

Repairing and regenerating the community: a study in activating garment repair initiatives with stakeholders at local level

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Introduction

Garment Repair as Regenerative solution

The focus on the process of independent garment repair as a regenerative practice at community level is increasingly important in reducing linear disposal practices and encouraging circularity. Repair is an effective way of contributing to the replacement of cradle-to-grave operations, emulating natural systems and contributing to the nurturing of natural capital (Hernandez, et al., 2020).

This paper investigates the function of independent, non-professional, informal repair initiatives (repair hubs) at community level comprising local non-profit organisations and community stakeholders or citizens and explores their inherent challenges and opportunities in operationalising and scaling up small-scale repair initiatives. It explores the role of local garment repair and regeneration initiatives to reduce the environmental impact of fashion consumption by extending clothing lifetimes, facilitating knowledge exchange and upskilling. The focus will be on the benefits and challenges in terms of the process and type of knowledge exchange, including active learning and additional outcomes.

The principles embedded in the circular economy facilitate a regeneration of traditional values in making and mending practices, manifested in a restored appreciation of material management, resulting in extended use. It is also possible to view repair as a regenerative process using socio-material practices (Van Der Velden, 2021).

Theoretical framework

Socio-material practice theory (Fenwick, 2015) describes how objects and people interact

through social behaviours and material actions to create change. This framework forms the basis of the conceptual structure, allied to behaviour change theory (Hargreaves, 2011) to enable a deeper investigation into both the 'why' people engage in repair practices; and the 'how' and 'what' of repair practices where learning takes place through participatory action (Purvis et. al., 2025). Adopting a living systems perspective emphasises the need for distribution by fostering communal skills that extend product lifespans, minimize raw material extraction, improve resource efficiency, and promote local cooperative initiatives (Bradley and Persson 2022). Repair workshops were investigated as a site of collective knowledge acquisition (knowledge and skills), sustainable repair practice (sustainability and materials) with social connections linked in a socio-material matrix with tangible outcomes for behavioural change.

Methodology

Acknowledging repair as a socio-material practice, the data collection process involved a multi-methods approach (Cresswell, 2015) including participant observation, interviews, participant reflections and focus group discussions. The first case features a launch event off-campus for the Chopwell Regeneration Shop offering services using both hand and machine sewing techniques. The second case covers the Repair Hub, part of Responsible Design Week at Northumbria University 2024, a two-day open studio session attracting students, staff and local community members interested in sharing and learning mending skills. Participants had the opportunity to learn techniques such as darning, re-sewing seams, plus visible and invisible mending practices (See Figures 1, 2 and 3).



Figure 1. Chopwell, launch event repair group.



Figure 2. Responsible Design Week, repair in progress.



Figure 3. Responsible Design Week, sharing repair methods.

The resulting qualitative data generated was analysed using open coding to identify key themes highlighting the benefits, opportunities and challenges regarding various forms of knowledge exchange and learning generated by the workshops and their environmental and societal outcomes while also acknowledging the barriers to implementing community-based initiatives more frequently and more widely in geographic terms.

Findings and Discussion

Findings from participants illustrate how local, community-centered activities can initiate and sustain garment repair initiatives by fostering knowledge exchange, develop repair skills, and build social networks around sustainability. The six main themes emerging from the participants in both workshops can be summarised in as social/community benefits; personal creative fulfilment; well-being; educational/upskilling; emotional durability; empowering personal/social time and space.

One salient theme emerging from the data was the social aspect of the repair hub emphasising the supportive group dynamic and collaborative environment across varied demographic groups created in sharing skills, while engaging in conversations and working on individual repair projects resulting in personal empowerment. Many participants saw the collective repair process extending beyond the practical mending of materials to encompass a

