

Identity Construction and the Multiple Meanings of Homemade Clothes in Contemporary British Culture

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the experience of wearing homemade clothes in contemporary British culture, and the way in which such items affect the process of identity construction. There is a lack of academic knowledge in this area; fashion theory rarely discusses homemade clothing, while craft theory primarily focuses on the process of making, rather than the use of finished items.

The research involved a review of literature on fashion, making and identity, combined with primary research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven female amateur knitters, aged between 43 and 66, as the initial stage of a qualitative design research project investigating amateur making as a potential strategy for sustainable fashion. These accounts are supported by over fifty comments about wearing homemade clothes, gathered at a drop-in knitting activity.

In our post-traditional world, identities are always evolving. Rather than occupying fixed roles associated with work, religion and class, we reflexively construct our identities through leisure and lifestyle. We do this through dress, using the constant shifts of fashion and the meanings associated with clothes. We also construct our identities through the activities in which we engage, such as amateur fashion making.

What happens when we come to wear the items we have made? These items lack the meanings associated with brands, and the sanctioning influence of industrial manufacture. Instead, they are subject to the multiple meanings of the homemade. This research shows that homemade items can be seen romantically, as garments made with love, associated with positive self-sufficiency and hip 'indie' culture. Conversely, we can observe the stigma of the homemade, of ill-fitting and badly-made items associated with poverty and old-fashioned values. Given these conflicting meanings, it is unsurprising to find that many amateur makers have ambivalent feelings about wearing their homemade garments.

Key Words: Fashion, identity, amateur, making, meaning, homemade, knitting, romance, stigma, ambivalence.

1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with the experience of wearing homemade clothes in contemporary British culture, and the way in which such items interact with the process of identity construction. This issue has emerged during a qualitative design research project investigating amateur making as a potential strategy for sustainable fashion. My particular interest is in homemade knitted garments; hence, I am using knitting as a focus while discussing amateur fashion making more generally.

The research is firmly situated in my practice as a designer and maker, specialised in knitwear. I agree with White and Griffiths that practitioners' perspectives are essential for the development of fashion as an area of academic study.¹ While running knitting workshops and projects as part of my practice, I have met many people who make their own clothes and find this to be an empowering, positive experience. However, other conversations I have had have shown that amateur fashion making is riddled with ambivalences, idiosyncrasies and disappointments. These fascinating conversations led me to embark on this project.

Before starting my own primary research, I carried out a review of literature on fashion, making and identity. In order to understand the complex cultural arrangements which structure individuals' experiences of wearing homemade clothes, I needed to establish an underpinning understanding of fashion theory. I am taking an inclusive approach; I agree with Wilson that '...in modern western societies no clothes are outside fashion',² and take a particular interest in what Craik describes as 'clothing behaviour in general'.³ During the review, I realised that making is absent from the vast majority of fashion theory literature, which assumes that the items being worn are shop-bought. Similarly, use is missing from craft theory literature, which is primarily concerned with process. There are valuable examples of research into the wearing of homemade clothes between 1890 and the 1980s.⁴ However, there is very little to help us understand the experience of wearing homemade clothes in contemporary British culture, beyond short journalistic accounts.⁵ Myzelev discusses the display of homemade objects in the home environment – an area which is clearly related to the wearing of homemade garments – and agrees that this area is ripe for investigation:

What is the role of objects, handmade objects in creating a house, a home? How does making it change its relevance? These issues *via-à-vis* knitting and handicrafts in general are yet to be explored.⁶

The research involved a series of knitting workshops with a group of seven female amateur knitters, aged between 43 and 66, which took place at my knitwear studio in Hereford. At the start of the project, I conducted individual interviews and a group ‘knitting circle’ discussion; these sessions provided the data explored in this paper.

