

Conclusion: Common threads

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There remains an irresistible urge to define, once and for all, what is meant by 'everyday' when applied to fashion. But to attempt to arrive at any semblance of clarity in this respect would be to depreciate the richness and complexity of everything that 'everyday' implies and encircles. At the conference which preceded this volume, preoccupation with definitions of the 'everyday' dominated discussions. This desire to define has coincided with what Ben Highmore describes as 'the transformation of the everyday from adverb into an adjective and finally into a noun'.¹ This volume has highlighted the need to retain a broader perspective.

As it stands, 'everyday fashion' represents myriad and varied meanings and values and is serviceable across a swathe of dress cultures and contexts. Other words relating to what we wear are mired in cultural baggage. 'Fashion' is contentious, 'dress' implies intellectual superiority and solemnity, and 'clothing' has been rendered almost obsolete within scholarly discourse. 'Everyday fashion', on the other hand, is flexible and mutable: it might refer to systems of design, production and retail; it may denote frequency of wear and ubiquity, or identity and belonging; it transcends seasonality and trend, but also indicates the importance of personal taste and personhood within these seasonal and trend-led cycles. In this way, its very lack of concrete delineation is what makes it such a useful phrase in studies of the non-elite, non-spectacular (but still thrilling) encounters we all have with clothes.

Since 2019 and the *Everyday Fashion* conference that led, ultimately, to this volume, everyday fashion has enjoyed a rise in status. There has been investment (both intellectual and financial) in its study across a range of contexts, from museums to universities, and within fashion studies more generally. This shift of focus away from studies of elite fashion cultures is especially interesting because the range of projects being pursued speaks once more to the plurality of meaning contained within the concept of the 'everyday'. Museum exhibitions including *An English Lady's Wardrobe* (2019–20) at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, *Fast x Slow Fashion* (2020) at Leeds Museums and Galleries, *Beautiful People: The Boutique in the 1960s* (2021–22) at the Fashion and Textile Museum and *Fashion City: How Jewish Londoners Shaped Global Style* at the Museum of London (2023–24) have addressed themes relating to those explored by our contributors, including production, retail, style shifts and individual taste.

These British exhibitions sit within broader national and international shifts towards a focus on the everyday in dress and textiles. Research projects including *Refashioning the Renaissance* (Aalto University) and *The American Everyday* (Columbia College) have considered the everyday within material histories and the embodied use of fashion. Most promisingly, a new generation of PhD researchers at universities across the UK are working on projects related to many of the themes suggested in this book. Doctoral research projects that centre the everyday in their analyses include those focused on manufacturing and production, people and their fashioned identities, place and business.² This body of new work signals an important moment for the historiography of fashion; while the everyday has previously been dismissed, or bound as a subsidiary of other concepts (including class, economics, labour structures and gender), now there is opportunity for it to come to the fore in its own right.

This overdue investment in the everyday presents an opportunity for a new diversity to emerge in fashion studies. As our contributors have shown, there is significant value in understanding the full complexity of 'everyday fashion'. The contents of this book demonstrate that the value of everyday fashion cannot be calculated in monetary terms. Although prices for second hand – and particularly vintage – clothing have risen in recent years, high-end auction houses still predominantly deal in couture and premiums are paid for rich fabrics and one-off pieces. Instead, the value of everyday fashion lies in the stories it has to tell about people, places and societies. Indeed, this value is evident in the types of historical mass-market garments that do command high prices, such as British 'CC41' labelled Utility fashions produced between 1942 and 1952, which are highly desirable to collectors and museums for their ability to communicate the social and personal upheaval of life on the home front during the Second World War.³ It is the very everyday-ness of such garments that makes them so evocative, conjuring the past by confronting us with the sometimes mundane realities of daily life and highlighting how personal,

embodied experience is materially connected to and shaped by broader geo-political events. In this way, everyday fashion endures as a powerful reminder of the agency of the people who shaped the past, many of whom are not recorded in written histories.

Everyday fashion is also surprisingly enduring in material terms, although, as the object biographies in this book demonstrate, everyday fashion has not always been prioritized for preservation and collecting in the same way as elite and special occasion clothing. Many of the extant examples we do have are robust and well-made. Contrary to popular misconception, everyday fashion is not necessarily cheap or shoddy, nor is it 'unfashionable' in style. Many everyday garments were made to withstand extensive wear, and 'best' clothing was cycled into everyday wear over time. More recently, textile researchers testing the durability of high-street jeans found that some of the cheapest pairs on the market were actually the most robust, challenging assumptions that inexpensive fashions are made to be disposable.⁴ This demonstrates that fast fashion is an attitude as much as a production system, once again highlighting the importance of exploring everyday fashion as both material and practice and refuting simplistic narratives that blame inexpensive fashion for the industry's sustainability crisis.

