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Design and prototype of semi-formal clothing for women with sensory issues

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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that up to 16.5% percentage of the UK population is affected by sensory issues. Furthermore, there is a strong correlation between Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) with over 90% of autistic individuals reporting significant sensory issues. With the increase of 787% in recorded ASD diagnoses in the UK between 1998 and 2018, the topic of sensory issues calls for our attention. Experiencing them can lead to irritation, confusion, lack of focus, or even self-harm. This paper is devoted to the analysis of the currently available clothing products for people with sensory issues and recognizing existing lack of solutions. Analysis of the current state on the market helped to determine important properties that should be included in sensory-friendly design. Moreover, it allowed us to pinpoint the gap in current products such as a complete lack of formal or semi-formal clothing. As a result, a design of semi-formal shirt for an adult woman experiencing sensory issues was prepared. In the developed clothing product, some innovative solutions were applied such as increased width of seam allowance, hidden fidget, printed tag in a QR form, magnetic fastening of the shirt cuffs, and others to meet the needs of potential users. The prototype of the shirt was made from a soybean protein fiber (SPF) / viscose woven fabric. Recommendations for further development of the product and future research of the topic are also discussed.

1 Introduction

For centuries, clothing has been a significant aspect of the daily life of human beings. Since the beginning of humankind, people have been trying to cover their bodies for different purposes. Nowadays, customers are expecting clothing products to be aesthetically pleasing, protective, comfortable, and possibly equipped with additional properties, all at the same time. The task is challenging enough when it comes to regular everyday clothing for a common crowd, and it is getting significantly more difficult when people of special needs are in question. However, obtaining a feeling of comfort coming from clothing that you are obliged to wear on a daily basis should be a standard, not a luxury. Due to the research done in this field, the statement can be made that there exists a lack of awareness in terms of sensory issues caused either by skin conditions or psychological ones. The consistent lack of knowledge in this field is leading to an everyday struggle and discomfort for people who experience sensory issues, starting with insufficient amount of adequate clothing available on the market, following through with the high price that is asked for the existing products and ending on the significant consequences that the subjects have to face in case of using regular clothing. Therefore, the purpose of this work is to analyze the needs of people experiencing sensory issues, compare and evaluate existing solutions, and design an improved clothing product. Based on the comparison of the existing products with the knowledge collected from the literature review, the clothing product design is prepared – a sensory friendly semi-formal shirt.

2 Sensory issues

Humphry wrote “Sensory processing is the ability to analyze, modulate, and organize sensory incoming information to respond to environmental stimuli” [1]. All humankind was taking part in going through the evolution process [1], the aim of which was to allow the individuals to survive in the conditions of their surroundings. However, even with the same surroundings, evolution affected everyone in slightly different ways, an example of which can be a possibility of people having various levels of brain sensitivity [2]. Dr. Winifred Dunn, who is a professor of occupational therapy, introduced one of the most well-known models of behaviors in relation to the sensory processing and response strategies, a so-called “Dunn’s Four Quadrant Model of Sensory Processing”, a graphic interpretation of which is presented in Figure 1.

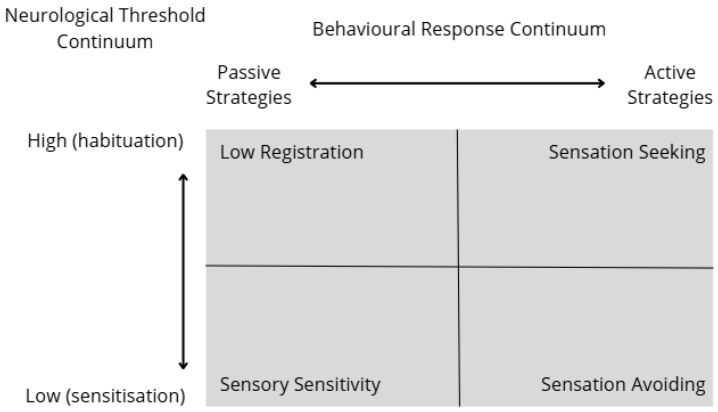

Fig. 1 Representation of Dunn’s Model of Sensory Processing. Author’s own work based on [3].

