



Yasmina Nessim

THE PURSUIT OF THE POWER-SUIT

Optimising Women's Wellbeing
Today Through the Application
of Science to Style

Fashion and Personal
Style Studies

Collection Editor

JOSEPH H. HANCOCK II

LIVED PLACES
PUBLISHING



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Abstract

The pursuit of the power-suit explores the transformative intersection of fashion and psychology to optimise women's wellbeing in contemporary society. Drawing from both academic theory and lived experiences, the book presents a new framework – Yasmina's very own SUITS™ – that outlines five pillars of fashion-driven wellness: Self-Expression, Understanding the Body, Identifying and Illustrating Our Emotions, Targeting Goals, and Social Unity. With a narrative that blends research with storytelling, it offers readers both the science and soul behind personal style, empowering them to use clothing as a strategic tool for confidence, identity, and mental health. It is both a call to curiosity and a manifesto for self-reclamation – reminding women everywhere that sometimes, the most powerful transformations begin in the fabric of intention.

Key words

Fashion psychology; wellbeing; identity; self-expression; positive psychology; clothing and mental health; body image; emotional regulation; enclothed cognition; social belonging; personal style; self-perception theory; fashion and personality

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Yes, this is a book. A tangible object with over 45,000 words stitched across its pages, but even still, there will never be enough words, or the right ones, to fully express the gratitude I feel for those who helped bring it into being. This section may be printed in ink, but know that each sentence is written in awe, reverence, and the most profound of thanks.

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of a business so I could carry the weight of this manuscript. May the world someday know the marvel you are. You are irreplaceable and I am forever grateful that you, in essence, are the pstyle family.

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To my parents and siblings – who applauded this dream when it was still a conversation at a local coffee shop, or a dream on a walk. You saw the seedling before there was a forest. I owe every word, every chapter, every page to your belief in me. I am who I am because of you.

And finally – most monumentally – to my husband. My anchor, my home, my greatest collaborator in life and leftovers. For two years, you have held me up when I had nothing left, ushered me to bed when I forgot time existed, fed me when I wouldn't feed myself, and carried the emotional weight of this project with the kind of grace only you possess. You believed in this book even when I didn't. And more astonishingly – you believed in me. I love you endlessly.

To you, dear reader, whether you purchased this book, borrowed it, stumbled upon it in passing, or read just a single page – thank you. You are the lifeblood of this mission, the reason this work can ripple beyond me. Thank you for caring about fashion and feeling, for choosing to reflect and grow. In doing so, you carry the message forward: that clothing can heal, that stories matter,

and that style, when wielded with intention, is nothing short of revolutionary.

Thank you – all of you – for everything.

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Learning objectives

By the end of this book, readers will be able to:

1. Define fashion psychology and understand its relevance to mental health and wellbeing
2. Identify and apply the SUITS™ framework to enhance personal style and psychological wellness
3. Reflect on the emotional, cognitive, and social impacts of their clothing choices
4. Use fashion as a method for self-discovery, emotional regulation, and goal-setting
5. Recognise the historical and cultural dimensions of dress and their psychological implications
6. Evaluate the psychological effects of intentional versus unintentional outfit choices
7. Reframe personal style as a strategic and empowering wellness practice

1

Introduction

"In the masque we may clothe our fantasies, moods and aspirations, the angel, devil, butterfly and flower within us each having its brief hour."

– Silvia Bliss (1916)

All fashion enthusiasts are well aware of the radical volatility and overwhelming catalogue of brand and clothing options that the fashion arena suffers from. If you too have been blessed with the intolerable pain of falling madly and erratically in love – I'm talking head-over-red-sole-heels in love – with all things fashion, then you too will know that the chaos and utter madness of the *monde de la mode* is completely worth it. All individuals associated with the fashion world – be they industry conglomerates, stylists, designers, or even devout shoppers – will preach their belief in the symbolic values and mystical powers of their clothing, unintentionally revealing the sheer force that garments have on their psyche and emotionality. Making all those unbearable moments of fashion anxiety, or any form of anxiety, really, truly invaluable. Speaking of anxiety and all its irritable forms, welcome, one and all, to the undeniable and underestimated world of fashion psychology.

