

# The Sensory Salon: Reimagining Inclusive Fashion Experiences

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the innovative intersection of textile design expertise and occupational therapy within the care economy, focusing on enhancing support for individuals with tactile sensory processing needs. Initiated in 2023 at RMIT University, Melbourne, the Textiles for the Care Economy (TCE) research cluster aims to bridge the gap between clinical practice and textile-specific knowledge. This led to the conceptualisation of a 'Sensory Salon', introduced at a hyperlocal community festival, envisioning an inclusive shopping experience curated by fashion and textile experts, occupational therapists, and second-hand clothing retailers.

Grounded in the social model of disability, the Sensory Salon offers a safe, bricks-and-mortar shopping space where clients, supported by occupational therapists, can explore clothing curated by material experts. This innovative environment allows for garment modifications based on sensory, material, and aesthetic preferences, fostering individual expression and comfort. The proposal received positive community feedback, highlighting its potential impact and relevance.

The theoretical framework is informed by Dunn's model of sensory processing, emphasising the role of textiles in sensory processing. Despite the use of textile-based tools in clinical settings, there remains untapped potential for systematic application of textile expertise to sensory support. Employing a qualitative research methodology, focus groups with occupational therapists reveal limitations in current sensory communication practices. To address these gaps, the research team is developing a textile-specific sensory-emotional lexicon to enhance communication between practitioners and clients. The research also suggests categorising secondhand clothing according to sensory typology could aid clinicians in addressing clients' sensory needs and fashion preferences.

The paper concludes by emphasising the potential for fashion and textiles expertise to contribute to the care economy through interdisciplinary collaboration. By reimagining the shopping experience through an inclusive lens, the Sensory Salon aims to create a more accessible fashion environment, illustrating how material knowledge can be repurposed to support sensory needs and promote sustainability

and re-use. This model offers new professional pathways and fosters inclusive, sustainable environments.

**Keywords:** Inclusivity, Sensory, Sustainability, Textiles, Care

## INTRODUCTION

The expanding role of textile design expertise beyond traditional manufacturing contexts presents new opportunities for social innovation and interdisciplinary collaboration. In 2023, building on PhD research at RMIT University, Melbourne, we established the Textiles for the Care Economy (TCE) research cluster with colleagues in textile science and sustainability and social science to explore how fashion and textile material expertise might contribute to care-based practices. Our initial focus centered on the intersection of textile knowledge and occupational therapy, specifically investigating how textile expertise might enhance support for individuals with tactile sensory processing needs.

A focus group with occupational therapists revealed a significant gap between clinical practice and textile-specific knowledge. One participant's reflection captured the essence of this challenge: "My ultimate dream would be to have a space where people can experience textiles with an expert's guidance, working through what works for them in a way that makes them feel special." This insight led to our participation in Melbourne Design Week's Irregular festival, where we explored the concept of a 'Sensory Salon' - a collaborative space bringing together occupational therapists, their clients and fashion and textiles experts (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The Sensory Salon\* pitch featured at the 2024 Melbourne Design Week, Irregular Festival. Theme: design the world you want. \*You will notice 'studio' in place of 'salon' - this was a proofreading oversight.

This interdisciplinary approach builds on established research demonstrating the value of textile knowledge in therapeutic contexts. Jakob and Collier (2017: 232) have shown how textiles can facilitate "sensory enriched environments and meaningful occupation" in dementia care. This application aligns with Valentine et al.'s (2017: 971) observation that textile design thinking is uniquely guided by "emotive, haptic, sensorial and tactile qualities." As Earley et al., (2016: 307) note, design's role is expanding "from the creation of artefacts through to services and social innovations," creating opportunities for "yet to be defined" practices.

The Sensory Salon concept represents one such opportunity, positioning textile designers as facilitators of connection and wellbeing within the care economy. This role extends beyond traditional product development to embrace circular economy principles while addressing social needs through a disability-informed approach. By bringing together fashion and textiles expertise with occupational therapy practice, we aim to develop new frameworks for understanding and supporting sensory experiences through textiles and clothing.

### **Theoretical Framework**

People living with sensory conditions (such as dementia and autism) are greatly affected by their environments, which can significantly impact their wellbeing and care. According to Bagby and colleagues (2012), sensory experiences occur when a stimulus affects an individual, leading to a response that is visibly observable. The foundation for understanding sensory experiences in daily life is grounded in Dunn's Model of Sensory Processing which established that individual responses to sensory events combine both sensory thresholds and preferences (Engel-Yeger and Dunn 2011). Sensory processing describes how the nervous system processes sensory information. The nervous system receives sensory input through vestibular, interoceptive, proprioceptive, visual, auditory, olfactory, and tactile stimuli. The Adolescent/Adult Sensory Profile (AASP), developed through Dunn's research, identifies four distinct patterns of sensory processing: sensory seekers, who actively pursue sensory experiences who have a heightened threshold for sensory processing and may require greater levels of sensory input; sensory avoiders, whose systems are highly sensitive to input who have a lowered threshold for sensory processing and may require lower levels of sensory input; those with sensory sensitivity, who participate despite experiencing rapid sensory overload due to hyper-sensitivity and lowered threshold for sensory processing; and those with low registration, who have heightened sensory processing thresholds with and hypo-reactivity and/or hypo-sensitivity (Engel-Yeger and Dunn 2011). Scholars and care providers realize that being aware of sensory profiles and responding to internal body sensations (i.e., interoception) contributes to an overall sense of wellbeing (Dunn et al 2022; Schmitt and Schoen 2022). Importantly, Dunn emphasizes that these patterns reflect natural variations in how individuals process and respond to sensory stimuli, intended not to pathologize but to help people understand their needs and engage more comfortably