The semi-structured life world interviews were structured around items from the participants’ wardrobes.⁷ The conversation moved naturally from the specifics of the individual garments, to broader questions about fashion, shopping, mending and discarding clothes. At the ‘knitting circle’, I captured the group’s experiences of knitting and their feelings about wearing homemade clothes. The group introduced themselves by sharing projects they had made, and we knitted together as we talked; thus, we got to know each other as fellow knitters with similar interests, experiences and concerns. The sessions were transcribed and analysed using thematic coding analysis and a constant comparative method.⁸ I have included three quotes from this data in the paper, highlighted in italics.

These accounts are supported by over fifty comments about wearing homemade clothes, gathered at a drop-in knitting activity that I ran at three music festivals. The comments provide a materialised version of the snippets of stories, anecdotes and comments that I hear during my practice. Images of three of these tags have been included, and should be thought of as visual quotes.

2. Identity construction

As Rogers and Smith-Lovin explain, ‘sociologists use the term ‘identity’ to refer to the many meanings attached to a person, both by the self and others’.⁹ According to Burke and Stets, we gain these meanings from our roles in society, the groups we belong to, and our personal characteristics.¹⁰ In traditional cultures, identities are stable; for example, Crane tells us that ‘...in nineteenth-century industrializing societies, social class affiliation was one of the most salient aspects of a person’s identity’.¹¹ We now live in a post-traditional world, and identities are less stable; Burke and Stets argue that in this context we have multiple identities and the self becomes an evolving, reflexive project.¹² As Giddens says:

The reflexive project of the self, which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives, takes places in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems.¹³

Belk explains that one way in which we construct our identity is through our possessions.¹⁴ According to Crane, because leisure and lifestyle, as opposed to work, religion and class, have become more important in constructing identity,

‘...the consumption of cultural goods, such as fashionable clothing, performs an increasingly important role’.¹⁵ Many writers argue that our clothes are a particularly significant type of possession, because of the intimate relationship they have with our bodies. For example, Dant identifies clothes as the objects which play the most intimate and constant role in our individual and social lives.¹⁶ According to Calefato, this unique relationship can be identified across a wide range of geographical, historical and social contexts.¹⁷ Attfield explains that clothes link the internal world of the self with the social realm of identity.¹⁸

Woodward describes the act of choosing what to wear as a practice of identity construction, and dressing as an act of ‘surfacing’ particular aspects of the self.¹⁹ This is an ongoing process, as she states:

It is apparent that clothing does not simply reflect the self or identity. Instead ... clothing gives women a sense that they have a self and indeed that they can change it.²⁰

Gregson, Metcalfe and Crewe remind us that this process of identity construction does not just take place at the point of purchase (a focus for much consumption literature) and what Guy, Green and Banim describe as ‘wardrobe moments’,²¹ but throughout ownership, and disposal, of clothing.²²

The process of identity construction relies on the meanings associated with our clothes. These meanings might relate to the style of the garment, as manifested through silhouette, detail or material, or to the manufacturer, as communicated via (more or less visible) branding. McCracken explains that such meanings are not universal or fixed.²³ As Miller describes, the symbolic meanings of objects are highly variable, ‘...dependent upon the social positioning of the interpreter and the context of interpretation’.²⁴ This is particularly true within a postmodern fashion system; a garment or outfit may be read in different ways by different viewers and in different contexts. Because of this ambiguity, clothes are a potent way of constructing our multiple, postmodern selves. Davis suggests that tensions such as ‘...youth versus age, masculinity versus femininity ... inclusiveness versus exclusiveness ... domesticity versus worldliness, revelation versus concealment ... and conformity versus rebellion’²⁵ can be expressed and resolved through dress. According to Kaiser, clothing is ‘good to think with’, and can bring ‘complex contradictions to the surface’.²⁶ As well as the meanings that we share with others, it should be noted that we also attach personal meanings to our clothes, often based on memorable experiences associated with the items. Such meanings may be deeply significant to the wearer, yet invisible to others.

