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Making it mine: personalising clothes at home

Amy Twigger Holroyd

Introduction

This chapter discusses personalisation in the context of amateur fashion making – the domestic knitting and sewing of clothes – and considers the motivations and experiences of those making and wearing personalised homemade garments. This topic emerges from my doctoral research, which explored the relationship between homemade clothes and sustainability, and more specifically investigated the potential of reworking knitted garments from the wardrobe (Twigger Holroyd 2013). This research was, in turn, informed and inspired by my practice as a designer-maker of knitwear with several years' experience of running workshops and participatory projects with amateur makers in a range of settings.

To start, I will define personalisation in terms of clothing, and set the scene by outlining the history and recent resurgence of domestic textile crafts. I will then describe the methodology used for the research, which involved a combination of making-based participatory activities and semi-structured interviews. Drawing on the insights gained from these activities, I will profile the opportunities for personalisation afforded by both the creation of new garments and the less familiar activity of reworking existing items. A number of fascinating themes emerge when reflecting on personalisation and homemade clothes; I will focus on two areas. Firstly, I will discuss the skills that an amateur maker must exercise in order to personalise an item, and the ways in which professional designers can support this activity. Secondly, I will explore the mixed meanings associated with the homemade and consider the appeal, and danger, of uniqueness in dress; these factors affect the experience of wearing personalised clothes. I will conclude by briefly discussing the implications of personalisation for longevity and re-use.

Personalisation and clothing

The concept of personalisation in terms of clothing is deceptively slippery; while there are various positions that could be adopted, I have chosen to define it as the making, or intentional alteration, of a garment for a known individual. In this chapter I am particularly focusing on amateur makers who undertake such projects for their own enjoyment and satisfaction. The creation of personalised items is not the sole preserve of the homemade, of course; tailors and dressmakers provide made-to-measure clothing as a professional service, as they have done for centuries (Ross 2008). In recent years clothing companies have started to offer premium services that produce unique garments for individual customers; new menswear label Alton Lane, for example, uses 3-D body-scanning technology to facilitate the creation of bespoke tailored suits (Gayomali 2014), while companies such as Adidas and Pringle use digital platforms to support customers to

create personalised products through the selection of particular patterns, colours and materials (Adidas 2015; Pringle of Scotland 2015). All of these processes sit in stark contrast to the usual situation, which sees garments being mass produced in standard sizes by the thousand and sold through high street shops in a distinctly impersonal process.

I am concerned not only with activities that produce new items of clothing, but also with processes that personalise existing items. Although any mass-produced garment will gradually become associated with its wearer over time, transforming from a generic product into a much more personally significant possession, I suggest that we should not consider this process to be personalisation unless it involves an intentional material alteration. I do not see the 'breaking-in' of shoes, therefore, as personalising them: although these objects physically change – gradually becoming shaped to the wearer's feet, and also reflecting the unique patterns of their gait – such changes are a by-product of the process of wearing, rather than a consciously staged intervention. Similarly, I would not include within the scope of personalisation the individual patterns of wear that occur as jeans adapt to a wearer; I would, however, include the deliberate act of shrinking raw denim jeans to fit an individual by wearing them in the bath. Likewise, I would include alterations that use sewing to adapt a newly-purchased garment to better fit a person's body, or to alter or enhance the style.

If a maker were to rework a damaged or degraded garment from their wardrobe and somehow changed it in the process, as in the examples of re-knitting that I will profile later, I would consider this to personalise the item. If they were to repair the garment in a way that aimed to restore it to its former state, however – using, to borrow terminology from Sennett (2008), a 'static' rather than 'dynamic' repair – I would not. If an existing garment were to be dynamically reworked not for a known individual, but rather for general sale – as is the case with the Remade range of upcycled items sold by UK charity Traid (Warren 2012) – I would, again, not consider it to be personalised; although the item itself would be unique, it would not have the direct link with a prospective wearer that I consider to be essential for personalisation.

These examples help to illustrate the scope of personalisation in clothing; they also serve to highlight various factors which differentiate them. We can see that in some cases personalisation takes place during the initial making process, while in others it is an intervention that takes place later; in the examples involving commercially produced clothing, personalisation may be supported by the designer or retailer, or may be an independent act undertaken by the wearer. Furthermore, these examples demonstrate that the personalisation of clothing falls within two broad categories: creating a personalised fit for an individual body, or creating a personalised style for an individual sense of identity. These aspects of personalisation may occur separately,

or together. Each could be said to operate on a sliding scale of intensity: a 'mildly' personalised item would be made or altered to suit the needs or tastes of the wearer, yet could also be viably used by many other people, while an extreme case would be created for an individual wearer, to the likely exclusion of others.

Amateur fashion making

The domestic activities of making clothes and adapting existing garments were formerly much more widespread than they are today; it was only during the twentieth century that it became usual for us to wear standardised mass-produced garments. Writing about the situation in Britain in the 1930s, for example, McDowell (1997) explains that the vast majority of women were able to sew their own clothes; while middle-class women would be making new items for themselves to wear, working-class women were more likely to be mending and adapting secondhand clothing to fit. During World War II, rationing led to an increase in this inventive adaptation; Breward (2003) reports that following the war, many more people embraced ready-made clothes, which had improved in quality. Thus in Britain, as in other industrialised countries, sewing clothes at home shifted from an integral element of domestic activity in the 1950s to a creative hobby during the 1960s. Participation declined from this point, as more women took up paid employment and adopted alternative ways of spending their valuable leisure time (Emery 2014). We can see a similar pattern in knitting: it had been a widespread domestic practice in the first half of the twentieth century and during World War II, but transformed into an optional leisure activity in the decades following the war (Black 2012).

It is widely acknowledged that there has been a resurgence of interest in amateur fashion making practices in the last fifteen years or so (Myzelev 2009; Bratich and Brush 2011; Hall and Jayne 2015). This revival has involved an increase in levels of participation; while trustworthy and transparent statistics demonstrating this increase are scarce, articles in the mainstream press regularly cite rises in sales of equipment and materials, along with other indicators such as making-related internet searches and craft book publications (Lewis 2011; Lewis-Hammond 2014). The UK Craft & Hobby Trade Association recently reported that 3.5 million people in the UK make their own clothes with a sewing machine, 433,000 of whom started sewing only in the last year (Lewis-Hammond 2014). The UK Hand Knitting Association (2015), meanwhile, suggests that there are now 7.5 million knitters and crocheters in the country. Alongside this increase in participation we can observe a shift in the cultures of sewing, knitting and mending; Hackney (2013: 170) describes a 'new energy' at work, meaning that 'the crafts [...] have changed beyond all recognition in recent years'. Although, in my experience, the majority of amateur fashion making happening today involves the production of new items, there has also

been a revival of interest in using sewing to rework existing pieces, with various books and blogs inspiring makers to see this as an exciting and accessible opportunity for creativity.

Various theories are in circulation regarding the cause of the resurgence of fashion making, with many pointing to the global financial crisis and the ensuing period of austerity as prompting a renewed interest in craft (Hall and Jayne 2015). While this may be part of the explanation, I would agree with Luckman (2013: 254) that the revival is 'largely a response to a number of bigger, longer, economic, industrial and cultural shifts around the economic base model *vis-a-vis* production and manufacturing in particular'. As she argues, these shifts involve a re-evaluation of the impersonal practices of mass production and an increased interest in the potential of small-scale craft. The recent growth of amateur fashion making has undoubtedly been assisted by the connective power of the internet. As Bratich and Brush (2011: 242) describe, 'the knitting circle now meshes with the World Wide Web'. Online platforms, blogs and social media are providing opportunities for makers to connect as never before, sharing their projects, patterns and problems and providing mutual support (Kuznetsov and Paulos 2010).

Methodology

This chapter draws on my previous research, in which I investigated amateur fashion making as a strategy for sustainability; as I have explained, this topic emerged from my experience of facilitating various knitting workshops and projects. This work brought me into contact with scores of amateur knitters, and the conversations I had with them revealed that the practice of making clothes at home involves an array of fascinating problems, issues and opportunities. I recognised that the complex nature of this practice brought into question the assumption – which I had frequently encountered – that amateur fashion making is straightforwardly positive in terms of sustainability. I set out to explore the lived experience of making and remaking clothes at home, in order to build a more nuanced view of the ways in which this activity might contribute to a sustainable fashion system.

I explored this topic through the prism of a specific design-led challenge, investigating the potential for reworking existing items of knitwear using knit-based skills, techniques and knowledge. Although these re-knitting processes would have been an integral part of knitting practice in the past, activity has declined significantly and much of the relevant tacit knowledge has been lost; I sought to use my design practice to develop methods of re-knitting that are appropriate to the knitted garments in our wardrobes today. Because I intended that the processes would be used by knitters to rework their own garments at home, I recruited a group of six amateur hand knitters with whom to test the techniques. These participants were aged between 43 and 66 at the time of the project, and all female – reflecting the fact that knitting is a

hobby predominantly adopted by women (Office for National Statistics 1997). The majority had previously attended one of my skills-based knitting workshops, and all were motivated to take part by the opportunity to explore new ideas.

The project was built around a series of four day-long practical workshops, in which we tested the re-knitting processes; activity at the early sessions involved structured explorations of particular techniques and short design-related exercises, while the project culminated in each participant reworking an item of knitwear from her own wardrobe. These sessions were audio and video recorded; I transcribed every recording and used thematic coding and a constant comparative method (Robson 2011) in order to analyse the data. By capturing the participants' thoughts before, during and after the workshops, I was able to examine the ways in which their attitudes to re-knitting changed as the project progressed. The participants linked the activities we were undertaking with their previous making projects and aspirations for the future; thus, I was also able to investigate their broader experiences of making clothes. The workshops were preceded by individual semi-structured interviews and two evening 'knitting circle' discussion sessions, which provided further data relating to the participants' attitudes and prior experiences.

The workshop method was complemented by additional data, gathered via a drop-in knitting activity which I facilitated at a number of UK music festivals (Latitude, Green Man, End of the Road and Port Eliot) each summer from 2009 to 2012. This free activity provided a space for festivalgoers to sit and knit; projects took different forms, but in each case the completed pieces of knitting were left on display, growing in number as the festival progressed. I invited participants to leave comments on small cardboard tags attached to the knitting; while these often related to the memories evoked by the activity of making, at the 2012 events many responded to my prompt to 'share your feelings about wearing homemade clothes'. Over the period of four years, I gathered over a thousand responses, providing valuable insights into attitudes to making and homemade clothes from a large number of respondents.

During the course of my doctoral research and practice, I had come into contact with four women who sew their own clothes; I requested to interview them in order to extend the scope of my research to include sewing, and to consider how this practice might differ from knitting. These interviews, and the tags from the drop-in knitting activity, were transcribed and coded using a similar approach as for the workshops; all of these accounts have enriched my understanding of amateur fashion making. In the rest of this chapter, I will use the term 'participants' to refer to the knitters who took part in the re-knitting project and 'interviewees' to refer to the sewers I interviewed.

Making new garments

Let us now look in more detail at the two different modes of personalising homemade clothes I have identified, starting with the more widespread and familiar process of producing new items 'from scratch'. Using my definition, introduced earlier, we could say that all homemade clothes are personalised because they are made for a known wearer, bearing in mind their aesthetic and stylistic preferences and body shape. Indeed, my research shows that many home sewers and knitters are motivated by the ability to create an entirely unique garment to a personal specification; many of the positive responses to the prompt about homemade clothes at the drop-in knitting activity mentioned uniqueness and originality. Part of this appeal is the ability to create an item in your preferred combination of colour, fabric and style; one of the research participants described wanting to make her own clothes because 'what I'm wanting is just something that looks a little bit different, a bit more individual'. One of the interviewees demonstrated a similar attitude: 'Why would I make anything that looks shop-bought? I want to make stuff that doesn't exist anywhere else.' Another benefit of domestic making is the opportunity to create items which are personalised in terms of fit. This can have a powerful impact on the wearer's sense of well-being, as Rushmore (2015) describes: 'As my skills grew, I started making clothes that actually fitted me well for the first time in my life, and my body image started shifting in parallel. [...] the feeling of abnormality and exclusion began to lift.'