in daily life (Ferrel 2022). Within this framework, textiles play a crucial role as "a key part of people's everyday environment, continuously producing tactile and visual sensory inputs which trigger the body's sensory integration processes" (Kay et al., 2024). The intersection of textile expertise with sensory support requires what Bardalai and Underwood (2022: 143) describe as "a considered understanding of the properties of the material through an objective (material properties) perspective as well as a subjective (experiential perspective)." This dual understanding positions textile and fashion expertise as valuable contributors to sensory support practices.

While occupational therapists currently employ textile-based tools in clinical settings, there remains significant untapped potential in the systematic application of textile expertise to sensory support. The secondhand clothing market provides an existing resource stream which could be categorized and sorted according to sensory typology. Together fashion and textiles designers, alongside fashion and textiles sustainability experts could work together to aid clinicians in dressing clients according to their sensory needs and fashion preferences. There is an obvious gap in the market for adaptive clothing. Recent initiatives, such as Melbourne-based adaptive fashion brand 'Jam', demonstrate the emerging recognition of this intersection between adaptive design, sensory needs, and personal expression through clothing. This is reiterated in a recent book by Jun (2024) exploring fashion, disability, and co-design through a human-centered design approach.

### **Research Progress**

Our investigation into the intersection of occupational therapy and textile expertise employs a qualitative research methodology. The research design centers on focus groups with occupational therapists, structured to capture both their professional experiences and their direct engagement with textile materials in the context of clients with touch processing hyper-sensitivity.

The initial two-hour focus group consisted of 3 occupational therapists from the same organization. The session was designed and moderated by researchers from the RMIT School of Fashion and Textiles to elicit multiple layers of information: practitioners' experiences in accommodating clients' sensory needs, specific client emotional responses to textiles, and the language used to communicate these experiences.

Analysis of this qualitative data is currently underway using NVivo software, with four researchers individually coding the data before collaboratively developing categories and themes. This approach acknowledges that "qualitative analysis involves a continual interplay between theory and analysis" (Babbie 2016: 409), with findings intended to be suggestive rather than definitive, laying groundwork for future investigation.

This preliminary research has highlighted significant limitations in current textile-

specific sensory communication. Of particular concern is the Australian Federal Government's decision not to mandate fiber identification on garment care labels (Australian Fashion Council 2021), which affects the ability to make informed decisions about textile properties. This challenge is compounded by a documented decline in material experts within the Australasian industry (Houlihan 2017), potentially limiting the available expertise needed to support sensory-informed textile selection and modification.

Before advancing the Sensory Salon concept, our research indicates the need for foundational work in developing clinical tools that bridge the gap between occupational therapy practice and material characteristics. The TCE research team is currently undertaking a comprehensive project to address this need through the development of a textile-specific sensory-emotional lexicon. This tool draws directly from occupational therapists' experiences and professional language, aiming to create a more nuanced and effective way to articulate and communicate about textile sensations and preferences.

The development of this lexicon responds to an identified gap in current practice: the lack of technical knowledge and codified language about textile characteristics and sensations. By creating a standardized yet nuanced vocabulary that brings together clinical expertise and textile knowledge, we aim to enhance the communication between practitioners and clients about sensory experiences related to textiles.

## **FUTURE DEVELOPMENT AND CONCLUSION**

This developmental research demonstrates the potential for fashion and textiles expertise to contribute meaningfully to the care economy through collaboration with occupational therapy. The next phase of research will focus on analyzing the focus group data and completing the Textile-Sensory-Emotional lexicon, aligning with the sensory profiles, which will provide a foundation for improved communication between material experts and occupational therapists clients who experience touch processing hyper-sensitivity.

The implications for the care economy are significant. This research suggests new professional pathways for fashion and textiles practitioners, positioning them as key contributors to wellbeing and care. It demonstrates how existing material resources can be repurposed through expert knowledge to support sensory needs, while simultaneously addressing sustainability concerns. Most importantly, it offers a model for how interdisciplinary collaboration can create more inclusive and accessible environments for all.

As this work progresses, we invite dialogue with conference participants about potential collaborations, methodological approaches, and strategies for implementing

these concepts in diverse community contexts. The Sensory Salon represents not just a new application of fashion and textiles expertise, but a reimagining of how material knowledge can contribute to care practices in contemporary society.

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