Making provides another means of constructing and expressing identity. Identities are based on positions in social structures; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton explain that these positions are increasingly based on our personal interests and chosen leisure pursuits.²⁷ As Giddens says, ‘...the more post-traditional the settings in which an individual moves, the more lifestyle concerns the very core of self-identity, its making and remaking’.²⁸

Taking up knitting as a hobby allows recognition as ‘a maker’. Johnson and Wilson say that the adoption of this identity connects knitters with wider networks, and creates a recognisable role within the circle of family and friends.²⁹ However, recognition as ‘a knitter’ might have different meanings in different contexts. Within the knitting community, this identity is shared and therefore seen in a positive light. However, in the wider world, it may not be so positive. Knitting has multiple, sometimes conflicting images: hip, anarchic and youthful on one hand, old-fashioned and uncreative on the other. I asked my research participants what they felt other people thought about knitting, and knitters. Their answers were mixed; some were positive, mentioning the current fashionability of the activity. However, several felt that others see knitting as old-fashioned:

They think it's boring. I think people think it's almost sad, you know?

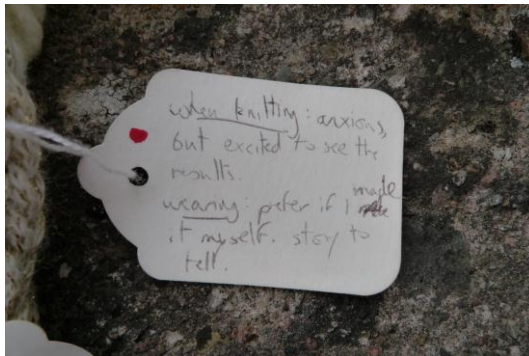
Thus, an identity as a knitter is rather ambivalent. It can be a source of pride and status when amongst like-minded people, at the same time as a potential source of embarrassment, to be concealed from those outside the knitting community.

3. Homemade clothes and identity

While the activity of making establishes an identity as ‘a maker’, the items produced materialise that identity; wearing them creates a resonance between the two. As Johnson and Wilson explain, homemade objects are manifestations of all the meaning which has gone into their making.³⁰ They describe how handcrafted textiles, displayed in the homes of the women who took part in their research, ‘...confirmed Belk’s (1988) assertion that items which convey creativity and the mastery of skills, and which mark time, are particularly effective in defining the self’.³¹ Similarly, Turney argues that the display of homemade objects in the home is ‘...highly significant in demonstrating the identity of the maker and the ideology of the household’.³²

In the last section, I described the many meanings that could be associated with clothes, and distinguished between personal and shared meanings. It is likely that homemade items would carry deeper personal meanings than purchased garments, because of the time and effort involved in their creation. Johnson and Wilson

describe how the extensive handling which occurs during craft making creates a strong attachment between wearer and garment.³³ Stalp describes homemade items as ‘bookmarks’ of the period during which they were made.³⁴ Writing about people who have built their own houses, Brown argues that the activity ‘...brings meaning to everyday life by the simple fact that the presence of the home prompts the re-telling of this, most compelling, creative experience’.³⁵ Similarly, knitters enjoy telling others about the items they have made, as this tag and quote from one of the research participants indicate:



I like wearing the gloves, I feel very pleased, I show everybody (laughs). You'd think I was twelve years old, look, I knitted these!

It should be noted that the making experience can create negative personal meanings, as well as positive ones. A knitter once told me about her current project: a cardigan, which had come out disastrously wrong on the first attempt and which she was subsequently re-knitting. Looking ahead to the time when it would finally be finished, she said that she did not know whether she would wear it, as she may still harbour feelings of resentment towards the project.

