

DEEP RESEARCH & POLICY PAPER

The Cognitive Wardrobe Framework

*Clothing, Identity and Cognitive Accessibility
in Early-Onset Dementia*

Esther Charalambous

Psychology | Human Behaviour Decoder

March 2026

Abstract

Early-onset dementia (EOD), typically diagnosed before the age of 65, presents profound challenges to identity, autonomy and social participation. While research has largely focused on neurological decline, clinical treatment and caregiving systems, comparatively little attention has been given to the material environments through which individuals experience cognitive change in everyday life. Clothing represents one such overlooked environment. This paper introduces the **Cognitive Wardrobe Framework** — a conceptual model proposing that clothing can function as cognitive accessibility infrastructure, supporting memory cueing, identity continuity and social participation for individuals living with early-onset dementia. Drawing on material culture studies, embodied cognition and inclusive design, the framework positions clothing as an external cognitive scaffold embedded within everyday routines. The paper further examines the British Fashion Council's Sustainability Requirements framework (2025) as a policy instrument, argues for its expansion to encompass human sustainability and cognitive inclusivity, and positions inclusive clothing design within the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 3, 10 and 11).

1. Introduction and Policy Context

Dementia represents one of the most significant global health challenges of the twenty-first century. In the United Kingdom alone, approximately 982,000 individuals are currently living with dementia, with this number projected to exceed 1.4 million by 2040 (Alzheimer's Society, 2024; Wittenberg et al., 2019). Dementia is now recognised as the leading cause of death in England and Wales.

Within this population, an estimated 70,000 individuals are living with early-onset dementia — defined as dementia diagnosed before the age of 65 (Alzheimer's Society, 2024). Unlike dementia associated

with advanced age, early-onset dementia intersects with established professional identities, parenting roles, social relationships and economic participation. Cognitive changes therefore carry distinct and compounding psychosocial consequences.

Research on dementia has traditionally prioritised neurological mechanisms, pharmacological treatment and formal caregiving systems. These domains remain essential. However, they do not fully capture the everyday material environments through which individuals experience cognitive change. This paper argues that clothing — one of the most intimate and socially visible of all material environments — demands serious attention from researchers, clinicians, policymakers and the fashion industry alike.

The fashion industry's current sustainability agenda, led in the United Kingdom by the British Fashion Council (BFC), has made meaningful environmental progress. This paper argues that human sustainability — defined as the design of clothing systems that support people across the full spectrum of cognitive, sensory and physical experience — must now be incorporated into that agenda as a matter of policy urgency.

2. Theoretical Foundations

The Cognitive Wardrobe Framework draws on three intersecting bodies of scholarship: material culture studies, embodied cognition, and inclusive design.

2.1 Material Culture and the Extended Self

Material culture research demonstrates that objects participate in the active construction of identity and social meaning. Belk (1988) introduced the foundational concept of the extended self — the proposition that personal possessions help individuals maintain a coherent sense of identity across time. Garments worn regularly become embedded within autobiographical memory and emotional experience.

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) further demonstrated that everyday objects within domestic environments frequently function as carriers of personal meaning and memory — what this paper terms *material identity scaffolding*: the process through which objects help stabilise identity when autobiographical memory becomes disrupted.

Clothing occupies a unique position within this material ecology. Unlike most possessions, garments are worn directly on the body and therefore operate at the boundary between personal identity and social recognition — simultaneously communicating identity to others while reinforcing the wearer's self-perception.

2.2 Embodied Cognition

Embodied cognition research proposes that cognitive processes emerge through interactions between the body and its surrounding environment, rather than being located solely within the brain. Objects and routines within everyday environments can therefore function as cognitive cues that support memory, orientation and action.

Within this framework, dressing rituals — such as putting on particular garments before leaving the house — can become deeply ingrained behavioural sequences that support procedural memory even when other cognitive systems are compromised. Clothing may therefore function as an *external cognitive scaffold*, reducing the cognitive effort required to initiate and complete everyday tasks.

2.3 Inclusive Design and Cognitive Accessibility

Inclusive design research focuses on creating environments and products accessible to people with diverse abilities. While historically concentrated on physical accessibility — wheelchair access, tactile signage, visual contrast — the concept of cognitive accessibility has gained increasing traction: designing environments that reduce cognitive load, support orientation and simplify task completion.

Despite this expansion, clothing has rarely been considered part of the accessibility environment. Adaptive clothing design has primarily addressed mobility impairments or ageing populations, rather than cognitive conditions such as dementia. Recognising clothing as part of the accessibility environment expands inclusive design into the material cultures of everyday life.

3. The Cognitive Wardrobe Framework

The Cognitive Wardrobe Framework proposes that clothing functions as an external cognitive scaffold operating simultaneously within three interacting domains:

Cognitive	Supports dressing routines; reduces cognitive load	Environmental cueing, procedural memory anchoring
Psychological	Reinforces identity continuity	Material identity scaffolding, symbolic congruence
Social	Shapes perceptions of dignity and competence	Social signalling, participation enablement

Central to the framework is the concept of **symbolic congruence**: the alignment between adaptive clothing features and the wearer's established identity. Clothing that simplifies dressing tasks but disrupts personal style may undermine identity continuity. Conversely, garments that preserve symbolic identity while reducing task complexity may enhance both autonomy and emotional wellbeing. This insight distinguishes the Cognitive Wardrobe Framework from conventional adaptive clothing design, which has historically prioritised functional adaptation over identity preservation.

