

Mundane Durability: The Everyday Practice of Allowing Clothes to Last

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Abstract: This paper introduces the *Emotionally Durable Clothing Model*, a framework that expands Don Norman's (2004) concept of three level design, in relationship to women's lived experiences with clothing. The model captures the results of a multi-level thematic analysis of in-depth *wardrobe conversations* with 10 women situated in the UK, aged between 29-69. The methodological approach, through a unique combination of sensory ethnography, narrative enquiry and a designer-maker practice produced valuable layers of information that are difficult to access through questionnaires and other purely verbal approaches.

The four themes discussed here: (1) Sensory experiences, (2) Enablers, (3) Longing and belonging and (4) Layering; highlight that women's relationships with clothes stem from a myriad of sensory impressions, practical needs and personal histories, so closely intertwined that it is often quite impossible to disentangle them. While the *Emotionally Durable Clothing Model* enables researchers and designers to grasp the leading principles to navigate this complex territory, emotional durability of a garment can rarely be reduced to any one of its elements. It seems striking then that design strategies for extending clothing lifetimes, often represent artificial divisions and fragmented approaches that have little in common with the complexities and conflicting demands of everyday life.

The paper therefore argues that the quotidian must be tightly integrated into the current discourse, if emotional durability in fashion is not to become an irrelevant "do good" exercise but an integral way of how we treat our wardrobes, and consequently, in a more holistic sense, our planet.

Introduction

There is a considerable body of work on design for emotional durability, but empirical evidence that examines its relationship to users' everyday experiences with clothing is so far limited.

Multiple design strategies for emotional durability of products have been previously proposed, but their practical application and user feedback have been mainly studied in experimental scenarios (e.g. Mugge, Schoormans & Schifferstein 2005, Mugge, 2008; Maclachlan, 2011). Moreover, such strategies have been predominantly formulated and tested on the background of research in industrial design, especially small electronics, and domestic appliances (Mugge, Schoormans & Schifferstein, 2005; Mugge, 2008; Chapman, 2009; Haines-Gadd et al., 2017). Their relevance for an entirely different product category such as clothing remains unclear. While overlaps and areas of cross-pollination

are likely, research also indicates that due to the intimate character of clothing, the mechanisms of building relationships with what we wear may differ from how we relate to other designed objects (Gnanapragasam, Oguchi & Cooper, 2017; Niinimäki & Koskinen, 2011; Fletcher, 2016; Connor-Crabb, 2017).

Some strategies, including adaptability, modularity, co-design, bespoke, customisation, personalisation, or open-source fashion (see Burcikova, 2020 for a detailed overview), have been proposed on the grounds of empirical studies in fashion and textiles. For example, Niinimäki & Hassi (2011) conducted two on-line questionnaires with 137 and 204 participants respectively and Laitala, Boks & Klepp (2015) based their recommendations on a thorough analysis of 620 clothing items from a mixed-methods study with 35 people in 16 Norwegian families. Yet, while studies to date shed light on users' views, they rarely reveal how the stated attitudes may be renegotiated when confronted with more complex, and often conflicting

demands of everyday life. Empirical evidence on the relationship of the current strategies to users' everyday experiences with clothing is scarce, among few examples are the studies of Connor-Crabb (2017) and Gimeno Martinez, Maldini, Daanen & Stappers (2019).

The anthropologist Robert Murphy (1990) argued that the disadvantage of methods that rely predominantly on participants' verbal statements is that "people often do not do what they say they should be doing, or even what they *think* they are doing" (p. 174). Hence, verbal statement data, even if collected from relatively large samples of the population, rarely enables access to tacit knowledge or the idiosyncrasies of lived experiences, emotions in particular (Stappers & Sanders, 2004). On the other hand, ethnographies that involve a trusting relationship between the researcher and the researched, utilising a range of complementary methods such as observation, photography, audio/video recordings, notebooks, sketchbooks or sensory diaries, offer the benefit of comparing verbal accounts to observable behaviour (Murphy, 1990; Pink, 2011, 2012, 2015).

Considering all the above, the methodology of the study I conducted between 2015-2018, stemmed from a combination of my designer-maker practice with my background in ethnography and cultural studies, an approach that has not been previously used in this area of research. My research role was hence not dissimilar to the notion of 'embodied ethnographer' - someone whose profession gives them entry to an area that is normally not easily accessible to other researchers and whose tacit knowledge from their frequent presence in the researched environment opens new layers for enquiry (Edvardsson & Street, 2007 in Pink 2015, p. 20-21).