As stated in the Dunn’s model, it consists of four different quadrants, which are combinations of neurological thresholds (high or low) and behavioral responses (active or passive). Low registration can be observed when an individual presents low activity in the tasks as well as minor registration of external stimuli. Sensation seeking occurs when an individual typically craves and actively looks for sensations to achieve a self-regulated state. Often, it comes together with impulsive behavior. On the other hand, sensation avoiding can be recognized when an individual is most likely to socially distance themselves because of active avoidance of sensations and stimuli that do not fit in their neurological thresholds. Finally, sensory sensitivity can be observed when individuals are easily overwhelmed by their surroundings or even internal sensations. Often, the side effects of this are outbursts and/or low self-esteem.

When a chronically sensory-overstimulated individual is behaving in a disruptive manner daily, they can receive a diagnosis of Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) given by a specialist. Wood wrote “Sensory

processing dysfunction is a neurological disorder in which the brain has a difficult time processing (detecting, modulating, interpreting) input from one's senses" [4]. It can be experienced externally through smelling, touching, listening to the noises or even visually, by different levels of brightness. In some cases, internal sensory overstimulation is reported as well, an example of which could be sensory overwhelming coming from the sensations of the digestive system.

There are three main sub-types of SPD defined so far: Sensory Modulation Disorder (SMD), Sensory Discrimination Disorder (SDD), and Sensory-Based Motor Disorder (SBMD).

The focus area of this article is related to the first main sub-type of SPD, Sensory Modulation Disorder (SMD). Therefore, distinguishing sub-types of SMD itself will make the process of understanding the discussed issue significantly easier. What is important to mention is the fact that even though sensory issues are very commonly observed in people with developmental disorders such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or others, the SPD is not exclusive to them [5].

3 Comfort aspect of clothing with sensory issues

Studies show that the most influential parameters that are affecting the clothing comfort are the garment fit, moisture transport, thermal resistance, lack of allergic reaction, and the aesthetics of the design [6]. Considering that, it is necessary to be aware that each of those aspects is also influenced by multiple other elements [7], the graphical representation of which is presented in Figure 2.

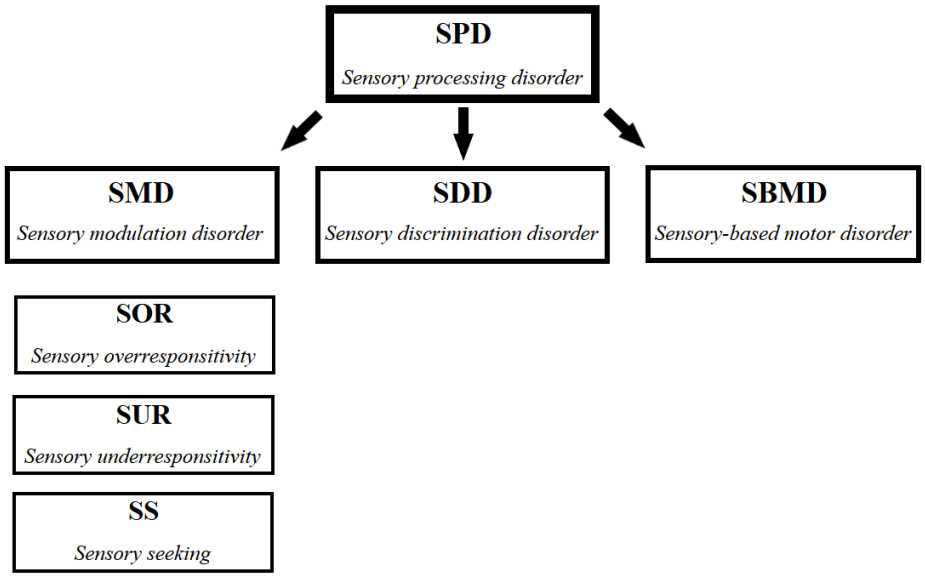

Fig. 2 Clothing comfort characteristics. Author's own work based on [4].

