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Re-knitting: exploring openness through design

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Abstract: This paper profiles a doctoral research project that investigated the idea of openness within fashion in order to understand the relationships between amateur fashion making, well-being and sustainability. The research was conducted through my practice as a designer-maker of knitwear.

The primary design activity involved the development of methods of ‘opening’ and re-knitting existing garments. This activity provided a practical platform through which I was able to explore openness at two, increasingly abstract, levels: first, opening my design practice to share design skills with amateur knitters; and second, opening fashion through

amateur making. At the conference I will show a sample garment featuring five different re-knitting ‘treatments’, which I produced while working with the research participants.

The research produced an extensive re-knitting resource, and a nuanced understanding of the lived experience of wearing homemade clothes in contemporary British culture. Furthermore, the study generated transferable knowledge relating to the reworking of existing items and ways in which this can be supported; the abilities of amateurs to design for themselves and the conditions which encourage this activity; and the changes in practice and identity which take place as we shift between the roles of designer-maker and meta-designer-maker.

Keywords: Open; Knitting; Fashion; Metadesign; Amateur.



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Introduction

This paper accompanies a reworked jumper, which I produced as part of my doctoral research project. The research investigated the idea of openness within fashion in order to understand and explore the relationships between amateur fashion making, well-being and sustainability.

The garment was used as a sampler to try out five re-knitting alterations, or ‘treatments’: *replace edge section*; *integral embellish*; *stitch-hack*; *afterthought pocket*; and *cut open and trim*. Images of these five treatments in progress will guide us through the paper. I will be demonstrating the techniques on another sampler throughout the conference.

Background

This research considers amateur fashion making – which I describe as ‘folk fashion’ – as a strategy for sustainability. It is linked to my practice as a designer-maker of knitwear, with the topic emerging from the explorations of design and sustainability which I have undertaken in the past decade.

I launched my experimental knitwear label, Keep & Share, in 2004 in order to investigate the design for sustainability principle of sufficiency, and associated strategies of longevity and versatility. Craft is integral to the philosophy of my label, because a knowledge of the making process can



Figure 1. Sampler garment during cut open and trim treatment.
Credit: Amy Twigger Holroyd.

engender emotional connections which contribute to longevity. The logical extension of this philosophy is to encourage wearers to become makers themselves, and between 2008 and 2013 I facilitated other people's making, running hand and machine knitting workshops and projects in a range of contexts. These experiences sparked my interest in the relationship between folk fashion and sustainability.

My working understanding of sustainability is rather broader than the most frequently cited definition, which involves three interconnected elements: environment, society and economy (United Nations 2005). This conception has been criticised for its dependence on conventional economic thinking, which arguably created many of the environmental problems that we face (Jackson 2009). As an alternative, Ehrenfeld (2008: 49) offers a positive, aspirational definition of sustainability, which I favour: 'the possibility that humans and other life will flourish on the Earth forever'. A focus on flourishing encourages us to understand human well-being as an integral element of sustainability.

Homemade clothes are often seen as sustainable, in comparison with the environmental and social problems associated with mass-produced 'fast fashion' (Allwood et al. 2006; Forum for the Future 2007). However, this view is partly based on a simplistic and romantic view of the homemade, which has received little critical examination. Through the workshops I have

run, I have met many people who make their own clothes and find this to be an empowering, positive experience. However, other conversations have shown me that amateur fashion making is riddled with ambivalences, which affect the way that knitters feel about their homemade items. Thus, I identified a need to investigate makers' experiences of wearing homemade clothes in a culture dominated by mass-produced garments, in order to build a deeper understanding of the relationship between folk fashion, well-being and sustainability.

Another issue affecting this relationship is the strong emphasis within amateur knitting culture of solely making new items. Although the reworking of existing items would have been an integral element of knitting activity in the past, such practices have fallen out of favour in recent decades. While there are many contemporary examples of wearers repairing and reworking garments using dressmaking techniques, examples using knitting are limited. This arguably restricts the advantages of knitting in terms of sustainability, as it mirrors – rather than challenges – the linear production-consumption model of the mainstream fashion industry.

