

Dressing the Alter Ego: Swing Dancers with Day Jobs

Dressing the
Alter Ego

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Abstract *People today belong to many different subcultures and have diverse interests. Their job no longer defines who they are, while their pastimes can be a bigger reflection of their inner self. This article examines swing dancers in Korea, and focuses on their self-identity and how they express this through clothes. Based on in-depth interviews, observations and photographs of swing dancers with different day jobs, the study results find that most of the subjects intentionally incorporate swing dance cues in their daily work wardrobe, and that this makes them feel more comfortable, honest and satisfied with their job and identity, both as a swing dancer and working professional.*

Key words *swing dance, dress, identity, self-expression, Korea*

Introduction

There was a time when people once thought that what you do defines who you are. However, people today, especially young people, do not let what they do for a living define who they are. They are growing more interested in having a full life and enjoying different things, and have more than one ego. For example, riders in Korea used to be limited to teenagers and people in their early twenties who enjoyed the thrill of speed and getting away from the pressures of adults and society, but in the 2000s, the rider subculture expanded to include young men in their thirties with white collar jobs and children (Ha and Park 2011, p. 12). Some even consider themselves to be riders at heart who happen to work at an office during the day. Punk is another subculture where members have a strong subcultural identity. A 2012 study found that those who consider themselves a part of the punk subculture negotiate between their subcultural and professional identities when they dress for the workplace (Sklar and DeLong 2012).

Swing dance is a major subculture group that is quite established and expanding fast in Korea. Searching the words "swing dance" in Korean ("스윙댄스") on the dominant internet search portal in Korea, Naver, will instantly show more than 100 active swing dance clubs in the country. Through a preliminary in-depth interview with a 32-year-old female swing dancer in Seoul, the researcher found out that there are several major swing dance clubs and bars, swing dance lessons are available nationwide, and swing dance organizations often hold large competitions or festivals, such as the recent 'Swing Dance Festival,' hosted by Dandara Dance Hall and held at Dongdaemun Design Plaza, which was at-

tended by around 400 participants (Kang 2014, Shin 2014).

Excluding swing dance club owners and some teachers, most swing dancers have day jobs and dance as a hobby - a hobby that takes up a large part of their life. The preliminary interview with the swing dancer also revealed that serious swing dancers consider swing dance a very big part of their lives and self. Just like some riders, they consider themselves to be "dancers" first, and have a very close group of fellow dancers who they meet frequently. Often, this group is the closest social group in their life, and although the dancers all have different jobs, they even spend their holidays together, going on group camps, and performing or participating in competitions together. The preliminary interviewee herself started swing dance by signing up for one month of lessons in order to dance on stage at the company year-end party. She had been pushed into doing a dance act by her colleagues. However, once she started lessons, she not only loved the dancing, but also the socializing, parties and traveling. She found a great group of friends outside of work she could connect and have fun with, and now, she spends all her weekends and holidays with other swing dancers. There are many similar stories, such as the story in the news about the young woman who says swing dance gave her hope and energy at a time when she was in despair after becoming blind in one eye and working too hard. She took dance classes at night, then auditioned for a swing performance team, and now tours different parts of the country to perform on weekends, all while maintaining her day job (Lee, 2014).

Few would guess that swing dancers have different jobs upon first glance as they all dress similar when dancing. This indicates that there is a difference between how swing dancers dress when dancing and when at work. Many studies have been conducted on the clothing of subculture groups, but there is a lack of studies on the dress of swing dancers, both in general and at work, especially in Korea, where the subculture is well established and continuing to grow. Existing international studies on swing dance generally focus on swing dance history and characteristics (Spring 1997) or identity construction of swing dancers (Renshaw, 2002), but there are few studies on how swing dancers dress and how they feel or what they hope to express through the way they dress. An examination of the dress of swing dancers would help shed light on an unexplored area of dress and culture, and aid understanding of the connection between clothes, subcultures and identity from a new perspective.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the dress of swing dancers in an effort to understand why they dress the way they do, how they express themselves and how they are affected by the clothes they wear. Specifically, the study focuses on how swing dancers dress at work. The study questions are as follows.

