The purpose of clothing

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Clothes protect us from extreme temperatures, solar radiation, insect bites, et cetera. They provide space for storage of things we want to carry with us and sends messages to those we meet. Despite this there is a lack of standards and guidelines for apparel properties, apart from regarding sizes as well as protection functions in protective clothing. Why is that? Is it perhaps because our clothing habits in the first place don't have practical grounds?

In order to, to some extent investigate this, I interviewed seven persons[1] about their opinion on the matter. The responses to a question about the meaning of clothing (table 1), however, suggests that the practice is certainly based on practical grounds. But even if the participating largely enumerated practical reasons perhaps the aesthetic, after all, weighs heavier in the everyday choice situations. Which would make practical standard clothes impossible to sell? Alternatively our clothes already meet the needs and further regulations on the design therefore are un-necessary.

Table 1. What the participants in this study responded to the question in the table header.

What do you think is the purpose of clothes?
Comfortable
Protects from heat and cold and because we have a tradition of covering ourselves.
Protect the body and tel others who I am.
To protect the body from environmental factors.
Protects from cold, suitable for the cause, tels who you are.
Neat, keeps you warm, provides stooring facitities.
One have to wear something because we use to do so + protects against cold et cetera.

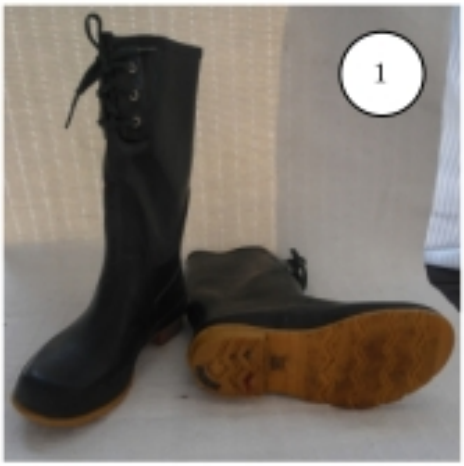
1. Five men and two women, on average, they were 48 years old (median: 46 years, min - max: 38-75 years).

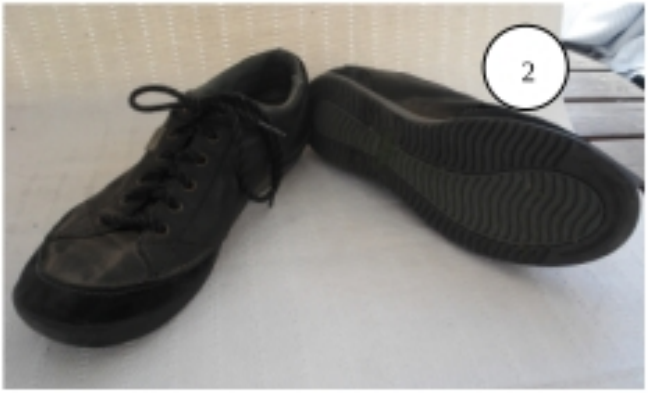
I think many, on questions about why they dress the way they do, would answer that it is because they feel comfortable in such clothes. In an attempt to go deeper than that, the participants were asked to rank a number of properties that could be important regarding footwear.
All of them ranked "provides good grip" high and three ranked it the highest of all properties. And it is reasonably an important requirement for a large fraction of all circumstances where shoes are used. As far as I can think of is it just in bowling and dance that good grip is a disadvantage. In addition, the participants felt that "good storage facilities" is an unimportant feature for shoes. And it fits well with my experience, which is that we rarely keep things in our shoes. While most other qualities can both be an advantage just as well as a disadvantage. Better protection from wetness usually means denser shoes, which makes the feet sweatier. Shoes that are easy to put on (as cloggs) often have other shortcomings, like that don't stay so well on the foot and thereby rub more in the event that they would be used for a long walk. Shoes that protect against cold are hot and therefore increases the risk of sweating during hot weather and so on.
Properties like sexiness and neatness is partly a matter of taste and secondly, according to the results, differently important for different participants. In addition, some of the properties particularly wear resistance and low load on the musculoskeletal system, are only relevant for those who are walking or standing a lot with shoes on.

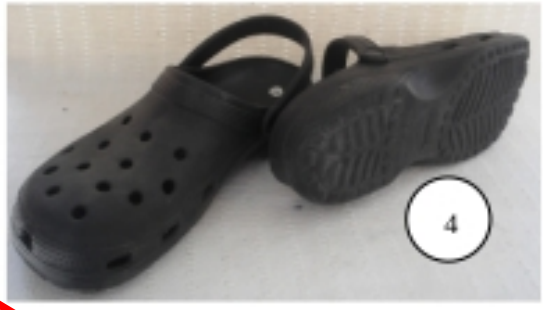
Table 2. The participants' ranking of a number of features for shoes. It was up to the participants themselves to interpret what different properties means (they had no explanation of what was meant by each property).

