

Fashion, Ageing and Sustainability:  
A Capsule Wardrobe Addressing the Clothing Desires of the Over Fifty Female

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## Background

Women over 50 are frustrated in their quest to find clothing they want to purchase and enjoy wearing. Few clothing lines are targeted to this market. Ones that do so are often quite boxy in shape in order to fit more sizes and shapes. For the larger in size and/or shorter in stature customer, these garments often render their wearers shapeless, serving to reinforce the “invisible-ness” often observed by this age group (Twigg, 2013, Townsend & Sadkowska, 2017). The dull colors often found in this clothing support “receding into the background” and imply that the wearer is not interested in fashion, color being a major component of the fashion system.

## Introduction

The capsule wardrobe in this project was developed for women over age 50 who are unable to find appropriate clothing. The overarching themes of inclusivity and sustainability refer to body shape, skin color, height, size, and financial means. The problems addressed in their search are “age-appropriate clothing”, fit for a changing body (Lewis, Medvedev, & Seponski, 2011), fabrics that “breathe” to help regulate body temperature due to changing hormone levels, and “style” or fashionability. This customer values the following elements often missing from the market: natural fibers for their aesthetic and comfort characteristics; flattering silhouettes that are less body-revealing; garments that are enjoyable to wear, that feel good on the skin, are non-restricting, and enjoyable to look at i.e. colors that compliment aging skin and hair color. This customer tends to buy fewer apparel items and has a strong interest in sustainability which can be at odds with the fashion industry as it exists today. The current fashion climate is dominated by fast-fashion, trendy apparel that is created in a rapid process from inexpensive fabrics and production, thus ensuring built-in obsolescence. This system is not sustainable, at huge cost to laborers and the environment (Fletcher & Grose, 2012).

The capsule wardrobe created in response to the sustainability challenge is geared towards longevity in three important areas: high quality construction, designed for durability and alterability; high quality, washable natural fibers (or more sustainable man-made fibers such as lyocell); tertiary colors with interesting patterns and prints (Townsend & Sadkowska, 2017). Secondary considerations to the capsule collection but important from a sustainability standpoint are that a large portion of the textiles were colored or patterned through the use of natural dyes, indigo and coffee, cyanotype and marbling

processes to achieve the tertiary or mid-tone colors most sought after by this age group (Twigg, 2013, Townsend & Sadkowska, 2017).

### Challenges

Few clothing lines are targeted to this market and the ones that do are often so lacking in fit and shape, to fit a range of sizes, that they conceal the body. For the larger in size and/or shorter in stature customer, these garments often render an unflattering, boxy shape and serve to reinforce the “invisible-ness” often observed by (Twigg, 2013, Townsend & Sadkowska, 2017) women of the over 50 age group. The dull colors often found in this clothing support “receding into the background” and seem to imply that the wearer is not interested in fashion and does not want to be noticed. The object of the eye is color, the first thing we see, hence it is a major component of the fashion cycle/system. A frequent comment by women in this age group, on seeing these capsule pieces “I would wear that” ...

### Development

One of the challenges faced with this project was that the original scope was too large for the specified time frame. The idea was to identify universally flattering shapes that are considered classics. In this case, classic means styles that can exist outside of fashion, not trendy. Often this leads to uninteresting generic styles found in the marketplace. Unfortunately, the word “classic” often connotes “dull, boring and old-fashioned.” Key apparel pieces were chosen to provide the core items for a flexible wardrobe: dress, pant, top skirt, tank, and ruana. Garment silhouettes were taken from classic styles known to be flattering to a wide range of body types and designed in a low-to-zero waste approach to fabric utilization. Fabrics were selected from those already in the collection of the designer and modified as needed for color and pattern:

- Linen/cotton burlap used for the ruana was made from repurposed curtains from the scrap bin and incorporated cyanotype printing for a reversible pattern.
- The rayon crinkle fabric used for the dress was another remnant from the scrap bin dyed with natural indigo.
- The silk charmeuse used for the tank was pieced together from scrap bin remnants and dyed with coffee grounds.
- 100% linen used in the reversible wrap skirt was salvaged from out of date prepared-for-digital-printing yardage and cyanotype printed.
- The cotton tweed used in the pencil skirt, the lyocell twill for the pant, the cotton/silk/wool tweed for the top were vintage off-cuts previously purchased from an estate.
- The black silk habotai in the evening dress was repurposed from a circle skirt, cut into strips, hand marbled and pieced back together.

