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Perceptions and practices of dress-related leisure: shopping, sorting, making and mending

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Abstract

This article explores the attitudes of seven women to four dress-related activities: shopping for new garments; sorting clothes within the wardrobe; making – specifically knitting – clothes for themselves; and mending damaged items. This topic is of particular interest within the field of fashion and sustainability, because clothing consumption could be reduced if activity were to be diverted from shopping to alternative fashion practices. Positioning these practices as intrinsically rewarding leisure activities may encourage such a shift.

The research demonstrates that all four of the dress-related activities occupy a grey area between leisure and chore. However, because perceptions are personal, context-dependent and flexible, there is scope for attitudes to be changed. An experimental project indicates that it is possible to reframe mending as a desirable leisure activity by integrating attributes such as social interaction and creativity. This reframing is aided by individuals' concerns about wasting resources, but can also be limited by concerns about wasting time.

Keywords

Sustainability; wardrobe; leisure; waste; fashion; mending

Introduction

This article explores the attitudes of seven women to four dress-related activities: shopping for new garments; sorting clothes within the wardrobe; making – specifically knitting – clothes for themselves; and mending damaged items. By comparing the women's feelings about these activities, a detailed picture is built up of the ways in which they characterise these various practices: as a leisure activity, a domestic chore, or a complex blend of the two. An experimental project is then discussed, which sought to position re-knitting – a transformative type of mending – as a desirable and creative leisure activity.

This topic is of particular interest within the field of fashion and sustainability, where efforts are being made to separate fashion participation from the consumption of new clothing.

Alternative practices such as sorting, making and mending have the potential to deliver sustainability benefits, and individuals may be more likely to engage in these activities if they are framed as leisure, rather than domestic chores. Thus, this article aims to establish current perceptions of each activity and explore the scope for existing attitudes to be changed.

In referring to 'leisure', I am using the definition offered by Argyle (1996, 3): 'it is those activities that people choose to do in their free time, because they want to, for their own sake, for fun, entertainment, self-improvement, or for goals of their own choosing, but not for material gain'. While choice is central to this definition, it must be acknowledged that this concept is rather problematic; as Rojek (2010) argues, individuals' options are not entirely free, but rather are constrained by a range of contextual and structural factors. Furthermore, it should be noted that 'leisure' and 'chore' are not binary categories; Argyle (1996, 3) argues that domestic tasks represent 'a whole sphere of activities ... which are neither work nor leisure proper'. With these issues in mind, I have explored the participants' own perceptions of their activities, looking for comments which indicate a *sense* of choice and properties which are commonly associated with leisure such as intrinsic motivation, enjoyment and relaxation (Mannell and Kleiber 1997).

Before describing the context for this research, I will also clarify my use of the term 'fashion'. As Entwistle (2000, 45) explains, fashion is 'a system of dress characterized by an internal logic of regular and systematic change'. Although some would argue that many clothing and dress practices take place outside the dynamics of the fashion system (Loschek 2009), I agree with Wilson (1987, 3) that 'in modern western societies no clothes are outside fashion; fashion sets the terms of all sartorial behaviour'. Thus, I recognise fashion as an incontrovertible – though often unacknowledged – contextual factor in all contemporary practices relating to clothing and dress, including those under discussion here.

Context

The environmental and social problems associated with the clothing industry are significant and well documented, with negative impacts occurring in all phases of a garment's lifecycle (Forum for the Future 2007). While many noteworthy sustainable fashion initiatives have managed to reduce these impacts, it is increasingly being recognised that a much more fundamental shift is required. In order to pursue genuine sustainability, rather than merely lessen the impacts of an unsustainable system, we in the global North must dramatically

reduce our consumption of new clothing. This is difficult for many to countenance; the present ‘fast fashion’ system is well established, and clothing consumption and fashion participation are fundamentally intertwined in contemporary consciousness. However, designers and activists are working to develop an appealing version of fashion which is not dependent on a rapid turnover of clothing items, but rather uses ‘material and non-material satisfiers to help us engage, connect and better understand about each other, our world and ourselves’ (Fletcher and Grose 2011, 5).

With this in mind, there is a growing interest in dress-related practices which slow down the consumption of clothing and offer an alternative means of participating in fashion. Sorting and mending clothes both serve to maintain those garments that we already own; some argue that making contributes to a greater sense of meaning and emotional attachment – and thus a longer life in comparison with mass-produced goods (Walker 2006, Martin 2010). There are potential sustainability benefits in transferring fashion activity from shopping towards each of these areas. However, there is no clear path which would encourage people to undertake such a transfer. Research has shown that changes to more sustainable lifestyles are most effective when people are motivated by a perceived personal benefit, rather than diffuse altruistic reasons (Marchand, Walker, and Cooper 2008). Thus, if we are to encourage people to increase their engagement in making, mending and sorting clothes, it could be useful to explore the potential for these activities to be positioned as leisure. After all, leisure activities are characterised by their intrinsic motivation: they are rewarding in themselves, and this delivers personal benefit (Argyle 1996).

