

Articles

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Personal clothing style and self-concept

Personal clothing style and self-concept: Embracing the true, the ideal and the creative self

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Received 1 December 2021; Accepted 20 March 2022

Abstract

Research shows that clothing style can influence self-perception, cognition and behaviour. However, the concept of personal clothing style and how it is linked to self-concept from an individual and subjective perspective of the wearer has received limited empirical attention. This qualitative study aimed to explore women's lived experiences and perceptions of personal clothing style. Using a homogeneous sample of seven female participants, data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis revealed that personal clothing style constitutes an embodiment of the true self, representation of the ideal self and expression of the creative self. More specifically, personal clothing style is predicated on self-knowledge, consistency and enduring sense of comfort. It is also perceived to actualize desired self-conceptions and one's creative potential. Findings not only provide an empirically founded conceptualization of personal clothing style but also identify its important psychological properties with implications for both psychology and fashion research.

Keywords: fashion, embodiment, self-presentation, self-concept, , lived experience, phenomenological analysis

Previous research shows how specific styles of dress may induce clothing-consistent self-definitions and potentially influence cognition and behaviour (Adam and Galinsky 2012; Hannover and Kühnen 2002; Kang et al. 2013). However, only a few of the existing studies investigated individual clothing practices of women (e.g. Guy and Banim 2000; Fleetwood-Smith et al. 2019; McNeill 2018; Woodward 2005). In this context, the concept of personal style has received little attention. Personal clothing style is generally defined as a particular way of self-expression through clothing and accessories (Armstrong et al. 2018). And yet, what such self-expression exactly entails is still unclear (Riggle 2015) and currently lacks empirical evidence. In response to very limited empirical research on both the notion of personal style and its psychological underpinning, using a qualitative approach, this study explored the meaning of personal clothing style from the wearer's perspective and how it is linked to self-concept.

The concept of personal style

The concept of personal style may seem self-evident, and this possibly explains limited academic literature on the subject. It is commonly agreed that a style is personal when it expresses personality, character or some other aspect of the inner self (Riggle 2015).

While in the context of fashion, style generally alludes to a certain objective design pattern such as minimalistic or casual, personal style relates to an underlying psychological reality of the wearer (Riggle 2015). Fashion theorists claim that personal style involves 'a highly personalised and self-controlled expression of particular aesthetic ability' (Miller 1994: 55) and reflects individual's unique history (Russo 2012). A sense

of style develops as a result of an interplay between experimentation with clothing and construction of the sense of self (Kaiser et al. 1991). However, most of the existing accounts on personal style either lack empirical evidence (e.g. Kaiser 1997; Miller 1994; Russo 2012) or do not specifically address clothing style (e.g. Simmel 1991; Riggle 2015).

In recent years, the concept of personal style has gained more attention in fashion sustainability and consumer research (Armstrong et al. 2018; Cho et al. 2015; Lundblad and Davies 2016; Gupta et al. 2019). Armstrong et al. (2018: 559) have developed the clothing style confidence (CSC) scale proposing that people who are confident in their clothing style dress in the way to reflect the 'real' self. Style-oriented consumers choose clothing that accentuates individuality, distinctiveness and uniqueness (Gupta et al. 2019). Lundblad and Davies (2016) have suggested that when individuals follow the self, they tend to develop a unique style, which embodies their personality, values and attitudes. This is particularly true for women, who as opposed to men tend to seek more uniqueness in their clothing and use a wider variety of styles to express their individuality (Cho et al. 2015). However, the aforementioned studies focus on possible sustainability-related aspects of personal style rather than its psychological underpinnings and do not address the concept of personal style in its own right. Thus, there is a need for conceptualizing personal clothing style grounded in individual experiences using an empirical lens, which can reveal subjective nuances of this ubiquitous phenomenon.