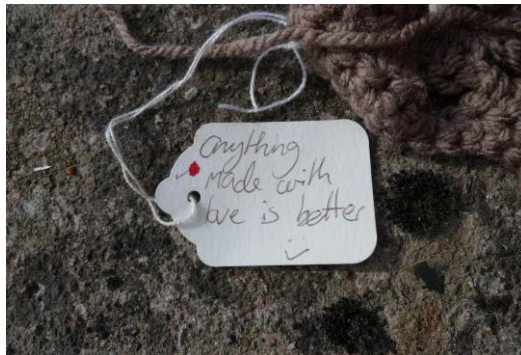
Along with personal meanings, we also use the shared meanings associated with clothes to surface aspects of our identity. Earlier, I described these meanings as multiple, movable and potentially ambiguous; I argue that this ambiguity is heightened in the case of homemade clothes. When a garment is given an economic value, we are able to make sense of it. Homemade items confound the logic of economic value and therefore challenge usual ways of understanding the objects around us, as Ditum explains:

When brands and prices are markers of identity and value, anything that's been made for the sake of love and craftsmanship

is infuriatingly tricky to place – that, I think, is the logic behind the snotty jibes at ‘nana sweaters’. It doesn’t matter how beautiful a homemade object is: for most of us, what we buy is an extension of who we are, and wearing something without a price tag comes off like a shifty refusal to state your business.³⁶

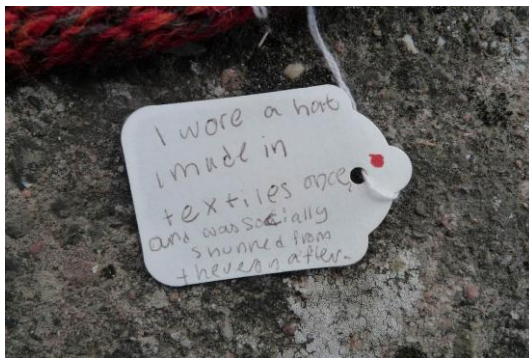
Just as people choose ready-made clothes that have meaning for them, knitters can do the same when selecting a pattern to knit. Some styles of homemade knitwear can be clearly associated with particular cultural meanings. For example, the ‘Starsky cardigan’ – as seen in 1970s cop show *Starsky & Hutch* – has become a fashion archetype, as has the traditional Nordic jumper worn by the star of recent crime drama *The Killing*. However, as Ditung argues, in the main homemade clothes do not have the markers, such as logos and brand names, which help us to quickly associate meanings with garments. The meanings associated with commerce are replaced by the meanings of homemade; and these are, indeed, difficult to place. I believe that the cultural meanings of homemade knitted clothing are related to the cultural meanings of the activity of knitting. As I have explained, knitting can be seen in a positive, vibrant sense, or denigrated as old-fashioned.

At the drop-in knitting activity, I asked participants to share their feelings about wearing homemade clothes. Within this context – where knitting was generally viewed as a desirable, creative activity – the majority of the responses revealed a romantic view. The comments paint a picture of homemade garments as indiscriminately better than mass-produced alternatives, with words such as *made with love*, *unique*, *quality*, *individual*, *happy*, *comfortable*, *cosy*, *proud*, *original*, *flamboyant*, *satisfying*, and *last longer* occurring. This comment summarises this positive view:



The idea that homemade items are inherently ‘better’ conflicts with the many accounts I have gathered of homemade items not turning out well, and never passing into use. Of course, knitters are not an homogenous group and will have a range of experiences; however, it is important to note that many of the knitting tent comments have an aspirational tone which suggests that the respondents may not have personal experience of trying to make wearable items for themselves. Whatever the personal experiences of the respondents, these comments indicate that homemade items are often seen in a romantic, positive way. This view connects with an emergent movement which values localism, thrift and self-sufficiency as elements of a desirable lifestyle.

