

“Spring Cleaning”: skill-sharing towards conscious clothing consumption

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Abstract: This article discusses the case study of “Spring Cleaning”, a one-off event comprising workshops sharing different approaches on extending the use-time of clothing and textiles. Through a qualitative approach, the study aimed to explore if a one-off event can have an impact on the application of skills learnt and how social connectivity contributes to that aim. A secondary aim was to determine if there was a demand for future iterations of this kind of event, in or beyond the university setting. Through the diversity of workshops offered, the event aimed to open up what the parameters of repair, reuse and revival in the clothing and textile sector can be, drawing attention to various timely topics through discussion and practice. These included the preservation of repair skills, celebrating the aesthetics associated with repair and fostering more caring, longer-term relationships with the material world. The findings, gathered through participant observation, a survey and follow-up questionnaire with both participants and facilitators, indicated that for the most part, the event had a positive and lasting impact on attitudes and behaviours around skill-sharing as well as benefits on the social and emotional sides. The sense of opportunity, fulfilment and inspiration was felt from all involved, regardless of their role. Limitations came in the one-off nature of the event, the participant demographic largely having previous experience in clothing or textile repair and in the amount of participant responses only accounting of one third of the total.

Introduction

“Spring Cleaning” was an experimental clothing and textile repair and exchange event taking place at Aalto University’s Arts and Design campus from 23.4.–3.5.2024. In this article we frame the event as a case study on the facilitation of a communal platform for skill-sharing in the clothing and textile fields. The study aimed to test the event’s potential as a positive behavioral intervention which can lead to empowerment and inspiration for extending product-lifetimes. The programme, generated through an open call, included the exchange of skills such as mending, quilting, collaging and upcycling, in a socially connected, co-learning environment.

The study aims to contribute towards Pugh et al. ‘s (2024) Just Transitions in the fashion and textile industry, under the concept of new exchange systems, which focus on ‘better care and repair of existing clothing’ (Pugh et al., 2024, p. 230), as well as on ‘facilitating the availability of physical space...and accessibility... to design and repair services,

clothing swaps...supporting wide access to training and skills for clothing repair and re-design.’ (Pugh et al., 2024, p. 235)

Background

The “Spring Cleaning” event came about as part of the citizen engagement activities work package in the EU research project Textile Recycling Excellence (T-REX). The fast fashion industry is the world’s second largest polluter (Castro-López, Iglesias & Puente, 2021), generating 92 million tonnes of waste per year (Niinimäki, Peters, Dahlbo, et. al, 2020), largely caused by the obsolescent nature of mass-produced clothes. As a counteraction to this, the event was structured as a temporary platform to enable skill-sharing on extending the lifetimes of textiles and clothes, from a variety of angles and in an accessible way.

This article builds upon previous studies on localized, decentralized workshops which aim to spread or revive skill sets enabling garment longevity within a group dynamic. The event aimed to contribute to the societal shift towards

slow fashion, 'a practice that decreases clothing purchases and increases garment lifetimes' (Liu, Baines & Ku, 2022, p.1), with emphasis equally on the communal, interactive experience as much as on the skills being shared and the work being crafted.

"DIY groups not only activate people to learn new skills, but the organizers themselves believe in giving people a sense of joy in making while also helping to build relationships with others." (Niinimäki et al., 2021, p.19)

The article also answers Durrani's (2021) call for explorations into an area she describes as being under researched,

"...earlier scholarship has remained limited within the domains of understanding perspectives on domestic mending instead of exploring the practices of communal mending" (Durrani, 2021, p.798).

Hirscher, Niinimäki & Armstrong (2017) found that items crafted in a workshop setting become infused with the meaning of the social experience, the emotional attachment making them less likely to be disposed of. Mazzarella & Black (2022) emphasise the importance of 'collaborative activities' to restore disappearing skills, for the benefit and well-being of local workforces and communities in general. Odabasi et al., (2022) echo the notion of the sharing and practicing of repair skills potentially having wider societal impact, aligning it with the 'mending' of relations within society and with the environment. Pugh et al. (2024) discuss the term 'wellbeing economy' as an alternative system to work towards, based around concepts which prioritise the health of individuals and the planet over financial gain.

According to Gwilt (2013), the problems caused by the overproduction and overconsumption of fast fashion are exacerbated by contemporary Western society's lack of repair skills. This could be remedied if 'the repair of fashion garments [was] accepted as a cultural norm' (Gwilt, 2013, p.82). Gwilt argues for the potential benefit of designer, producer and wearer sharing the responsibility of extending garment lifetimes. Odabasi et al. (2022) emphasize the active promotion of textile-based repairs, increasing citizens' agency by circulating making skills between designers and local participants.

'The collective nature of taste enables making visible the interplay that occurs between the individual, the material, and the social, and the lines between what a professional and a vernacular mender can do often become blurred.' (Durrani, 2021, p.788)

Research Method

The "Spring Cleaning" workshop series was organized as a way to carry out practice-led research around a two-part question: Can a one-off intervention increase consumers' long-term interest in and practice of repair skills? Can a workshop experience increase feelings of social connectedness, which in turn, strengthens the impact of the skills learnt?



