Voices From Women's Wardrobes: Mid-Life and Self-Image

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Introduction: Current fashion research has not explored adult women's perceptions of available clothing choices in relation to the changes they experience during midlife. Women's biological and physical transformations include but are not limited to pregnancy, motherhood, and menopause (Northrup, 2006). Women in mid-life may also experience a diminishing social presence, as Western patriarchal constructs emphasize a beauty ideal that is young and thin (Twigg, 2010, 2013). Cultural shifts such as divorce or the premature death of a partner or loved one may significantly disrupt a woman's emotional and psychological disposition. In response, clothing may become a vital expression of a woman's personal and public personas. This study sough to identify women's perceptions of clothing and fashion based upon the following research question: How do mature women successfully navigate the fashion system and develop a wardrobe that reflects their personal identity? Buckley and Clark (2012) argue that "the truly ordinary remains elusive" (p. 18) within fashion scholarship and discourse. Tseëlon (1995) refers to the many identities that women portray with clothing. During mid-life, everyday wardrobe and daily dressing practices foster an elusive and undesired self-image, leading toward the possibility of a wardrobe impasse—a visual and symbolic clothing side effect synonymous with mid-life challenges. In contrast, a woman may achieve self-actualization and visually project dress success. Thus, in order to better understand embodied dress practice, this study drew upon three theories to investigate ways that women in mid-life negotiate the fashion system to develop their self-image: (i) dress as an embodied practice (Entwistle, 2000); (ii) fashion as a way to validate the self (Wilson 1985, 2003); and (iii) photography as a means for personal reflection of one's self-image (Nash, 2014).

Methods: The study applied a qualitative approach with Photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997), an innovative research methodology that utilizes photographs taken by participants as a means to prompt reflective perspectives. We used a snowball method to recruit a group of women (n=11) between the ages of 45-55, of varying lifestyles and education. Exclusion criteria included: women who wear uniforms; women who self-identified as wearing petite, plus size, or tall clothing; as well as women employed or teaching in fashion and beauty industries. Participants completed a brief demographic survey that requested information on age, cultural background, profession, family status, and household income. Participants took full-body "selfie" photographs over the course of one week, while wearing their favourite daywear outfits to create a short personal fashion diary or wardrobe story. Each participant identified three photographs that became an integral part of the interview process, encouraging dialogue and self-reflection. In semi-structured interviews, participants discussed personal viewpoints about their wardrobes, sources of fashion information, who influenced their fashion decisions, how they chose their wardrobe items, and their opinions about their image as presented in the photographs. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Data were thematically analyzed. Assessment of keywords

in context provided linguistic fingerprints to obtain data measurements, thereby supporting the Photovoice approach (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Pennebaker, Mehl, & Niederhoffer, 2003).

Discussion and Conclusion: This research marked the debut of Photovoice in fashion research to elicit the embodied dress practice of women in mid-life, drawing on their personal reflexivity to reveal deep perspectives that otherwise may have gone undetected. The results were categorized according to common themes: past and present fashion influences, shopping behaviours, wardrobe building strategies, as well as common strategies used to navigate the fashion system in order to establish a wardrobe that reflected their self-image. The results are important to fashion designers, retailers, and marketers. Participants' viewpoints promote a better understanding of this market segment through discussion of fast and slow fashion and behaviours related to how individual and public personas are created, modified, maintained, and communicated. Women's personal perspectives and self-valued dressing choices reveal if their everyday wardrobe supports or compromises their desired self-image, thus fostering dress success or a wardrobe impasse.

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