

Garment Therapy: Understanding the Therapeutic Connections between Garments Choice and Management Behavior and Mental Health

Joy Mairura, M.F.I.S., Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH 43403
Jihyun Kim-Vick, Ph.D., Kent State University, Kent, OH 44240

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Background

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (2021), 40 million adults are affected by anxiety each year. 17.3 million adults have had at least one major depressive episode within the past year. As anxiety and depression have been on the rise, it has led to numerous methods within the fashion industry to provide solutions, such as opening mental illness conversations to increase awareness within the industry (Press, 2018). Those who suffer from anxiety can often worry about various issues, from personal health to everyday life experiences. Despite this, there has been a significant gap in academic research between garments and mental health. While not an official form of medical therapy, retail therapy has been found to provide therapeutic benefits to one's mental health and achieve mood repair (Rick et al., 2014). Atalay and Meloy (2011) found that clothing was the most preferred choice of retail therapy purchases.

Mental Health and Clothing

It is important to note that, beyond retail therapy, Dubler and Gurel (1984) found a high correlation between women experiencing depression and their perception of clothing that was typically upbeat. They (1984) found a significant link between depression and one's perception of their clothing and how they view themselves. When individuals are in a joyful versus depressed state, their self-concept and how they describe themselves are better than when depressed. Abraham (2020) states that in most cases, one's anxiety is not solely rooted in their garments, yet one's choice of garments can play a role in one's anxiety. Kang, Johnson, and Kim (2013) found that many individuals who deal with anxiety may use clothing as a comfort or camouflage method to avoid socially demanding atmospheres. Beyond garments as a source of comfort for those dealing with anxiety and/or depression, research has shown wardrobes can have a similar effect on one's mental health. For instance, neuropsychiatric literature indicated that "the relationship between clothing behavior and depressive mood provides the need and possibility about the therapeutic meaning of clothing for depressive people" (Kim & Lee, 1999, pp. 1245-1253).

Clothing Attributes on Mental Health

Intrinsic characteristics of clothing, such as color and fabric, among others, have a significant impact on the moods of individuals (Hasan et al., 2011). Bakker et al. (2015) show that women prefer red and black clothing for its slimming effect, yet they are associated with aggression and/or depression. In addition, blue and green are known as calming and harmonious colors, and yellow and orange are stimulating colors (Edwards, 2013). Fabrics affect visual, tactile, and auditory senses, resulting in one's physical or perceived comfort (Roth, Kim, & Kincade, 2017).

Purpose of the Study

We aim to contribute to academia by unveiling how clothing selection in daily lives can help those experiencing anxiety and/or depression gain a more positive outlook about themselves and their environment via their garments and wardrobes through answering the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How do individuals experiencing anxiety and/or depression navigate their garment selection as part of their daily routine?

Research Question 2: How do these individuals illustrate associations between their wardrobe's (dis)organization and their anxiety and/or depression?

Research Question 3: How do these individuals describe relationships between garments and their mood?

Research Question 4: How do clothing attributes relate to their choice of garments within the selection routine?

Qualitative Approach using Personal Interviews

Upon receiving approval from the IRB on the research protocol, 27 participants were recruited via email announcement. They took part in the initial screening survey regarding General Anxiety Disorder (GAD) and Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ) for depression. We adopted purposive sampling to focus on individuals with particular characteristics who will better be able to assist with our research. Eighteen scored either low or intermediate levels of GAD and PHQ; twelve completed a semi-structured personal interview. The remote personal interview was chosen to accommodate the social distancing due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Dupuis & Renaud, 2020). Our interview participants were between 18 and 29 years of age. We had 10 female, one male, and one non-binary participants. Most participants were undergraduate or graduate students attending a midwestern university. All interviews were audio-recorded for data transcription. Each interview participant also submitted a couple of pictures representing the most and least favorite garments. These visual aids were collected to triangulate the data collected via the interviews.

Findings and Discussion

Among the 12 participants interviewed, the most common method of clothing selection was to regard the weather, their mood, or what event was going on for the day. With an exception related to higher depression and anxiety scores, some participants cared about wearing whatever was clean and focused less on expressing themselves or personal style (RQ1). All, except one, preferred a form of organization of their clothing. While closet organization behaviors varied, seven participants followed some method of hiding or storing away clothing they did not enjoy wearing. Most commonly, participants placed these items towards the back of their closets or in dresser drawers (RQ2). The higher the depression and anxiety, the lesser organization of their closets. Our findings were somewhat congruent with those of Bye and McKinney (2007), who found that individuals' wardrobes stored more than functional items and items from the past.

Some of our participants reflected their mood directly with their clothing choices, which amplified their experience of that mood. Overall, participants expressed they experienced a positive shift in their mood based on garments worn that they enjoy (RQ3). Our findings were in line with those of Kang et al. (2013), who found that many individuals who deal with anxiety may use clothing as a comfort or camouflage method to avoid socially demanding atmospheres. Our participants stressed that colors and prints are necessary as they can pull positive energy from the clothing attributes they enjoy. For others, the clothing material was important, such as denim, which was especially important for nearly all participants (RQ4). In the literature, blue was the most favored color amongst patients with depression (Frank & Gilovich, 1988; Kodzoman, 2019).

Contribution and Implications

Our findings add in-depth qualitative narratives to the prior studies that demonstrated how garments could positively influence a person's mood through the impacts of clothing and its intrinsic characteristics. With the increased number of individuals who experience anxiety and depression in the higher education setting, our findings would be helpful to academicians and therapists who may look for innovative and creative remedies to support individuals struggling with anxiety and/or depression. Our solutions are not to replace medical treatment but to be pragmatic and accessible to the individuals and practitioners who seek additional ways to understand and support one's daily struggles.

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