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## **Expanding Style Horizons: Slow, local and collective care as an intervention to fast fashion cycles**

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Fashion brands and clothing manufacturers rely on a global supply of extractive and linear materials. This economic model leads to exponential growth in waste across every supply chain stage. A growing trend to reduce textile waste from overconsumption is based on a capitalist model of exponential economic growth meant to keep people wanting more. Research on sustainable fashion focusing on alternative futures through small and local making practices explores how engagement with clothing deepens our attachment, illustrating the vitality of practice to reshape the disposable nature of fashion. To shift away from fast fashion, the collective efforts of everyday citizens demonstrate how social forces can have a significant impact. This paper explores an ongoing research project on prolonging garment and textile usage by engaging with surplus textiles and hand stitching. As a developing method for future research, the aim is to imagine a useful future for garments, stitch by stitch. While narrowly focusing on the slow stitch, there are connections to the larger problem space.

**KEYWORDS:** systems thinking, design for repair (DFR), product longevity, reverse supply chain, slow fashion, care and maintenance, generational garments

**RSD TOPIC(S):** Methods & Methodology, Socioecological Design

## **Introduction**

Most fashion brands are product-driven and profit-oriented, requiring value-engineered efficiencies that ignore the interdependencies between economic, social, cultural, and environmental subsystems. Lacking in fast-fashion design and clothing manufacturing is the desire to comprehend the complex problems at hand and move toward a more desirable future. There are efforts to slow the waste stream by closing a loop toward circularity (Crocker, 2018; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017); however, they are rooted in a capitalist framework of exponential economic growth aimed to keep customers needing and discarding apparel quickly. Many of the solutions rely on approaches aligned with socio-technical regimes. Individual and community experiences and connectedness in smaller nested rings are missing from this discussion.

This presentation focuses on developing research of transitional pathways for slower, socially engaged means of extending garment life through ongoing projects to investigate a counter-narrative rejecting capitalist notions by incorporating nested multi-scaler networks.

## **The disposable nature of fashion**

As of 2018, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (2018) reported that over eleven million tons of textiles were sent to landfills. Aligned with their projections, these numbers continue to increase as clothing production increases (McKinsey & Company, 2022). The disposable nature of the fashion industry is perpetuated throughout the clothing manufacturing, acquisition, and usage stage.

Socio-technological advancements drive efficiencies, which underpin the overproduction of clothing (Minter & Henning, 2020) by reducing the quality of materials, labour wages, and environmental stewardship, placing the burden on supporting systems with a lesser voice. Costs are externalised to meet consumer demand for low pricing and rapid trend cycles, which contributes to increasing textile waste.

The purposeful designing of products' psychological or physical obsolescence (Packard, 2011), the dominant product marketing strategy in fashion, devalues a garment before physical failure by introducing fast-paced trend cycles, causing perceived failure (Chapman, 2021), perpetuating a disposable mindset. The pace has steadily accelerated beyond four seasons to daily drops to encourage impulse purchases. The average US consumer purchased roughly 35 garments in 2021 (Smith & Statistic, 2021). This accumulation of clothing through impulse purchases is fueled by consumers' fleeting need for social belonging. Purchases of clothing are tangible yet pseudo-satisfiers (Max-Neef, 1992) of the need for identity and social acceptance.

### **Invisible and forgotten stage of clothing**

Once purchased, clothing is of little interest to industry designers as it provides no financial advantage and expunges them from further engagement with the product. The United States lags behind countries in the EU, which are beginning to set Extended Responsibility policies (EPR) (Ecommerce Europe, 2022). Advocates in New York are making inroads on a state level, pushing legislation to control clothing waste (Friedman, 2022; NY State Senate Bill S1185C, 2022).

The assemblage of a wardrobe consists of; present and past styles, sizes, utility, identities, and places inhabited, which are distanced from daily use. Often forgotten by spatial boundaries (AllOnGeorgia, 2018; Fletcher & Klepp, 2017), only to surface during milestone events causing the need for decisions and leading to the waste stream of unwanted clothing (Minter & Henning, 2020 ). These clothes are frequently forgotten and underutilised (Cline, 2019). As interactions are reduced, connection and enjoyment diminish (Chapman, 2015), which leads to overbuying.