Interplay between clothing and self-concept

A link between clothing and identity has been discussed in various occasions (see Johnson et al. 2014), suggesting that individuals not only portray but also establish self-

views through clothing. It has been found that women use clothing to create positive and coherent images of themselves that reflect aspects of their identity (Guy and Banim 2000). Clothing acts as a visual reflection of individual characteristics, preferences, attitudes and lifestyles (Masuch and Hefferon 2014). By maintaining a certain style, women allow others to draw conclusions about who they are, which may in turn impact their lived experience of selfhood. This encourages a closer investigation of the link between personal style and self-concept.

Self-concept encompasses the totality of thoughts and feeling about the self as an object (Rosenberg 1979). While the self is a broader construct and encompasses all that is experienced as 'me' (Combs and Snygg 1959), self-concept refers to that part of the self, which an individual is to a certain extent aware of, hence comprises the most salient and enduring self-views (Hattie 2014). As the present study relied on open self-disclosure using the interview-based data collection method, reference was made specifically to self-concept; namely, most salient self-views that emerged as participants spoke about their personal clothing style.

Clothing and self-presentation

According to Owens and Samblanet (2013), the way people present themselves to the world is shaped by the self-concept, which largely develops through social interaction. Clothing allows to externalize desired self-images and make them accessible to social evaluation (Kaiser 1997). As people tend to define themselves the way they expect others to view them (Mead 1934), the real or imagined impressions they make on others through their clothing style may have a direct impact on their self-concept. Therefore, it is

important to understand how people experience and make sense of their personal clothing style.

Although people differ in the extent they perceive their clothing as part of the self (Sontag and Lee 2004), self-congruity theory postulates that they generally prefer clothing styles that correspond to their self-concept (Sirgy 1982). Consumer studies show that both young and elderly women engage in symbolic fashion consumption to articulate their identities (Anand and Kaur 2018; McNeill 2018; Thomas and Peters 2009; Vigolo and Ugolini 2016). Women often experience clothing as strongly related to their selfhood, which induces a sense of resonance between clothing and the self (Fleetwood-Smith et al. 2019). Guy and Banim (2000) explored how women used clothing to present different images of the self in everyday life, showing that by actively engaging with their clothing women seek to display actual and desired aspects of their identity as well as achieve consistency between various self-images. This suggests that individual clothing choices are inextricably linked to important aspects of self-concept. Therefore, a better and more in-depth understanding of how personal clothing style resonates with the self-concept is much needed.

Clothing and self-perception

The importance to explore the relationship between personal style and self-concept further lies in the fact that clothing can impact how individuals perceive themselves with potential implications on cognition and behaviour (Adam and Galinsky 2012; Hannover and Kühnen 2002; Kang et al. 2013; Kellerman and Laird 1982). Research on clothing and self-perception shows that during wear people establish a consistent representation of themselves by matching the meaning their clothing holds and their self-views (Hannover

and Kühnen 2002). For instance, they tend to regard themselves as more reliable and competent when wearing formal clothes, while more friendly and creative when wearing casual clothes (Karl et al. 2013). People form ideas about who they are based on what comes to mind easily (Oyserman 2001) and clothing does offer tangible and readily accessible cues. Therefore, in line with Johnson et al. (2014), it is important to understand the relationship between clothing and that specific aspect of the self, which indicates who a person is as a unique and distinct individual; namely, the self-concept.

The theory of embodied cognition suggests that physical states of the body contribute to shaping mental representations of abstract concepts and thus may trigger corresponding cognitive activities and behaviour (Adam and Galinsky 2012). Based on the extended-self theory (Belk 1988), clothing during wear is perceived as an extension of the body and, thus, capable to impact cognition and behaviour just as bodily reactions (Kraus and Mendes 2014). For example, Kraus and Mendes (2014) showed that wearing clothes that hold social class symbols elicits physiological response in the wearer associated with dominance leading to more self-benefitting behaviour. According to Briñol et al. (2017), the more profound effects of embodiment are potentially due to a stronger association to self-concept. Central to this process is the meaning clothing holds and the strength of association between this meaning and relevant cognitive and behavioural patterns (Adam and Galinsky 2012). Symbolic interactionism postulates (Blumer 1969) that the meaning is formed as a result of social exposure and in close interaction with the self. This meaning allows to draw inferences about the self, which then in turn may be used to further reinforce specific self-definitions.