Research design

How long is durable: Physical durability and Emotional durability

"Lifetime", "life-span" and "longevity" extend beyond design, material specifications, or manufacturing quality, because the actual time for which a product gets used is influenced by individual users and socio-cultural expectations (Cooper, 2010, p. 8). A product's longevity is intricately linked to both its physical and

emotional durability. While physical durability can be defined as a product's robustness and resistance to wear and tear, emotional durability refers to the length of time a product remains relevant and attractive to the user (WRAP, 2015, p. 9). Both are closely interconnected and need to be carefully considered in design, because "there is little point designing physical durability into consumer goods if consumers lack the desire to keep them" (Chapman, 2015, p. 13).

Cognition, Meaning, Pleasure

The relationships between the physical and the emotional aspects of products are examined in detail by Norman (2004) in his concept of three-level design [Figure 1]. With his background in usability engineering, user-centred design and cognitive science, Norman argues that the first, *visceral* level of *design*, requires a focus on appearance and immediate appeal through its haptic qualities – the way things look and feel. The second, *behavioural* level, needs to consider the pleasure and effectiveness of use – the way things work. The third and last level, *reflective design*, is then directed towards the self-image and memories associated with the product – the meaning of things (p. 39).

The interconnections between the physical properties of products, their symbolic meaning, and their potential emotional value to users have also been examined by Cupchik (1999), Jordan (2000) and Walker (1995, 2006), with their respective focus on meaning, pleasure and sustainability. Yet, Norman's three level design specifically resonated with the experiences and insights from my designer-maker practice, and so it provided a key point of reference for this research. In addition, his emphasis on the critical role of emotions in everyday decisions, corroborated by the growing evidence from behavioural economics (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008; Partnoy, 2013; Thaler, 2015; Roberts, 2015), seemed especially relevant in the context of my study and its relationship to sustainable consumption.

Learning from the wardrobe

Utilising snowball sampling and word of mouth, starting with the clients of my slow fashion studio, my field study adopted sensory ethnography (Pink, 2015) and included 10 women, aged 29-69, interviewed in their homes

in several localities in the UK. The aim was to gain a deep insight into women's experiences and their attitudes towards emotional durability and longevity of clothing. I chose a narrative approach to interviewing (Elliott, 2005), focusing on what women wanted to tell me, while occasionally steering the conversation with additional questions. One of the key benefits of this approach was that by not asking women to pre-select clothes ahead of the interview, I got to hear not only about successful and 'loved' garments but also about those that failed to satisfy. This enriched my data with material for further cross-analysis.

These *wardrobe conversations* resulted in a multi-level thematic analysis of 450 garments, 20 hours of audio recordings and 2778 photographs, in four iterative stages: 1. Transcription, 2. Wall printouts and wardrobe narratives, 3. Codes, themes and categories, 4. Sketchbook reflections and selections of references for final designs, that interpreted each of the key themes through a corresponding garment. The iterative process aligned with Pink's assertion that analysis in sensory ethnography typically "moves between different registers of engagement with research materials and between different materials" and it also involves "analysing the same materials in different ways" (2015, p. 158).

Findings and discussion

With regards to the qualitative approach employed, the findings should not be generalized on the wider population and globally. Accordingly, while the focus was on female participants, due to my experience as a designer-maker of womenswear, the study does not assume a unified female gender identity. This research however offers some clear methods of analysis and outcomes that can be used in design research and practice and adapted to specific contexts.

The Emotionally Durable Clothing Model

The four interconnected themes discussed here [Figure 2] elaborate on how the rarely verbalized, and often entangled aspects of everyday experiences with clothing make up the mosaic of emotional durability in women's wardrobes. While my findings in connection to the first three themes: (1) Sensory experiences, (2) Enablers and (3) Longing and Belonging broadly correspond with the visceral,

behavioural and reflective levels of Norman's three level design [Figure 1], this study extends Norman's (2004) concept in two key respects.

Firstly, while Norman's three-level design was developed with a focus on product design, my research offers empirical evidence for extending its application to fashion design and making. Secondly, my research focus on garments in the context of whole wardrobes reveals that emotional durability of individual items is often shaped in close relationship to other clothes and the ways in which such relationships change and develop over time. This aspect of emotional durability constitutes the theme (4) Layering, that does not have a parallel in Norman's concept.