Gill and Lopes (2011: 312) argue that too many sustainable design initiatives involve the production of new things; they suggest that 'the challenge for the material practices of design might be recast in terms of a negotiation with those things already in existence'. Excited by this idea,





Figures 2 & 3. Replace edge section treatment. Credit: Amy Twigger Holroyd.



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I became interested in developing methods of reworking contemporary knitted garments using knit-based techniques, skills and knowledge.

As we will see, I used a design research methodology to investigate these two central ideas – understanding the experience of wearing homemade clothes, and revitalising the practice of re-knitting – via a central theme of openness.

About openness

Openness draws together amateur activity and sustainability, and thus provided a useful concept to guide my research. The trend of openness has reached many fields of life, creating movements such as open source software, open manufacturing and open gaming (van Abel et al. 2011). In each area, if we compare the conventional culture with its open equivalent, we see the breaking down of hierarchical relationships and divisions between professional experts and amateur users. In many cases, the role of the user is fundamentally altered from passive observer to active contributor (Gauntlett 2011).

In order to explore the idea of openness in fashion, I chose to see fashion as a commons: a valuable resource, shared by a community. Within this resource, I see all of the garments – new, old, fashionable, unfashionable – in existence. On a more conceptual level, I see every desirable way

of appearing through dress, throughout history. Fashion depends on this broad, varied, vibrant resource: new fashions involve existing styles revisited, recombined or recontextualised. I believe it is important for our well-being – and therefore sustainability – to have an open fashion commons, offering diverse options with which we can construct our identities. Some researchers argue that fashion is already an open commons, because it has minimal legal protections for its creative design (Cox and Jenkins 2005). While I acknowledge that intellectual property law affects the openness of the commons, I feel that other factors are restricting access to, or enclosing, this resource.

As a maker, I am particularly interested in the role of manufacture as a mechanism of enclosure. Clothing production has become increasingly industrialised and professionalised in recent decades, and concentrated in the hands of a small number of powerful companies. Consequently, wearers have become geographically and psychologically alienated from the making of their clothes. The businesses which produce the garments that we wear restrict our use of the fashion commons because they make many choices about what is available and, as dependent wearers without an independent means of production, we can only choose from the options provided. This enclosure can be challenged, of course; opening up the fashion commons would involve gaining access to a greater diversity of styles, and making or adapting our own clothes is a particularly accessible strategy for doing so.





Figure 4. Replace edge section treatment. Credit: Amy Twigger Holroyd.



Figure 5. Integral embellish treatment. Credit: Amy Twigger Holroyd.

There is a clear link between making and openness. Openness, after all, relates to a ‘making and doing’ culture, and an atmosphere of sharing and collaboration. The cultures and communities of amateur craft have offered an opportunity for people to actively create for centuries. The culture of craft is based on sharing, with activities such as knitting, quilting and embroidery drawing on a rich resource of traditional designs and an ethos of communal evolution (Freeman 1987; Robertson 2010). Open culture is vibrant in the world of contemporary knitting; knitters have embraced the potential of the internet for connecting and sharing their knowledge. However, knitting is not as open as it may first appear: many knitters who I encountered in my practice and research expressed frustration at their own dependence on patterns. In my experience many amateurs have a desire to be ‘more creative’, but lack the confidence to work without a pattern – both in terms of technical planning and making aesthetic design decisions. If we combine these issues with the concerns people have about wearing their homemade items, mentioned in the previous section, we can see that amateur making does not automatically lead to an open fashion commons or a satisfying, fulfilling experience of fashion.

The process

In this study I pursued openness at the micro scale, developing and testing techniques for reworking existing knitted garments by manipulating the individual stitches from which they are formed. This activity provided a

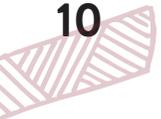
practical platform through which I was able to explore the possibilities of openness at two, increasingly abstract, levels: first, opening up my design practice to share design skills with amateur knitters; and second, opening up the fashion commons through folk fashion. These levels are represented in figure 8.

