

Relationship Between Autism and Fashion

Phoebe Zaranski

School of Arts, Design, and Communication

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Dr. Leslie Simpson

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Clothing can positively and negatively affect autistic people, such as aide their self-image, and there is no universal accommodation to serve each individual needs.

According to the DSM-5, the two main symptoms of autism are deficits in social communication/interaction and repetitive behavior, interests, or activities (*Clinical testing and diagnosis for autism spectrum disorder*). They struggle with maintaining conversation cadence and responses, since nonverbals can be very difficult to decode. Relationships are hard to establish and maintain. As for repetitive behaviors, some people find fidgeting with toys very comforting, others need the structure of a routine to stay regulated, and others experience strong, intense emotions towards topics of interest. Finally, sensory inputs, such as the feeling of a blanket or the taste of mushy foods, can feel either irregulating or comforting.

When interviewing several autistics about clothing, many reported certain clothing textures feel as if “sandpaper was rubbing against their skin”, “a really bad bug bite”, or even forces them to think about their clothing 24/7 (Kyriacou et al., 2021). It is important to note that one autistic person’s clothing trigger may not be overwhelming by all autistic people. The most common triggers include tags, seams with plastic coatings, fabrics with a stiff hand, noisy fabrics, and tight fits most notably around the neck. Just as neurotypicals may have off days, feeling extra irritable than usual, autistics may have days that they wake up less tolerant to their triggers. But generally, most people find that with age they have become less sensitive (Kyriacou et al., 2021).

Although clothing can be distressing for some autistic people, it can also be a source of comfort. Clothing with various pockets can hold their fidget toys. For good-feeling fabrics, usually softer ones, the wearer can feel soothed and “use dressing to create a tiny bubble of comfort” (Rosa, 2021). For those who find deep pressure therapy helpful, “a therapy where touch

or weight...helps someone who may need an intervention if they're feeling stressed, anxious or overloaded", items like weighted vests or blankets can help them decompress (Aylward, 2017). Even clothing that's texture reminds them of something calming, such as athletic clothes making them feel energized simply by the feel of spandex, can immediately have a positive impact on the wearer (Kyriacou et al., 2021).

Communication and sharing personal experiences can be difficult for autistics, but fashion is an alternative form of expression. They "can't always translate myself into language or motion, but I can translate myself into clothes" (Kansen, 2017). Clothes can follow trends based on the music one likes, it can demonstrate status symbols, and it can even help others highlight their interests with aesthetics. Through these standards, it can be easier for autistics to read others. For special interests, autistic kids find comfort in sporting their favorite cartoon characters across all their tee shirts, even sometimes wearing a singular costume daily that makes them feel magical (Kansen, 2017). Whether it's part of an autistic's communication pattern or their special interest, clothing can be a tool for them to express themselves.

While there are some common clothing triggers, there is no streamlined solution to make clothing more accessible for autistic consumers (Shin, et al., 2015). A children's clothing company experimented with autistic-accommodating clothing, discovering "autistic children's clothing in terms of designs, colors, and trends is not different from other normal children" (Oetojo, 2019). Some common solutions, such as screen-printed labels, seamless garments, and soft-handed textiles were found, however, autistic consumers all experience clothing differently. A general rule of thumb when making clothing for autistic consumers is to ask their needs upfront. Every individual on the autism spectrum can experience negative and positive effects of clothing, but to be accommodating is to understand their specific needs.

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