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Aesthetics of Anxiety

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in *Fashion Merchandising and Apparel Design*.

By
Sade' Culliver

Under the mentorship of *Professor Hope Simpara*

ABSTRACT

My research gives an in-depth explanation of what anxiety is, and a general idea of what it is like to deal with the condition. This research includes an illustrated clothing line consisting of fifteen looks that visually summarize the information about anxiety. Each element of these looks was based on research about anxiety, design techniques, and color theory. Of the fifteen looks, one was physically constructed and 2 were prepped for construction. The purpose of this research is to help people without the condition get a better general understanding of it, as well as help people with the condition feel more empowered, confident and understood.

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Introduction

Through fashion illustrations and physical garments, my project will address several aspects of anxiety including symptoms, thought patterns, and common triggers for worrying and panic attacks. I will also address a few aspects of depression since it is often found to coexist with anxiety. By raising awareness of these conditions, it is my hope that society as a whole will be more accepting of different states of mental health.

It is important to address mental conditions such as anxiety and depression because they have such a massive effect on the people who deal with the condition and their loved ones. Anxiety and depression can create irrational thoughts in one's brain that causes them to change their behavior (Clark, 1999), struggle with their daily tasks and sometimes even have fatal heart conditions (Schwartz et al., 2012). In my personal experiences, I have found that it is very difficult to describe in words what it is like to have a mental illness. This lack of proper communication has often caused confusion in my relationships with people that haven't had personal experience with anxiety, which unfortunately has led to harmful jokes and neglect. That is why it is so important and beneficial to address this topic in a visual way specifically, to show people the things that are so hard to verbally communicate. As I researched this topic, I became increasingly aware of the importance of addressing this in the fashion industry. The fashion industry has little to no examples of work addressing mental illnesses in general. Fashion is also an important component of the way we identify ourselves, therefore creating an aesthetically pleasing collection about anxiety can help women wear their mental illness with pride in a way.

Literature Review

Anxiety is characterized by the irrational or unjustified fears it creates (Clark, 1999). Examples include obsessive worrying over rather typical, everyday situations, or drastic fears over worst case scenarios. Anxious thought patterns can manifest themselves into a variety of physical symptoms. These may include muscle tension, fatigue, trouble sleeping, difficulty controlling thoughts, feeling on edge, irritability, and trouble going about everyday activities. Everyone gets anxious from time to time. This temporary anxiousness can lead to some of the same physical symptoms. However, what sets normal anxiousness apart from having anxiety is the severity and time frame of the anxiousness. For a person to be clinically diagnosed as having anxiety, they have experienced excessive worry on more days than not within the past six months over different types of events and situations (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2013). These symptoms vary from person to person and so does the extent to which they are experienced. This variation can be seen across all mental illness, making it difficult to conduct concrete research on these types of topics. There are multiple conditions that are very similar to anxiety, making it difficult to diagnose the condition. For example, people with anxiety can experience worrying so intense that they have a panic attack, but there is also a condition called Panic Attack Disorder that is separate from anxiety. Some people can also experience worry over one thing in a more severe way than usual, which also makes it difficult to diagnose the condition. For example, stressing constantly and irregularly over physical appearance (with no irregularities in stress concerning other areas of life), would likely indicate body dysmorphic disorder rather than anxiety (Reynolds &

Kamphaus, 2013). There are multiple types of anxiety and an unlimited number of things that can trigger stress in people with anxiety. One of the most common triggers is the heavy use of smartphones that we see in society today. This not only has an effect on those with generalized anxiety disorder, but it can cause social anxiety. Theories suggest smartphones trigger anxiety over time because smartphone users get so accustomed to digital interaction with other humans that person to person interaction can become increasingly uncomfortable (Elhai, Levine, Dvorak, & Hall, 2016). When stress is experienced at extremely high levels, it can result in cardiovascular issues that could even be fatal. This risk is not limited to those with anxiety. These cardiovascular issues can be experienced by anyone dealing with singular situations that cause acute stress such as losing a loved one (Schwartz et al., 2012).