Although this book does not explicitly tackle issues of sustainability, its lessons from history have resonance to this contemporary debate. The research presented here repeatedly demonstrates the importance of everyday practices of making and consuming fashion to wellbeing, and in doing so provides a warning against blanket condemnations of the growth of a mass-market fashion industry that has democratized access to these benefits. The everyday fashion practices described throughout this volume clearly refute the idea that everyday dressing is about practicality and material need, while fashion is about the crafting of identity and style. They demand we interrogate the elitist construction of fashion as a system that excludes certain people and processes. In particular, they highlight the overlooked role of garment workers and makers in the production of fashion in its broadest sense. This has implications for the way workers are perceived in the contemporary global supply chain and serves as a reminder that truly sustainable solutions to fashion's issues must consider both producers and consumers.

In contemporary contexts, the systems governing how we consume, wear and appreciate clothing have been transformed. Clothes have, for many, become disposable commodities. According to one 2015 study by the British charity Barnardo's, on average each garment will be worn seven times before being discarded.⁵ There are various reasons for this. The fashion cycle has significantly sped up, with clothes produced more quickly and at a lower cost. This new fashion system has been galvanized through desire, novelty and thirst for perpetual newness. Social media, too, has unquestionably had an effect; the daily capturing of versions of ourselves online has led to a desire to continually look different, and new clothes have become a conduit to instant gratification. Overall this means that in the twenty-first century, typically how clothes *look* – while always central to any purchase decision – has become significantly more important than how they *feel*.

Technology will also surely continue to impact how we manufacture and consume fashion, and there are new opportunities for consuming fashion currently in development, particularly around digital dressing and the metaverse. This is the envisioned future iteration of the Internet that is made up of 3D virtual spaces linked within a perceived virtual universe. In a broader sense, it often refers not just to virtual worlds, but rather 'the full spectrum of virtual worlds, augmented reality and the Internet'.⁶ In the future this means that we may see a persistent digital overlay on the real world. We may, in the next few years, be dressing digital versions of ourselves not only in games but for business meetings or social media, with entire outfits that do not (physically) exist. Emergent technologies such as this, could, in some respects offer a reduction of clothing waste as some online content creation for platforms such as Instagram could be created using digital, rather than physical clothes. However, even as we shift towards these opportunities the value and the power of real things remains central to the human experience of fashion. Will these technologies make real clothes redundant? No. People will still have to get dressed and the physical experience and power of clothes cannot be underestimated; rather, emerging technology and digital garments will offer new opportunities for creative, playful fashion engagement.

What will fashion scholars looking back in 2050 consider representative of the everyday fashion of the 2020s? Fashion exists now as part of an incoherent, anarchic and ultimately liberated bricolage of styles, and, arguably, this has been the case for at least the last twenty years. The rise of 'vintage' as a popular

style trend, the increased acceptance of second-hand fashion, the global dissemination of fashion images and information through the Internet and related processes of exchange of both fashion goods and fashion ideas have all contributed to a new era in which the everyday now is more influenced by the individual than by the collective. However, this does not mean that everyday fashion has become an individual pursuit.

We are all consumers of everyday fashion, and participation in everyday fashion practices is central to negotiating relationships between the individual and the collective. Since sources for the study of everyday fashion are now so accessible and plentiful, this volume highlights the collective opportunity and indeed, responsibility, to preserve its history. Our contributors have demonstrated that paying attention to the everyday confirms the agency individuals have in shaping the world they live in, and their capacity to unpick the historical hierarchies and power structures inherent within fashion itself. By drawing together the common threads of our everyday fashion experiences we will reveal the potential of the everyday to tell new stories about the long history of British fashion.

Notes

1 Ben Highmore, 'The Everyday Is Always a Question, a Problem', Interview with Ben Highmore by Gianluca Simi. University of Nottingham, Department of Culture, Film and Media (2018).

2 For example: Emily Gallagher whose thesis examines Victorian working-class fashion at Birkbeck, University of London; Lucy McConnell who is researching manufacture of Utility fashion at the University of Leeds; Rachel Neal who is studying everyday men's fashion at De Montfort University; Abigail Jubb whose thesis considers department store and mail order fashions in the early twentieth century at the University of York.

3 At one Kerry Taylor auction, *Passion for Fashion* in October 2015, a Utility suit achieved a record-breaking price of £1700 – almost ten-times its original estimate.

4 Durability testing by Dr Mark Sumner, 2021. Unpublished research.

5 Dana Thomas, 'The High Price of Fast Fashion', *Wall Street Journal*, 29 August 2019.

6 McKinsey & Co., *The State of Fashion*, report published in association with *The Business of Fashion* (2022).