Because the findings I present here are based on qualitative research with a small number of participants, they cannot be treated as generalisable; however, it can be argued that the conclusions of this research may have relevance far beyond the participant group. Knitting is a popular hobby; if sustainability benefits may be derived from greater participation in knitting and re-knitting then a considerable impact could be achieved, should these initiatives be scaled up. The UK Hand Knitting Association (2015) claims that there are 7.5 million knitters and crocheters in the country (though this figure must be treated with caution, as no methodology or source is available) and it is generally agreed that the craft has grown in popularity in the past 15 years (Black 2012).

Methods

Within this article, I will compare the attitudes of seven women to the four dress-related practices in question. The data were gathered during research which broadly aimed to investigate experiences of making and wearing homemade clothes. More specifically, the study explored the possibility of extending amateur knitting activity to embrace design and the creative reworking of existing garments. At the time of the research in 2012-2013, the seven participants ranged in age from 43 to 66 and lived in the same rural county in England; they all enjoyed knitting as a hobby and were recruited for the research on this basis. The participant group is typical in terms of gender; the most recent relevant UK survey by the Office for National Statistics (1997) found that 36% of women had participated in dressmaking, needlework and/or knitting in the four weeks before the survey, compared to just 3% of men.

The data on which this article is based were primarily gathered during individual garment-led interviews, which took place at the start of the project; additional material was gathered from the participants at subsequent group making workshops. While the interviews were structured to investigate the participants' attitudes to fashion and making, an explicit focus on the four practices was not intended at the start of the research. It was during the process of analysis via thematic coding (Robson 2011) that this topic emerged as an area of particular interest.

Before exploring the participants' experiences of the dress-related practices, I will first briefly introduce each individual:

- Alex, 63, is retired 'but always busy', involved with two walking groups and the local theatre. She enjoys gardening and knits a great deal.
- Anne, 64, works full-time as a social worker. She spends a lot of her spare time visiting friends and family, and recently returned to knitting.
- Catherine, 44, is a full-time carer for her disabled son. She is passionate about making but has little time available for herself.
- Helen, 53, lives as part of a cooperative farming community, and has just started a one-year course at the local art college.
- Julia, 66, is retired and enjoys handicrafts, gardening, reading and music. She and her husband are building their own house, which has been a long-term project.
- Kiki, 62, is now 'basically retired' but works two days a week in a shop. She enjoys many hobbies and holidays in her camper van.

- Margaret, 50, works part-time and spends the rest of her time growing vegetables, keeping sheep and managing a wood with her partner.

I have chosen to discuss the four dress-related practices according to their prevalence in fashion culture more broadly. Thus, we will examine the most visibly widespread practice of shopping first, followed by the common but hidden activity of sorting clothes within the wardrobe, before moving on to the more marginal activities of making and mending.

Following discussion of these four familiar practices, I will discuss the experimental project which sought to frame mending as a desirable and creative activity.

Shopping

According to Timothy (2005), shopping is now one of the most common leisure activities in the world. However, the relationship of shopping to leisure is complex and dependent on multiple contextual factors. A wealth of literature has sought to develop understanding in this area, offering various typologies of shopping and shoppers (Timothy 2005). While there is not the space to delve deeply into these typologies here, it is fair to say that for some people shopping for clothes can be a source of enjoyment and leisure, while others see it as a chore to be endured. I discovered a diverse range of attitudes amongst the participants in my study. Anne said that she enjoyed the activity of shopping, as did Alex:

Oh, I enjoy shopping, I love going looking at clothes.

At the other extreme was Kiki, whose response was particularly vehement:

I hate it... I absolutely can't bear it.

A distinction is commonly made between recreational and non-recreational shopping in academic discussion (Bäckström 2011). The participants made the same implicit distinction; they tended to describe either going shopping for a specific item, or going to browse, regardless of need. The former was seen as a necessary household task to be tolerated rather than enjoyed, while the latter was framed as leisure. This distinction is shown by a comment from Helen:

I don't just go shopping for clothes for fun, like my daughter. She'll go and look through all the racks just in case there's something that really catches her eye. I'll generally have something in mind that I need to get... I don't tend to look round a huge amount, because I just don't feel I've got the time or the energy.

Some of the participants described enjoying shopping as a social activity. This corresponds with existing research, which shows shopping to be an important opportunity for social interaction (Guiry 2012). Margaret, for example, reported that she does not often have the chance to go shopping and therefore turns it into an event, often shared with her sister or mother. Even Julia, who said that she did not enjoy shopping in general, described shopping trips with her daughters-in-law as a pleasant way to spend time together – indicating that perceptions of the activity can vary according to the way in which it is framed and the benefits that come along with it. Helen's interview suggested that she was able to strategically adopt a positive attitude to shopping in certain circumstances. Bearing in mind her general distaste for shopping, this further demonstrates the flexibility of attitudes:

If I feel that I just need a bit of a lift, I will go and look... is there a nice top or something, and will that just make me feel a little bit better (laughs).

