

Making and writing; writing and making: Co-constructing experiential knowledge in and through 'doing' fashion

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The logo for RTD2017 features the text 'RTD2017' in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The letters are filled with a dense, white, cross-hatched pattern. To the right of the text is a stylized yellow and white geometric shape resembling a folded piece of paper or a modern architectural element.

Proceedings of the 3rd Biennial
Research Through Design Conference

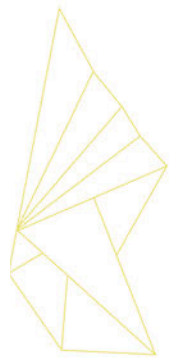
Making and writing; writing and making: co-constructing experiential knowledge in and through 'doing' fashion

Ania Sadkowska

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Image credit: Ania Sadkowska.



Making and writing; writing and making: co-constructing experiential knowledge *in and through* ‘doing’ fashion

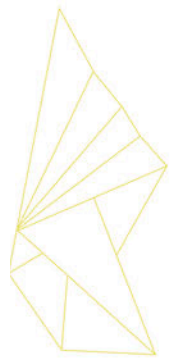
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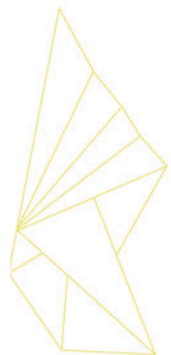
Keywords: fashion and clothing; ageing; mature men; meaning-making; writing and making; Arts-Informed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Abstract: This paper stems from my doctoral project in which my aim was to develop an in-depth understanding of how a small sample of mature men has experienced fashion and ageing. Working with such an open-ended aim allowed me to develop a fit-for-purpose methodology that accommodated two components: the topic of the investigation and the theoretical perspectives that, as a creative practitioner, I brought into it. A particular research mechanism, which was based on the integration of fashion theory and practice, synthesised to activities of interpretative making and writing, was implemented to suit my epistemological constructivist stance, my particular way of being in the world and conducting research-through-design. In this paper, I focus on

two artefacts I created in response to empirical data gathered via in-depth interviews and personal inventories with the study participants. The making processes of the Dis-Comforting suit jacket and film, involved de-construction of a second-hand garment, a scenario-based reflective performance, and practical experimentations with materials and objects. ‘*Making*’, as a means of embodied, visual enquiry became a highly metaphorical analytical tool that afforded the advanced insights into older men’s lived experiences. Consequently, I argue that through my embodied interactions with objects and materials, as the creative practitioner, I co-constructed new experiential understandings and offered fresh perspectives of the phenomenon under study.



Sadkowska | Making and writing; writing and making: co-constructing experiential knowledge *in and through* 'doing' fashion



Introduction

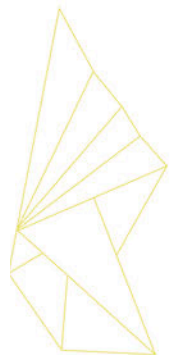
This paper accompanies two artefacts, the Dis-Comforting suit jacket and film, which I produced as part of my practice-based research project (Sadkowska 2016). The aim of my study was to investigate the possibility of adopting the conceptual lens of fashion and clothing in order to explore the older men's experiences of ageing. In this vein, as a fashion practitioner, I sought to creatively explore the vantage point and the relationship between fashion, clothing, embodiment, and the physical and social processes of growing older in relation to individuals' experiences.

Building on the concept of the hermeneutic circle (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009), '*making*' as a means of embodied, visual enquiry became a highly metaphorical analytical tool that afforded the advanced understandings of and insights into the study participants lived experiences, as compared to the standard text-based qualitative analysis. Throughout this paper, supported by a series of images documenting my research process in regards to the selection of the empirical material, I argue that merging the practices of *making* and *writing* into one analytical mechanism allowed me to produce extended understandings, both in form and depth, of the participants' interpretations of their experiences.

Research Context(s)

There are many different contexts surrounding this research, which impacted its form, processes and outcomes. Firstly, this study has been conducted and presented at the time of important socio-demographic changes which have resulted in a stronger link between fashion and ageing than ever before, such as the growth of the British ageing population and maturing of the so-called baby boomer generation. Subsequently, this study should also be understood in the academic context where men's fashion is an ever-growing field of study; yet, as Edwards (2011: 41) comments, it is still a problematic topic that is somewhat "haunted by the ghost of Flügel [1930] who asserted with some aggression that men had 'renounced' fashion in the early nineteenth century". But, the timing of this study is also coinciding with that of the menswear branch of the fashion industry being the strongest it has ever been (Mintel March 2014), illustrated not only by the growing sales, but also by its recognition at the various fashion events, such as the London or Paris Fashion Week.

Secondly, it is also important to highlight that the notions that I explored in this study, namely older men and ageing masculinities in relation to fashion and clothing, resonate strongly with studies of the body and embodiment. The body plays a central role in how men age and how they enact what it means to be a man (Whitehead 2002), and the intrinsic connection exists between ageing, masculinity and the male body.