Although initially product symbolism was explored in general and stereotypical terms, eventually phenomenological nature of symbolic meaning-making gained momentum (Wright et al. 1992). According to Guy and Banim, 'as women use their clothes or decide whether they like themselves in particular garments at particular points in time their clothing becomes invested with their meaning' (2000: 326), which can only be understood by exploring the different ways in which it is embodied by the wearer. Hence, as clothes are often imbued with meanings accessible only to the wearer (Fleetwood-Smith et al. 2019), to understand the relationship between personal style and self-concept, it is essential to unravel what personal style means to the wearer and how that meaning evolves.

The current study

An empirically founded conceptualization of personal style is currently still lacking and there is very little knowledge on how it relates to self-concept. Existing studies support the idea of a reciprocal interplay between clothing style and self-concept, yet an understanding rooted in individual experience is missing and much needed. Using a phenomenological approach, this qualitative study aimed to explore women's lived experiences and perceptions of personal style and how these related to their self-concept. The research question was the following: what does it mean to have a personal style from the wearer's perspective and how is it related to self-concept?

This study specifically explored personal style in relation to clothing. As such, when participants spoke about the personal style, they specifically referred to their way of dressing. The aim was to provide an empirically founded conceptualization of personal

clothing style, contributing to the existing literature on the enclothed self with a focus on women's relationship with clothing.

Methods

Study design

A qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews was used to gather rich data as the concept of personal clothing style and its link to self-concept is under-researched (Smith and Osborn 2008). With the research aims in mind, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used for its emphasis on each unique experience and subjective nature of the investigated phenomenon. IPA allowed to describe and explain the notion of personal clothing style in sufficient detail without generalizing or testing assumptions (Willig 2013). IPA focused on how participants made meaning of their individual experience within their personal and social environment (Smith and Osborn 2008), which was deemed fundamental to understand the relationship between personal clothing style and self-concept.

Participants

Participants were selected using snowball and purposive sampling methods for sample homogeneity in accordance with IPA standards (Smith and Osborn 2008). The sample consisted of seven female individuals between the ages of 26 and 34 and who identified themselves as having a personal clothing style. All participants were Europeans living in different metropolitan cities (see [Table 1](#)). Although most participants were Lithuanian by nationality, they have been living, studying and working in different metropolitan cities across Europe, such as London, Paris, Milan and Amsterdam. Each of them holds a

higher education degree. Pseudonyms were used to refer to participants and to ensure anonymity.

Table 1: Participant demographic details. <?Single?>

Pseudonyms	Age	Gender	Nationality
Linda	31	Female	Lithuanian
Sarah	31	Female	Lithuanian
Bella	26	Female	Lithuanian
Megan	34	Female	Lithuanian
Claire	28	Female	Albanian
Anna	33	Female	Norwegian
Mary	33	Female	Lithuanian

Materials and procedure

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. In line with the exploratory nature of the study, this data collection method was deemed most appropriate to focus on individual experiences and provide rich naturalistic data (Smith and Osborn 2008).

Participants were asked a number of open-ended questions, such as ‘[w]hat does it mean to you to have a personal clothing style? what does your style say about you as a person’ and ‘[w]hat is the difference between having a personal style and just being dressed?’ which encouraged a detailed reflection of their personal clothing style revealing associations to self-concept. The interview schedule was self-designed based on the existing literature (e.g. Armstrong et al. 2018; Anand and Kaur 2018; Guy and Banim 2000). There were eighteen open-ended questions in total. The semi-structured approach allowed to adapt to each individual case and encouraged more in-depth sharing of personal experiences around the development of personal clothing style (Smith and Osborn 2008).

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Psychology Review Ethics Panel at the London College of Fashion. Due to COVID-19 outbreak, all individual interviews took place online via Facetime. Prior to the interview, all participants received an information sheet and digitally signed the consent form. Each interview lasted 40 minutes on average, after which participants were verbally debriefed. To preserve participants' anonymity and confidentiality, any identifying information was omitted from the recordings, transcripts and findings.

