

Legacy in Latex: Fashion's Evolution through the Stories of Ageing Fetishists

Dr Charlotte Goldthorpe

The University of Huddersfield, UK. c.m.goldthorpe@hud.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

The risqué nature and sexual appeal of latex became outwardly facing in fashion with the likes of Michelle Pfeiffer's Catwoman in *Batman Returns* (1992) and Madonna's *Human Nature* music video (1994). In the UK, this crossed into reality TV through presenters such as Paula Yates wearing a full black latex catsuit on *The Tube* in 1995 (sanchopanzam8, 2012) and through the rise of the 'ladette' culture where women such as Denise Van Outen, Dani Behr and Sharron Davies unapologetically wore the tight and shiny material. Latex, although now in the fashion mainstream with high profile designers such as Mugler and Saint Laurent creating iconic and staple pieces, it still carries connotations of kink and is rarely seen on the general public.

However, for rubber and latex fetishists the clandestine nature of wearing rubber is part of the appeal. This paper examines the untold stories of the ageing fetish community (60+), focusing on their rubberwear habits and the stigma they navigated while coming to terms with their fetish. As part of a wider project, I have been working with members of the ageing fetish (60+) community to collect untold stories of individuals rubberwear habits and kinks in order to understand the type of garments worn and their appeal. It considers why these people continue to love wearing latex and its implications in later life.

I just love the feel of it, putting it on, it's like what they say a second skin, you feel almost naked but you're not naked and it's the feel of it, the tightness, you feel secure inside it (personal communication, 5 February 2020).

This paper will identify key garments that appeal to rubber enthusiasts and, through personal recollections, show the evolution of fetish style through the eyes of the wearers.

Keywords: Fetish, Latex, Kink, Wellbeing, Ageing

INTRODUCTION

Latex holds a unique position in fashion and culture. From its origins as a practical material to its contemporary associations with sexuality and subversion, it has evolved

into both a high-fashion statement and a symbol of fetishism. Iconic moments in popular culture, such as Michelle Pfeiffer's portrayal of Catwoman in *Batman Returns* (1992) and Madonna's *Human Nature* (1994) music video, brought latex to mainstream attention, framing it as both provocative and empowering. In the UK, the material gained further visibility through presenters such as Paula Yates and the unapologetic 'ladette' culture of the 1990s. Despite its integration into collections by designers like Mugler and Saint Laurent, latex remains primarily linked to kink, although has been seen more readily on performers and celebrities such as Sam Smith, Doja Cat and the Kardashians who want to be noticed.

For members of the fetish community, latex holds deeper meaning beyond its aesthetic appeal. Its tactile qualities, tightness, and shine evoke powerful emotional and sensory connections, while its clandestine nature creates an intimate and rebellious appeal. However, fetishists often face societal stigma, navigating feelings of shame and secrecy as they embrace their desires. Since the early 20th century, fetish enthusiasts have documented their experiences through niche publications like *London Life* and *Atomage*, and more recently through digital platforms like Fetlife. These spaces have served as vital networks for self-expression and normalisation within a largely misunderstood community.

This paper, as part of a larger study, explores the experiences of ageing fetishists, particularly those over 60, who have spent decades reconciling their love of latex with societal judgment. Using archival materials from the UK Leather and Fetish Archive at the Bishopsgate Institute alongside interviews with community members, this study sheds light on the personal and cultural significance of latex. By examining the evolution of fetish style and the resilience of those who wear it, the research offers fresh insights into the intersection of fashion, identity, and ageing within the fetish community.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This paper aims to explore the untold stories of the ageing fetish community (60+), focusing on their relationship with latex garments and how they navigated societal stigma and shame while embracing their fetish identities, pre-internet. This will be done through the following objectives:

- Investigating how latex garments have evolved in design and significance within the fetish community, highlighting key styles cherished by enthusiasts.
- Conducting interviews with ageing fetishists to uncover personal stories about their rubberwear habits, the emotional appeal of latex, and the challenges they faced throughout different life stages.
- Analyse how these fetishists have had to use secrecy over time and what strategies they employed to embrace their identity.