Through these mechanisms, the cognitive wardrobe becomes part of a broader *material ecology of cognitive support* — a network of everyday objects and environments that collectively sustain identity and functional independence.

4. Dressing, Identity and Cognitive Change

Dressing is not a simple task. It is a cognitively complex activity engaging procedural memory, executive function, visual recognition, spatial reasoning, sensory processing and emotional regulation — simultaneously, every morning.

For individuals living with early-onset dementia, executive dysfunction progressively disrupts these processes. The following represent documented everyday dressing challenges experienced by this population:

- Remembering that dressing is the next task
- Identifying appropriate clothing for weather or occasion
- Locating clothing within a wardrobe
- Distinguishing similar garments (shirt vs jacket)
- Recognising front from back of garments
- Identifying inside from outside of clothing
- Sequencing dressing steps in correct order
- Managing buttons — requiring fine motor precision
- Navigating zips, particularly on outerwear
- Tying shoelaces or managing buckled footwear
- Maintaining balance when putting on socks
- Layering garments in correct order
- Selecting appropriate temperature layers
- Tolerating seams, labels and synthetic textures
- Managing pressure of waistbands, collars and cuffs
- Distinguishing items in low light conditions
- Remembering whether dressing has occurred
- Identifying when clothing requires changing
- Placing shoes on correct feet
- Fastening structured undergarments
- Managing overhead garments without disorientation
- Handling small accessories (earrings, cufflinks)
- Recalling seasonal dressing conventions
- Maintaining dignity and emotional safety throughout

Observational Vignette

During a community dementia awareness event, a man in his early fifties described how dressing for work had become unexpectedly difficult. For most of his career he had associated his professional identity with tailored shirts and formal jackets. As cognitive symptoms progressed, he found himself standing in front of his wardrobe unable to sequence the dressing process. Yet when he eventually put on a familiar navy blazer, he remarked that he 'felt like himself again.' The garment appeared to function as a psychological cue — reinforcing professional identity and restoring confidence. This vignette illustrates how clothing operates not merely as physical covering but as a material anchor for identity continuity.

5. Fashion's Structural Demographic Exclusions

Fashion, as currently constituted, is designed for a narrow demographic range. Fast fashion targets the 16–35 age group. Luxury markets address high-earning able-bodied consumers. Even 'mature' fashion

lines largely replicate trends designed for younger bodies without accommodating cognitive or physical difference. The populations systematically excluded from design consideration include:

- Older adults experiencing reduced dexterity or arthritis
- People with physical disabilities or limb differences
- Individuals with sensory processing conditions — autism, fibromyalgia, hypersensitivity
- Wheelchair users, for whom clothing is almost universally designed assuming bipedal posture
- People living with Parkinson's disease, stroke-related motor impairment, or multiple sclerosis
- The approximately 70,000 people in the UK with early-onset dementia — many professionally active at diagnosis

This structural exclusion is not incidental — it reflects the **dementia design gap**: a structural absence of collaboration between dementia research, behavioural science and fashion and clothing design. The three fields rarely intersect, resulting in clothing for cognitive accessibility that remains underdeveloped and largely medicalised in appearance, further undermining the identity needs it ought to serve.

6. The British Fashion Council: Sustainability Policy and Its Gaps

The British Fashion Council's Institute of Positive Fashion (IPF), established in 2020 as a think tank to address fashion's environmental impact, represents the most significant institutional mechanism for systemic change within the UK fashion industry.

In January 2025, the BFC announced a landmark partnership with Copenhagen Fashion Week to adopt its Sustainability Requirements (SDS) framework across the BFC NEWGEN emerging designer programme. Under this framework, NEWGEN applicants must respond to 18 statements covering environmental, social and governance (ESG) considerations as a mandatory admission criterion, with full implementation from January 2026. BFC Chief Executive Caroline Rush described the move as 'a significant step in ensuring that sustainability becomes integral to the future of fashion.'

The Copenhagen Sustainability Requirements were first introduced in January 2020 and updated in 2024 to reflect EU policy developments. They require participating brands to: maintain a formal sustainability strategy; implement diversity and inclusion hiring guidelines; use preferred materials; and eliminate single-use props from presentations. The BFC's adoption makes London Fashion Week the first among the 'Big Four' global fashion weeks to implement such standards for emerging designers.

The Human Sustainability Gap in BFC Policy

The BFC's sustainability framework represents genuine institutional progress. However, its current scope remains almost entirely *environmental* in orientation. Carbon reduction, circularity, material choices and supply chain ethics dominate. What the framework does not yet address is **human sustainability** — defined here as the design of clothing that supports people across the full spectrum of age, ability, and cognitive experience throughout their lives.