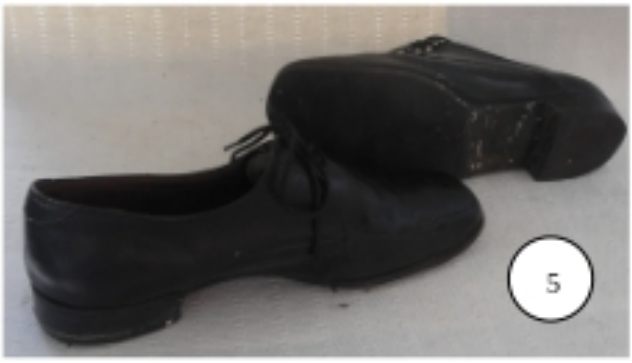
Rank the following properties for shoes 14= best)	Average ranking	Standard devience	Participant						
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Provides good grip.	12.1	1.9	11	14	12	14	10	10	14
Protects from water.	9.3	4.5	12	11	13	12	11	5	1
Easy to put on/take off.	10.9	1.3	10	12	10	9	13	11	11
Protect from cold.	9.4	3.5	13	10	7	7	12	4	13
Protect from sharp objects.	5.6	2.7	3	9	5	8	3	3	8
Protects from heat.	5.0	3.2	9	6	2	3	1	9	5
Sexy.	3.9	4.6	1	1	4	2	2	14	3
Easy to clean.	6.0	2.2	5	2	6	6	9	8	6
Minimizes the risk for wear on the body.	10.0	3.2	14	7	14	11	8	6	10
Low musculoskeletal load.	7.0	1.9	4	8	9	5	7	7	9
Looks good.	9.4	4.2	8	4	11	4	14	13	12
Antiperspirant.	5.0	2.6	6	5	3	10	5	2	4
Good storage capacity.	2.0	1.2	2	3	1	1	4	1	2
Durable.	9.4	3.1	7	13	8	13	6	12	7

Luckily, everyone, more or less explicitly, can create their own specification before each purchase of shoes. When the specification is designed it remains to assess which shoes, to the most reasonable price, meets the requirements the buyer consider to be the most important.
It appears like, judging from the participants' ranking of five different pairs of shoes (see photos below), we have a fairly common view of which shoes that provide good grip, have good/poor water resistance, good/bad ergonomics and airiness (table 2). For other criteria, however, the interviewees' perceptions were more widespread.
To sum up, which footwear features is desirable varies with the situation, and it may not be possible to make a general specification for these (except that they generally should provide good grip and do not need to have any storage compartment). In addition, it appears as the perception of how well different shoes meet various possible requirements varies between different users.
No wonder then that we have not managed to agree on standards or guidelines for other than some aspects of some work shoes.









According to the participants, these shoes are the worst regarding: grip, safety, cleaning, ergonomics and tear strength. In addition, they are difficult to put on / take off and they chafe. But they are the sexiest, neatest and the least sweaty.

Table 3. The participants' rankings of the five pairs of shoes above. Their assessment is based on the same images, but with a higher magnification. The green and red boxes indicate that the shoes, is considered the best and worst, even with regard to the distribution measurements.

Assess a number of shoes, based on these criteria on a scale of 1-5, where 5 = best	Average ranking					Standard deviance				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Provides good grip.	3.7	4.7	1.0	2.4	3.1	1.0	0.5	0.0	0.5	1.1
Protects from water.	4.9	3.6	1.0	2.4	3.1	0.4	0.8	0.0	0.8	0.9
Easy to put on/take off.	3.1	3.3	1.9	4.9	1.9	1.2	0.5	1.6	0.4	0.4
Protect from cold.	3.7	4.7	1.4	1.7	3.4	1.0	0.5	0.5	0.8	0.8
Protect from sharp objects.	3.5	3.5	2.0	2.2	3.8	1.2	1.0	1.3	1.6	1.3
Protects from heat.	1.7	3.0	3.0	4.1	3.1	1.1	1.4	1.6	1.2	0.9
Sexy.	2.1	3.6	4.4	1.6	3.3	1.1	0.8	1.5	0.8	1.0
Easy to clean.	3.9	2.4	1.6	4.6	2.6	1.5	0.8	1.1	0.5	0.8
Minimizes the risk for wear on the body.	2.7	3.7	1.6	3.7	3.3	1.1	1.6	1.1	1.4	1.0
Low musculoskeletal load.	2.0	5.0	1.1	3.4	3.4	0.6	0.0	0.4	0.5	0.8
Looks good.	2.1	3.6	3.9	2.1	3.1	1.1	1.0	2.0	1.1	1.2
Antiperspirant.	1.1	2.1	4.6	4.4	2.7	0.4	0.7	0.5	0.5	0.5
Good storage capacity.										
Durable.	3.7	4.0	1.3	2.6	3.4	1.5	1.0	0.5	1.4	0.8