- 1) How do swing dancers dress differently according to occasion and why?
- 2) How do swing dancers dress at work and how does that make them feel?
- 3) How do swing dancer dress when swing dancing and how does that make them feel?
- 4) What are the effects of swing aspects incorporated in everyday wear on the emotional comfort of swing dancers?

Literature was reviewed to examine the swing dance culture, and the study questions above were answered based on interviews with swing dancers, and observations of swing dancers and photographs.

Literature review

Swing dance culture

There are different theories about the origin of swing dance. One is that it first appeared at the end of the 1920s in New York City as a new style of jazz. The new swing music used elements such as four-four rhythms, string bass, guitar, drums and riffs to produce a new form of rhythmic music. An American social dance called Lindy hop, which developed from dance that can be traced back to Central Africa and evolved in New York City in the 1920s and 1930s (Manning and Millman 2007, pp. 45-47), especially helped spread swing music and dance, and the swing era is roughly considered from the late 1920s through to the 1940s (Spring 1997, p. 183).

There were mixed reactions to swing in the 1920s. The reactions of adults were mostly negative, as they thought the dance was too free and young people were letting themselves go. However, most agreed that it was an expression of the times - the fast-moving and tense atmosphere after the war in the 1920s, the unstable atmosphere of the 1930s when the bad economy ultimately led to the Great Depression, and the celebratory atmosphere after economic recovery (Stowe 1998, p. 24-25). It peaked after recovery from the Great Depression.

Although some older generation members frowned upon swing, it was a more culturally acceptable form of dance preferred by youth. Compared to intimate moods of cabarets and nightclubs of the 1920, swing dance ballrooms were bigger, more graceful and elegant, and swing dance members wore splendid attire and groomed themselves well (Stowe 1998, p. 45).

Another opinion is that swing dance originally started in the 1940s as a fun, energetic dance of black people created in Harlem that gradually crept into popular culture. The early swing dance period in this case is considered to be the 1940s through to the 1960s (Renshaw 2002, p. 69).

Swing dance faded away with the influential appearance of rock 'n' roll in the 1960s, but appeared again through the early modern swing scene in the 1980s. White middle class people in their mid-twenties to early thirties brought back swing dance but this time it blended ska from Jamaica, rockabilly with its fast drum tempo, and stylish punk rock. Swing dance became something people in their mid-twenties and upwards who still wanted a stylish, fun and edgy lifestyle could enjoy in a more grown up way (Renshaw 2002, pp. 70-72). Swing dance clubs and lessons became much more widespread as its popularity grew in the late 1990s (Renshaw 2002, p. 76). One characteristic of swing dance is that you have to dance with a partner. It is different from most other modern types of dance where you dance alone, and there are traditional aspects such as manners and clothing that also need to be considered.

*Methodology***Interviews, field observations: Same kind of people, different jobs**

Twelve swing dancers were selected using the purposive sampling method, where participants are grouped according to preselected criteria relevant to the research question. For this study, swing dancers who belong to a swing dance group in Seoul, Korea, such as a swing dance class or club, and dance at least twice a week, were grouped. Two major swing dance clubs in Seoul were contacted for recruitment, and 12 swing dancers agreed to take part in the study. The participants were interviewed in a semi-structured way for at least 30 minutes each, and observed at a swing dance party for two hours in August, 2012, to confirm and support the findings of the interviews. Photographs were taken of the swing dancers, too, for secondary observations, focusing on confirming that participants' dress was in fact visually in line with the findings of the interviews.

All interviewees said they thought of themselves as "swing dancers" and that what they did for a living was only a part of their identity. Many felt that swing dance strongly represents who they are. Six men and six women from the ages of 26 to 37 were interviewed, with most subjects being in their late twenties to early thirties. All of the men interviewed were Korean, and five of the women were Korean, with one woman subject being American. The interview was conducted in English with the American subject, and with two other women who were bilingual but preferred English. The rest of the interviews were conducted in Korean. The Korean interviews were translated into English directly by the researcher, who is an expert in fashion with a PhD in clothing and textiles, but also a bilingual expert interpreter and translator with two Korean to English translation certificates and 14 years of professional translation experience. Thirty-six photographs were taken of swing dancers at the swing party, and analyzed. The experiences of the subjects were transcribed and the data was analyzed using the Strauss and Corbin (1990: 13) coding method to identify prominent themes among participants. The coding paradigm included categories related to (1) the phenomenon under study: swing dance, swing dance activities, the identity of swing dancers, and swing dancers' day jobs (2) the conditions related to the phenomenon: what they wear when they swing dance, what they wear to work, what is important to them when they choose clothes, and how they feel when they wear clothes for swing dance or work, (3) the actions and strategies for handling the phenomenon: whether they have a dress code at work and if they do, how the way they dress at work is different from how they dress to dance, whether they include swing dance elements in their work dress, and (4) the consequences of the actions related to the phenomenon: how they feel when wearing work attire, how they incorporate swing dance elements and why they do, and how including swing dance aesthetics in their work attire makes them feel. Tables 1 and 2 show the demographic information of the interview participants and the interview structure.

Table 1.
Demographic information of interview participants

Demographic information	Category	Number of subjects (%)	Category	Number of subjects (%)	Category	Number of subjects (%)	Total number of subjects (%)
Gender	Male	6 (50%)	Female	6 (50%)	-	-	12 (100%)
Age	25-29	3 (25%)	30-34	7 (58%)	35-40	2 (17%)	
Nationality	Korean	11 (92%)	American	1 (8%)	-	-	
Level of education	College graduate	11 (92%)	Graduate school graduate	1 (8%)	-	-	
Occupation	Freelancer	3 (25%)	Self-employed	4 (33%)	White-collar job	5 (42%)	
Monthly income	1 million-under 3 million won	10 (84%)	3 million-under 5 million won	1 (8%)	5 million-under 7 million won	1 (8%)	

Table 2.
Interview structure

Coding category	Phenomenon under study: <i>Swing dance</i>	Conditions related to phenomenon: <i>Swing dance wear, work wear</i>	Actions and strategies for handling the phenomenon: <i>Dress codes, swing dance elements in work wear</i>	Consequences of actions related to phenomenon: <i>How swing dance elements in work wear makes them feel</i>
Specific questions	How many times per week, how many minutes per session do you swing dance?	How do you normally dress?	Do you have a dress code at work?	Why do you include swing dance elements in your work wear?
	Where do you swing dance?	Do you dress differently when you swing dance?	Does your company have a policy that defines a dress code?	How do you feel when you include swing dance elements in your work wear?
	What kinds of swing dance activities do you do?	How do you dress when you swing dance?	What is your dress code at work?	How do others react when they see you wearing swing dance elements at work?
	Do you consider yourself a “swing dancer?”	What are the important points you consider when choosing swing dance wear?	How is your dress code at work different from your swing dance wear?	How do the reactions of others make you feel?
	How do you define a “swing dancer?”	How do you feel when you wear your swing dance clothes?	Do you include swing dance elements in your work wear?	

What is your job? What is your position/ rank at work?	How do you dress at work?	How do you include swing dance elements in your work wear?
Which takes up a bigger part of your identity - swing dance or your job? Why?	How do you feel when you wear your work clothes?	

Results

Dress codes: Dressing for dance and work

Swing dancers in Korea form a sort of clan and consider themselves to be alike. They meet up two to four times a week for various activities such as swing dance classes, dancing at a swing dance bar, watching a swing related movie together, performances or competitions. The swing dancers interviewed generally seemed to have similar ideas and outlooks on life and their identity. All of the subjects said that anyone who sincerely enjoys swing dance could be considered a “swing dancer.” Although only one interviewee said you also had to swing dance regularly to be considered a real swing dancer, all of those interviewed agreed that the swing dance culture was so close-knit and enjoyable that almost all swing dancers ended up dancing at least twice a week anyway. They said that swing dance makes you happy and healthy, and helps forget about the stresses of daily life. They also said that since you have to dance with a partner and it is bad manners to decline when somebody asks you to swing dance with them, it is a very open, sociable and warm culture. All of the subjects placed great importance on living a happy, stress-free and youthful life, and said they thought their hobby of swing dancing was a healthy and sound alternative to drinking or partying hard, for example, and a way of life.

