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The unseen threads: reweaving fashion's future with emotional science and methodological innovation

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Introduction

Picture this: a young woman is struggling to decide what to wear today. It is not a special day, and nothing significant is expected to happen. She simply wants something that will make her feel serenity and contentment. She opens her wardrobe, and there is the green, half-length dress waiting for her, ready to bring her that sense of serenity and contentment.

Can clothes elicit emotions? And, if yes, which ones? How?

Globally, the answer to the first question is yes, to the second and the third is still an open issue (Lindeman et al., 2023; Solomon and Schopler, 1982; Moody et al., 2009). While the way a person dresses has been shown to signal social categories such as status and aesthetics, as well as cognitive states (Hester and Hehman, 2023)—and specifically, emotions—little evidence is available on how clothing can shape and relate to wearers' emotions and to which emotions, in detail.

Although prior research has linked clothing, affect and emotion through a range of traditions [e.g., affective design (Agarwal, 2022; Ruggerone, 2017; Jiang et al., 2024), Kansei engineering (Wei et al., 2025), mood regulation frameworks (Lindeman et al., 2023; Kang et al., 2013; Frith and Gleeson, 2008), and the theory of Encloded Cognition (Horton Jr et al., 2025)], these perspectives tend to focus on general affective states or broad emotional categories, and only rarely systematically address the underlying emotional mechanisms. What remains largely unexplored is a framework that synthesizes existing perspectives and redirects attention toward the underlying mechanisms, relying on experimental manipulation and systematic measurement of emotional processes in relation to clothing.

Here, I argue that the approach of discrete emotions, intended as fleeting discrete, universal, and evolutionarily adaptive phenomena functionally organized and composed of coordinated behavioral, psychophysiological, experiential, and cognitive responses to perceived challenges and opportunities (Horton Jr et al., 2025; Rivers et al., 2007)—can serve as a promising foundation for this endeavor, complementing existing frameworks, for three reasons. First, this approach is well-grounded in experimental research with clear emotion-induction procedures and assessment tools (Mikolajczak et al., 2008). Second, discrete emotions are differentiable at the cognitive, behavioral and physiological level (Chirico et al., 2021, 2024; Keltner and Haidt, 2003), while still encompassing core affective dimensions of valence and arousal. Finally, this framework has already enabled the identification of specific pathways linking individual emotions to distinct behavioral, cognitive, and physiological components involved in emotion regulation processes (Rivers et al., 2007; Mikolajczak et al., 2008; Chirico et al., 2021).

Among discrete emotions, awe offers a particularly relevant case for investigation. Awe is a complex, multifaceted, and self-transcendent emotion (Chirico et al., 2024), consistently elicited by appraisals of vastness and the need for cognitive accommodation (Keltner and Haidt, 2003). Its cognitive and behavioral effects have been extensively studied. A central mechanism—self-diminishment (the “small self”) (Piff et al., 2015)—shifts attentional focus away from self-concern and toward broader systems, thereby fostering a heightened sense of connectedness with others and with nature (Chen and Mongrain, 2020; Bai et al., 2017; Stellar et al., 2017). Awe promotes systems-based, meaning-oriented thinking (Keltner, 2025) and elicits an abstract mindset (Septianto et al., 2023), which has been associated with an expanded perception of time and a diminished emphasis on money and short-term desires (Rudd et al., 2012; Jiang et al., 2018; Septianto et al., 2020). In the context of material goods, object-inspired awe enhances appreciation and perceived value, imbuing the item with a deeper sense of meaning—an important factor for long-term retention (Guo et al., 2018). These effects contribute to pro-environmental intentions and increased green purchasing behavior, often mediated by a stronger sense of psychological ownership of nature (Wang et al., 2019). In fashion and marketing specifically, awe-inspiring content has proven effective in increasing consumer engagement with ethical brands. This is because awe activates deontological moral beliefs—principles rooted in fairness and care—which have been shown to be stronger predictors of ethical fashion consumption than utilitarian reasoning (Pu et al., 2025). When awe triggers these self-transcendent processes, it can generate tangible behavioral changes, including a preference for eco-conscious brands, increased garment care and repair, and reduced impulsive purchasing (Rudd et al., 2012; Kaplan et al., 2025; Li and Julie, 2024; Rudd et al., 2018). These outcomes are further reinforced by awe’s incompatibility with exclusivity-driven motives (Senyuz et al., 2025) and its facilitation of adaptive regulation strategies such as cognitive reappraisal (Li and Julie, 2024).