Physical aspects of comfort can be affected by various skin conditions of different origin, for example some can be developed due to genetics; they can also appear because of outside circumstances – such as burn wounds. Regardless of the reasons for the appearance of the skin conditions, we know that according to Gade they "affect one-third of the world's population, significantly lowering the quality of life of the patients, who deal with symptoms" [8]. Due to clothing being the closest surrounding of all individuals, a special attention should be devoted to the design of the garment for people with some additional needs, such as those with sensory issues. Individuals experiencing sensory issues based on psychological reasons (SPD) can both experience comforting sensations and disturbing disgust from different sorts of fabrics. Even though their perception is very individual, based on the interviews performed with people experiencing sensory issues, it is possible to draw out some more general conclusions. Many participants mention that soft fabrics are their preference. Moreover, the majority of respondents would be more likely to choose muted colors. An increased level of sensitivity in the upper back (neck, shoulders) area was also mentioned.

Inappropriate choice of fabric and its side effects cannot be ignored. The risk of wearing clothing which is not meeting the needs of individuals with sensory issues is not only high levels of anxiety, but even the

sensations of pain are not a rare occurrence [9]. On the other hand, clothing can also be a way to cope with sensory overwhelm. It can be a form of therapeutic action. External sensory experiences can help by stimulating an individual's senses "just enough" for them to achieve a sense of being present. Most mentioned a way to achieve the calming effect is by heavy pressure [10]. Choice of fabric can either cause a tantrum or calm an individual down. Seam placement can result in pain sensations or comforting softness. The fastening method can exclude certain individuals through its level of difficulty or can make clothing fully accessible. To conclude, for clothing engineers willing to focus on sensory-friendly clothing, it is a necessity to consider the details of each product, such as material, seam placement, and easy fastening methods because they are making an unspeakable difference [11]. The purpose of this article was to recognize the clothing needs of people experiencing sensory issues in the field of specialized clothing. As an integrated part of it, designing and manufacturing an example of a clothing product for an adult woman experiencing sensory issues took place. The designed clothing product would allow the individuals experiencing sensory issues to be in the state of comfort and calmness of their mind while maintaining the semi-formal look often required at different functions or offices. Clothing could possibly improve the quality of life of such individuals.

4 Analysis of the existing products designed for people with sensory issues

To properly evaluate the needs of the customers, finding the gap in existing solutions and collecting already tested and successful solutions, an analysis of the existing products was performed. The analysis is divided into two sub-chapters since so far there are no products designed for people experiencing sensory issues due to skin conditions and psychological conditions at once.

Products designed due to the skin conditions

Currently on the market there are quite a few options when it comes to clothing designed specifically due to medical reasons. Below, the list of examples of such products is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Products designed due to the skin conditions.

Name	Manufacturer	Primary fiber	Secondary fiber	Price
Remedywear™ (TENCEL + Zinc) Pants – ADULT Unisex	The Eczema Company [12]	75% TENCEL® (lyocell)	19% Smartcel™ Sensitive (TENCEL/lyocell + zinc)	289 zł = 68.46 € (state for January 2025)
Anti-Itch Long Sleeve Shirt with TENCEL and Zinc – Adults	YoRo Naturals [13]	75% TENCEL® (lyocell)	19% Smartcel™ Sensitive (TENCEL/lyocell + zinc)	217 zł = 51.41 € (state for January 2025)
Therapeutic knee sock in white silk for women	Skinnies [14]	Specified content of fabric was not explained, silk is mentioned		29.99 £ = 35.85 € (state for January 2025)

Above, there are only a few examples of clothing designed for people with sensory issues due to skin conditions. The clothing is mostly produced from Tencel or silk. They offer hypoallergenic properties, soft in touch designs, and unfortunately a rather high price. Produced clothing is designed mostly with the purpose of being an undergarment, therefore the aesthetic functions are not really fulfilled. Producers offer soft, everyday clothing which is not a very appropriate option for more official gatherings.