The links between these activities were fortuitous: because existing garments are endlessly variable, re-knitting offered an excellent opportunity to explore the creation of ‘open’ resources (rather than fixed patterns) and to investigate the abilities of amateurs to design for themselves. Furthermore, by working closely with a group of knitters to develop and test the re-knitting techniques, I was able to gain a deep insight into their experiences of making and wearing homemade clothes.

During the first phase of activity I worked independently: developing the re-knitting methods through iterative cycles of planning, sampling and reflection. I gradually worked through my initial ideas about re-knitting, researched methods from the past and built a spectrum of techniques that could be used to alter and rework any knitted garment – whether hand-knitted or mass-produced (figure 9).



Figures 6 & 7. Stitch-hack treatment. Credit: Amy Twigger Holroyd.



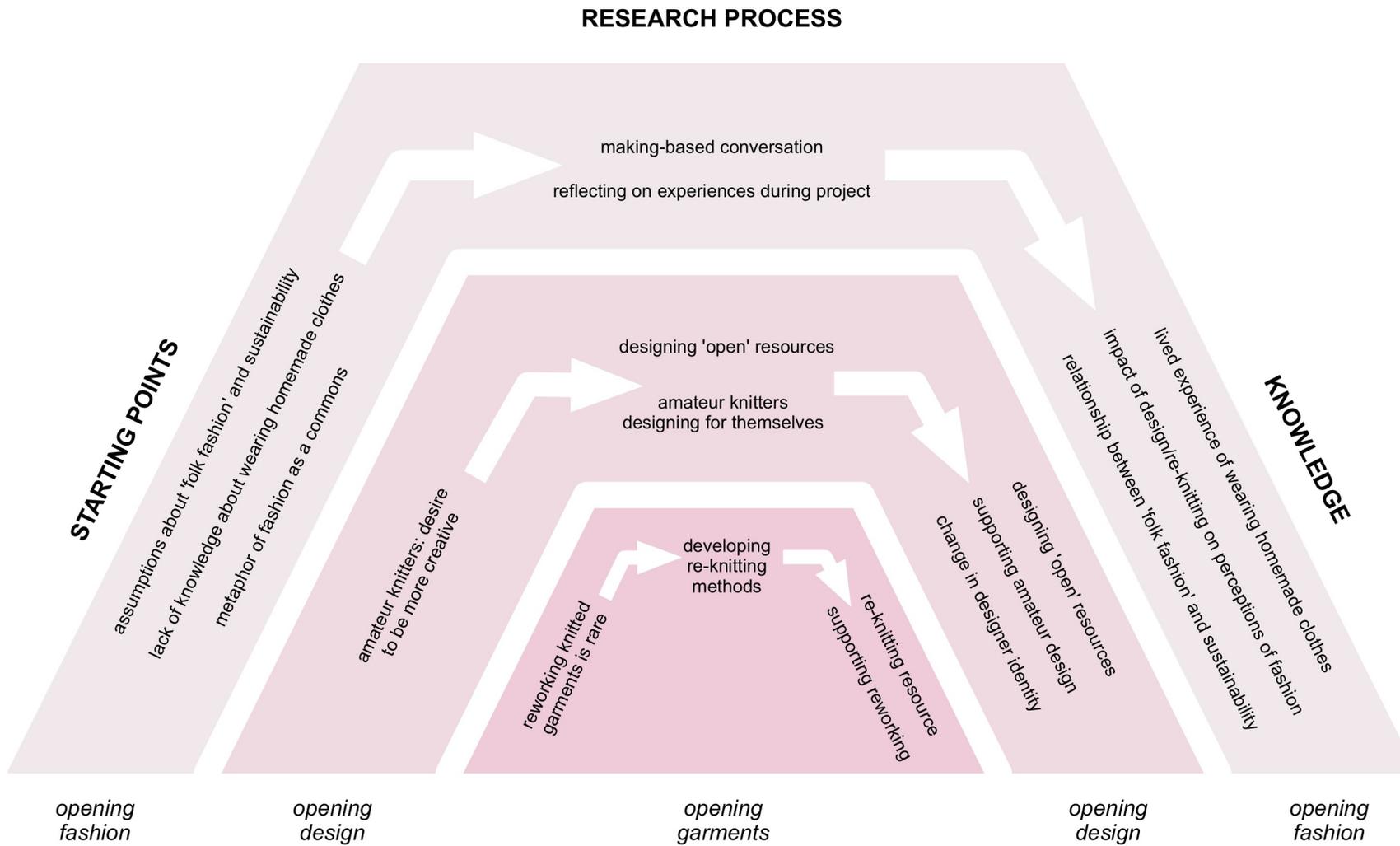


Figure 8. Infographic summarising the research: starting points, process and knowledge generated. Credit: Amy Twigger Holroyd.



