

I like it because it's been worn before: The sensory longevity of worn clothing

Abstract

This chapter opens pathways for a deeper, contextual understanding of clothing lifetimes, through a focus on sensory aspects of users' long-term relationships with clothes. The argument employs a combination of narrative enquiry, ethnographic analysis, and the tacit knowledge of the author as a designer-maker. A contextualised portrait of one woman's wardrobe here unravels the critical interplay between physical, emotional, and sensory elements of clothing longevity. The discussion throughout the chapter considers how sensory analysis of clothing contributes to an enhanced understanding of clothing longevity, alongside the opportunities and lessons this offers for creative design practice.

Introduction

This chapter highlights that designing for extended clothing lifetimes should include a focused creative reflection on user's multi-sensory perceptions of clothing in long-term use – introduced here as sensory longevity of clothing. As Bridgens & Lilley (2017) note, while designers are producing objects that are to be used in the future, they rarely look at that future. However, if clothes are to be worn over extended periods of time, learning to project long-term use must be at the core of the design process. The research presented here highlights that while the current fashion system is geared towards an obsession with newness and constant change, women's relationships with clothes in their wardrobes can unfold slowly, through multi-faceted considerations and sensory perceptions that often favour familiarity acquired through long-term use over the push to look for new and supposedly better, choices. In short, as Skjold too points out, the logic of current fashion business does not seem to reflect the "logics and practices of the majority of people when they go about getting dressed every day" (2016, p. 136), with devastating impacts on both the planet and people.

The argument presented here builds on my doctoral research that investigated emotional durability of clothing through the lens of my designer-maker practice. The approach I chose considered especially how women's sensory engagement with their clothes figures in their relationships with their wardrobes and how these relationships could inform the creative practice of designers who wish to design for continuity (Skjold, 2014) and increased user satisfaction (Niinimäki, 2014). The research journey I chose was shaped by Sarah Pink's work on sensory ethnography (2015 [2009]), which led me to focus especially on women's hands and the ways in which clothes were handled. My research approach also

reflected Norman's (2004) argument that look and feel in perception of design (*visceral level*) often precede considerations of how things work (*behavioural level*) and how they link to our self-image and memories (*reflective level*).

This chapter builds on the relationship of sensory comfort and construction details to clothing longevity, as these have received little consideration in research to date. For an extended discussion of sensory experiences, and other contextual aspects of emotional durability of clothing, please compare also with Burcikova (2017; 2020; 2021). The discussion concludes with a proposition of a sensory exercise for designers [Table 4.1] that opens tangible pathways to implementing sensory analysis of wardrobes into design practice.

Methodology

The methodology of the study I conducted between 2015-2018, stemmed from a dialogue between my designer-maker practice and my background in ethnography and cultural studies - a combination that has not been previously used in this area of research. My research role was hence not dissimilar to the notion of 'embodied ethnographer' - someone whose profession gives them entry to an area that is normally not easily accessible to other researchers and whose tacit knowledge from their frequent presence in the researched environment opens new layers for enquiry (Edvardsson & Street, 2007 in Pink 2015, p. 20-21). Theory, empirical research, and design practice equally underpinned my enquiry, albeit one or the other may have taken a stronger lead at various stages of the research.

The anthropologist Robert Murphy (1990) argued that the disadvantage of methods that rely predominantly on participants' verbal statements is that "people often do not do what they *say* they should be doing, or even what they *think* they are doing" (p. 174). Hence, verbal statement data, even if collected from relatively large samples of population, rarely enables access to tacit knowledge or the idiosyncrasies of lived experiences, emotions in particular (Stappers & Sanders, 2004). On the other hand, ethnographies that involve a trusting relationship between the researcher and the researched, utilising a range of complementary methods such as observation, photography, audio/video recordings, notebooks, sketchbooks, or sensory diaries, offer the benefit of comparing verbal accounts to observable behaviour (Murphy, 1990; Pink, 2011, 2012, 2015).