Regarding jackets/outerwear there were even less consensus among the participants regarding which characteristics that are important (table 4). Apart from that providing good grip is considered to be unimportant, and protection from the cold and wet were considered important. And in addition, as little consensus in the assessment of which garments that best/worst meet different requirements (table 5).
The former can be explained by that in Sweden we only use jackets/outerwear outdoors and that only when the climate indoors and outdoors differ significantly. And the larger the difference, the more important the outer garment. This means, of course, that to protect against the conditions in Sweden that are often troublesome when we are outdoors (rain/snow) are the most important features for such garments.
The latter may be explained by that it is more difficult to rank different jackets from photos than it is to rank shoes, because it is poorly shown, for example, how thick they are.

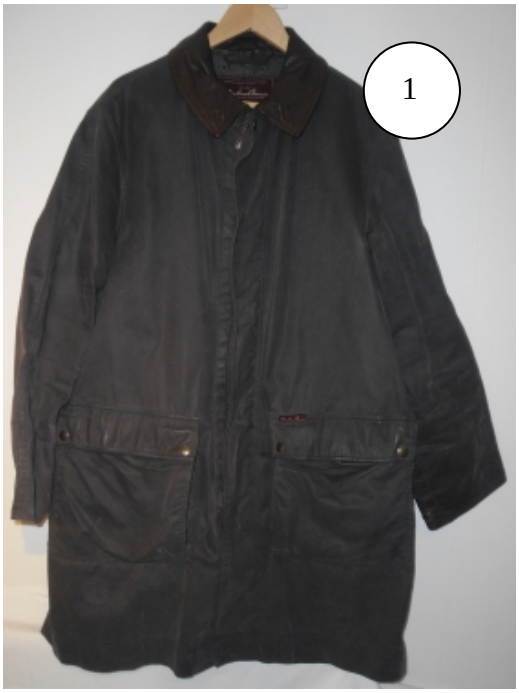
Table 4. The participants' ranking of a number of properties for jackets/outerwear.

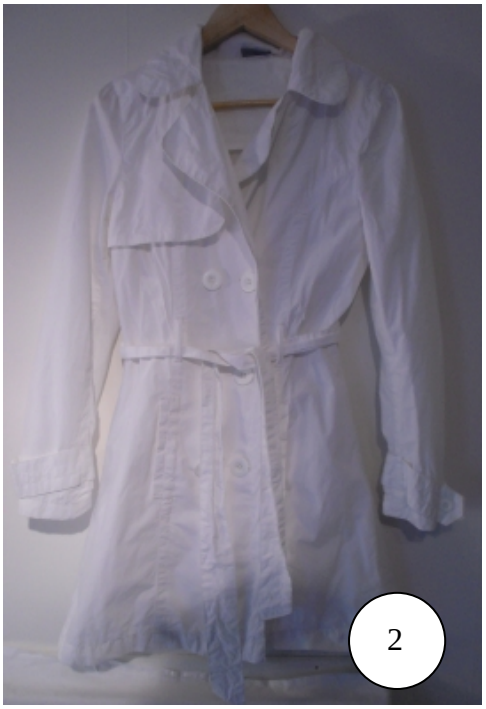
Rank the following properties for jackets 14= best)	Average ranking	Standard devience	Participant						
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Provides good grip.	1.1	0.4	2	1	1	1	1	1	1
Protects from water.	12.1	1.8	11	13	13	14	10	10	14
Easy to put on/take off.	9.4	1.4	10	11	8	10	8	8	11
Protect from cold.	13.0	1.0	14	12	12	12	14	14	13
Protect from sharp objects.	3.3	1.4	4	5	2	5	2	2	3
Protects from heat.	5.3	4.1	3	14	3	4	3	3	7
Sexy.	5.6	3.8	1	6	6	3	4	13	6
Easy to clean.	8.3	1.8	9	7	10	8	5	9	10
Minimizes the risk for wear on the body.	6.1	3.2	12	8	5	6	6	4	2
Low musculoskeletal load.	5.3	2.8	8	2	4	2	7	5	9
Looks good.	11.4	2.5	7	9	14	13	13	12	12
Antiperspirant.	6.3	1.6	6	4	7	7	9	6	5
Good storage capacity.	8.0	3.8	5	3	11	11	11	11	4
Durable.	9.7	2.1	13	10	9	9	12	7	8