When asked about their swing dance style, the subjects all had different answers, but the styles they pursued generally had the same codes. Main themes that came up repeatedly were “the forties,” “retro” and “high-waisted clothes” for both men and women, and for everyday swing dance wear in particular. The men said they liked to wear shirts with decorative patterns such as prints or plaid shirts with high-waisted pants and suspenders, and hats such as fedoras. They chose to wear brogues or sneakers as dancing shoes. Some men said they liked to dress in a retro style, but wore casual separates such as a T-shirt and khakis for everyday dance lessons because it was more practical. The women said they liked to wear checkered or dotted items, flared skirts and sleeveless tops with forties style pumps, flats or sneakers. One woman was an exception, who said she just liked to wear comfortable track suits or a T-shirt and cotton pants with sneakers.

The codes were similar for men regarding swing dance competitions or performances, albeit the clothes they chose to wear were more formal and mainly black and white for such special occasions. For women, the codes changed to “sexy,” “lingerie-like,” “shiny” clothes with embellishments such as “tassels” or “bejeweled” items. They said they went to stage costume stores or online shopping websites

to look for sexy bikini tops, corsets and fishnet tights. The colors the women preferred for the stage were black, red, silver and gold.

The swing dancers interviewed had similar values and pursued similar styles of swing dance clothes, as mentioned above, but they were found to have different jobs. Two of the men had office management jobs, one was a hardware developer, one was the owner of a model development company, one was a web designer and one was a photography agent. All of the women had different jobs. One was a vocal trainer, one was an English teacher and librarian, one was a private tutor, one was a VFX producer, one was an interpreter, and one was a fashion designer.

None of the interviewees said they had official dress codes at work, but the two men with office management jobs said their workplace had unofficial dress codes. They were expected to wear a tie, shirt and jacket and maintain a clean and presentable appearance. They said that women are allowed to wear tops without collars and bright colors, but men are not. This coincides with the findings by Easterling et al. (1992) that dress at the workplace is more specified for males than females. This study also found that the expectations of customers, CEOs and past experiences affected the development of dress codes. The men with office jobs in this article were found to be working in environments with dress codes established for similar reasons. They said they dressed formally to fit in with the corporate atmosphere and look professional.

The rest of the men interviewed had jobs with comparatively freer atmospheres and did not have dress codes at work. The hardware developer and web designer worked at small companies created and run by young people, and the owner of a model development company and photography agent were self-employed. The two self-employed men said the way they dressed was important at work, but it was more important to be comfortable and express their individuality and style than to conform to a social norm of men's wear.

The typical work attire of the web designer was a simple T-shirt that absorbs perspiration and jeans, and he preferred bright colors or classic black and white. The hardware developer said he wore relaxed clothes to work such as simple slacks and a shirt. The photography agent who organizes photo shoots said his personal style was a 1930s to 1940s vintage style and his typical attire for work was a fedora, shirt and tie. The owner of the model company wore jeans and a shirt to work, and the colors he wore most frequently were black, white and blue.

All of the women had different jobs. One was a vocal trainer, who teaches at a music education institute and does private lessons. She said she usually wore a skirt and T-shirt to work, for a relaxed and comfortable style. Although no strict rules about dress apply to her at work, she said there were limitations regarding length and fit of her clothes. She was not allowed to wear clothes that are too tight or short.

The English teacher and librarian was a twenty-nine-year-old American woman teaching at a private Korean school in Seoul. She said she liked to wear comfortable clothes like a skirt or loose pants with a basic top. Her dress code at work was business casual and items that are not allowed included ripped jeans, a short skirt or any cleavage. A study on the importance of appearance in retail and hospitality

industries found that employers in these industries look for “soft” skills in their personnel, such as attitude, and more importantly, appearance (Nickson et al. 2005, p. 195). The subject said that appearance and image were important for her too, as she had to meet children and parents, and she especially made sure she wore a smart shirt on top, to compensate for her relaxed bottoms.

A study on the impact of workplace attire on employees found that wearing formal business clothes make employees feel authoritative, trustworthy and competent, and wearing casual or business casual styles makes employees feel more friendly (Peluchette and Karl 2007). One of the female subjects for this study was an interpreter, and she said she had to dress in business clothes to appear “decent” and “competent.” She was an interpreter for a bank and was not permitted to wear sleeveless tops or shorts. Other restrictions included tight-fitting or short clothes and excessive accessories.

