

Reflections on blending garment analysis with wardrobe interviews

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Abstract

This article presents my reflections on a method that attempts to bridge the divide by blending garment analysis and wardrobe interviews. In doing so it presents the ways in which we can consider evidence from the subject, the object and the subject–object assemblage. Garment analysis is a method rooted in dress history and fashion curation, whereas wardrobe interviews 'focus on the physical, material aspects of wardrobes as an important way to offset the preference in qualitative interviews [...] to intangible aspects and specifically to language and linguistic utterances' (Fletcher and Klepp 2017: 10). While wardrobe interviews do some extent offset the preference for language in interviews, what is missing was a systematic way of encouraging a deeper engagement with that garment. Interview techniques can provoke the wearers or owners of clothes to narrate their garments. With one method we consider the object, the other method the subject. My research gathers evidence from both the subject and the object by blending garment analysis with wardrobe interviews to uncover the meanings entangled in objects and memories, to interrogate what we can consider evidence from the subject, the object and the subject–object assemblage. My study explores how this methodological pluralism can allow movement between material, semiotic and affective interpretations of garments. I conclude by emphasizing the importance of both the physical garment and the embodied experience of wearing to fashion research and argue that 'turns' in the discipline should instead be considered as expansions that allow the coexistence of multiple approaches.

Keywords: fashion, garment analysis, materiality, methodology, sustainability, wardrobe studies

Introduction

This article is presented as a series of reflections on the challenges to developing a fashion studies method which considers the garment, the owner's subjective meaning attached to the garment as well as the subject–object assemblage. The desire to create a novel methodology draws from my frustrations with existing methods in fashion studies. While interview methods enable the participant to narrate their garment, garment analysis tends to focus on the material aspects of the garment. My research gathers evidence from both research traditions to uncover the meanings entangled in objects and memories, to interrogate what we can consider evidence from the subject, the object and the subject–object assemblage.

In the next section, I will sketch out the development, contours, boundaries and limitations of existing methods. I will then give an account of the method, highlighting the features which specifically address the limitations and frustrations of previous methods. Evidence from participants are considered to ground the discussion in the realities of empirical fashion research. The article concludes with a consideration of the methodological and ethical implications of this novel method.

Methodologies in fashion research

Fashion studies is an interdisciplinary field and has evolved without a 'methodological canon' (Jenss 2016: 2). The result is that researchers in fashion and dress often adapt methods from other disciplines. Francesca Granata argues for a 'multi-methodological' approach for researchers investigating fashion and dress because the 'inter-media nature of fashion in general [...] calls for a range of different approaches' (2012: 74), while Jenss similarly identifies '[t]he essential need for the use, combination and adaption of multiple methods in the exploration of fashion' (2016: 11). The challenge of bringing together multiple methods from different disciplines is that each discipline has its own history and theoretical and methodological standpoints.

This is illustrated by a debate in fashion studies surrounding the divide between object-focused museum-based approaches and more theoretical, representational socio-economic analyses (Taylor 1998; Tseëlon 2010). Entwistle (2000) pointed out the inherent tension between studies of fashion as a system and investigations into everyday dress practices, highlighting the lack of research that bridges the gap between these approaches. Theoretical studies as found in sociology and cultural studies previously investigate the relationship between fashion and everyday dress and conversely, research surrounding dress and everyday life were empirical and focused on non-western/traditional communities that do not say much about fashion as a system (Entwistle 2000). This represented a clash between the deductive theoretical methods focused on the representation of fashion and inductive empirical methods, between ideas of fashion as a system and dress as practice and between the deductive theoretical method and inductive empirical method.

Fashion studies as a discipline has since moved past these dualisms (for a full overview, see: Smelik 2018: 37–38) to include a wider variety of theoretical and methodological approaches, influenced by wider turns in the humanities and social sciences such as the material turn and the affective turn. Even so, Smelik asserts that ‘a focus on the gathering of data for description and documentation can no longer be considered the most appropriate approach for analysing fashion now that fashion studies encompass such diverse issues’ (2018: 37) and quoting Alexandra Palmer to say ‘the descriptive methodology has fallen out of fashion’ (Palmer cited in Smelik 2018). Granata (2012) argued for a re-introduction of object-based research combined with film and performance studies and specifically, Smelik (2018: 45) found that the usual tools of object-based research were insufficient for the intricate designs of Iris van Herpen. In considering affective methods for fashion studies, Van Tienhoven and Smelik (2021: 165) note that adopting an affective approach to fashion may allow a resurgence of object-based research due to an increased sensitivity to the material world inspired by new materialist and posthuman perspectives (2021: 165).