Given that the phenomenon of fashion psychology is fairly young in its nature, there are a myriad of 'definitions' and 'interpretations'

dancing between the worlds of academia and the blogosphere. What's more, for what may seem like an eternity, fashion in its entirety was presented negatively, if at all, within the realm of contemporary psychology. It wasn't until recently that a handful of [fashion] psychologists, myself included, helped breathe new life into the significant number of positive and enlightening associations involved within the art and science of fashion and dress. Our research has exposed the truly unjust treatment of fashion within psychology, which has continuously disregarded the union between individual clothing practices and intrapsychic experiences (Masuch & Hefferon, 2014). My research in particular is unique in its exploration of fashion choices from a positive psychological perspective, and focuses predominantly on well-being and the physiological rapport between individuals and their clothes. My definition of fashion psychology, therefore, involves the ways in which the fashion industry, clothing, and fashion in all its forms impact our mental health and psychological well-being. Fashion psychology is, quite simply, understanding how fashion choices can mould and manipulate the human mind.

To all the haters and naysayers who roll their eyes at the mere thought of fashion having such immense power over the human psyche, I see you and I say this: you, my darling, are already a part and product of the wonderful world of fashion. Your daily ritual of getting dressed, as apathetic as it may be. Your almost ceremonial peek in the storefront window on your daily commute, your inevitable shopping haul on your I'm-not-shopping-on-this-vacation vacation, and above all else, the love and comfort you shamelessly feel in that great, grey sweater are all indicators that you, yes you, are part of the universal fabric of fashion. While

you come to terms with your raw and newfound appreciation for fashion, allow me to help you not only embrace it but, better yet, use it to your utmost advantage.

The fundamental purpose of my work is to help people from across the globe understand and apply fashion psychology in the context of mental health. It is dedicated to providing individuals with an ignored and yet inescapable vehicle for enhancing their wellbeing. After years of academic, scientific, empirical, and practical research, my work has proven that the application of fashion psychology in one's daily ritual can maximise their wellbeing in ways that are truly and tear-jerkingly amazing. And all it takes is a suit. Or should I say, S.U.I.T.S.:

Self-Expression; Understanding the Body; Identifying and Illustrating Our Emotions; Targeting Goals; and Social Unity.

Oh, the power that that one suit holds.

S.U.I.T.S. is my fashion psychology formula to help anyone and everyone optimise their wellbeing through outfit curation and fashion choices. The formula is based on compound research and mechanisms, all of which are thought to be decisive hallmarks of wellbeing (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011). Centuries of analyses have shown that projects and elements that influence happiness are based on their impact and ability to facilitate self-expression (Christiansen, 2000), the first and most unmistakable component. The identity-establishing and expressive powers of fashion have been an invariable topic for decades, with a consensus that clothing choices play a pivotal role in identity formation and identity management (Bernard, 1996). Similarly, the second component is based on the love, appreciation, and

understanding of the body. It is dedicated to the celebration of a healthy and respectful internal narrative of one's physical assets. Contrary to the invasive and unwelcome notions made by popular media sources, positive body perception is argued to be associated with subjective happiness (Swami et al., 2010) and wellbeing (Tiggemann et al., 2009). Identifying and illustrating our emotions is anchored in the management and manipulation of our feelings through introspection and reflection. It is based on the premise that fashion choices can be employed as a coping mechanism to regulate mood; argued to be one of the fundamental indicators of emotional intelligence and wellbeing (Goleman, 1996).

Targeting goals. Pretty self-explanatory. But it is less concerned with the mere act of ticking tasks off an endless to-do list, and more to do with how garment association and assignment can help individuals achieve their goals, regardless of what they may be. Personal or professional, big or small, people build meaning in life through goal pursuits (Emmons, 1999). And finally, saving the best and most heartwarming for last: the act of social unity. Self-expression's little sister, but equally as brilliant. A relationship built up of two coexisting yet contradictory psychological motivations: differentiation and imitation (Simmel, 1957 [1905]). The natural human desire to be unique and individualistic, whilst in parallel serving the innate need to belong. Creating a sense of community, feeling safe and seen in an environment complete with like-minded people, and knowing that in this vast and fast-paced world you are truly never alone, is the foundation for true and everlasting wellbeing. Our clothes, something as simple as a t-shirt, have the ability to communicate volumes of nonverbal

words to those around us, which in turn might trigger a smile, a curious sideways glance, or even a nod of appreciation from a stranger who just might become a friend. A friend, and a bond, and a connection. And all it took was a t-shirt.