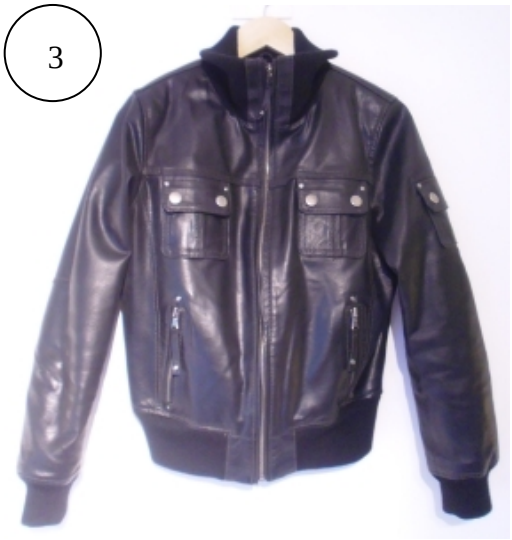
Table 5. The participants' rankings of a number of outwear (see next page). The green and red boxes indicate that the jacket is considered the best and worst.

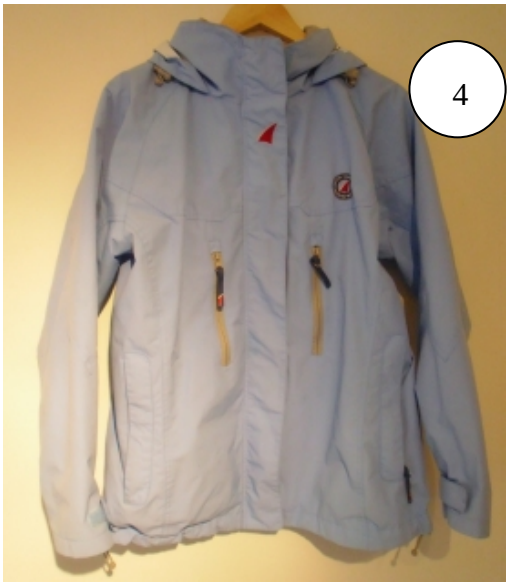
Assess a number of jackets, based on these criteria on a scale of 1-5, where 5 = best	Average ranking					Standard deviance				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Provides good grip.										
Protects from water.	4.5	1.3	4.0	3.2	2.0	0.8	0.5	0.6	1.3	0.6
Easy to put on/take off.	2.6	2.6	3.4	4.0	2.4	1.3	1.8	1.7	1.2	0.9
Protect from cold.	4.3	1.0	4.0	2.7	3.0	1.0	0.0	1.1	0.8	0.9
Protect from sharp objects.	3.0	1.5	5.0	2.5	3.0	0.9	1.2	0.0	0.5	1.3
Protects from heat.	2.2	3.7	2.8	3.7	2.7	1.5	1.8	1.5	1.5	0.5
Sexy.	2.7	4.5	3.8	2.3	1.7	0.8	0.8	1.5	1.2	0.8
Easy to clean.	2.3	2.8	4.3	3.3	2.2	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.4	1.5
Minimizes the risk for wear on the body.	2.4	3.6	1.8	4.0	3.2	0.9	1.5	1.8	0.7	1.3
Low musculoskeletal load.										
Looks good.	3.3	3.5	3.7	2.7	2.2	1.4	1.0	1.5	1.6	1.5
Antiperspirant.	2.5	4.8	2.0	3.3	2.0	1.2	0.4	0.9	1.2	1.1
Good storage capacity.	3.8	1.3	3.3	3.8	3.0	1.0	0.8	1.4	1.6	0.9
Durable.	2.7	1.2	4.8	3.2	3.2	0.8	0.4	0.4	1.2	1.2