Material culture and fashion

Both wardrobe studies and object analysis are rooted in the study of material culture, however, we might differentiate between two approaches to the study of material culture.

The first approach was the museum-focused study of objects, as seen in archaeology and dress history. The second is an approach that has grown out of anthropology and referred to as Material Culture Studies, '[m]aterial culture studies was developed to solve long-standing problems involving the relationships between the social/cultural and the material. Since the 1970s, material culture studies attempted to reconcile both structuralist and semiotic approaches' (Woodward and Fisher 2014: 4).

A central idea of Material Culture Studies is materiality, although subject to debate, it refers to 'the fleshy, corporeal and physical, as opposed to spiritual, ideal and value laden aspects of human existence' (Tilley et al. 2006: 3). Daniel Miller's (2005) conception of materiality appears as a swipe at object-based approaches as he desires to go beyond a 'vulgar' account of the artefact and consider peoples relationship to objects 'the ephemeral, the imaginary, the biological and the theoretical; all that which would have been external to the simple definition of an artefact' (Miller 2005: 4). This would seem to be at odds with other definitions, which ground materiality in the physical, considering how a physical object can embody value and meaning (Taylor 2013). Tim Ingold (2007) argued that discussion of an object's materiality is often distracted by theory, and, called for a focus on the materials that objects are made from. Woodward and Fisher (2014: 12) proposed using concepts from both Miller and Ingold and argued that the two were not as opposed as they seemed. Their position allows the analysis of the materials, the individual's relationship to the material object and the meanings that may arise from this relationship. In the same article, they point to dress historians close object-based analysis of garments noting that although criticized for being overly descriptive, 'there is much to learn from their material attentiveness' (Woodward and Fisher 2014: 6).

The turn of the millennium saw increasing critiques of the semiotic approach. Many argued that material and embodied nature of clothing could not be ignored (Entwistle 2000; Miller 2005; Woodward 2007). This includes the recognition that objects are not merely carriers of meaning but active agents in the creation of it through their material, immutable form (Keane 2005). Going further, current material culture perspectives see the object itself as having agency in the creation of meaning (Miller 2005). Clothing as material object is seen as an active element in the creation of meaning rather than a mere carrier of symbols or

representations inscribed upon it (Keane 2005; Latour 1995). In other words, it is seen as having agency (Keane 2005; Miller 1987); an agency emerging through 'material/human assemblages' (Woodward and Fisher 2014: 8). Even though the move towards wardrobe studies and the material turn has meant a deeper engagement with the physical garment, this has always been in relation to the owner, the subject–object assemblage of person–garment, rather than the garment alone.

Woodward and Fisher argued that it was difficult to apply a semiotic approach to items of clothing because 'such approaches seem to deny the very material stuff of fashion' (2014: 5). Cwerner warns, '[c]lothes are not simply abstract elements of a system of meanings and communication. They are primarily material objects that possess material lives or biographies' (2001: 88). Campbell further points out that meaning is not 'dependent on their use being witnessed by others and hence associated with public display' and can therefore be held privately (1996: 103). Whilst the focus on the materiality of clothing here is welcome, it does discount the rich meaning that can be generated from a cultural analysis when combined with a material one.

Jenss further examined the relationship between fashion and material culture, noting that any study of clothing from a material culture perspective has methodological implications 'it involves not only the examination of fashion and dress as material objects, [...] but also involves the exploration of material practices – for example, what people do with material things' (2016: 21–22). This highlights the importance of the object in studies employing a material culture approach. Smelik argues that 'fashion studies may be well equipped to integrate the divergent strands and bring together dress and art historians, anthropologists, sociologists and cultural studies scholars' (2018: 38) adding that 'fashion studies has always privileged the materiality of clothes and the relation between clothing and the body' (2018: 38).