The capsule collection was developed through flat patternmaking and draping, then fitting on a size 10 dress form and a size 8 model for a semi-fitted cut leading toward garments “where the body shapes the

clothes more than the clothes shape the body” (Aalto via Townsend & Sadowska, 2017). Once muslins were finalized, slow(er) sewing construction techniques were used to allow for alterability and durability: wider seam allowances finished separately, uncut darts, deeper hems, metal components instead of plastic ones, and wooden buttons.

**FASHION, AGEING, AND SUSTAINABILITY**  
**A Capsule Wardrobe Addressing Wardrobe Desires of the Over 50 Female**  
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**BACKGROUND & PROBLEM**

*Women over fifty have limited options in clothes*

Women over the age of 50 are unsatisfied in their search for clothing they would enjoy wearing. The few clothing lines targeting this market offer boxy silhouettes. For women who are larger-in-size or who are shorter in stature customers, these garments render their wearers shapeless. This serves to reinforce the “invisible-wear” often observed by this age group.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the dull colors frequently found in these lines recede into the background and imply that the wearer is not interested in fashion, color being a major component of the fashion system.<sup>2</sup>

“Older female baby boomers desire age-appropriate but fashionable clothing that accommodates their changing bodies, provides both style and comfort, and enhances their self-confidence.”<sup>3</sup>

This capsule wardrobe was developed for women over 50 and is inclusive of body shape, skin color, height, size, and financial means and sustainable in design, materials, and processes. Each piece was created to enhance the useful and enjoyable lifespan of the garments.

**THE CAPSULE COLLECTION:**

A core collection of clothing forming the basis of a wardrobe

Consists of 8 pieces:

- pencil skirt
- pair of trousers
- blouse
- special occasion dress
- tank top
- day dress
- wrap skirt
- ruana

**METHODS**

**DESIGNED FOR OPTIMAL GARMENT LONGEVITY**

Kate Fletcher suggests that garment durability is rooted in satisfying activities around the wearing of the garment as well as resourcefulness related to it, in contrast to the sole technical durability of the garment.<sup>4</sup>

“Durability, while facilitated by materials, design and construction, is determined by an ideology of use.”<sup>5</sup>

**Garment Design** - understanding target market needs and wants

- Fit and garment breathability for changing body of older females
- Evolved style for engaged living (activity booklets)
- Key silhouettes for changing female bodies
- Tertiary colors which complement a wider range of skin tones

**Materials and Processes**

- Natural fibers: linen, cotton, silk
- Sustainable man-made fibers: lyocell
- Alterable construction: wider seams/hems, untrimmed darts, non-sew seam finishes
- Natural dyes: indigo and coffee
- Low toxicity cyanotype printing and hand marbling
- Non-representational, timeless patterns
- More sustainable components: metal zippers and wooden buttons

**Enhanced Relationship with the Garment**

A booklet accompanies the garments, containing the story of how each garment was uniquely created, possible outfit combinations, styling suggestions, mending/alterations options, and a list of “fun things to do” while wearing the garments. This emphasizes social experiences to encourage satisfying interactions with the clothes.

**RESULTS & CONCLUSIONS**

The initial goals of this project were achieved: to create an inclusive yet sustainable capsule collection that is stylish, age-appropriate and meets the needs of older women. The clothing is fitted but includes plenty of wearing ease and is constructed from breathable fabrics in a tertiary color palette. The accompanying booklets give resources and wearing tips to encourage engaged, satisfying interactions with the clothes, leading to a wardrobe with longer lifespans.

This process and the end results acknowledge a woman’s beauty throughout her lifetime, made more visible by creating the appropriate frame and context, tailored to her needs.

**FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

- Capsule collections designed for other specific climates
- Complementary line of knits, both cut and sewn and fully-fashioned, i.e. t-shirts, novelty knit pieces and sweaters
- Additional seasonal pieces and accessories

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Ruana: Reversible linen/cotton burqa with cyanotype print



Day dress: Indigo-dyed corduroy



Tank: Coffee dyed silk  
Wrap skirt: Reversible cyanotype printed linen



Tank: Coffee dyed silk  
Pencil skirt: Cotton/terrywool blend



Blouse: Cotton/lin/vernal blend  
Trousers: wrap skirt, lyocell knit



Strapless evening dress: Silk with hand-marbled and pieced front and back panels

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The process and end results acknowledge a woman’s beauty throughout her lifetime, made more visible by creating the appropriate frame and context, tailored to her needs.

**Future Directions**

This capsule collection concept can be further expanded to design for specific climates, ideally with a three-season wearing approach. While the initial collection was composed of woven fabrics, the natural progression would be to design a complementary line of knits, both cut and sewn and fully-fashioned, i.e. t-shirts, novelty knit pieces, and sweaters. An additional expansion could be made in creating season-specific items along with accessories.

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