It is hoped that this research bridges gaps in fashion and cultural studies by offering insights into the connection between fetishism, ageing, and self-expression, demonstrating the broader cultural and personal significance of latex.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The sexual nature of latex in fashion and its subcultural associations with fetishism have been explored in both historical and contemporary contexts by many social and cultural historians. Valerie Steele published *Fetish, Fashion, Sex and Power* in 1996, which became a seminal text in revealing how fetishes towards different types of clothing such as the corset, high heeled boots and also rubber had developed from fetish onto the catwalk shows of high-end designers. Steele discusses elements of rubber fetish within the *Second Skin* chapter (p.148-154, 1996) and finds early accounts from fetishists submitted to publications such as *London Life* magazine in the 1920s and 1930s. These accounts, although brief, start to disclose what people enjoyed about the material, however much of the existing research focuses on its role in fashion and sexual liberation without examining the lived experiences of fetishists, particularly those in later life.

Since the 1920s fetishists have been documenting their dress up and play with latex in publications such as *London Life* as discussed above was groundbreaking in terms of its content where readers could send in photographs, discuss their fetishes and find manufacturers of particular garments they could not buy on the high street. As Bienvenu discusses “topics that became prominent in the late 1920’s and 1930s included rubber fetishism, wrestling girls, human ponies and body piercings” (1998, p. 52). Fetish magazines such as *AtomAge* (1972-1985) started by John Sutcliffe as a way of “explaining to females the reasons why males want to see them dress in leather clothes” (atomage.co.uk, n.d.) and focussed on rubber, latex, PVC and leather clothing, allowed the same interaction with the reader by encouraging them to write in to the magazine and send photographs. A significant part of the *AtomAge* magazines was the illustration of rubber and latex clothing being shared by married couples. From the 1970s onwards, titles such as *Dressing for Pleasure*, *Rubberist* and *Skin Two* were popular with rubber enthusiasts and featured readers photographs and stories of dressing up, where contributors happily discussed what outfits, they would wear and for what activities which helped undercover rubber fetishists feel part of a community and that they weren’t the only one.

The UK Leather and Fetish Archive (Bishopsgate Institute) holds scrapbooks from the late 1930s of individuals collections focussing on mackintoshes, rubber and rainwear stories and newspaper cuttings (Mackintosh Collection, MC/1) which has been a great source of primary research. In recent years websites such as Rubber Pal (2005-now

closed) and Fetlife (2008-current) became the new places for the fetish community to instantaneously swap stories, photographs and experiences.

The Mackintosh raincoat was first designed and made in the 1820s from rubberised fabric as an outerwear garment to repel water (www.mackintosh.com, n.d.). Although made from a rubberised cotton, or a rubber outer with a cotton lining, mackintoshes were purposely made for protection from inclement weather, they still offered a particular look, smell or feel to someone with a rubber fetish.

Sociologist, Dr. Maurice North gathered recollections within his 1970s study *The Outer Fringe of Sex* in which he quoted from correspondence within a magazine that whilst on the underground the writer saw a girl “wearing a shiny red, double-breasted mackintosh, shiny red wellingtons and matching gloves” (p. 23). He stated that as she left the carriage, she was aware of the affect she had created and hoped that he would be one day dominated by a mackintosh clad woman. Therefore, the assumption that mackintoshes are purely utilitarian garments fails to account for their role in fetish subcultures, where their tactile qualities, distinctive appearance, and sensory associations evoke strong emotional and erotic responses. These garments transcend their practical origins, becoming symbols of power, allure, and identity within niche communities.

While studies on fetishism and stigma (Goffman, 1963) provides valuable insights into how marginalised groups navigate societal judgment, little attention has been given to the ageing fetish community, a demographic that offers a unique perspective on identity, desire, and resilience. Ritter and Nowakowski (2020) have researched later life sexual intimacy that includes sexual variations such as kinks (unconventional sexual practices) and advocates for older members of communities such as BDSM and other sexual practices. It does not however, look at life story of their participants.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative methodology to explore the experiences of ageing fetishists (60+) and their relationship with latex garments and how they navigated their love of latex and whether they have finally now embraced their identity. Methods include a combination of archival research and semi-structured interviews which provide social and cultural perspectives on wearing latex.