Wardrobe studies

Wardrobe studies are increasingly used in fashion research (Fletcher and Klepp 2017: 7). The method emerged as part of the wider material turn in the new millennium, although, at first,

they were not being conducted by fashion researchers, but by sociologists and anthropologists interested in material culture. Earlier research refers to 'wardrobe ethnographies' (Sjov 2011; Woodward 2007) highlighting the methodological debt to anthropology. Wardrobe methods have since developed into an interdisciplinary approach to studying clothing practices and behaviours that incorporates methods from fashion theory, design, social history and others (Turney 2017: 6) and lend themselves to being blended with other methods and theoretical frameworks (Fletcher and Klepp 2017).

The relationship between the wardrobe and ideas of fashion is a complex one. On the one hand, wardrobes can provide a counter point to the constant change of fashion because the wardrobe is defined by a continuity of styles (Skjold 2016). On the other hand, the wardrobe can be seen as a place where fashion is translated into the personal, idiosyncratic realm of the rhythms of everyday life (Heinze 2021; Woodward 2007). Wardrobe studies have also been used to learn more about distinct groups such as older people (Lövgren 2015), gay men (Tse and von Pezold 2023), people with dementia (Buse and Twigg 2016) and people with physical disabilities (Barry and Nesbitt 2023), groups of people that have been under-represented in fashion research.

Wardrobe studies can benefit from varied theoretical frameworks, some have focused on the construction of identity (Banim and Guy 2001; Woodward 2008) and more recently affect theory (Almila and Zeilig 2021; Petersson McIntyre 2021; Tse and von Pezold 2023), memory studies (Slater 2014), thing theory and actor–network theory (Tse and von Pezold 2023). The inclusion of affect in wardrobe studies allows fashion research to better study emotional, embodied relationships to clothing in way that was not previously available via representational or object-focused approaches. They provide a counterpoint to grand narratives such as Veblen's conspicuous consumption or Simmel's trickle down and instead reveal the affective complexity of individual clothing choices (Tse and von Pezold 2023). When fashion has considered the individual, it has often focused on personal style and identity construction, which underemphasizes the agency of both consumer and object (Tse and von Pezold 2023). Whilst wardrobe studies have already contributed to narratives of identity, using affect, thing theory and memory studies reveals that person–object relationships are deeply linked to the unconscious, memory making and multisensory

experiences. The agency of the object is significant '(re)shaping how significant life events are/were experienced, remembered and felt' (Tse and von Pezold 2023: 5) adding to the body of evidence for studying the clothing object itself.

Wardrobe studies is an umbrella term that covers a number of different approaches and methodological stances. *Opening Up the Wardrobe: A Methods Book* (Fletcher and Klepp 2017) presents 50 variations of wardrobe methods, whilst the earlier article 'A methodological approach to the materiality of wardrobe studies' (Klepp and Bjerck 2014) outlined a comprehensive approach to wardrobe studies that included wardrobe interviews, wardrobe audits, fieldwork notes and laboratory testing. Two key definitions are 'the wardrobe audit' and 'the wardrobe interview'. Wardrobe audits and interviews are a way of bringing materiality to the fore rather than the symbolic, communicative elements of clothing (Klepp and Bjerck 2014) and can fuse both the practical and emotional aspects of clothing practices. Wardrobe interviews 'focus on the physical, material aspects of wardrobes as an important way to offset the preference in qualitative interviews [...] to language and linguistic utterances' (Fletcher and Klepp 2017: 10). While wardrobe interviews do some extent offset the preference for language in interviews, what I found was missing was a systematic way of encouraging a deeper engagement with that garment.

Wardrobe audits involve creating an inventory of the wardrobe, which can include counting the total amount of clothing or specific items, as well as recording elements such as form, material, condition and distribution (Klepp and Bjerck 2014: 379). Each garment is registered and can include the participant's stories about the garments as well as where it is stored, the state of repair and any brand names associated with it (Klepp and Bjerck 2014: 380). This process, whilst time consuming can yield unexpected comparisons and allow quantitative data on people's wardrobe habits to be collected. However, it is not included in all wardrobe studies and many lack a deep, systematic material engagement with a single garment. Whilst the importance of object-based approaches is emphasized, there is still room to go further in the engagement with the object as found in object-based garment analysis.