Data analysis

IPA was deemed particularly appropriate with the study's focus being on identity concerns and a sense of self implicated in participants' narratives around personal clothing style. It provided a comprehensive perspective on the meaning of personal style and allowed to unravel subtle aspects of self-concept emerging from participants' accounts. Data were analysed on a case-by-case basis and adopting line-by-line coding to understand each individual account and capture personally unique perspectives across participants (Smith and Eatough 2011). This analysis process involved identifying the themes within the first case and then integrating with the themes from subsequent cases. Each case was analysed in a few stages as recommended by Smith and Osborn (2008). First, data were read a few times to gain a holistic perspective of the case at hand and making notes of codes that appeared significant. Transcripts were then read again more closely, transforming initial codes into more specific themes with an emphasis on the links between personal clothing style and self-concept emerging from participants' accounts. The next step involved identifying patterns across the initial themes, which were then organized into clusters making sure that they were grounded in the data (Smith

and Eatough 2011). At the next stage, initial themes were refined looking for connections between them and merging some of them together. This process was followed for each individual case. At the end, the themes from each case were merged into one final list and presented as the master and subordinate themes across the sample. Reliability was established with the second author reviewing the coding process.

Reflexivity

Authors had an extensive knowledge of various fashion-related topics and shared similar characteristics with the participants. Although, this helped to better inform the study and design the interview schedule, potentially, it could also have given rise to certain preconceptions and expectations around the findings with a potential impact on the interpretation of the data from an epistemological standpoint. To address this issue, authors strictly adhered to the standards of IPA to ensure that the themes were clearly grounded in the data rather than preconceived ideas or theoretical conceptualizations (Willig 2013).

Results

Three master themes have emerged from the analysis of the seven semi-structured interviews (see Table 2), showing that personal clothing style was experienced as a reflection of different meanings related to the true, ideal and creative self. In the following sections, each theme is presented with the supporting verbatim extracts.

Table 2: Master and subordinate themes. <?Single?>

Master theme	Subordinate theme
1. Embodying the True Self	1.1. Knowing Thyself
	1.2. Feeling Comfortable in Her Own Skin
	1.3. Consistency: 'It's like a signature'
2. Representing the Ideal Self	2.1. Seeking Self-Actualization

Theme 1: 'Embodying the True Self'

Embodying the true self refers to the link between personal style and self-concept inherent in clothing choices, which reflect various self-perceptions related to individual values, interests, self-beliefs and roles. All seven participants felt that their personal clothing style encompassed an authentic self-representation, predicated on self-knowledge, a sense of comfort and consistency.

For Megan, personal style was about staying 'true from inside and outside to herself'. In particular, her clothing choices reflected personal interests such as 'Japanese culture, art and history'. Claire similarly felt that personal style was 'a character thing' and drew a link between herself as a person and her clothing style: 'I see myself as a very neat person and I like everything to be in order and clean and I like everything to have a specific place and that shows also in my personal style'.

The link between clothing style and self-concept was further elaborated when Sarah who explained how her personal style had changed in response to major life transitions. As shown below, her way of dress aligned with the changing sense of self in the course of important life events such as building a relationship with her partner and becoming a mother:

He wanted me to dress in a more reserved way [...] And yet somehow with time something changed. I think something changed inside me and from there you could notice that change in the way I dress. [...] As I am currently pregnant, I don't want to look sexy, I want to look more or less like soft, like something a mother would look like.

As illustrated below, she experienced a very deep connection to her clothing style as if it was a part of her and hence, it felt effortless and inherently personal: 'I don't see myself

naked. The concept of me it comes with clothes [...] Personal style it has to be something that you just have it. It has to flow’.

Bella explained that personal clothing style could not be understood without seeing a person as a whole, including ‘your manners, the way you walk, the way you speak, the way you behave around the others’. This suggests that clothes acquire meaning only in relation to a person wearing them. As suggested by Anna ‘it’s not in your closet, it’s in you’. A white jacket might hold different meanings depending on the subjective experience of the wearer but to Sarah it is a symbol of success. This meaning is tied to her self-concept and through clothing embodied in her way of being. ‘When I’m thinking “I am so successful” so I see a white jacket I’m sure I’m a very successful person and looking so strong and neat and independent’.