Data Collection

Working with archival material provides a contextual review of the garments that were available, the styles from periods of time, the manufacturers who fulfilled rubberists needs and how these were made. Catalogues from different manufacturers such as Sealwear, South Bucks Rainwear, Kastley, Macmart, Rubber Fashions, Cocoon, etc have been analysed in terms of pricing, historical context and styles available. This

was then compared to magazine publications and the fashions advertised or situations where rubber was being worn. This was combined with first hand testimonials from people who bought from these companies and how they navigated ordering and receiving garments whilst living within a family which was unaware of these purchases and their importance to the fetishist, and the consequent stigma attached to both the buying and wearing process. Semi-structured interviews have been conducted with 20 participants aged 60 and over, recruited via fetish forums and personal networks. Questions explored their experiences with latex, its emotional appeal, and how societal attitudes have influenced their practices.

Ethical Considerations

All interviews have been conducted anonymously to protect identities of participants and as such are referred to by a pseudonym. Interviews have taken place face to face in participants homes with wardrobe analysis or via Teams, Zoom or phone, where participants have had the option whether to show their face.

Limitations

The study is very male dominated, and this is acknowledged this could lead to a potential bias. As the study continues it is hoped more female participants will be encouraged to discuss their experience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The research explores participants' beliefs about the origins of their interest, concerns about stigma if their enthusiasm for rubber were to be discovered, and the emotional and sensory experiences associated with wearing rubber clothing. Particular attention has been given to how specific outfit choices influence these feelings. The findings will predominantly focus on the latter aspect, examining interviews through different genres of clothing and their fetish connotations. All participants enjoy wearing latex and rubber personally, but also seeing it on others, which will be discussed here.

Life Before the Internet

Many participants in the study reported that their discovery of a latex fetish often began in early childhood or adolescence. This initial attraction was frequently sparked by encounters with people dressed in rubber—such as nurses in hospital settings— or through exposure to imagery in television and magazines. For some, everyday items like bed-wetting sheets or weather balloons provided opportunities to experiment, leading them to craft small-scale rubber garments, such as latex knickers or bloomers.

Before the advent of the internet, many participants struggled with feelings of isolation, believing they were “the only one” (personal communication, 31 November 2024) with such desires. As a result, many attempted to suppress or conceal their fetish. During their teenage years and early adulthood, participants often found it challenging to

share their love of latex with partners or spouses. Some were met with judgment, being told they required therapy or that their feelings were abnormal. While a few sought to "cure" themselves, others explored their fetish in secrecy, discovering advertisements from companies like Sealwear in national newspapers such as *Exchange and Mart* and *The Daily Express*. Over time, this led them to other publications, rubber fashion businesses, and eventually, for some, a network of like-minded individuals.

As participants have aged, many have continued to keep their relationship with latex hidden, often out of fear of being ostracised by family or rekindling the shame they experienced in earlier years. "I could name at least two people who keep it undercover - mature people who are still keeping it undercover from their family. I mean, my family knows absolutely nothing about what I'm up to," (personal communication, 16 December 2022) shared one participant, reflecting the persistent secrecy that still surrounds this aspect of his life.

It's the draw of it, for most people they've grown up with it, it's not just hit them in their 60s. It's so important. You read so many stories where people have thrown all their latex away and then six months later bought it all again because they cannot do without it (personal communication, 23 November 2024).

Mackintoshes, Catsuits and Diving Suits

Garments have played a fundamental role in shaping the lives of participants, each item carrying unique significance. Interviews revealed reflections on various types of clothing, including mackintoshes, catsuits and diving suits (associated with total enclosure), some of which have been popularised by popular culture, such as TV and film. The following section provides an in-depth exploration of these garments, examining their impact on participants—whether through the personal pleasure of wearing them or the visual experience of observing others.

The UK Leather and Fetish archive at The Bishopsgate Institute in London hold scrapbooks from as early as the 1930s that contain letters and illustrations from London Life magazine and images of women in mackintoshes. (MC/1 Mackintosh Collection: Scrapbooks. (c1930s-c2000s). [Description of material: scrapbooks 1-25] UK Leather and Fetish ARCHIVE, Bishopsgate Institute, London). Recollections from former members of the The International Mackintosh Society (IMS), active between 1960 and 1990, remember an event where women would be dressed in shiny black rubber raincoats for admiration and men in dinner jackets and suits. Women were seen as objects of desire, with one member stating, "if my husband likes it, then it's okay by me" (P7, Mackintosh Magazine October 1973). When discussing with a man in his early 70s who had been a member of the IMS, he discussed his love of shiny coats, seeing "the girl protected against the elements" (personal communication, 23 May 2024). A male participant who visited the IMS event in the 1970s with his wife felt it

was “a bit odd” and “voyeuristic” (personal communication, 23 November 2024) seeing women dressed in latex, but they also wanted to dress up in latex themselves. From this, the Mach 2 Society was born, from members who wanted to do something different such as allowing men to wear latex.