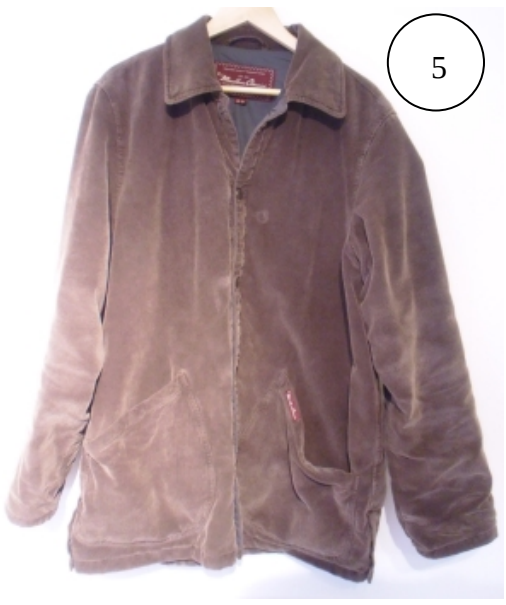
One possible conclusion from this is that it is probably even more difficult to create a common specification for outerwear than for shoes.











When participants choose to buy a new jacket it may not due to better meet any of the ranked qualities, instead maybe the reason is purely economic (table 6).

Table 6. The interview answers to the question in the table header.

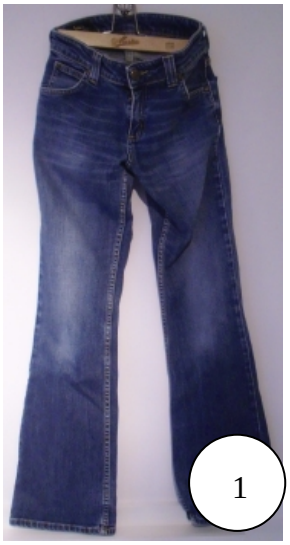
Has it happened to you ever bought a new winter coat, though you already had one fulfilling the same function, and if so, why?
Yes, because it was half the ordinary price.
Yes, I was tired of the old one and wanted something new.
Yes, one get tired of them before they are worn out.
Yes, it was nice, it was half the price and i got convinced.
No.
Yes, because I was stupid.
Yes, because I wanted two winter coats.

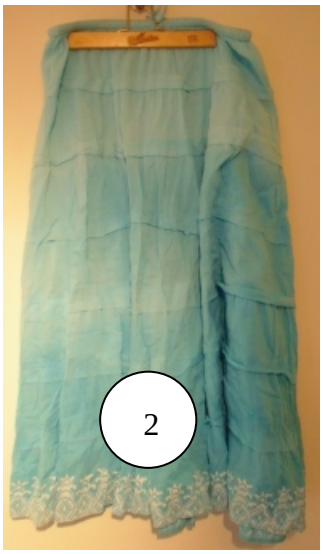
Regarding clothing on legs and torso the interviewed showed even more disagreement, both on which properties are important (table 7 and 9) and about which garment that best meets various requirements (table 8 and 10). It can, however, not be explained by that the use of such garment vary with the season, because almost everyone wear them every day and all day long. The variation in the ranking of the photographed garments can also not, to the same extent as for jackets, be explained with problems in the assessment. Since none of the photographed pants/skirts are bolstered and these garments usually aren't.

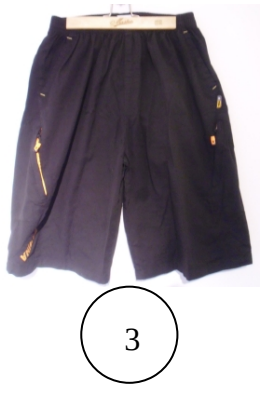
One guess is that we more often than regarding shoes and jackets use leggings (pants), and clothing on the upper body (shirts) for cultural/aesthetic reasons rather than practical ones. Another explanation could be that the pants and the shirt are used the whole day, as opposed to shoes and jackets. Which may mean that for some, the most important features for these kinds of garments is how they suit them in an indoor environment. Unlike the case for outdoor shoes (which we in Sweden normally don't wear indoors) and jackets.

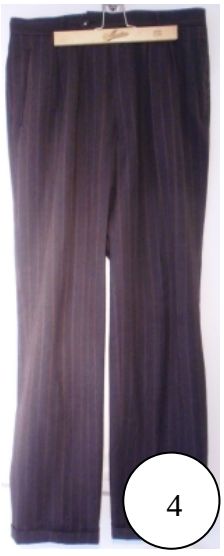
Table 7. The participants' rankings of a number of properties for leggings (pants/dresses/skirts).