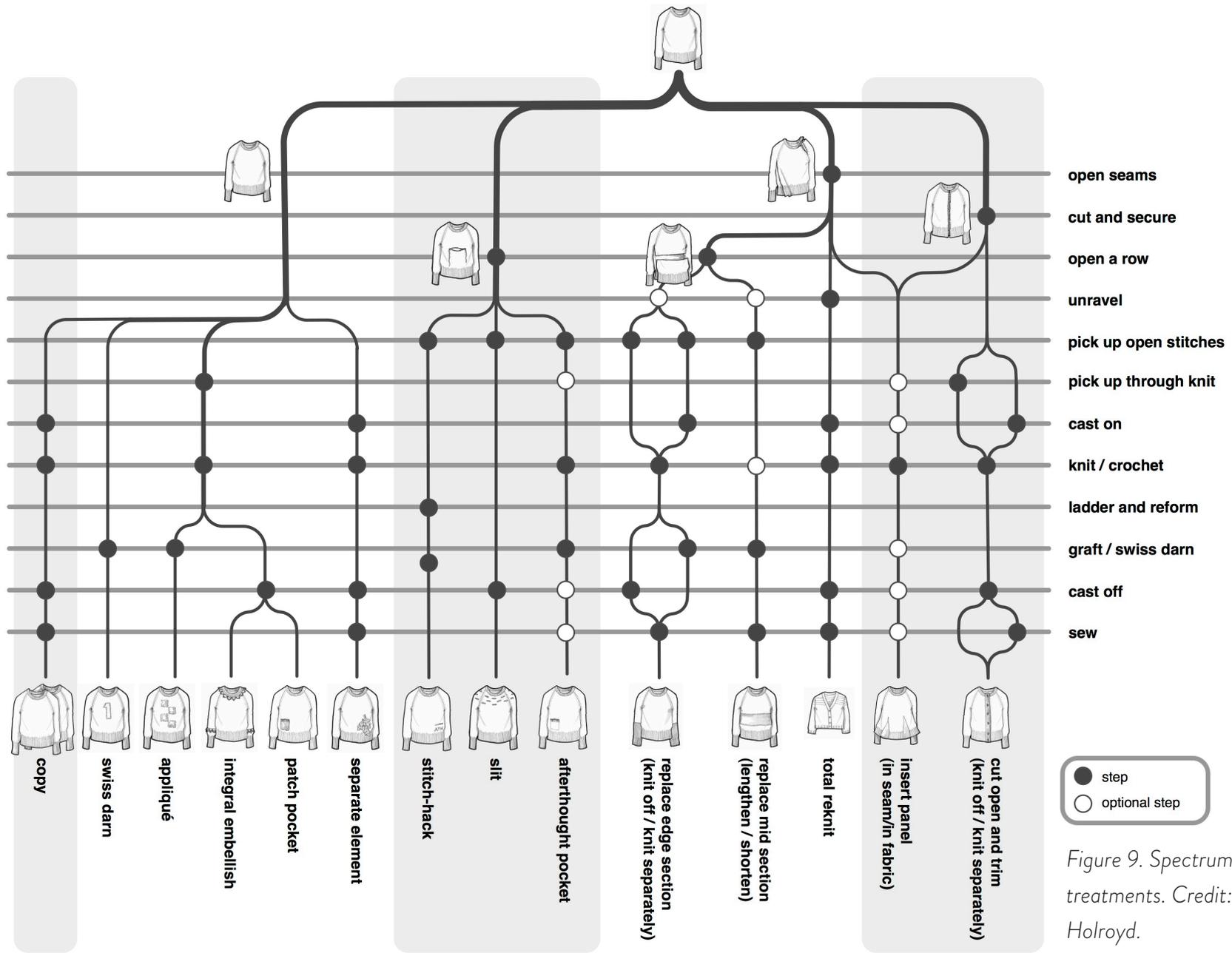


Figure 9. Spectrum of re-knitting treatments. Credit: Amy Twigger Holroyd.

Because I intended that these techniques would be used by amateur makers, it was crucial that I had input from such people during the development process. I recruited six female amateur knitters, aged between 43 and 66, especially for the project. The majority had previously attended one of my skills-based knitting workshops, and all were motivated to take part by the opportunity to explore design and creativity.

The workshops I had carried out within my practice formed the starting point for this research; I had found this environment to be conducive to open conversation and collaborative work. I built my methodology around four day-long workshops spanning a period of four months. At the early workshops I tested my re-knitting techniques, design activities and instructional materials with the group. The sessions gradually shifted from these short structured activities to a more fluid studio environment, as the knitters developed ideas for their individual projects: designing and executing an alteration to a knitted item from their own wardrobe.

Because I wanted to explore conceptual aspects of openness alongside the practical re-knitting activities, I integrated opportunities to capture qualitative material into the research design. The conversations at the workshops generated a great deal of valuable data; the participants spoke openly, linking the activities we were undertaking with their previous experiences and aspirations for the future. I also conducted individual

garment-based interviews in advance of the group activities and carried out three evening ‘knitting circle’ sessions, which provided opportunities for structured discussion and reflection. When the scheduled sessions drew to a close, the participants expressed a desire to continue meeting, and thus I was able to document several additional evening sessions. All of these activities were audio and video recorded; I transcribed every session and used thematic coding and a constant comparative method (Robson 2011) in order to analyse the data.

