

“Wearing Vintage with a Shaved Head”:  
Balancing Historic Authenticity with Personal Authenticity in Retro Sewing

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## Significance

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. 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, 2017). The retro sewer is one who chooses to build a sartorial identity by creating unique clothing outside the mainstream. Understanding their motivations may lead to deeper understandings of why some women value and choose to build a sartorial identity outside of the mainstream and why sewing is chosen as a way to exercise control over their appearance. Understanding the motivations and methods of the retro sewer provides insight into this specific segment of the home sewing market that has additional motivations not seen in home sewers that create non-retro clothing. This research also provides a perspective on how personal values are expressed through sewing one’s own clothing outside the mainstream.

## Theoretical Framework

Because people recognize that they are being evaluated or read by their appearance, they attempt to link their appearance with identity to portray an “authentic” self (DeLong et al., 2005, p. 39; Entwistle, 2000, p. 73). Wearing vintage clothing is closely linked to the portrayal of identity through dress (DeLong et al., 2005, p. 39; Veenstra & Kuipers, 2013, p. 362). Some people are content with mass-market clothing that is readily available; others deliberately seek out garments that construct a distinctive identity (Veenstra & Kuipers, 2013, p. 360). DeLong et al. (2005) found that vintage enthusiasts use vintage to construct a “distinctive and individual look” that is in line with their authentic selves (p. 39). Authenticity of identity has been linked to vintage clothing since the first appearance of vintage in the 1950s. Le Zotte (2017), discussing a 1950s fad for 1920s raccoon coats, stated that the coats’ authenticity was arguably their most important attribute; they “demonstrated consumer discrimination and originality” (p. 132).

According to Merriam-Webster (2018), authenticity can take on several different forms, three of which are relevant to the discussion of retro clothing. First, authenticity is the quality of “conforming to an original so as to reproduce essential features.” This definition could be applied as a measure of authenticity in historic reproduction garments and in retro sewing. Second, something that is authentic is “not false or imitation,” applicable to the notion that a true vintage garment is a genuine historic artifact rather than a reproduction. Third, something that is

authentic is “true to one’s own personality, spirit, or character,” which could be applied to the idea of clothing as a true expression of self (“Authentic,” 2018).

Postrel (2004) delineated two different types of authenticity. The first is a type of authenticity related to the object; for example, authenticity as an “original form of something” or authenticity as patina or “showing the signs of history” (pp. 110-113). The second type of authenticity relates to a person’s identity rather than to an object; specifically, authenticity of self-expression (Postrel, 2004, pp. 115-117). Both the authenticity of original garments (related to the object) and authenticity of self-expression (related to identity) are factors in why people choose to wear vintage garments. Most of the literature on vintage wearers has not differentiated between the two, speaking of authenticity in more general terms.

## Methods

The data from this study is from a larger study that used grounded theory methods to analyze semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 18 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, and snowball sampling. From the 103 retro sewers who filled out a pre-screening survey, 18 participants were purposively selected to ensure the maximum possible variation in age, geographic region, race/ethnicity, decades sewn, and types of sewing patterns used (Creswell, 2014, p. 189; Gray, 2014, p. 217; Miles et al., 2013, pp. 31-36; Ritchie et al., 2013, p. 131).

## Results

For the retro sewers interviewed, although their clothing is historically influenced, much of their style tends to be a negotiation between *historic authenticity* and *personal authenticity*, with one often being set against the other. Similar to people who wear vintage clothing (DeLong et al., 2005, p. 31), retro sewers are situated at different points on a continuum from a modern look with subtle retro elements to head-to-toe period ensembles. Although both historic authenticity and personal authenticity are important to the participants to at least some degree, typically either one or the other is given priority. For their everyday retro clothing, most of the sewers prioritize personal authenticity. Personal authenticity is linked to an aesthetic interest in the past, interpreted in a way that makes it personal; this sometimes means sacrificing historic authenticity.

Some retro sewers, on the other hand, prioritize historic authenticity to the point of portraying specific personas. For these participants, historic authenticity is related to their love of learning and trying to experience in the present how a person might have lived in the past. The focus on historic accuracy is not the same as it might be in reenacting, in which one is trying to fit specific guidelines so as not to mislead the public; instead, historic authenticity is more of a personal challenge and an opportunity to learn.

The prioritization of historic authenticity over personal authenticity increases over time, for some retro sewers. Although they begin sewing retro for the aesthetic, they shift to focus more on historic accuracy. In some cases, however, the order of priority depends on the purpose of the garment or the event to which an ensemble is being worn. One participant noted that she feels a sense of responsibility for accuracy in historic reenactment, whereas she will mix and match eras in everyday retro.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Because of the contradictions inherent in retro clothing, it is a complex expression of identity. This study found that retro clothing is a fusion of historic authenticity with personal authenticity, with one or the other being assigned higher priority depending on the sewer's preferences and/or the event for which the ensemble is being worn. 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. These findings provide additional insight into a specific segment of the home sewing market.

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