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Satisfaction and frustration: the well-being experience of homemade knitwear

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Abstract

This paper considers well-being in relation to homemade knitted garments. The topic forms part of a qualitative design research project investigating amateur making as a sustainable fashion strategy. Within this context, well-being is identified as an integral component of sustainability.

A small group of amateur knitters took part in the project; they were interviewed individually before taking part in a series of knitting and design workshops with an experienced designer-maker.

The process of knitting is widely recognised as beneficial in terms of well-being, offering a source of relaxation, personal satisfaction and social connection. However, knitters can experience frustrations, such as patterns restricting opportunities for creativity.

Homemade clothes materialise the making process, and wearing them can create a strong sense of identity and pride. However, the positives of the making process do not automatically carry through to the wearing phase. Homemade clothes are marginal in comparison to the mass-produced norm. They are particularly vulnerable within the context of contemporary fashion, which is already ambivalent in terms of well-being.

Despite these issues, the preliminary results of this research indicate that amateur knitters can be supported to work without fixed patterns and achieve wearable results which contribute to a positive sense of well-being.

Keywords

knitting, making, amateur, sustainability

Conference paper

This paper considers well-being in relation to homemade knitted garments. The topic has arisen during research investigating amateur making – and more specifically, the reworking of existing garments – as a sustainable fashion strategy. Hence, my interest in well-being sits within a wider context of sustainability; like others, I see the two as interconnected concepts. Jackson (2005) discusses the opportunity for a ‘double dividend’, in which there is a reciprocity between personal and environmental benefits. This idea, which recognises that a low-impact lifestyle may better suit our human needs

(Stibbe and Luna, 2010) is starting to become more widespread in sustainability circles (Reid and Hunter, 2011; Stevens, 2011). As Escobar-Tello and Bhamra (2009: 152) observe, 'the characteristics of sustainability overlap with the triggers of happiness'. From this perspective, well-being and sustainability can be seen as two interconnected elements of human flourishing. Furthermore, well-being can be used as a way of approaching and exploring sustainability. For example, P. Stevens (2011: 1) suggests that 'if we focus on being well, we will find that sustainability emerges from that state'.

The qualitative design research project involved a small group of amateur knitters, aged between 43 and 66. At the start of the project, I conducted individual garment-based interviews to elicit the initial attitudes of each participant towards fashion and knitting. At a series of workshop sessions, we then tested methods of re-knitting existing garments and explored design skills. The project culminated in each participant using re-knitting techniques to alter an item from their own wardrobe. These alterations can be seen as a staged version of a naturally occurring process: the construction of identity through dress. The valuable data gathered from this small group is supported by comments from a wider community of knitters that I have collected both online and directly, in the course of my practice as a knitwear designer-maker.

Although my invitation to participate in the research project was open to any hand knitter, all of the participants are female; this reflects the gender imbalance in hand knitting activity generally. As I will explain, the experience of wearing homemade garments takes place within the context of fashion. I take an inclusive view of fashion, understanding it as 'the whole spectrum of desirable ways of looking at any given time' (Hollander 1993, p.350). However, I recognise that women are stereotypically expected to be more interested in, and aware of, clothes than men; hence, the participants' comments, and my analysis, reflect the gendered nature of their experiences as both makers and wearers.

The process of knitting is widely recognised as beneficial in terms of well-being, offering a source of relaxation, personal satisfaction and social connection. While the research by Stitchlinks (c. 2013) into the well-being impacts of knitting and stitching is motivated by benefits for those with health problems, their findings indicate that the 'possible physiological, neurological, psychological, behavioural and social changes' brought about by such activities are applicable to everyone. Gauntlett (2011) describes the importance of 'something to strive towards' for well-being and quotes Richard Layard, who says: 'prod any happy person and you will find a project' (Gauntlett 2011, p.125, re Layard 2006, p.73). Turney (2009, p.159) agrees that a project, such as the knitting of a garment, 'contributes to a sense of self-worth, of achievement and desire to continue, which ... promotes self-esteem and confidence, which ultimately enhances quality of life'. Reynolds (2004) describes textile craft as a particularly accessible form of creative activity; small-scale crafts, like knitting, can be easily fitted into everyday life.

Homemade clothes materialise the making process, and wearing them can create a strong sense of identity and pride. While the activity of making establishes an identity as 'a maker', the items produced render that identity both tangible and visible; wearing them creates a resonance between the two. As Johnson and Wilson (2005) explain, homemade objects are manifestations of all the meaning which has gone into their making. They describe how handcrafted textiles, displayed in the homes of the women who took part in their research, 'confirmed Belk's (1988) assertion that items which convey creativity and the mastery of skills, and which mark time, are particularly effective in defining the self' (Johnson and Wilson 2005, p.124 referring to Belk 1988).