Utilising snowball sampling and word of mouth, starting with the clients of my slow fashion studio, my study included 10 women¹, aged 29-69, interviewed in their homes in several localities in the UK. I

¹ Julie, Louise, Hanka, Nicola, Golraz, Kathryn, Annabelle, Emma, Mary and Tanya. All participant data have been anonymised, pseudonyms are used throughout.

chose a narrative approach to interviewing (Elliott, 2005), focusing on what they wanted to tell me, while occasionally steering the conversation with additional questions. One of the key benefits of this approach was that by not asking women to pre-select clothes ahead of the interview, I got to hear not only about successful and 'loved' garments but also about those that failed to satisfy. This enriched my data with material for further cross-analysis.

My *wardrobe conversations* provided data for a multi-level thematic analysis of 450 garments, 20 hours of audio recordings and 2778 photographs, in four iterative stages, including 1. transcription, 2. collating wardrobe narratives and visual documentation of key garments, 3. thematic coding and 4. sketchbook reflections towards final designs, that interpreted each of the key themes through a corresponding garment. This iterative process aligned with Pink's assertion that analysis in sensory ethnography typically "moves between different registers of engagement with research materials and between different materials" and it also involves "analysing the same materials in different ways" (2015, p. 158).

Pairing selections of my transcribed data with photos from each interview strongly highlighted how visual showing and women's tactile engagement with clothing are inseparable from their verbal descriptions. This corresponds with Pink's observation that our engagement with materials is often quite performative, which means that people tend to "stroke, feel, smell, visually show and as such engage sensorially" with things during interviews (2015 [2009], p. 127). Throughout my wardrobe conversations, such sensory interaction with clothing sometimes preceded any verbal descriptions, other times it accompanied women's explanations. Most importantly though, on numerous occasions, touching, stroking, and examining garments in more detail clearly helped women to pin down what may have first seemed hard to put into words.

It is important to note that due to the qualitative approach employed in my study, the findings should not be generalized on the wider population and globally. Accordingly, while I focused on female participants, due to my experience as a designer-maker of womenswear, my findings do not assume a unified female gender identity. The methodology established through this research instead offers some clear methods of analysis and outcomes that can be used in design research and practice and adapted to specific contexts.

As the scope of this chapter does not allow for including the voices of all 10 participants, the narrative here draws on the portrayal method (Christou & King, 2014; Lulle & King, 2015), with focus on the wardrobe of one woman – Louise, corroborated it later discussion with findings and quotes from across

the sample. The wardrobe of Louise was selected for its richness and the insights it provides in relationship to the argument of sensory longevity presented here.

While a wardrobe conversation is a moment in time, a woman's wardrobe is a diachronic process that constantly evolves and can hence never be captured in its entirety. Yet, as the following section will demonstrate, being able to savour at least a fraction of this process through a woman's narrative, still offers a number of valuable clues on the clothes women love to wear and the reasons why they keep wearing the same items over many years.

Louise: I just like it because it's been worn before

LOUISE'S WARDROBE

Louise is a French tutor, living in West Yorkshire with her partner and two young children. When I first approached her about my research, Louise felt she did not really have enough clothes that could interest me. Just like several other women I spoke to, she seemed to need reassurance that I was not looking for any extraordinary pieces. She seemed to relax into our conversation when I reiterated that the purpose would be to talk about clothes that she wears on a regular basis.

Louise does not really like new clothes, or clothes shopping as such, because she finds it difficult to find what she would like to wear. This is why her wardrobe mainly consists of clothes handed down to her from other people. Many of these items are up to forty years old. She has several pieces from her grandmother, who had a similar figure, and like Louise, liked simple clothes. Other clothes in Louise's wardrobe come from her mother, her sister and there are also some presents from her best friend. Quite a few pieces, both old and new, are supplied by Louise's mother-in-law. Unlike Louise, she loves clothes shopping and often buys presents for the family in small boutiques in her hometown in northern France.

Louise still also keeps and wears several items from her teenage years in France. For example, the pair of trousers she was wearing at the time of our conversation, is one that she has had for nearly fifteen years [Figure 4.1].

This pair of trousers is the only one I wear. I'm going to be thirty-one and my mum bought them for me when I was about sixteen. I didn't wear them for a long time, but I kept them because I thought they were good quality. Then one day I found them in my mess [laughs] and I was like

– “wow”! Now I wear them all the time because they’re so comfy! It’s a good shape. I’ve had them for so long and I wear them almost every day.