There are six main behavioral methods used to cope with anxiety and studies indicate that these behaviors seem to help the patient in the moment, but are potentially more harmful to the patient in the long run. These behaviors are spontaneous imagery (e.g., seeing images of oneself passing out in a public space), memory processes (e.g., being so worried that one forgets times they were able to get themselves out of similar situations), attentional deployment (e.g., if one has social anxiety, they might avoid social settings or avoid eye contact), emotional reasoning (using feelings to justify things as fact), safety seeking (leaving situations where there is a perceived threat), and representation of the nature of the threat (not fully understanding triggers that cause anxiety) (Clark, 1999). These different types of behaviors help therapists understand what methods work best for each of their patients. Safety seeking behaviors in particular, have more extensive coverage in research than other coping behaviors. This may indicate that

it is a more common response to anxious thoughts. Safety seeking behaviors are a direct result of chemical imbalances within the brain, which is exactly what a mental illness is. The imbalances result in a lower quality of life for those that suffer from mental illnesses in general, not just anxiety (Micale et al., 2017).

People experiencing anxiety are also at risk of dealing with depression. The two conditions have many symptoms in common and have been found to coexist in many adults and adolescents (Strauss, Last, & Hersen, 1988). Much like anxiety, depression affects each person in different ways. Studies show that women are affected more severely than men, and that more of the conditions coexisting with depression are evident in women (Kim, Shin & Song, 2018). When patients dealing with depression seek treatment, they often have specific goals in mind. Many patients and therapists find that this helps people get the most out of their treatment. These goals differ from patient to patient, but the most common goals include gaining self-confidence, and returning to one's normal way of operating on a daily basis. These are not measurable and clearly observable goals, which sets mental illnesses even further apart from physical illnesses (Zimmerman et. al. 2006).

In order to artistically portray the emotions and experiences of having anxiety, I needed an understanding of color theory. Colors are heavily associated with emotions, which is why sayings like "green with envy" or "yellow bellied" are so popular. Warm colors like red, yellow and orange are associated with excitement, energy and motion (Choo & Kim, 2003). Cool colors, on the other hand, evoke a sense of peace and relaxation over people. These associations make warm colors a good representation for anxious thought patterns. However, these typical color associations can change when

applied to the fashion industry. This is because a few more factors need to be taken into consideration along with the color of the garment including texture and where the garment is being worn (Bleicher, 2018). Texture can affect perception of color because it alters the way light hits the fabric, which alters the perceived color of the fabric in some areas. For example, bumpy textures create hills and valley on the surface of a garment. The tone of the fabric will seem lighter on the hills because those areas catch more light, and darker in the valleys because there is less light in those areas. The location the garment is worn in can change the perception of color because it affects the garment's appropriateness in a setting. For example, when attending a music festival, bright colors like yellow and orange are acceptable. However, when attending a funeral, those same bright colors may be viewed as disrespectful if all the other guests are dressed in traditional black garments.

My project also requires a lot of knowledge in fashion design and pattern construction. The industry process for creating fashion lines starts with getting together inspiration. This is completed by finding pictures from multiple sources like social media and magazines. Once a source of inspiration is chosen, designers complete background research on the source as well as general research on what is currently trending or about to trend in the fashion industry in their target market. In order to complete research on current and upcoming trends, designers often turn to fashion forecasting companies. Next, the designer puts together a list of the garments they would like to have in the collection. This list should be as specific as possible. For example, it is much more effective to list "cropped hoodie with bell sleeve" than simply listing "hoodie". The designer then uses the list and inspiration images to create their initial sketches, which