Timothy (2005) identifies various factors that affect the perception of shopping as leisure, including a range of 'external' factors such as the variety of products available and the retail environment. The issue of choice emerged in many of the conversations; it was evident that the variety of shops impacts greatly on the appeal of shopping for the research participants. Catherine, for example, said that she does not particularly like to shop on a typical high street, but enjoys browsing in locations with a mix of more unusual, independent outlets. Despite Anne's enjoyment of shopping in general, she described her frustration about being unable to find suitable clothing, in terms of both style and size:

I suppose I do feel constrained sometimes. What happens is, I think I'd like a so-and-so, and I have an image in my head, and it's just not available.

If I want dresses or blouses or things, there's a lot of shops I couldn't go in, I wouldn't be able to get into them.

Considering the links between the four dress-related activities in question, it is interesting to note that this frustration with the ready-made clothes in the shops can lead to an increased interest in making. Margaret reported disappointment in the quality of garments from high street shops, and directly linked this with an intention to start making clothes for herself:

I think, now, clothing is so shoddy, so thin, so... stuff that won't last anything. And you just think, well why don't you make something nicer?

An unexpected issue emerged in two of the interviews: guilt. Kiki said that she does not like spending money on herself, and needs encouragement from her husband to do so. Catherine does not have the money to shop a great deal, but suggested that even if she did, there would be 'some sort of guilt' in purchasing something for herself. Guilt was also implicitly involved in concerns – mentioned by several of the participants – about ethical consumption and waste. As Lewis and Potter (2011: 4) explain, such issues 'are increasingly entering into the everyday language as well as the shopping experiences and practices of so-called "ordinary" consumers'. For Catherine and Helen, these concerns seemed to hamper their enjoyment of 'mainstream' shopping, but allowed them to frame shopping in charity and second-hand shops in a much more positive light. As Catherine described, she enjoys browsing in this context:

I don't particularly like shopping, but I must admit, the charity shop shopping is really quite good, actually. It's always quite a challenge to find something interesting, or it's quite exciting when you do find something interesting.

Alex, too, expressed concerns about waste, though these concerns shape her shopping habits in a different way. As she explained, she has rules which restrict her purchases:

I definitely have a price ceiling... [then] will it go with five things in my wardrobe... will it have an extended life. But lots of things I want, I won't buy. I might look at something all summer, or all winter, and never buy it, because I don't need it.

Alex also described trying on items she would never buy, such as high-heeled shoes, just for the experience. For her, the activity of shopping is mainly about browsing, not buying. She

enjoys the activity of exploring diverse options, but has the self-control to resist over-indulgence.

It is hardly surprising that these accounts show mixed attitudes to shopping as a leisure activity. However, they throw up insights which are interesting from the viewpoint of sustainable fashion. They demonstrate, for example, that attitudes to shopping are flexible: individuals will reflexively reframe the activity as leisure if additional benefits, such as the opportunity to socialize, are integrated. They also show that even amongst those who declare themselves to love shopping, there are external frustrations which could, potentially, support increased participation in alternative dress-related practices. Meanwhile, people's concerns about sustainability-related issues are already guiding them towards practices which reduce consumption, such as browsing rather than buying, or which keep existing garments in use, such as second-hand shopping, and are helping them to perceive those activities as enjoyable and worthwhile.

Sorting

Having explored the participants' experiences of shopping, let us now consider the practice of sorting clothes once they have taken up residence within the home. By sorting, I am referring to the process of organizing, reviewing and disposing of clothes within the wardrobe, rather than the more regular maintenance tasks of washing, drying and ironing. This 'wardrobe practice' has been largely overlooked by academic literature; research into consumption tends to focus on purchase, rather than use. However, a number of studies (e.g. Banim and Guy 2001; Woodward 2007) have explored the wardrobe in terms of identity construction, finding that sorting and disposing of clothes is as constitutive of identity as more visible practices such as shopping and dressing.

At the initial interviews, I spoke to each of the participants about sorting out their wardrobes; they reported a range of practices. Only one of the participants, Helen, described organizing her clothes as a regular annual activity. Her account communicates a sense of utilitarian efficiency:

I'll go through everything and think, have I worn it in the last year. And I'll think well, why haven't I?

In contrast, Anne said that she sorts out her clothes very rarely, suggesting she sees it as a chore to be avoided:

I'm a bit lazy at sorting it all out, really. [I do it] very infrequently, which is why I've got so much stuff. I very rarely throw things out.