Garment analysis

Part of the role of a dress historian or curator is to 'chronologically locate and interpret objects from the point of their design, make or manufacture and initial use or circulation' (de la Haye and Clark 2008: 151). De la Haye extends this to the later biography of objects, who owned them, where they were stored and their appeal to contemporary buyers. The concern with creating a biography of an object is not new, Appadurai and Kopytoff (1986) argued that the understanding of a biography or 'social lives of things', rather than only looking at moments of production and exchange, could 'make salient what might otherwise remain obscure' about the culture that the things are part of (Kopytoff 1986: 67). In many wardrobe studies or studies of fashion, the biography of the single object is not considered, if the garments/fashion objects are considered at all, they are considered as either part of a whole of the wardrobe or in relation to their current owner's practices of use. Of course, the current owner can help to illustrate the biography of the garment, by discussing how, where and from whom it was acquired. But the locating of the object's history in time and culture as done by a curator is usually absent.

This method is commonly used in dress history and by museum curators, who, most of the time, do not have access to the owner of the garment for information, so must use the garment itself. The value of this approach, according to Valerie Steele (1998: 239) quoting Jules Prown (1982: 1) is that 'artefacts are primary data for the study of material culture, and therefore, they can be used actively as evidence rather than passively as illustrations' and that 'the formal data embodied in objects are therefore of value as cultural evidence' (Prown 1980: 197). Here, the object is considered in and of itself, outside of the potential subject.

To examine the treasured garment as an object, a close garment analysis was included after the wardrobe interview. In some ways it is surprising that object-based analysis has not been used for garments in individual's wardrobes. Granata (2012) argued for the use of object-based approaches to museum garments combined with film and performance studies, Fletcher and Klepp noted the similarity of garment analysis to their wardrobe audits and

Woodward and Fisher (2014) asserted that studies of material culture could learn a lot from close readings of garments. In the current study, it was not only the garment and researcher; the owner was present as well, which gave the opportunity to ask for clarification on any points and prompted the participant to provide information that may not have come out in the interview.

The garment analysis encompassed aspects that reveal meaning, including style, age, condition, repairs, brand, fashionability and fabric. There has been little formal methodological writing on object analysis; instead it has been passed down orally from one curator to the next (Mida and Kim 2015). Valerie Steele's (1998) article 'A museum of fashion is more than a clothes bag' briefly explains the methodology of object-based dress history research. The Dress Detective by Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim is a more recent publication that aims to be a 'singular framework that offers a clear and systematic approach to the study of dress artefacts' (2015: 22).

These researchers (Mida and Kim 2015; Steele 1998) refer to Prown (1982) who devised a methodology for object-based research. Prown's methodology has three stages 'which must be undertaken in sequence and kept as discrete as possible' (Prown 1982: 7). The analysis proceeds from description, recording the 'internal evidence of the object itself' (Prown 1982: 7), to deduction, 'interpreting the interaction between the object and the perceiver' (Prown 1982: 7); to speculation, 'framing hypotheses and questions which lead out from the object to external evidence for testing and resolution' (Prown 1982: 7). Mida and Kim (2015) used Prown's work as a basis for their similar three-stage system of observation, reflection and interpretation.

Although similar, Mida and Kim's (2015) method has been devised specifically for garments and has revised Prown's method in light of their own experience and that of other fashion researchers. They include practical checklists for analysis that can be worked through for each garment studied. This ensures that same information and reflections are captured for each garment. Whilst intended for those working with historic dress in a museum or private collection context, with some amendments, the checklists were adapted to suit my own study.

The first is a 'checklist for observation' to capture the information from the garment, which was completed after the wardrobe interview with the garment and participant present. The checklist for observation includes information about the type of garment, its construction, the textile components, labels, brand, signs of use, alteration and wear, measurements and supporting material such as original packaging, photographs, etc. The reason for this is to 'secure enough factual information to be able to create a rich description of the artefact' (Mida and Kim 2015: 29).

The researcher carried out the 'checklist for reflection' once they returned home. This checklist has two sections, one which asked the researcher to consider their personal and sensual reaction to the garment, asking questions about smell, touch, garment weight and how it might feel to wear. The second part required contextual research about the garment, using desk research to find images of the garment or similar garments in museums, magazines or for sale, the history of the item's brand or designer, images from a similar period, etc. (Mida and Kim 2015: 31). During this time detailed field notes were written up from the interview and a rich description of the garments were written based on the information from the checklist for observation and the photographic images.

