New-Old Jeans or Old-New Jeans? Contradictory aesthetics and sustainability paradoxes in young people's clothing consumption

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Introduction

In a white paper published by sustainable clothing activists Fashion Revolution in 2015, the millennial age group (young people aged 17-34) was named as the demographic group best positioned to drive the shift towards a more ethical and sustainable fashion industry. In part this is the result of young adults (under the age of 34) being the biggest consumers of fast fashion (Bhardwaj and Fairhurst 2010). With the rapid obsolescence that characterises fast fashion widely acknowledged to be one of the biggest drivers of unsustainability within the fashion industry, a shift away from such stylistic churn will be key to longer-lasting relationships with clothing and thus less textile waste. Environmental threats driven by unsustainable consumption are increasingly high on the youth agenda; recent activism and growing awareness of consumption impacts may herald a turning of the tide against too-easily-disposability, just as growing concern about the environmental impacts of meat and dairy consumption have led to increasing rates of veganism (Hancox 2018). However, another important driver of more sustainable clothing consumption comes from a purported increasing willingness from young consumers to consume second-hand clothing (Satenstein 2016). Although, in recent decades, research into consumption of second-hand garments has highlighted a range of anxieties – from bodily 'contamination' to fear of being seen as 'poor' – that inhibited uptake (Gregson and Crewe 2003), two cultural shifts have, in the last decade, increased its acceptability: i) the emergence of 'swapping' or 'trading' apps such as Depop and Shpock, which make exchange cheap and convenient; and ii) the valorisation of a 'vintage' and/or 'pre-worn' aesthetic.

Indeed, such has been the cultural caché of the 'old' aesthetic that it has been enthusiastically embraced by fast fashion producers, with the ubiquitous 'pre-ripped' jeans constituting the ultimate symbol of this 'new-old' tension. In direct response to this apparent paradox, these items – pre-ripped jeans – formed the starting point for this inquiry into the tensions between aesthetics of 'newness' and 'oldness' in young people's clothing consumption. The project sought to examine what kinds of 'oldness' are considered cultural acceptable and stylistically desirable by young consumers, and in what kinds of contexts something temporally 'old' might be made acceptably 'new'. Understanding the subtleties and nuances in young consumers' responses to these characteristics of garments may usefully inform the approaches of those seeking to promote and embed longer garment lifetimes.

Following an overview of recent research at the intersection of sustainable consumption and aesthetics from a range of social science and design literatures, the two-phase methodology is presented. The small-scale scoping studies were designed to explore young adults' (aged 18-22) practical and affective responses to the ageing of their clothing by placing actual garments belonging to the participants at the heart of the conversation. Key findings from these studies are summarised, highlighting important nuances in how young consumers understand and respond to the ageing of garments, and the implications of these for a sustainable clothing consumption system are summarised.

Aesthetic Implications in/for Sustainable (Clothing) Consumption

Whilst much debate concerning the product lifetimes of clothing has focused on matters of physical durability and the environmental impacts of material choices, how garments look, feel and even smell plays an equally significant part in their longevity. Although studies explicitly located at the intersection of multi-sensory aesthetics, sustainability and material consumption remain rare, these concerns have intersected in studies from a range of disciplines, from product and fashion design, to sociology, anthropology and human geography, amongst others. The discussion that follows pinpoints some of these intersections and articulates key conceptual contributions which help to inform emergent debates around aesthetics of/for sustainable material consumption.

Venkatesh and Meamber's 2008 paper examining aesthetics in the context of everyday consumption practices notes the relationship between the multi-sensory nature of aesthetics and the pursuit of hedonic experience – or pleasure – through various forms of consumption. Beyond the affective response based on how something looks, as Roe (2006) demonstrates, practical interaction with an object – embodied experience of its texture and smell – can either amplify or contradict that initial response. Our multi-sensory interaction with the multiple aesthetics of an object make us either inclined, or not, to consume it – and this (dis)inclination is equally shaped by a range of personal subjectivities accrued across lifetimes of embodied experiences.