The success of this methodology hinged on the gathering of data during the creative activity. Rather than talking to makers about their practice retrospectively, as would be the case in an interview-based strategy, I was able to hear the participants’ feelings first-hand as they tried out the re-knitting techniques. By capturing the participants’ thoughts before, during and after the workshops, I was able to examine the changes that occurred in their attitudes as the project progressed.

Outcomes

The project produced various outcomes relating to re-knitting, which I gathered together as an online re-knitting resource. The core of the resource is the re-knitting ‘spectrum’ that visualises a range of treatments that could be used to alter an existing item of knitwear, and identifies the steps involved in each treatment (figure 9). This spectrum





is comprehensive; from a technical perspective, it includes every possible knit-based alteration. However, each treatment has countless variations, depending on the characteristics of the original garment and the design of the alteration.

There is a section for each re-knitting treatment within the resource, including step-by-step instructions for carrying out the treatment (for example figures 12 and 13). Further pages offer instructions for each individual step. In developing these instructional materials and producing the associated samples, I was highly conscious that the choices I made would affect the way the techniques were perceived by others. These choices fell into two groups: technical and aesthetic. When I needed to narrow down a wide array of technical options and select those to sample, I was guided by my tacit knowledge of knitters' preferences and the research participants' initial responses. In aesthetic terms, because I was aiming to create resources that could be readily adapted by others, I made my samples as generic as possible. I employed a consistent and basic style, using red woollen yarn to alter cream woollen panels. I used the same approach for the sample garment that is featured in this paper. I feel that this strategy was successful; the knitters were able to see the potential of the treatments and imagine how they could be adapted for their own garments. The six completed participant projects (figure 14) demonstrate that the participants understood, and exploited, the versatility of the techniques.

Figure 10. Afterthought pocket treatment. Credit: Amy Twigger Holroyd

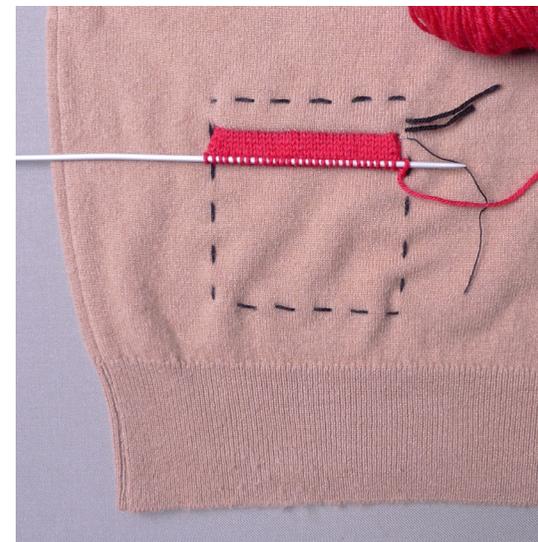


Figure 11. Cut open and trim treatment. Credit: Amy Twigger Holroyd



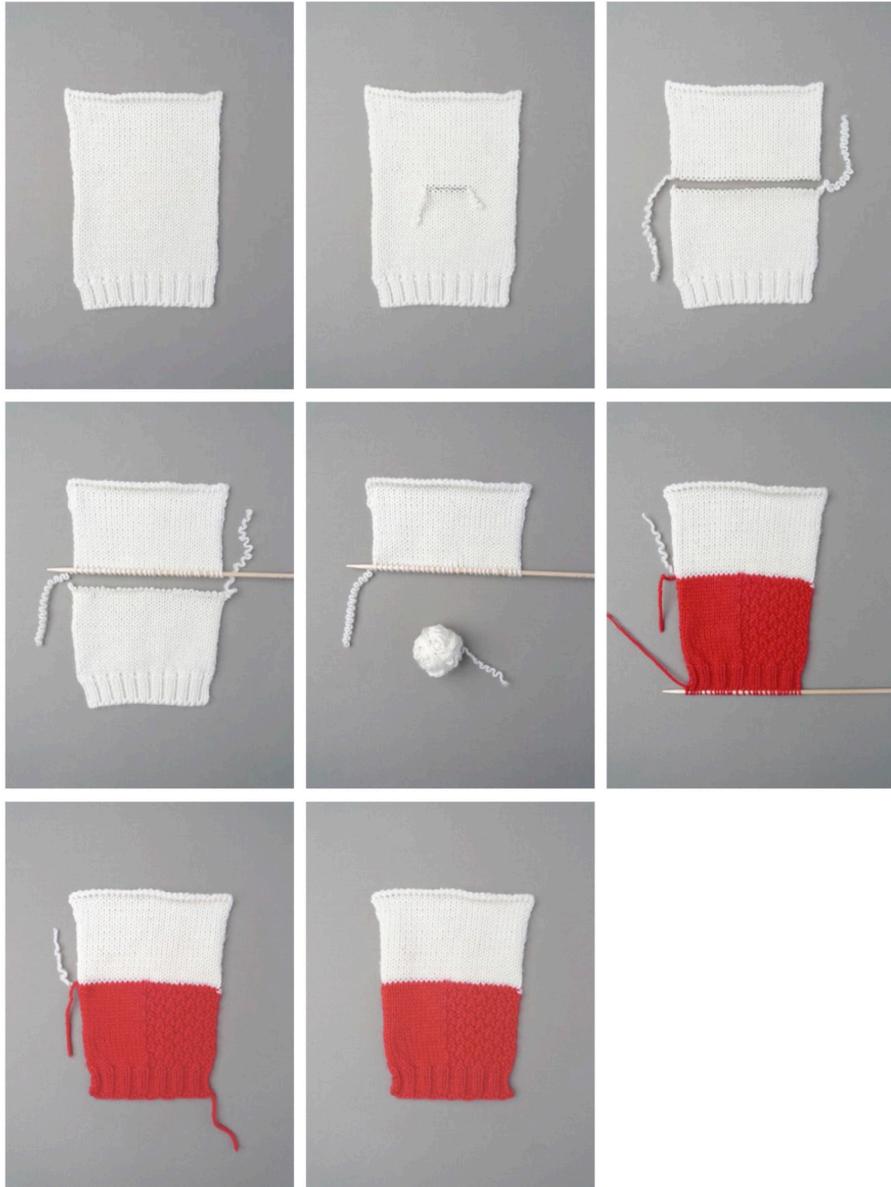


Figure 12. Replace edge section step-by-step instructions. Credit: Amy Twigger Holroyd.