People may think that fashion designers can dress any way they want since they work in an atmosphere where people respect fashion, but the fashion designer who participated in this study said she had a dress code at work, even though she designed for and ran her own store. Her store sells retro shirts and dresses, and she makes it a rule to wear a shirt at all times. She does not wear T-shirts, sneakers or casual attire because how you dress is even more important when you are selling clothes.

Both the private tutor and the VFX producer did not have to follow a dress code. A VFX producer is a visual effects producer who handles special effects. The VFX producer in this study worked on special effects for films. The private tutor said she liked to dress in an ethnic style or Japanese street style, and wore items such as fish-net tights or leggings with a high-waisted skirt and retro dresses, similarly to her swing dance style. The VFX producer said she usually wore a T-shirt and pants or a miniskirt.

Power of social conceptions and dress: How swing dancers feel in work vs. dance clothes

Similarly to previous study results on other subcultures, such as members of the punk subculture, who were found to wear subtly coded punk cues that appeared conventional to work or selectively reveal punk symbols in an effort to push boundaries of work-appropriate dress (Sklar and DeLong, 2012), participants of this study were found to negotiate between expressing their subcultural identity and their identity at work.

Swing dancers generally do not care what others think and are used to expressing themselves freely, but they were found to be affected by the clothes they wear. Most of the subjects interviewed said they dressed a certain way for work, but they felt more comfortable when they wore swing dance clothes than work clothes. This confirms the expressive function of clothing. Dress codes may make people project a certain image through clothes, but dressing to express personal feelings and style appear to have an even deeper positive emotional effect on the wearer. Hollander stated that clothes stand for the creative, struggling state of man. They conceal the body yet reveal all of the wearer’s possibilities. They stand for knowledge and language, art and love, time and death (Hollander 1993, p. 448)

The men with office management jobs said they did not want to differentiate between their work and private lives, and were found to incorporate swing dance elements into their work wear. One subject wore high-waisted pants and vintage-style suits (Figure 1), and another subject wore vintage glasses and

colors like brown or red for shoes, tie or sweater in the winter. They said they wore a tie and shirt because it was expected of them, but felt mixing some of their own color and style into their wardrobe made them feel happier.

The photography agent wore different styles for work and personal outings. He said wearing a shirt and tie made him feel more professional. A study on dress norms at work found that there are different expectations of the appropriate split between personal and work identities depending on field of work and type of duties at work (Dellinger 2002). This was confirmed in this study, too. The photography agent said he enjoyed wearing both types of clothing and they were both part of his true self. He enjoyed wearing 1930s and 1940s vintage styles for personal occasions because he thought it expressed the side of him that was a swing dancer.



Figure 1.
Couple dressed in vintage style at a swing dance party

“I think it’s because I like what I do. I have some friends with office jobs who say they hate going to work and hate wearing a tie all day because it’s so stuffy. But I feel like the white collared shirt makes me more confident and sure of myself. I instantly feel successful. Of course, I don’t need to feel that way when I’m meeting up with friends and I want to be relaxed so I don’t wear formal clothes all day. I guess I still want to feel young and free.”

However, the interpreter who was expected to wear formal clothes for work said she much rather preferred her personal style and felt more herself when wearing shorts and boots with a sleeveless top, for example - a big change from what she had to wear for work. She said she wore a formal shirt and skirt to the bank and it did make her feel professional, but she almost always changed immediately after work and even took clothes to change into afterwards if she had to go somewhere in the evening or had a swing dance appointment.

The vocal trainer did not have to stick to a strong dress code, but said she still had to be careful.

“I don’t like dress codes, unless they are fun dress codes for a party. Telling people you have to dress a certain way just makes me feel uncomfortable. Luckily, I don’t have a strict dress code at work, but I do have to be careful. I was once warned for wearing short skirts. I guess you just have to appear a certain way because you’re representing the company that is paying you. I get it, but dressing for myself and for work is definitely different.”

The English teacher recognized the need for a dress code at work, saying that she knew the children she taught were easily impressionable and she did not mind dressing in business casual for school.