To date, concerns with sustainability have been brought into productive discussion with this framing of consumption aesthetics in several ways. One response has involved making the impacts of product use a conspicuous part of that product's design, such as Backlund et al.'s (2006) designs for lighting that etches delicate lines into the surrounding lampshade to show the light's energy consumption. Another response has focused on designing products that face considerable everyday 'wear and tear' in materials which are both physically and stylistically resilient. Lilley et al. (2016) have experimented with this approach, designing smartphone casings from materials ranging from cork and wood to leather, in order to gauge consumer responses to the emergence of an aged patina generally considered attractive in non-tech contexts, such as home furnishings. Such experiments with materials that age elegantly are not only interesting means of informing sustainable product design, but constitute an intriguing critique of the vulnerability and temporary shine (literally and metaphorically) of new consumer goods (such as the typical glass and plastic smartphone), and in turn of the superficiality and transience of postmodern (consumer) culture.

Within the domain of sustainable fashion, increasing attention is being paid to how garments might be designed for changeable style and functionality, thus producing – via one item – multiple garments and multiple (visual) aesthetics (e.g. Koo et al. 2014). Here, whilst novelty is 'designed in' to the object to increase interest in more frequent and/or longer-term wear, fulfilment of that aim rests on the willingness of the consumer to engage with the potentialities of that design. Relatedly, research has suggested that consumers have found the aesthetic repertoire within existing 'eco-fashion' and ethical clothing ranges somewhat limited (Niinimaki 2010), thus limiting its consumption. Here only the strongest environmental values overpower consumer commitment to aesthetic variety. Given the important of clothing consumption for articulation of both sense of self and peer group affiliation (Venkatesh and Meamber 2008), a limited garment palette may be problematic, especially for young consumers for whom conspicuous identity articulation can be particularly important.

It must also be remembered that access to modes of consumption with strong ethical and sustainability credentials is also limited by cultural and economic capital. In their research into the Slow Food movement, for example, Sassatelli and Davolio (2010) argue that, whilst this mode of consumption is environmentally sensitive and aesthetically enjoyable, it has the potential to be socially exclusionary by virtue of the capitals required to access and participate in it. Nevertheless, as Gill et al. (2016) argue, forms of sustainable consumption are accessible to everyone; the challenge is

making those modes of consumption culturally desirable. Specifically, they suggest that making visible the worn-life of clothing, as emphasised through practices of maintenance and laundering, makes sustain-*abilities* (i.e. ability to sustain) of clothing conspicuous and valuable, by demonstrating the importance of everyday acts of care for prolonging garment lifetimes both materially (i.e. ensuring material durability) and culturally (i.e. the social acceptance of worn-looking clothing).

In light of the dominant consumer cultural veneration of the new and pristine, however, maintaining confidence in a personal clothing aesthetic where the visibly worn is embraced may well be challenging for many (young) consumers. Yet there is significant political potential woven into consumer willingness to resist the thrall of the new. Crouch (2015) notes how living an aesthetic that runs counter to dominant norms can act as an effective policy lever, with Sharp (2013) similarly suggesting that our material surroundings (including clothing) can be reworked in order to create new habits and dispositions, and afford forms of resistance (see also Venkatesh and Meamber 2008). Making these alternative aesthetics playful and fun also increases our attentiveness to our surroundings by prompting us to reflect on the material semiotics we employ to make sense of ourselves and our place in the world (Mann 2015).

In sum, a growing number of theoretical and empirical strands across a range of disciplinary literatures are informing debates around sustainability, aesthetics and material consumption, although these are yet to cohere around distinct positions. Most salient for this discussion in this paper are those debates concerned with the expressive capacity of consumption – specifically how consumers feel their (new, old, worn or (un)cared for) garments are seen and interpreted by peers – and the labour involved in keeping objects in use. Following a brief overview of the research methodology, empirical findings are used to elucidate some of these ideas.

Research Methods

Two small scoping studies inform this paper. The first, which took place in 2016, took the form of a series of one-to-one 'workshop interviews'. Following similar approaches discussed by Shercliff and Twigger Holroyd (2016; knitting) and Straughan (2015; taxidermy), a format was designed in which participants were invited to bring to the workshop interview a garment or other textile item which required some form or repair, maintenance or upcycling. Since items worn by participants are ideal stimuli for discussion about clothing aesthetics (Eckman and Wagner 1995) the intention was to direct conversation through the garment and the work that would be applied to it. Twelve participants aged between 18 and 24 took part in a one-to-one workshop, having been recruited by word of mouth. Each workshop session, facilitated either by the lead researcher or research assistant, lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. Participants completed a short pro forma in advance of the workshop, detailing points such as what garment/textile item they would bring with them and their self-assessed level of competence in basic sewing tasks. All materials required for the repair/maintenance/upcycling task were provided. A seminar room was set up as a textile workshop and participants browsed the materials before deciding what they wanted to use. Guidance was given to the participant as required, both with the decision about how to attend to the garment and how to go about it. The specific tasks participants engaged in included: patching jeans/dungarees; darning socks; sewing up holes in hoody cuffs/jacket seams; repairing a broken rucksack zip. These items and the work they demanded invited conversation around topics including: object novelty; ageing of garments; fashion; style; garment quality/-ties; skill. Most participants' projects were finished within the time scheduled, but where they were not participants were provided with the materials required to finish their tasks at home. (A more detailed overview of this methodology can be found in Collins and Dixon 2016.)

The second study, which ran from January to April 2019, took a peer-research approach. Four undergraduate students (in Geography) were recruited and tasked with devising a qualitative study through which they could explore their peers' attitudes towards the ageing of garments. Taking a peer-research approach addressed the power imbalance inherent when an older researcher, particularly one in a particular power relation like an academic staff member in a university setting, seeks access to young participants' experiences and points of view. Instead, having young consumers interview their peers enabled discussion between 'equals' with shared cultural emplacement (Murray 2006; Northcote and Tarryn 2019). The four peer-researchers conducted sixteen object-led peer interviews in total, each of which lasted 30-45 minutes. A standard semi-structured interview approach was augmented by the incorporation of three key clothing items: jeans, coats, pyjamas. Each interviewee was asked to bring these items to the interview to facilitate discussion. In addition to using these items to structure discussion, the peer-researchers also asked questions about their participants' understanding of the terms 'vintage', 'retro' and 'old' in relation to clothing.

Transcripts for both the 2016 workshop interview and 2019 peer-led interviews were produced and subjected to a process of open coding and grounded theorisation. Key themes from this analysis are presented below organised around two foci: i) how different constructions of 'oldness' mediated willingness to consume different kinds of garments, and ii) how young consumers' (dis)inclination to engage in acts of everyday maintenance and repair fed back into their orientation towards complex new-old aesthetics. All participant names used are pseudonyms, but the real names of the peer researchers are used to acknowledge their role as co-researchers in this project.

Discussion

V is for… Very Old (or not) (a.k.a. Vintage)

The contradictions that characterise the temporal registers of young people's clothing consumption were made evident in the ways they talked about 'old' clothing in relation to 'vintage' clothing. This was summed up neatly in this exchange between Hannah, one of the participants in the peer research project, and Abbie, her interviewer:

> Hannah: "I think that the term vintage has changed over the past few years to what it actually means which I'll go onto but now it's actually like a trend a fashion trend, shops have vintage sections, I was in Primark today and they have vintage jeans which are not vintage because they're brand new. [Abbie: Ok.] Vintage should mean, well personally I think it should mean old clothes that have been re-, like, given a new life. To be sold on again, it's second-hand stuff but now I think vintage has become like a style. [Abbie: Mmhmm ok.] But vintage to me is going into a shop, and there's loads of old brands and styles and you can go, like, 'oh cool, a nice Adidas coat from 50 years ago'. That's what I think vintage is."

Whilst 'old' clothes were described by participants using words such as 'dated', 'ruined', 'tacky', and 'worn-out', there was consensus that items which had a strongly evocative style – often clearly associated with a past era – could, and often were, framed as 'vintage'. Rosie (a workshop participant) described how she liked to imagine 'glamorous' or 'exciting' past owners of 'vintage' clothes (see also Goulding 2002), which formed part of their appeal. Loveland et al. (2010) link this nostalgic view of these garments as indicative of a need to relate, belong, and feel a sense of embeddedness in a more distinctly articulatable cultural grouping than is often possible in postmodern consumer culture. Indeed, the appeal to some young consumers of clothing tied to distinct cultural epochs might be situated in a broader consideration of the loss of conspicuous youth sub-cultures and an associated

convergence or homogenisation of youth identities. Beyond 'glamorous' or nostalgic perspectives on vintage clothing, participants' comments suggested that constructing vintage as a style (rather than a temporal characteristic of garments) might also have the effect of limiting its appeal – by culturally historicizing garments in ways that detract from their banal, practical utility. As Mair (workshop participant) noted wryly, "It's a little silly… those things were still nice before you had to stick a label on it for it to be good." Cameron (workshop participant) also noted that sourcing genuinely vintage clothing that both suits and fits the intended wearer is much harder than sourcing new items styled as vintage – as Hannah indicates in the opening quote.