In my project, I explored the intersection of the embodied experiences of male ageing via analysing the relationship between the body, fashion and clothing. I approached the body not only as the changing ‘canvas’ on which men’s ageing is marked, but also as the vehicle for clothing and fashioning their appearances in response to those changes. Merleau-Ponty (1962/2002) famously asserted that experience occurs between the body and mind. This relates to the participants’ embodied experience that I attempted to understand through the constant movement between the different elements of their interpretation of it; but on a different level, this applies also to the researcher’s embodied experience of creating her understandings and interpretations.

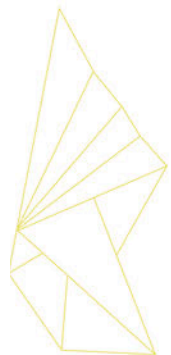
Consequently, this project built upon the hypothesis that practices of engaging with materials and objects can advance my understanding of the human condition started in the process of engaging with text; and, furthermore, that *making* can be as important tool of interpretation as *writing*.

The researcher

Underpinned by the qualitative and practice-based approaches, as the researcher-interpreter I played an instrumental role in the research process based on constructivist and subjectivist uncovering of the possible meanings of the lived experience. Thus, it is important to explain my own context as the creative practitioner undertaking this interpretative investigation, including my understanding of what knowledge is and how this has impacted the study.

Firstly, I am strongly influenced by the work of critical realists, especially their acceptance of the multiplicity of alternative yet valid accounts of any phenomenon, the inevitable partiality of all knowledge (Maxwell 2008) and the possibility of discovering the remarkable in the mundane and prosaic (Silverman 2007; cited in Butler-Kisber 2010). Secondly, from the contextual constructivists, I take the notions of reality being socially constructed and mediated, and its inextricable attachment to the given context. I do not entirely reject the realists’ claim that there is an objective and independent truth but I advocate for the impossibility of getting any closer to it than through the myriad of subjective and often interconnected accounts of it. Furthermore, I am inspired by the opportunity of deriving fresh understandings through alternative tools and languages (Vygotsky 1978; cited in Butler-Kisber 2010), especially various *artful* practices (Sullivan 2010). My aim, as a creative practitioner, cannot be, therefore, simplified to new knowledge production, but rather can be described as knowledge co-construction and accumulation.

To add to this, having trained as a fashion designer, it has quickly become apparent to me that my research practices do not fit neatly within this one discipline; instead they display significant over-laps with the disciplines of creative arts, phenomenological psychology and sociology. Thus, this research in part allowed me also to question my own practices as a fashion practitioner interested in lived experiences; furthermore, it allowed me to investigate alternative ways of exploring these experiences and disseminating my research findings.



The participants

Due to the idiographic focus of this research, each of the five study participants provided the context for it. It is therefore important to explain, albeit briefly, their characteristics. Such an acknowledgment is important also because of my constructivist stance, which requires me not only to recognize the participants as the source of inspiration, but as the active co-interpreters in the process. All of the participants were recruited using word-of-mouth and snowballing techniques. All of them were white, British, heterosexual, middle-class men with a significant interest in their appearance, and especially in fashion and clothing; they shared a similar fashion past, including being members of distinctive British youth subcultures from the 1950s onwards, such as Mods and Punks. Moreover, they all employed various body management techniques such as exercising and dieting, and embraced what, generally, could be explained as a healthy lifestyle.

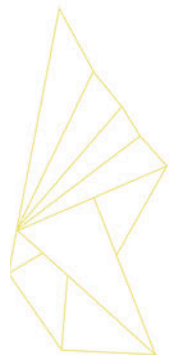


Figure 1. The participants on the day of their interviews showing their favourite fashion artefacts; Eric (60) and Grahame (61). Photo: Ania Sadkowska, 2016.

The methodology

The main aim of my research was to explore how a small sample of older men have experienced fashion and clothing throughout their lives, and how they negotiate their ageing identities through those mediums. Undoubtedly, there is more than one suitable methodology on offer that could be effectively used for such purposes. However, the research methodology that I was aiming to develop for this study was tailored to fit my skills set and qualities as a researcher, designer and artist. Such research parameters required searching across disciplines including sociology, psychology and fashion design in order to establish the most appropriate approaches that could be merged together into one hybrid methodology affording a seamless fit between the topic under study, the research processes, and the researcher herself. Furthermore, by employing such an interdisciplinary approach, I tested the boundaries and value of objectivity and subjectivity in the research process.

Given the parameters of my epistemological position, the research aim, and the qualitative and practice-based approaches to research, within which this study is located, the developed research mechanism was informed by two emerging methodologies. In developing an in-depth understanding of the small and homogenous sample of older men's experience of ageing in the context of fashion and clothing, I conducted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith 1996); for this I utilised two complementary research methods, namely in-depth semi-structured interviews and personal inventories (fig. 1) with five British mature men. By extending the interpretative strategies through various



creative practices and producing artefacts as a valid form of knowledge advancement and dissemination, I undertook Arts-Informed Research (Cole and Knowles 2008); for this I utilised a research method of practical explorations.