Products designed due to the psychological conditions

When it comes to clothing designed for individuals experiencing sensory issues due to conditions such as developmental disorders, the options are significantly more limited. However, there is a quite high variety of accessories offering comfort while experiencing sensory issues. Examples of such products are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Products designed due to the psychological conditions.

Name	Manufacturer	Primary fiber	Secondary fiber	Price
Sensory Kozie Sac	Manufacturer: Kozie clothes [15]	Specified content of fabric was not explained; nylon/spandex is mentioned.		43 $ = 41.49 € (state for January 2025)
Sound Reducing Sensory Hoodie	Manufacturer: Senseational you [16]	80% cotton	20% polyester	228 zł = 54.01 € (state for January 2025)
Sensory-friendly FidgetFocus Hoodie featuring a discreet FidgetCord	Sam sensory clothing [17]	47% Organic Cotton	47% Viscose	125 € (state for January 2025)

Although there exist few options for the products designed for people experiencing sensory issues due to the psychological conditions, the amount of goods is significantly smaller than products for people with skin conditions. Another important aspect to discuss is the fact that there is not even one product designed as a formal or semi-formal clothing piece. When some adjustments are added to the products, they are rarely combined – for example magnetic fastening could be combined with hidden fidgets without any negative interaction. Producers are also not paying big enough attention to the content of the fabric; they focus just on the feel of it without considering the health aspect. Designs are sometimes also contradictory with their requirements (for example adding regular tags to the sensory friendly clothing) [18].

5 Conclusions from the existing products analysis

From the analysis performed above, it was possible to draft out several conclusions. There exists a market gap in sensory-friendly clothing which is a semi-formal or formal apparel. People experiencing sensory issues are also expected to fit in the societal norms and dress according to the occasion or their occupation, hoodies and t-shirts are not always allowed. There are no existing products combining needs of people experiencing sensory issues due to the skin conditions with the needs of people experiencing them due to the psychological conditions. Producers are also not paying big enough attention to the content of the fabric; they focus just on the feel of it without considering the health aspect. Stating the content should be a standard practice, especially when it comes to clothing for people with skin conditions. A higher number of adjustments could be made within the same product to provide better properties and more solutions. For example, magnetic fastening could be combined with hidden fidgets to improve the overall functionality of clothing.

6 Experimental part

6.1 Design assumptions

To achieve the objective stated at the beginning, an analysis of the currently existing solutions on the market was performed to determine important properties that should be included in sensory-friendly design. It shed a light on modern solutions and allowed us to pinpoint the gap in currently existing products such as a complete lack of formal or semi-formal clothing. Finally, the clothing product for an adult woman experiencing sensory issues was designed and manufactured. Reflecting the importance of fabric composition mentioned previously, a deliberate choice was made. The project was created from the fabric with soybean protein fibers (SPF) in warp direction and rayon fibers in weft direction. SPF are man-made fibers created from the proteins found in soybeans. They were invented by Henry Ford [19]. However, the first US patent on the soybean protein fibers was obtained by Kajita and Inoue in 1940 [20]. In today's world, everything is moving towards being more sustainable, good for the environment, and beneficial for future generations. Soybean protein fibers are falling into all the criteria mentioned above. It is achieved by their origin – renewable sources, their biodegradability, and non-toxicity [21]. Moreover, SPF contains 18 amino acids which are beneficial for the skin. With that property in mind, the most common use of the fabrics made from SPF are products that are in direct contact with the body [22]. They also offer UV protection that is an important feature while considering the health of the skin, especially for the people already experiencing skin conditions [19]. Li Yi-you wrote that fabric created from soybean protein fibers has very good qualities such as luxurious appearance achieved by the luster compared to silk, good

comfort offered thanks to very satisfying air and water vapor permeability and health-care function with possibility to use it even as a medical textile with the appropriate after treatment [23].