Altogether, these findings outline a pathway from awe-evoking design choices to emotion regulation, via mediators like the *small self*, connectedness, and reappraisal, enhancing the symbolic and moral value of garments and promoting sustainable practices, including extended use, repair, and reduced replacement. Awe may thus act as a regulatory mechanism reshaping the emotional relationship between individuals and their clothing toward more sustainability-oriented choices, a theme further explored in the next sections.

Clothing and emotions: an (almost) unseen thread

Clothing, a fundamental aspect of human life, serves far beyond its primary function of protection, acting as a crucial medium for communication, self-expression (Baumgartner, 2012), and social interaction (Gruber et al., 2024; Flugel, 1933). While its impact on first impressions and social perceptions has been widely recognized, there is no systematic treatment, though, of how emotional experiences relate to clothing (Lindeman et al., 2023), especially from the perspective of the wearer. Clothing

serves as a fundamental component of the material self and is conceptually viewed as an extension of the self, profoundly shaping one’s self-concept, self-esteem, and body image (Moody et al., 2009, 2010). This deep identification is critical for sustainable fashion, as emotional bonds are necessary for durability and attachment (Guy and Banim, 2000), thereby promoting practices like extended use and repair (Dobbelstein and Lochner, 2023) and resisting impulsive replacement (Hosany and Martin, 2012; Wallace et al., 2017). Furthermore, attire is deliberately used as a psychological regulatory tool (Moody et al., 2010), allowing the wearer to reflect, express, and manage personality traits, mood, and vulnerability in social settings (Kwon, 1991). This functional role of clothing in coping with social circumstances and internal feelings (Lindeman et al., 2023; Gruber et al., 2024) positions the garment as an active element in the wearer’s daily affective experience.

Studying this phenomenon implies deepening (i) “the feelings we experience about and in our clothes when we are dressed” (abstract) (Ruggerone, 2017), (ii) the emotions we anticipate before wearing a garment, sometimes simply by observing it or choosing it from the wardrobe, and (iii) the ways we use clothing to alter or reorient our emotional states. In psychological terms, this directly concerns processes of emotion regulation (Gross, 2015a). Research in the psychology of clothing and fashion has acknowledged the role of garments in mood regulation (e.g., Lindeman et al., 2023; Wenderski and Jung, 2025), contributing to the description and exploration of the general affective space associated with clothing. These contributions have predominantly drawn on dimensional models, which organize affective experience along broad parameters such as arousal and valence (Kang et al., 2013). Therefore, there remains scope for a complementary analysis of specific emotions, their underlying components, and the mechanisms through which clothing can be involved in their elicitation, modulation, or mediation, always still including the two dimensions of arousal and valence.

Within this landscape, *enclothed cognition* (EC) (Adam and Galinsky, 2012) offers a valuable starting point. The framework shows how the symbolic meaning of a garment, together with the physical sensation of wearing it, can influence cognition and behavior, a principle supported by recent meta-analysis (Horton Jr et al., 2025). Meta-analytic evidence shows that these effects are stable (small-to-medium in size, $d \approx 0.39$) in studies published since 2016, though generalization remains limited to predominantly Western, lab-based contexts. While most applications to date have emphasized cognitive or behavioral outcomes (e.g., sustained attention, helping behavior), the same logic could be extended to explore emotions more explicitly. EC provides a conceptual framework through which to examine how clothing can be involved in emotion regulation processes. Specifically, it allows for the analysis of (i) the modulation of emotional responses occurring while one is dressed, (ii) the anticipatory regulation of emotions during garment selection (situation selection), and (iii) the intentional use of clothing to modify or maintain specific emotional states. All three domains reflect distinct but interrelated regulatory strategies within the broader process model of emotion regulation (Gross, 1998, 2002, 2015b; 2014). Advancing this line of inquiry requires a more

detailed articulation of the “symbolic meaning” component in emotion-related terms, with attention to how specific emotions may be involved. Above all, it is possible to systematically study the impact of clothing-related emotions on specific cognitive and behavioral processes, including proenvironmental ones.