Rank the following properties for pants 14= best)	Average ranking	Standard devience	Participant 1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Provides good grip.	2.3	2.2	2	1	1	3	1	1	7
Protects from water.	9.0	3.7	11	13	7	8	10	2	12
Easy to put on/take off.	9.4	3.1	10	11	8	11	12	3	11
Protect from cold.	10.1	3.3	14	12	5	7	11	9	13
Protect from sharp objects.	4.6	1.8	4	5	4	5	2	8	4
Protects from heat.	5.4	4.7	3	14	2	4	3	10	2
Sexy.	6.6	5.1	1	6	12	1	4	14	8
Easy to clean.	8.0	1.7	9	7	9	10	5	7	9
Minimizes the risk for wear on the body.	9.4	3.8	12	8	14	14	6	6	6
Low musculoskeletal load.	5.3	3.1	8	2	3	2	7	5	10
Looks good.	11.9	2.7	7	9	13	13	14	13	14
Antiperspirant.	6.0	2.6	6	4	10	6	9	4	3
Good storage capacity.	7.4	4.9	5	3	6	12	13	12	1
Durable.	9.6	2.6	13	10	11	9	8	11	5









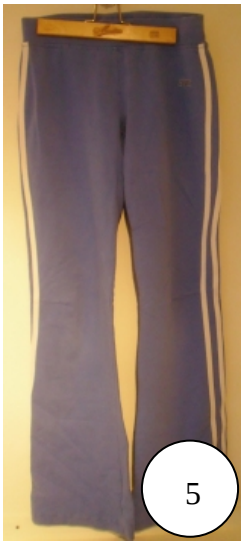


Table 8. The participants' rankings of a number of leggings (found on the page before). The green and red boxes indicate that the pants/skirt is considered the best and worst.

Assess a number of leggings, based on these criteria on a scale of 1-5, where 5 = best	Average ranking					Standard deviance				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Provides good grip.										
Protects from water.	4.6	2.2	2.0	3.6	2.6	0.5	1.6	1.0	1.1	1.1
Easy to put on/take off.	1.4	4.4	4.0	1.9	3.3	0.5	1.1	0.8	1.1	0.5
Protect from cold.	4.7	2.0	1.0	3.9	3.4	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.9	0.5
Protect from sharp objects.	4.9	1.6	1.7	3.6	3.3	0.4	0.5	1.1	0.8	0.8
Protects from heat.	2.7	4.0	3.1	2.4	2.6	1.3	1.4	1.6	1.6	1.1
Sexy.	4.0	3.9	3.3	1.7	2.0	1.4	1.1	0.5	1.1	1.4
Easy to clean.	3.7	3.0	4.2	1.0	3.2	1.2	1.3	0.8	0.0	1.2
Minimizes the risk for wear on the body.	1.6	4.0	3.6	2.1	3.7	1.1	1.4	1.3	0.7	1.0
Low musculoskeletal load.										
Looks good.	4.0	4.0	2.7	2.1	2.1	1.2	1.2	0.8	1.5	1.5
Antiperspirant.	2.1	4.0	4.4	1.6	2.9	0.9	1.2	0.5	1.0	1.2
Good storage capacity.	4.0	1.4	4.7	2.7	2.1	0.8	1.1	0.5	1.0	0.4
Durable.	4.7	1.7	3.4	2.6	2.7	0.5	0.8	1.4	1.5	0.8

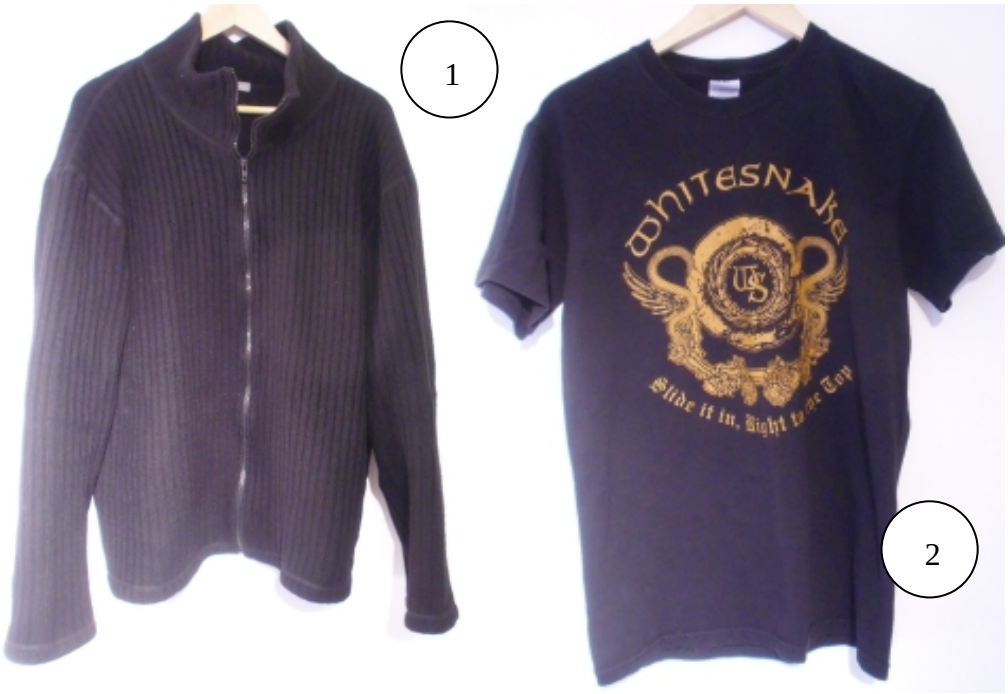
Table 9. The participants' ranking of a number of properties for shirts (clothes on the upper body).

