

Exploring the Transformative Role of Fashion in Fostering Resilience during Post-Breast Cancer Experiences

Hyo Jung (Julie) Chang, Ph.D., Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX, USA
Seoha Min, Ph.D., California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, CA, USA

Keywords: Breast cancer, fashion, communication theory of resilience, self-concept, qualitative

Introduction: According to the American Cancer Society (2024), breast cancer emerges as the prevailing cancer diagnosis among American women, affecting around 1 in 8 women in the United States who will experience invasive breast cancer in their lifetime. Additionally, breast cancer represents 30% of all newly diagnosed cancer cases among US women. The disease notably influences body image and self-concept, stemming from alterations in appearance such as mastectomy, hair loss, and weight fluctuations, which affect emotional well-being (Pintado, 2017). Thus, resilience aids individuals in adapting to these changes and accepting their altered appearance (Izydorczyk et al., 2018). It can also foster a sense of empowerment and control over one's circumstances (Ostadi-Sefidan et al., 2024). However, there has been insufficient research investigating the resilience process of breast cancer patients and the role of fashion in it. Regarding body image and self-concept, fashion plays a substantial role, serving as a form of self-expression that enables individuals to communicate their identity in daily life. Fashion emerges as a powerful tool for communication, self-expression, and social interactions, beyond its functional aspect. For breast cancer patients, who often face challenges related to body image and self-concept due to mastectomy and chemotherapy, the role of fashion becomes even more crucial. It serves not just as a means of self-expression but also as a form of therapy and empowerment. Therefore, *this study aims to explore the resilience process of breast cancer patients in the context of fashion, an element closely associated with their daily lives.*

Literature Review: *Communication Theory of Resilience.* Resilience for breast cancer patients refers to the ability to adapt positively and cope effectively with the challenges and adversities associated with the diagnosis, treatment, and recovery process (Tu et al., 2020). Following disruptive life events, the communication theory of resilience is employed to examine how individuals create a new normal (Betts et al., 2022). This theory is characterized by five communication processes: crafting normalcy, affirming identity anchors, maintaining and utilizing communication networks, putting alternative logics to work, and foregrounding productive action. Crafting normalcy involves efforts to regain a sense of life and routine that existed before experiencing breast cancer. Returning to daily activities is crucial in regaining a sense of normalcy following a cancer diagnosis. Afterwards, affirming identity anchors acknowledges that cancer can alter one's sense of self and attempts to regain their identity, followed by maintaining and utilizing communication networks through established connections with social contacts, such as friends and family. The process of implementing logistics involves understanding the hardships and appreciating the positives (Lillie et al., 2018). Cancer can disrupt patients' lives significantly, making it challenging for them to manage and communicate their feelings effectively. Additionally, discussing cancer-related topics can affect individuals' well-being. Therefore, establishing new routines can positively impact cancer patients, helping them regain a sense of normalcy. Another

coping mechanism that has a positive effect on cancer patients is humor, as it provides an alternative logic through which resilience can be enacted (Venetis & Lillie, 2020).

Fashion and Breast Cancer Patients. Fashion serves not only as a means for self-expression but also as a form of therapy, providing comfort and boosting the self-concept to navigate challenging life experiences. Fashion allows a person to view their appearance in a more positive and realistic manner with regard to their body shape (Lee et al., 2020). Breast cancer patients can utilize clothing to enhance their mood and build resilience. Research by Maran et al. (2021) highlights the significance of visual cues, demonstrating that fashion can convey a wealth of information, such as cultural values, personality, and profession. For breast cancer patients, this represents an opportunity to articulate their stories, struggles, and survival through the language of fashion on their path to recovery and normalcy. With the therapeutic effect of clothing in mind, breast cancer patients would utilize clothing throughout various stages of building resilience.

Method: The study utilized a qualitative research approach involving in-depth interviews. A total of 12 participants, who were breast cancer patients, were selected using the snowball sampling method. Data analysis employed the reflexive thematic analysis method, chosen for its effectiveness in exploring qualitative datasets, enabling the identification of meaningful patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Reflexive thematic analysis allows the researcher to acknowledge and reflect on the ways their values, experiences, interests, and social location inform the analysis being undertaken. The emphasis on theoretical flexibility differentiates reflexive thematic analysis from some other methods. In this approach, themes are constructed, tested, and refined over a series of repeated phrases or recurrent meanings across datasets (Terry & Hayfield, 2020).