Knowing Thyself

Although implicit in all interviews, four participants specifically indicated that their personal clothing style was strongly related to self-knowledge, which they acquired through experience and self-reflection. Megan emphasized the importance of self-development as she felt that creating a personal style, required learning who she was, what defined her as a person and, also, what was important to her, all of which was reflected in her clothing style: ‘I guess only when I started to think more about my personality as such, reading some books, more traveling, going into fashion history details maybe after that I mixed and matched a perfect style for myself’.

Similarly, Linda and Anna drew a connection between personal style and self-concept, explaining that their personal clothing style developed with age as a result of growing self-knowledge and self-acceptance. ‘With age, you kind of know what suits

you, what doesn't. You know what you like and what you don't like [...] I've grown older so I guess I accepted myself more' (Linda).

While other participants emphasized the importance of self-development, Bella spoke of the role of self-awareness in the development of personal style. For her, having a personal style necessarily implied being aware of 'what her values are, what she believes in', which then allowed to choose clothing, which 'tells you something about the character and personality in general'. As personal style is related to 'the way a person is formed as she is', she believed that everyone has a personal clothing style although what really matters is to be aware of it. 'If you understand your personal style you might better understand yourself like this [...] That's definitely something which leads you to a more successful representation of yourself and more successful relation with yourself'.

'Feeling Comfortable in one's Own Skin'

For all seven participants, their experience of being dressed reflecting their personal style was imbued with a feeling of comfort. For Megan, Bella and Claire specifically personal clothing style was primarily about the sense of comfort rather than 'looking good'. For example: 'Although I like how I look like it doesn't correspond to my inner self – I don't feel comfortable and when I don't feel comfortable, I'm not looking good in what I wear' (Megan).

Megan's personal style involved militaristic and masculine elements, which served as a counterbalance against the sense of vulnerability, allowing her to embody the meanings of strength and security: 'When I was a teenager [...] I tried to defend myself and sometimes my style reflects that. That's why I like militaristic clothing, I like masculine clothing and comfortable, if you would need to defend yourself'.

Similarly, Sarah would experience a rise in self-confidence when her clothing reflected her personal style, because it was about ‘being’ herself: ‘It really gives confidence. Because it’s like being yourself [...] Because when we are ourselves we make the best decisions, and we feel the best possible way’.

Therefore, she would get a sense of discomfort when wearing clothing styles incongruent with her self-concept. As shown below, for her it is almost a physical experience, which highlights potential embodiment effect taking place during wear: ‘If we wear clothes that it’s not us like...me, I feel I can’t even sit straight’.

This resonates with Linda who would become self-conscious, which impacted her focus on activities at hand: ‘I start thinking about that and that obviously stops me from either enjoying what I’m doing or being fully immersed in what I’m doing’.

Similarly, Anna felt that her personal style allowed her to portray her personality in an authentic way, thus wearing something that did not align to how she perceived herself triggered a change in her usual way of being:

I’m quite social and I’m not afraid to approach or talk to people but when I was wearing that dress I felt like my normal personality would come off as a little bit too much [...] I did not feel as comfortable and as confident as I normally do. I didn’t feel like me in a way.

'Consistency: It's like a signature'

All seven participants felt that their personal clothing style constituted a distinctive pattern of self-presentation, which allowed to recognize a person as such. While Anna felt that people have a personal style ‘when they combine items in a way that is recognizable and constant’, Linda explained that personal style was about ‘looking the same’. This highlights how personal style is perceived as a certain distinctive and

personally unique pattern that transcends clothing and becomes a signifier of identity:

‘They might be wearing different clothes but they are always similar looking [...] there is this look that you can just say “yes, it is that person”’ (Linda).

Self-consistency motivation was evident in Claire’s interview when she explained how through her clothing she constructed an image of herself that she felt inclined if not bound to maintain: ‘You stick to your style because you’ve created your own certain image and don’t wanna maybe deviate from’.