<FIGURE 4.1 HERE>

There is also an even older pair of trousers which she keeps wearing in summer:

I got these pants when I was twelve. Honest! I loved them! I can’t wear them outside anymore because they’re full of stains and they’re probably a bit pink-ish. They’re supposed to be white. Anyway, my grandma’s fixed them several times. She changed the zip, the button, she also had to do some work over here [showing]. And when I grew out of them, she cut the bottom to make them into shorter pants. I still love wearing them in the summer [smiles]. It’s like a treasure hunt in my wardrobe.

Another of such treasures is a skirt that Louise remembers her mother wearing when she and her sister were growing up [Figures 4.2-4.3].

This was just so cool! I used to call it the Pocahontas skirt, when I was little. And then I was old enough, my mum said: do you want it? And I said: yeah - I’ve always dreamt of having your Pocahontas skirt!

I’ve worn it a lot, a lot, a lot. Especially when I was pregnant, because it can extend. Unfortunately, that destroyed the skirt - it’s stretched. You can tighten it a little bit but it’s lost its glory [laughs]. It’s also lost the little pearl that gave it its Pocahontas style.

<FIGURES 4.2-4.3 HERE>

Despite the damage and the lost pearl, Louise still keeps the skirt. It has served her well and it may well be useful again sometime in the future – “you never know”, she says. Browsing through all the pre-worn clothes in her wardrobe, she is adamant that latest trends or fashion brands are of no interest to her. However, she still has a very clear idea about her own style and the kind of clothes she likes or dislikes. She prefers plain elegance and does not like extravagance in material or design, so she looks for clothes with simple style and straight cut.

Other key considerations for Louise are the softness of material and comfort. Soft touch, she thinks, explains her love of pre-worn clothes because they would have softened through wear and repeated washing. At the same time, she is conscious that quality is a critical factor, “cause if you wash a Primark

top fifteen times then it would be dead, right? - it wouldn't be soft [laughs]". The clothes passed onto her by her mother-in-law and other family members have all stood this test of time, just like the bright red work dress that she loves [Figure 4.4].

This one is also from my mother-in-law. She had it when she was a young girl and she had it adjusted for me. It's very old - you can tell - and it's just really nice. She said: do you want it? I tried it on and it was a bit too wide, so she did that [showing how it's been taken in] - she took it to someone who made it a bit tighter. I love it!

You know, I just like it because it's been worn before. I find that cool [laughs]. Someone loved it and now I love it and maybe someone else will love it one day.

<FIGURE 4.4 HERE>

Her all-time favourite, however, is a black day skirt by Sisley, that her mother-in-law used to wear as a student [Figure 4.5]. Louise wears this one all the time, and so when I visited, the skirt was in the dryer. However, she kindly pulled it out to show it to me in the kitchen as I was leaving.

<FIGURE 4.5 HERE>

This is my favourite black skirt. It's easy to wear, it's straight, and I wear it at work with anything. It's very old, right? It's awful - it used to be black and now it's grey. So my favourite clothes are probably not the prettiest [laughs]. Here you see how it used to be really black, but I still love it! It's so versatile! I've been wearing this since I've met my partner - probably good fifteen years now. And look at it! It's still good...

Pre-worn clothing seems to possess the kind of reassuring familiarity and sensory comfort that Louise looks for in her wardrobe. Long history of wear and washing not only softens materials, but it also gradually reshapes each item so that it almost moulds to the body. *You put it on and it's like a second skin really*, she says with a broad smile.

Sensory longevity

The wardrobe portrait of Louise demonstrates the significance of tactile perceptions of clothing for women's clothing relationships. While her wardrobe here serves as an illustration of a case in point, all the women I spoke to repeatedly commented not only on the aesthetic and visual qualities of their

clothing, but also, and perhaps more often, on how an item wears on the body or how it makes them feel.