Across both research projects, participants' levels of comfort with consuming 'old' and/or second-hand clothing was varied. Participants were more likely to embrace the 'old' where those garments were worn further from the skin. Coats and jackets were commonly worn until they started to materially fail (e.g. through holes, failing fastenings), and there was widespread ease with the idea of wearing a second-hand garment. In contrast, whilst participants in the peer-led interviews were comfortable wearing very old pyjamas (generally replaced only when they started to fall apart), some did not like the idea of wearing second-hand nightwear, likening it to second-hand underwear because of the proximity of the garment to the wearer's skin. This reflects widely documented anxieties about the intimacy of proximity to (un)known others' bodily traces (e.g. sweat) through second-hand garment consumption (e.g. Roux 2006).

The discussions around new/old pyjamas elicited by the peer-researchers may also offer a partial explanation of the desire to consume new-old jeans. Jeans are designed to be worn hard and worn a lot. Leading brands (including Levi's, Tommy Hilfiger, Hiut and Nudie) advocate not laundering jeans, at least for the first six months of wear (O'Connor 2016). The length and intensity of wear invites a range of deeply embedded bodily traces – both through emittances such as sweat, but also the shape of the wearer's body itself – that imprint upon the item. For wearers uncomfortable with such conspicuous proximity to a prior owner – especially if the garment does not have the stylistic caché of 'vintage' – second hand 'old' jeans may be unpalatable. Yet a cultural aesthetic has been produced in which visibly **new** denim is not as 'cool' as visibly **old** denim. (More generally, Rosie suggested, having *anything* that looks brand new is 'not cool'.) Adam (workshop participant) reflected that many young consumers will wear garments with holes in if the holes were produced by a machine or some kind of industrial process, but not if another person has worn that hole organically. Thus, amongst these young consumers, there was widespread acceptance of – even enjoyment in – an 'old' aesthetic, but much more limited consumption of temporally (rather than stylistically) 'old' clothes.

Sanctions: Fear and Loathing in Clothing Consumption

Beyond the challenges associated with navigating the 'right' kind of new and the 'right' kind of old in their clothing consumption, participants revealed their varying (dis)inclination to keep garments in long-term use through acts of maintenance, repair or upcycling.

There was quite widespread willingness to engage in 'quick win' adjustments. Hannah, for example, removed some frills from a pair of jeans: "Frilly bits on the end, that was so in fashion for, like, six weeks and then everyone stopped wearing them, so I just chopped them off and now they're just my, like, one pair of good skinny blue jeans." Although all the participants in the one-to-one workshops had the necessary basic level of sewing competence to engage in their chosen repair/upcycling project, all noted that repairing, maintaining or upcycling clothing was not something they would normally do as a matter of course – only if the item was particularly treasured or important. For Emily (workshop participant), this was because she felt it was simply an 'uncool' use of time:

"… for my age group it's just kind of a bit uncool, like there's that stigma of, "Oh, she makes her own clothes", or like, "She sews her own thing up", it's quite, like, uncool, and we're in an age where you can just so easily, if you rip your top you can go out and get another one for two quid, so I don't think people are that concerned when it's that cheap."

She was, however, keen to point out that she did not consider the practices themselves, or their aesthetic effects, to be uncool. Because of her personal interest in cosplay (where participants dress up in costumes as fictional characters), along with the style aesthetic of her immediate friends and family, the broader youth-cultural 'uncoolness' of sewing up a frayed hem did not prevent her from doing so. This raises interesting questions about the cultural (un)acceptability amongst young people of giving time to their possessions, through acts of maintenance or repair, and creates a timely tension with growing youth activism around sustainability and environmental threats due to over-consumption.

Luke (workshop participant) was less concerned about spending time on repairing garments – he confessed he enjoyed taking apart household appliances in need of repair to try to fix them. Instead, he explained, he was worried about doing the repair 'incorrectly', and being seen by peers as having been 'wrong' to even try. In contrast, he said, a newly bought garment was automatically 'correct' or 'acceptable'. Research over the last two decades (e.g. Russell and Tyler 2005; Isaksen and Roper 2012) that has examined the sanctions young people can face by getting clothing consumption 'wrong' highlights the significant emotional impacts of these cultural errors. The fear of judgement Luke articulates may be an alternative narrative of Emily's report that, amongst her peer group, repairing or upcycling is seen as an 'uncool' use of time (cf. Breunig et al. 2014; Ojala 2007). Samantha (workshop participant) noted that she finds her peers simply judge whether an upcycled or repaired garment looks nice or not, rather than wondering who did the work, how long it took and how much skill might have been required. This emphasises the extent to which consumption-based peer and self-esteem within this group is primarily produced through conformity to established aesthetic codes via *consumption*, rather than the development and application of practical skills via *production*.

