A History of 4-H Clothing Clubs in New York State: A Preamble to Sustainable Fashion Education?

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Introduction

With the growing impact of climate change and interest in more ecologically minded approaches to fashion design (Bednall, 2022), how might society look to past pedagogical approaches to inform future solutions? The discussions contained within this study strive to connect the pedagogy of mid-to-late-20th century 4-H clothing club curricula with current 21st-century sustainable fashion practices. This oral history and archival case study examines primary source materials, including archival holdings found within the Division of Rare and Manuscripts Collection at Cornell University, ranging from 1930s-1990s, along with twenty-two newly conducted interviews of 4-H clothing club members, educators, and leaders from 1944-present across New York State. The research allowed for an in-depth study approach that fully engrossed the archives and communication with interview participants. The investigation explores both individual narratives and collective initiatives, correlating them with ecologically-minded practices. This research acknowledged the potential presence of socially unsustainable concepts embedded within curricula and materials disseminated by Cornell Cooperative Extension. This resulted in asking the question, did 4-H clothing club curricula unknowingly teach and promote sustainable fashion practices during the mid-20th century, and if so, how? What does sustainability actually mean in this context? How does the meaning of sustainability extend beyond ecologically-minded practices? Through a critical analysis, this study seeks to find valuable insights that could potentially inform and enhance contemporary and future sustainable fashion education practices through modern revisions in youth development programs.

Literature Review

4-H was founded in 1902 in Clark County, Ohio by A.B. Graham and has become the largest youth development program in America with over 6 million members (4-H History, n.d.). Their goal is to help create positive youth development, mentorship, and education to help improve the world through community (About, 2023). 4-H is an informal educational program that teaches life skills, including clothing design, and reaches youth from rural, urban, and suburban communities under CES, which includes 100 land-grant universities across the nation. Given that this study aims to investigate sustainable practices in fashion, the question is: How does sustainability appear in the fashion industry from a consumer perspective? It involves purchasing practices that minimize environmental impact and protect garment workers' rights. This idea emphasizes conscious consumption, avoiding excessive buying habits (What is Sustainability? n.d.). The responsibility for the environmental and social damages created by fast fashion is not only on the shoulders of consumers but also rests heavily

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on retailers, manufacturers, and designers, without them knowing the negative impacts they are creating (Marcketti 2020, p. 71). The industry, however, contributes to social and environmental injustices and is responsible for 10% of greenhouse gas emissions (Adeogun, n.d.), 20% of all global wastewater (Bailey et al., 2022), wage theft, and poor working conditions (San Segundo, 2019). Research at Cambridge University (2022) has shown that educational efforts can change behaviors that perpetuate harm to the environment. According to Fashion Revolution, education across all levels "could move attention away from this damaging model by promoting sustainable fashion through more moderate consumption" (Gallagher, 2019). Sustainable fashion education is therefore necessary, and a historical examination of 4-H can reveal why and how approaches to pedagogy have been both effective and ineffective.

Research Methods

This project uses a qualitative approach rooted in historical methods to analyze primary source materials in archival holdings alongside 22 newly conducted oral history interviews with 4-H leaders, educators, and former members from 1944-present. Funding for this research was provided through the Cornell College of Human Ecology Graduate Summer Archival Fellowship. Primary source materials include: Cornell University Cooperative Extension records, 1915-2015; New York State College of Home Economics records, 1875-1979; and New York State College of Agriculture 4-H club records, 1918-2019 held in the Division of Rare and Manuscripts Collection of Cornell University Library. Primary source materials include correspondence, meeting minutes, photographs, pamphlets, curriculum booklets, and scrapbooks. Oral history interviews offered first-hand accounts from participants in 4-H programming. Altogether, these methods help to illustrate how New York State Cooperative Extension agents and 4-H educators have approached teaching design and clothing maintenance, and how this curriculum impacted 4-H members throughout their lives.

Results and Discussion

Data revealed that 4-H fashion education centered on several themes related to sustainability, including garment care to enhance longevity and resource conservation. This section examines this concept through the lens of 4-H educational programming, focusing on three primary themes: quality, clothing care, and resourcefulness as depicted in Figure 1. At the same time, the program was hindered by an inability to remain culturally relevant and attempts to stay up-to-date sometimes reinforced untenable and unsustainable fashion practices.