There's an undeniable rise in mental health concerns worldwide, with an approximate 13% increase in conditions and disorders over the last decade. Complications related to mental health and wellness now cause 1 in 5 years lived with disability, with a substantial effect on all areas of life: from professional and academic performance, to the sustenance and development of relationships, and even one's ability to participate in the community.

With that rise, however, comes a majestic boom in the need for and search for a global and uninhibited discussion on mental health and wellbeing, including, but not limited to, topics such as anxiety, depression, and emotional stability. The fundamental purpose of this book – and my very reason for being – is to aid in the recognition and education of mental health and wellbeing, in the hope that we may collaboratively and collectively develop significant and accessible solutions to these issues. More specifically, the intention of this book is to help people everywhere understand how fashion, in its magnitude, can contribute to the improvement of mental health and overall wellbeing. The chapters that follow are not limited to the elaboration of the theory and science behind the five pillars of wellbeing, but also include the sincere and unfiltered stories of individuals who have incorporated fashion psychology into their lives. The stories in this book have monumentally helped make sense of an extraordinary topic that, until recent years, had not been looked at with the scientific and professional rigour that it deserves and demands,

that humans around the planet need, and that has been disregarded as an afterthought. And above all else, the stories in this book perfectly illustrate that, when achieved, even just a little bit, happiness really is attainable and it is truly gorgeous: a majestic symphony of calm and confidence with fashion in the role of conductor.

2

Well-dressed and wellbeing: A history

It began, as most things do, with a leaf. A humble fig leaf, plucked not for its verdant beauty but for its modesty, making humanity's first foray into fashion. From that moment onward, clothing ceased to be merely functional. It became symbolic – a statement, a shield, a canvas. And with that evolution came the most fascinating and complex question of all: why do we dress the way we do? The history of fashion psychology is not stitched together by hemlines and trends alone; it is a living, breathing testament to the human condition – to our vanity, our vulnerability, and our deeply ingrained need for self-expression. For millennia, we have slipped into garments to cover our flesh, yes, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to craft identity, to signal status, to seduce, and, if the mood strikes, to deceive. So, welcome, reader, to a brief but mind-blowing history of fashion, in a way, perhaps, that you may not have thought of it before.

In its infancy, fashion was survival. Furs and hides shielded Palaeolithic bodies from the elements, while rudimentary adornments marked tribal identity. Archaeological evidence shows that as early as 20,000 years ago, humans were already using dress as a form of storytelling: a bone-carved Venus figurine

found in France, for instance, depicts a woman draped in a twisted-fibre skirt – the first known garment of its kind (Barber, 1994). Across continents, petroglyphs – stone carvings created by ancient peoples – etched the first known “runways”, immortalising what they wore and how they lived. Honestly, if that’s not the most exclusive debut issue of a fashion magazine, I, quite frankly, don’t know what is. Now, fast forward several millennia, and dress became not just a reflection of culture but a tool for it. The Egyptians draped themselves in linen to reflect purity and divine power. The Greeks elevated drapery into sculpture, their flowing chitons and ode to aesthetic perfection. Meanwhile, the Romans – those master propagandists – used dress as a political billboard. The toga, once a symbol of Roman citizenship, became a sartorial shorthand for power, class, and masculinity. Fashion was no longer about survival; it was about the narrative.