In this research, I have developed a novel hybrid methodology, Arts-Informed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Rooted in phenomenology and arts, this methodology put to the test the concept of *making* as a valid way of data analysis, equal to *writing*. My research process built on the concept of the hermeneutic circle; the subsequent activities of writing and making allowed me to constantly move between different elements of the participants' experiences, which in turn facilitated the conditions for more in-depth and holistic understanding and enhanced interpretations. In addition, such an approach gave me the opportunity to utilise my skills and sensibilities as a creative practitioner and to blur the boundaries between the artificially disconnected domains of fashion theory and practice. Such an integrative approach to research methodology has the potential to be easily transposed across other disciplines, given the sensibilities of the researcher and the conditions of the research require it.

My hermeneutic circle

Drawing from the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith 1996), the key concept used in the methodology is that of the hermeneutic circle. The unique features of my hermeneutic circle are

the virtual 'checkpoints' (fig. 2) and constant research actions through which I developed meanings. In this manner, there are five critical checkpoints on my hermeneutic circle: firstly, Text (I), which refers to the interview transcripts; secondly, Images, meaning the photographs and sketches taken during the interviews; thirdly, Objects and Materials, consisting of the purchased second-hand men's jackets and the various materials I used for my interpretative analysis; and, fourthly, Artefacts, which refers to the re-made men's jackets. Finally, the fifth checkpoint, Text (II), encompasses the final written accounts illustrating and explaining my understanding and interpretation of the participants' experiences.

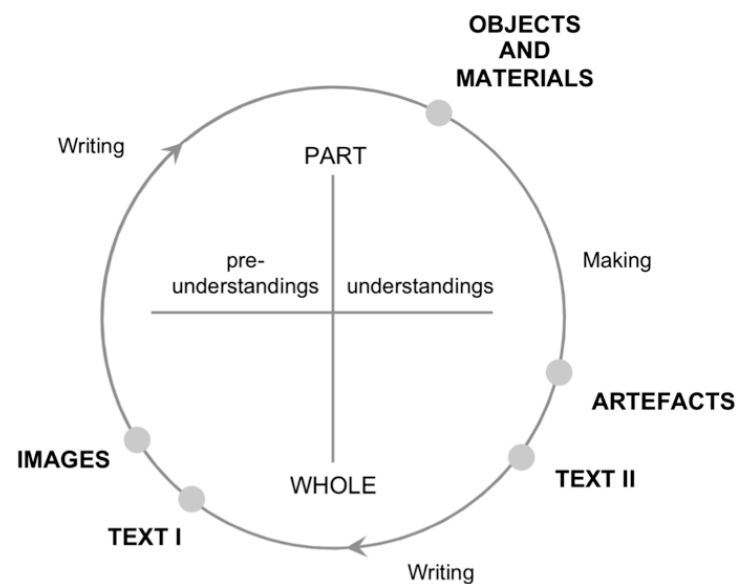
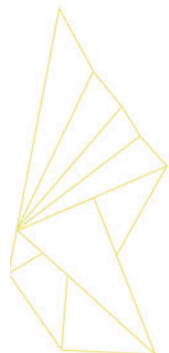


Figure 2. The hermeneutic circle developed for this study. Credit: Ania Sadkowska, 2016.



Data analysis

The images documenting personal inventories (fig. 3) and the interview transcriptions (fig. 4) were analysed following steps that were standard to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009). That stage of interpretative data coding, resulted in a series of themes describing the participants' experiences of fashion and clothing, as they grow older, grouped and organised under three sets of superordinate (master) themes (tab. 1). Below, I briefly introduce each of the superordinate and the corresponding subordinate themes.



Figure 3. Personal inventory with Henry (54); his past and present favourite fashion artefacts. Credit: Ania Sadkowska, 2016.