Kiki and Margaret both described sorting out their clothes as a spontaneous activity, prompted by frustration at untidiness or a lack of space. For Kiki, this negative impetus turns into pleasure as the sorting gets underway:

It often starts in a bit of a temper, when I feel things have got on top of me. I just start cleaning things, and I get to a drawer, and then it becomes a pleasure. An absolute pleasure.

Kiki described becoming absorbed in the activity of sorting, with the re-organisation spreading across the whole house. For her, the process seems to take on qualities of a 'flow' activity, which offers total absorption, focus and enjoyment (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). As Mannell and Kleiber (1997) observe, flow activities are intrinsically rewarding and thus are strongly associated with leisure.

Alex described an entirely different approach to sorting the wardrobe, removing unworn items one by one:

I'm running a campaign, this year, to get rid of things like the clothes I had at work. I'm systematically going through it, and emotionally getting to the point where I can let it go. And every other week or so, I make sure I take something to the charity shop. It doesn't hurt so much to take one or two things, and just keep doing it constantly.

Alex's comments show that, for her, a wholesale reorganization and disposal would be too emotionally demanding. She described needing support from her husband to make the difficult decision to dispose of her clothes – an interesting parallel to Kiki's need for support in acquiring new items. Indeed, existing wardrobe-related research shows that the task of disposing of clothing is emotionally loaded – much more so than shopping – and involves a process of divestment, or letting go (McCracken 1990). Cluver (2008) suggests that these

emotions are caused by the close relationship between clothing and the self. However, Alex identified the source of her personal reluctance to dispose of clothes as her deep-seated discomfort about waste:

There's a very strong sense that you mustn't waste anything, you mustn't throw anything away, and you must wear it out. It is a definite mindset that I grew up with, and it's ingrained and it's very difficult to overcome as an adult.

Julia expressed similar concerns, though in less explicit terms. Helen described conflicting thoughts about waste and thrift:

I get quite strong feelings about never wanting to see a garment again, but that is always balanced by slight thriftiness. Thinking well, you know, maybe I could do something with it, or maybe I'll need it...

These ethical considerations can also lead to a dilemma about where items should be sent. Recent research (Fisher et al. 2008; Gracey and Moon 2012) identifies a range of disposal habits, including donating to charity, giving to friends or family, and throwing in the bin. As Gregson (2007) argues, a great deal of thought often goes into choosing the appropriate route for disposal. For Kiki, who clearly found sorting to be satisfying, the next step was felt to be much more of a chore. She was happy to send wearable garments to a charity shop, but worried about what she should do with items in poor condition.

It is useful to think about the relationships between sorting and the other dress-related practices. Some of the participants' comments indicated that sorting can be a favourable alternative to shopping, particularly for those who do not enjoy shopping as a leisure activity. Helen described rescuing items from bags intended for the charity shop by her daughters. This habit clearly involves less effort than shopping for her, and also fits with her attitude to waste:

I do actually inherit bits from my daughters. I take them on, because I don't like them being thrown away if I think they've got some life left in them.

Helen's experience highlights the fact that shopping is not the only way of acquiring new clothes. Research by Corrigan (1994) identifies seven different modes of clothing circulation,

only two of which involve the purchasing of new items. As he explains, ‘it is as if a “primitive” economy were to be found at the private heart of advanced capitalism; pre-capitalist modes have not been stamped out, but have found a refuge in the family’ (Corrigan 1994, 442). Intriguingly, the same sense of discovery can happen within a single wardrobe. For Kiki, a key benefit of sorting is the experience of coming across items which she likes and wishes to wear, but had entirely forgotten about. Again, for her it seems that this process requires less effort, and is more satisfying, than shopping.

The participants’ accounts also demonstrate a dynamic link between shopping, sorting and making. In the previous section, we saw that Margaret’s dissatisfaction with the quality of new clothes was leading to an interest in making. This ambition similarly shapes her attitude to sorting unworn clothes; rather than disposing of items, she saves them for future use:

I've always got this mad idea that one day I'll be making loads of stuff. And you think well, keep it, because I might need that when I create something one day.

Julia made similar comments, describing a number of beautifully coloured but worn-out jumpers she was saving for a future project. Helen and Catherine, meanwhile, keep ragged items for making rugs.

As we have seen, the participants in this research have a range of approaches to sorting clothes within the wardrobe. The task is generally seen as a chore, and decisions about disposal appear to be particularly difficult. However, there are glimmers of leisure for some: the absorbing task can become intrinsically rewarding. It can also reveal much-loved but forgotten items, support the non-economic exchange of clothes, and provide materials for future making projects, all of which have benefits in terms of reducing the consumption of new garments.