The true pivot towards fashion psychology began when scholars realised that clothing was, in truth, a language. Sociologist Georg Simmel (1904) first described fashion as the “social skin”, a surface upon which individuals projected their place in the hierarchy. This was a dance of imitation and distinction – people seeking both to conform and to stand out. The paradox of fashion, Simmel argued, was that it offered a means to express individuality whilst simultaneously enforcing conformity. By the twentieth century, psychologists took the stage. Yay! Ernst Dichter, the pioneering consumer psychologist, declared that “clothing is packaging”, a psychological wrapper for the self (Dichter, 1964). His research revealed that fashion was, at the very least, aesthetic, and at the very best, medicinal. During times of recession, for instance, people dressed brightly,

seeking chromatic antidotes to economic gloom. Clothing, he found, was aspirational, hopeful, and optimistic. It allowed the wearer to slip into a version of themselves that felt more powerful, more beautiful, and more alive. In 1928, Paul Nystrom, one of the earliest theorists of consumer behaviour, wrote that fashion was “the prevailing style at any given time” (Nystrom, 1928). And by 1958, psychologist Dwight Robinson argued that it was far more insidious: a relentless “pursuit of novelty for its own sake” (Robinson, 1958). Ah, the sceptics. But fashion, they’d eventually realise, was an addictive elixir of self-reinvention. One dress could rejuvenate, and another silhouette could offer the illusion of rebirth. It was extraordinary.

By the latter half of the century, the field began to take on its modern shape. The 1960s brought with them an age of rebellion: miniskirts, leather jackets, and free love. Fashion became a megaphone for politics, sexuality, and identity. It was no coincidence that psychologists turned their gaze to the wardrobe. George B. Sproles (1979) formalised the psychological models of fashion behaviour, identifying diverse motivations for sartorial choices: escapism, creativity, rebellion, conformity, and status signalling. His contemporaries, William Gorden and Dominic Infante, argued that fashion was a form of communication (Gorden & Infante, 1987), a “body idiom” akin to non-verbal language (Knapp, 1972). And by the 1980s, Solomon’s *Psychology of Fashion* (1985) declared the field a legitimate area of study – double yay – blending consumer behaviour with social identity theory. His work underscored the fundamental truth: fashion was not simply a response to trends; it was a mirror to the soul. Let’s all take a collective breath, reader, because that was the moment

fashion psychology stopped lurking in the dressing room and officially took centre stage.

And we're back.

At its core, fashion psychology was revealed to be a study of dualities – ego and insecurity, beauty and decay, individuality and conformity. It showed that people dressed not just to express who they were but who they longed to be. Clothing became a talisman for self-belief. And with that, throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, researchers such as Sharon Lennon and Leslie Davis expanded on these theories, exploring how clothing influences self-esteem, body image, and emotional wellbeing (Lennon & Davis, 1989). Their work found that clothing could alter mood and cognition, turning the wardrobe into a form of cognitive therapy. Adam and Galinsky (2012) later coined terms like *enclothed cognition* – the phenomenon where what you wear influences how you think and behave. And just like that, the science was in. Today, fashion psychology is both an academic field and a cultural force. It informs marketing strategies, consumer behaviour, and even therapy – *hello*. It reveals that the little black dress is more than a closet staple; it's an armour and an immensely powerful tool to help treat anxiety. That jeans are not just everyday casualwear; they are emotional barometers and occasionally a silent cry for help. The science has spoken – and continues to speak, louder than a runway finale – our clothes may be a mirror, yes, but they're also a chisel, carving out the edges of who we are yet to become. And so, as you hold this book, dear reader, remember that fashion is far more than fabric; it is history, psychology, rebellion, and redemption. It is a language we all speak, whether we intend to or not. As with any new language, fluency

starts with the basics. So, consider this your glossary, your very own sartorial Rosetta Stone.

Key definitions to help in the pursuit

Like any language, the world of fashion psychology comes with its own lexicon – a glossary of terms that define the subtle, yet powerful, ways clothing and the human mind intertwine. Here's your primer, reader, to help you grasp what's to come.

Dress vs. clothing vs. costume

Let's start with the basics, shall we? While these terms are often used interchangeably, they each carry distinct meanings in fashion psychology. *Dress* refers to the full assemblage of body modifications and supplements. This includes not just garments but also hairstyles, makeup, tattoos, and even scent, a complete sensory presentation of the self (Eicher & Roach-Higgins, 1992). *Clothing*, on the other hand, is more specific. It refers exclusively to the fabric enclosures that cover the body. Unlike dress, it omits other modifications, and inevitably introduces personal or social values: i.e. covering is good, and revealing is bad – at least, according to certain puritanical codes of dress. *Costume*, meanwhile, denotes attire reserved for specific social roles or activities. It is “out-of-everyday” dress – what one might wear to a masquerade ball, a historical reenactment, or perhaps a *really* eccentric Monday meeting. Together, these terms form the foundation of how we describe what we wear and how we wear it. But for the sake of simplicity – and because we have no interest in being fashionably outdated – consider them interchangeable in this

book. After all, who are we to declare what is costume and what is couture? What is good taste and what is simply good fun? The above distinctions are for your future trivia nights, dear reader, for the purposes of this book, it's all just fashion. Glorious, expressive, limitless fashion.