Sensory experiences

Sensory experiences considerably influence women's feelings towards an item of clothing. The success of favourite items often manifests itself in that their wearing is effortless and almost unnoticed by the wearer [Figure 3]. The feeling of comfort, often negotiated through the light weight and soft touch of materials, was hence identified as the key contributor to emotional durability of clothing (see also Niinimäki, 2010; Niinimäki & Koskinen, 2011). My findings also support the observations of Chong Kwan (2016) who notes that the changing "sensorial materiality" of clothes, as experienced through multiple senses, affects the wearer not only physically but also emotionally (p. 284). This means that while perceptions through multiple senses can often be coordinated and supporting each other, at other times they can be contradictory and causing confusion (Howes, 2005; Chong Kwan, 2016). The latter then often results in mixed feelings, when for example a jumper with a beautiful pattern and a lovely colour feels itchy against the skin.

In the light of the above, it seems striking that sensory aspects of design hardly feature in design education (see also Sonneveld, 2004). Sissons (2016) argues that designers can hardly expect people to want to wear their creations if they themselves would not want to wear them. My research offers ample evidence to suggest that by sensitising to their own sensory responses to the clothes they wear, focusing especially on soft feel, comfort, construction details and fastenings, designers could cultivate "an emotional and sensorial

closeness to their users” (von Busch, 2018a). This could significantly improve experiences of everyday use.

Enablers

Research to date often focused on “special” items, associated with a considerable symbolic or sentimental value within the owner’s life story (see Burcikova, 2020 for detailed overview). However, my data shows that the truly significant garments can equally be those used on an everyday basis and appreciated for their long-lasting suitability to the owner’s way of life. Such “ordinary” items tend to get overlooked even by their owners (Shove, 2009, 2012; Pink, 2012a), which explains why such clothes rarely feature in studies that rely on asking about special items.

While current design strategies highlight the need to foster the meaning embedded in individual items through craftsmanship, provenance, or customization (see the Introduction), I argue that a careful attention to everyday practical considerations such as versatility, adaptability, appropriateness for purpose, laundering, ironing and easy combinations [Figure 4], are just as important because sustained satisfaction of use is vital for emotional durability of clothing.

At the same time, my research evidences that emotional durability of clothing hinges on a shared responsibility. Whereas designers and makers need to consider both physical and emotional aspects of durability, users need to recognize that like any other relationship, our relationship to clothing must be an investment from both sides. Choosing garments appropriate to our needs and circumstances is a critical first step for mundane durability.

Longing and belonging

The significance of memories connected to clothing is widely recognized in wardrobe research (Woodward, 2007; Fletcher, 2016; Niinimäki & Armstrong, 2013). Yet, as a designer-maker, I found it fascinating to observe that such memories not only shape women’s feelings towards the original item, but they also seem to exert a lasting influence on women’s attitudes towards other items. Numerous later *incarnations* and variations on the original garment bear witness to the

enduring styles, habits and relationships cultivated in women’s wardrobes [Figure 5]. Continuity and referencing the familiar seem to be often valued more than change (Skjold, 2014).

Hence, the largely unspoken details of personal histories can be pivotal in shaping the future of women’s wardrobes. Surprisingly though, the significance of early life experiences for long-term (clothing) practices has so far been largely ignored both in research on emotional durability and in the discourse on fashion and sustainability. As my research offers important clues on the potential implications of early education for long-term use of clothing, I propose that the conversation on emotional durability of design should be accompanied by nurturing our own emotional durability – cultivating sensibilities that help us appreciate and value what we have before we resolve that we may need something else.

Layering

The fourth theme, *Layering*, reveals that the relevance of an item of clothing at one point in time (or a lack of it) are not finite, because different life phases tend to be linked with different clothing needs and preferences. A deep satisfaction is often derived from use across multiple life phases, and the reassuring familiarity that result from this process (see e.g. Niinimäki & Armstrong, 2013; Skjold, 2014; Fletcher, 2016). My data shows that dormant clothing is often likely to *slot into place* again in the future and can get worn and enjoyed repeatedly over many years. Hence clothes serve as tangible links between multiple events and stages in women’s lives (Banim & Guy, 2001; Woodward, 2007), as their relationship to individual items evolves over time. While the theme *Enablers* highlighted satisfaction that stems from a garment’s fitness for purpose and its appropriateness to women’s current circumstances, *Layering* captures the satisfaction derived from long-term ownership and use [Figure 6].