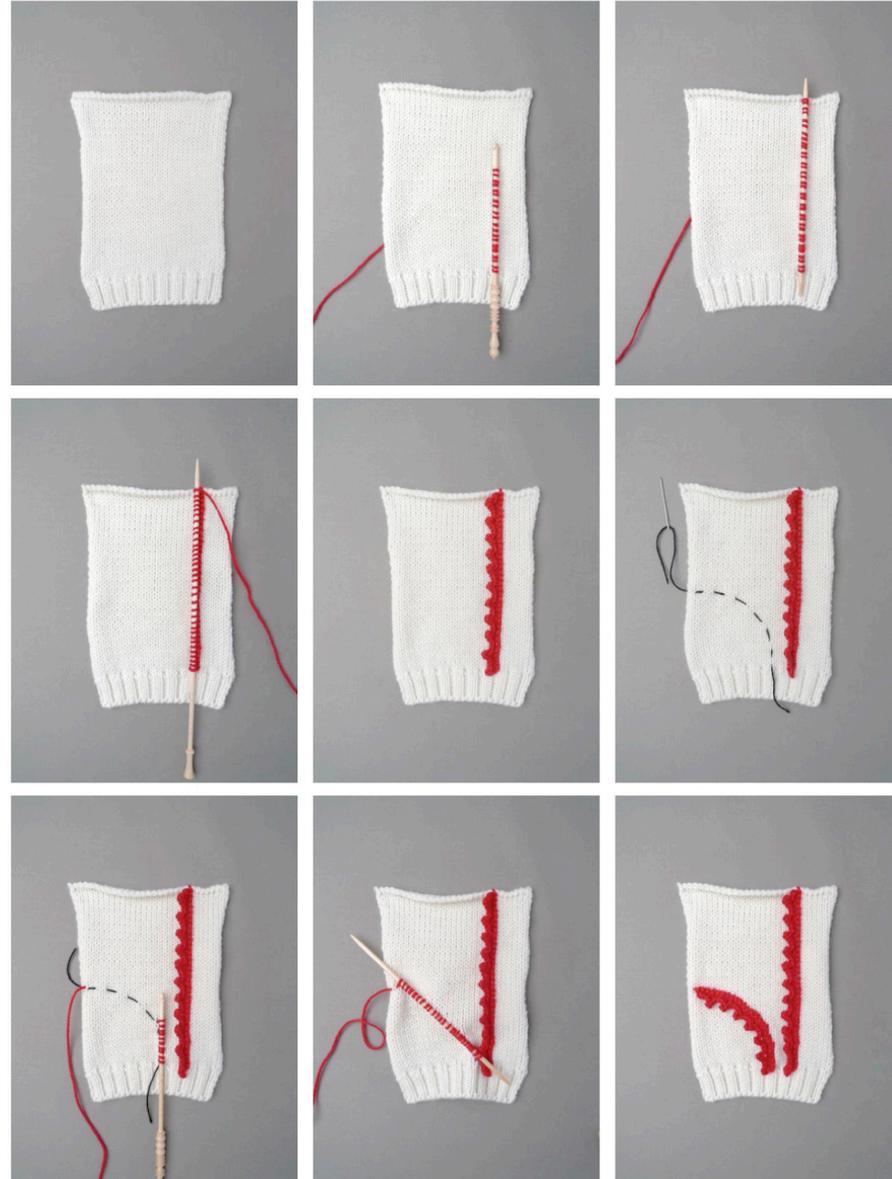


Figure 13. Integral embellish step-by-step instructions. Credit: Amy Twigger Holroyd.



Figure 14. Participant re-knitting projects. Credit: Amy Twigger Holroyd.

The resource has received a positive response from the knitting community, with particular interest in materials which support the process of changing gauge, a technical challenge which does not seem to have been previously addressed. At present the resource remains in prototype form, with further work necessary to make the materials more user-friendly.

Critical reflections

The research generated knowledge relating to each of the three levels of openness that I had identified: opening garments, opening design, and opening fashion. In many cases, these insights can be applied beyond the immediate context of knitting and fashion. A summary of this knowledge is included in figure 8.

To start, let us consider insights relating to the reworking of existing items, and ways in which this can be supported. Firstly, I identified the need to be sympathetic to the material structures of the already-made, and to apply the in-depth knowledge we have as makers to the task of remaking. Secondly, the research demonstrated a need to recognise the social and emotional aspects of remaking: that is, to understand the factors that affect what we perceive to be possible and desirable, and ways in which this perception can be altered. Thirdly, this research indicates that a supportive culture must develop around remaking if it is to thrive, to foster a sense of shared practice and gradually build tacit knowledge.



Figure 15. Cut open and trim treatment. Credit: Amy Twigger Holroyd.

The study generated knowledge regarding the second level of openness – opening up my design practice to share design skills with amateur knitters. This research shows that amateur knitters are able to design for themselves, and draw on their tacit knowledge, gained from years



Figure 16. All five treatments completed. Credit: Amy Twigger Holroyd

of following patterns, when doing so. This may be surprising; after all, knitwear design is a complicated process, in which multiple technical and stylistic considerations must be balanced (Petre et al. 2006). However, the participants in the research demonstrated that they were