Making

As I have already explained, the participants in this research enjoy making clothes – specifically, knitting for themselves, family and friends – as a leisure activity. Knitters organize their activities around projects; while small projects may be completed in a few hours, larger projects often take several months or even years. Various writers have highlighted the importance of the project as a way of structuring leisure time. Gauntlett (2011,

125) describes the importance of having ‘something to strive towards’, as offered by the project. Turney (2009, 159) agrees that the project – an activity that can be performed and completed – ‘contributes to a sense of self-worth, of achievement and desire to continue, which ... promotes self-esteem and confidence, which ultimately enhances quality of life’. A key advantage of the project is its flexibility: projects can be initiated, paused and rediscovered to suit each individual’s lifestyle. Some knitters, such as Alex, describe themselves as knitting obsessively and continuously, and will complete whole garments in a matter of weeks. Others, such as Kiki, describe knitting in phases, or even binges. Knitting projects are also highly flexible in terms of skill and style, allowing knitters to target their efforts according to their own preferences as makers and wearers. This flexibility allows knitting to span what Stebbins (2007) characterizes as ‘casual’ and ‘serious’ leisure.

My conversations with the group have shown that knitting projects involve a blend of two types of leisure: relaxation and concentration. In its relaxing mode, knitting is a rhythmic, repetitive activity that can be carried out without a great deal of focused attention. This repetitive movement enhances the release of serotonin, which has a calming effect (Stitchlinks 2008); it can also create a meditative state (Parkins 2004). Alex described how knitting allows her to empty her mind, yet work through problems:

It frees the mind to just wander, and think about things. Not necessarily deep thinking, but just things pass through your mind, and sometimes you can ponder on something that might be bothering you.

In contrast, focused concentration is required for tricky procedures, such as picking up the stitches for a collar or fixing a mistake. This type of process has a strong correspondence with the idea of ‘flow’, an intensely absorbing activity, as already discussed in relation to the practice of sorting clothes.

The tactile and sensory stimulation offered by the process of knitting is another benefit, as this comment from Julia illustrates:

I’ve nearly always got some knitting or crocheting on the go. And I’m a bit lost, if I haven’t. I’ve got to be doing something with my fingers and my hands, generally.

When I asked the group why they enjoyed knitting, several responded by simply raising the needles and yarn in their hands. Shercliff (2009, 189) reports that ‘playing with pattern, shape, colour and materials is pleasing perceptually, emotionally and cognitively’. Knitters derive particular satisfaction from seeing the work grow in their hands, as Julia went on to indicate:

It's creating something, isn't it? I think it is just having these balls of wool and the needles and then... eventually you end up with something, it's lovely.

Considering our interest in different dress-related practices, it is interesting to remember that most household work is ephemeral; the activity of sorting clothes, like tidying rooms and cooking meals, may be viewed as more or less of a chore by different people, but is not rewarded by any enduring evidence (Scott 1987). In contrast, as this comment from Kiki demonstrates, making provides a lasting reminder of one's effort:

There's something nice about leaving something behind that you have made. You know, continuity.

Another key benefit of making is the opportunity for social interaction, an important aspect of leisure already discussed in relation to shopping. Knitting provides a means of connecting with those closest to us, through teaching skills and making gifts (Turney 2012). Knitting also offers another kind of social link, through attendance at craft groups. Anne described the benefits of attendance:

It's a nice congenial atmosphere. It's a real good source of knowledge, and it's nice to see what other people are doing, and just have the general chit chat really.

Today, knitters are able to connect online, as well as in person. Niche areas of knitting are blossoming as enthusiasts share their projects, patterns, problems and tips through blogs, online communities and social media (Kuznetsov and Paulos 2010).

Despite the various satisfactions associated with making, my research did identify some problems. The knitters described a degree of frustration at their own dependence on commercial patterns; despite the variety of designs available, they find it difficult to find

styles that they like, and patterns appropriate for their level of skill. Although Alex is able to adapt patterns to suit her needs, this is rare; Anne described herself as being ‘a slave to the pattern’. Furthermore, all of the participants expressed a desire to feel more creative in their knitting, and a wish to design for themselves – although they did not have the confidence to attempt this on their own, as Alex indicated:

It's a scary thing to be creative, when you've got nobody anywhere giving you a nod that you're on the right line.

My discussion of making thus far has focused on the many intrinsic motivations associated with the experience of making. Knitting also offers material benefits, which offer further motivation to the maker: new homemade items that can be worn. Margaret’s comments about shop-bought clothes show that she sees making as a means of acquiring items which better suit her preferences. Making can also offer economic benefits; although in many cases it is cheaper to buy new than to make for yourself, this comparison depends on a range of factors, including one’s own sense of quality. Both Alex and Catherine described making specific items for themselves more cheaply than they could have bought them. However, my research indicates that many knitters have strong concerns about their items not ‘turning out’, due to a range of factors. It is far from certain that any given project will achieve a high quality fit and finish, or even end up being worn, as Anne pointed out:

You buy the wool you like, and you buy the pattern, and then when it's made up, it doesn't seem to look right. You spend all that time and money, and then it just looks a bit of a dog's dinner at the end of it.