will be edited and reworked in small ways until the designer has something they are happy with. For every garment a designer makes, there are usually at least 10 sketches. The next step is to create technical flat sketches of these garments which are detailed drawings showing the placement of any seams, notions and hardware (Abling & DaCosta, 2017). For most larger companies and brands, the designer isn't the person who physically constructs the garments, so these sketches need to be detailed enough that a seamstress (sometimes from a factory in another country) can look at them and know exactly how to construct the garments. These can be done by hand, but CAD (computer aided design software) makes this a quicker and more accurate process (Trivedi, 2015). Designers often include design notes in the margins of their flat sketches to help communicate details that aren't easy to understand through the drawing. Next, the designer creates a pattern for the garment on pattern paper or they drape the shape of the garment on a mannequin and transfer the drape to pattern paper. After that, the designer creates a prototype, or muslin, to ensure the garments are functional. The fabric used for the muslin needs to be as similar to the final fabric as possible. While the designer is in this "drafting" phase, they will also use scraps of muslin or scraps of their final fabric to test out any fabric manipulations or surface treatments they intend to use. If the prototype proves to be functional and looks the way the designer envisioned, they move on to make the garment in their final fabric. The final fabrics are often much more expensive than muslin, so making prototypes in muslin helps save money in the fashion industry. Other optional (but often completed) components of a fashion collection include illustrations (drawings done in either watercolors or markers to represent the garments in an aesthetically pleasing way), photo shoots and specs (similar to flat sketches, include more

detailed notes and measurements of all aspects of the garment. For example, if a designer makes a button up shirt, the specs will show what the exact measurement is between each button.)

Inspiration

My personal journey with anxiety served as my biggest source of inspiration for this project. I also found myself inspired by the many people I have met over the years that have experienced some of the same struggles as myself, as well as some of their own. I was also inspired by people that know nothing about anxiety, and the fact that there are so many people that fit into this category. Ignorance to this mental illness has caused a lot of people with the condition to feel misunderstood and ashamed. As far as the aesthetic aspect of this project goes, I was inspired by the abstract artist Basquiat. His messy way of painting is a great visual representation of the thought patterns of people with anxiety, especially when they are in the midst of a panic attack. I was also inspired by several different designers and crafters that post their projects on social sites like Pinterest, which is where I was able to find my reference images for my garment sketches.

First Concepts

My first capstone project idea was to design a functional clothing line for cancer patients. Every aspect of the clothing was going to cater to some type of need that people with brain cancer have. There were also going to be a few pieces that would focus on empowering the patients, such as graphic tees that have catchy quotes or phrases signaling that the wearer was a cancer survivor. After doing some research, my mentor

and I quickly realized that there just wasn't enough substance in the research for me to move forward with that project topic.

Iterative Revisions

After quickly deciding to move on to my current project topic, I immediately started sketching. I sketched multiple outfits without putting much thought into research or anything else other than the aesthetics of the garment. I showed these sketches to my mentor and learned that this was absolutely not the proper way to go about creating a fashion collection, and that the inspiration process of the fashion industry includes much more research than most people think. Needless to say, I got rid of my entire first line of illustrations and went back to square one. I collected more research on my inspiration and started collecting inspiration images and trend research from current fashion blogs. From there, I decided my approach of creating one big cohesive collection wasn't working for me. Not only was it too difficult, I found out it wasn't even the most commonly used practice in the industry. Most designers in the industry split their collections into cohesive blocks. My mentor and I decided that I would have three blocks and make each of them focus on a different aspect of anxiety. I sketched out the first block and was still a little stuck in my early habits. My mentor could tell I didn't actively use my inspiration and a lot of the garments that I sketched were simply regurgitations of silhouettes I had seen before. I learned that I should sketch every garment at least 10 times and tweak something new each time. This is how you create design development pages. Design development pages help make sure a designer is creating the best version they can of each garment and makes it easier for the designer to find ways to put their own spin on garments. I scrapped this version as well and really sat down to sketch the proper way. I

finally came out with a block that I liked. I moved on to the second block and breezed through that a little easier. The third block was a little difficult for me because I felt like I was running out of inspiration and ideas by that point. Because of this, I had to scrap a lot of the looks and take the time to find new inspiration images to make sure this block wasn't a weak link in the collection.

