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Idle and Active Dresses: Design Briefings from the Wardrobe

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Abstract: This paper explores how a wardrobe study, the dress audit, was combined with literature on the dress archetype to create a brief for fashion design practice that aims to increase the active wearing of dresses. Overall, clothing utilisation has declined by over a third in the last 15 years, with dresses being the least worn of any significant item. Unworn dresses amount to hidden wardrobe waste, and increasing their utilisation could reduce fashion overconsumption.

A cultural examination of the dress through a lens of sustainability reveals an archetype of the Western fashion system, tied to production and consumption discourses with complex socio-political dimensions. In contrast, the wardrobe study provided vital insights into dress-wearing experiences.

Most dresses are now mass-produced, creating a disconnect between designers and wearers, and this paper highlights some of the implications of this divide. The wardrobe study identified three leading factors that impact wearing: fit, occasion, and style. If designers address these three factors alone, it could mitigate up to 80% of low usage issues. These findings helped develop five baseline parameters and create a new brief for fashion design practice that prioritises greater garment utilisation by incorporating the lived experience of wearing within the design process.

Introduction

Clothing utilisation has declined by over a third in the last 15 years (Sellers 2022). A recent Australian study (Payne et al. 2024) revealed that a third of participants did not wear half of their wardrobe in the past year. Dresses are believed to make up more than a quarter of Australian wardrobes–the most of any significant garment type–yet are also the least worn clothing item, with more than half rarely worn (Khan et al. 2022). Unworn or idle clothing amounts to hidden wardrobe waste, and it has been suggested that increasing the active use of clothing may reduce the overconsumption of fashion products (Coscieme et al. 2022).

This, however, assumes that dress owners can be compelled to wear their clothes more; Fletcher (2012) stated that within the existing fashion system, a designer's agency to impact the long-term utilisation of clothing is questionable, or, at the very least, there is little or no evidence to support it (Payne 2021). Fletcher (2012) also argues that designers rarely consider the wearing practices or 'lifeworld' that impacts garment longevity. Within the fashion system, knowledge of customer behaviour is limited to the point of purchase. Beyond acquisition, scant attention is given by fashion companies to the frequency with which people wear their clothes.

Increasingly sustainable fashion studies have highlighted clothing use practices and their implications for sustainability (Fletcher 2016; Klepp et al. 2020; Laitala and Klepp 2020; Niinimäki 2024). This project sought to bridge the production-consumption binary by exploring ways in which understanding dress utilisation could inform more responsible garment design. This paper identified five key dimensions that affect the utilisation of dresses: *sizing, style, occasion, textiles*, and *pockets*. It proposes a brief for fashion design practice that seeks to mitigate these issues.

Methodology and Methods

While wardrobe studies originated in the social sciences (Guy et al. 2001; Woodward 2007), these methods have been adopted within sustainable fashion studies because of their potential to understand the impact of the use phase from both social and material dimensions (Klepp and Bjerck 2014; Holgar 2022; Maguire

and Fahy 2022). This wardrobe study is positioned as research *for* design (Frayling 1994) within a practice-based research project exploring increased garment utilisation. It was speculated that the fashion designer's inclination toward an innate material and product emphasis could be complemented by greater adoption of such methods to help break down the divide between production and use.

A mixed-method approach was developed, combining a digital survey of dress ownership and usage patterns with reflection on literature spanning historical, social and industrial contexts inherent to the dress archetype to uncover insights that might inform design practice. In designing the study, several methods were adapted from Fletcher and Klepp's compilation Opening-Up the Wardrobe (2017); Twigger Holroyd's methods 14 and 15 informed a comparison of the most-worn and least-worn dresses across many wardrobes. While Halls's wardrobe method 26, participant-led photography, was employed to gather images of these dresses, which provided a richer understanding of the data when triangulated with the qualitative and quantitative responses.

The Dress Audit

The digital survey collected 134 unique responses from participants using the Qualtrics platform, primarily in Melbourne (Naarm), Australia. Participants were recruited from social media groups actively interested in sustainable fashion and answered a call for people who owned dresses. The survey was deliberately devised to be easy to complete to elicit as many responses as possible. Participants were asked to select and reflect on their *most-worn* and *least-worn* dress and upload a photograph of each (Figure 1). They were asked how they acquired these dresses, the textile type, the frequency of wear, why they liked or did not like wearing them, and how their *least-worn* dress could be improved.

Various methods were employed to interpret the data, beginning with cluster analysis of the quantitative data, exploratory for the qualitative responses and visual mapping for the photographic images to evaluate shape, colour, materiality, and form, techniques which are more akin to design practice. At stages, the data was triangulated to help unlock otherwise hidden patterns.