Several male interviewees in this study recalled that their fascination with rubber began in childhood through interactions with their mothers', sisters' or school friends' mackintoshes. One described spreading the garments out on the floor to roll on it (personal communication, 14 April 2023), while another turned one inside out to experience the smooth rubber against their skin (personal communication, 27 November 2023), with these memories dating back to as young as age four. Of the experience one participant stated, “it was both, the aroma was erm, quite strong and also the feel, the supple nature of rubber and wearing” (personal communication, 14 April 2023). The rubber would gently heat up whilst being worn on the body and began to emit a “sweet” (personal communication, 28 November 2023) smell which captivated the senses. Many believe it was the combination of the element of protection, the smell and the feel on the skin that appealed to them. As one participant in their 70s expressed, “There’s a certain amount of restriction; you know the mackintosh is heavy, and it’s difficult to move around in if you get a long one, which is quite exciting. So yeah, but it’s more a girl in a mack that will turn me on rather than a catsuit” (personal communication, 23 May 2024).

Mackintoshes were also the easiest fetish item of clothing someone could ‘get away with’ wearing out in public, therefore the stigma attached to wearing these in public may be lessened. One participant discussed how he bought him and his girlfriend matching raincoats when at college to go out walking, but also ordered her a blue, shiny mackintosh which she innocently wore before she knew of his rubber fetish. In this way, fetishisation of an object, in this case the mackintosh could be hidden in plain sight.

Now, participants who wear mackintoshes in later life, who were once scared to go in a shop, one participant walked past the door of Weathervain in Kew a number of times before he decided to eventually go in for fear of being categorised “a weirdo”, now happily goes out shopping in his latex. “I’ve never had anyone say anything bad to me when out in latex...people will say that’s a lovely mac where did you buy it from?” (personal communication, 23 November 2024). One participant still wears latex every day and will sleep in it. Of the type of latex, he prefers lose fitting clothing such as shirts and mackintoshes as he likes the noise it makes “a slopping sort of noise as you move long and the rippling effect as the light reflects on the lines” (personal communication, 23 November 2024).

These accounts illustrate how mackintoshes, initially designed for practicality, have evolved into potent symbols within fetish communities, intertwining themes of

protection, allure, and control. The archival materials and personal recollections underscore the deep cultural and emotional resonance these garments hold, revealing how they bridge the realms of functionality and fantasy, and continue to captivate enthusiasts across generations.

Tight fitting latex or total enclosure has been a central theme in many of the interviews conducted. Numerous participants emphasised that being encased in rubber from head to toe provides a fully immersive sensory experience, engaging sound, touch, sight, and smell. Dr. John Money, in his 1986 text *Lovemarks*, observes that “fetishists can be classified as related either to haptic or olfactory imagery in perception or fantasy” (Money, 1986, p. 64). This perspective provides insight into how the various sensory dimensions of catsuits, and other rubber garments are appreciated.

Regarding the haptic qualities of tight latex, Lunning expands on this concept, describing the sensation as being “encased and embraced tightly by the garment” (Lunning, 2013, p. 79). Visually, the sleek and seamless silhouette of a latex catsuit conveys a sense of power, popularised in mainstream culture by Michelle Pfeiffer’s portrayal of Catwoman in *Batman Returns* (1992). At the same time, the look can signify submission, as famously depicted in the cult film *Pulp Fiction* (1994) with the character of ‘The Gimp’. It is worth noting, however, that the term “gimp” is viewed by some members of the aging fetish community as pejorative, perpetuating stigma against those who enjoy full rubber enclosure. While some participants do engage in BDSM practices, the focus of this paper is on the fashion aspects of rubber enclosure rather than its association with sexual gratification.

Before Honor Blackman and Diana Rigg in the 1960s television series of *The Avengers*, catsuits had been an underground foray more common with motorcyclists. John Sutcliffe, leather fetishist, fashion designer and founder of the *AtomAge* fashion brand and later, *AtomAge* magazine, developed new tight fitting leather suits and waterproofs for “lady pillion riders” (atomage.co.uk, n.d.). Women had never been dressed in this way before, in fitted leather. Several participants discussed the ‘Granville Girl’- a woman in a full leather suit with hood and goggles who was used to promote *Granville (oil)* – “we used to go down to the local garage and this picture (the Granville Girl) was on a calendar in the local garage and that’s what started me off into girls in second skins” (personal communication, 23 May 2024).

