

Retirement and post-growth: towards a model of considered clothing consumption

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on a phenomenological exploration of older men's experiences of fashion and clothing. Ongoing research into fashion and ageing suggests that valuable insights into garment longevity can be identified through analysing individuals' lived experiences of clothing, offering an intriguing conceptual parallel between retirement and post-growth thinking. Therefore, in this paper, firstly, we explore the relationship between retirement and clothing consumption, and, secondly, we expose a series of conceptual similarities between post-growth thinking in fashion design, and post-retirement fashion consumption practices, and highlight their potential to inform a model of more considered clothing consumption.

Within the phenomenological commitment of centring the lived experiences of individuals, two complementary approaches were used; (1) the life-course perspective, and (2) wardrobe studies. In 2013 and 2024, a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a small group of mature fashion-conscious male participants, supplemented by personal inventories. Analysis of these materials resulted in several research themes and findings, encompassing various ways in which the participants have used their embodied relationship with clothing as a mechanism for articulating and negotiating their status as ageing men.

Keywords: retirement, post-growth, considered clothing consumption, slowing down, cultural narratives, older men's fashion

INTRODUCTION

Retirement, when an individual withdraws from their active working or professional life, can be perceived as a time of slowing down to undertake leisure pursuits or fulfil lifelong aspirations. Historically, however, retirement has an underlying negative connotation, especially when considered in terms of the capitalist concepts of constant productivity and continuous growth. In parallel to changing perceptions on ageing, we are currently witnessing a rejection of the dominant fashion system based

on over consumption, depleting resources and unethical working conditions. Fashion is awakening to the idea of post-growth where attention is given to wearing and caring for clothes in a way that celebrates their production, use and after-life in equal measure. Ongoing research into fashion and ageing suggests that valuable insights into garment longevity can be identified through analysing individuals' lived experiences of clothing. Ageing individuals clothing practices, particularly those reaching retirement offers a particularly intriguing set of conceptual parallels between post-work and post-growth thinking. Drawing such parallels has the potential to activate fashion communities to re-assess and re-evaluate their current perspectives leading to unlearning the fashion system as we know it today, in favour of establishing new, more considered individual and sector-wide practices and behaviours.

This paper draws on a phenomenological exploration of older men's experiences of fashion and clothing. In 2013 and 2024, a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a small group of mature fashion-conscious male participants, supplemented by wardrobe studies. Analysis and comparisons of the material gathered through both research engagements revealed the various ways in which they used their embodied relationship with clothing as a mechanism for articulating and negotiating their status as older working, then recently retired men, to communicate their individual and collective identities. Notable changes occurring during the 11-year gap, such as physiological changes, health issues and new pastimes were discussed, emphasising their influence on the men's evolving clothing choices, including the reviewing and editing of wardrobes to house well-worn and tested styles, as well as new interpretations of workwear and smart clothes. The second stage (in retirement) conversations provide compelling socio-material and cultural narratives which have the potential to inform a blueprint for adopting more considered clothing consumption in all stages of life.

LITERTURE REVIEW

The current, dominant fashion system is based on constant and continuous growth, in productivity, sales, profits, and more recently in the number of followers on social media, amongst other criteria. As argued by Meadows and Meadows in 'The Limits to Growth' (1972), such growth can only be achieved by increasing agricultural production, depleting non-renewable resources, generating pollution, industrial over-production and over-consumption which are unsustainable, destructive and catastrophic in their consequences. In response to this, across economies, and industries, we are currently witnessing an influx of alternative transitional cultures and thinking advocating for the urgent need to design out the intentional inefficiencies of a growth system based on gross domestic product (GDP) in favour of a 'less is more' approach designed to support a better quality of life for all (Hickel, 2021). A step towards this this would be for products to last twice as long, which would halve the resources and energy required (ibid., 2021), empowering individuals to explore and

adopt alternative, slower fashion practices.

In a similar vein, Kate Fletcher (2016) has argued for the complete rejection of mass-produced and mass-consumed objects in favour of replacing them with a potentially more satisfying and considered use of garments offering a highly experiential and dynamic path to post-growth fashion. Fletcher (2016) advocates the need for shifting the focus of the fashion sector from producing and distributing goods towards the practices of how the garments are used and experienced. She observes that while such a paradigm shift is inevitably disruptive, it offers a plethora of opportunities for fostering '*enchantment with what we already own*' (p.271), and a slower approach to engaging with fashion objects which values experience and wisdom over quantity and profits (e.g., Clark, 2019). Based on these arguments, an intriguing conceptual parallel exists between post-growth fashion thinking and retirement. In this article we explore some of the correlations between a mindful withdrawal from fashion consumerism and a partial or complete withdrawal from active working life; these correlations, we argue, can provide a valuable knowledge base and inform a more sustainable, empowered approach to clothing consumption in all stages of life.