Appearance vs. dress

In the great Venn diagram of fashion psychology, dress and appearance overlap, but they are not one and the same. *Appearance* is the broader of the two; it encompasses not only dress but also the undressed body – including shape, skin tone, and even the fleeting language of gesture and expression. *Dress*, in contrast, is narrower, focusing solely on the external modifications and adornments we apply to the body. Think of it this way: appearance is the whole visual novel, while dress is the cover art, the carefully curated first impression.

The functions of dress

Since the early twentieth century, scholars have identified distinct functions of dress – each one a psychological puzzle piece contributing to the larger picture of why we wear what we wear. *Physical protection* is, quite literally, dress that shields us from the elements – faux-fur-lined coats for frost and linen shirts for sun. *Psychological protection*, on the other hand, refers to the moments when, sometimes, the armour is metaphorical. A tailored power suit becomes a shield against impostor syndrome. A leather jacket becomes a cloak of confidence. *Modesty* refers to the age-old social construct of covering the body for the sake of decorum. *Attraction* is dress as flirtation, a visual language

of allure. The short sundress. The sharp tuxedo. The just-right amount of décolletage. *Status signalling* refers to clothing as currency – the monogrammed handbag and red-bottom heels that might as well come with a portable spotlight and string quartet. *Adornment* is in reference to dress for beauty's sake alone – colour, texture, and pattern as pure aesthetic expression. In more recent decades, scholars have expanded the list, identifying additional functions such as ornamentation, concealment, social identification, and personal expression. These are the subconscious drivers behind every wardrobe choice – from the statement necklaces to dark hoodies – each serving a deep, psychological purpose; each bewilderingly powerful.

Wellbeing: Hedonic vs. eudaemonic

In fashion psychology, and in this book, wellbeing takes centre stage, but it does so in two distinct acts: hedonic and eudaemonic. *Hedonic wellbeing* is all about pleasure, instant gratification. It's the thrill of the new, the dopamine hit of retail therapy, and the buoyant feeling of biting into a slice of decadent chocolate cake, or that first glass of white wine on a warm summer's day. It's slipping into a fresh new look and realising, with a smug little grin, that it's flawlessly on brand with exactly who you are in this given moment. *Eudaemonic wellbeing*, however, runs deeper. Adopted from Aristotelian thought, it speaks to a more profound sense of fulfilment – personal growth, authenticity, and the pursuit of meaning. In fashion terms, it's the deeply sentimental attachment to your grandmother's scarf or the power you feel in the blazer you wore when you landed your dream job. It's clothing as

a vessel for memory, identity, and self-actualisation. Both dimensions reveal how fashion doesn't just make us look good but makes us *feel* good – in ways both fleeting and formative.

And with that, the prelude ends. Now, step forward, reader, as your pursuit begins.

3

Self-expression

Please take your seats

Needless to say, all of us here are, in one way or another, bonded by the unspoken agreement that fashion is far more than just fabric stitched together for modesty or protection. At the very least, it is its own Esperanto. A universal language or visual shorthand that allows us to communicate with one another – sharing secrets, forming friendships, participating in the intricate dance of self-perception and social identity. Lennon (2017) expands on how people use their fashion choices to tango between self-expression and social unity, discussing how “through clothing, individuals can assert uniqueness or conformity, choosing either to stand out or to blend into their social group, depending on their desire for self-expression or belonging”. She later elaborates on how “dress can serve as an extension of the self, offering a means for individuals to express their emotions, values and affiliations”, illustrating the communicative power of outfit curation that outshines utility and function. And that, my friends, is what we’re dedicating this chapter to: the phenomenon of self-expression through clothing, how it stretches far beyond mere aesthetics, and its undisputed ability to transcend all non-verbal methods of self-disclosure.