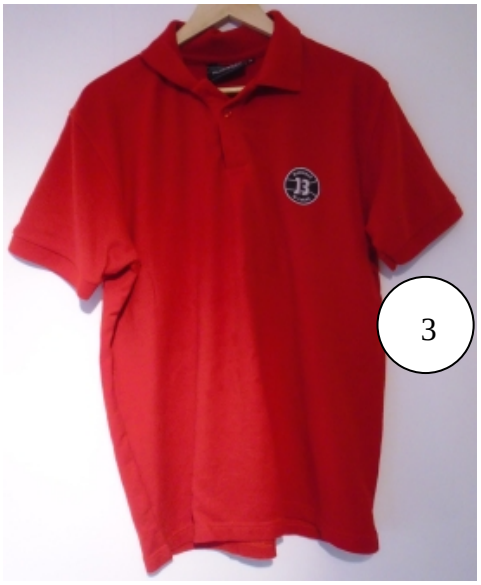
Rank the following properties for shirts 14= best)	Average ranking	Standard devience	Participant						
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Provides good grip.	2.3	3.0	2	1	1	1	1	1	9
Protects from water.	5.3	3.9	3	13	5	7	2	2	5
Easy to put on/take off.	9.9	3.4	8	11	12	13	10	3	12
Protect from cold.	9.4	2.2	7	12	6	9	11	10	11
Protect from sharp objects.	5.1	1.7	6	5	4	6	3	4	8
Protects from heat.	7.1	4.6	5	14	7	5	4	13	2
Sexy.	7.6	5.0	1	6	13	3	5	12	13
Easy to clean.	9.9	2.8	9	7	11	12	6	14	10
Minimizes the risk for wear on the body.	8.4	3.0	14	8	10	8	7	8	4
Low musculoskeletal load.	5.3	3.1	10	2	3	2	8	5	7
Looks good.	12.7	2.0	13	9	14	14	14	11	14
Antiperspirant.	8.4	3.6	11	4	9	11	12	9	3
Good storage capacity.	4.9	4.1	4	3	2	4	13	7	1
Durable.	8.7	2.2	12	10	8	10	9	6	6

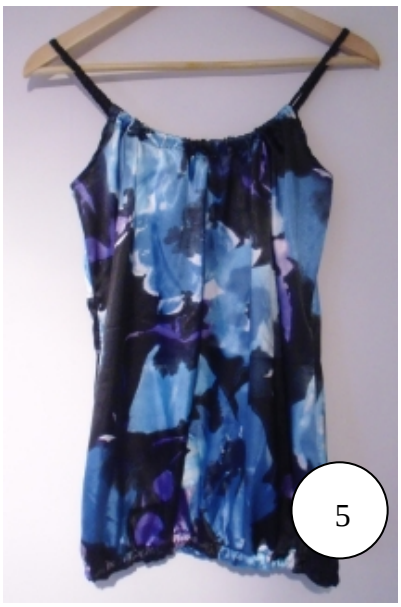
Table 10. The participants' rankings of a number of shirts and the like (next page). The green and red boxes indicate that the shirt is considered the best and worst.