There are a lack of studies explicitly investigating the link between the transition into retirement and how it might impact the expectations, purpose or pleasure people may derive from engaging with fashion and clothing. In contrast to this, several studies have investigated the relationship between fashion and age/ ageing; here two separate strands can be highlighted. Firstly, the topic of older women and fashion has received some attention from scholars, especially within the fields of sociology and cultural gerontology (e.g., Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko, 2012; Twigg, 2013), and some within the field of fashion and clothing design (Townsend and Sadkowska, 2017; Wren 2017; Townsend et al., 2019). Secondly, there has been growing academic interest in older men, and their relationships with clothing (e.g., Sadkowska, 2016; Twigg, 2020). Sociologist Julia Twigg, who first conducted a series of interviews with older women, later supplemented by corresponding interviews with older men, observed that for older men '*age was less a point of challenge or change than for many women, (...) and there was not the sense of cultural exile that had marked many of the women's responses*' (2020, p: 105), reinforcing some of the ways in which the experience of age remains highly gendered.

What is of particular relevance to the current study, is that Twigg concluded that for the men in her study age was often linked to wisdom and good taste, and clothes were seen as a medium enabling them to express their abiding values and qualities of worth, '*repudiating the cheap throw away aspects of modern culture, and an implicit endorsement of the older self as of continuing value*' (2020, p: 122). This observation raises the possibility for establishing a compelling contextual parallel between the meaning and value that as individuals and society we might attach to retirement and age/ ageing, and the idea of post-growth fashion based on the appreciation and

cultivation of clothing experiences.

METHODOLOGY

In this paper we present and discuss findings from two consecutive studies. In the first study (Sadkowska, 2016), the aim was to develop an in-depth understanding of how a small sample of mature men have experienced fashion and ageing. The aim of the second study (Sadkowska and Townsend, 2024) was to build on the previous findings, by exploring various points of continuity and change in the participants social performance through their evolving fashion and clothing practices. It is through the second study that retirement emerged as one of the key drivers in the participants' current fashion consumption, as explored later in this article.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (e.g., Smith et al., 2009; 2022), with its overarching focus on (1) how individuals perceive lived experiences in their lifeworld, and (2) the researchers developing highly interpretative accounts of those experiences, provides the theoretical framework for this project. This combination of approaches has enabled us to better understand how individuals use clothes to navigate their transition into retirement, and what lessons can be learnt from their emergent fashion consumption practices.

Participants

The five participants recruited in 2013 for the original study were all openly interested in fashion and fashionable clothing. They were all white, British, heterosexual or bisexual, and middle class (Table 1); additionally, they all had past experiences and memories of being part of different youth subcultures, however, the duration and type (including style of preferred clothing) of these experiences was unique to each participant.

Within the parameters of the follow-up study, it was imperative to re-interview men who participated in the original study. Three, out of the five original participants were re-interviewed (Table 2). All three participants had retired in the period between the two studies, and they all remained relatively affluent following their retirement.

Table 1. Sample characteristics in Study 1 (2013-14)

Name*	Age when first interviewed	Occupation	County of residence
Eric	60	Artist	Nottinghamshire
Grahame	61	Social care worker	Derbyshire
Henry	54	Academic	Leicestershire
Ian	58	Company director	Nottinghamshire
Kevin	63	Lecturer	Nottinghamshire

Table 2. Sample characteristics in Study 2 (April 2024)

Name*	Age in 2024	Occupation	County of residence
Henry	65	Retired	Leicestershire
Ian	69	Retired	Nottinghamshire/ Thailand
Kevin	74	Retired	Nottinghamshire

*Pseudonyms are used to preserve participants' anonymity

Data Collection

The data collection for the first study was completed between 2013-2014, and consisted of a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews undertaken with five mature fashion-conscious men (based in the Midlands, UK). These interviews, alongside personal inventories, revealed the various ways in which the participants used their embodied relationship with clothing as a mechanism for articulating and negotiating their ageing bodies, individual and collective identities. The second study, conducted in 2024, involved a series of three follow-up interviews and personal inventories with some of the original study participants, shining new light on the richness and complexity of the men's lived experiences, and their social bodily performance post-retirement.

Analysis

Both phases of the study followed a standard IPA protocol, where similar/ conceptually overlapping emergent themes (i.e., subordinate theme) were grouped into master themes (i.e., subordinate themes). Nine subordinate themes, grouped into three master themes, that represent the lived experience of ageing through the lens of fashion and clothing for the study participants emerged in the first study; these themes were discussed widely in previous academic outputs (e.g., Sadkowska, 2016; Sadkowska 2022).

In the second study in 2024, some conceptually similar themes emerged, however, these themes were grouped differently to give provenance to the new contexts such as retirement, bodily changes and new expectations and preferences towards fashion and clothing. In this article we focus and present our interpretations of the Transition into Retirement superordinate theme.

FINDINGS

The narratives of the three men participating in the second study offered multiple insights into their experiences of fashion and clothing during and after their transition into retirement.