Most homemade garments are produced using pre-designed patterns; these tools can vary from 'quick and easy' options to 'couture' projects requiring a high level of skill. Knitting patterns provide instructions in the form of written, and sometimes graphically represented, code, while sewing patterns combine full-size shaped pattern pieces with step-by-step guidance. Although these resources are invaluable in guiding makers through what is – even for a simple garment – a relatively complicated procedure, they introduce a degree of standardisation to the process of making, which could be seen as a barrier to personalisation. This standardisation partly relates to fit; patterns are typically offered in standard size ranges, just like the ready-made clothes on the high street. It also relates to style; although patterns have long offered choices in terms of styling, 'so that the sewer could choose various options and features, giving her a role to play in the design of the garment' (McLean 2009: 78), these options are often limited to an alternative neckline or sleeve length (Figure 1). While the choice of materials is a prime opportunity for personalisation, meanwhile, I am aware that some makers decline to stamp their individuality on a garment in this way, aiming instead to produce an exact replica of the original sample as photographed for the pattern. Bearing all of these factors in mind, it can be argued that many makers following patterns are producing items which are barely personalised; in fact, we might conclude that these garments differ from mass-produced clothing only in terms of the context in which they are made.



Figure 1. Design variations offered by sewing patterns.

Anyone with experience of making their own clothes, however, will know that the use of patterns does not, in fact, lead to identical outcomes; homemade items will inevitably bear the hallmarks of the maker's individual technique. Furthermore, most makers do seize the opportunity to pursue personalisation through the choice of materials; one of the interviewees suggested that sewers 'bring themselves' to a pattern when selecting fabric for their garment. Furthermore, makers frequently venture beyond the options offered in terms of size and style; Szeless (2002) suggests the term 'unorthodox home dressmaking' to describe the ways in which home sewers adapt patterns themselves. Knitters similarly alter pre-designed patterns: it is common for a different yarn to be used to that recommended, and more experienced knitters might choose to use alternative stitches or to vary elements of the design.

Makers are also able to alter patterns to create a custom fit, adapting the standard sizes offered to suit their individual needs – either before starting work, or while the project is in progress. One of the participants described altering the neck shape, sleeve length and body length of a knitted jumper, explaining: 'I'll take ninety per cent of this pattern, and I'll just do the bits that I want, so

that I know I'll wear it and be comfortable in it.' For those willing to put in the time and effort, a toile (sample garment) can be made to test the fit, with any changes transferred to the pattern and subsequently the final garment. Alternatively, makers can choose to work more independently, creating garments without the aid of pre-designed patterns; this opens up the options in terms of personalisation. Drafting a pattern using your individual measurements creates a more personalised fit than altering a standard pattern, just as originating your own design allows you to pursue a personal vision to a greater degree than would be possible when tweaking an existing style. As we will see later, however, this challenging activity requires both creative and technical skills, and many makers lack confidence in their abilities.

Reworking

The reworking of existing garments offers an alternative opportunity for personalisation. As I have explained, this activity is less prevalent than the practice of producing new items of clothing. Thus, in order to discuss the potential for personalisation through reworking I will draw on the experiences of the research participants as they engaged with the activity of re-knitting for the first time.

