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Patterns of Wear: Wardrobe Research & Self Care Through A Daily Hand Sewing Practice

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Abstract: (150 words)

I am researching enduring use in clothing through wearer's connections with their clothes. My starting point being that in order to keep garments for longer, and look after and dispose of them responsibly, we must first care about them.

I have developed a creative practice-based method of exploring my connections with, and care for, my own clothes. Each day that a garment is worn I hand sew a stitch directly onto it to create a visual marker of wear, a kind of 'Wearing Tally'. The practice has become an autoethnographic response to my research and is a reflective, mindful space that not only "allows" me time to do something I enjoy (hand sewing), but grounds me in my own habits, giving the subject a tangible reality.

These daily stitches also allow me to channel my frustration at the dysfunctional nature of the current fashion system into a positive, caring activity.

Key Words: data visualisation, wardrobe tracking, wearing tally.

Word count (Chapter text / references): 2722

Making and Me

In this chapter I explore the daily stitch practice that has become integral to my PhD, my reflection on it as a source of knowledge, and how it provides me with a space for creative expression and mindful reflection. In this context I use the term 'making' to describe a creative practice, rather than a fully resolved 'made' product.

Broadly, my practice-based PhD investigates sustainability in fashion from a grassroots or "rewilding" (Payne, 2019) perspective in which wearers are empowered to take direct action. Recent research has shown that we could significantly reduce the

environmental impact of our wardrobes by simply acquiring fewer clothes and using the ones we already have for longer (Coscieme et al., 2022). It sounds so easy.

Using wearer's connections to, and relationships with, their clothes I am researching whether it is possible to enact the findings of Coscieme et al., (2022) by acquiring fewer clothes and using what we have for longer. My starting point is that in order to keep garments for longer and look after and dispose of them responsibly, we must first care about them (Saito, 2022). However, patterns of disposability in clothing use (WRAP, 2022) suggest that this care is currently lacking.

When fashion is inevitably tangled up with identity, by showing more care for our clothes do we also show more care for ourselves? Potentially, as recent research by Tölg & Fuentes (2024) found that caring for clothes is connected with caring for others when practicing circular clothing consumption.

Making as Caring

'Self-tracking' is prevalent in the fields of health and wellbeing and can benefit participants by enabling them to meet fitness goals, improve sleep or lose weight, through self-knowledge gained from monitoring and collecting data on their own behaviour (Lupton, 2016). This activity is beginning to gain momentum as a tool for tackling unsustainable clothing behaviour, digital 'Wardrobe Tracking' (Chan, 2024; Mac Donnell, 2024) offers the promise of improved clothing practices through a deeper understanding of our wearing habits.

At the start of my PhD and particularly in response to the findings of Coscieme et al. (2022) around smaller, longer lasting and better-used wardrobes, I embarked on an audit of my own wardrobe. This autoethnographic method felt like a more tangible approach my research and, after asking myself whether I could feel good asking participants to do something that I wasn't prepared to do myself, a way to be accountable to my eventual research participants.

The initial wardrobe audit was recorded in an Excel spreadsheet that is regularly updated using my own version of 'wardrobe tracking' and records the inflows and

outflows through my wardrobe as well as the number of garments worn each season. So far, so accountable, but also so boring and ‘disconnected’ for a creative practice-based researcher!

I realised that the data I was collecting, whilst showing the bigger picture view of my wardrobe, didn’t record more granular, garment level detail such as frequency of wear. Both WRAP (2022) and Coscieme et al. (2022) highlight wear frequency as an area needing improvement if we are to achieve longer lasting wardrobes.

How could I collect the rich embodied picture of wear and connection that I wanted to communicate?

In the early stages of my PhD I missed making and creating, and despite being on a practice-based doctoral programme, felt like the balance of my activities was too much towards thinking, writing and reading. This was partly self-imposed; the first in my family to attend university and now returning to education in my late 40s after a long break, I was plagued by imposter phenomenon¹. It made me believe that these ‘scholarly’ activities demanded more of my attention because this was where I needed to do the most learning. Consequently, my creative practice was being neglected and I was itching to get my hands dirty and do something creative.