The analysis identified five key themes, which were expanded on by reviewing historical, cultural and industrial literature to make sense of the data. This was an iterative process, reflecting on a wide variety of sources. The following sections discuss the findings within these themes.

Figure 1. A selection of dress images provided by participants for the Dress Audit.

Sizing

The most frequent problem (32%) participants cited regarded their *least-worn* dress was the *fit*. This was determined through the quantitative survey question, "Why don't you wear it (your least worn dress) very often?"

The dress arose from a custom-made domestic and professional tradition, where dressmakers/designers dealt directly with the wearer, often developing long-term working relationships. However, most dresses are now mass-produced to a standard size for generalised body proportions and imagined persons. Standardised sizing makes mass production more profitable by catering to as many people as possible while trying to avoid the steep costs of producing too many sizes (Volonté 2021). This standardisation inevitably makes assumptions about height, weight, shape, and proportion, ultimately problematising non-conforming bodies. Dresses are more vulnerable to standardisation than separates, like trousers, skirts and shirts, as they cover both the torso and lower body, which increases the variables and opportunity for poor fit.

Regrettably, many participants attributed this fit failure to their bodies and described wanting to change body size or shape rather than alter the fit of a dress. For example, "[I] am too fat for it

now, but maybe I'll fit into it again". Like all clothing, dresses are entangled with perceptions of the self (Woodward 2007; Mair 2018; Calefato 2021). Perhaps the standardisation of dress sizes contributes to an internalised expectation of *perfect* body proportions, that, combined with tight or poorly fitted dresses, reminds wearers that this body ideal is not represented in their flesh. So, while poor-fitting dresses can be considered a systemic industrial problem, the failure is transferred to the body, and the dress hangs hidden in the wardrobe unworn.

Style

17% of problems participants claimed about their *least-worn* dress were attributed to style; this involved either feeling a dress was outdated or no longer represented their identity. Possibly in response to this dissatisfaction, participants in the study owned an average of 23 dresses each–a previous Australian study showed that participants owned an average of 17 dresses (Khan et al. 2022)–This elevation of numbers could show a growing trend or perhaps an increase due to the exclusion of those without dresses. However, a quarter of participants owned 30 or more dresses; this group averaged 48 dresses each and owned over half of the total dresses[1]. 100% of the *least-worn* dresses were worn three times or less per year (Figure 2), with 63% never worn. Even 13% of the *most-worn* dresses were only worn one to three times a year (Figure 3).

A cultural examination of dresses reveals an iconic clothing archetype (Palmer 2021) or style trope (Payne 2021) of the Western fashion system (Kawamura 2004; Calefato 2021); tied to discourses of production and consumption with complex socio-political dimensions. Historically, the quality of one's dress and the sumptuousness of the textile were an indicator of class and social status (Ford 2021). It is now more of a marker of wealth and success displayed through the ability to wear the latest luxury designer 'look'. The mass market and fast fashion industry preys on this desire for apparent success by delivering new products more regularly than ever before, with some fast fashion brands releasing new garments every week of the year (Munasinghe et al. 2022). A marketing ploy used to sell more products has become a social pressure not to wear the same thing twice, which is rarely spoken about, yet performed on social media and instinctively understood by most (Maguire and Fahy 2023).

Coupled with a world of less social hierarchy and access to cheap clothing, wearers can create their ideal selves through what they wear more easily, expressing novelty, individualism or belonging to a social group (Mair 2018). However, this identity performance in the digital world of social media has inevitably accelerated matters into a never-ending recreation of self and dramatically reduced the active use of clothing. A study by Maguire and Fahy (2023) highlighted that outfit-of-the-day posts (#OOTD) have, for many, become a social pressure not to repeat wear *looks*. Mair (2018) explains that our brain is hardwired to seek out novelty or newness and receives dopamine hits in return. Rather than insist that wearers break an addiction, perhaps strategies that decouple continual change from material production may be more successful. This would be an enabling strategy rather than constraining (Niedderer et al. 2017).

