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Dressmaking: How a clothing practice made girls in
New Zealand, 1945 to 1965

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Abstract

This thesis looks at domestic dressmaking to understand what the practice meant for practitioners beyond making garments. It focuses on New Zealand girls in the period from 1945 to 1965, when dressmaking was understood as a universal part of the female experience at home and school. Despite this assumption of ubiquity, little work has been done to document how dressmaking happened in homes and in schools and, more importantly, how it affected girls. The critical framework combines feminist historical and sociological thinking — including Bourdieu’s theories of habitus and cultural reproduction — with fashion studies, cultural studies, material culture and object studies. The methodology reflects this interdisciplinary approach by layering personal recollections gathered in 15 oral history interviews, with documentary evidence, image research, and object studies.

This thesis argues that dressmaking offers a new lens through which to view female experience in New Zealand at that time. Dressmaking not only shaped appearance: it affected the allocation of space and time within households; it established and reinforced shopping behaviours; it created inter-generational bonds as women shared their skills within family groups; it maintained relationships within extended family groups as a source of hand-me-down clothing; and it offered the possibility of paid employment either within or outside the home. Beyond the home, dressmaking was part of girls’ school experience, used to prepare them for a prescribed femininity, but perceived as second-rate subject because of the strong association with domesticity. Dressmaking also offered girls and women a means of engaging with change — in fashions, fabrics, patterns, and tools. Memory, place, objects, and people combined to influence dressmaking practice. For some, dressmaking became ingrained as part of their identity and can be understood as habitus. The thesis shows how dressmaking shaped girls’ identities as much as dressmaking was used to shape garments.

Preface and acknowledgements

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Abbreviations

ANZ	Archives New Zealand
<i>EP</i>	<i>The Evening Post</i>
NatLib	National Library of New Zealand
<i>NZWW</i>	<i>New Zealand Woman's Weekly</i>
<i>NZH</i>	<i>New Zealand Herald</i>
<i>ODT</i>	<i>Otago Daily Times</i>
Te Papa	Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa