
LITERATURE REVIEW

RETHINKING REPAIR PRACTICES: customisation and longevity through repair.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainability in design is often focussed on the production of durable, good-quality products (Van Hinte, 2004, p.258), generally disregarding the role the consumer plays in making them last long. There is in fact evidence that consumer behaviour can make the difference (WRAP, 2017; Van Hinte, 2004, pp.67, 97). The main purpose of this literature review is to analyse how each person's consumption and disposal behaviour has a direct impact on the environment and to show how we can implement change in our daily lives so that all species can thrive. This assumption is based on the belief that education and action have a key role in achieving large scale effects. The solution outlined suggests repair practices as a way to tackle the fast fashion mindset. It is centred on the idea that the individual plays an important role in this global change, therefore visible mending is analysed as a creative alternative to the consumption of new goods. What is the difference between patching the hole on your denim jacket and buying a patched brand new one with the same style? The act of reinventing garments we already own is analysed as a practice strictly linked to the building of new skills, creativity and individual expression of identity. A personal engagement with the items from our wardrobe, as in the repair act, can deepen the emotional attachment

between consumer and product, as well as creating novelty (Twigger Holroyd, 2017, p.171). Practices such as repair, remake, swap and resale can therefore be an alternative to the purchase of new goods (Middleton, 2014, p.267). As Kate Fletcher wrote in her book *Craft of Use* (2016, p.141), we live in a materialistic society, however we need a shift to a "truly material society" in which materials are cherished instead of being seen as disposable commodities.

It is important at this stage to define the terminology that will be utilised throughout this paper. Jonnet Middleton (2014, p.264) defines mending as a "practice of maintenance", such as laundering, reuse and alteration, which is aimed at increasing the wearability and the lifespan of clothing "on both the material and immaterial level". While 'mending' is mostly linked to a practice carried out by females, the term 'repair' is regarded in its more gender-neutral significance (Middleton, 2014, p.264). In this paper, the two terms will be used interchangeably, however it is important to note that the term 'mend' will be of preferred use due to its historical underpinning and the relevance of the Make-do and Mend campaigns for this research. 'Repair' will be also utilised to avoid any link to a practice that can be carried out by a specific gender.

2. HISTORIC UNDERPINNING

In June 1941 clothes rationing was introduced in Britain (Norman, 2007, p.8). As more materials were required for military production, restrictions were imposed on both the industry and consumers. The government established limitations on manufacturers for the use of raw materials and limited their production output for civilians, so that more resources could be used for military purposes (Norman, 2007, p.9). Each person was allocated a specific number of coupons with which they could buy clothes; starting from sixty-six coupons for an adult each year, the equivalent of a full outfit, it was gradually cut down to twenty (Norman, 2007, p.8). Inevitably, wartime shortages shaped the trends that characterised British fashion in the 1940s (Winston, 2016). First of all, clothes had to be practical: women started wearing versatile dresses that could be easily styled to suit multiple occasions from town to country (Summers, 2015, p. 58). As they started working in factories, functional garments such as the siren suit, dungarees and boiler suits paired with peaked caps and double wrapped turbans became fashionable (Summers, 2015, pp.58-61). Later on, women slowly started wearing trousers and uniforms became the norm (Winston, 2016). Materials and clothes that would be considered non-essential were restricted for civilian use: from raw silk, which was mainly used for women's stockings, to corsets and fur, which was reduced by 75% compared to the pre-war period (Summers, 2015, p. 65). To create less waste, consumers were encouraged to bring their