6.2 Fabric parameters

To characterize and offer a detailed description of the fabric used for the purpose of the proposed solution, several tests were performed. It ensures a possibility of the future comparison of the fabric properties that might be a choice for a similar purpose. Basic structural parameters of the woven fabric applied in the semi-formal shirt are listed in Table 3.

Table 3. Fabric characteristics.

Parameter	Unit	Measuring method	Value		
Content	-	-	Direction	Content	Linear density
			warp	soybean protein fibers	18.5 tex
			weft	viscose fibers	20.0 tex
Warp density	thread/cm	PN-EN 1049 2:2000	31		
Weft density	thread/cm	PN-EN 1049 2:2000	31		
Thickness	mm	Alambeta device	0.305		
Mass per unit area	g/m^2	laboratory weight scale	135.6		
Weave	-	-	multi-row twill		

The fabric was measured in the range of its comfort-related properties. Measurement of thermal insulation properties was done by means of the Alambeta device by Sensora, Czech Republic [24,25]. Water-vapor resistance was assessed based on the Permetest measurement, a portable “skin model” developed by Hes, Sensora, Czech Republic. The moisture management properties of the fabric were tested by means of the Moisture Management Tester, MMT m290 by SDL Atlas, US. Measurement by means of the MMT was performed according to the AATCC Test Method 1975: 2011 standard [26]. Selected comfort-related properties of the woven fabric applied in semi-formal shirt are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Selected comfort-related properties of the woven fabric applied in a semi-formal shirt.

Parameter	Unit	Measuring method	Value	Standard Deviation
Thermal resistance	$m^2KW^{-1}• 10^{-3}$	Alambeta	11.21	0.30
Thermal absorptivity	$Ws^{1/2}m^{-2}K^{-1}• 10^{-3}$	Alambeta	168.29	20.65
Water-vapor resistance	m^2PaW^{-1}	Permetest	3.1	0.2
Relative water vapor permeability	%	Permetest	67.6	1.6
Overall moisture management capacity OMMC	-	AATCC Test Method 1975 2011	0.4081	0.0108

The SPF/viscose fabric was measured in a wide range of parameters, characterizing the ability of fabric to ensure thermo-physiological comfort. Table 4 presents only the most important properties. Thermal absorptivity characterizes the cool/warm feeling at first contact of human skin with clothing material. Higher value of thermal absorptivity means a cooler feeling [25,27]. Typically, the value of fabrics’ thermal absorptivity can be in the range from 30 to 300 $Ws^{1/2}m^{-2}K^{-1}$. The value of thermal absorptivity of the investigated SPF/viscose fabric is in the middle of the range observed for typical fabrics. Relative water-vapor permeability is easy to interpret. Its value can be in the range 0 – 100%. A value of relative water-vapor permeability higher than 50% means good sweat transfer through the material to the environment. For the applied SPF/Viscose fabric, the relative water-vapor permeability is 67.6% (Table 4). It confirms good water-vapor transport through the investigated fabric. The OMMT parameter is calculated on the basis of the results from the MMT. Its value can be in the range from 0 to 1. The higher value is the better

transport of liquid moisture. In the case of the investigated fabric, the value of OMMC is 0.43. According to the AAATCC Test Method 1975: 2011 standard and classification according to the MMT manufacturer's recommendation, this value classifies the fabric into the 3 Grade – Good.

6.3 Proposed solution

The designed clothing product would allow the individuals experiencing sensory issues to be in the state of comfort and calmness of their mind while maintaining the semi-formal look often required at different functions or offices. Clothing could possibly improve the quality of life of such individuals. The product is a thin, semi-formal skin-friendly shirt prepared from woven fabric (Fig. 3). It has a line of buttons on the front that add to the level of formality, without increasing the level of difficulty in the process of dressing up (button fastenings are permanently closed). For the same reason, the sleeve cuffs are equipped in magnetic closure, and the button is there to fulfill simply the aesthetic functions of the design.

