

‘Residencies’: mixed methods research investigating fashion through place

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper explores research methods which draw on a new wave of fashion and sustainability discourse and design-aligned methods looking to everyday practices for the seeds of change.

Art and design practices are increasingly being called on to address societal challenges, and therefore need to contend with questions of system-level societal change. However, fashion and sustainability discourse tends to focus on developing technical fixes for individual concerns of production or consumption, rather than addressing the underlying socio-economic issues supporting the status quo.

Design/methodology/approach: ‘Residencies’ is a suite of creative, ethnographic and cooperative research methods for swiftly gathering the ‘lie of the land’ of fashion behaviours associated with sustainability and resilience in specific geographic locations.

Findings: We describe a pilot of ‘Residencies’ in the summer of 2018 in London and Leeds, United Kingdom. A description of each method is followed by recommendations for future use by other researchers, including acknowledging the requirement for an iterative approach to these types of data collection, and the need to ‘leave space’ for spontaneous method development.

Originality/value: This paper shares insights of novel research methods development used to build initial holistic understanding of clothing behaviours. It will be of interest to those seeking new methods for more useful understanding of clothing systems, transformational change and cross-disciplinary, creative and participative practice.

Keywords: Sustainable Fashion, Design Research, Participatory Research Methods, Mixed Methods Research, Poetic Inquiry

Article Classification: Research Paper

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Introduction

This paper describes ways of developing understanding of everyday fashion behaviours, with the larger objective of gaining crucial insights into possibilities for social and cultural sustainability action. We have been motivated to develop new, much-needed hybrid field methods based on our own experiences and familiarity with literature from sustainability, design and research disciplines.

Background

As design is increasingly called on to tackle large societal challenges it must contend with questions not only of form and function but of system level change (Sangiorgi and Scott, 2015; Thackara 2005; Manzini 2008). For this, design in part turns to the social sciences which has a long history of investigating the complex organic systems society and culture (Sangiorgi and Scott, 2015). Muireann McMahon and Tracy Bhamra note that sustainability investigations are well suited to the discipline of design because it offers a creative platform that is a convergence of science, technology and the arts (2015). As a subset of design, fashion is equally likewise engaged with difficult problems such as sustainability, but in this regard has so far been dominated by industry-linked approaches preoccupied with technical solutions for individual elements of production or consumption, rather than addressing underlying socio-economic issues supporting the status quo (Thackara, 2015).

There is however, an emergent movement in fashion calling for systemic approaches focused on the potentially more far-reaching and powerful aspects of fashion sustainability: the social and cultural fashion of the everyday human experience (Fletcher, 2017b). This builds on the evolving recognition from international sustainable development bodies that sustainability strategies must be grounded in social and cultural realities if they are to succeed (Duxbury and Jeannotte, 2010). Social sustainability approaches are also in sympathy with the recent surge in interest from fashion studies more generally into everyday aspects of fashion culture (Entwistle, 2015; Buckley and Clark, 2017). Like other design disciplines before it, fashion is drawing on more established work in the social sciences, developed since the 1970s, looking at the 'life-world' of materials and culture (Reckwitz, 2002: 244). Given the burgeoning interest from fashion and sustainability in this area, further development of the already existing fashion methodology is required.

To this end, ethnographic approaches offer ways of understanding the complexity of the social or contextualised world of clothing and fashion. Furthermore Sophie Woodward finds ethnographic approaches have the potential to offer important sustainability insights (2015: 131-132). Methods inspired by ethnography have been used within studies of fashion and sustainability in the following areas: wardrobe audits and wardrobe interview methods (Fletcher & Klepp, 2017), design thinking and community engagement (Williams, 2018) and hybrid methods adapted from geography specifically to study fashion localism (Fletcher, 2018). A thread running through many of these projects is that useful

new knowledge for sustainability is to be gained from making detailed observations of the specific contexts that influence the social dynamics of clothing often at the very local level.

'Residencies' calls on the strengths of art and design to make sense of certain difficult to describe dimensions of the human condition and surrounding world; including nuance, empathy and those not reducible to language (Knowles and Cole, 2008). There were specific strengths of art and design that we have designed into each step of the research process. At the observation and analysis stage, critical theory supports the position of the researcher's methods acknowledging their subjective selves as instruments of research analysis (Nutov, 2017) and this has been developed with traditions of artist residencies in mind, to frame the researcher as bringing their existing tools and evolving practice to a new area, using an outsider or 'foreigner' gaze as a useful perspective (Lippard, 1997). At the analysis stage we were further interested in how art processes might practically be developed as a means building knowledge by 'thinking through making' (Glanville, 2015: 15; Shön, 1983; Dewey, 1910). Creative outputs in this pilot using explorations through drawing, mapping, poetry and photography offer the potential to include subjects' own words and voices (Woodward, 2015) to communicate to non-scholarly audiences (Fletcher, 2017) and to function as interventions and action for change (Sangiorgi and Scott, 2015).