The results of a study on beliefs and attitudes regarding workplace attire found that those who use clothes to manage the impressions of others and believe it impacts the way they feel about themselves and their outcomes at work value workplace attire, and those in management or executive positions in particular dress to impress (Peluchette et al., 2006). The fashion designer who owns her own store chose to dress in a smart shirt and overall classic style when working because of the image of her store. As Hollander put it, “Clothes do not make the man, but the image of the man,” (Hollander 1993, p. XV) and the designer was pursuing exactly that - an image. For swing dancing, she said she liked to wear a skirt or shorts and a T-shirt that absorbs perspiration well, or a dress that is comfortable to move in. She also enjoyed dressing up in a vintage style dress or short dress for swing dance parties or performances (Figure 2).

“When I dress up to swing dance, I feel freer than I feel when I’m working, and I feel like I am expressing myself better. When I choose what to wear to dance, I focus on a style that will make my dance moves appear better, like a flared skirt, and a style that expresses my unique self well. On the other hand, I can only wear certain items for work, but that is not all bad because I feel calmer, act more responsible and feel more professional.”



Figure 2.
Swing dancers dressed up for a performance

The interviews revealed the strong power of social dress codes. All the subjects said they were “young at heart” and pursued a free, young lifestyle. However, all the subjects agreed that a white shirt, tie and jacket were symbols of professionalism and success. One subject also pointed out that dress codes not only exist in the workplace, but at swing dance clubs, too. For example, a woman would feel uncomfortable if she went to a swing dance club wearing a formal suit and shiny stiletto heels.

Emotional comfort through dress: The effects of swing cues incorporated in everyday wear

Dale Carnegie famously said, “The expression a woman wears on her face is far more important than the clothes she wears on her back.” This indicates the importance of emotional comfort and thoughts over clothes. A study in 2006 found that fashion changes the internal feelings of wearers and emotions are frequently expressed through clothes (Tombs 2006, p. 1). The results of this study also showed that those who incorporate swing dance elements into their daily work wear wardrobe have higher emotional comfort at their job.

Four of the men interviewed said they incorporate swing dance elements into their daily wardrobe. They wore accessories that were in trend at swing dance clubs (Figure 3), such as fabric bracelets, to work, wore swing dance clothes together with formal wear, or wore clothes that could work double as work clothes and swing dance clothes like a plaid shirt. Reasons for wearing swing dance elements to

work included wanting to express themselves, wanting to feel freer and wanting to feel special.

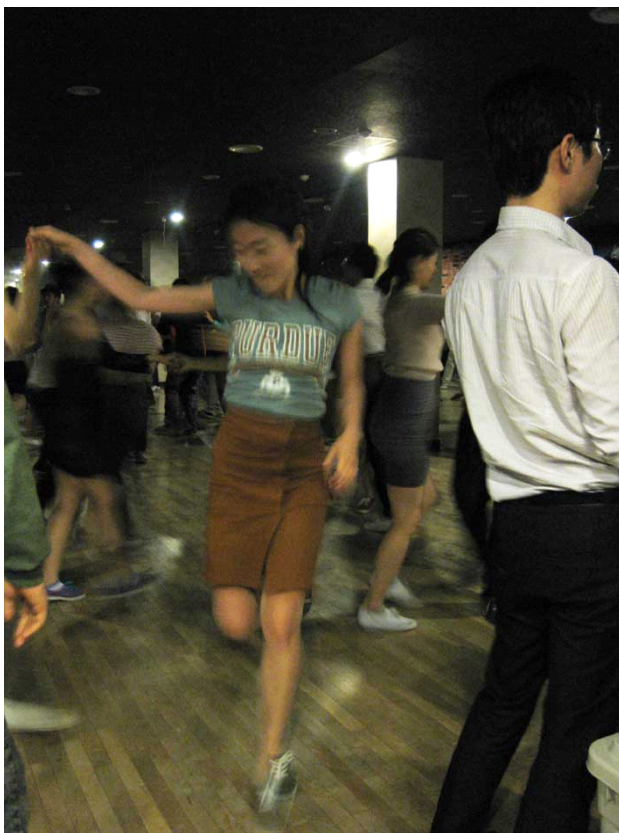


Figure 3.
A swing dance club in Seoul

“Even if most people don’t notice a difference, I know that people who are trendy will appreciate the bracelet they see through my shirt cuffs. I also like wearing plaid shirts because they look formal enough with a tie, and it also means I am ready to stop by a swing dance club on my way home from work.”