However, this romantic view is countered by a stigma that, for some, is associated with the homemade and relates to the marginality of these items in a culture dominated by mass-produced garments. On a collective level, there is an association between homemade garments and poverty which endures, despite the cheapness of today’s ready-made clothes. Homemade items are often the butt of jokes; negative comments about itchy, uncomfortable, ill-fitting jumpers are overwhelmingly familiar. These collective attitudes reflect countless individual stories; many people have anecdotes about the embarrassment of wearing homemade items in childhood. These comments provide snippets of two such stories:



You might think that I would be grateful for this lovely handcrafted pair of gloves, uniquely made just for me. You would be wrong. I remember whingeing that they were the wrong colour, they didn’t fit right and they were just not cool! Being eleven, I wanted to have something the same as all my school friends, namely machine-knit ones from Marks and Spencer; not embarrassing ones knit by my Mum and Nan.³⁷

Further conflicts can be identified in the meanings of the homemade, such as cool versus authentic. Russell explains that ‘coolness’ is highly valued in fashion, and is associated with actual or apparent effortlessness.³⁸ The time and effort involved in producing a homemade item would seem to be the opposite of this effortless cool. However, authenticity is also highly valued; a homemade traditional garment, such as an aran jumper, can be seen as highly authentic and therefore highly desirable.

4. Conclusion

Wearing clothes made at home can be a potent way of constructing identity, which links the physical creation of a garment with the slippery process of ‘surfacing’ particular aspects of the self. My research suggests that makers are aware of the ambiguous and often conflicting meanings associated with their homemade clothes, and thus may have ambivalent feelings about wearing them.

It could be possible to wear homemade items in a way that highlights their positive, rather than negative, associations. This idea is sometimes discussed in relation to second-hand clothes, which have a similar mix of meanings: poverty and lack of sophistication versus post-consumerist, stylish thrift. For example, Gregson and Crewe describe people wearing second-hand items in combination with new items, in order to present them in a positive sense: ‘The certainties of one unlock the potentials of the other, safely, in a framed, controlled juxtaposition of meaning.’³⁹ In this situation, the wearers are recognising the conflicting meanings of their garments, and taking control of them. It is interesting to think that homemade clothes could be approached in a similar way.

In my research project, I supported the knitters in the group to design their own items of knitwear. A series of workshops at my studio gave them space to experiment and try out ideas for their projects, and the opportunity to reflect and select their preferred option. Crucially, they did so with the aid of feedback from their peers, as one participant noted:

I think it's really exciting to design. But it's something I couldn't do on my own. I need to feed off other people, I think, to get ideas, and then to gain confidence in my ideas, I suppose.

When dressing, we anticipate the gaze of others; Kaiser explains that our self-image is largely informed by external appraisals.⁴⁰ During this project, the knitters tested out their ideas under that gaze and thus developed confidence in their work. It seems that taking the making out of the private space of the home into a more social, yet supportive, environment is one way of helping amateur makers to see the items they have made in a more consistently positive light.

Notes

- ¹ Nicola White and Ian Griffiths, Introduction to *The Fashion Business: Theory, Practice, Image*, ed. Nicola White and Ian Griffiths (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 3.
- ² Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 3.
- ³ Jennifer Craik, *The Face of Fashion: Cultural Studies in Fashion* (London: Routledge, 1994), ix.
- ⁴ For example:

Sarah A. Gordon, “‘Boundless Possibilities’: Home Sewing and the Meanings of Women’s Domestic Work in the United States, 1890-1930”, *Journal of Women’s History* 16, no. 2 (2004): 68–91.

Cheryl Buckley, ‘On the Margins: Theorizing the History and Significance of Making and Designing Clothes at Home’, *Journal of Design History* 11, no. 2 (1998): 157-171.

Carol Tulloch, ‘There’s No Place Like Home: Home Dressmaking and Creativity in the Jamaican Community of the 1940s to the 1960s’, in *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking*, ed. Barbara Burman (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 111–25.