We perceive one of the biggest obstacles to employing such approaches in fashion research is that studies of everyday actions inspired by ethnography are extremely time consuming and require a high level of research expertise. In response to this, we have designed a set of methods, 'Residencies' to be quicker and less involved as a first step to gaining such knowledge; an initial 'lay of the land', useful for guiding subsequent research in the area. The list of methods we developed are just one combination possible, that we felt was appropriate to the context. In this case drawn from design, fine art observation, and cultural geography processes. We have used these to gather and analyse data about the area in relation to fashion behaviours and dynamics. We have begun the process of exploring these findings further using creative practices of drawing, mapping, poetry and photography, as a means of further analysis and communication. They have also been designed to include descriptions in local residents' own words, and an exploration of our subjective experience of the place as 'researchers-in-residence'.

Description of methods, development and recommendations

We tested two versions of the 'Residencies' methods in July and August 2018 in two different urban contexts, London and Leeds. As part of a larger overall aim to understand how clothing cultures are shaped by place and vice versa, we sought to more specifically focus our efforts in this project around the research question 'What dynamics of clothing behaviours are present in places of extreme demographic diversity?'.

The ‘neighbourhoods’ we worked in were two urban areas characterised by extremes. The first is two retail ‘zones’ in Leeds city centre which sit side-by-side: Leeds Kirkgate Market, established in 1875 and the largest covered market in Europe, and Victoria Gate, a £165 million luxury shopping development completed in 2016. Our second site was Shoreditch, London: a place where fashion reflects the intense gentrification of recent years (inspiring the phrase ‘Shoreditchification’) and some of the highest poverty in Europe (London Borough of Hackney, 2015). One of the researchers has her home in Leeds and considers this to be her ‘patch’. The other is resident in London and sees east London as her locale.

We designed a mix of methods to undertake over the course of about five hours in each location. Some methods had been tested and refined prior to the Residencies work. The methods were as follows:

Method 1: WALK AND OBSERVE

Description

In each location, the city’s ‘resident’ researcher planned a rough route to walk the area over the course of the day. The resident researcher introduced the visitor researcher to people, places and information of the area considered potentially interesting. This included historic and socio-economic context, local knowledge specific to clothing and fashion and their own lived experience. Routes included a rough circumnavigation of the area followed by a meandering walk diagonally through the centre. Over a 5-6 hour day in each location we walked between 1-3 miles and spoke to about 2 dozen people.

Development and recommendations

We found it difficult to plan for the extremely small area which can realistically and fruitfully be covered in one day. We suggest future researchers plan to cover a maximum area of 1 km² (~.4 mi²) of densely packed urban area per five hours. The design of a semi-structured, semi-guided walk proved a useful way to combine some of the best aspects of a guided walk (efficient gathering of data, packed with rich moments for observation) and a flaneur-inspired walk (spontaneous, not pre-determined observations of meetings and places) (Rizk and Birioukov, 2017).

Method 2: AMBIENCE COLLECTION

Description

During these walks, in randomly-selected two-minute bursts throughout the day, we independently recorded all multi-sensory internal and external data available to us at that moment. Each researcher set phone timers for the ambience collection for the other researcher, to make it as ‘accidental’ as possible.

Data was recorded through written notes, audio recording and photography, which became part of our ‘experience collection’ of the place (Heavey *et al.*, 2010).

Development and recommendations

This method proved fruitful as a way of inserting reflection points throughout the day, and a useful subjective and sensory point of reference when revisiting our notes. We recommend future researchers practice this method beforehand to gain a handle on how to document ‘ephemeral’ data most effectively and consider how to ensure the two-minute bursts are as random as possible.



Image 1 Caption: Photograph from fieldwork in Leeds



Image 2 Caption: Photograph from fieldwork in Shoreditch

Method 3: PHOTOGRAPHY

Description

Film cameras with manual focus were used to record two types of image through the day: the scene immediately in front of each researcher, done at the same time each hour; the scene selected as significant by the researcher at randomly-selected times. This type of photography slowed the process of observation and documentation and encouraged careful selection of ‘worthwhile’ scenes. In turn this encouraged greater analysis of subjectivity when viewing the photographs post-research. Photographs were also captured using our smartphones.

Development and recommendations

We feel a useful development (which we didn't have time for in this project) would be to have all the printed images laid out and be able to move them around as part of our overall reflection. In general, our visual observations formed predictably useful data as part of the overall analysis, including comparing reasons for shooting on film or smartphone.

