

What makes it last? Exploring Human Relationship traits in long-term wearer-clothing relationships

Ana Neto

CIAUD, Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal

João Ferreira

UNIDCOM / IADE / Universidade Europeia, Portugal

Abstract

Background and issue addressed: When we think about our wardrobe, we can quickly identify pieces we could readily part with and pieces we could not live without. We may distinguish with similar ease between pieces we use and care for to go on using, and items we will replace without batting an eye as soon as we deem them unfit for our body, taste, or life. The extraordinary combo of affordability and convenience allows for clothing in our wardrobes to amass and be replaced indiscriminately. However, buying less may contribute to improving people's satisfaction with their clothes, as "when humans possessed fewer items of clothing than today, (...) they generally had more meaningful, sustainable, mindful and pleasurable relationships with their garments" (Clark, 2019, p.320). Looking back to our wardrobes and how we experience clothing, the million-dollar question emerges: what makes people stick to what they already own, regardless of the affordability and convenience with which they could buy more?

Understanding what leads to garment retention and extended use is crucial to advancing the sustainability agenda. Research focused on the relationships between people and clothes is becoming fundamental to understand the complexity of the use phase. For example, studies by Niinimäki & Koskinen (2011) and Laitala, Boks & Klepp (2015) are notable on identifying motives for people to keep or discard clothes; Woodward (2007) digs into women's considerations when getting dressed; Fletcher (2016) focuses on the practices of use of clothing; Burcikova (2019) pinpoints the more mundane concerns that surround emotional durable clothing, and Valle-Noronha (2019) identifies concepts on wearer-clothing relationships that can elicit more active engagements.

Within this field, in our previous study (Neto & Ferreira, 2021) we focused on the occurrence of conflict in wearer-clothing relationships — which seems to be inevitable — and suggested that the longevity of the former is more influenced by the wearer's approach to conflict than by the existence of conflict itself.

Corresponding author's email:

ana.neto@fa.ulisboa.pt

Changes made to garments to extend their functional life, and acceptance of their appearance — either looking new or old and worn — are examples of ways in which wearers overcome difficulties and enjoy fashion at a slower pace and beyond the buying experience (Fletcher, 2016; Clark, 2019). Valle-Noronha & Niinimäki (2018) identify how early difficulties can provide a learning curve that is beneficial for wearer-clothing relationships, further wondering if design should purposely incorporate such frictions in clothes. This, however, could backfire into more unwanted garments if wearers are not willing to go through the learning curve and overcome those difficulties. It seems essential, then, to understand what makes wearers face the difficulties with their garments positively.

Methodology: This paper presents a work in progress where we explore the similarities between what makes wearer-clothing relationships and human loving relationships last. To do so, we designed an open-ended questionnaire where we asked adult participants — regardless of practising conscious or conspicuous consumption of clothing — to write about a garment they have owned for a long time and was still in use. We then took an inductive approach based on the grounded theory method (Glaser & Strauss, 2006) to analyse the data from our survey, focusing only on female participants (the majority of our respondents), in a total of 170 submissions. Initial analysis resulted in the identification of wearers' behaviours towards their clothes; these behaviours were then categorised according to interpersonal relationships theory, which allowed us to identify patterns that may influence the wearer's approach to the difficulties in their relationships with clothes. We illustrate our findings with qualitative data and discuss it with existing research on garment longevity and use.

Results and Relevance: Our preliminary findings suggest that behaviours that have been found in interpersonal love theory as contributing to relationship longevity can be recognised in long-term wearer-clothing relationships. Similarly, these behaviours seem to influence the willingness of wearers to engage in efforts to overcome the frictions arising in the relationship with their clothes. Through this framework, we discuss our findings with relevant literature and point out why some common design strategies to promote user attachment may not, alone, foster garment longevity.

For fashion and sustainability theory, it strengthens the argument that more than specific attributes in clothing, it is how the relationship develops with the user that supports its longevity (Fletcher, 2016). The clear mapping expands the landscape of literature on this subject, opens paths to further research on how to nurture specific behaviour in wearers and change the collective narrative on cultural clothing practices. For design practice, the expansion of our understanding of what makes wearer-clothing relationships last may help to find more effective solutions to support slow fashion values during use.

Keywords: slow fashion; wearer-clothing relationships; product attachment; garment longevity

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