Before embarking on the group workshops, I first developed a range of relevant re-knitting techniques that I could explore with the participants, gathering knowledge from an array of knitting books and combining them with my own ideas. While doing so, I realised that the resources I would produce to share these techniques would need to be quite different to a normal knitting pattern, with its linear format and narrow set of options. Every item of knitwear in our wardrobes has a different combination of characteristics in terms of gauge, structure, yarn, colour, shape and condition, and when we rework an item we must take these characteristics into consideration. Thus, it would be impossible to produce conventional patterns for re-knitting; instead, I aimed to create flexible methods, or 'treatments', that could be adapted to suit the specifics of any particular item. Each treatment is highly flexible in terms of scale, aesthetic and finish; these processes can be used in countless ways to personalise an item of knitwear. The fit of a garment can be altered, as can the aesthetic; the alteration may be highly visible or rather more subtle.

Although re-knitting offers the same benefit in terms of personalisation as making new – the opportunity to create a unique item to suit your own needs and preferences – the fact that this activity is not more common suggests that these benefits are not readily apparent to makers. This was certainly the case with the research participants: despite having the practical skills needed to rework existing items through knitting, they had not previously considered doing so. They were intrigued by the possibility of transforming their clothes in this way, but were generally unsure

about what form this transformation could take. One of the participants, for example, suggested at the outset of the project: 'I can't see it, I can't visualise, I can't imagine what you would do. I'm not very imaginative in that way.' Another said that any customisation process she had attempted in the past 'just never looked right. It was never good enough that you'd want to wear it. It was a lot of effort, and the result was unsatisfactory.' At the workshops, however, the participants quickly embraced the techniques I had developed and responded positively to their potential. Following the project it was apparent that their view of knitting had expanded, and that they were now considering re-knitting as an option for other items in the wardrobe. One participant described having 'a large pile of knits waiting for new futures'. Another explained: 'I think I've realised that knitting the garment is not the end of the journey. [...] it can always become something else.'

The projects completed during the research demonstrated the flexibility of the re-knitting treatments: two of the participants replaced sections of the sleeves of their cardigans, while two others re-knitted the trims of their items, one adding pockets along the way. One participant converted a jumper into a cardigan and another reshaped an oversized item, adding new trims and repurposing the waste fabric into pockets. Of the six items, two were originally homemade and four were mass-produced. Each of the garments had an identifiable problem: three had holes and two were not a good fit, while one was simply felt to be too boring to wear. In fact, analysis of the discussions which took place at the workshops revealed that it was precisely these problems that prompted the participants to consider personalisation; 'perfect' items seemed to discourage intervention, while garments that were considered to be deficient in some way were perceived as 'open' and ripe for alteration. The participants successfully overcame the various problems associated with the garments, personalising the items in the process by designing alterations that suited their own personal aesthetic. They were pleased with the transformed items, and enjoyed wearing them. It was evident that the participants would not contemplate reworking just any damaged or deficient garment, however; an item needed to offer the prospect of a positive outcome, and had to be perceived as sufficiently valuable to expend the necessary time and effort in reworking it. Within the participant group, this sense of value variously related to emotional attachment, an expensive or high quality fibre, a garment in too good a condition to discard, and a homemade item representing a great deal of embedded effort.

Reworking reframes making as an ongoing, cyclical process, rather than a one-off event that brings an item into being; this has potentially powerful implications in terms of personalisation. Our needs and preferences, of course, change over time; if we are able to alter a garment to meet these preferences once, then we can – in principle – do so again and again. While our needs may change in terms of obvious factors such as size and fit, it is important to note that changes will also relate to intangible factors such as identity. Indeed, the evolving context of

fashion is such that changes in dress are required in order to maintain a consistent sense of identity (Roach-Higgins and Eicher, 1995); thus, in order for a personalised garment to remain relevant and appealing to its owner, it may need to be reworked – re-personalised – at intervals throughout its life. This is precisely what happened in the case of the participant who felt that her cardigan was too boring to wear (Figure 2); although she had knitted this item for herself some years before and had enjoyed wearing it for a while, she now felt it did not reflect her identity. By updating it to correspond with her current preferences (Figure 3), she was able to change the meaning that she perceived in it. Through reworking, personalisation can become a process of evolution, albeit one which is limited by the characteristics of the physical garment and the ability, and attitude, of the maker.