The SDS framework's existing diversity and inclusion requirements focus on workforce composition and hiring practices. They do not extend to the consumer — to whether the clothing being produced is designed to be worn, managed and lived in by people with dementia, disability, or neurological difference. This is a policy gap that the BFC is uniquely positioned to address.

Incorporating cognitive accessibility standards into the NEWGEN framework — and subsequently across London Fashion Week's full schedule — would represent a significant and internationally visible policy statement: that sustainable fashion is not only planet-responsible but people-responsible.

7. Alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals

Recognising clothing as part of the cognitive accessibility environment aligns directly with three United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Clothing design that supports cognitive accessibility contributes to each as follows:

<p style="text-align: center;">SDG 3</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Good Health & Wellbeing</p> <p>Adaptive, identity-preserving clothing supports the psychological wellbeing and dignity of individuals living with dementia. Dressing autonomy is a recognised marker of functional independence and is directly linked to quality of life outcomes in dementia care.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">SDG 10</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Reduced Inequalities</p> <p>Early-onset dementia disproportionately affects individuals who remain professionally and socially active. Cognitive inaccessibility in clothing constitutes a structural barrier to participation. Inclusive design reduces this inequality.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">SDG 11</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Sustainable Cities & Communities</p> <p>Dementia-friendly environments have been a policy focus in the UK since the Prime Minister's Challenge on Dementia (2012). Extending 'dementia-friendly' design principles to clothing expands inclusive environments beyond architecture to encompass everyday material culture.</p>
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8. Design Principles and Evidence-Based Recommendations

The following design interventions are supported by occupational therapy practice, inclusive design research and the principles of the Cognitive Wardrobe Framework. They represent actionable standards that could be incorporated into industry sustainability and inclusivity frameworks:

Magnetic closures — Replacing buttons as primary fastenings — functionally invisible and indistinguishable from conventional garment aesthetics when well executed

Colour-coded garment orientation cues — Subtle contrast stitching or label systems differentiating front/back and inside/outside without medicalising appearance

Seamless construction and tag-free labelling — Reducing tactile distress for individuals with sensory hypersensitivity — a documented feature of neurological conditions

Elasticised and adjustable waistbands — Eliminating the cognitive and motor demands of belt and button fastenings while maintaining conventional silhouette

Natural, breathable fibres — Cotton, bamboo and merino wool reduce sensory friction; important for individuals with altered thermal and tactile perception

Adaptive layering systems — Simplified modular clothing that reduces decision-making load while preserving the appearance of considered personal style

Side-opening and wrap constructions — Enabling easier dressing and facilitated dressing assistance without requiring overhead manoeuvring

Identity-preserving aesthetics — Designing adaptive features to be invisible where possible, ensuring that cognitive accessibility does not compromise symbolic congruence

The Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design at the Royal College of Art has begun exploring inclusive fashion within a broader design research framework. Interdisciplinary collaboration between occupational therapists, behavioural scientists, dementia researchers and fashion designers represents the most productive pathway toward systematic progress.

9. Policy Recommendations

For the British Fashion Council

Expand the SDS framework to include a 'human sustainability' pillar addressing cognitive and physical accessibility in garment design. Incorporate inclusive design criteria into NEWGEN admission standards alongside existing environmental requirements. Commission a dedicated research partnership between the IPF and dementia care and occupational therapy sectors.

For Fashion Design Education

Integrate cognitive accessibility and inclusive design principles into undergraduate and postgraduate fashion curricula. Dementia-inclusive design challenges could be embedded within final year project briefs at institutions including the Royal College of Art, Central Saint Martins and the London College of Fashion.

For the National Health Service and Social Care

Recognise dressing autonomy as a functional independence indicator in dementia care plans. Provide occupational therapy guidance on cognitive wardrobe principles for families and carers. Commission NHS design partnerships with the fashion industry to develop accessible everyday garments.

For Government and the DCMS

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport currently provides £1 million in funding to BFC NEWGEN (2025–26). Future funding conditions should include accessibility and inclusive design criteria alongside environmental sustainability standards.

For Researchers

Empirical research is required to test the three domains of the Cognitive Wardrobe Framework. Priority areas include: the effect of garment familiarity on dressing anxiety; the relationship between symbolic congruence and identity continuity; and experimental design trials of adaptive garment features with early-onset dementia populations.

10. Conclusion

Clothing sits at the intersection of body, identity and environment. When cognitive decline alters the experience of daily life, garments can either intensify confusion and distress or provide continuity, dignity and stability. The Cognitive Wardrobe Framework proposed here positions clothing not as a peripheral concern of dementia care but as part of its foundational material infrastructure.

The fashion industry — and the British Fashion Council in particular — has demonstrated that it can mobilise institutional frameworks for change. The integration of environmental sustainability into NEWGEN criteria proves that design standards can evolve to reflect broader social responsibilities. Human sustainability and cognitive accessibility must be the next frontier.

Fashion is not merely cultural expression. For individuals living with early-onset dementia, it is the quiet architecture of a recognisable self — and it deserves to be designed accordingly.

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