Results and Discussion: The analysis of the collected data has yielded five themes grounded in the communication theory of resilience. Under the theme “*Crafting Normalcy*,” participants articulated the development of new appearance routines following breast cancer surgery. Post-surgical alterations to their bodies, such as weight loss, weight gain, or breast removal, prompted participants to adapt to these changes as their new normal. For instance, Participant 1 explained, “Whenever I went through chemo, they put me on a lot of steroids. And so, it made me gain a lot of weight, and I don’t have hair...I started dressing a lot more feminine than I had in the past.” This theme highlights the adaptability and resilience demonstrated by participants in embracing and incorporating physical transformations into their evolving sense of self (Lillie et al., 2018). In the second theme, “*Affirming Identity Anchor*,” participants expressed the creation of a new identity through clothing. Despite potential challenges to their perceived femininity post-surgery, they utilized fashion as a means to redefine and embrace their unique beauty. Participant 8 mentioned, “I think it’s really important to, to dress to use clothing as that will pick me up.” This theme highlights the transformative power of fashion in fostering a positive self-image. The third theme, “*Maintaining and Using Communication Networks*,” emphasizes the pivotal role of fashion in community engagement. Participants found fashion to be a powerful channel for social interactions, whether through shopping therapy with friends and family or participating in breast cancer awareness fashion shows. In the fourth theme, “*Putting Alternative Logins to Work*,” participants detailed their efforts to develop new styling and self-care methods as coping mechanisms for the traumatic experiences they faced (Venetis & Lillie, 2020). Under the theme of “*Foregrounding Productive Action*,” participants highlighted the role of creative activities and self-acceptance in their healing journey. Participant 11 explained, “I feel confident in that way [new style after breast

cancer]. I would feel better about myself because I want to look good and feel cute and just feel good about myself.” Fashion emerged as a significant contributor to these responses, providing a medium for expressing newfound confidence and exploring previously unexplored styles.

Conclusion: This study offers valuable insights for healthcare practitioners, psychologists, and support communities working with individuals undergoing post-surgical experiences, particularly those related to breast cancer. Further, healthcare providers can integrate fashion-based therapies and creative activities into holistic patient care plans to enhance psychosocial well-being and facilitate positive adaptation to physical changes. Future research could explore the efficacy of fashion therapy interventions and other fashion-related activities to support breast cancer patients. Additionally, conducting quantitative research to investigate the resilience process among breast cancer patients would yield more generalizable findings.

References

- Betts, T., Hintz, E. A., & Buzzanell, P. M. (2022). Emplotting anticipatory resilience: An antenarrative extension of the communication theory of resilience. *Communication Monographs*, 89(2), 211-234.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589-597.
- Izydorczyk, B., Kwapniewska, A., Lizinczyk, S., & Sitnik-Warchulska, K. (2018). Psychological resilience as a protective factor for the body image in post-mastectomy women with breast cancer. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 15(6), 1181.
- Lee, S. E., Lee, Y., & Yoo, J. J. (2020). Understanding the fashion therapy (FT) experience through the cognitive behavioral perspective on body image. *International Journal of Costume and Fashion*, 20(2), 1-10.
- Lillie, H. M., Venetis, M. K., & Chernichky-Karcher, S. M. (2018). “He would never let me just give up”: Communicatively constructing dyadic resilience in the experience of breast cancer. *Health Communication*, 33(12), 1516-1524.
- Maran, T., Liegl, S., Moder, S., Kraus, S., & Furtner, M. (2021). Clothes make the leader! How leaders can use attire to impact followers’ perceptions of charisma and approval. *Journal of Business Research*, 124, 86-99.
- Ostadi-Sefidan, H., Faroughi, F., & Fathnezhad-Kazemi, A. (2024). Resilience and its related factors among women with breast cancer. *European Journal of Cancer Prevention*, 33(2), 129-135.
- Pintado, S. (2017). Self-concept and emotional well-being in patients with breast cancer. *Ibero-American Journal of Psychology and Health*, 8(2), 76-84.
- Terry, G., & Hayfield, N. (2020). Reflexive thematic analysis. In *Handbook of Qualitative Research in Education* (pp. 430-441). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Tu, P. C., Yeh, D. C., & Hsieh, H. C. (2020). Positive psychological changes after breast cancer diagnosis and treatment: The role of trait resilience and coping styles. *Journal of Psychosocial Oncology*, 38(2), 156-170.
- Venetis, M. K., Chernichky-Karcher, S. M., & Lillie, H. M. (2020). Communicating resilience: Predictors and outcomes of dyadic communication resilience processes among both cancer patients and cancer partners. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 48(1), 49-69.