own bags as packaging for the items they would buy. The initiatives of the government to help people do the best use of their coupons marked the beginning of the "Make-do and Mend" campaigns. Leaflets were issued to teach people how to reduce their consumption and how to make the most out of the clothes they owned by repairing and altering them (Brown, 2009). Tips were given on how to be your own "clothes doctor", on how to take care and reuse knitted garments, on darning clothes before the first wear to make them last more and on how to convert an old coat into a useful two-piece dress and jacket (Norman, 2007). Garments were darned and patched regularly: as the leaflets advised, well darned clothes could last more without looking shabby (Norman, 2007). Children's clothes were regularly altered and reinvented to better fit children as they grew (Norman, 2007). In the absence of their husbands, wives started converting men's clothes into jackets, skirts and dresses (Summers, 2015, p. 132). Women regularly updated their wardrobes by stitching contrasting pockets on dresses or by altering them, and on magazines you would find tips and complementary drawings on how to make-do and mend garments. As Summer writes (2015, p.133), "mending was raised to the status of respectable art". Women increasingly became more inventive and creative, quickly interpreting and recreating from home the most fashionable trends of the time.

"A patch was no longer the badge of the disadvantaged and by 1942 even the glossiest fashion magazines were supporting the idea of mending

existing garments and claiming that ‘dressiness’ was outdated” (Summers, 2015, p. 129-130).

3. DATA ON CONSUMPTION BEHAVIOURS

In the years between 2000 and 2015 clothing sales have almost doubled globally (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). This was due to the growing middle-class population and emerging markets like Africa and Asia, as well as to the rise of fast fashion, with its low price points and increased number of collections per year (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). Specifically, in the UK the amount of clothing purchased in 2012 was estimated to be 950,000 tonnes, compared to 1,130,000 tonnes in 2016 (WRAP, 2017). According to the WRAP 2017 Valuing Our Clothes Report (2017), despite the growing tendency of the population to constantly buy new clothes, research shows a “decrease in the carbon and water footprints per tonne of clothing in use in the UK”

compared to 2012. Specifically, the carbon footprint has decreased by 8.29% and the water footprint was reduced by 6.68%. On the other hand, the amount of waste has remained the same, amounting to 1.7 tonnes. This data represents a slight shift in consumer behaviour: more research shows that the change is mainly due to the in-use phase of a garment lifecycle, with people being more aware of the impact laundry practices have on the environment. However, due to the increased number of clothing being bought in 2016 and the consequent impact of production and processing, overall the carbon footprint was higher than in 2012 (WRAP, 2017) (see Figure 1).

A large amount of reports show that the current consumption and production behaviours appear to be unsustainable due to their negative impact on people and the planet. As the Ellen MacArthur Foundation stated in A New Textiles Economy Report (2017), the linear system adopted by the fashion industry is heavily responsible of a

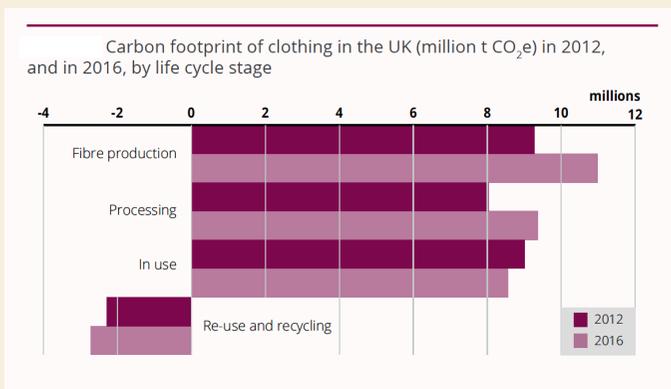


Figure 1
WRAP Valuing Our Clothes Report, 2017.

number of issues we are currently facing. From the pressure on natural resources, like oil and water used in the production of clothing, as well as of a great amount of the global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. It is also responsible of the microplastics that are present in our oceans and of a number of social issues such as modern slavery, poor working conditions, low rates of pay and child labour (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017).