There has been a growing movement in ethnography, the social sciences and fashion studies towards a taking a more sensory approach to research, considering elements other than the visual (Pink 2009). This includes paying attention to embodied experience such as smell, touch, sound and taste. Reflecting on the personal, sensory experience of the garment aids the researcher in recognizing biases and helps the researcher to imagine the embodied experience of wearing and owning a garment, stimulating deeper interpretation.

Methodology

The above considerations were key to developing the method, which is described in brief below. Purposive sampling was employed around a geographic area, the criterion for inclusion was that participants had a treasured garment, were happy to be interviewed in their home and their garments handled by the researcher. The participants were recruited via flyers posted through doors in Southeast London. Five men and five women aged

between 21 and 44 participated in the study. All the participants were working towards or already held a higher education qualification. Their professions were in the creative and third sector. None were born in London but had moved from elsewhere in the United Kingdom or abroad. Their varied birthplaces reflect the wide pull of a major city such as London.

Interviews took place in the participant's homes. The first set of interview questions aimed to gather information from the subject about their broad approach to clothing and fashion, independent of the treasured object. Participants were asked about their lifeworld, how they felt about clothes and fashion, their approach to personal style, how often and where they purchased clothing and their clothing divestment habits. This section was conducted as a verbal interview without the treasured garments present. The second section of the interview was a wardrobe interview, in which participants were asked to show their treasured garment and where it was stored which included observation of clothing storage, the wardrobe and other garments. The key question '[t]ell me about your treasured garment' was purposively broad to allow the participant to narrate their experience in the order they chose. There were several planned prompts that covered elements like acquisition, memories, how they wear it, when they wear it, how they felt about it, why they liked it. This element of the method gathered information on the person-object assemblage and to understand the material and emotional interactions with between person and garment. The interviews were video recorded, and photos were taken of both the garments and storage locations. After the interview the 'checklist for observation' was completed, followed by the 'checklist for reflection' once the researcher returned home.

Reflections on garment analysis

What follows is a reflection on the inclusion of garment analysis to the study and includes information and discussion from selected participants using the pseudonyms Mark, Phoebe, George and Zoe. I will discuss the impact that including a garment analysis had on the study and the theoretical implications. If allowing someone into the private space of the wardrobe is one thing, allowing a researcher to touch, handle, turn inside out and upside down, feel, smell and potentially wear your clothing is another level of intimacy. Participants apologized

for the state of their worn clothes, seeing new rips, imperfections and thread pulls as I began to examine the garment. Some people stayed with me whilst I examined, anxiously hovering over me, whilst the checklist was worked through in comparative silence to the interview. This allowed the participants who stayed in the room with me to have an off the record conversation about their clothing. If I repeated this method, I would request to take the garment away to carry out the analysis, which would have allowed me to spend more time with the garment and examine it in greater detail. However, as these were people's most treasured garments, I felt a duty of care to them and did not want to separate them from their owners.

From materiality to affect

The garment analysis allowed both me to move from a material understanding to an affective, embodied one. When participants showed me their garment, they would hand it to me and ask 'do you want to see it', meaning I suppose 'do you want to touch it, hold it, feel it'. In the position of researcher, I was handed the garments to examine; I too could feel the fabric, examine the stitching and in one case, even try on the item. The subsequent garment analysis helped to familiarize myself with the structure of the garment, the size, dimensions and fabrics. This engagement with the material of the garments was important to understanding the participants' experiences as there is an affective, embodied knowledge gained from physical touch that is difficult to verbalize.

Mark wore his coat throughout the interview and after the interview requested that I tried it on to illustrate how warm it was, although I had not planned to wear the participant's clothes it was useful for understanding the embodied experience. In the interview Mark compared how the coat feels to wear as being 'hugged': '[W]hen we're going out and we're walking or something, people want to wear it for a little while and just [hugs himself] be hugged for a little while' (Wood 2018). The coat was heavier and longer on my body than I had imagined it would be, and I quickly felt myself getting too hot. For Mark, the coat's function as a warm coat was one of the reasons why he loved the garment, so it made sense that he would want others to experience it. Wearing the garment offered me an embodied and affective experience of the item that would not have been possible through language or

garment analysis. It also highlighted the link between the material agency of the garment in keeping the wearer warm and the emotional bond created by that.