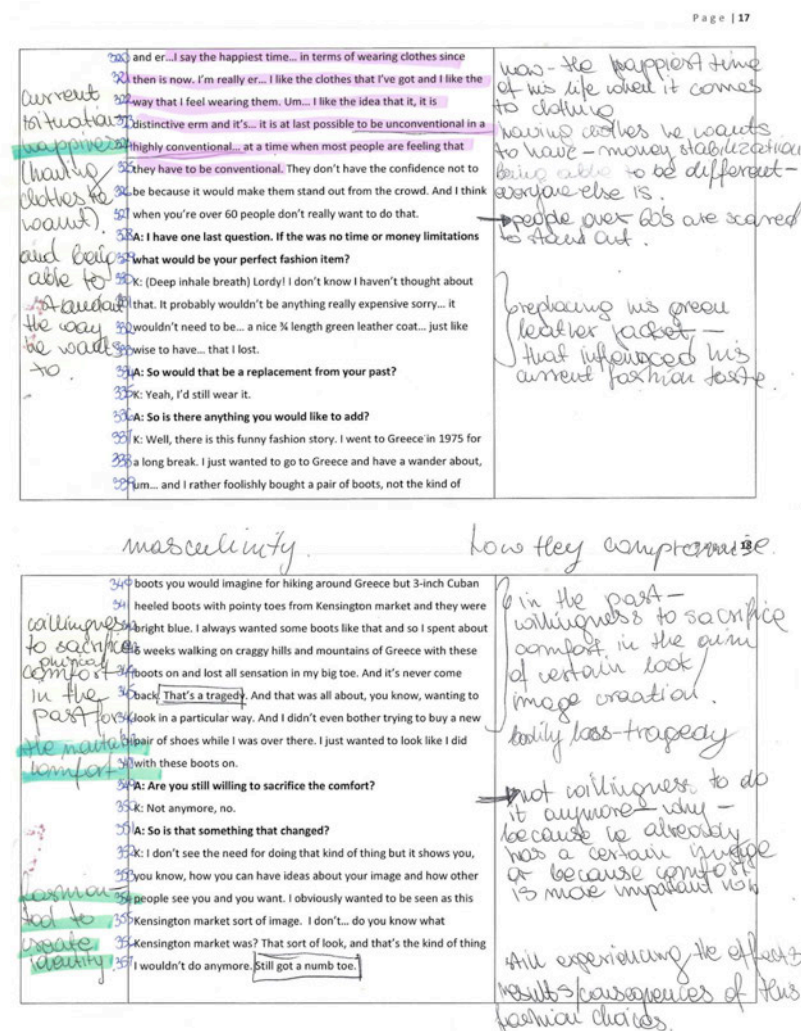
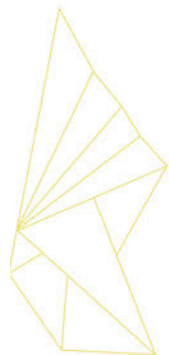


Figure 4. Interview transcription with the IPA coding – example; interview with Kevin (63). Credit: Ania Sadkowska, 2016.



SUPERORDINATE THEMES		
Learning Fashion	Defining the Fashion-Self	Fashion-Age(ing) Performance
SUBORDINATE THEMES		
Mirroring	Pioneering	Presenting
Dis-Comforting	Non-Conforming	(Un-)Fashioning
Peacocking	Distancing	Re-Materializing

Table 1. Superordinate and subordinate themes in the study.

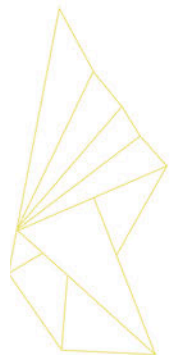
The first superordinate theme, 'Learning Fashion', is concerned with the various past practices through which the respondents developed their fashion sensibilities, allowing them to engage actively with fashion. The three subordinate themes of 'Learning Fashion' are: 'Mirroring', which describes the participants' past practices of copying others' appearance, especially in relation to youth idols and other members of youth subcultures; 'Dis-Comforting', which outlines the active sacrificing of physical comfort in order to create the desired look; and 'Peacocking', a term used to highlight the pleasure derived from being recognised, praised, and admired for the way the participants presented themselves.

The 'Defining the Fashion-Self' superordinate theme is concerned with the ways in which the participants have constructed and defined their fashion identities, especially in relation to continuity and transition. It comprises the subordinate themes of: 'Pioneering', which is concerned with the participants' sense of being part of important social and cultural revolutions, including the creation and development of mass-

and youth-oriented fashion; 'Non-Conforming', which describes respondents' often rebellious approach to fashion trends and certain social limitations; and 'Distancing', which is concerned with the importance, as expressed by the respondents, of not being associated with certain fashion looks and/or behaviours or even brands and individuals (Sadkowska et al. 2016).

The final superordinate theme, 'Fashion-Age(ing) Performance', focuses on the participants' social performance relating to ageing through the medium of fashionable clothing, with the main locus in the present. It includes three subordinate themes: 'Presenting', which relates to the participants' changing physicality and its influence on their social performance in relation to fashion; '(Un-)Fashioning', which describes the respondents' cautious navigation between various fashion styles, trends, and so-called 'timeless solutions'; and 'Re-Materialising', which focuses on the participants' reminiscing about unique fashion artefacts from the past and their desire to reconnect with them, consequently influencing the creation of a certain prism through which they currently experience fashion and clothing.

At the final stage of data analysis, each of the nine subordinate themes was re-analysed using various creative artful practices, objects and materials, in order to enhance its interpretative capacity. Below, I explain this in relation to the 'Dis-Comforting' theme, which was selected for its novel character and qualitative richness, as well as its unique procedural developments.