Knitters are deeply disappointed if their items do not turn out as intended. While they may have enjoyed the process of making, they are unlikely to value – or wear – a finished item if it does not meet their standards. It is clear from the participants’ comments that in this situation they feel the project to be somewhat of a waste, which interferes with the satisfaction of making.

We have seen that knitting is an enjoyable leisure activity for the participants in this research. It is sufficiently flexible that knitters are able to tailor projects to suit their preferences, and also supports various types of social interaction. Knitters derive satisfaction from the

interaction of body and materials, and the opportunity to create useful items which will last. However, knitters are not always happy with the garments they have made, and may never wear them; this compromises the potentially positive impact of domestic making on overconsumption. Furthermore, many knitters have a desire to be ‘more creative’ in their making, but are unsure how to go about this.

Mending

The final of our four dress-related practices, and probably the least discussed in academic literature, is mending. This activity would once have been straightforwardly classed as a household chore: a task that must be undertaken in order to keep clothing in use, because items were costly to replace. As the price of clothing has fallen, repair has become much less commonplace, and an option rather than a necessity. Recent research shows that mending is generally limited to ‘minor tasks such as sewing on buttons and fixing hems’ (Fisher et al. 2008, 30), and that even these tasks are not commonly undertaken (Gwilt 2012).

However, all of the participants in this research said that mending was normal to them; they found it odd that others did not mend, as shown by this comment from Anne:

I can't usually understand it when people say, I can't sew a button on or I can't do this or that. To me, it's just what you do.

The participants did, indeed, report sewing on buttons and fixing hems; between them they described a range of other tasks, including sewing holes in seams, fixing pulls in knitwear, replacing broken zips, shaving bobbles off pillied fabric, and reinforcing fabric and buttonholes. Holes within the fabric of a garment seemed to present more of a challenge; Alex described fixing tiny holes which appear in her husband's jumpers, but said she would not repair a larger hole. Similarly, Julia was willing to undertake a range of mending tasks, but did not darn socks, as her mother had done in the past. However, Anne found a creative way of mending holes which appeared in a dress she particularly liked:

I packed away lots of summer clothes last year and the mice got in them. I had a very nice loose linen dress in an emerald green colour, and so I could carry on wearing it, I embroidered little flowers over all the holes.

I asked each of the participants how they felt about mending: whether it was a chore, or a pleasure. Because they had the skills required, the general view was that it was somewhere in between: ‘something you have to do’, that does not tend to take too much time, and would generally be dealt with quite quickly. Anne described mending while watching television in the evening:

If I'm watching telly or something, I'll just sit and do something like that. It never feels like a real chore, or anything difficult.

Helen described taking her mending to business meetings relating to the community farm she lives within:

Quite often we will take our mending to the meetings, and so we sit there doing our mending while we're listening. So actually, it is drudgery, but there are opportunities here (laughs) where you can actually do something with your hands while you're in a meeting, and so it's worthwhile, it's ok.

Various considerations play a role in the decision of whether to repair. The participants described weighing up whether the garment was sufficiently valuable (in either emotional or economic terms) to be worth the effort, and considering the prospect of a successful outcome, given the nature of the problem and their own level of skill. One example of a garment which was seen to be worth mending was an Icelandic Lopi cardigan knitted for Helen by her sister about 30 years ago:

It's coming apart, but I love it and I keep thinking that I've got to mend it. I want this to keep going forever, really. Because it was something nice that my sister did, and I get a lot of use from it, and it's lovely and warm.

Similarly, Kiki described a blanket crocheted by her aunt, which she repairs in order to keep in use. Therefore, we can see an interesting link between making and mending: there seems to be a shared desire to maintain homemade items, to expend the effort necessary to extend the life of items which themselves indicate effort you or others have made in the past.

While mending has clear benefits in terms of extending the active lifetimes of garments in the wardrobe, we have seen that it tends to be seen as a relatively uninteresting task, which is carried out only as long as the item is considered to be worth the effort and the process does not appear to be overly time-consuming or complex. It is usually a solitary domestic activity; the participants do not connect with others through mending in the same way they do through making. As we will see in the next section, in the re-knitting project I sought to overturn this negative perception of mending by connecting the practice more directly with the act of making, which was already seen by the participants as creative and pleasurable.

Re-knitting

Re-knitting is a means of reworking knitted garments using knitting skills, techniques and knowledge; in the past, this activity would have been an integral part of the craft, but today it seems to be marginal within the knitting community. The mending previously discussed by the participants generally has the characteristics of what Sennett (2008, 200) identifies as ‘static repair’: alterations which restore an item to its original state. In contrast, re-knitting can be seen as ‘dynamic repair’, which changes an item’s form or function, transforming it to something new.