According to the United Nations' Global Goals for Sustainable Development (2015), responsible production and consumption are both fundamental to implement change in the current system so that all lives can flourish on our planet. Therefore, an effort from both industry and consumers is needed. How can we as consumers make a contribute? Only 13% of the overall textile industry output is recycled, 1% of it accounts for a closed-loop recycling, while the rest 12% consists of cascading recycling, meaning that the materials are utilized for lower-value applications in other industries, leaving little chance for them to be recycled ever again. As a result, 73% of the materials used end up being landfilled or incinerated (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). Although a part of the problem is the lack of technological advances in the recycling industry (The Secret Life of Rubbish, 2015), consumers are responsible for not keeping materials in use long enough, in fact they are most likely to dispose of fast fashion items of clothing within a year from their purchase (Remy, Speelman and Swartz, 2016). There is evidence that keeping our clothes in circulation for longer can make a difference on a

national and global scale in terms of environmental impact. Extending the lifespan of 20% of UK clothing by 3 months would account for -2% on carbon emissions, -2% on water usage and -1% on tonnes of waste, and would go down to -8% for carbon, -10% for water and -4% for waste if 50% of UK clothing was kept in use for 9 months longer (WRAP, 2017).

“After the restrictions of the war years” there has been “a shift in the perception of clothes as a durable consumer good with an intrinsic material value, to non-durable consumer goods with novelty and brand value” (Fletcher, 2016, p.193). During the war, the government was creating advertising campaigns with bold graphics to educate people on how to save up and take the best care of what they already had. People would follow those tips, motivated by the idea of doing their part in helping the country win the war (Brook Lapping Productions, 2010). As a result, Vogue would feature on its pages the most popular style of the period. Therefore, fashion trends were motivated by the political and economic situation of the country (Summers, 2015, pp. 129-133).

Scientists have defined the current climatic situation as an emergency. Climate change is about to reach a point of no return, but we can still reverse the situation (Wrightau, 2016). In an interview for The Guardian (2009), Robert Opie, curator of the Museum of Brands, Packaging and Advertising in Notting Hill, said that people were urged to help their country during the war, even if this meant a life of shortages, everyone felt responsible and this made people come together (Brook Lapping Productions,

it and replace it with a new one (Gill and Mellick Lopes 2011, p.315). Any type of mending, repair or restoration practice is considered socially unacceptable, partially due to the easily accessible prices of fast fashion and the resulting high cost of clothing repair (Gwilt, 2014). On the other hand, a new pair of jeans with a worn-out bleached effect, holes created on purpose on a knitted garment (see Figure 3), or the deconstructed look of brands such as Margiela (see Figure 4) become fashionable in a society which is dependent on speed.

In his book *Emotionally Durable Design* Jonathan Chapman (2015, p.49) writes about a new way of making design. The focus is not anymore on creating products with a pleasing aesthetic we will discard as soon as they are not anymore “up-to-date reflections of our existence”, but he emphasises the importance of creating a deeper and more sustainable relationship between users and materials. New business models need to be implemented and products should be designed to evolve and grow alongside their owners to avert obsolescence and waste. Objects should deliver experiences and become storytellers, and not merely convey a temporary material satisfaction (Chapman, 2015, p.87).

“In this respect, waste is nothing more than symptomatic of a failed user-object relationship, where insufficient empathy led to the perfunctory dumping of one by the other”
(Chapman, 2015, p.25).

The “work of hybridization” theorized by Ilmonen refers to the human-object relationship as a mutual one, in which both are subject to change during the

use phase, in a constant process of making (Gill and Mellick Lopes, 2011, p.309). Objects enable us to fix stories in time, they can be reminders of past experiences, memories and feelings (Belk, 1988) and as we grow they can evolve with us (Chapman, 2015, p.61). Nowadays materials are perceived as fleeting objects which function is fixed in time, and as soon as our needs change a new item will follow, as the previous one is not anymore able to satisfy them (Chapman, 2015, p.62). According to Chapman (2015, p.69), we are currently relying upon material things to satisfy our need to feel “wholeness within the self”, which is why we are incessantly engaging in the act of shopping (Fletcher, 2016, p.184). The practice of mending could potentially constitute a sustainable alternative to the consumption of new goods (Middleton, 2014, p.267). A creative act which allows us to create novelty in our wardrobe and to construct our identity, therefore satisfying those human needs we are trying to meet in the act of shopping (Twigger Holroyd, 2017, p.171; Fletcher, 2018). Furthermore, by taking control of the objects we surround ourselves with, we develop a stronger sense of the self (Belk, 1988). Stressing the importance of the process rather than the outcome (2011, p.76), David Gauntlett demonstrates that the act of making is strictly linked to individual self-expression (2011, p.34) and sense of community (2011, pp.66-68), therefore leading to happiness (2011, p.116-127).