A 1970s 4-H pamphlet found in the archives entitled *Make-Over Magic*, Figure 2, discusses the opportunities to spruce up damaged clothing, such as those with tears or stains, using decorative additions such as embroidery, appliques, crochet doilies, trims of embroidered flowers, and collar or cuffs of faux fur (*Make-Over Magic*, 1970). The fashion movements of eco-conscious consumption and resourcefulness continue to be seen throughout the 4-H curriculum, and beyond mending and refashioning, the trend of thrifting and the use of hand-me-downs were embraced by youth. This idea of recycling and upcycling was a major theme of the 1970's and the pamphlet's ideas and teachings aligned with the fashion of the time, making for exciting and relevant education for youth.

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Curricula and other materials produced and circulated by CES in the post- World War II era increasingly and more explicitly reinforced stereotypical gender roles, even as hegemonic norms began shifting with women's liberation in the 1960s and 1970s. As one member stated during her interview "What I'm familiar with, it really was sort of preparing you to be a homemaker. Yeah, so it's got a long way to go and lots of areas to improve, I would think" (E. Gibbs, personal communication, May 20, 2024). A leader's guide created by the College of Home Economics at Cornell in 1966 entitled, Care of Today's Fabrics *(Figure 2)*, gave guidelines to instruct 4-H leaders on fostering proper clothing care mindsets within their clubs. Stating how "Lately, detergent manufacturers have recognized that women want white and bright washes" (Care of Today Fabrics, 1966, p. 7). They gave suggestions on how to brighten clothing; however, along with the blatant gendered biases, some of these suggestions negatively impacted the environment by instructing the use of detergents that "add a fluorescent dye to the wash." This kind of literature was seen throughout multiple findings in the archives and was felt by the young members participating in these clubs, reflecting a larger de facto gendered division in Cooperative Extension Services and 4-H clubs specifically, with girls participating in home economics and boys in agriculture.

During oral history interviews, former 4-H clothing club members were asked whether they believed that the organization knowingly addressed environmental issues/concerns in any way and, if so, to detail their response. Interestingly, most members initially stated that 4-H did not explicitly teach sustainable or environmentally-conscious practices. However, as they elaborated on their experiences, they described practices that would align with modern sustainability standards. For example, Talia one of the youngest participants' responses to the question explained: "I would say not at all. Growing up with not a lot of money, it was being more resourceful" - (T. Baker, personal communication, June 3, 2024). Talia's use of the word resourcefulness was found commonly throughout the twenty-two interviews conducted, while 4-H did use the term, resourcefulness, they used longevity more frequently while describing clothing care maintenance.

Conclusion

This study examined the history of a longstanding youth education program with a specific focus on fashion, 4-H, and how clothing club curriculum taught youth about clothing consumption, maintenance, and care paradigms emphasizing longevity and resourcefulness. This retrospective analysis provides a backdrop to conceptualize and formulate future sustainably-minded solutions that consumers and youth can integrate into their clothing behaviors. These historical educational practices including instruction in garment care for longevity through proper laundering techniques, mending practices, and emphasis on quality of garment construction, align with contemporary sustainable fashion paradigms, despite the curriculum's century long curriculum. This alignment underscores the ever-lasting relevance of such practices, although with shifting emphases reflecting evolving societal priorities, from economic and social reasonings to current environmental issues. The project's significance lies in its depiction of how historical insights can inform current challenges, effectively bridging the gap between community engagement and potential activism.

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Figure 1. New York State College of Agriculture Extension Service, 4-H Club Records, (1940) (#21-24-692, Box 120, Scrap Books). Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, NY.

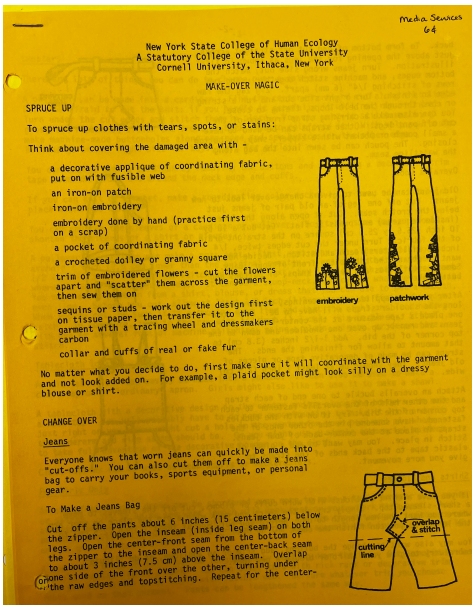

Figure 2. *Make-Over Magic*. (1970). Cornell University Department of Textiles and Apparel records, 1942-2007, (#23-19-2807, Box 6, Folder 6-14). The Rare and Manuscripts Collection, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, NY.

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