That is not to suggest it would be ethically or physically possible to wear participant's clothing as a requirement for a study, but the request of wearing by the participant did alter the power dynamic of the interview. Even though wearing was useful, it would not be possible for all participants and items, due to practicality of different body sizes and shapes. Even without the physicality of wearing, the checklist for reflection asks the researcher to imagine the garment on themselves, how it would feel to wear and who would wear it. Although not the same as physically wearing the garment, it challenged me to think more deeply about what the garment might feel like on me and allowed an immaterial affective response to be recorded. The checklist also asks the researcher if they have an emotional response to it, whilst affect and emotion are distinct (Van Tienhoven and Smelik 2021). The self-reflective nature of the questions could be adapted further using Van Tienhoven and Smelik's framework for affective methods.

This process helped generate empathy with the experience of the garment's owner and, on occasion, imagine alternative lives of the garment. For example, George's long blue beaded Indian style skirt, without the interview I might have imagined the owner as a south Asian woman rather than a white man, showing how the garment alone could be read differently to the person–garment assemblage.

From materiality to semiotics

The contextualization and research element of the checklist for reflection prompted further research about the item separate from the owner, such as looking up similar garments for sale, auction prices and designer information. Moving from the physical garment to information about that garment allowed me to return to some of the comments the owner had made, in some cases corroborating and in others questioning what the owner had said. Mark had researched the brand of his coat, Woolrich and could tell me a lot about the brand's history. We discussed why he had gone for a Woolrich coat rather than the similar but arguably more famous Canada Goose, discussing the representational meanings

associated with both brands. Mark had bought his coat to wear on a trip to the mountains of Canada, something that he saw as the coat's 'true function', however, he also found himself wearing it on the streets of London. During the garment analysis, I found that Woolrich's advertising campaigns and applied a semiotic reading, finding they alternated between these two ideas/ideals, snow covered mountains and urban environments. This was relevant in the context of how my participant viewed his jacket, how fashions had changed and how jackets like Woolrich, Canada Goose and The North Face had moved from technical winter outerwear into fashionable city coats. The wearer, Mark, embodied both representations in the ads, an example of a fit between semiotics, recent fashion trends and his experience. The object brings together individual experience, fashion trends, fashion history and representation and allowed a way back to semiotic, communicative readings of fashion allowing a greater understanding of person, garment and person–garment.

Phoebe's treasured garment was a long skirt with a white base and bright abstract floral pattern that used to belong to her mother, whom she described as a 'bit of a hippy' (Wood 2018). The contextual element of the garment analysis revealed that Ayesha Davar, the designer of the skirt, was associated with hippy styling. This represented a semiotic fit between how Phoebe saw her Mum and a reading of the skirt and its place in fashion history.

To understand the participants' perspectives on fashion and style, I deliberately chose these seemingly contrasting terms to provoke discussions. While some distanced themselves from fashion, others expressed an appreciation for it and those who favoured fashion did not primarily base their clothing decisions on its influence. While the fashion system of representation might not significantly affect my participants, the system that entails clothing design, production and consumption undoubtedly does. The act of purchasing clothes inherently ties individuals to the prevailing fashion system or the ones of the past. Through object analysis, it became possible to situate their garments within fashion history and consider the objects in relation to the larger fashion system, transcending the sole focus on the individual and bridging the gap between representational and embodied aspects, thus revaluating the significance of the fashion image in relation to its material embodiment.

Object multiples

Central to my research was the investigation of diverse frames for valuing clothes, particularly exploring the potential commodity value of these individualized objects. The uncanny experience of encountering versions of my participants' cherished garments for sale, in which they looked the same but lacked the aura of the original was a notable revelation. I contemplated acquiring copies of these garments for display, to avoid exhibiting participants' precious possessions in a public space. Seeing the garments as commodities rather than individual's possessions allowed a distance from them and alternative readings. Zoe's bag's garment analysis brought up a different puzzle. A key reason for treasuring her bag was its perceived scarcity, her Mum had a similar one and her dad had bought her one from the same antiques shop a year later. There were only six in the shop, so Zoe believed she had something both antique and rare. When closely examining the garment I internally questioned as to whether it was 'antique', my subsequent research led me to find that her bag was a reproduction, available online and various vintage style independent shops. As a researcher this presented me with a moral quandary, I decided not to tell Zoe that her bag was not as unique as she thought it was, as I did not want to taint her feelings about it. This led me to consider the role of garment analysis in this instance, did it matter that the bag was not what Zoe thought it was or did it only matter that she believed it was rare. In this case the owner's perception negated the reality of the garment's history in meaning-making.