Due to the high sensitivity in many areas, the following changes were adapted: The collar of typical formal shirts was removed to make the area less stiff, shoulder seams were moved further to the outer side of a sleeve, the pattern was designed in a way that the side seams are non-existent, and finally, instead of sewing in any form of tag, the QR code with all the needed information was printed on the outer-back area of the shirt. Additionally, to offer the wearer a subtle way of a so-called "grounding" and calming down the individual, a hidden fidget is in the front bottom of the shirt to offer soothing when needed without bringing unnecessary attention to it. To avoid irritation caused by the seam roughness, all the seams have an increased width of seam allowance. The neckline is finished with the bias tape. All the solutions and their placement in the final product can be found in Figure 3.

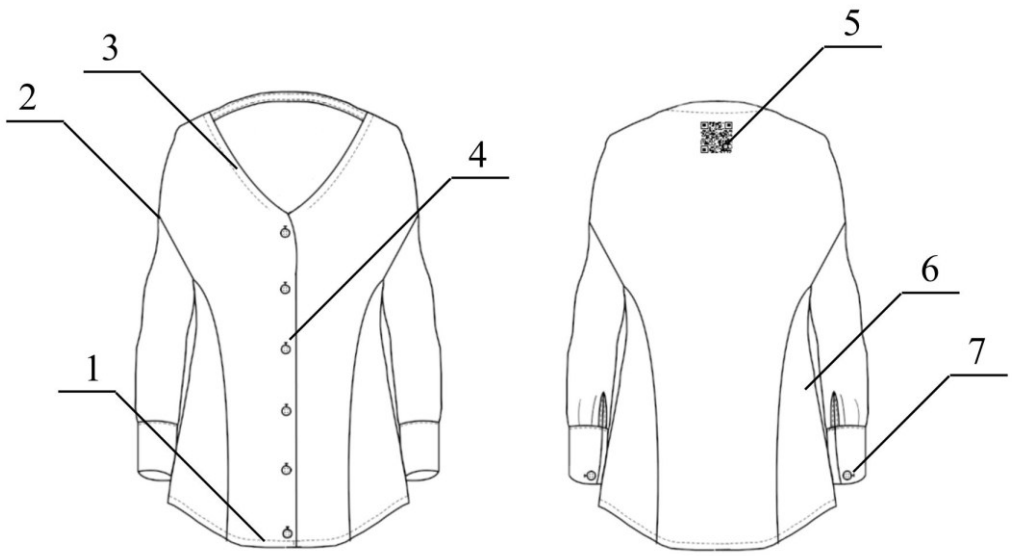

Fig. 3 Model drawing with marked placement of the solutions in the final product: 1 - hidden fidget, 2 - shoulder seam moved away from the shoulder line, 3 - neckline without a collar, 4 - non-functional row of buttons, 5 - printed QR code as a form of tag, 6 - non-existing side seams, 7 - magnetic closure in the cuffs.

The clothing product design was prepared based on a basic construction of a women's shirt in size 38. However, the pattern pieces were modified to obtain an oversize look. The product is a semi formal oversize shirt designed for an adult female experiencing sensory issues. It is made from SPF/Viscose fabric. To achieve a clothing product with features accurate for people with sensory issues, some adaptations were made. Since some adjustments are made for the same reasons to make it organized and easy to read without unnecessary repetitions, all the data is presented below in Table 5.

Table 5. Adaptations made in a project with their reasoning.