Research Design

My collection is split into 3 cohesive groups, that also fit cohesively with each other. The first block of designs in my collection shows the chaotic thought patterns of people with anxiety. In my personal journey with anxiety, I find myself conflicted in my feelings toward the condition. On the one hand, it gives me a unique perspective in life and inspires me to create art. On the other hand, it can be a burden to have to carry those thoughts around every day. I will try to show this internal conflict in this block by making clothing that is messy and abstract, but will give the wearer a sense of pride at the same time. For example, a few of the tops I have illustrated for this block have patterns that are obviously inspired by the abstract work of Basquiat, making it hard to keep up with everything that is going on on the top. But screen printed across the front is the word "irrational", as if the wearer is taking the words that are used to describe her thoughts (and have negative connotations) and wearing them with pride. Other features of this block include patchwork denim pieces, dot gradients (similar to pointillism, used in my collection to create a visual representation of feeling numbness in the limbs during a panic attack) and asymmetrical designs to continue creating beautiful confusion. I have illustrated 5 looks for this block and physically constructed patterns, muslins, and fabric manipulations for one of the looks.







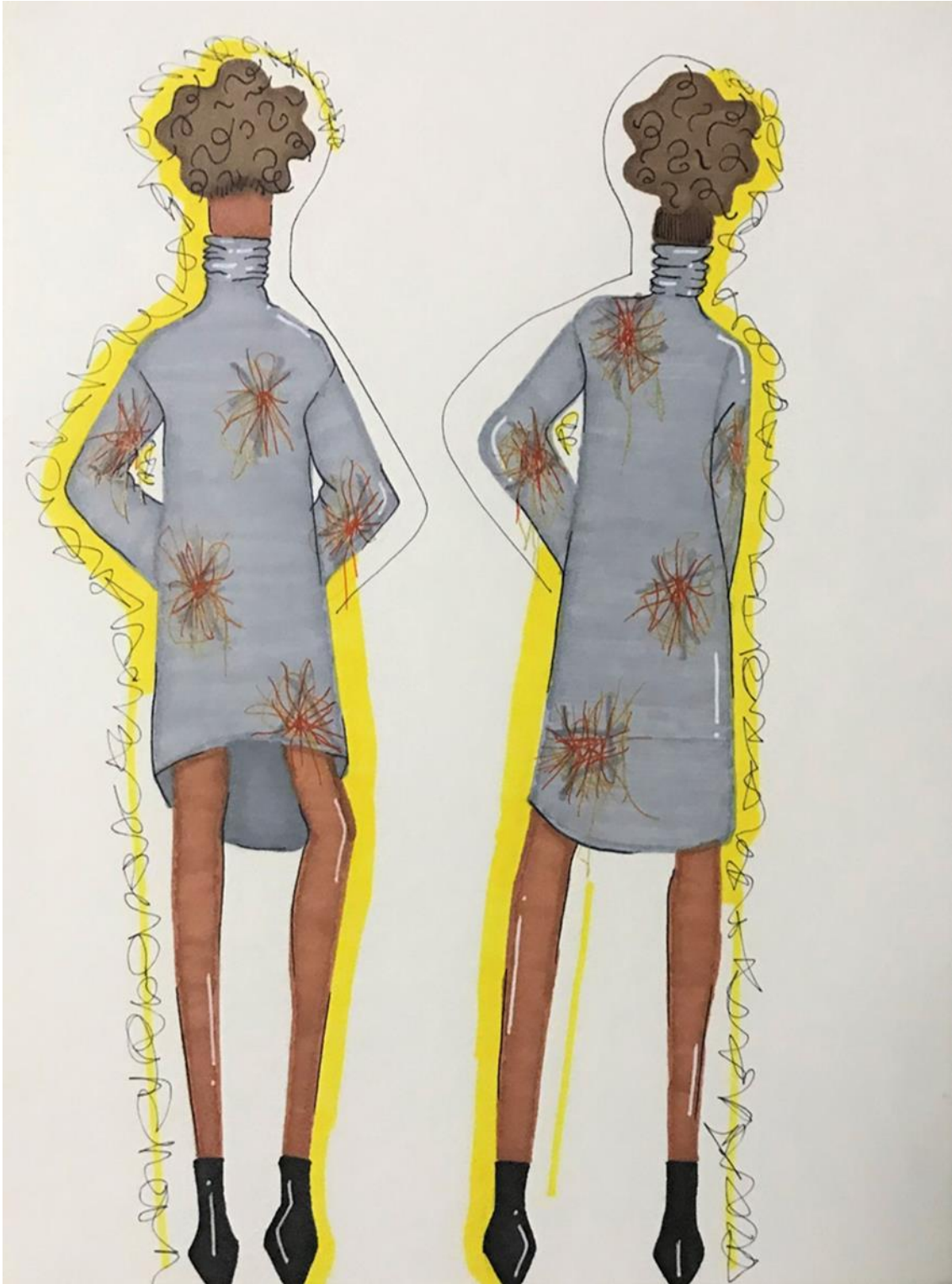




The second block of my line shows the side effects of having a panic attack which include lack of control of limbs (weakness in legs, shaking hands, etc.), trouble breathing and feeling overwhelmed. This block in my collection doesn't have the same level of functionality as the other two blocks because it is illustrating the most severe symptoms of anxiety. A lot of the pieces in this collection could potentially make viewers uncomfortable. For example, I illustrated a few looks that use straps and lacing in very constricting ways to show how an overwhelming amount of thoughts can have a physically paralyzing effect. I also illustrated some traditional and well-known constrictive garments such as corsets. If these looks were to be created, the models would also have a hard time walking down the runway. This would further illustrate how difficult it can be to complete daily tasks when panic attacks get in the way. Another special feature of this block is a surface treatment that I found through my design inspiration research. The treatment makes the garment look as though there are threads or other fabrics that have ripped through the surface from underneath. I felt that this was a great representation of the way panic attacks can surprise people in the middle of the day, and don't exactly need a specific trigger to affect people. I have illustrated 5 looks for this block and physically constructed the patterns, muslins and actual garments for one of these looks.