Figure 2. Hand knitted cardigan in the early stages of transformation, with samples.



Figure 3: The same cardigan after re-knitting, with samples and calculations.

Design and metadesign

Having considered the opportunities for personalisation offered by making and reworking, we can now consider two themes which arise when reflecting on this topic. The first theme is design: we will look at both the design skills that a maker needs to exercise in order to personalise an item, and the role of the professional designer in providing frameworks and materials that support amateurs to undertake this design activity – a task described by de Mul (2011) and others as ‘metadesign’.

As I have described, the majority of making projects are guided by pre-designed patterns; makers can amplify the potential for personalisation by deviating from these instructions in various ways, or work more independently to originate their own designs. Either way, makers wanting to create unique garments must develop a vision for their item, and couple this with a strategy for how to execute it: thus, they require both creative and technical design skills. The technical skills are arguably more accessible: makers can learn how to draft their own patterns, for example, via workshops, books and online resources. As described earlier, as part of the re-knitting project I developed practical resources that could be used by the participants to plan the alterations to

their garments: step-by-step instructions, technical advice and stitch patterns that could be adapted to the particularities of each individual item. The participants used their tacit knowledge of knitting – gained primarily through the use of conventional patterns – to make sense of these resources in relation to their garments, considering technical issues and evaluating the complexity of various proposed solutions.

My experience of producing the re-knitting resources highlights a central challenge faced by the metadesigner: how much to limit the options offered by the frameworks they create. As I experimented with the re-knitting techniques, I realised that some processes involved several technical variables; in combination, these variables generated a staggering number of combinations, many of which were awkward to knit or produced a messy-looking result. De Mul (2011: 37) proposes that the metadesigner must restrict such options in order to help the user; as he explains, ‘the designer’s task is to limit the virtually unlimited combinational space in order to create order from disorder’. I wanted to edit the options available in order to remove those that were unsatisfactory, and to prevent the user from becoming overwhelmed. I felt that it was important, however, that the treatments remained flexible in both technical and aesthetic terms; I intended that makers would use the resources I developed to create personalised designs that reflected their taste, rather than my own. As such, the priorities of my metadesign project were very different to those of a commercial personalisation platform, such as the Adidas and Pringle examples discussed earlier; in such contexts the options offered are much more restricted. Users are able to vary specific elements according to set options – such as selecting the colour of a component from a limited number of choices – in order to keep users’ creations within manufacturing-related and aesthetic boundaries set by the brand.

Let us now turn to the creative skills required when developing individual making projects. In my experience, these skills feel more alien to many amateurs; all of the participants in my research project were attracted by the idea of feeling more creative in their craft activities, but had not felt confident enough to attempt to design their own items previously. As one of the participants commented at the start of the project: ‘It’s a scary thing to be creative, when you’ve got nobody anywhere giving you a nod that you’re on the right line.’ In the project, I sought to create a supportive environment that would enable the participants to design for themselves. The design exercises that I integrated to the early workshops, which involved gathering inspirational materials and exploring colour, helped them to gain confidence in specific design-related processes. More holistically, the project as a whole created a permissive space in which they felt ‘allowed’ to explore their creative ideas.