Integrating a discrete emotion perspective into this framework can allow for identifying specific mechanisms through which clothing is implicated in processes of emotion regulation, also addressing one direction provided by Petrova and Gross (2023), that is, to move from strategies to concrete tactics. Such an approach would not replace dimensional models, but rather complement them by directing analytical attention toward specific emotional states. As a preliminary focus, the emotion of awe may serve as a relevant case for initiating this line of inquiry.

Awe: a complementary endeavor toward a systematic study of wearer’s emotion regulation process

Emotions act as interpretive lenses through which individuals construct meaning in their social environments, and extensive empirical research shows that each emotion is associated with distinct appraisal tendencies, recurring thematic patterns that shape how people interpret current contexts, recall past experiences, and anticipate future events (Shiota, 2024).

The EC framework has demonstrated that wearing garments with symbolic associations (e.g., a lab coat) can influence cognitive and behavioral outcomes, by focusing on general affective states of broad emotional categories (Adam and Galinsky, 2012), like in the Kansei Engineering approach (Wei et al., 2025). Specifically, the present framework complements dimensional affect models (Russell and Barrett, 1999; Barrett and Westlin, 2021) and Kansei Engineering (Wei et al., 2025; Nagamachi, 1995), which typically map holistic emotional impressions to design features through a user-centered methodology, focusing on a macro-level analysis of how emotions influence symbolic and regulatory functions of clothing. A discrete emotion approach focuses on a micro-level analysis of specific emotions, such as awe, and their associated appraisals, enabling testable predictions about downstream behaviors (e.g., repair, extended use). It can be integrated with research on identity and the extended self (Belk, 2014), emotional longevity (Niinimäki and Armstrong, 2013), and repair culture (Twigger Holroyd, 2018).

Specifically, here, I focus on the emotion of awe as a paradigmatic case. Awe emerges a theoretically grounded and empirically tractable emotion through which to examine the emotion-related mechanisms involved in the relationship between individuals and clothing. Investigating how clothing can elicit or sustain experiences of awe offers a pathway to explore how discrete emotions contribute to emotion regulation processes and, potentially, to sustainability-oriented outcomes in fashion consumption.

Wearing awe: a research agenda

Building on the process model of emotion regulation (Gross, 1998; Petrova and Gross, 2023) and the theory of EC (Adam and Galinsky, 2019), I propose a research agenda that conceptualizes awe as a regulatory mechanism operating through clothing. The agenda is articulated across three domains: (i) response modulation during wear, (ii) anticipatory regulation during garment selection (situation selection), and (iii) longer-term strategies of affective regulation through repeated use of emotionally meaningful garments. In each case, clothing is not treated merely as an object, but as an emotionally salient cue whose symbolic and material dimensions can shape affective, cognitive, behavioral, and sustainability-related outcomes.

The first step is to identify garment features that correspond to awe’s core appraisals, vastness and need for accommodation, so they can be both selected and measured experimentally. This involves disentangling physical attributes (e.g., color, silhouette, texture) from symbolic associations, the latter operationalized e.g., via short narrative framings (e.g., “inspired by sacred landscapes” vs. “designed for a luxury runway”). These narratives act as symbolic cues, shaping cognitive appraisals and emotional responses. By systematically varying narrative types while holding physical features constant, studies can isolate the impact of symbolic meaning on emotional and sustainability-related outcomes, such as repair intentions, emotional durability, and resistance to impulsive consumption. Using a stimulus validation paradigm, I propose to compare garments framed with awe-inducing narratives to those linked to other discrete emotions, using both single-item and multidimensional measures (e.g., the Awe Experience Scale, AWE-S; Yaden et al., 2018) to assess awe’s subcomponents, such as vastness, accommodation, small self, and connectedness. The goal is to develop a validated set of awe-eliciting garments, isolating the relative contributions of visual, tactile, and symbolic cues.