Discussion and conclusion

Wardrobe studies when combined with garment analysis enable the examination of clothing through various analytical frameworks, giving both subject and object agency. This multidimensional approach goes beyond the surface-level examination of garments and delves into the personal narratives, cultural contexts and sociopolitical implications associated with clothing choices. By embracing diverse analytical lenses, wardrobe studies challenge the hegemonic understanding of fashion and create space for alternative narratives and interpretations. These collaborations can capture the nuances, similarities and differences in how and why people choose, wear and keep clothing, fostering a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of global fashion practices.

The practical approach to wardrobe and clothing management can seem divorced from the affective realm. However, it can be tricky to separate them, Cluver (2008) discovered that many of the decisions consumers made about clothing location in the wardrobe or without it were emotionally driven. Both Whitson-Smith (2018) and Petersson McIntyre (2021) found that the affective nature of clothing attachments was difficult to separate from sustainable behaviours and that sustainability-focused wardrobe studies can easily blur into questions of attachment, identity and affect. As Woodward (2007) asserts, some sustainable wardrobe behaviours happen 'accidentally' when consumers make sustainable decisions without sustainability being a motivator. I too had aimed to study the emotional attachment to clothes rather than sustainability but ended up with findings that were relevant to sustainable behaviour. Wardrobe studies also offer a way to explain sustainable attitude-behaviour gaps in consumer behaviour, while wardrobe audits have revealed that people underestimate how many clothes they have in their wardrobe and their most used pieces (Hebrok et al. 2016). Wardrobe studies framed using affect offer a route to understanding seemingly idiosyncratic consumer fashion practice and can generate findings that could encourage consumers to make accidentally sustainable decisions. Through wardrobe studies we can see the lineage from the material turn to the affective one, the materiality of objects is essential to considering their affective nature and can be enhanced by the inclusion of object-based analysis.

Wardrobe studies have demonstrated their utility in uncovering consumer behaviours related to clothing, contributing valuable insights towards building a more sustainable fashion system. By examining clothing ownership, usage patterns and disposal practices, researchers can identify avenues for positive change and inform strategies for reducing environmental impact and promoting ethical consumption.

The garment analysis facilitated a deeper sense of empathy with the participant and enabled a contextualization of the garment beyond its immediate relation to the wearer. It also offers us a way to blend the material, semiotic and affective perspectives, by considering both the meanings of garments given to them by the owner and the meanings generated by the object itself. This broader perspective allowed for an understanding of the garment's

position within the wider flows of fashion, which could have proven valuable in curating an exhibition showcasing these items.

The approach implemented in this study not only facilitated a more nuanced understanding of the participants' clothing but also offered valuable insights into the broader realms of fashion and sustainability. The method's adaptability and potential to uncover hidden material cues provide an avenue for researchers to delve into clothing and fashion from diverse angles. Examining fabric weight, susceptibility to tears or creases and detecting alterations in suits could offer insights into changing body shapes and material transformations. These material clues, often overlooked or forgotten by individuals, serve as invaluable nonverbal information that may remain concealed in a wardrobe interview unless the researcher actively interacts with the garment. In addition, the adoption of an affective lens can highlight the intricacies of the person–object relationship and uncover motivations for accidentally sustainable behaviours (Woodward 2007).

The object analysis employed in this research involved making deductions about the garments, while wardrobe interviews and ethnographies generally adopt an inductive approach, building theories based on practices and experiences. The underlying goal of this method is to merge the deductive and inductive approach to fashion. By employing a process of abduction, the study oscillated between these deductive and inductive methodologies, ultimately leaning more towards the latter. The presence of the owner's insights acted as an anchor for interpretations, privileging the subject's perspective over the object. In retrospect, if I were to repeat the study, engaging a dress historian as an expert to examine the garment impartially, devoid of any knowledge about the participant, would present an intriguing approach to expand interpretations of the object. Such an endeavour would liberate the garment from its anchoring association with its owner, endowing it with an additional layer of agency and identity, transcending the confines of the person–object fusion.