Body plays a vital role in women's decisions about what to wear, Woodward (2007) argues. The tactile perceptions of softness or warmth, as well as the sense of how a garment enables or restricts movement, are all key in such considerations (p. 17). Chong Kwan (2016) further notes that the changing "sensorial materiality" of clothes, as experienced through multiple senses, affects wearers not only physically but also emotionally (p. 284). In addition, while perceptions through multiple senses can often be coordinated and supporting each other, at other times they can be contradictory and causing confusion (Howes, 2005; Chong Kwan, 2016). The latter often results in mixed feelings about an item of clothing, when for example a jumper with a beautiful pattern and a lovely colour feels itchy against the skin.

Niinimäki & Armstrong (2013) highlight that it is the physical aspects of garments that we experience first, and while these in themselves do not guarantee neither longevity nor long-term emotional connection, they are critical to how we respond to a piece of clothing over time (p. 192). Another key insight from my observations of women's sensory engagement with clothing is the significance of apparently small construction details, such as pockets or buttons, for how women relate to the clothes in their wardrobes over time. Pockets, it seems, are humble agents of independence and comfort. Buttons, interestingly, can easily tip the balance between loving or discarding an item of clothing. As I noted earlier, the argument here focuses especially on the relationship of sensory comfort and construction details to clothing longevity, as these have been rarely addressed in discussions to date.

SENSORY COMFORT

In his discussion of Heidegger's *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* (1977), the anthropologist Tim Ingold remarks that the leading interest of the essay is in determining what it takes "for a house to be a home" (2000, p. 180). My observations of women's sensory engagement with clothing were led by a similar concern. As my explorations progressed, it gradually emerged that research on what lies behind longevity and emotional durability of clothing is in many respects a search for a point when a piece of material worn on the body is no longer perceived as something external to the wearer. If perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, my wardrobe conversations evidence that a strong emotional connection to an item of clothing often manifests itself in that a garment is no longer noticed. Its wearing becomes habitual, and almost unconscious. The feeling of reassuring familiarity makes the experience of wearing it feel like a second nature. In line with Baumann's notion of the home as a place where no defence is required and where there is no need to prove anything (cited in Malicki, 2014, p.

4), such piece of clothing becomes “a home for the body” (Niinimäki, 2010; Chong Kwan, 2016). While such items are then integral to how we feel and how we experience the world around us, their success relies on the fact that their wearing is effortless and almost unnoticed by the wearer. This is evidenced in multiple references to garments that “feel like not wearing anything” (Hanka, Julie, Louise, Mary). All such instances are strongly linked to bodily comfort negotiated by the softness of materials, often enhanced through long-term use.

Several materials have been recognised in wardrobe research for their capacity to improve and become more comfortable through wear. For example, wool and leather are frequently mentioned as materials that age “gracefully”, and so they often feature in narratives of favourite items and long-term use (see e.g. Woodward, 2007; Niinimäki, 2010, 2014; Fletcher, 2016; Connor-Crabb, 2017; Ravnløkke, 2019). Denim is an especially compelling point in case. Its popularity and wide appeal is often linked to its inherent quality of moulding to the body and aging with the wearer (Candy, 2005; Woodward, 2007; Miller & Woodward, 2011).

In sum, soft and light garments seem to possess the crucial capacity to be appreciated for being “unnoticed” by wearers. Just like health is the blessing of being unaware of one’s body (Murphy, 1990), comfort experienced through the soft feel and the lightness of fabric seems to be a state of being unaware of one’s clothes. Crucially, in terms of the argument presented here, both these qualities also tend to improve with time, through continuous wear and laundering. Tanya’s beloved blue dress that she has worn for over fifteen years has softened to an extent that it is now “incredibly comfortable to wear”. Importantly for her lifestyle of frequent travel, it’s worn quality also means that it now folds very easily into her suitcase. As highlighted in Louise’s wardrobe portrait above, the unique worn quality that clothing acquires over time is also one of the main reasons for her preference of old clothes over new items.

DETAILS

In addition, the evidence from my wardrobe conversations provides further support for Fletcher’s suggestion that “our search for satisfaction – so often the motivation behind a new round of consumption of whole fashion pieces – is channelled through uncovering and noticing the details” (2016, p. 283).