The third block of my line shows the way people often try to hide their mental illnesses out of fear or embarrassment due to the lack of knowledge and acceptance

mental issues get in society in general. This block will feature a lot of layers and oversized and baggy silhouettes so that the person wearing the clothes is less visible, almost consumed by the outfit. This can be related to the way people often hide behind their clothing when they feel as though some area of their body isn't attractive. I designed my own warm colored, non-directional print to use on the clothing in this line. This was developed through meetings with my mentor where I created a list of my own anxious symptoms and then listed what those symptoms would look like if they were garments or features of garments. I felt like non-directional prints best represented my anxious thought patterns because there isn't much direction to my thoughts. I chose warm colors because, as stated earlier in my research, they represent action and movement. Many of the looks I illustrated here feature garments with this print under other sheer garments (created using mesh fabrics) or barely peeking from under another layer. This effect is to show that while we may look, or act a certain way in public to hide our mental illnesses, they will always still be a part of us. Ultimately, I hope viewers understand that concept and decide to learn how to manage and accept their mental health flaws, rather than hide or suppress them. I have illustrated 5 looks for this block and physically constructed the patterns, fabric manipulations and muslins for one of the looks.











Fabrication

I chose cotton fabric for the look I constructed. The other materials I used to construct this look include buttons, threads and acrylic paint. I sourced these materials from a few local fabric and craft stores. In order to construct the other looks in my collection I would also need denim, neoprene, mesh fabrics and a few fabrics with small percentages of spandex in them. Other notions and hardware that would be used in my garments include zippers, thread, buttons, interfacing, acrylic paint and little fuzzy balls of fabric. Most of these items would also be sourced from local fabric stores or ordered online from locations with a wider variety of fabrics available. The patchwork surface treatments that I have created for this collection require many different types of denim in small amounts. This makes it easier to recycle denim rather than purchase it, which makes the fabrication process cheaper and more sustainable. I personally have collected many denim samples from garments that no longer fit myself and my friends, and from scrap bins in the university sewing lab.