Catherine Cerny, ‘Quilted Apparel and Gender Identity: An American Case Study’, in *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning in Cultural Contexts*, ed. Ruth Barnes and Joanne B. Eicher (Oxford: Berg, 1992), 106–20.
- ⁵ Sarah Ditum, ‘Knitting Offers Welcome Relief from Fashion Lust’, *The Guardian*, 22 February 2012, Viewed 20 June 2013, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/feb/22/knitting-fashion-lust>>
- Germaine Greer, ‘Who Says Knitting Is Easy? One of My Bedsocks Is Bigger Than the Other’, *The Guardian*, 13 December 2009, Viewed 20 June 2013, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/dec/13/germaine-greer-knitting-cultural-olympiad>>
- ⁶ Alla Myzelev, ‘Whip Your Hobby into Shape: Knitting, Feminism and Construction of Gender’, *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* 7, no. 2 (2009), 157.
- ⁷ Steinar Kvale, and Svend Brinkmann, *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE Publications, 2009), 27.
- ⁸ Colin Robson, *Real World Research: a Resource for Users of Social Research Methods in Applied Settings*, 3rd ed. (Chichester: Wiley, 2011), 474.
- ⁹ Kimberly B. Rogers and Lynn Smith-Lovin, ‘Action, Interaction, and Groups’, in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), 121.

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- ¹⁰ Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.
- ¹¹ Diana Crane, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender and Identity in Clothing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 4.
- ¹² Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, 3.
- ¹³ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 5.
- ¹⁴ Russell Belk, 'Possessions and the Extended Self', *The Journal of Consumer Research* 15, no. 2 (1988), 139.
- ¹⁵ Crane, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas*, 11.
- ¹⁶ Tim Dant, *Material Culture in the Social World: Values, Activities, Lifestyles* (Open University Press, 1999), 85.
- ¹⁷ Patrizia Calefato, 'Fashion and Worldliness : Language and Imagery of the Clothed Body', *Fashion Theory* 1, no. 1 (1997), 69-70.
- ¹⁸ Judy Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 121.
- ¹⁹ Sophie Woodward, *Why Women Wear What They Wear* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 157.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Maura Banim, Eileen Green, and Ali Guy, Introduction to *Through the Wardrobe: Women's Relationships with Their Clothes*, ed. Ali Guy, Eileen Green, and Maura Banim (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 3.
- ²² Nicky Gregson, Alan Metcalfe, and Louise Crewe, 'Moving Things Along: The Conduits and Practices of Divestment in Consumption', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32, no. 2 (April 2007), 187.
- ²³ Grant D. McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 71-2.
- ²⁴ Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 106.
- ²⁵ Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 18.
- ²⁶ Susan B. Kaiser, 'Minding Appearances', in *Body Dressing*, ed. Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 84.
- ²⁷ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 118.
- ²⁸ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 81.

- ²⁹ Joyce S. Johnson and Laurel E. Wilson, "'It Says You Really Care': Motivational Factors of Contemporary Female Handcrafters', *Clothing & Textiles Research Journal* 23, no. 2 (2005), 118.
- ³⁰ Johnson and Wilson, "'It Says You Really Care'", 121-6.
- ³¹ Johnson and Wilson, "'It Says You Really Care'", 124.
- ³² Jo Turney, 'Here's One I Made Earlier: Making and Living with Home Craft in Contemporary Britain', *Journal of Design History* 17, no. 3 (September 2004): 275.
- ³³ Johnson and Wilson, "'It Says You Really Care'", 121.
- ³⁴ Marybeth C. Stalp, *Quilting: The Fabric of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2008), 111.
- ³⁵ Roni Brown, 'Designing Differently: The Self-Build Home', *Journal of Design History* 21, no. 4 (November 2008): 368.
- ³⁶ Sarah Ditung, 'Knitting Offers Welcome Relief from Fashion Lust'.
- ³⁷ Ingrid Murnane, 'Just an Instruction Leaflet?' *Knit on the Net*, no. 9 (2008), Viewed 20 June 2013, <<http://www.knitonthenet.com/issue9/features/justaninstructionleaflet/>>
- ³⁸ Luke Russell, 'Tryhards, Fashion Victims, and Effortless Cool', in *Fashion: Philosophy for Everyone*, ed. Jessica Wolfendale and Jeanette Kennett (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), 43.
- ³⁹ Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe, *Second-hand Cultures* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 8.
- ⁴⁰ Susan B. Kaiser, *The Social Psychology of Clothing: Symbolic Appearances in Context*, revised 2nd edition (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1997), 173.

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