Dis-Comforting

As explained above, the processes of textual coding brought my attention to several passages in which the participants referred to their physical comfort i.e. the 'Dis-Comforting' subordinate theme. This included various aspects of physical and mental comfort; for example, while some of the participants discussed physical comfort as a result of their mental comfort (feeling good wearing a certain garment), others discussed it in the context of their past participation in various youth subcultures (comfort as a result of fitting within a group's standards). However, the biggest 'surprise' for me as a researcher was the realisation of the presence of the body dis-comforting practices in the participants' past and present fashion behaviours. This was opposed to my pre-conception of older men's relationship with fashion; I entered the study with the belief that older men value highly their physical comfort and they would not sacrifice it for the sake of the fashionable look; dis-comforting practices, in my understanding, were reserved to youngsters, and perhaps even more specifically to young women.

At this stage, I re-approached the images of the participants on the day of their interviews and the images of the artefacts they chose to bring with them including their favourite fashion items and old photos. I looked for the connections between the interviews, images and my field notes. Since some of the artefacts that the participants brought along were photos of the artefacts that no longer existed, I quickly discovered that some of these photos carried special memories of the dis-comforting caused by those garments. This understanding emerged

through the interplay between what the participants said about dis-comforting their bodies, the garments and images they showed to me, and what I thought this might have meant; this was the first step of my unfolding interpretation and it marked the first and second checkpoints on my hermeneutic circle: engaging with text and images.

I then sought to process this data further. I wrote about it, testing my ideas on paper. I tried to stay reflexive and to acknowledge my own pre-conceptions and how they were influencing my developing understanding. As a result of this, I noted some of the ideas of what the 'Dis-Comforting' theme might be in my sketchbook (fig. 5). I became strongly driven by one of the passages, in which Henry (54) discusses his willingness to wear a corset in order to get into fashionable clothing:

Comfort... no. Style first. I will breathe in, and fasten anything, and live with it for the day, if I have to. I would probably consider a corset, if I had to get into something.

Inspired by this, I experimented with materials that corresponded to my unfolding understandings, such as metal corset wire, while developing the theme further. I chose this material because, to me, it metaphorically represented the stereotypical ideal of masculinity, strength and roughness hidden within its hard metal structure; historically, however, it was an innovative material for the female corset in the early 20th century in Britain and Germany (Eleri 2010). I drew in my sketchbook some ideas - I tried to understand. I felt lost and I realised that I did not understand enough to write up the theme.