Dresses also reinforce divisions along gender, class, status, and culture (Calefato 2021). They communicate an impression of femininity at odds with contemporary reality and, until recently, were (perhaps still are) a predominant female identifier (Palmer 2021). The deep-seated gendering of the dress persists; for example, gender-fluid and trans individuals use this archetype to either question, play with, or reposition and perform their identity (Catalpa and McGuire 2020). The dress 'becomes a site of political struggle' (Conway 2016) and symbolic activism. Behnke (2016) tells us that gender is not a fixed attribute but a constant, reiterative performance of gender roles as defined and expected by society. The gendered nature of dresses could be one reason it has declined in wear, with many individuals resisting what could be considered a patriarchal ideal of feminine dressing. When describing the style of their *least-worn* dress, one participant noted that it felt too 'girly' now that they were older; the gendered nature of dresses and historical dress codes may be weighing on the wearers' perception of suitability. So loaded with, or perhaps because of these conflicting meanings, the dress remains revered within museums, on the runway, and red carpet. Bari (2020) reminds us that searching for the perfect

[1] 134 participants collectively owned 3048 dresses.

dress to captivate all who look upon us is akin to magic, a deception that will either show or mask who we really are. Perhaps the reverential status afforded this garment category within popular culture also drives its underutilisation, a reality that cannot live up to the fantasy.

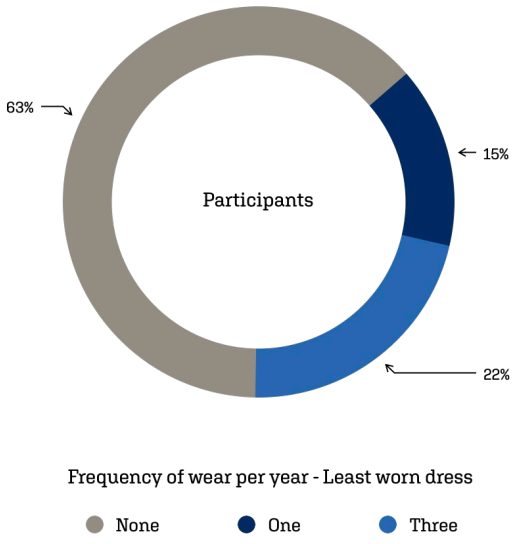

Figure 2. Least-Worn Dress Frequency of Wear

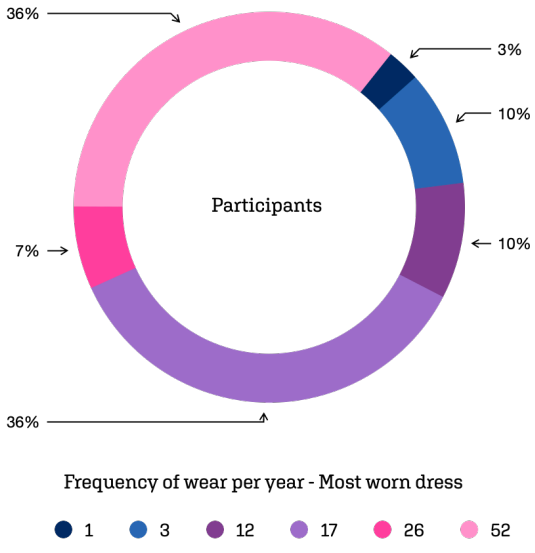

Figure 3. Most-Worn Dress Frequency of Wear

Occasion

Just over 30% of participants reported that their *least-worn* dress lacked versatility or suitability for their everyday life occasions (Figure 4). Historically, the dress has been defined by the occasion or place it is worn, for example, the evening dress. Contemporaneously, increased casualisation of clothing has made these demarcations subjective; however, the relaxing of rigid social stylistic rules has not increased dress-wearing. At the same time, the complexity of the contemporary supply chain has distanced the designer from the wearer, who creates for occasions determined by retail and marketing calendars without reference to the lived experience of wearing.

In the fashion industry, design inspiration is no longer a conversation with the intended wearer, instead it is a mix of generalised market, textile and visual research divorced from the embodied wearing experience (Robinson 2022). Design decisions are often made to meet price points and increase profits. New collections and dresses are based on previous bestsellers (Munasinghe et al. 2022), changing only the colour or minor details; these decisions favour the point of purchase and will likely result in higher sales volumes but not create more wearable dresses than the last.

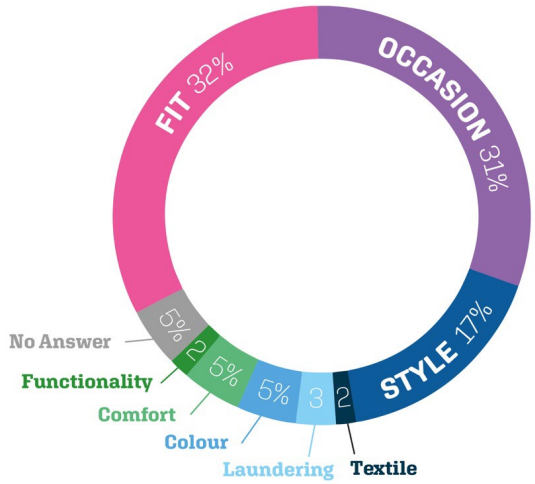

Figure 4. Least-Worn Dress Failures

Textiles

Nearly 80% of the *most-worn* dresses were made from bio-based fibre textiles (Figure 5), while synthetic polymer-derived textiles represented just over 20%. Of the *least-worn* dresses, synthetic polymer-derived textiles