All participants in the follow-up study referred to the period of transition into retirement as being an especially challenging time in their lives, during which clothes had continued to provide a source of validation and purpose. In this vein, Henry (65) offers a very insightful account, highlighting the difficulties he experienced during this transition and the important role clothes played in the process, enabling him to adjust to and navigate through new settings:

Uhm... yes. I hated it [the retirement]. For the first three months, I absolutely hated it. (...) So clothing, I now have got more leisure time. But that doesn't mean I am not wearing waistcoats and pocket watches. (...) So, I still put a suit on whenever I can, and a tie. Even if I am just wandering to the pub. And certainly, on holiday, smart clothes are fewer, smarter, but still going in.

On the surface, the first thing we notice in Henry's account here is his very negative attitude towards this life transition. This reaction could be linked to Henry's personal situation and view of ending his working life in a high-level job. Conversely, it could be linked to a common negative conception around ageing and retirement seen as a stage of life defined by a sense of loss, gradual disappearance, especially when considered in terms of the capitalist concepts of continuous productivity and growth. It is compelling therefore, to look at Henry's linguistic choices here, and especially the combination of the phrase "*but that doesn't mean*" and use of the word "*still*" twice in this otherwise short extract; the use of language highlights how important it is for Henry to distance himself from the behaviours and practices which he perceives as a form of social and personal withdrawal and cessation. Instead, he insists that the active cultivation of his life-long interest and practical pursuit of fashion provide him with a sense of emotional security, continuity and belonging. Kevin (74) also echoed the importance of maintaining his fashion identity and style, despite his transition into retirement:

And now I guess, it still is important, because I still don't dress conventionally, as a 74-year old man. As can be noted when I go up to my local boozier. And people point that out to me. (laughs) Not always in the kind way. People don't like difference, no they don't. I mean most of the people my age wear beige, or pale grey. And sort of comfortable shoes. And sort of athlete/ sports wear... ummm lovely.

Again, what is compelling in this account, is the repetition of the word "*still*"; like Henry, Kevin emphasises that his commitment and desire to expressing his identity through stylish clothing remains strong. This, he realises, might go against the grain of the commonly held assumption that individuals, and perhaps men especially, stop caring about their appearance at a certain time in life. In this sense, Kevin observes that his clothing practices might be visibly different to others of a similar age, which was also

something he expressed in the first interview; Kevin recognises his appearance might make him stand out, or trigger negative comments, but he sees this as an important part of his identity. Consequently, he refuses to give up on the pleasure he derives from wearing smart clothes allowing him to navigate through the new stage in his life by transmitting what he has always valued in life.

Finally, all the men in the follow up study recognised the impact of new settings on their clothing practices. Within the three interviews, these settings were articulated and situated in different contexts such as reduced spending potential, changed geographical locations, or new hobbies and pastimes. Here, Ian (69) reflects on his current living arrangements, explaining how this influences his clothing choices.

So, I now have a place in Thailand, and basically, I have the whole wardrobe over there, because there it is always 30+ degrees. (...) And Thailand wardrobe... there still are some nice... well it's shorts and T-shirts (...) in the daytime, different to the night-time, where I would still wear the good stuff in the evening. And they are still shorts and T-shirts but not high fashion, but still some good labels.

It is Ian's orientation towards good quality, branded clothing's that comes to function expressively. For Ian, as for other men in the follow-up study, the changes in his circumstances were meaningful in terms of adapting his dressing habits and behaviours in response to those changes but were not detrimental to his desire to look and feel good about the way he presents himself. And while Ian recognises his functional needs towards clothes might be different when he lives in Thailand, he continues to make the effort to dress up appropriately for evening occasions, enabling him to enact his personal sense of style despite the different location, culture, and climate.

As identified by all the men in the follow-up study, while their aesthetic choices have remained, their shopping and purchasing practices have in fact changed and slowed down significantly. All three men shopped considerably less, prioritising quality over quantity. And although their often-unique appearance might suggest otherwise, this rationalised approach to purchasing is in line with idea of post-growth in fashion, where focus is placed upon slower and more considered clothing consumption and intentional and meaningful experiences of clothing objects, rather than being dictated to by fads and trends. Ian acknowledged this directly by stating that the interview gave him a space to reflect on his relationship with fashion and he realised that unlike 10 years ago when he purchased various fashion magazines (e.g. GQ etc) to see what was 'in' he no longer did this. He did admit to going online to look at clothes but acknowledged that most new pieces he purchased were from tried and tested brands.

CONCLUSION

As shown throughout this article, important conceptual parallels exist between the transition into retirement and post-growth thinking; these parallels have not been previously acknowledged, nor investigated. The interactions and engagement with clothing displayed by the men we interviewed for the follow-up study have exposed new, more sustainable ways and means of experiencing, engaging and consuming fashion. Central to this argument is the potent parallel between retirement perceived as a time of slowing down, and post-growth fashion concepts - where lived fashion experiences are not forgotten but remembered and cherished (Fletcher, 2016). Similarly, our participants all discussed the complexity of their current fashion practices as rooted in positive attachment, strong emotional connectivity and fulfilling social interactions; these traits, we argue, can provide a valuable knowledge base and inform a more sustainable and empowered approach to clothing consumption in all stages of life.

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