Figure 1. "Spring Cleaning" event, featuring the 'Exquisite Corpse' communal sculpture created in the first workshop. © Aalto University

Nine different workshops took place during the event, brought together through an open call in the university's internal and external channels. The call for facilitators was a point of emphasis in this study, as it enabled us to use the platform to equally draw out those who had skills to share, alongside those who wanted to learn. The call, circulated via e-mail, invited proposals on sharing methods of clothing and textile repair, reuse and revival, from facilitators with skill levels ranging from hobbyist to professional. A fee was offered to selected applicants. Acceptance was intentionally low threshold, in order to embrace unexpectedness and a plurality of approaches. Seven out of eleven proposals were accepted based on practical feasibility and having a balance of traditional and experimental topics. The Helsinki-based collective Seams, which organizes workshops and events to promote sustainable fashion cultures (Seams, 2024), was invited to host two additional workshops as part of the programme, drawing in participants

from more established and experienced workshop facilitators.

Through the final event programme we aimed to open up ideas about what repair, reuse and revival can be and the variety of forms they can take, creating wide appeal. Workshops were free and open for the general public to attend with each one allocated a running time of two and a half hours. The event was located in a temporary workspace set up in the main lobby of the Arts and Design campus, enabling exposure of the activity to passers-by, as well as inviting walk-in attendees. Two domestic sewing machines, an ironing board and a fabric scrap box were included in the set-up.

The facilitators had varied levels of experience – about one third were running a workshop for the first time. The more traditional topics included: upcycling old or unwanted trousers into bags, hand-quilting with fabric scraps, applique sock mending, darning for knitwear, Sashiko & Kintsugi mending and guidance for repairing cut and sewn garments with signs of wear. The more exploratory topics included: a hands-on learning exercise about differentiating garments' suitability for upcycling vs. recycling, the assembly of a spontaneous, communal soft sculpture from waste material and a sensory, reflective brainstorming session exploring tacit knowledge as a method of critique on current clothing and fashion systems.



Figure 2. Detail, "Material Library" workshop © Aalto University

Alongside the workshop space, a durational clothing exchange area was also included, with items being left and taken freely throughout the event, adding another layer of engagement from passersby. In terms of wider context, the event coincided with Fashion Revolution Week.

Approximately ninety participants took part in the "Spring Cleaning" workshops, five - twenty per workshop. Participant observation in the form of field notes and photography took place.

An online survey about the participants' experience was taken directly after the event, containing mostly multiple-choice questions, about motivation for attending, satisfaction level and skill competence level after the workshop. Facilitators were also sent a survey at this point, but not enough responses were gathered to be included in the data analysis. Follow-up email questionnaires with three or four open ended questions were sent out four months later to both participants and facilitators. The participant questionnaire focused on the continued impact on behaviors or attitudes around the skills learnt or repairing and upcycling habits more in general. The facilitator questionnaire focused on the motivations for running the workshops and reflections on how they went.

The research was conducted qualitatively and the data analyzed thematically by the authors. Key topics were identified around the activities that took place and how participation or facilitation influenced actors.



Figure 3. "Applique Sock Mending" workshop © Aalto University

Findings

Findings from the survey and questionnaires help to answer the study's questions on the impact of the event on feelings of social connectivity and on the subsequent application of the skills learnt. Through reflection on the event's benefits and shortcomings, the findings also help to inform the authors if a demand exists for future iterations and how to best shape these.

Survey

The survey garnered approximately twenty responses, the vast majority indicating the experience had been a positively impactful one. 60% of respondents attended one workshop, while 40% attended several, indicating that there was interest to learn a variety of skills and to repeat the experience. Most of the respondents had some previous experience in clothing repair, with the main motivator for attending the event being to learn a new skill. Many were very satisfied with the workshop/s they attended and all stated they felt more able to repair or upcycle their clothing and textiles after attending. Freeform feedback included remarks about the event's 'cozy' and 'convivial' atmosphere, lots of interest to join in future if the event ran again, the joy of meeting new people whilst learning a new skill, the convenience of some workshops being scheduled after office hours and informative and effective assistance from facilitators. There were also some useful critiques on some workshop facilitators being hard to hear due to the openness of the location, there being a lack of specific enough information on what equipment or materials to bring and that certain workshops could have had a longer duration. A suggestion was made that the workshops could be structured with an introductory lecture on a screen in the beginning, to ensure the core information is made clear and accessible to all participants.

Questionnaire

Seventeen participants and seven facilitators responded to the questionnaire. Feedback from facilitators on their motivation for applying confirmed a demand for this kind of platform, to **test and launch** new ideas:

'...Spring Cleaning was a very good way for us to test this kind of workshop as we had more sewing machines than normal and more material at hand.' (F2)

'I have been wanting to expand my knowledge and skills to more communal work, so I found this opportunity perfect and 'safe' for facilitating my first ever workshop.' (F4)

'I thought the event provided a nice platform and ready audience to try something new.' (F5)

Regarding the question of the impact of a one-off workshop experience, feedback indicated

that participants and facilitators were **inspired and activated** to continue with the activities, beyond the event. The continuation of these activities can potentially help to counter society's lack of repair skills, as identified by Gwilt (2013).