From the earliest moments in human history, when the only runways were *running away* from all things life-threatening, clothing choices have long been central to the reflection of our self-image and public personas. Historians trace the origins of calculated fashion choices as far back as the Middle Ages, when fashion was first employed as a marker of social standing. The cut, colour, fit and styling of one's attire reflected wealth, status, and occupation, telling a story that words could never fully capture. Today, while perhaps the face of fashion may have evolved, and although we may have abandoned our fig leaves and farthingales (a super-sexy hooped petticoat used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to give skirts a cone or bell shape), self-expression through fashion, at its core, remains ever so en vogue.

Self-expression and social unity: We've touched on the sisterhood between both pillars and how essential the duality is when discussing the psychological implications of fashion. But allow me to ask Big Sis to take centre stage for a moment. A Harvard study has shown that expressing oneself, regardless of the means or medium, triggers the same reward and pleasure centres of the brain as those activated by other fun-tastic experiences – experiences like indulging in a delicious meal, getting money, or – for the purpose of this book, let me put this nicely – *engaging in physical intimacy*. I am fully aware of the fact that this one particular Harvard study may have single-handedly inspired every hip-hop and R'n'B artist circa 1990 to now, but it is, in fact, all true. The act of disclosing information about yourself to an audience, even through non-verbal cues (i.e. fashion), has been proven to bring us emotional satisfaction. Rap about that.

The show is about to start

Having covered a brutally brief history and introduction to self-expression in the realm of fashion, allow me to walk you through the intricately woven sequence of theories, phenomena, and practices that illustrate just how our garments can help us express ourselves and in turn, tap into that mystical sense of wellbeing. Oh, the drama-*turgy* of it all. Read on to get in on why that was oh-so witty:

Beyond the superficial dance of fabrics and colours, fashion is a mirror reflecting our journey of self-discovery. We begin with the most personal of quests: the *discovery* – or in, some cases, myself included, *rediscovery* – of who we truly are and slowly befriending who we hope to be. This is where our journey begins, using fashion and garments to explore our values, quirks, and dreams, and laying the groundwork for what comes next. *Dramaturgy*, darling. With this new sense of self, we take to the world stage, trying on roles like costumes in a play, each one an experiment in showing off these freshly pressed discoveries, inviting the world to witness how we see ourselves. With every costume change, monologue, and solo, we wait to see if others respond, searching for signs of connection and validation. *Validation*, after all, is an innate and elemental human desire, and with each spark of recognition, each nod of understanding, our self-image tightens its stitches, creating a stronger foundation of *self-perception*. Now, with the remnants of applause echoing within, a clearer, more rooted identity emerges, and we begin to dress with *intention*. And with that, finally, Guy and Banim's work guides us through the importance of dressing with deliberate purpose; aligning

outward appearance with inward self-perception (Guy & Banim, 2000). Each stage enriches the next: from self-discovery to social performance, from validation to self-perception, and ultimately to the empowered choice to dress with intention and acceptance. And there it is: a tapestry of self-expression, woven with threads of identity and intention, revealing a truth that transcends the surface: style is more than appearance, it's an assertion of self, stitched together with purpose and passion.

Step I: *Discovery and rediscovery*

I can imagine you're eager to dive headfirst into self-expression, but first, let's take stock of the parts of ourselves we're actually interested in expressing. There's no denying we all have quirks and characteristics that we keep buried deep in our closets – our soon-to-be very psychologically appeasing closets – and perhaps those shadier traits don't belong in the spotlight. Instead, the goal is to step into each day with a positive, authentic, and mindful approach to what we disclose to the world around us, with a clear and unwavering answer to the time-old question: which parts of our identity do we intend on revealing today? And here we go, this is where the journey of self-expression begins. In *Why We Dress the Way We Do* (1985), Ernest Dichter explores how fashion helps us discover, rediscover, and on rare occasions even reinvent aspects of ourselves (Dichter, 1985). He likens the moment of slipping into a garment to unveiling a hidden self, new and alien in an alternate universe – each glance in the mirror revealing a new dimension of who we are is compared to an intoxicating or even hallucinogenic experience. As we shimmy into a new chemise and