That self-constructed image made her feel comfortable and that was what kept it constant. However, her using phrases such as ‘daring’ and ‘deviate’ felt as if she was not allowed to change it. A change would require stepping out of comfort into unfamiliar, which is ‘difficult’ and sometimes ‘scary’. While she felt that the way she dressed was entirely her choice, it also constituted a social image that she felt committed to:

An image is created, it’s an unconscious thing [...] But then at some point you have to sort of keep up with it, because it’s known, and you are used to it [...] And also you probably think that it’s also what people like to see you in.

Theme 2: 'Representing the Ideal Self'

Although personal clothing style was primarily described as an embodiment of important aspects of self-concept, which felt like an effortless act of ‘being yourself’, six participants spoke about it as a way to represent their ideal self whereby they could actualize aspirational sides of themselves when interacting with others.

Anna felt that when choosing clothing she could not refrain from thinking about how others perceived her, because that impacted how she perceived herself. Therefore, in Anna’s words, personal style represents ‘who you want to be and how you want others to

perceive you' and involves clothing, which 'elevates your total look and represents you in a way that you want to be seen'.

Self-enhancement aspiration was evident in Sarah's interview. Although personal style was an embodiment of her 'story' and a 'character', in social interactions, making a positive impression was a predominant concern. Thus, in her clothing, she sought to simultaneously be herself and represent her ideal self to elicit positive reactions from others:

I think my personal style says that I'm creative, carefree, adventurous and spontaneous person. That I'm happy. I think my clothes say a lot about me [...] When you enter the room, people look at you and they know. So, you want that they know that you are amazing, so successful, and other values that you want to show that you have.

'Seeking Self-actualization'

Seeking self-actualization related to the ways in which participants sought to realize the desired personal qualities and ideals through their personal clothing style. This was imbued with meanings of what they felt was uniquely pertinent to who they were and what they valued. Megan spoke of how she was able to realize her personal 'uniqueness' through her style. It was not the aesthetic sophistication of clothing she referred to but rather that kind of uniqueness, which was inherent in simply being herself. On the other hand, Linda highlighted how the realization of her desired personal qualities was at least in part dependent on social recognition: 'I try to be elegant but whether I achieve that it's obviously a question and it's not for me to judge, but I'd like to say that sometimes people might think that I'm elegant'.

Anna and Sarah spoke about personal style as a way to embody the best version of the self. Sarah felt her clothing style not only reflected her changing self-views but

also helped her to gradually become a person she wanted to be. It is interesting how she said she wanted ‘to be kind and nice’ rather than just look that way, which emphasized the embodiment quality inherent in her personal style:

I want to be a good mother and I express it with the clothes I wear now. I’m not gonna put a leather dress now. No, I want to be kind and nice and giving so I’m wearing light colour clothes and fluffy stuff [...] maybe it can bring us closer to the person we want to be.

Theme 3: 'Expressing the Creative Self'

This theme highlights the link between personal style and creative self-concept, which is achieved through an active and effortful engagement with clothing. As shown below, for Linda, creating her personal clothing style had always been a way to express her creative self, which she felt she was not able to achieve through other means. This constant creative endeavour imbued her clothing with personal meaningfulness. ‘For me clothes may have been that outlet to express myself creatively because any other outlet in my life I am not very creative in those aspects’.

As shown below, for Anna personal clothing style was also a product of her creativity, as it was not about following or copying trends. She felt knowledgeable and independent and was therefore able to make self-determined clothing choices: ‘Creativity is like the knowledge you have and you put it together with something that you’ve probably seen [...] Very often I combine them (clothing items) completely different than what I see’.

Claire further explained the relationship between personal style and creative self-concept saying that to have a personal style ‘you need to have a thought about it and get a pleasure out of it’, which clearly indicates an emotional involvement with her clothes, as

when she failed to achieve the desired outcomes, she found it 'frustrating'. She emphasized personal meaningfulness of this creative endeavour, which made her more immune to social evaluation and associated pressure: 'I'm dressed in a good way, it's just simply according to my opinion, not necessarily good to the eye of other people'.