'The workshop inspired me a lot to learn more about caring for clothes and garments, and to learn mending & darning. After the workshop I've actively sought information on those.'

'...after the workshop I have fixed my nieces and nephews clothes and my own clothes too... even more often I will think twice how to fix something before tossing it away.'

'The feedback I got directly from the participants as they were leaving was excellent. I think the hop-on-hop-off way works well for this workshop, as it is rather fast to get started and towards the end there's a lot of work that can be done individually without instruction and a participant can also easily continue the work home.' (F1)

'... this experience has inspired me to share [the skill of hand-quilting] with others in the future.' (F6)

Durrani's description of mending as 'a gateway between the old and the new, the broken and the fixed, the wasted and the restored' (Durrani, 2021, p.798), is echoed in the feedback which emerged on discovering **new potential** in damaged or unused garments. The ability to influence consumers' perception and identification of what can still be revived, paired with the skills on how to action it, can potentially lead to the extension of product use-times:

'I've loved old garments for a long time, but this workshop made me see more possibilities in broken garments as well.'

'The workshop inspired me to look at some old clothes that belonged to my family members who no longer use them and now I have got them upcycled to new dresses for myself.'

A sense of **wellbeing and appreciation** for the social aspect of the workshop was noted by participants and facilitators, affirming the event's positive impact on feelings of social connectedness, as discussed by Mazzarella & Black (2022), Odabasi et al. (2022) and (Niinimäki et al. (2021).

'Repairing and mending clothes is actually really fun and makes you feel good afterwards. Also, it would be nice to mend clothing together with friends, as we did in the workshop.'

'The workshop wasn't only an opportunity to learn new skills and gain another point of view on sustainability of clothing but also to socialize because I was a foreigner in Finland it was also nice to spend time with other foreigners and exchange experiences. So it was both an educating and a social experience, I really enjoyed it.'

'I think the location was also really nice, I was a bit concerned in the beginning that it would be too loud in the lobby or that people might feel "watched" but it was a really comfortable environment.' (F2)

A feeling of **fulfillment and surprise** was felt amongst facilitators upon reflection on the act of skill sharing in practice:

'Many of the beginner participants were really happy with the workshop, and I could see their excitement and joy through learning the new skill of fixing their own clothes by themselves.' (F4)

'We mostly have to show them everything step by step but are always surprised of how fast they learn and are then able to repair the garments on their own...Throughout the workshop, they all talked and chatted with each other which was really beautiful to see.' (F2)

'It's good to spread the word about the importance of mending and reducing textile waste.' (F3)

'This was my first mending workshop. ...after the Spring Cleaning event I have organized the same sock mending workshop twice...I think the method has been equally inspiring for both beginners and advanced crafters: it's an easy, zero-pressure and almost zero-cost project for beginners and something new for the advanced sewists who pretty much make all other clothes except socks themselves. (F1)

'Hands-on techniques often lead to surprising results, and in this case, I was impressed by how quickly the participants grasped the technique, despite it being a morning session. Additionally, the materials used in this

workshop resulted in a very different aesthetic compared to what I've seen in India, which added an interesting contrast.' (F6)



Figure 3. Detail, "Quilting" workshop © Aalto University

Discussion

The event "Spring Cleaning" proved effective as a starting point for skill-sharing and social encounters to emerge. The continued impact of the seeds of interest, capability and inspiration, planted during the workshops, was evident in the participants' and facilitators' feedback.

From the facilitators' side of things, structuring a task in a way that it can be continued at home helps to extend the activation of the skill beyond the workshop setting. Inspiration was recurrent and mutual between those who experienced the workshop, regardless of their role. For participants, there was an equal appreciation of the educational side and the social opportunity, with feedback indicating positive feelings during and after the workshops. These findings support Liu, Baines & Ku's (2022) observations that activities which satisfy the needs of autonomy, competence and social connectedness directly contribute and correlate to feelings of well-being.

The event was successful in its goal of empowering consumers towards slow consumption and stewardship of products whilst celebrating the aesthetics of repair and individual creativity. Ideologically, it helped to promote alternatives to fashion as a status symbol, trends and pristine-looking products, which can contribute to shifting agency from global brands into the hands of consumers.

Limitations for tracking benefits and impacts come with the one-off, short durational nature of the event, along with the fact that

only approximately one third of the total participants who attended, submitted feedback.

Since the majority of attendees had previous experience in repair, there could be efforts made to target those less familiar with it. The various critiques on the event which emerged from the survey would be taken into account, if or when the event was to run again. There was a clear demand and from, and benefit for, both facilitators and participants of this event, so the authors would also encourage others to explore further iterations of the same model in different contexts and in a more regular frequency.

Conclusion

Through this case study we can conclude that a short-term, one-off skill-sharing experience can increase consumers' interest in and application of repair-related skills while increasing feelings of social connectedness. In relation to product-lifetime context, an event such as "Spring Cleaning" has the potential to change consumers' mindsets and behaviours whilst improving their social well-being. In turn, a culture of active consumers, extending product-lifetimes in practice, can grow.

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