

Self-sewn Identity: How Female Home Sewers Use Garment Sewing to Control Self Presentation

Addie Martindale, Georgia Southern University

Ellen McKinney, Iowa State University

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Significance and purpose. Although it is no longer necessary for women to sew their own garments to present themselves in socially acceptable manner as there is an abundance of inexpensive ready-to-wear available, a renewed interest in personal garment sewing is happening. The purpose of this study was to understand how women use their garment sewing skills in their self-presentation practices. It is aimed to understand how these women use their sewing skills to achieve control over their appearance and more accurately present their desired self to others.

Related literature and relevant theory. Identity is formed by the choices made by individuals (Lennon, Johnson, & Rudd, 2017), which includes decisions to participate in activities, such as sewing. These decisions construct a person's lifestyle therefore serving as part of their self-identity (Giddens, 1991). A person's identity is generally constructed through their possessions and consumption practices (Crane, 2000), which includes the use of clothing. A person's clothing serves as a fundamental way in which impressions are made and acts as a basis for initial judgement by others (Kaiser, 1990). Clothing choice is used by individuals to control the perceptions of others (Guy & Banim, 2000). Where the majority of individuals are forced to choose ready-to-wear clothing from predetermined assortments already prescribed with social meanings (Guy, Banim, & Green, 2001) sewers have increased control over their clothing selection and therefore have more authority over the way their identity is presented.

To further understand and analyze how female home sewers control their identity through sewing, it is important to consider women's clothing use and identity. A research framework developed by Guy and Banim (2000) explains how women use clothing to regulate presentation of self to others. This framework proposes that clothing is used to control three different versions of the clothed self: *the woman I want to be*, *the woman I fear I could be*, and *the woman I am most of the time* (Guy & Banim, 2000). As women negotiate their daily lives they use the clothing they wear to control which of these versions is viewed by others.

Methods. This qualitative research was part of a larger grounded theory (Saldana, 2016) study regarding the reasons why women choose to sew clothing for themselves. A purposive sample of fifteen English speaking female home sewers from ethnically diverse backgrounds were recruited from three garment sewing Facebook groups. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted asking questions regarding the reasons for and benefits received from personal garment sewing. Data analysis was completed on the transcribed interview audio from the 15 interviews. Two researchers independently coded the data with an interrater reliability rate of

96.38% exceeding the recommended agreement threshold (Saldana, 2016). The present research focuses on findings from two themes in the larger study: Control over Appearance and Validation of Garments Worn.

Results. The theme of control over appearance was constructed of four sub themes that explained how these women accomplished increased control over their appearance: the amount of clothing sewn, control over clothing style, control over clothing quality, and control over clothing fit. Findings revealed that the number of garments the women had sewn for themselves influenced the level of control they had over their appearance. Control over clothing style was vital as the women felt they could accurately present themselves in clothing that clearly communicated their personality and taste. The desire for control over quality varied across the women but of great importance to all the women was increased control over fit. This allowed them control over how clothing looked on their bodies when it was presented to others.

The theme of *validation of garments worn* was comprised of the positive feedback from others that the women received while wearing garments they had sewed. All of the women reported having this experience with friends, family, and even strangers. This positive feedback was an essential part of the women's sewing experience as they felt that their time and effort was validated. This approval from others of the way in which the women presented themselves in the clothing they had sewed was empowering for the women and had a positive impact on their self-esteem.

The women in this study's participation in sewing was an important part of their constructed identity (Lennon, Johnson, & Rudd 2017) and their lifestyle choices (Giddens, 1991). The clothing that the women sewed was used to create the women's preferred identity by controlling the way in which they presented themselves to others (Crane, 2000) and therefore controlling the way in which others perceived their appearance (Guy & Banim 2000). Like previous studies on use of clothing (Guy & Banim, 2000), the women in this study used the clothing they sewed to present the version of themselves that they desired others to see. These sewers had an advantage as they were able to sew the clothing they desired to present "*the woman I wanted to be*" as well as their sewing skills prevented others from seeing "*the woman I fear I could be.*" "*The woman I am most of the time*" did not appear to be as much of an issue as the women conveyed that the clothes they sewed themselves represented who they were more accurately.

Implications. Although the research sample was limited and cannot be generalized it provides beneficial insights into how female home sewers use garment sewing to control their appearance. The findings that the women of this study would not concede to the choices available in ready-to-wear offers a reconceptualization of the clothing consumer. The results exposed clothing attributes that these women were interested in controlling through their sewing including: fit, quality and style. Garment sewing was found to give the female sewers increased authority over their appearance than their non-sewing peers. This research establishes noteworthy benefits of garment sewing that include increased satisfaction with appearance and self-presentation that is unattainable by any other means.

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