For the research I developed a range of re-knitting processes, combining knowledge from various knitting sources with my own creative explorations of technical possibilities. The group and I tested these processes on small samples, and the project culminated with each of the participants using one or more of the processes to rework a knitted item from her own wardrobe. This activity provided an opportunity for the participants to design for themselves and explore their creative ideas. Interestingly, as they engaged in this new experience the issue of waste emerged once again. I encouraged the knitters to experiment with materials and stitches before embarking on their final project: this is a playful process which allows the designer to explore a range of possibilities. As Julia described, at the start of the project the participants were reluctant to spend time experimenting in this way:

It seems like wasting time, because you’ve got the wool, and you want to end up with your garment. You just want to get on with it.

During the workshops, the knitters started to embrace experimentation; it was notable how quickly it became second nature for them to try out their ideas before making a final decision. The experience shifted their attitudes towards this ‘waste of time’, as Alex described:

I feel, now, that doing any samples or trying out wool is not a waste of time because it adds to a benefit of what you're eventually going to do.

At the end of the project, the knitters reflected on their transformed garments; they were pleased with them, and considered their alterations to have improved the original items. They also felt positive about the activity of re-knitting, as this comment by Margaret indicates:

It's been really quite exciting, what you can do with existing garments. Just to turn them into something really original, which I think is fantastic... It's quite a liberating thing.

Julia described feeling proud of having achieved a complex task in reworking her garment (figure 1), suggesting that re-knitting offers more of a challenge than conventional mending:

I'm impressed with the way it all works, the construction of it. I think that's really clever. And I'm quite pleased that I've been able to do it.

Catherine spoke about her satisfaction at having been able to transform an unworn item and return it to wear (figure 2), a satisfaction which links to her ethical concerns about waste:

It does feel good (noble... perhaps, sounds too pompous) to reinvigorate a rather sad garment.

From these comments, we can see that the participants saw re-knitting as quite a different task to conventional mending; the previously unremarkable semi-chore had taken on an entirely new character as an exciting, impressive and admirable practice. This transformation was achieved by translating many of the established benefits of knitting to the new activity. For example, I was able to integrate social interaction into the process, and bracket the challenge of re-knitting within the ‘frame’ of a project. Furthermore, because re-knitting involved creative design activity, it addressed the frustration that the participants had expressed about

their dependence on patterns and thus could be seen as offering even greater satisfaction than their usual making activities.

Having discussed our four dress-related practices and the experimental re-knitting project, we can now take a step back to consider some broader issues which have emerged through this exploration: first, the idea of being positively engaged with clothing choices as a type of leisure activity, and second, the issue of waste.

Positive engagement

As I explained in the introduction, I was motivated to explore the leisure attributes of four dress-related practices by the challenge of fashion and sustainability, and the need to develop ways of participating in fashion which are not dependent on the consumption of new clothing. Fashion and consumption are, of course, fundamentally intertwined at present. As Breward and Evans (2005, 2) explain, ‘fashion is a process in two senses: it is a market-driven cycle of consumer desire and demand; and it is a modern mechanism for the fabrication of the self’. In order to build a more sustainable fashion system, we need to separate these commercial and emotional processes: this would involve a significant shift in fashion culture. Rather than thinking about these four dress-related practices as separate or even competing activities, it may be helpful to think of them all as ways of being positively engaged with clothing choices: that is, means by which we can consciously consider the construction of our identities through dress. I believe that this activity – part of what Giddens (1991, 5) terms ‘the reflexive project of the self’ – can be intrinsically rewarding and a potentially valuable form of leisure.

A positive engagement with clothing choices is most obvious in shopping: when browsing and selecting new items, we are consciously considering who we are, and who we want to be. Alex combines browsing in shops with other sources of information as a way of being ‘in the know’ about fashion:

I subscribe to Good Housekeeping magazine, and one of the reasons is they do the fashion spread every month. I'm looking to understand what's fashionable and what the colours are, what the cuts are, what the details are...

Alex applies the knowledge she gathers within her making activities; in the re-knitting project, she used ideas from garments she had seen in the shops to inform her own design

decisions. While Alex is primarily interested in fashion trends, engagement with clothing choices does not have to involve a concern for contemporary fashion. In the re-knitting projects, several of the participants used emotionally significant sources of inspiration to guide their projects, including items they had inherited and images of places that were important to them. When designing, they also reflected on their personal style to consider their preferences as wearers. In summary, I would say that the process of re-knitting intensified and energized the relationship between wearer and wardrobe in a rewarding manner. Thus, a positive engagement with clothing choices can be achieved across the four dress-related practices we have examined; it is not restricted to shopping. Exploring the potential for this positive engagement in the practices of sorting, making and mending could be a valuable strategy for sustainable fashion.