Method 4: PARTICIPANT CARDS

Description

We engaged in casual conversation with shopkeepers, shoppers, shopping centre staff and stall holders to ask questions about the dynamics and fashion issues of each area. With some of these conversations, we asked the participant to complete a double-sided card. These were designed to stimulate further conversation and to get participants to report on personal clothing practices linked to each area. This included a form of sentence completion to draw out their values and motivations in relation to these practices and place. See Image 1 for an example of the cards.

1. How would you describe what local clothing around Shoreditch means:

(write as much as you can please!)

2. Tick any of the following that you do IN Shoreditch:

- Shop at a local independent clothes shop
- Use a drycleaner or laundrette
- Have a place or person locally that inspires you to dress in a certain way or that you dress differently for
- Get clothes made or repaired by a tailor
- Attend a sewing class or knitting group
- Source fabric or haberdashery supplies locally
- Have a friend or family member locally who lends you clothes, helps you repair clothes or makes clothes for you
- Anything else in relation to your clothes

CARD FRONT

CARD BACK

Image 3 Caption: Participant Clothing Practice Cards version 4

Participants began by filling in simple questions designed to elicit useful, 'conversation-starting' answers, including marking which in a list of clothing-related activities they had participated in locally. This answer was then used by one of the researchers to ascertain more details about the subject's

experience of this particular clothing practice. We used Reckwitz' description of practices as constellations of bodily, mind, object and background experiences (Shove *et al.*, 2002) to ask questions related to the practice to gain a fuller story of the combination of practice, subject and place.

Development and recommendations

Of all the methods, the participant cards underwent the most development. Two iterations were piloted before the project and refined twice more to best fulfil the difficult aim of generating a beneficial interaction where useful descriptions of people's clothing practices in relation to place could be uncovered. We found people do not naturally have a language to talk about clothing practices in relation to place, making it a challenge to design questions, phrasing and conversation management for this type of research. However, the ethnographic value of participants' voices encouraged us to iterate, and we are pleased with the final version of these cards.

In both locations it was only possible to give out about six cards over the course of the research, due to the time demands of other methods and the requirement to engage participants and explain the project. Future researchers could choose to prioritise the card activity over other methods to gain more responses or devote a separate research period to this method (as we plan to do).

Method 5: WALKING REFLECTIONS AND CONVERSATIONS

Description

Originally unplanned but then developed and formalised were the dozens of little conversations and reflections shared between the two researchers throughout each of the research periods. Initially these were recorded as notes and then consequently audio recorded.

Development and recommendations

Audio recordings became the most effective way to document these often complex and meandering reflections, and we recommend any partner researchers to use this as a primary method of documentation. This was a time-consuming but fruitful method of interrogating data as it was collected, allowing for immediate insights which were then explored post-research. Future researchers should take this into consideration when scheduling their research period.

Method 6: CREATIVE RESPONSE AS ANALYSIS

Description

Each researcher used their creative specialism in the post-research period to further explore the data collected, test the specialism as a way to analyse data, and - if possible - build further knowledge about

each of the areas. This included drawing and mapping, and poetry. Our subjectivity in this method is clearly visible and is used as an attempt to deepen understanding of the data as well as consider ways in which the data so far can be presented to a non-academic audience.



Image 4 Caption: Initial mapping of clothing activity areas in Shoreditch



Image 5 Caption: Initial mapping collage of Shoreditch

Development and recommendations

As this is almost a post-research research method, we are still understanding the potential developments it needs to undergo to be most effective for future researchers. However, researchers wishing to use the whole suite of 'Residencies' methods should consider how their creative specialism can be used to explore and analyse data, and what specialised data they need to collect during the research period to facilitate this e.g. recording footsteps and directions, or direct quotations.

Conclusion

The 'Residencies' methods described in this paper function as suite of creative, ethnographic and cooperative research methods for swiftly gathering the 'lie of the land' of everyday fashion behaviours in specific geographic locations. They are meant to be useful to future fashion and sustainability research based on the emerging belief that designed technologies, services and systems matter only if they are implicated in the enactment and practices of everyday life (Sangiorgi and Scott, 2015: 116-118). These methods have been developed for a new wave of fashion and sustainability discourse and design-aligned methods looking to everyday practices for the seeds of change (Fletcher & Klepp, 2017; Glanville, 2015; Ehrenfeld, 2008; Thorpe, 2012; Ward 2005: 141). This is therefore the best place to look for places to intervene in systems and challenge the status quo (Shove 2003: 203).

These methods should be of interest to those seeking new methods for more useful understanding of clothing systems, transformational change and cross-disciplinary, creative and participative practice. These methods should act as a barometer to identify (a) emergent practices linked to sustainability and resilience, and (b) points for future research and (c) interventions for change. We hope this novel approach to building initial holistic knowledge of clothing behaviours and of this cooperative enquiry research process described above will be used by future research and developed further.

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