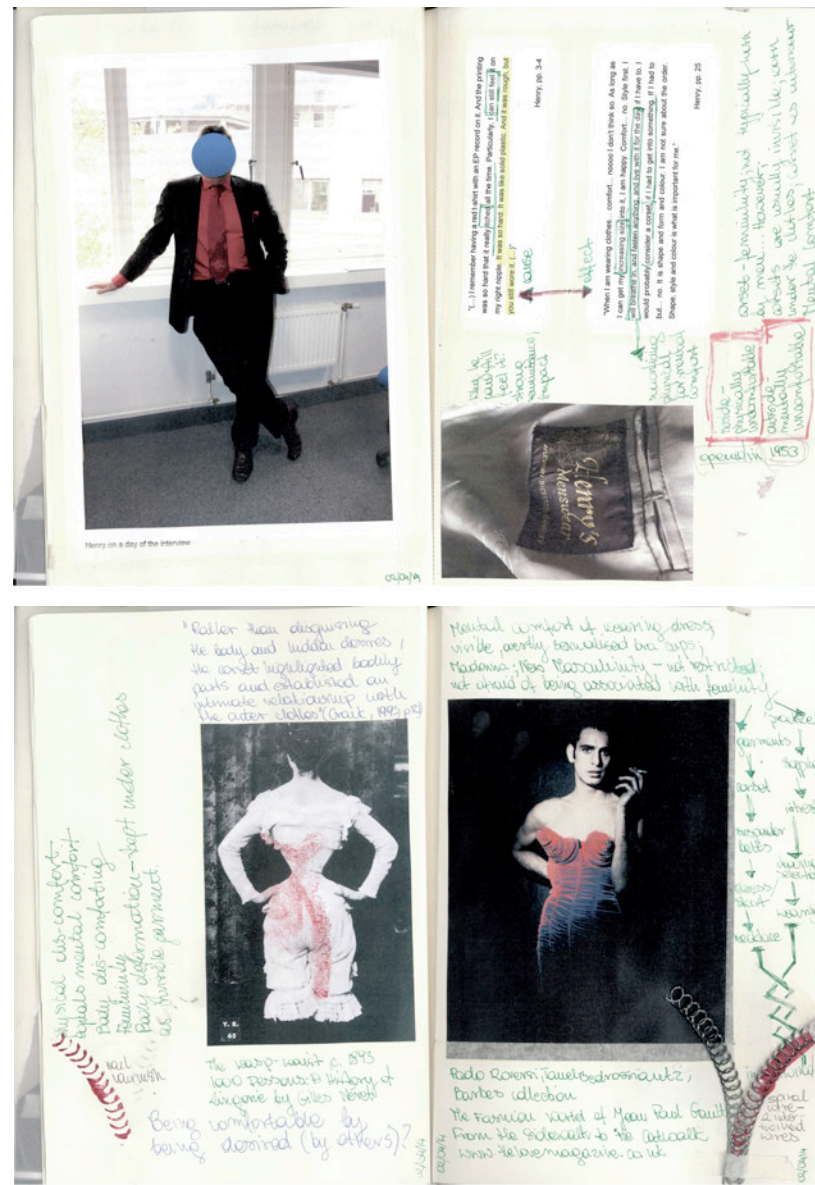
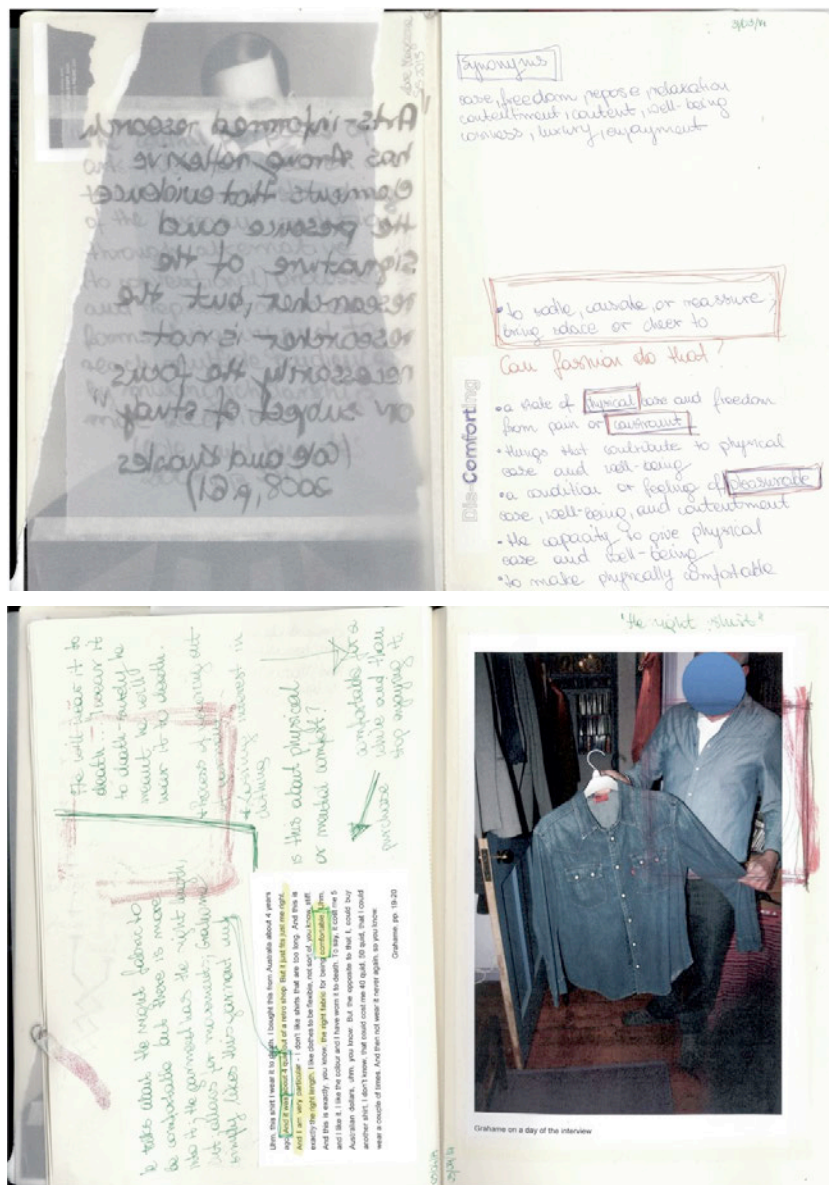
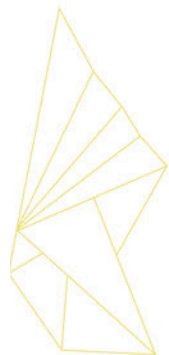
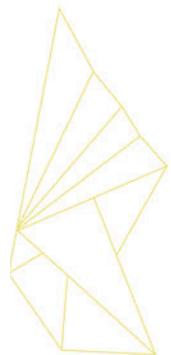


Figure 5. 'Dis-Comforting' sketchbook pages; initial notes and ideas. Credit: Ania Sadkowska, 2016.



Intrigued by the passage from another participant, Kevin (63) in which he provided a description of his past trip to Greece, I begun to question the consequences of the participants purposively dis-comforting their body:

[T]here is this funny fashion story. I went to Greece in 1975 (...)
[A]nd I rather foolishly bought a pair of boots, not the kind of boots you would imagine for hiking around Greece but 3-inch Cuban heeled boots (...) and so I spent about 6 weeks walking on craggy hills and mountains of Greece with these boots on and lost all sensation in my big toe. And it's never come back.