Design Purpose

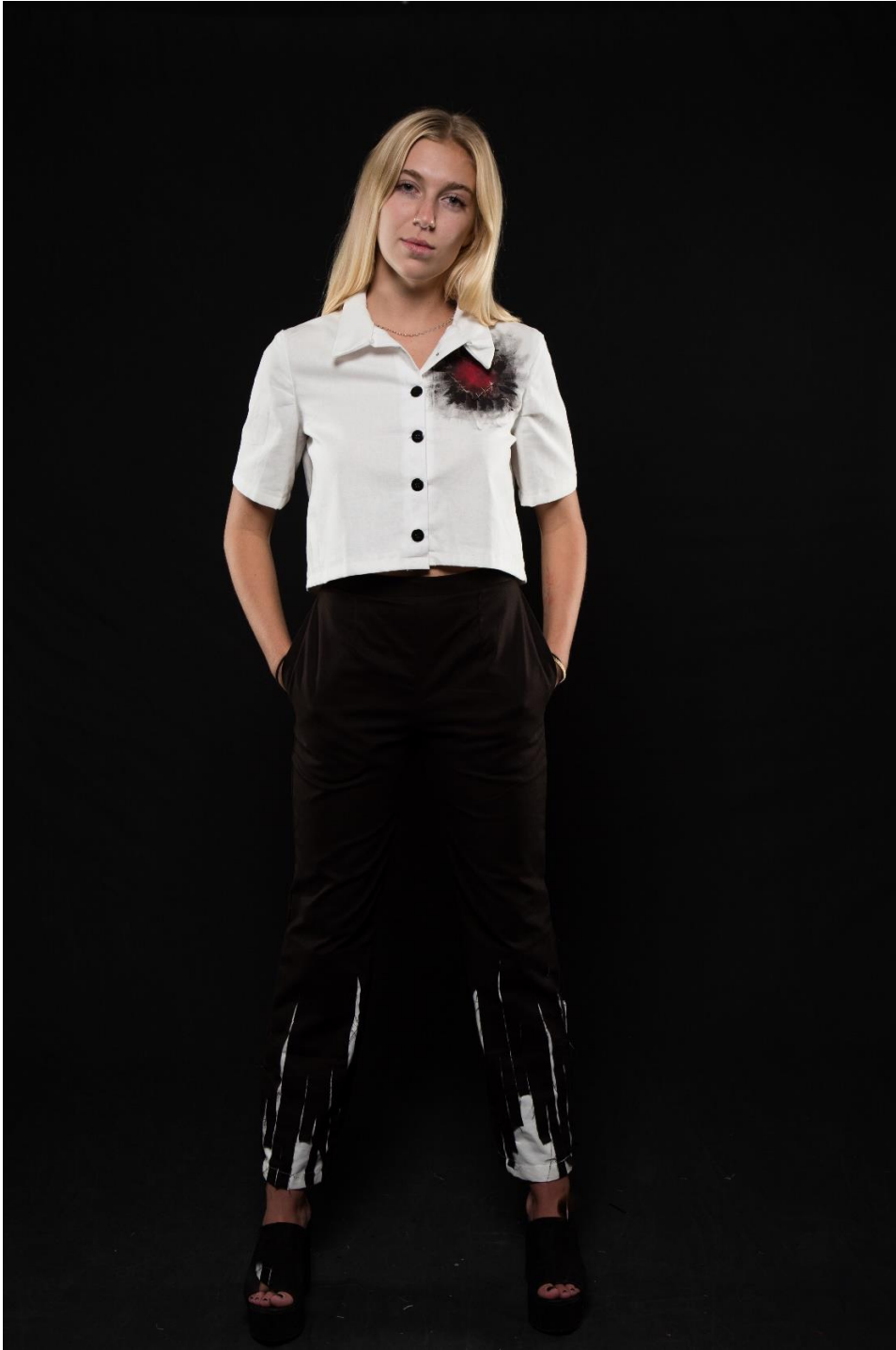
I have several purposes I hope to fulfill through this collection. First and foremost, I hope to raise awareness of anxiety in general. I want people to develop a better understanding of what it's like to live with the condition. By learning about anxiety, it can become easier for people to seek treatment methods and it can improve relationships. Secondly, I would like to empower those that deal with anxiety. I think people will be able to feel a sense of pride when they wear these items broadcasting parts of them that they normally keep secret. It links to my third and final purpose. I hope to

help myself in my personal journey with anxiety by creating this line. Creating something beautiful and artistic out of a mental illness definitely helps me appreciate that piece of myself a little more. I think other people will appreciate their anxiety or any mental illness they may be dealing with when they see the positive things that can be created out of it.