Wasting time

Another central issue in the discussion of dress-related practices and leisure is the question of how we choose to spend our time. The alternative practices we have discussed – sorting, making and mending – are inherently slower than shopping, and offer gratification that is not so instantaneous. We can see these practices as what Fletcher and Grose (2011) call ‘non-material satisfiers’, and, as Reisch (2001, 378) describes, ‘obtaining non-material satisfaction calls for attention, demands involvement, requires time’. The sense of slowness, or even timelessness, associated with activities such as making is, for many, part of the attraction of these practices. However, this slowness can present problems. On a practical level, it can be hard for those with busy lives to find enough time to make, mend or sort alongside paid and unpaid work. Comments made by the participants in this research suggest that there is a deeper issue within a concern about time, which is linked to waste. We have seen this topic emerge in relation to all of the dress-related practices we have examined. The participants’ concerns about waste, in many cases, contribute towards more sustainable practices: they can limit purchases and promote re-use and mending. However, these concerns also seem to apply to time. As we saw in the making section, makers are frustrated if their projects do not ‘turn out’ as expected, seeing them as a waste of time. They also tend to consider experimenting with materials and stitches to be a waste of time, which should instead be spent on productively creating the intended useful item.

According to Weber (1930, 158), ‘waste of time is thus the first and in principle the deadliest of sins ... loss of time through sociability, idle talk, luxury ... is worthy of absolute moral

condemnation'. Lash and Urry (1994, 226) argue that we believe that it is our 'duty to be frugal with time, not to waste it, to use it to the full': and that this attitude applies to leisure activities, as well as work. They suggest that we feel a pressure to organise our leisure and use the time in a worthwhile fashion, as 'rational recreation'. This argument is particularly interesting in relation to leisure activities that offer a mix of intrinsic and external benefits, as with our dress-related practices. All of these activities are undertaken for both the inherent satisfaction of the process, and the material outcome. In this situation, concerns about waste can clash: after all, activities which reduce material waste often require time to be spent in a way which can feel, as the participants described, 'wasted'. This is even more the case if we seek to maximize the opportunities for creativity within an activity, which arguably amplifies the sense of intrinsic motivation and therefore leisure: creativity, after all, requires time in which to experiment and potentially make mistakes.

However, is this time really wasted? I agree with Shercliff (2009, 195), who suggests that 'the more time we "waste" on making things, the better we provide for our social, emotional, physical and biological needs'. This research suggests that while individuals may be vaguely aware of the diverse benefits they may gain when sorting, making or mending as a leisure activity, their concerns about material productivity generally override this more intangible sense of value. Therefore, those designers and activists seeking to shift activity in fashion face not only the challenge of changing perceptions about individual practices, but also the more deep-rooted question of ways in which people might be encouraged to fully embrace the act of 'wasting time' when pursuing these dress-related practices as leisure activities.

Conclusion

In this article, I have analysed the attitudes of seven women to four dress-related practices – shopping, sorting, making and mending – looking for evidence of these practices being perceived either as leisure or household chores. As I acknowledged in the introduction, these are not binary options, and indeed the research demonstrated that these activities occupy a grey area between the two. While none of the practices leads to external rewards such as money, awards or recognition – which would indicate non-leisure motivations – they do have practical, external benefits: wearable clothes or an organised wardrobe. However, each includes elements of leisure, offering a degree of intrinsic motivation and being undertaken by choice; they also integrate social interaction and opportunities for either 'flow' or relaxation.

It may be surprising to some that activities such as sorting and mending could have any attributes of leisure; they do, after all, have an established cultural image as household chores. However, these activities are no longer essential tasks. Mending, in particular, can be entirely avoided, and sorting can be postponed for a long period of time by simply acquiring more and more clothes, as long as there is space in the wardrobe. Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005) explain that the act of choosing to do an activity increases its positive impact on well-being; this indicates why people are able to derive satisfaction from choosing to undertake practices which were non-optional, and even regarded as drudgery, in the past.

The participants' experiences in this project revealed complex and flexible attitudes to the four dress-related activities. Perceptions vary between individuals and are dependent on context: an activity which one person regards as an enjoyable leisure activity may be seen as a dreaded chore by another. The same person may even vary their attitude to the same activity, according to a range of contextual factors. We have seen interconnections between these four practices, and that the attitude of an individual towards one practice can affect their activity in another. This demonstrates that dress-related practices are not isolated but interdependent, and suggests that there is scope for existing attitudes to be changed. However, efforts to promote alternative dress practices such as sorting, making and mending may be hampered by apparently widespread concerns about 'wasting time'.

Nevertheless, there is the potential to reduce clothing consumption – thereby contributing to a more sustainable fashion system – by supporting and promoting leisure activity in alternative dress practices. The re-knitting project indicates that it is possible to reframe mending as a creative, social, project-based leisure activity by integrating the benefits of making and the opportunity to positively engage with one's clothing choices. It is hoped that this micro-scale example may inform and inspire further activity amongst the large and vibrant community of amateur fashion makers.

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Figure captions

Figure 1: Julia's re-knitting project, a jumper converted into a cardigan with matching pocket.

Figure 2: Catherine's re-knitting project, an oversized cardigan with shortened and re-trimmed sleeves and matching pocket.