Discussion

The present study set out to explore the lived experiences of personal clothing style in relation to self-concept. Phenomenological analysis led to the conceptualization of personal style in relation to three dimensions of self-concept, namely the true, the ideal and the creative self. This is in line with other studies showing how women use clothing to manage their identities by creating and expressing relevant aspects of their selfhood, in terms of who they are, desire to be or fear they might become (Guy and Banim 2000; McNeill 2018; Woodward 2005).

While Belk (1988) proposed that individuals come to know themselves through their possessions, in the case of personal style it is, predominantly, self-knowledge, which orients preferences towards certain styles of clothing (Wright et al. 1992). Self-knowledge is one of the basic components of self-concept (Baumeister 2010).

Participants' accounts show that personal clothing style is predicated on various self-conceptions informed by personal experience (e.g. Megan), growing self-awareness (e.g. Bella) and self-confidence (e.g. Anna). As individuals go through important life transitions, they define their roles and eventually build relatively clear and stable self-representations (Diehl et al. 2011), which are reflected in personal clothing style in a consistent and durable fashion.

Moreover, two participants' accounts suggest that confidence in personal clothing style may grow with age, as they come to know and accept themselves. This might be related to self-concept clarity, namely, the extent to which the contents of self-concept are clear, internally consistent and temporarily stable, which tends to positively correlate with age and self-esteem (Diehl and Hay 2011). McNeill (2018) showed that women with stronger self-concept were more independent and creative in their clothing choices while those with weaker self-concept were more insecure and often resorted to fashion 'followership'. Megan's, Anna's and Linda's accounts show how growing self-knowledge and self-confidence allows them to detach from others and follow their own instinct in relation to their clothing choices. This suggests that the extent of autonomy and disinterest in fashion trends may depend on the strength of association between clothing style and self-concept, which is a function of self-knowledge and constitutes the basis of personal clothing style.

This study has shown that personal clothing style for its close link to the true self elicits an enduring sense of comfort. In line with various studies on authentic self-expression showing that authentic behaviours positively impact subjective well-being, self-esteem and mood (Bettencourt and Sheldon 2001; Sheldon et al. 1997; Schlegel et al. 2009), Masuch and Hefferon (2014) proposed that wearing clothing infused with self-relevant memories and meanings reinforces the selfhood and potentially enhances well-being. This study extends this line of research revealing how wearing clothing styles, which conflict with the self-concept, may elicit a sense of discomfort with cognitive and behavioural implications. Participant accounts referring to inability to focus (e.g. Linda), socialize (e.g. Anna) or find the right posture (e.g. Sarah) reveal a potential embodiment

quality of personal clothing style, namely an implicit alignment between clothing style, cognition and behaviour. Understanding embodiment effect of personal clothing style is an interesting and important avenue for future study.

Research on self-concept shows that people tend to perceive themselves in part based on how they believe others view them (Cooley 1902) and are, generally, motivated to enhance their self-views (Baumeister 2010). This study complements the finding of Guy and Banim (2000) who found that women in their clothing seek to portray desired self-images, highlighting that ideal self stems from what they most value in themselves given the time and context. In particular, personal clothing style was experienced as conducive to self-actualization for it allowed to embody desired personal qualities and identities such as in Sarah's case being a kind person, a good mother or a successful professional. In line with Cooley (1902), Linda's and Sarah's accounts show that self-actualization takes place through social interaction as they observe themselves and subsequently evaluate and internalizes the impressions, real or expected, their personal clothing style evokes in others.

Finally, three participants' accounts suggest a link between personal clothing style and creative self-concept predicated on awareness of and trust in one's creative ability. According to Karwowski (2016), creative self-concept encompasses people convictions about their ability to think creatively and the role of creativity in forming identity. Anna's and Claire's accounts indicate that they experience the sense of clarity and sovereignty about their personal clothing style, which is linked to an active, effortful and self-directed engagement with clothing. Personal clothing style as a creative outlet sustains the

creative self-concept, which might enhance not only creative engagement and performance (Beghetto and Karwowski 2017) but also a sense of personal identity.