One subject, who pointed out dress codes exist at both work and in the swing world, said he knew the two occasions were different, but he tried to mix the two dress codes together because they were both important to him. One of the men who did not incorporate swing dance elements into their work clothes said he thought his job as a researcher was more important than his identity as a swing dancer because he

made a living through his job. Another man who did not wear swing elements with work clothes was not interested in fashion at all and wore what made him comfortable and caught his eye in the morning.

Two women said they try to include swing dance elements into their professional wardrobe, while four women said they did not. The vocal trainer said she likes to wear swing clothes such as a polka-dot skirt with her basic everyday clothes (Figure 4), and that they make her feel more relaxed and comfortable. She said that people who work with her appreciate her personal style and that also makes her feel good. The fashion designer also said she tries to wear retro swing dance clothes with her smart clothes for work, or at least to wear accessories she likes to wear for dancing, such as feather earrings, with her professional clothes. She said her swing dance clothes and accessories made her feel more comfortable, too, and that it was important to her because swing dancing was a big part of her identity.



Figure 4.
Retro swing dancer styles

The English librarian was an exception, as she was not interested in fashion at all and just wore sweat pants and a T-shirt to dance and formal but loose clothes to work. The VFX producer and private tutor said they did not make an effort to wear any swing elements for work, but their daily dress was very informal and appropriate for swing dance anyway - The VFX producer usually wore a short skirt and T-shirt, and the tutor liked retro street style. The bank interpreter did not incorporate swing elements in her dress because she worked at a bank and it was not permitted. However, she dressed very boldly in strappy and sparkly dresses and retro styles for swing dance. She was also very unhappy with her job, one of the reasons being that she did not feel she was doing something that expressed her style and values. During the course of this study, she actually changed her job, She moved from working at a bank to working at an international fashion brand. Immediately upon changing to her new job, where fashionable clothes are permitted, she dressed in a less conservative way and incorporated swing dance elements such as big, dangly earrings and tight tops to her work wardrobe. She said she was much happier at her new job, and being able to dress freer and more like her real self was a large part of the satisfaction.

Discussion and conclusion

People have complex egos, and what they consider to be “themselves” depends on many factors such as their job, hobbies, interests, circle of friends, values or religion, just to name a few. Swing dancers in particular place importance on a free, youthful, fun life and self-expression.

However, some swing dancers dress differently from their usual attire at their workplace, due to dress codes. Some like dressing differently for work because it makes them feel professional, while others do not necessarily feel comfortable but do so because of social perceptions and company rules. Some transform completely, while some incorporate swing dance aspects such as accessories they wear to dance or a retro skirt into their work clothes. Those who incorporate swing aspects generally appear to be more satisfied with their job and happy with their identity, both as a swing dancer and as a person with a professional occupation, and have higher emotional comfort. A few of the subjects said their swing dance style was not that important, but they were found to be either already wearing casual clothes to work, or not interested in style at all. Ultimately, all the swing dancers studied in this article consider themselves to be “swing dancers” and not being able to express a swing dance element or their true self throughout the day generally made them feel uncomfortable.

The results of this study indicate that swing dancers have a desire to reflect what they feel and believe about themselves. They have to dress “with integrity” to feel good and comfortable. Some are comfortable with both the professional and personal sides of themselves, but some place more importance on their personal interests. If they are not able to be themselves, they feel as if they are lying or wearing a costume, and this leads to extreme thoughts such as considering a different career path or direction in life.

There is a high chance that members of other subcultures and those with other passionate interests

feel the same way as swing dancers do about dressing for work. This indicates that it may be in the best interest of companies to have more lenient dress codes if they want to utilize the power of diversity, make people genuinely feel comfortable, and help employees enjoy their work more. It also reflects changing aspects of Korean society, where young people are placing more importance on their interests and hobbies rather than just their job, like their parent generation did.

The limitations of this study are that it was conducted on a small group of twelve subjects, and in the limited area of Seoul, focusing on two major swing dance clubs. Although the one-on-one interviews and observations lead to interesting insight on the swing dance culture, the identity of swing dancers, swing dance dress and possible effects of dress on the identity and emotional satisfaction of swing dancers at work, the sample is too small for generalization. It is suggested that further studies cover a bigger pool of subjects and a wider area, or compare Korean swing dancers with swing dancers in other countries to find out the uniqueness of the same subculture in different countries.

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