able to accomplish this task. It is important to note that this activity was different from that of the industrial designer designing garments for mass production. The participants were designing for themselves, and therefore were ideally placed to consider their own individual – and sometimes idiosyncratic – preferences as knitters and as wearers. Although the participants had the ability to design for themselves, they needed support to do so. The key element in building the participants' abilities as designers was not to show them the 'right' way to design, but to create the space for them to experiment and make creative decisions. I found that integrating peer support into this permissive space was key to its success; by trying out their ideas in front of their peers within the group, the knitters gained confidence in their decisions.

During this process of opening up my design practice, my role and identity changed: I shifted from designer-maker to meta-designer-maker. While my previous practice involved designing and making garments to sell as finished items, during this project I was designing fragments of knit processes, developing instructions and advice, and creating a structure within which to present these resources. Furthermore, I was attempting to facilitate the creativity of others. This blend of activities corresponds with the 'hactivist' designer role described by von Busch (2009: 63), which involves 'designing material artefacts as well as social protocols'. I found this role to be highly rewarding, enabling me to explore design and making at different scales, from individual stitches to complex systems.



Figure 17. Re-knitting tools. Credit: Amy Twigger Holroyd.

Finally, we can return to the systems level to consider whether re-knitting – and amateur making more generally – can contribute to an open fashion commons. Through this research, I was able to build up a nuanced understanding of the experience of wearing homemade clothes in contemporary British culture. I saw the participants gain the confidence to access the fashion commons in ways that they would not have done

before. Hence, I found that re-knitting can be seen as an effective strategy for sustainability. It not only provides a means of extending product life, but more holistically offers an alternative means of participating in fashion, and a way of addressing the relationship between fashion and consumption.

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