

“So Weird and So Fabulous”: Expression of Identity in Retro Sewing

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Keywords: Home sewing, feminism, retro sewing, nostalgia, identity

Home sewers choose to sew their own clothing as a means of self-empowerment to control their appearance as well as a creative outlet (Martindale & McKinney, 2018). Retro sewers, who sew their own versions of historic styles to wear as part of their everyday lives, represent a unique intersection between the vintage clothing market and the home sewing market. These findings are part of a larger study about women who sew retro clothing. This study explores the ways in which sewing retro clothing is used to express identity.

Methods. Because the practice of sewing retro clothing has not been adequately articulated in the literature, a qualitative, grounded-theory approach was used for this study so that a greater number of possible meanings could be explored (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Miles et al., 2013; Ritchie et al., 2013). The population for this study was women living in English-speaking countries who sew retro clothing (clothing inspired by or replicating clothing from a past fashion era) for everyday wear, as one of their primary leisure activities. Participants were recruited via the researcher’s personal network, Facebook groups dedicated to retro sewing and vintage patterns, and snowball sampling. Potential participants filled out a pre-screening survey; from the 103 retro sewers who filled out the survey, 18 participants were purposively selected using a sampling matrix (Ritchie et al., 2013) to ensure the maximum possible variation in age, geographic region, race/ethnicity, decades sewn, and types of sewing patterns used (Miles et al., 2013; Ritchie et al., 2013). Grounded theory methods were used to analyze semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 18 retro sewers.

Discussion of findings and application of theory. The participants in this study use retro sewing as a means of identity portrayal in a variety of ways. First, retro sewing is a visual expression of identity. These home sewers consider their retro clothing to be part of their identities and an extension of themselves, corresponding with the literature that discusses portraying an “authentic” self through clothing (DeLong et al., 2005, p. 39; Entwistle, 2000, p. 73). For retro sewers, clothing functions as an extension of their identities (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988). The nostalgia involved in retro sewing, often linked with family, is part of the participants’ identities and provides identity continuity. The portrayal of a retro visual identity is enabled by postmodern fashion, through the reinvention of period styles for today’s use, allowing the participants a variety of options for self-expression. The tension between modernism and postmodernism in retro dress is that many of the retro sewers maintain the original look and rules of vintage dress, focusing on historic authenticity, which means that they are operating within a modern system of dress. However, the translation of vintage style into today’s context makes it entirely postmodern. A desire for uniqueness is one of the most persistent themes in the interviews; in the member checking survey, 100% of the respondents agreed with the statement, “I sew/wear retro clothing because it allows me to have unique garments that no one else has.” This finding aligns with previous studies that indicated that uniqueness is a motivation for wearing vintage (Cervellon et al., 2012, pp. 960-961; DeLong et al., 2005, pp. 38, 40; Fischer,

2015, pp. 50, 58; McColl et al., 2013, p. 145). In opposition to their desire to dress to stand out, some retro sewers expressed that their retro style is sometimes a compromise between what they would like to wear and what is socially acceptable. By enabling the expression of self while still fitting social norms, retro sewing represents an intersection between uniqueness and social acceptability.

Second, retro sewing is a way to enact personal values; participants discussed retro as opposition to the fashion industry, although they show high fashion involvement, and some use retro sewing as an expression of feminism. Retro sewing provides trend immunity, which facilitates continuity of identity. Corresponding with Entwistle's observation that the fast pace of today's fashion is linked to instability of the sartorial identity (2000, p. 74), wearing retro clothing helps to maintain the stability of one's sartorial identity, allowing the retro sewer to maintain control of her personal style as noted by Gregson et al. (2001, p. 17). Retro sewing also enables opposition to the dictates of fashion, corresponding with Bain's (2016) finding that sewing can be a means to challenge fashion norms; by creating styles dramatically different from mass-produced garments, retro sewers provide themselves with a way to step outside the limitations of what is commercially prescribed. Although retro sewing is a refusal to participate in the mainstream fashion system, it by no means follows that retro sewers are not interested in fashion; rather, retro sewers are interested in fashion on their own terms, and their individual style is prioritized over following others. Retro sewing, therefore, gives these women the power to step outside what is prescribed for them by the fashion industry. Retro sewing was also found to have third-wave feminist characteristics. Both sewing and wearing retro clothing are described by participants as a form of empowerment. A few of the participants intentionally use society's view of retro and/or sewing as "traditional" to overturn traditional ideas. The words "subversive" or "subverting" were used by five participants. Several of the participants discussed reclaiming traditionally-feminine activities as valuable pursuits, changing the perception of sewing from something that is expected of women and used as an economic measure to something that has value as a hobby and significance as a choice (Dawkins, 2011; Groeneveld, 2010; Myzelev, 2009). These findings indicate that retro sewing can have characteristics of third-wave feminism whether or not sewers are cognizant of that fact; the intent of the activity determines its feminism, rather than the labels that are applied to it.

Significance/usefulness. Retro clothing is used as a portrayal of identity linked to nostalgia and negotiated in a postmodern society that, despite allowing more options for self-expression than in the past, is mediated by interactions with others. Sewing their own clothing enables retro sewers to balance their own aesthetic preferences, interest in and application of history, and values in tension with social expectations and their various roles. The goals of the retro sewer determine the methods and materials used for any given project, particularly whether the sewer desires an entirely period-accurate ensemble or a project that fuses modern fashion with a retro aesthetic. Designers of retro patterns could appeal to a broader range of retro sewers by providing sewing patterns that include multiple versions of a garment, including a completely period-accurate version as well as options for modifying and customizing the patterns. Because retro sewers place a high value on uniqueness and personal authenticity, it is likely that customizable retro clothing would be in higher demand among retro sewers – although Eshakti currently offers customized fit with retro styling, there are no known options other than custom dressmaking for

customizing the aesthetics of a retro garment. Providing customization options would be a viable tactic for improving the appeal of ready-to-wear clothing for the retro sewing market.

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