almost doubled to just over 40%[2] (Figure 6). Although there was still a significant number of bio-based textiles in the *least-worn* category, cotton (the most significant proportion) had decreased by nearly half. When coupled with participant written feedback, it showed that many participants prefer and often seek out bio-based textiles to wear. "…also, it's a synthetic fabric, which is not always comfortable to wear." Previously, Neto and Ferreira (2023) had found little to no correlation between textile selection and longevity of use. However, contrasting the *most-worn* and *least-worn* dresses allowed previously elusive underlying patterns to emerge, revealing that participants seem to prefer wearing bio-based fibre dresses over synthetic polymer-derived textiles.

Silk-derived dresses, however, reversed this trend and increased by more than half from the *most-worn* to *least-worn* category to 14%. Considering that silk production is only around 0.07% of the worldwide textile production (Textile Exchange, 2024), it seems an overly large representation in both dress categories, particularly in the *least-worn*. Silk's higher material cost meant wearers are less likely to discard a garment they have spent more money on and believe is higher quality (Paço et al. 2021). Also, the luxurious nature of silk means it is often used in more special occasion dresses and numerous participants described not having many occasions appropriate to wear their silk dress, stating, "I don't wear it very often because I don't go to many formal events". Most silk dresses presenting in the *least-worn* category were acquired for special occasions and often deemed too formal to wear. Although these dresses are likely to have memorable life moments attached (Goldsworthy 2017), which would suggest higher emotional durability (Chapman 2005), which explains why they are kept, the data reinforces that emotional durability does not always equate to current and ongoing utilisation (Paço et al. 2021). This also vividly illustrates how societal casualisation has impacted the utilisation of more formal types of dresses, making them difficult to wear.

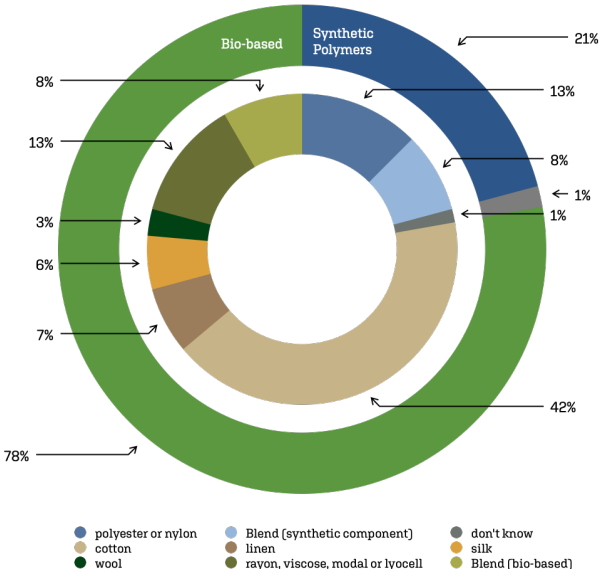

Figure 5. Most-Worn Dress Textile Type

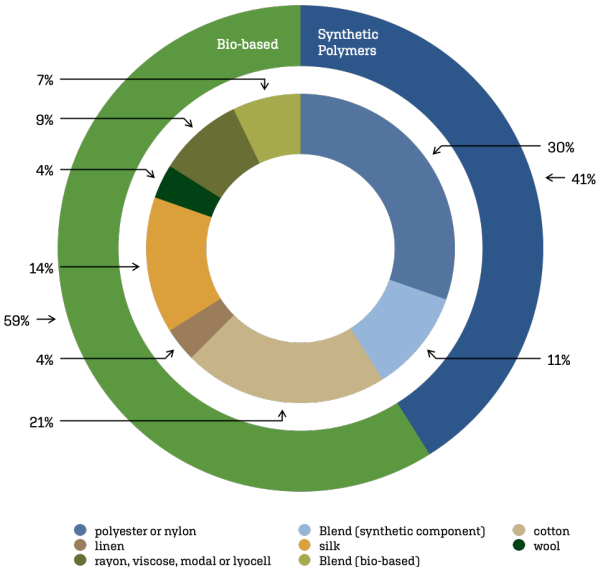

Figure 6. Least-Worn Dress Textile Type

Pockets

Twenty per cent of the participants in this study commented on pockets in their dress, either exuberantly when their *most-worn* dress had pockets, "It has POCKETS!", or remarking that

[2] Any dress that contained a blend of fibres consisting of any percentage of synthetic fibres was categorised as synthetic polymer derived.

adding pockets would improve their *least-worn* dress.

