwistle. In this sense, the clothing we wear forms a visible envelope designating how we appear in the world and how the world, in turn, responds to us. Yet as the past two years have taught us, clothing plays another role by supporting everyday forms of emotional and physical comfort.

While comfortable, elasticated leisure wear provided respite from the sartorial strictures of the pre-pandemic workplace, it also points towards a tension between dressing for oneself and dressing for others. How, then, could attending to those embodied yet nebulous “comfort” feelings associated with wearing clothing that we discovered through the pandemic help us find new forms of social and sartorial agency we can catalyse in a post-pandemic world?

I admit to a vested interest: not only do I wear clothing, but I also worked for a decade as a professional designer. Now my job is to research, think and write about clothing and fashion and our relationship to it, exploring the meaning and significance of bodily experiences in relation to fashion and clothing.

When clothes fail us

The notion of emplacement derives from the practice of sensory ethnography. It highlights the embodied, multi-sensorial experiences in a research context and recognises how meaning emerges from the situated experiences and activities of both participants and researcher.

Despite the obvious appeal and our connection to the materiality of clothing and fashion – we physically interact with and even select pieces of clothing on their material and tactile qualities – the field of fashion studies has until only recently emphasised the symbolic, visual and aesthetic aspects. When we wear items of clothing, they are understood to convey recognisable messages about who we are, often in the form of sociological markers designating gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, age or class.

There are scholars who advance an alternative view by highlighting the embodied, sensory and affective aspects to wearing clothing. According to feminist fashion scholar Lewellyn Negrin, there is

an inextricable connection between the body and clothing, revealed through our kinaesthetic and tactile experiences of clothing as we move in space. When we wear clothing, it shapes and influences our interactions in the world. This might not be immediately obvious, as our everyday experiences of clothing transpire for most of the time at the edges of conscious awareness.

We can, though, notice our clothes when they fail us. For example, we might notice an unsightly hole or stain on a sweater we are wearing, or it feels as if the clothes we are wearing have grown too small, fallen out of fashion or generate a discord with how we perceive ourselves.

Then again, we might also notice our relationship to clothing in more expansive and uplifting moments. We might feel particularly attractive or confident while wearing a favourite blazer or jeans, or experience ourselves in accord with a prevailing sense of style or in tune with aspects of our identity and self-understanding that we consider important or meaningful.

Fabric's sensory role

We can also experience sensory aspects of our relation to clothing as it moves against our skin, as a gentle weight, pressure or warmth registering on different parts of our body – around the waist, the thighs, the hips – as well as the sensation of sartorial kinesis as we move through space and clothes drape and wrap around our body.

These tactile and kinaesthetic sensations can be tinged with feelings such as joy or pride, when we are feeling at our best; or excitement as we anticipate arrival at a fashionable event. However, these more conscious feelings and deliberations and the kinds of bodily sensations that precede them don't work in predictable and uniform ways. For example, a fleeting sensation of fabric against the skin may register as anxiety or self-consciousness about one's body, while at other times an enlivening sense of one's own attractiveness.

Sociologist of clothing Lucia Ruggerone has advanced a concept for understanding the relationship we form with clothing as “the feeling of being-dressed”. This notion is useful in accounting for “feelings of pleasure or displeasure” that might arise in relation outfits of clothing we select or consider. According to Ruggerone, getting dressed is a process of entering into a relationship with ensembles of clothing she terms a “body-clothes” assemblage. It is not the items of clothing alone that matter, nor what they might signify about a us but rather how the “mutual becoming” of us and them when we wear them produces either a positive or negative outcome.

These outcomes are not based in liking or disliking a piece of clothing or ensemble, but rather if the clothes will enhance our power to participate in the practices and activities of our everyday lives.

Dressing for progress

Moreover, there have been historical instances where innovative forms and styles of clothing have ushered in new ways of dressing. The development of bloomers, comprising a new, bifurcated design, made it possible for Victorian women to use what was at the time a novel mode of transport – cycling – bringing about increased forms of social mobility and agency.

While the emergence of “power dressing” in the 1980s typified a tailored style of women’s fashion that mimicked the broad-shouldered tailored suits favoured by men, it’s worth noting that power dressing was not only a style of dress but also a mode of bodily comportment, which realised significant political, social and economic consequences for wearers.

The notion of comportment is useful to understand how clothing can shape and influence our behaviour. Comportment is defined [<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/comportment>] somewhat vaguely in everyday usage as bearing, conduct or demeanour. Yet in the field of corporeal philosophy it refers to the potential or capacity of the body to realise particular tasks or activities through physical action.