I began thinking about ideas for a daily project, something with defined boundaries that would give me a regular ‘excuse’ to scratch that creative itch. I had already found Clare Danêk (2023) and Claire Wellesley-Smith (2015) and been inspired by their stitch journals, but I was searching for something more directly linked to clothing. What I wanted was a way to connect with and explore my clothes and clothing habits creatively, rather than the dry spreadsheets of my ongoing wardrobe audit. I was looking for a way to make the data *feel* meaningful and to somehow capture the interaction of wearing my clothes. In a world where we have such abundance of clothing that we rarely wear something until it gathers material evidence of our bodies and lives through wear, damage, and distortions in shape, I wanted to explore creative ways to add those visual markers of wear and to give visibility to the invisible evidence of wear and use. A pursuit of ‘wear and care’ in the absence of wear and tear.

Through the Dear Data project (Lupi & Posavec, 2016) I had started to investigate the possibilities offered by data visualisation as well as the potential of 'making with data' (Huron et al., 2023) to my research and had begun to try out some ideas via an ongoing creative relay project outside of my doctoral research (Rucklidge & Ward, 2025). A small aspect of this project eventually morphed into what I now call my 'Wearing Tally' a method in which I hand sew a stitch onto a garment for each day that it is worn. This quantitative data driven approach to a creative process spoke to me, as it seemed the perfect vehicle to unite my research and my own clothing practices with my need for creative expression. Embedding quantitative data directly into my garments transforms them into communication tools and carriers of a uniquely personal narrative, a form of storytelling way beyond the original intentions of fashion brands.

Making Time

Time is important in this practice; I have to commit to around 20-25 minutes each day to stitch the previous day's wears. Time is also captured and made tangible in the emerging patterns: time that garments have been owned and worn, and time spent mindfully stitching. The practice has now become a daily meditation and a reciprocal relationship: I wear the garment; I make a stitch on it, which enhances its surface; it becomes more satisfying for me to wear; and provides me with a daily space for reflection and creative practice.

The practice has become a restful, mindful activity that not only "allows" me time to do something that I enjoy (hand sewing), but also grounds me in my own habits and gives the subject a tangible reality through close noticing, looking, and handling. The time spent stitching each day allows me to pay attention to the material quality of each garment, as Jonnet Middleton describes it: "a resensitization to materiality" (2012). This led me to make a few small repairs on damage previously overlooked during wear for example: the threadbare knee of my pyjama trousers, underarm holes in a wool jumper and tiny holes in a t-shirt. It has also become a time to reflect each day on what I have worn: why I chose it; our shared history; what I did while wearing it; and how it made me feel. Part of this has been a better connection with how I wear

individual clothes and use my wardrobe of clothes in light of my changing menopausal body.

A space for self-care has developed through the practice, as the regular commitment reminds me of the progress that can be made on dauntingly large projects (like a PhD) through a small, mindfully repeated act (Danêk, 2023). It also reminds me of the power of slow: time to think; time to notice; time for thoughts to form and ideas to brew. Feeling a bit rusty and out-of-place as a working-class woman returning to education in my late 40s and suddenly finding myself alongside twenty-something recent graduates, this has felt important and reassuring.

The Wearing Tally has also made me consider time not only in human terms, but also non-human time because all of the garments in my wardrobe (and probably yours) have the material capacity to outlive us. Despite this, the fashion industry seems to deliberately shorten the 'useful' lifespan of clothes, leaving behind materially durable objects that, given their composite make-up of natural and synthetic materials, are often difficult to dispose of responsibly.