The relationship between creativity and identity has long been a subject of interest with the main idea being that creative acts may enhance the sense of self (Dollinger and Dollinger 2017). Participants reported a higher sense of self-expression while they seek to integrate and find balance between various images they hold of themselves. By using creativity to express the self, they potentially reinforce their self-views both in the process of creation of their personal clothing style and during wear, given the impact of clothing on self-perception (Johnson et al. 2014). Assuming that everyday creative self-expression can be a resilience mechanism against anxiety and stress (Barbot and Heuser 2017), future studies could specifically address the interplay between personal clothing style, creative self-concept and identity, which would allow to formulate more substantiated hypotheses on potential well-being implications of personal clothing style.

Implications of findings

This study revealed that personal clothing style was an aspect of a deeply psychological process, which allowed women to embody the true self, represent the ideal self and express the creative self. By extending existing qualitative accounts on psychological underpinning of women's clothing practices, this study provides detailed empirical basis to support the link between personal clothing style and self-concept. The findings open new avenues for future studies and can be applied across disciplines such as psychology, sustainable fashion and fashion design.

Future studies could investigate the potential well-being implications of personal clothing style and prospects of therapeutic application. According to Raimy (1975), the

basic aim of therapy is to correct various misconceptions individuals hold of themselves that might be achieved by making positive self-representation more accessible to cognition (Brewin 2006) or promoting greater self-acceptance through integration of various aspects of the self (Maslow 1962). Personal clothing style with its link to self-concept could potentially aid in such endeavours, for instance, by facilitating and consolidating positive changes in self-conception, although this needs further empirical attention.

According to Preiholt (2012), personal style has now become the main driving force within the fashion system. The conceptualization of personal clothing style rooted in individual perceptions and experiences can inform and encourage client-driven strategies in fashion with possible positive implication on both consumer experience, consumption trends and sustainability. Based on current findings, the present study advocates for increasingly consumer-centric models to create opportunities for consumer participation, for example, in fashion design. In particular, empathic (Niinimäki and Koskinen 2011) and positive design (Desmet and Pohlmeier 2013) models could be used as a framework of reference to create a stronger link between clothing and the wearer's self-concept.

Study evaluation

This study followed rigorous standards of IPA to engage in an in-depth, individual and unique analysis of the phenomenon of personal clothing style to provide a novel perspective on this under-researched topic. The rich and exploratory nature of the findings helped to capture the much-needed subjectivity inherent in the understanding of personal clothing style, contributing to existing research on the psychology of women's

clothing practices. Importantly, it shed light on the relationship between clothing and self-concept, which has only been hypothesized in previous studies.

However, some limitations need to be acknowledged. First, a small and homogeneous sample although in line with the rules of IPA does not allow for generalization of the findings (Smith and Osborn 2008), which would require further elaboration by way of experimental/quantitative investigation. Nonetheless, such sample was necessary to fully engage with the data and gain a thorough understanding of the investigated phenomenon. Moreover, there might be relevant gender and cultural differences in how personal clothing style is developed and experienced (Cho et al. 2015). Therefore, future studies could use different samples considering both genders and diverse cultural backgrounds to broaden the current conceptualization of personal clothing style.

Conclusions

This study extends existing literature and provides important insights into the under-researched but prominent concept of individually and subjectively experienced personal clothing style, showing how the latter is linked to the true, the ideal and the creative self. The findings further the discourse in which clothing patterns constitute an important component within the personality paradigm. Further investigation into therapeutic implications of clothing, creativity in everyday clothing practices and opportunities for direct consumer involvement in fashion design is strongly encouraged.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all the participants who volunteered for this study.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Vingilyte, Justina and Khadaroo, Ameerah (2022), 'Personal clothing style and self-concept: Embracing the true, the ideal and the creative self', *Fashion, Style & Popular Culture*, X:X, pp. 00–00,
https://doi.org/10.1386/fspc10.1386/fspc_00130_1.

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