### **Second-hand flow and generational garments**

The growth of the second-hand clothing market is predicted to rise (McKinsey & Company, 2022), widening the spectrum of generational garments to include recycled garments made from multiple tiers of recalled materials, fibres or disassembled garments for components to reconfigure new styles (Engel & Engel, 2018; Reworn, 2022). Second and subsequent generational garments may contain a mix of pre and post-consumer clothing parts to form hybrid garments. Significantly slower than mass

production, it requires a reverse supply chain through take-back programs as part of a product-service scheme. Despite the popularisation of thrift and up-cycled clothing, second-hand markets cannot keep up with the pace of used material flow (Minter & Henning, 2020).

## **Weaving in interventions**

An increasing interest in fashion and design practitioners counter consumption and waste by making the user experience central to the object by building stronger bonds between the wearer and objects through narrative storytelling (Fletcher, 2012). Other ways to extend garment use are through garment care, alterations, and mending (Fletcher, 2014). Investigation into home-crafted clothing reveals tacit knowledge of extending the life of clothing (Twigger Holroyd, 2017). Emerging business practices focus on reclaiming their clothing to reduce wasted textile materials (Engel & Engel, 2018), and efforts regarding pre-consumer textile waste are growing (Fabscrap, 2022; Renewal Workshop, 2022). Independent design activists use imported second-hand garments in Africa as provocation toward policies against dumping unwanted clothing (Cernansky, 2022; McCool, 2022). While mainstream media is beginning to raise awareness of the issue (Farra, 2019; Greep, 2022), more is needed to make the problem tangible toward a personally felt experience.

## **Care and the social fabric of repair**

Clothing manufacturers adhere to the minimum required care guidelines, omitting responsibility for the longevity of garments (Mead, 2015; Sekules, 2020). In reaction to the lack of repair options, there is a growing movement for the right to care for and maintain belongings (The Care Collective et al., 2020; Maintainers, 2022). Enthusiasts, operating from a position of privilege, disrupt the current quo through collaborative actions. Less prominent and documented communities repair out of necessity (Mattern, 2018) without notice. Invisible to businesses and public support as home repair does not contribute to the market share, leaving a gap in understanding this network of practice, skills, and resourcefulness (Twigger Holroyd, 2017). Digital spaces augment the visibility of communities of care. Individuals seek and offer tips on repair, providing a wealth of knowledge transcending neighbourhoods.

## **Conclusion**

To make tangible the imbalance of mass-produced clothing, designers need to navigate across scales – from systems thinking to product thinking to service design – to gain emerging perspectives that connect across these dimensions and lead to positive change in product longevity through an ecology of interventions; no one solution will resolve the issue (Irwin, 2015).

## **Strengths and limits of system thinking in a design practice**

Designers who use systems thinking as a research method for future planning have an advantage in that they can move in and out on scalar levels. However, additional time is required in the design cycle to allow for discoveries of interconnectivity, which may not be appropriate in all design settings.

## **Next steps**

My ongoing research examines plural pathways toward alternative clothing experiences (Fletcher, 2016) using Transition Design frameworks (Irwin, 2015) and Cosmopolitan Localism principles, which focus on complex long-term initiatives with locally rooted solutions (Kossoff, 2019; Manzini, 2005; Manzini & M'Rithaa, 2016). These approaches aim to illuminate multiple paths toward a circular economy (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). An assemblage of solutions creates emergent efficiencies of materials, ecological rebuilding with networks between individuals, communities, and social cohesion (Vuletich, 2015; Hirscher et al., 2019).

## **Future of fashion care**

The implications of this method demonstrate design opportunities for interventions leading to reverse supply chains, Design for Repair (DfR), and community engagement. Overlapping and intertwined styling between first-generation and subsequent garments creates value through emergent regenerative style (Greyson & Crewe) unique to geographic settings, population, age, and skill set, expanding style horizons toward a slower fashion arc.

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