Accordingly, I decided to utilise the method of a scenario-based reflective performance; I asked a male model to wrap the metal spiral corset wire around his body. This proved to be a stimulating and thought-provoking exercise as it allowed me to observe the physical signs left on his body by the metal wire in the process of the direct body dis-comforting. It resulted also in the set of photos and a written account given by the model (fig. 6) in which he reflected on his bodily experience. I captured and documented it via a short film (fig. 7); this was, I believe, the key moment allowing me to more clearly formulate my ideas about the theme, which marked the third checkpoint on my hermeneutic circle: materials and objects.

At this stage I purchased a second-hand men's suit jacket (fig. 8) and I started planning how I could incorporate the metal wire within it. I decided to work with a suit jacket because, by many authors, a suit is interpreted as a prime vehicle of masculinity (e.g. Hollander 1994,

Hamilton 2007). Suits were also present in the narratives of all of the participants, and most of them referred to the suit jackets as either their favourite items of clothing or as an item that carried a significant meaning or memory. I decided to use a previously owned men's suit jacket to highlight the participants' past experiences; metaphorically, any second-hand garment is already invested with a life of its own.

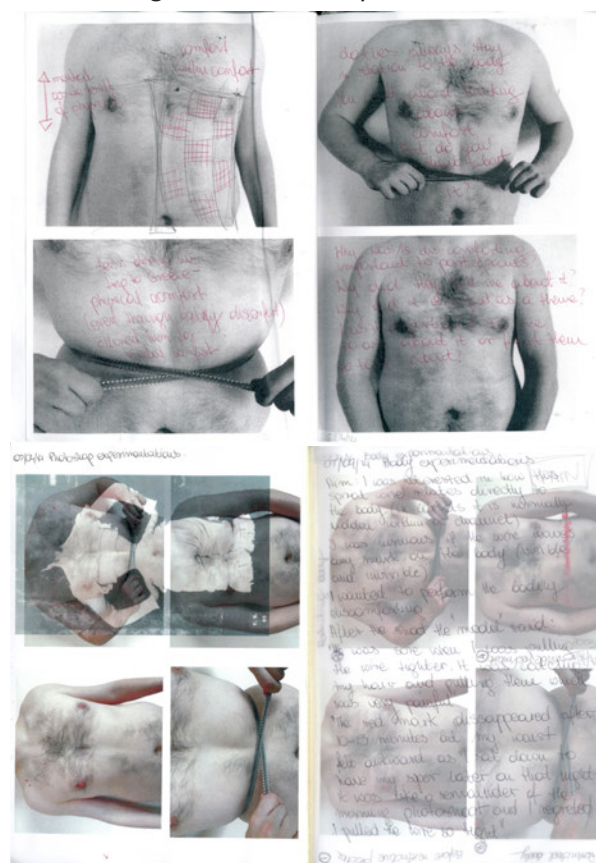


Figure 6. 'Dis-Comforting' sketchbook pages; scenario-based reflective performance: photos and model's account. Credit: Ania Sadkowska, 2016.

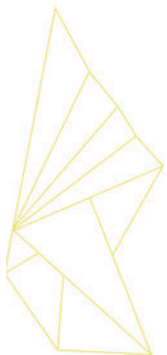


Figure 7. 'Dis-Comforting' film; stills. Photo: Fraser West, 2016.



Figure 8. Purchased second-hand jacket. Photo: Ania Sadkowska, 2016.

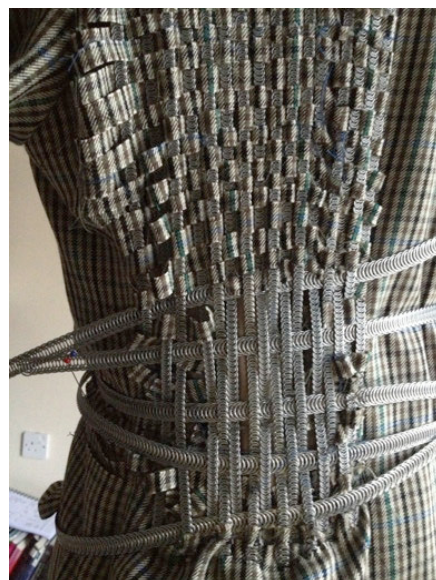
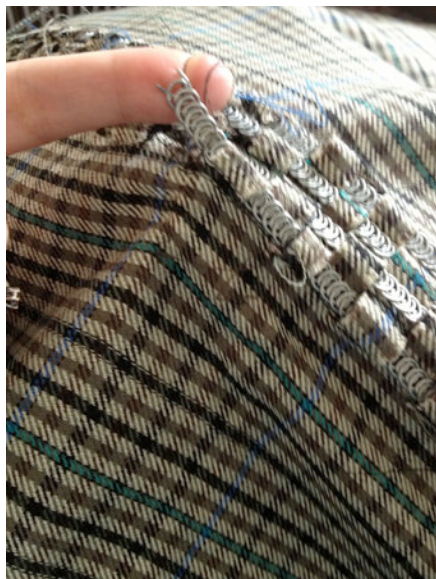
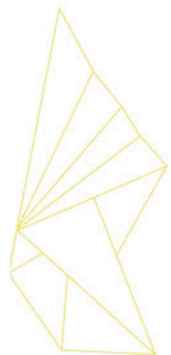
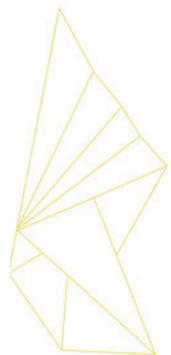


Figure 9. 'Dis-Comforting' theme; practical explorations: inserting a spiral metal corset wire within the second-hand men's suit jacket. Photo: Ania Sadkowska, 2016.