Two elements of the project proved to be particularly important in creating this supportive space. The first factor is experimentation: developing the habit of sampling different ideas and being willing to make mistakes. As a trained designer, I find that experimentation is key to developing an appropriate and appealing solution, and also one of the most enjoyable parts of the design process. However, as one of the participants suggested, 'There's no culture for ordinary knitters of playing around.' Furthermore, from my conversations with makers I am aware that many fall into the trap of expecting a garment to turn out exactly right on the very first attempt, becoming discouraged if it does not. I encouraged the participants to experiment from the outset of the project, and it was striking how quickly they shifted their thinking and practice. The second factor is peer support; the participants worked collaboratively, discussing their projects in pairs and small groups. Their design ideas developed through discussion, evolving and becoming clearer with each iteration. When the participants reflected on their experiences of designing, they felt that these conversations and the support of the others in the group had been particularly important. As one participant commented: 'I love the collaboration bit of it, chatting about it, the exchanging of ideas.' Another made a similar point: 'I need to feed off other people, I think, to get ideas, and then to gain confidence in my ideas, I suppose.' When we dress we anticipate the gaze of others, and imagine their appraisals of our clothing choices (Kaiser 1997). This consideration is essentially a concern for the opinions of the people around us; in this project, the knitters were able to get 'a nod' from a number of trusted peers throughout the process of personalising their garments.

Wearing personalised clothes

So far we have focused on the experience of creating personalised clothes; let us now discuss the experience of wearing them. As we have seen, the prospect of wearing a one-off item, uniquely tailored to the individual's needs and preferences, is a significant motivation for many of those who choose to make their own clothing. Franke and Schreier (2010) describe how self-designed or customised products are perceived as being more valuable by their creators; domestic making could be seen as an amplified version of customisation, which strengthens attachment and a sense of value. I have spoken to many makers who have successfully created one-off items for themselves, and wear these garments with great pride. However, I have also come across a multitude of stories which indicate that homemade items do not always fulfil their promise and may fail to become the wardrobe staples their creators had hoped. One response from the drop-in knitting activity to the prompt about wearing homemade clothes epitomises this problem: 'Often disappointed: they never quite match up to how I imagined and hoped them to turn out!' This disappointment partly stems from the fact that achieving a high quality fit and finish is a difficult task, requiring skill and care. It is also down to the tendency, common amongst makers, to be hypercritical of things we have created ourselves. One of the interviewees has

observed this tendency when teaching sewing to others: 'Learners can get so stressed out. They're looking through the magnifying glass at what they've done.' Beyond these concerns relating to the materiality of personalised garments, though, I would argue that the misgivings we feel about wearing these items often relate to the mixed meanings associated with homemade clothes in contemporary culture.

Homemade clothes are frequently portrayed in a negative light; Turney (2004) describes domestic textile crafts being 'frequently the butt of jokes' and seen as 'old-fashioned, requiring little skill or design flair'. Luckman (2012) identifies a lingering association between the homemade and poverty, which she traces back to the Depression in the 1930s and the postwar desire for mass-produced goods. New perceptions of sewing and knitting as creative and aspirational practices are emerging, however, through the vibrancy and diversity of contemporary textile making culture; these fresh perceptions reframe homemade clothes as eminently desirable items. A positive, even romantic, attitude to the homemade is reflected in the comments gathered at the drop-in knitting activity, which included terms such as 'made with love', 'quality', 'comfortable', 'original' and 'satisfying'. The image of homemade clothes in the public perception, therefore, is rather muddled: old-fashioned and indicative of poverty on one hand, alternative and aspirational on the other. When we dress we anticipate what those around us will think of our selections; as Dant (1999: 107) explains, 'wearing clothes is social in that what people wear is treated by those around them as being some sort of indicator of who they are'. When we wear our homemade items, we are aware that they may be perceived in a negative light, and this can have an impact on our sense of identity. No matter how much our personalised clothes may delight us and meet our personal requirements, their appeal has the potential to be tainted by the cultural meanings which, far out of our control, circulate in society.