Consumers should be educated on the consequences of their choices, and alternative patterns of behaviour need to be adopted. However, for customers to be able to extend the lifespan of their



Figure 3
Maison Martin Margiela, S/S 1990.



Figure 4
Comme des Garçons oversized sweater decorated with holes, circa 1982.

garments, durability becomes of fundamental importance. Designing and producing clothes of higher quality and providing access to them via new business models would help shift the perception of clothing from being a disposable item to being a durable product (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). For this change to be effective and have a positive impact a global effort is essential, and it must be undertaken by consumers, companies and governments collectively.

In *Making is Connecting*, David Gauntlett (2011, p.162) gives creativity a central role in the health of the individual and society, stating that the making of things has a positive impact on both political and emotional levels, in contraposition to mainstream manufactured objects. Nui Project is an embroidery workshop organized in 1985 in Kagoshima City for people with mental and physical disabilities. Assisted by the coordinators, participants were given pieces of shirt or cloth to work on. Their work is characterised by creativity and spontaneity: they do not have any skills in embroidery and no structure is planned ahead (Shobu Gakuen, no date). The results are heavily embroidered shirts with interesting patterns; consequent variations in shape made the shirts look like sculptures which evoke the natural world (Recker, 2011) (see Figures 5,6). Another remarkable example are the visible mending techniques adopted by Tom of Holland in collaboration with Wolf and Gypsy Vintage, which give rise to avant-garde fashion pieces (Hodgson, 2016) (see Figure 7). These works demonstrate that darned garments do not necessarily have to look ‘poor’ or forced.



Figure 7

Tom of Holland x Wolf & Gypsy Vintage, 2018.

5. CONCLUSION

“Garments can be reworked to meet changing needs” this way “replacing consumption with action” (Fletcher, 2016, p.105). Change in the appearance of an item can ease its evolution, ensuring that its value is sustained over time (Van Hinte, 2004, p.183). Repair is a political act (Middleton, 2014, p.268) and a “rebellious tradition” that celebrates the recovery of objects, their wear marks, history and character (The Guardian, 2013). Referring to Sennett’s definitions of static and dynamic repair (2008, p.200), the first one concerning the restoration of an object to its original state and the second one including a change in its function and appearance; the research aims at reframing ‘dynamic repair’ and visible mending practices as ways of customising the garments we already own and as an alternative to the purchase of new goods. I refer to this type of restoration as ‘creative repair’, meaning a practice of visible mending and dynamic repair which aims at



Figure 5
Nui Project, 1985.



Figure 6
Nui Project, 1985.

changing the style and/or appearance of a garment in order to restore its function. Creative repair differs from practices of visible mending in the fact that it does not focus exclusively on the broken parts of the piece, but sees the garment as a whole.

“It is important to show that old things [...] still have the right to exist and be used”
(Van Hinte, 2004, p.79)

In this perspective, the act of mending becomes a personalisation practice, to make garments truly our own. In a capitalist society, can repair be seen as a way

of customising garments which allows us to deepen our emotional attachment to the pieces we already own? As we expect materials to satisfy non-material needs (Chapman, 2015, p.69), is the act of buying new clothes actually playing a role in constructing and updating our identity or is it merely a mean to instant and temporarily satisfaction of those needs? Could the act of engaging in practices of care, maintenance, repair and alteration be an alternative to the purchase of new goods in the construction of our identity?

Some of the questions that have been raised will be further investigated in the personal research process.

I, Beatrice Soncina, certify that this is an original piece of work. I have acknowledged all sources and citations. No section of this essay has been plagiarised.

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