As I already noted in the methodology section, my focus on photographing the ways in which women handled the clothes they chose to show me, led me to noticing how their hands followed their favourite details. Emma, for example, pointed out the fabric covered buttons that were her favourite feature of

her mum's old dress. Tanya proudly showed me the inside of the pocket on her beloved travel dress - a cherished reminder of its now washed-out original colour. Louise's favourite "Pocahontas skirt" (see Figures 4.2-4.3), named after a plastic pearl at the end of the drawstring, is another great illustration here. Subtle and often hidden construction details can capture the intimacy and the richness of meaning only known to the wearer and so they can be vital for a garment's long-term appreciation.

Buttons and other decorative details

As the following extracts illustrate, buttons, belts, and decorative details such as applique or embroidery were frequently mentioned in connection to favourite items:

I like the fact that you've got these sort of brocade things, the velvet and then it's done it also on the pocket (Kathryn)

This is very old...I love it because of these flowers (Golraz)

I liked it because of the belt (Mary)

I like things like this – I like pearl buttons (Nicola)

It's a feature on the sleeves – I think that's quite nice – it gives a little something to the jacket (Louise)

Kathryn and Emma especially emphasized their love of buttons. They both seem to have jars of vintage buttons which they occasionally use to alter and liven up some items. "*I quite often change buttons on things*", Emma says, "*because it makes quite a difference, doesn't it?*"

Buttons, my research confirms, can decide whether a piece of clothing finds its use within its owner's wardrobe. This strongly corresponds with Fletcher's point that, "many times the stories from the public suggest that it is the details and components of garments that hold the key to satisfying use" (2016, p. 238). Hanka offers a good illustration here, as she tells me that buttons were a great disappointment to her when she first received a dress from one of her favourite designers bought on E-bay. Similarly, Annabelle admits that she "*felt a bit rotten*" for throwing away a jacket from her mother's two piece because "*the buttons were just too big and looked dated*".

In addition, garment details are often also seen as important indicators of quality. This comes through especially clearly as Golraz explains that to assess the quality of a garment when clothes shopping, she

first looks at details. She shows me the zip on one of her favourite day dresses, gently unzipping and then closing it again. She repeats the process several times as we speak, gently savouring the process. Her love of this dress is strongly linked to the way the zip has been inserted:

Because when I wear it, I kind of think that I am taking care of myself – because somebody took care of this. This has been loved, you know [smiles]. That's what I like.

Similarly, Julie points out the lining and the mismatched buttons on a designer jacket that she had bought on a shopping trip with a friend. While she is adamant that she does not care about designer brands per se, she admits that “these kind of details” that she likes, are more likely to come with the more expensive designer pieces. Like Golraz, Julie too says that attention to detail makes her feel that an item she is wearing was well made. It is this sign of quality, rather than a brand, that she looks for and appreciates in a piece of clothing.

Pockets

It doesn't have pockets, that's its only fault, Hanka tells me as she hands me a dress that she loves wearing in summer. Pockets, as it later turns out, are key to the success of any item in her wardrobe. Mary and Emma do not especially look for pockets when clothes shopping, but along with the rest of my interviewees they too agree that pockets are an appreciated and extremely useful feature in clothing. While Mary feels that is also important for pockets to work with a garment's cut, she admits that they have their place in most garments, work jackets especially:

It's nice to have pockets. It's gonna be irritating on the odd occasion when you're wearing something that doesn't have pockets. It is irritating not having pockets on a jacket (Mary)

As Summers (2016) argues, having pockets to put things into gives women independence and a freedom to walk around unburdened by extra items such as purses. This comes through especially strongly in Kathryn's description of one of her longest standing pieces of clothing - a denim jacket that she associates with holidays. She loves it especially because she can put her keys and anything else she needs in her pockets when she wears it with a dress in summer. The same is reiterated by Golraz, who says she always has something to put in her pockets. If her clothes do not have them, “it's a problem because I have to put things in my bag then”.

In sum, pockets seem to be a strong feature of many favourite garments. If my interviewees liked an item without pockets, their absence was often commented on, just like in Hanka's above description of

her pocketless dress. The lack of pockets seems to be “*a shame*” and “*a disadvantage*” of a piece of clothing.