Consideration of the social experience of dressing leads us on to a further issue related to homemade clothes: uniqueness. Clothes connect the individual with others in society; this connection is shaped by the dynamic processes of identification and differentiation. First identified by Simmel (1904), identification, or conformity, describes a need to belong and carries a sense of solidarity; differentiation, or individualism, describes a need to feel unique. Uniqueness is a self-correcting process, so when individuals start to feel too similar to others they will find ways to reassert their individuality, and vice versa (Snyder and Fromkin, 1980). Thus, although uniqueness in dress is generally considered to be desirable, if our clothing is *too* different, it will cease to perform that crucial role of connecting us with others:

Originality is often thought to mean not being influenced in any way – not imitating others. But if originality becomes an ultimate goal, and one consistently pursues it, one loses the

most valuable means of growing as a person – the possibility of imitation, the process that is so essential to the development of the self in the first place. (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981: 190)

Shop-bought items – even those offering a degree of personalisation – have been ‘validated’ by a chain of professionals, providing reassurance that the item is desirable and appropriate; it will not have strayed far from the path of normality. Conversely, a personalised homemade item represents, and displays, the decisions of a single person and thus has the potential to be unwittingly transgressive of social norms. This is especially the case in situations where the maker has deviated significantly from a pre-designed pattern, originated their own design or used ‘open’ resources such as those that I developed for re-knitting. Although makers may derive great satisfaction from the process of designing and making a unique item of clothing, they have much less assurance that their garments will be positively received in the outside world, compared to a shop-bought alternative. This danger can be overcome, to some extent, by integrating peer support into the design process, as was the case in the re-knitting project.

Personalisation, longevity and re-use

To round off this exploration of personalising clothes at home, I would like to return to the topic of sustainability, and in particular the issues of longevity and re-use. I have frequently come across the assumption that homemade clothes are particularly emotionally significant, and therefore more likely to be kept and worn over an extended period. There is evidence to support this argument; Mugge et al. (2005), for example, identify active personalisation as a route to product attachment and longer product lifetimes. However, this relationship is not as simple as it might appear; emotional significance is not exclusive to homemade or personalised items, and – as I have explained – many homemade garments do not turn out as hoped, and are therefore never worn.

Furthermore, there is a flipside to the connection between personalisation and longevity: should we reject our personalised items, they may be less suitable for re-use than more generic garments. Consider, for example, traditional Eastern modes of dress, which involve a wrapped sheet of fabric; this garment adapts to the wearer through the act of wrapping, and could be handed on to wearers of any shape and size. In contrast, the ultra-personalised couture garment, made to fit one individual, is far less likely to find a subsequent wearer. Similarly, we may find it difficult to re-use one-off items which have been created to suit a very individual sense of identity. Thus, we must conclude that personalising clothes at home has unpredictable results in terms of longevity and re-use, and therefore sustainability: while the garments we physically shape to

meet our needs and preferences may hit the spot and remain in use for many years, we run the risk of creating anomalies that will struggle to find their place in contemporary fashion culture.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined processes of personalisation in the context of fashion, and specifically amateur fashion making. Sewing and knitting offer various opportunities for personalisation, even when patterns – which initially appear to standardise activity – are used; clothes can be personalised in terms of both fit and style, and with varying degrees of intensity. The ability to create a one-off item, specifically catering for the individual's unique preferences, is frequently mentioned as a motivation by people who choose to make their own clothes at home. While this activity most commonly involves the creation of new items, existing clothes can also be personalised; through this process deficient garments, which are seen as 'open', are renewed and altered to suit the maker.

Although personalisation has the potential to be intensely satisfying, the experience of making and remaking unique clothes at home is not always positive; these activities require a mix of creative and technical skills, and makers are sometimes disappointed with their finished projects. Furthermore, when we consider the important social function of fashion it becomes evident that uniqueness in dress carries dangers: if taken too far, it can interfere with the connections we make with those around us. Personalisation can also cause problems in terms of re-use: the more closely an item is tailored to suit the preferences of one individual, the less likely it is to find another home, should it be discarded.

Given the growing popularity of making, it is important that we develop our thinking about the contemporary experience of crafts such as sewing and knitting. While these practices offer many intrinsic benefits, there is a need to challenge the widespread assumption that personalised homemade clothes are automatically successful and straightforwardly sustainable. By exploring the characteristics of current practice we can build up a much more detailed picture of amateur fashion making and its relationship to the mainstream fashion system; this understanding can then be used to inform future metadesign initiatives which seek to support amateur makers in their own creative activities.

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Credits

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