Iris Young, in her essay “Throwing like a girl”, addresses differences in styles of movement between men and woman. She argues that, due to the realities of women’s socio-historical situation, there are particularly “feminine modalities of bodily comportment”. She also points out that bodily comportment is revealed in the observable ways in which people adopt a “manner of moving” and “relation to space” and that these movements can be ascribed an intelligibility and significance.^[1]

Post-pandemic dichotomies

A survey of popular predictions of post-pandemic fashion suggests that we have been confronted with two general options. We can continue to wear the kind of comfortable, body-friendly clothing typified by track pants, sweaters and soft shoes we wore through countless lockdowns [<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/how-postpandemic-comfort-first-fashion-accidentally-liberated-women-b1591623.html>]. This is a kind of style governed by the pandemic’s risk averse, housebound, sedentary existence.

The alternative is to engage in a kind of over-expressivity. Denied the opportunity to engage in public displays of fashionable clothing, we manically re-enter a social world inhabited by living and dangerously breathing others. This encourages an experimental approach to clothing where, supposedly, we will feel a desire to embrace risky choices and strange colours [<https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2021/nov/18/sweatpants-pandemic-favorite-slubby-trend-over>], where unusual shapes and silhouettes become the norm.

So what role can clothing play in this post pandemic world? Is it possible we can return to our pre-pandemic modes of clothing consumption and fashionable display? Or do we carry on wearing our

most pragmatic and comfortable clothes and implicitly reject the expressive appeal of fashion?

I think the answer lies less in accepting the false dichotomy of an anti-social melange of physical comfort or ballgowns for dinner and more in recognising that pandemic dressing revealed how we are more than capable of fashioning ourselves to fit new and changing circumstances. Perhaps this demonstrates a way of engaging with clothing and fashion that is about satisfying oneself, by tuning into a nascent sartorial agency. So, as we move back into the public realm, we do so with a recalibrated sense of what it means to find comfort or even pleasure in wearing clothing. This pleasure is tied to how we feel in our clothes, in a world we share with others.

Footnotes

1. Although this work has been critiqued by some feminist scholars on essentialist grounds as well as construing a normative femininity as inhibited and subordinate to masculine comportment, it does offer a way of considering the relationship between fashion design and garments, movement and agency

References and further reading

- Entwistle, J. (1997). Power Dressing and Fashioning of the Career Woman. In *Buy this Book: Studies in Advertising and Consumption*, edited by Mica Nava, Andrew Blake, Iain MacRury, and Barry Richards. London: Routledge.
- Jungnickel, K. (2018). *Bikes and Bloomers: Victorian Women Inventors and Their Extraordinary Cycle Wear*. In. Goldsmiths, University London: ProQuest Ebook Central.
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uts/detail.action?docID=5377495>
- Negrin, L. (2016). Maurice Merleau-Ponty: The Corporeal Experience of Fashion. In *Thinking Through Fashion: A guide to the key theorists*, edited by A. Rocamora and A. Smelik. London, New York: I.B. Taurus. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9780755694785.ch-007>
- Pink, S. (2009). *Doing sensory ethnography*. London: Sage.
- Ruggerone, L. (2017). The Feeling of Being Dressed: Affect Studies and the Clothed Body. *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*, 21 (5):573-593.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2016.1253302>
- Wissinger, E. (2007). Modelling a way of life: Immaterial and affective labour in the fashion modelling industry. *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization*, 7(1):250-269.
- Young, I. M. (1980). Throwing like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality. *Human Studies*, 3(2), 137–156. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20008753>

About the author

Todd Robinson

Todd Robinson is Senior Lecturer in the School of Design, University of Technology Sydney, Australia. He is an interdisciplinary researcher, designer and artist specialising in the relationship between fashion and embodiment. Dr Robinson has worked as a fashion designer and his research is oriented towards developing embodied perspectives in fashion studies and the associated implications for fashion practice, theory, technology and ethics. His work has been published in *Fashion Theory*, *The International Journal of Fashion Studies* and *Fashion Practice*, and he has participated in numerous exhibitions and projects in Australia, China, Europe and the United States.

Cite this work

Robinson, T. (2022, June 7). Comfort or style?: Fashioning ourselves to fit the post-pandemic world [Online]. The Sociological Review Magazine. <https://doi.org/10.51428/tsr.xrc05773>

Copyright

© 2022 Todd Robinson. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Please consult the Creative Commons guidelines for information on how you may reproduce and re-use the content of this article.