Assess a number of shirts, based on these criteria on a scale of 1-5, where 5 = best	Average ranking					Standard deviance				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Provides good grip.										
Protects from water.	5.0	2.0	2.3	4.0	1.7	0.0	1.0	0.6	0.0	1.2
Easy to put on/take off.	3.2	3.8	3.4	1.5	4.0	1.5	1.1	0.9	1.2	1.2
Protect from cold.	4.5	2.0	3.2	3.8	1.0	1.2	0.0	0.4	0.4	0.0
Protect from sharp objects.	4.2	3.0	3.6	2.6	1.8	1.3	1.0	0.9	1.3	1.8
Protects from heat.	3.0	2.0	3.0	3.5	2.8	2.2	0.9	0.9	0.8	1.8
Sexy.	2.0	2.7	2.8	2.5	4.7	1.3	1.9	0.8	1.2	0.8
Easy to clean.	2.7	4.3	3.0	2.2	3.3	1.9	0.8	1.3	1.0	1.2
Minimizes the risk for wear on the body.	2.0	4.5	3.8	1.5	3.5	1.1	0.5	0.8	0.8	1.2
Low musculoskeletal load.										
Looks good.	3.2	2.3	3.2	2.3	4.0	1.7	1.2	1.2	1.8	0.9
Antiperspirant.	1.7	3.3	3.3	2.2	4.5	1.6	0.8	0.8	0.8	1.2
Good storage capacity.	3.0	2.7	3.3	4.4	2.0	1.7	0.6	1.5	1.3	1.7
Durable.	4.0	3.8	3.3	2.8	1.0	1.1	0.8	1.5	1.0	0.0

The difference between men and women in our culture is significantly greater for leggings than for any other type of clothes (apart from bras). Since almost only women uses skirts or dresses. One guess about the reason for the difference is that in the times when there were no toilets, it was a great advantage for women, but not men, to wear a skirt. With a skirt they were better protected from cold, insects and glances when they performed their needs. While skirts would have made men more vulnerable when performing the most common need. Nowadays, these arguments are less important, as evidenced by the fact that women have largely abandoned the skirts and dresses.







The type of clothes for which the appearance reasonably should have at least importance is underwear, as they are rarely seen by other than the user and his/her partner, and, in some jobs, by colleagues in the dressing room. Thus the choice of underwear and the rationale for using them would be of more practical than aesthetic nature, in relation to other clothing. Partly confirmed by the participants (table 11). But the announcements about, especially, lingerie testify that the aesthetic arguments are in focus even for this type of garments. For how can a pair string panties in lace constitute adequate protection for the pants?

Table 11. If and why the participants use underwear.

Do you use underwear and if so why?
Yes, because I am taught to wear it.
Yes, the trousers are keept clean longer.
Yes, smell and dirt stopper and they protects my genitals.
Yes, because it’s more comfortable and the trousers are keept clean longer.
Yes, otherwise the pants gets dirty.
Yes, to protect the trousers from shit and the dick from the zipers.
Yes, so that dick and scrotum lays correct.

In summary, it can be noted that, in any case, the interviewees claim that they put emphasis on the practical aspects of clothing and the practical aspects are different for different types of garments. The weighting of these practical aspects are different from person to person, and the evaluation of how good different garments meet these practical aspects varies between individuals. But the more the garments are designed to protect the body from disturbing external factors (such as slippery roads, wet and cold): the less the variation appears to be.

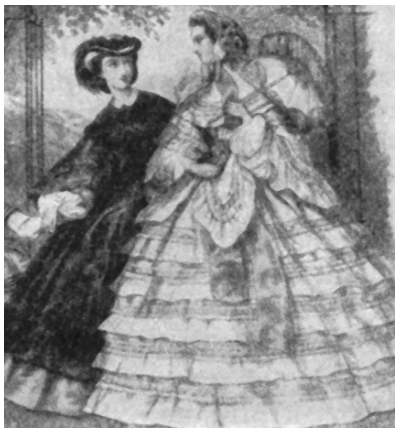
But it is still marketed plenty of clothes that are both expensive and impractical, why? Some would say that they have, for example, high heels and tight skirts since that are required in the work. Others would respond that it makes them feel so sexy, or beautiful in these clothes, that it’s worth the price and discomfort. But what is considered to be attractive varies over time and between different groups and cultures.

In the past, contemporary upper class was often seen in clothing that was very complicated to put on, expensive, uncomfortable and it was probably hopeless to perform physical work while wearing them.



1500s


1600s

1800s

Probably the meaning with these hopeless clothes was to show that here came someone, so rich or important that he/she did stand above the menial manual labour. Perhaps this approach, to some extent, remains in our collective subconscious. When we do not intend to perform manual labour, we do not use garments that signal such work. Instead, we emphasize the opposite, with impractical garments and accessories like ties and jackets, high heels and tight skirts. If so, this could be summarized as:

Even today we show our distance to simple manual labour, more or less unconsciously, with clothes that do not meet practical requirements.