Participants mostly quote catsuits as their latex item of choice both then and now. Of wearing a catsuit in later years one participant stated that when wearing one that “the movement in a catsuit (is) as constant reminder of previous adventures as well as intercourse with a loved one” (personal communication, 20 December 2022). He likened his catsuits to “intimate friends... they have generated some magic moments, which frustratingly you can no longer generate”. When discussing changes in wearing rubber whilst older, participants did not state any difference in terms of how it felt on

the skin, more so the issue with getting them on and off partially due to zip positions. One participant did state that chlorinated latex (a chemical process that smooths the latex rather than it having a sticky texture) was easier to get on and off but the desire had to be there to put it on in the first place. The recollection below begins to unpack this:

In effect one has to realise that the great days of the sensation of rubber, bondage, tied and tease and e-stim (electrical stimulation) are fading. Although one still gets turned on by seeing and feeling your gear, putting it on and seeing you in it, and seeing others enjoying themselves in pictures online, you are somehow now impotent. There is a residual benefit with e-stim. It's a slightly different dimension giving some of the original enjoyable sensations. Sadly, one realises it no longer leads to the other sensations which you were used to. (personal communication, 11 June 2023)

Other participants enjoy the feel of total enclosure and restriction through baggier alternatives such as heavy diving suits. Unlike catsuits, the thickness of the rubber for diving suits is substantially thicker, to allow for pressure of water on the body whilst diving. An 87-year-old participant of the study had actually been in the navy and as part of his job role had to dive, but he would also wear his suit in the confines of his own cabin when not working. "I had a Siebe Gorman suit on the excuse that it was for diving for my own purpose and so I kept those for quite a while and then I bought more when I was at sea, and I used to take it to sea with me and put it on in the confines of my own space." (personal communication, 16 December 2022).

One participant, in his mid 70s has just ordered a 'leisure' diving suit (meaning not for actual diving), with strategically placed zips so he can get himself in and out of it as he lives alone. He still enjoys the heavier rubber and the feel of it, but dressing up is getting more limited due to mobility and libido. The stimulation to do it is not so much there but stresses the look and feel of wearing rubber always turned him on and in an email stated to a degree that he was "married to rubber. No lady partner (unfortunately) just heavy rubber" (personal communication, 12 December 2024). In other correspondence he stated: "I've been polishing up my Knight Rubber dry diving suit this morning, taking it along with me for therapy tomorrow with a mistress" (personal communication, 8 August 2024) which he partakes in twice a year as he still enjoys sessions where he gets the opportunity to be totally enclosed in latex.

CONCLUSION

"Putting on a bit of latex you almost become younger again" (personal communication, 23 November 2024)

The interviews offer a unique perspective in terms of the continuous energy and

emotional resonance that latex holds for ageing fetishists. Throughout this research, the lived experiences of participants over 60 has demonstrated the deep connections they share with rubber garments. From their early, often isolated discoveries to their current habits of wearing latex and rubber, the interviews reveal the relationships between personal history, societal attitudes, and self-expression.

The aims and objectives of this study were to uncover the untold stories of an ageing fetish community, focusing on their relationships with latex garments and their strategies for navigating stigma. By tracing the evolution of latex designs and their emotional significance, it has become evident that these garments are far more than fetishist objects; they serve as reliquaries of meaning and to some extent, intimate friends. Participants' recollections show how styles like mackintoshes, catsuits, and diving suits have shaped their experiences, offering sensory pleasure and emotional support through life's ups and downs.

The stories of secrecy and shame, contrast against moments of joy and empowerment, and show participants' perseverance in integrating their fetish with social norms. From rolling on mackintoshes as children to seeking community through niche publications and discreet shops, their journeys reflect their commitment to self-discovery and being themselves. Whether through the haptic embrace of a catsuit or the imposing weight of a diving suit, participants have expressed the power of these garments to transport them back to earlier years and sensory engagement throughout their later life.

This research aims to not only shed light on the experiences of an underrepresented demographic within the fetish community but also to challenge and expand the boundaries of fashion and cultural studies.

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