Design for sensory longevity

The discussion above demonstrates that women’s tactile perceptions of clothes can significantly affect how they feel about individual items in their wardrobes. The success of favourite pieces often manifests itself in that their wearing is effortless and almost unnoticed by their wearers. The feeling of comfort, often negotiated through the light weight and soft touch of materials, can thus be a critical factor in longevity and emotional durability of clothing.

Another key finding from my wardrobe conversations relates to the significance of construction details for satisfying use. Surprisingly, aside from few exceptions (WRAP, 2013; Fletcher, 2016), these have received little attention in research on fashion and sustainability more broadly, and design for longevity and emotional durability more specifically. More questions on garment details therefore need to be raised in the future by researchers and design practitioners with interest in clothing longevity.

While noticing the significance of sensory perceptions in everyday experiences with clothing, it seems striking that sensory aspects of design hardly feature in design education - also highlighted by Sonneveld (2004). In her *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, Pink (2015 [2009]) recommends that sensory ethnographers prepare for their fieldwork by an auto-ethnographic exercise which can help them develop an understanding of their own sensory perceptions of the world (p. 60). In light of the empirical evidence presented here, I propose that designers who wish to design clothes that can have long-term relevance in people’s wardrobes, would usefully benefit from a similar auto-ethnographic exercise.

Sissons (2016) argues that designers can hardly expect people to want to wear their creations if they themselves would not want to wear them. Echoing her approach, I propose that if designers develop a deeper understanding of their own sensory responses to the clothes they wear, they can more easily implement multi-sensory considerations into their creative work. As discussed throughout this chapter, the evidence from my wardrobe conversations strongly suggests that this could considerably improve everyday experiences of people who will go about their lives wearing their designs.

SENSORY EXERCISE FOR DESIGNERS

The sensory exercise in the table below [Table 4.1] was developed as an extension of the sensory wardrobe methodology established through this research. Its purpose is to help cultivate designers’

sensitivity towards multi-sensory perceptions of clothing and to focus imagination beyond visual aspects of design. To date, it has been utilised in the application of this research to designer-maker practice (see Burcikova, 2020 for more detail). It has also been used as a teaching tool at London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London and the School of Arts, Design and Architecture at Aalto University. The exercise can be equally adapted for use within design teams in fashion and textiles MSEs and larger organisations, to facilitate contextual understanding of clothing longevity and to shift creative focus away from the still prevailing cult of newness.

<TABLE 4.1 HERE>

Conclusion

The empirical evidence presented in this chapter alongside strategies for incorporating sensory analysis of wardrobes into design will be of interest to a breadth of researchers and students of fashion concerned with clothing longevity and sustainable fashion futures. Critically though, this way of working opens new pathways for designers who wish to cultivate “emotional and sensorial closeness to their users” (Von Busch, 2018). It is therefore especially suitable for the expanding segment of micro and small sustainable fashion businesses (MSEs), who are increasingly recognised as leaders in human-scale, holistic innovations within the fashion sector (Aakko, 2016; Connor-Crabb, 2017; European Commission, 2019). While the mainstream narrative of fashion is still ruled by large players and high-street chains, the global fashion sector largely comprises of micro and small businesses (FSP, 2018-21; Statista, 2017; European Commission, 2019).

In this sense, the approach to fashion design and making that this chapter introduces sits outside the production methods used in the “current condition” (Fletcher, 2016, p. 272) of the fashion industry at large. Focus on sensory longevity of clothing is not an approach to be scaled up, thus residing within the current narrative of growth and scale. Rather, it is a way of working to be “scaled across” (Connor-Crabb, 2017) by those whose operations, like my own designer-maker practice, aim to counteract the mindset of clothing disposability by embracing models that enable rich customer engagement and iterative feedback on design (Williams, Burcikova & Buchan-Ng, 2021). Larger scale design and production industries of fashion and clothing can use this research as a point of reference to reconceptualise their practices towards long-term customer satisfaction, shifting away from an outdated and wasteful model that continues to accelerate the climate crisis.

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