Homemade items often carry deeper personal meanings than purchased garments, because of the time and effort involved in their creation. Writing about people who have built their own houses, Brown (2008, p.368) argues that the activity 'brings meaning to everyday life by the simple fact that the presence of the home prompts the re-telling of this, most compelling, creative experience'. Similarly, knitters enjoy telling others about the items they have made.

For some, wearing homemade clothes is a positive experience, which enhances well-being. I have met many people who are successful in making garments for themselves to wear, and do so with pride. However, from my extensive experience of working with amateur knitters I know that it is far from certain that every homemade garment will end up being worn. I suspect that this relates, at least in part, to the marginality of homemade clothes in contemporary British culture.

In order to understand the experience of wearing homemade clothes, we must first gain an understanding of the relationship between fashion and well-being. In his work on human scale development, Max-Neef (1992) offers a list of basic needs which he believes constitute well-being, including identity and participation. Fletcher and Grose (2008) argue that fashion offers a versatile means by which we can meet these needs. Through fashion, we construct our identities and connect with others; as Winkler (2012: 59) says, 'as a medium for endowing us with an identity and a method of interaction it has a positive effect on our spiritual and social state'.

However, anxiety dominates many women's relationships with clothing (Clarke and Miller 2002). This anxiety stems from the uncertain nature of contemporary fashion, lacking in clear and definite rules. Meanings of clothes are multiple, moveable and ambiguous, and 'appropriate' choices are framed by complex social norms. In well-being terms, we have to take the rough with the smooth; we cannot eliminate the tensions associated with identity construction and connection with others, if we are to gain the benefits of these processes.

Homemade clothes are particularly ambiguous, subject to multiple conflicting meanings. They are often seen in a romantic, positive way, indiscriminately better than mass-produced alternatives. This view connects with an emergent

movement which values localism, thrift and self-sufficiency as elements of a desirable, sustainable lifestyle. However, the romantic view is countered by a stigma that, for some, is associated with the homemade. On a collective level, there is an association between homemade garments and poverty, which endures, despite the cheapness of today's ready-made clothes. Homemade items are often the butt of jokes; negative comments about itchy, uncomfortable, ill-fitting jumpers are overwhelmingly familiar.

Hence, it is possible to see homemade items in a positive, romantic light and simultaneously in a stigmatised, negative way. While we can try to wear our homemade garments in an ironic and knowing manner, which consciously highlights the positive connotations, we cannot be sure of success. By making our own clothes independently, without the sanctioning influence of professional manufacture, we encounter the risk of unwittingly transgressing social norms or of making garments too unique to connect with those around us. The time involved in making raises the stakes; It is, after all, surely worse for one's self-esteem to labour for months over a fashion 'mistake' than to quickly acquire it from a 'fast fashion' source.

Another problem relating to amateur knitting is the feeling that patterns – used for the vast majority of knitting projects – restrict opportunities for creativity. This is significant in terms of well-being; Devlin (2010, p.11) observes that creativity 'on its own merit' is particularly important in the well-being benefits of amateur arts activity. Dalton (1987) describes patterns as having a standardising effect on craft practice, which makes amateurs feel they need to look to an 'expert' for guidance on creative matters. In contrast, Hackney (2006, p.23) argues that patterns offer women 'opportunities for self-expression, agency and self-determination'; patterns and books help to develop makers' skills, and therefore their freedom. Although, like sewing patterns, knitting patterns can be adapted and used in 'unorthodox' ways (Szeless 2002), many knitters do not have the confidence to do so. For those who manage it, there is sometimes a sense that their adaptations are remedial, helping them achieve the intended design with a different yarn, for example, rather than delivering creative satisfaction. Overall, my conversations with knitters have indicated frustrations with conventional knitting patterns, and a desire for more freedom and creative input.

In the early stages of my research, I identified ambivalence around the well-being benefits of homemade clothes, and a desire for greater creativity amongst knitters. I used the design research project to investigate whether I could construct an opportunity for knitters to be more creative, and whether that experience might contribute to a feeling of confidence in the finished items, and a sense of well-being more broadly.

The group responded positively to the project, and each participant produced a successful re-knitting project, which they subsequently wore with pride. They said that during the project they had learned new skills and become more adventurous; their perceptions of knitting, and what was possible, had changed. They had particularly enjoyed collaborating with others and being part of a supportive group, which gave them confidence in their creative

decisions and the finished garments. This demonstrates that amateur knitters can work without fixed patterns and achieve wearable results which contribute to a positive sense of well-being. However, the project also indicated that amateur knitwear design requires support in order to flourish. The participants described the project as a catalyst: a structure within which they could work creatively. While the experience had changed their practices and perceptions to some extent, they felt that without further support they may gradually revert to a more conventional approach.

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