Making As Reclaiming

Since my creative practice has involved making fewer clothes from scratch and a move towards creative explorations of using, repairing, adapting and personalising, I have started to feel a better connection with my clothes. I understand them on a deeper level: their materiality, history and the way they 'work'. My practice has become a process of making my clothes more my own; of reclaiming clothes from fashion and making them fit my life rather than trying to fit myself into them physically and aspirationally; a process of reclaiming the fashion narrative. My clothes are becoming more precious because of the investment of time and self that they now embody. They are much more *mine*.

The more stitches I add to a garment, the more visually appealing it is, meaning the garment is improving aesthetically with wear. The first few lone stitches look a bit lost and insignificant, my eye focuses on the perfection (or otherwise) of the execution of each stitch. As they increase, my eye turns to the pattern of the collective

rather than individual stitches. This drives me to want to wear items more so that they gather more stitches. As the stitches accumulate into a bigger pattern, I become 'a-wear' of it as I wear the garment.

The purpose or meaning of these stitches is not obvious to anyone else. It feels like a 'secret' between my garments and me, a hidden form of branding rather than an instantly recognisable logo. It is a way to reclaim my clothes back from fashion, strengthening my connections with them.

For all garments, I follow the same coding with my stitches. First I use a different coloured thread for each season, this not only embeds data about seasonal use into a garment but also references the seasonal cycles of fashion and the use of changing colour trends, both of which are used to drive consumption of new clothes. My practice subverts these trends and seasonal cycles by using an evolving colour palette of stitches to embody enduring use, connection and a shared history.

The summer and winter solstices and spring and autumn equinoxes are also marked, but with distinct symbols using white thread. A star for the winter solstice, a circle representing the sun of the summer solstice and an adapted equal symbol for the equinoxes with an additional coloured stitch to distinguish between the autumn and spring equinox.

There are more and more 'cycles' and 'seasons' in fashion today, but never has it seemed more disconnected from nature's cycles. One of the effects of this daily practice is that I feel more connected than ever to the seasons and cycles of nature as I select a new thread colour to match each changing season and change my stitches on the equinoxes and solstices.

Making Space for Making

I have found that a small daily creative act with a simple focus can be immensely helpful in academic life as well as everyday life (Richards, 2007), be that a stitch, a drawing, a print, a row of knitting or a circle of crochet. I recommend it! Set some simple parameters and just start.

I am now working with participants in my PhD and have also set them the task of engaging more regularly with their clothes. Each week they share photos of their most and least favourite wears along with a short commentary. Even this less time-consuming practice of regular engagement is revealing interesting data, for example, how environmental factors and social situations can result in a garment being a favourite one week and a least favourite just a week later. Participants are also sharing advice on mending and maintaining well-used clothes and ways to adapt under-used clothes.

Making a Conclusion

Wearing Tally is a perfect fit for practice-based research with the focus being on process more than on finished products or fully resolved outcomes. At time of writing I am halfway through my PhD and sixteen months into this daily stitching practice and can reflect on:

- The value of time in research and in creative practice, I am a part-time student and am not sure that this aspect of my practice would have found the chance to flourish in the pressure of a full-time schedule.
- To find a nourishing and positive way of researching a potentially overwhelming subject such as the environmental and social damage being caused by an industry, of which I was once a part, has helped to ease my occasional sense of powerlessness.
- An unexpected benefit to my wellbeing from this practice is the sense of agency it has given me to effect change and that small changes can, over time, contribute towards bigger change.

Much like ‘Craftivism’ (Corbett, 2017; Greer, 2007) and the idea that repairing and modifying clothes is a visible, radical action against fast fashion and consumerism, these daily stitches allow me to channel my anger and frustration at the current fashion system into a positive and caring activity.

Notes:

¹ ‘Imposter phenomenon’ is more commonly known as ‘imposter syndrome’, however, the original description of the experience was as a phenomenon (Clance & Imes, 1978). The use of ‘syndrome’ pathologises a common experience with symptoms and causes that can vary between individuals (Reid, 2022).

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