Description of Garments and Illustrations

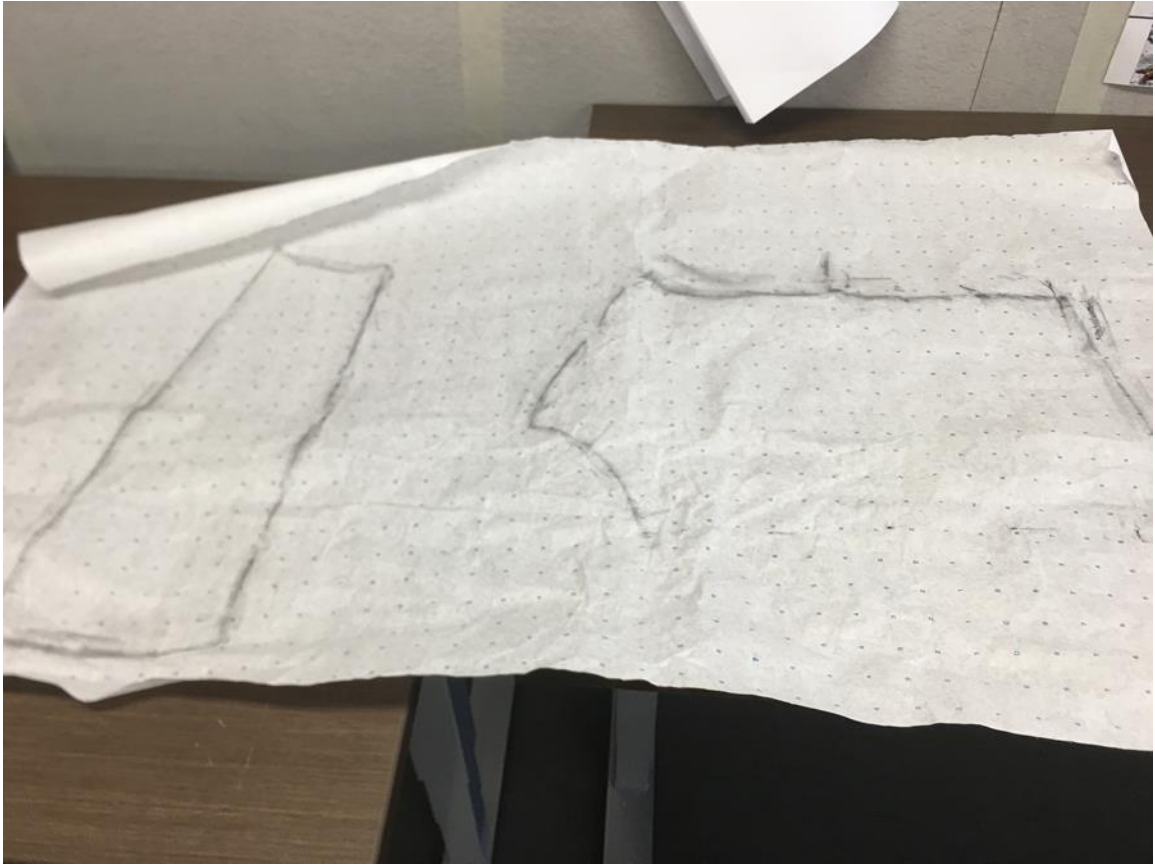
The look I created comes from the panic attack group and consists of a top and pants. The top is made of white cotton fabric and has a straight collar and 5 black buttons running down the front center. On the left side of the chest, I have created a surface treatment that illustrates the most severe symptom of panic attacks and acute worrying: fatal heart issues. To create this surface treatment, I first used acrylic paint to create a “circle” of black paint that fades into a bright red. Next, I cut a few random, small, jagged slashes through the paint. Lastly, I took gold colored thread to loosely stitch over the slashes so that they weren’t closed completely. The top has short, set in sleeves that fit the model a little loosely. The hem of the shirt sits just below the model’s true waistline and is loose fitting as well. I created the loose fit and rather boxy shape of the bodice and sleeve by adding more space in the flat patterns of the garment. The pants are made of black and white cotton fabric (mostly black) and have a straight leg fit that stops around the model’s ankle. I used a 7-inch invisible zipper on the left side to close the pants and a 1-inch waistband to finish the top. I created some texture at the bottom of the pants to give them a distressed look. I did this by sewing a layer of white fabric underneath the black fabric from the model’s knee down to the hemline of the pants. Then, I cut the top layer (the black layer) into strips of varying lengths so that the white would show

underneath. Next, I put a stay stitch down the middle of each strip so that they wouldn't move. All of this caused the ends of each strip to naturally fray, creating the messy look I wanted.