Adaptation	Reasoning
Use of unique SPF & rayon fabric	Fabric provides with cool touch sensation, amino-acids beneficial for the skin health
Multi-row twill weave (Fig. 4)	It gives a softer touch sensation than the basic plain weave
Loose fit (Fig. 3)	Close contact of the fabric to the skin can cause higher irritation or reopen the wounds in case of sensory issues caused by the skin conditions
Increased width of seam allowance	The longer the seam allowance is, the more it is possible to iron it out flat, which decrease its roughness
Non-existent side seams (Fig.3)	Removing the seams from highly sensitive areas, where typically due to the arm pressure in a standing position they are pressed against the body
Hidden fidget (Fig. 5a)	In cases of sensory issues related to ASD, general level of anxiety, especially with social interactions, is often observed. Fidget offers calming down through repetitive actions
Printed tag in a QR form on the outside back area (Fig. 3, 5b)	Individuals with sensory issues often mention increased sensitivity around the area of upper body
Lack of collar (Fig. 3)	
Shoulder seams moved away from the shoulder line (Fig. 3)	
Frontal row of non-functional buttons (Fig. 3)	Severe amounts of people with sensory issues are in an autism spectrum, which on higher levels of its advancement can be related to a decrease in mobility abilities. The adaptations are making product easy to wear for everyone
Magnetic fastening of the shirt cuffs (Fig. 5c)	

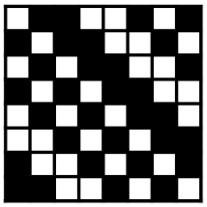

Fig. 4 Repeat of weave of the woven fabric applied in the semi-formal shirt.

Due to increased sensitivity on the sides of the body, regular side seams that can be found in the majority of formal or semi-formal shirts were replaced by the seams located in the front and back of the clothing product. The oversized look provides enough space that seams located in that area are not interfering with users' comfort. The location of the new seams is presented in Figure 5.

a b c

Fig. 5 (a) Hidden fidget; (b) QR code. QR Code Generator; (c) magnetic fastening of the shirt cuffs.

The realization of a project confirmed the proper design of the shirt. The technological process took place without any difficulties. A photography of the front side is presented in Figure 6 a, and the back side of the shirt is presented in Figure 6b.

a b

Fig. 6 (a) Adult female sensory-friendly shirt front view; (b) adult female sensory-friendly shirt back view.

7 Summary and conclusions

Sensory processing challenges remain a significantly under-studied issue. The literature review part sheds light on the everyday problems experienced by individuals with sensory issues due to either skin conditions such as eczema, allergies or burn wounds. It also explained the correlation between sensory issues and developmental disorders. Cited articles allowed us to make conclusions that sensory issues, unrelated to their origin, are disturbing in everyday life. If not treated properly, they don't allow individuals to stay focused, maintain social interactions, be comfortable, or even to be mindful of the surroundings. Side effects of which can be as drastic as self-harm, as a result of itchiness and skin irritation, or social withdrawal due to the high level of discomfort. Properly designed surroundings can allow individuals with sensory issues to thrive, be effective at their school, workplace, and be their best self. Since clothing is the closest surrounding of each human being, the proposal to create a sensory-friendly apparel was born. The analysis of the existing products showed good aspects of some designs such as the presence of fidgets, softness of fabric, and easy fastening methods. Unfortunately, it also exposed some flaws – poor choice of the fabrics' content, limited number of applied adjustments in one design, lack of formal or even semi-formal clothing. It is necessary to remember that people experiencing sensory issues are around us and that they are also expected to fit in societal norms like everyone else. On formal gatherings they are expected to dress accordingly, the same thing applies to the work dress-codes. Unfortunately, even if some casual wear would be their preference, it is not socially accepted.

Based on the performed analysis it is possible to conclude that sensory friendly design should include an appropriate choice of fabric of high softness and content with properties beneficial for the skin, adjustments in a design to limit the irritation around the upper back area, which is significantly more sensitive, accessories helping in staying focused and calm, such as fidgets, soft seams to avoid extensive skin irritation and muted colors to limit unnecessary visual stimulation.

Therefore, the proposal for a semi-formal sensory-friendly design was created. A fabric was deliberately chosen; it is healthy for the skin and for the environment. The shirt is full of the adjustment prepared specially for people with sensory issues, such as transferred seams or a hidden fidget. The proposed design could improve the life of many and could be worn also by people who are not subjected to sensory issues.

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