Figure 10. 'Dis-Comforting' jacket; front and detail. Photo: Fraser West, 2016.

I re-read and re-listened to the relevant passages. I started to 'make' my design (fig. 9); I tried not to impose myself on the data; instead I let the data lead and stimulate my making. Correspondingly, making this jacket proved to be a physically painful process for myself, causing bruises and cuts on my hands. It was only when I completed the Dis-Comforting jacket (fig. 10), which marked the artefacts checkpoint on my hermeneutic circle, that I felt that I could finally understand the various experiences of men dis-comforting their bodies that my participants told me about. As the result of this iterative process of *making* and *writing*, I finished writing up yet another draft of the 'Dis-Comforting' theme. This marked the final checkpoint on my hermeneutic circle, text II.



Reflections and Conclusions

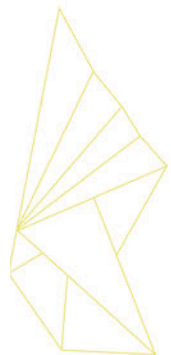
In this paper I described the research process in which '*making*' as a means of embodied, visual enquiry became a highly metaphorical analytical tool that afforded the advanced understandings and insights as compared to the standard text-based qualitative data analysis.

Firstly, it is imperative to reflect that this research process, including the role and form of the practical explorations, responded to the 'character' of the empirical material that I gathered from the sample of the study participants. In this vein, this research methodology and its processes were flexible and accommodating and allowed the researcher-interpreter to respond to the selected material in a creative, yet transparent way. In this sense, the making processes were never dictated or limited by fulfilling a design brief, but were, instead, about facilitating and stimulating my understandings; the practice of *making* was about finding a metaphorical fit between the participants' experiences and my embodied sensitivities to, and readings of them. My role as a maker can, therefore, be compared to a filter through which the unfolding interpretations were produced. And, although I have been aware of many technological and technical possibilities and advancements within the field of fashion and textiles design, my making practices were not determined, or even driven, by these. Instead, I chose to focus on the elements and aspects of the participants' experiences that inspired me as a fashion practitioner and, consequently, chose to engage with materials and techniques that I felt embodied and reflected the character of these experiences. In line with

the constructivist stance, the making processes, techniques and materials that I utilised, were meaningful only when understood through the context of the participants' experiences to which they corresponded.

It is equally important to reflect that such a methodological mechanism required the researcher to have certain skills and sensitivities to human experiences; this particular research mechanism was created and implemented to suit my particular way of being in the world and conducting research as a creative practitioner. In this sense, this research-through-design process was about finding a balance between my research subjectivity and objectivity; this constant negotiation played a significant role in the unfolding interpretations. Furthermore, it is not a coincidence that this research used fashion and clothing as a lens to access the participants' experiences, a field that I hold professional training and experience in. This once again required me to strive for a balance between my skills, expertise and sensitivities and the qualities and requirements of the research material. Various fashion- and clothing-oriented making practices were always partly about the empirical material and partly about the researcher and practitioner who was analysing it; there is no doubt that a different researcher with a different set of characteristics would select different ways of implementing such a mechanism.

Finally, building on the previous points, it is important to reflect on the roles of the artefacts within this research process and in regards to the co-construction of experiential knowledge. As evidenced by the 'Dis-



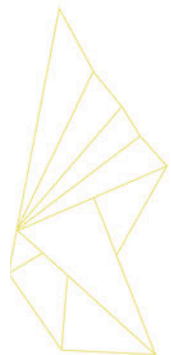
Comforting' theme, during the processes of my practical explorations, I engaged with various materials, techniques and objects, which reflected the variety and richness of the experiences of the men in this study. Therefore, it is not entirely unjustifiable to argue that the artefacts that I produced, including the Dis-Comforting jacket and film, function as a peculiar form of side-products; indeed, the focus of this research was on the practices of *making* these artefacts, and their role in enhancing my written interpretations, rather than the artefacts themselves. However, at the same time, each of the artefacts I produced is an independent aesthetic solution; tangible and meaningful outcome of the research process, and in many respects equal to the parallel written interpretations. Therefore, the status of the artefacts produced in this research can be described as embodying certain knowledge (through enabling certain understandings to be developed) and, simultaneously, as forms of metaphoric visual representations of this knowledge (Frayling 1993/94). In this vein, the practical process of 'doing' fashion offered me a conceptual space and creative vehicle for a meaningful and continuing discourse on the meaning and perception of the ageing male body.

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