The look that I began working on in the thought pattern group consists of a pair of slim fit pants with a 7-inch zipper on the left side. This is paired with a cropped sweater with a very boxy shape and bell sleeves sewn into a dropped shoulder seam. Through all the research and practice I have received through this project; I was able to critique my own muslins and decide that my sleeves need edited down in order for these garments to be ready for production. I created my own fabric for this look by sewing together scraps of old and unused denim together, leaving the ends raw and not paying the usual attention to the stitching to create a messy look.

The look I began working on in the stigma group includes a loose-fitting cropped hoodie with a dropped shoulder seam and a kangaroo pocket, which I would make out of neoprene. It would have bell sleeves that fall to the model's knees, which would be made from mesh fabric. I used a silhouette that was very similar to the last set of patterns and muslins that I made, so I could practice editing patterns. As I learned from my mentor, designers keep all the patterns they make and edit older ones when they can, rather than taking the time to create entirely new patterns for every single garment. These are paired with denim pants that flare out from the knees and have a pleat up the center front and back of both legs. I created a fabric manipulation for the pleats by sewing the wrong sides of the fabric together (standard industry practice shows that right sides are usually sewn together so that the raw edges are inside the garment). Next, I distressed the raw edges so that the entire pleat would be frayed. Again, this practice has allowed me to see the process of executing and editing muslins. I was able to figure out on my own how to edit the pants to make the hips and waistline fit better, which helped me feel like a much more independent designer.



Reflective Critique

I have learned so much about research through the completion of my capstone project. I learned that research is not a linear process. There will be times when researchers have to go back and choose new research topics, or do more background research or revise their methodology much later in the process than they would have anticipated. I also learned how to become a more independent learner and to take more responsibility for my own education. I learned the importance of research as a whole and how it can benefit people in many ways outside of a classroom setting.

As far as my topic goes, I didn't think there was much more for me to learn about anxiety. I had accepted my own personal experiences and those of my friends as all the

education I needed. As I conducted research for this project though, I realized that there is so much more to each mental illness than what science or research has actually been able to publish. Each case is very different and each person with a mental illness reacts to their symptoms in very different ways. This makes it hard to publish definitive research on the topics and even harder for any person to grasp all the knowledge necessary to understand any mental illness case. I have also learned a lot of the medical and scientific jargon used to describe mental illnesses. This makes me feel more confident in my ability to have intelligent conversations and raise awareness in the general public. I believe this research will also benefit me in my personal relationships because it has taught me how to manage and communicate better about my own case with anxiety.

I think the knowledge I have gained through my work with my mentor in this project has also been extremely beneficial. There were so many ideas floating around in my head and I wasn't sure how to communicate them or where to even start in the process of bringing those ideas to life. My mentor worked with me and helped me develop professional jargon and improve my non-verbal communication skills so that I can present my ideas in a way that other fashion professionals would understand. From there I was able to learn what the next steps were in physically constructing those ideas. By learning so much about the creative process as it pertains to fashion, I was also able to learn how to better analyze my own clothing choices when shopping and the choices of other designers. This makes watching other designers, both famous and in my own university, more fun and inspiring for me. I can appreciate their work more now that I know all the steps that go into each of their projects.

Perhaps the most valuable knowledge I have gained from this project is the knowledge I have gained about myself. By doing this project, I was able to make a lot of progress toward figuring out my own design aesthetic. I was also able to figure out how my anxiety fits into my life as an artist. Finding ways to incorporate my anxiety into my art helped me to be more accepting of that piece of myself. I also learned what methods of time management and organization work best for me, which is going to be extremely useful information as I move into the professional world. Overall, being a part of a program that encourages students to complete a self-guided project like this made me more confident in my abilities as an artist and encouraged me to be a lifelong learner.

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