Bridgens & Lilley (2017) note that while designers are producing objects to be used in the future, they rarely look at that future. However, if clothes are to be layered and enjoyed over time, learning to project long term use that allows our wardrobes to evolve alongside our changing lives; embracing repairability, alterability and styles that adapt

easily to fluctuating figures, must be at the core of the design process.

Conclusion: Listening, Discovering, Making

As the four key themes presented here demonstrate, designing with people in mind necessitates taking the time to listen and reflect on the many entangled aspects of their lives. The task ahead is then to avoid the temptation to “escape complexity” (Manzini, 2017) and instead work with multiple themes, strategies and strands of knowledge in unison because there are no shortcuts to emotionally durable design. My own experiments in “design through making” (Gatzen, 2018, cited in Bollier, 2018), and the *One Thing Collection* that constituted a distillation of my thesis, offered tangible examples of how an in-depth understanding of the quotidian can be reflected in garments that balance everyday requirements on wearability with women’s unique personal histories and deeper emotional needs (see Burcikova, 2020, p. 245).

While critical voices argue that overfocus on materials will not resolve the core issues of fashion and sustainability (Fletcher, 2016, 2014 [2008]; Brooks et al. 2018), my study confirms that focus on behaviour alone is not a solution either, because behaviour often emerges from what materials and designs enable us to do (see specifically the themes Sensory experiences and Enablers). Hence, as Van Hinte Notes, “every project requires its own harmonized combination of solutions” (1997, p. 21).

The findings from my *wardrobe conversations* offer ample evidence to suggest that any real impact in fashion and sustainability can only be achieved if the current discourse is balanced by a deeper understanding of people’s everyday perspectives. While most of the participants in my study would no doubt agree that fashion’s contribution to environmental deprivation is a concern of utmost importance, the everyday reality revolves around considerations that are felt with more immediacy. It is therefore important to recognize that the long-term future is often shaped by short-term, *mundane* concerns (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008; Partnoy, 2013, Roberts, 2015). This is why the quotidian must be tightly integrated into the current discourse, if emotional durability in fashion is not to become an irrelevant “do good” (von Busch, 2018b) exercise but an integral way of

how we treat our wardrobes, and consequently, in a more holistic sense, our planet.

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Figures and Tables



Figure 1. Don Norman's concept of three level design - Adapted from Norman, 2004

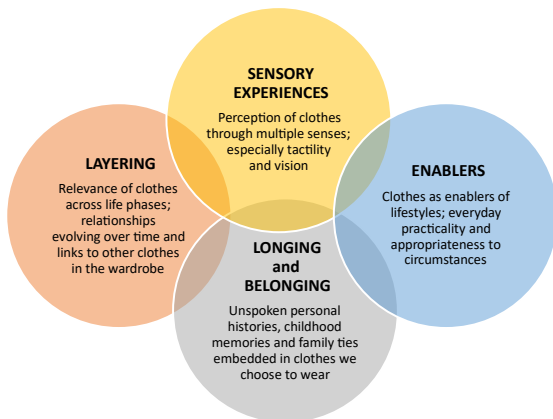


Figure 2. The Emotionally Durable Clothing Model



Figure 3. Julie: *Feel that - it's like not wearing anything* [Photo: author, 2017]



Figure 4. Nicola: *I can go straight from the board rooms onto a ladder in this dress* [Photo: author, 2018]



Figure 5. Emma: *I realized - not at the time but after - that it's quite similar shape to that green velvet one of my mum* (Photo: author, 2017)

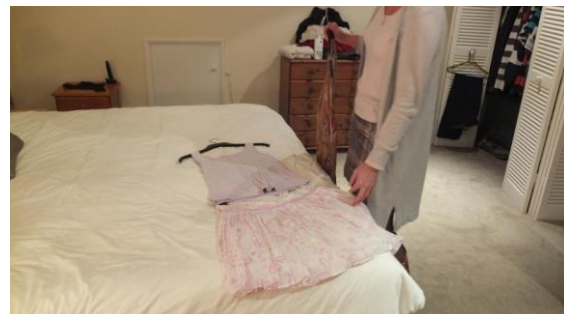


Figure 6. Annabelle: *I've probably had this skirt twenty years. And so when I was going out for my first date with my boyfriend, my mother said: you're not going out wearing that, are you? I was like: yeah, I'm gonna go out wearing this!* [Photo: author, 2017]