The typical duration of time spent with a participant in their home is between one and three hours. During this period, the researcher may be conducting interviews, observing, filming and capturing nonverbal responses related to emotions. In my own research, I had an

assistant who handled the filming, but in future projects, I might consider involving a photographer to capture more professional images of the clothing, such collaborations might not always be feasible, they underscore the importance of greater collaboration in fashion research projects.

In the ethical considerations around wearing, I wondered why I had not asked my participants to wear their treasured garment, many of them did, but others did not and perhaps I would have had more engagement if the participants were wearing their garments, having the participant wearing their garment could open up further discussions about embodiment and the affective elements of fashion. There are studies that whilst not located in the wardrobe include the participant wearing their garments, indeed certain interviews take place in public settings with the participant wearing selected garments from their wardrobe and discussing them in relation to others (Fleetwood-Smith et al. 2019; Fletcher 2016; Smith and Yates 2018). Increasingly, individuals are wearing and styling clothes for public consumption in their own private space via social media. The process of this could be captured via if not a wardrobe study, a version of a bedroom ethnography that includes reflections on the embodied, affective experience of wearing perhaps blended with analysis of social media posts and comments.

In contemporary academic discourse, the notion of 'turns' is frequently discussed; however, it is essential to view these shifts not as a complete departure from established methods but rather as expansions. Therefore, the title of this Special Issue should be regarded as signifying a theoretical expansion rather than a turn. Fashion studies, owing to its interdisciplinary nature, has evolved from multiple disciplines with sometimes competing epistemologies and methodologies. This approach acknowledges the profound connection between practices that may not seem conventionally fashionable and the larger fashion industry. It underscores the intricate relationships between individual sartorial choices, sustainability decisions, emotional connections to clothing and their collective impact on the global or local fashion system.

This blended methodology contributes to the expanding body of literature on wardrobe methods, building upon the work of Fletcher and Klepp (2017) and introducing a novel

variation that can be adopted by other researchers. By incorporating techniques commonly employed in dress history, the inclusion of garment analysis becomes an extension of the wardrobe interview method. In this approach, the object of study is not merely a passive presence but an active subject of engagement between both the participant and the researcher. In this method, we encounter various levels of voice and agency. During the wardrobe interview, we listen to the wearer's voice, enabling us to analyse their interaction with the garment. However, when we separate the garment from the wearer, the object itself becomes the subject, possessing its own voice both in relation to its wearer and independently. Through systematic documentation of garment details, this interactive process often elicits additional information from the participant concerning the garment or related aspects. The study endeavours to embrace alternative modes of knowledge creation, transcending the dominance of language as the primary medium and places emphasis on other senses as avenues of understanding.

Acknowledgement

This article is based on the methodology for my Ph.D. research, 'Treasured garments: Exploring value in the wardrobe' in which I blended wardrobe interviews with garment analysis to investigate how meanings and value were constructed in relation to special clothing objects. During my MA in fashion curation I was introduced to the methods of dress history and spatial practices. A frustration when thinking about fashion in museums was that the evidence provided by the clothing object was to be incomplete, questions like who wore them, why did they wear them, how did they feel in them are often not recorded or answered by looking at the object alone. While interview techniques can provoke the wearers or owners of clothes to narrate their garments, they rely on language and also seemed incomplete. With one method we consider the object, the other method the subject. Previous methodologies tended to privilege one method over the other. With garment analysis the wearer is not present to answer questions about their garment. In interviews, material engagement with the garment can be lacking. Therefore, in using either method alone we are missing vital details as fashion researchers. My Ph.D. aimed to stage an exhibition of individual's personal, most treasured garments. Although the exhibition was never realized, it was the starting point of my research and methodology. To answer the

questions about how people felt about important garments, these people would have to be alive and the clothing still in their own wardrobes rather than already in museums. What began as a museum-based, dress history project, morphed into a contemporary fashion studies project that used both ethnographic wardrobe interviews and object-based garment analysis inspired by dress history and situated within fashion studies as a field. This required research methods that engaged with both private and public meaning. I wanted to explore both the value that the garment had to a person, its emotional value and the value that the garment had outside of the person, the cultural monetary or historic value. To encompass these, methods from social science (semi-structured wardrobe interviews), dress history (garment analysis) framed by a material culture approach.

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