There is evidently, then, a strong set of culturally produced disincentives for young consumers to act on their clothing to keep it in use. This is despite their professed acceptance of multiple 'old' aesthetics, and the evidence that we tend to keep and use for much longer any items (not only clothing) that we have had some part in the (re)making of, precisely because we have invested our time (and arguably part of ourselves) in it (Cooper 2005; Maller et al. 2012). Even small acts of personalisation identified as having an element of positive sub-cultural identification (such as the patches featuring logos of rock bands identified by James (workshop participant) and worn on his bag) had very limited uptake amongst the participants in these projects. (Emily was the only other participant to make any use of patching.) The purported desire for individuality commonly sought by young consumers through their consumption is, thus, firmly situated within the safety of defined stylistic boundaries. Further, there is a widespread reluctance to self-produce any element of this individuality through acts of maintenance, repair or upcycling, or even basic customization. Buying off the peg is not only practically easier, it is culturally safer.

Conclusions

The research presented here sought to explore tensions and contradictions in young consumers in/tolerance for visibly old clothing, in order to extend discussions about mechanisms for extending

usable garment lifetimes. It was clear that, for the participants in these two studies, decisions about whether or not to wear (or purchase) 'old' clothing were made in the context of how socio-culturally acceptable that 'old' garment was imagined to be – or, perhaps more accurately, whether the garment was the 'right' kind of 'old'. Given that a significant part of the relationship between object aesthetics and consumption decisions concerns the capacity of the object to make the user or wearer feel good (Venkatesh and Meamber 2008), and young people's sense of self- and peer esteem is about complying with culturally acceptable trends, this should come as no surprise.

The data presented here indicates that garment aesthetics based on fabric wear or stylistic ageing, conspicuous upcycling, or that feature elements of (in)visible repair, were not inherently undesirable to this group. As such, these aesthetics can be argued to be compatible with a more sustainable approach to fashion consumption amongst young consumers. The key appears to be finding a balance between what this group considers to be the 'right' kind of new (i.e. not visibly, conspicuously new) and the 'right' kind of old (i.e. perhaps associated with a clear cultural epoch; probably limited to garments worn some distance from the skin). It will be important to remember that – at present, at least – young consumers seem quite willing to *consume* these garments, but not *prosume* them. Although prosumption (producing for one's own consumption) is gaining traction both theoretically and practically as a means of relocalising production and drawing long-overdue attention to matters of labour, skill, identity and self-efficacy (e.g. Knott 2013; Ritzer 2014), the participants in these studies reported that, for their peers (and sometimes, by their own admission, for themselves), spending their own time on maintaining their garments was simply not 'cool'. This admission points the way to a number of important questions for future research, including the extent to which the 'uncoolness' of maintenance and repair is a façade for an experiential deficit (i.e. feeling unskilled, lacking confidence), and the extent to which the recent upsurge in environmental activism amongst youth is being matched by their willingness to challenge the entrenchment of consumer cultural demands within youth cultural practices (Collins 2019).

More practically, what might this mean in the short term for attempts to engage young people in more sustainable clothing consumption? Given that there are 'old' aesthetics that are demonstrably appealing to this group, and given that garments are seen to be more appealing when they aren't 'too new', there may be scope to make more of clothing designs, ranges or retail mechanisms that allow 'old' garments (or their fabrics) to be re-made into a new item. (Companies such as RE/DONE are already active in this space.) Here, the garment is sanitised through the re-making process, but retains cultural cache through the fabric's history and offers sustainability benefits by reducing/avoiding the need for virgin materials. At a more localised scale, there are opportunities to culturally normalise spending time on clothing maintenance and repair by making it more common, making it enjoyable and making it a mechanism through which peer esteem and relations can be nurtured. The growth of hobbyist sewing classes, both online and in retail outlets (e.g. haberdashers) and public spaces (e.g. libraries), is a modest but encouraging start in this respect. Providing these kinds of opportunities in a range of spaces will not only contribute to the normalisation of the practice but should go some way towards addressing the risk that everyday action towards sustainable clothing consumption is only for some, when it must be for all.

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