Historically, dresses (and female-gendered clothing) have lacked usable pockets. For around 200 years in the 17th-18th century, women tied large pockets around their waists hidden under skirts (Buran and Fennetaux 2020) to subvert this exclusion. Emancipation has not overly improved the addition of pockets to female-gendered clothing, and patriarchal-driven beliefs persisted as late as the 1940s, with style commentators and production houses often believing only men needed utility in garments (Carlson 2023). Although these views have mostly shifted, pockets remain lacking in many contemporary styles (Gaillard and Visser 2022). This contemporary lack of usable pockets is now more of a cost-cutting measure, accelerated by fast fashion and ever-cheaper production; their historical scantness, justifies the loss (Carlson 2023).

A New Brief: designing for wearing

In the context of professional and industrially situated design, a 'brief' is described by Buchanan (1992) as "a problem and a set of issues to be considered in resolving that problem", often for a specific client. However, unlike most other design disciplines, fashion designers devise a brief for an imaginary customer and occasion (Payne 2021). Chapman (2021) proposed that designers need to understand why people discard working products, or in this case, why dresses are underutilised if they hope to prevent this outcome. This study's insights on dress-wearing were transformed into a new brief for dress design focussed on maximum wear encompassing five key parameters (Figure 7): 1. Make changeable for diverse body shapes and sizes, 2. Design for versatility across different life and wearing occasions, 3. Allow for style renewal, 4. Use only bio-based textiles, 5. Include useable pockets**.**

Buchanan (1992) regards the brief as an "indeterminate subject waiting to be made specific and concrete". As such, it was distilled into a graphic to inform a dress design process that might activate increased utilisation. The graphic presentation of the brief illustrates the design researcher's interest in modularity as a concept underpinning their practice. It suggests modules that may be selectively utilised, amplified, or explored to address one or more wearing issues that can be further tested.

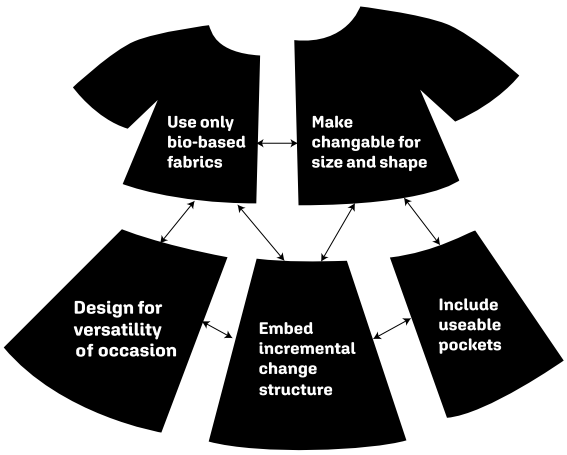

Figure 7. The New Brief Diagram

Conclusion

The dress audit wardrobe study has shown the magnitude of dresses languishing unworn in wardrobes. It reflects how the cultural, historical and industrial contexts influence use. Many problems, especially poor fit, have evolved out of mass production standardisation of sizing and production rationalisation, alongside the dislocation of the designer from those they design for, through a production/consumption binary. Three main factors; fit, occasion, and style, impact up to 80% of utilisation problems. As such, designing for a changing body, versatility for life occasions, and the ability to update the style over time could help to negate dress failures that wearers experience.

Moreover, the findings give insight into one way that designers could focus on increasing dress and clothing utilisation within their practice. The dress audit comprises a form of research for design that considers garment use and wearing experiences as fundamental to fashion design practice, an approach lacking within a mostly disconnected and industrialised contemporary fashion system. Five baseline parameters were identified that form a new brief for designing dresses for greater utilisation.

Limitations

The data's scalability may be limited by the sample size (n134) and the specificity of the place, predominantly Melbourne (Naarm), Australia. The recruited participants were actively interested in sustainable fashion while those who did not own a dress were excluded. The study only examined the *most-worn* and *least-worn* dresses, so utilisation between

those extremes is unknown and may explain more about how dresses are worn.

Future Research

The proposed *new brief* is intended for the design application to speculative dress prototypes and testing with participants. This will lead to further refinement of the brief and the process of collecting and utilising wearing experiences to inform fashion design practice for increased wear.

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