The second domain, anticipatory regulation, can be examined through two complementary methods. First, a minimal viable protocol would involve within-subject VR-based study simulating a wardrobe selection task in which participants choose garments (awe-inducing or neutral) under different contextual conditions [e.g., immersive environments congruent or incongruent with different types of awe, such as a forest (nature-based) vs. cathedral (human-made) vs. neutral room]. Primary outcome would include self-reported discrete emotions (as manipulation check) and state awe, physiological indexes related to awe (e.g., heart rate variability, skin conductance), and post-task behavioral intentions (e.g., reuse or repair intentions, preference for upcycled clothing, preference to repair vs. replace). This allows for the isolation of symbolic meaning from tactile experience. Second, following the original EC paradigm, a more traditional lab-based study can manipulate the symbolic meaning and physical experience of awe-related garments independently. For example, participants may be randomly assigned to conditions where they either wear or simply see an awe-framed garment (e.g., described as a nature-inspired ritual robe vs. luxury fashion item), allowing assessment of symbolic vs. embodied effects on affective and sustainability-related behavioral outcomes.

To investigate strategic, longer-term emotion regulation through clothing, a field-based ecological momentary assessment (EMA) (Koval and Kalokerinos, 2024) design can be implemented. Participants would be assigned two garments (awe-symbolic and control) and asked to wear them across 3 weeks in their everyday settings. They would report momentary affect before and after wearing, perceived symbolic meaning of the garment, and behavioral outcomes. Key sustainability-related measures would include frequency of wear, delay in replacement, intentions to repair or donate, emotional attachment, and resistance to new purchases. This would assess whether awe-linked garments foster durable engagement and promote slower, more mindful fashion consumption.

This agenda also considers contextual and individual-level moderators. Awe elicited through naturalistic or communal narratives may foster prosocial and sustainable behaviors, whereas awe framed around luxury or exclusivity might fuel aspirational consumption. Pre-registered hypotheses and measures of traits (as potential moderators) such as materialism (Zhang and Xuexin, 2023), narcissism (Zhang and Xuexin, 2023), environmental concern (Gao, 2025), emotion regulation strategies (Li and Julie, 2024), and fashion involvement (Pramestya and Widagda, 2020) are needed to capture such variability. Methodologically, while VR enables controlled manipulation, it reduces tactile realism; combining VR with physical try-ons or haptic interfaces can enhance ecological validity. Ethically, eliciting intense emotions like awe requires attention to potential risks, such as negative awe (Gordon et al., 2016), the impact of self-diminishment, or exclusion in marketing contexts, especially among body-sensitive or vulnerable populations. To mitigate these, awe-linked garments should be embedded in narratives of care, repair, and connection, avoiding scarcity cues. Sustainability-related Key Performance Indicator (KPIs), including frequency of wear, repair behaviors, inter-purchase intervals, and emotional attachment, should be systematically tracked. Success would be reflected in measurable improvements in these outcomes relative to neutral controls. Overall, the program offers a testable, ethically grounded framework for integrating discrete emotions and EC into affective design for sustainability.

Conclusions

This agenda advances a discrete emotion framework, complementary to dimensional affect-based models, to investigate how garments may elicit and regulate specific emotional states. Awe serves as a paradigmatic case due to its unique appraisal structure (vastness and need for accommodation) and its capacity to reorient attention beyond the self, fostering connectedness, reappraisal, and sustainability-relevant behaviors. Positioning clothing as an emotionally salient cue, both symbolic and material, this perspective offers a testable model for integrating emotion regulation and affective design. It aims to promote garments that are not only psychologically meaningful but also more likely to be valued, cared for, and worn longer, thus contributing

to more durable and environmentally conscious forms of fashion consumption.

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AC: Validation, Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft.

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Conflict of interest

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frsus.2025.1686093/full#supplementary-material>

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