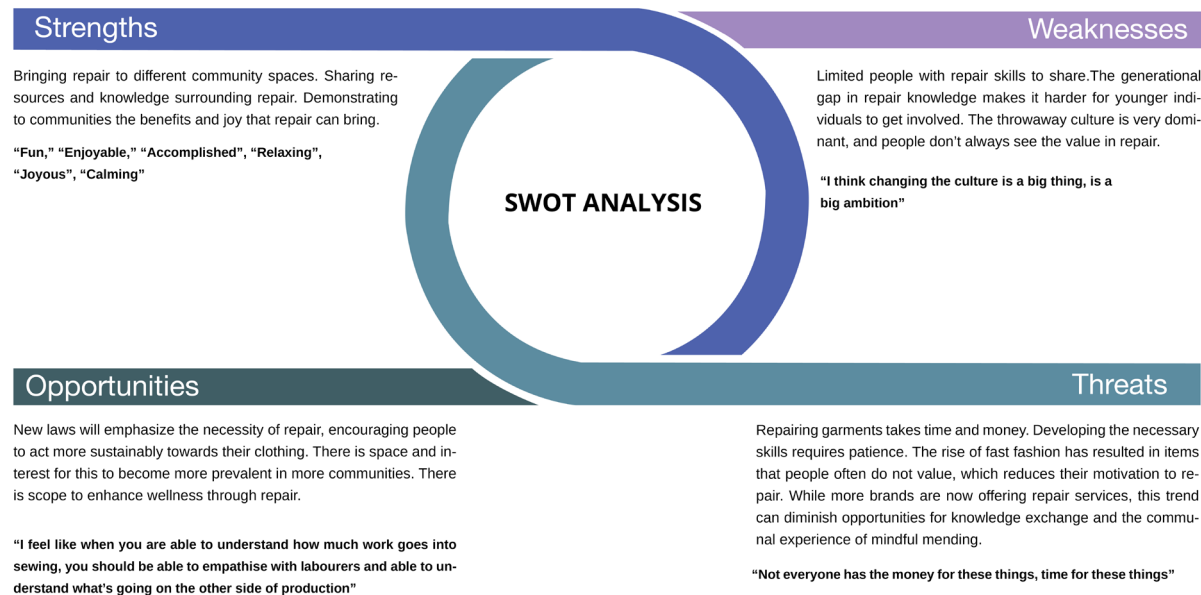


Figure 4. SWOT analysis of repair workshop responses.

creative and emotionally fulfilling output. Enhanced well-being and mental relaxation and meditative benefits of stitching, darning and sewing were linked with holistic healthfulness benefits. To facilitate social and health benefits, many participants foregrounded the importance of earmarking personal time and space to facilitate the collective endeavour of repair to learn and share and acquire skills. This linked with another key theme of the need for upskilling and education including the need to embed garment design and making skills in the educational curriculum at all levels.

Emotional attachment was a common consideration, as many respondents had brought items owned or pre-loved to the second workshop. Barriers and disbenefits also emerged from respondent feedback in three main themes regarding the challenges of replacing the slow practice of mending to negate the disbenefits of the fast fashion system to encourage people to take responsibility for better clothing management. Allied to this was the shared desire for a fundamental culture shift driven by consuming less and buying better for longer. This included changes in how people value garments and the need for top-down initiatives embedded in policy and legislation to fund and support sustainable repair practices. It was

acknowledged that people needed dedicated time and space to undertake repair which were often unattainable luxuries by many with other responsibilities. Some questioned how inclusive and accessible these initiatives were and how some might feel intimidated by perceived lack of skills and financial resources to get involved.

The workshop findings are represented as a SWOT diagram (See Figure 4) summarising the strengths, opportunities, weaknesses and threats from workshop respondent data providing a realistic assessment of the potential for scaling-up across and beyond bounded local communities at regional and national levels. Overall, positive strengths and opportunities were gained in social, educative and mental health benefits of participating in repair hubs that appear to outweigh the weaknesses and threats in the form of the lack of resources, the need for major cultural change and required policy, financial, infrastructural and legislative directives and investment. In quantitative terms, during the repair events, an average of 30 garments were repaired each day. Using WRAP's repair displacement rate of 82.2%, with four new purchases being displaced for every five garments repaired, this resulted in a displacement rate of 24 garments per session (WRAP 2025). This suggests that garment repair activities have measurable, positive environmental impact for potential discarded material objects.

Positive social, material and sustainability aspects of community repair hubs are compelling for all participants demonstrating overlapping socio-material benefits as an entanglement of people and things (Van Der Velden, 2021) fulfilling social, skills/knowledge-based and sustainability expectations of stakeholders (see Figure 5). Yet, structural enablers and facilitators must be in place (Gwilt, 2014), or repair initiatives cannot survive or thrive.

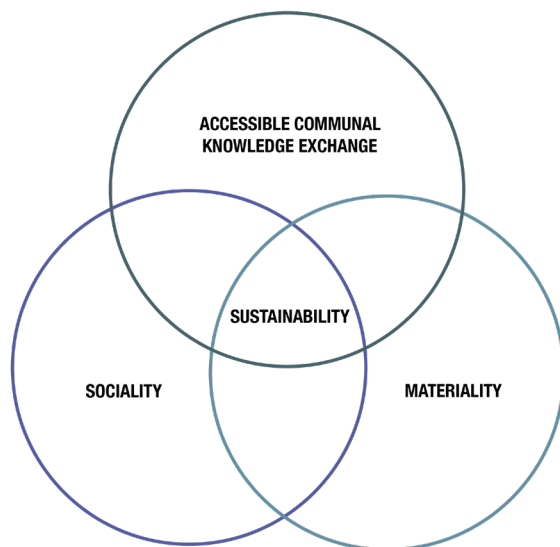


Figure 5. Socio-material expectations and outcomes of repair events.

Conclusion

Communal learning through knowledge sharing took various forms of equal importance, including sustainable, social and material perspectives. Workshop participants representing a broad demographic range, acknowledged that they learned a transformative range of repair skills extending garment use, offering usage options before discarding garments, enhancing considered garment management, imparting self-sufficiency, while elevating self-confidence and empowerment in a therapeutic, inclusive, supportive social space. The study has significance for future propagation and scaling-up local participatory repair practices, enabling communities to activate local solutions for global ecological issues and behavioural change concerning environmental and socio-material solutions. This is dependent on

resources requiring a re-evaluation of current garment ownership and mindful consumption habits.

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