

***‘Stuff and Nonsense’*: Conflicting values in women’s wardrobes**

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Abstract

Purpose: In a world of fast fashion and rapidly changing style, issues of sustainability and the ethics of fashion are at the forefront of critiques of exploitative systems and practice. However, it is evident that consumers are not dupes, and retain items of clothing and accessories for a number of reasons that exceed these prior occupations (Banim and Guy, 2001; Woodward 2007; Miller 2010; 2012; Twigg 2013; Crewe 2017). Investigations on the lifecycle of clothing have noted that “extending the average life of an item of clothing by just 3 months would reduce its carbon, water and waste footprint by 5-10%” (WRAP, 2012: 2) so it is pertinent to consider the ways in which clothing could be worn, or used, over a longer timeframe. This paper uses a material culture approach to explore the conflicting values in play for consumers, highlighting agency that is exercised post consumption (de Certeau 1984; Fiske 1989, 2010; Fletcher 2016), and why, despite critiques of an exploitative fashion system, people keep ‘stuff’, attaching an array of memories, stories and values to items that ultimately appear to have no monetary value.

Methodology: Using a material culture approach that draws on ethnographic research, alongside testimony and object analysis, this paper will explore how the sorting of clothing in women’s wardrobes is pertinent to understanding the different connotations of value that come into play in relation to the disposal practices employed, such as a hierarchy of sorting; the consideration given to the gifting of clothing to others; the innovative practices employed in relation to either extending the life of garments through alteration or alternative use; and that the initial monetary value of clothing and accessory items often does not constitute the reason for their retention. Significant emotional attachment, evident in the discussion of clothes, extends far beyond economic capital and into memory activity.

Findings: Evidence illuminated through such research methodologies provides valuable insight into everyday use through the experiential voice of the consumer, highlighting their practices in the gifting, borrowing, sharing, retention and disposal of clothing in their post-consumption life.

Originality/value: This paper utilises testimony from seven women ranging in age from their 40s to their 80s undertaken for this paper. Clothes that are kept but unworn, are often overlooked in discussions of clothing, dress and fashion, and an understanding of these practices can, and should, feed into discussions of sustainability.

Keywords: value; material culture; agency; gifting; memory; stories; post-consumption; disposal hierarchies

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