

CARING FOR FASHION BY DOING THE LAUNDRY

GENERATING ALTERNATIVE ACTS OF CONSUMPTION FROM THE LAUNDRY BASKET

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Abstract

Wearing has long been the primary act of fashion, yet fashion consumers additionally engage in a complex, interactive relationship with garments when they are not worn. This paper explores the nuanced relationship between care and fashion consumption by examining the acts of care involved in doing the laundry. In identifying laundry as a series of seemingly small quasi-events that intertwine identity, social norms, and cultural consumption, caring for fashion can be reframed by abstracting typical laundry acts, such as progressing folding into a caring act of holding. Common consumption patterns and behaviours can be altered by disrupting standard laundry practices and engaging consumers in care activities based on joy, fulfilment, or even frustration. Examining how we consume fashion objects in our homes through the laundry basket can provide further insight into body-object relationships from the perspectives of care, maintenance, and dependence. This can thereby redefine expressions of bonding and our engagement with material culture by suggesting the consumption of acts as opposed to things as a means to care for fashion.

Keywords: *Laundry, Care, Consuming acts, Expressions of bonding, Body-object relationships*

INTRODUCTION

Wearing is commonly viewed as the heart of the relationship between body and object within fashion (Thornquist (b), 2018). Despite the significance of wearing as a fashion act, humans also have an extensive and complex relationship with garments when not worn. A wardrobe can be viewed as a complex set of practices involving consumption, care, and imagination, both off and on the body (Thornquist (a), 2018). As fashion consumers, we dedicate a significant portion of our lives tending to the clothes we or our immediate family members own, and often, this care is labelled as a chore rather than a thoughtful activity.

Care can be viewed as the commonplace “layers of labour that get us through the day, a

material space in which many are trapped” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 87). In a fashion object context, doing the laundry can be a demanding layer of labour and a vital element of fashion maintenance. By exploring and defamiliarising the chore of care, we can begin to identify mundane aspects of our lives as aesthetics (Saito, 2022) and as expressions of bonding between body and object. In doing so, further care acts can be designed to prompt bonding and engagement.

Most people consider doing the laundry a notoriously mundane event. However, the procedure of this event encompasses multiple acts, practices, encounters, and happenings that contribute to a humanistic code of conduct and consumption patterns.

Society's socially approved codes of conduct shape how we interact with our things (Chapman, 2012), and these normative interactions can be viewed as cultural products of their own in the form of customs and values (Chapman, 2021). Codes of conduct can also impact how we cultivate our everyday material experiences in seemingly small encounters with our things. One way to enrich everyday encounters is to focus on the small moments of pleasurable experience that generally go unnoticed because they are fully absorbed into the background of our lives (Saito, 2017). In this light, doing the laundry can be viewed as a quasi-event.

Quasi-events are a primary condition of human social life. They are seemingly unimportant events that recognise the mundane and engage with the minor—moments that do not become spectacles but are infused with meaning nonetheless. The consequence of a quasi-event can be only a slight shift, a delicate alternation (DiSalvo, 2022), such as hanging up a sock to dry or folding a pair of pressed trousers. Because quasi-events occur daily, they can draw attention to delicate routines and patterns in life. This is where everyday care acts thrive, yet still often go unnoticed by the carer.

FASHION CONSUMPTION & CONSUMING ACTS

The general understanding of the concept of consumption can vary significantly based on individual perspectives. For example, a fashion enthusiast might associate consumption with purchasing clothing, whereas a baker may consider it savouring freshly baked bread. Therefore, consumption is a constant process, an integral part of human nature (Chapman, 2012), and refers to more than purchasing; it can occur through use, enjoyment, and even disposal (Dant, 1996).

Fashion consumption exists in various aspects of our lives and is critical in shaping cultural consumption. Fashion can symbolise the meaning of an object, as people commonly use fashion objects to express identity, taste, lifestyle, social status, and community, as well as an extension of the self (Boradkar, 2014; Pink, Mackley & Morosanu, 2015; Kuusk, 2016; Thornquist (a), 2018). Today, many (fashion) products serve as signs of the user's character rather than as entities in their own right or as reflections of the object's character (Verbeek, 2005). This can obscure the distinction between body and object, which places the object in the background of the

act of wearing. In order to alter fashion consumption patterns, fashion acts beyond wearing must be investigated, allowing users to appreciate the object as a unique entity.

Habits of consumption can become an end in themselves because they tap into the human desire to possess. However, by infusing consumption habits with meaning beyond mere possession, a shift in consumption behaviour and understanding can occur (Csikszentmihalyi & Halton, 1981). By examining the meaning of what and how we consume, a shift can be explored from consuming *things to actions*.

Social change depends on human attitudes and values, and altering consumption habits is imperative in addressing consumption-related issues (Cooper, 2005; Shove, 2010; Kuusk, 2016). Conversely, desire and consumption are fundamental human behaviours and emotions (Chapman, 2012; Norman, 2004 (b)), which renders it unreasonable to expect people to simply want less. Therefore, asking consumers to want less can lead to feelings of guilt and failure for individual consumers. However, establishing alternative consumption patterns by nurturing acts of care in body-object relationships as methods of consuming can sustain the current level of wants while limiting the environmental impact of the consumed act.

There is a need to reorient consumption patterns (Marchand & Walker, 2008; Thornquist (b), 2018), and studies have shown that consumers prefer products that allow them to be engaged in doing or products that enable an activity (Marchand et al., 2008). Doing is commonly associated with more meaning than doing for the sake of doing; it is frequently laced with emotions such as care, love, and fellowship (Saito, 2017). Care is a doing and life-sustaining everyday practice and an affirmation of the significance of a series of activities (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017 & Saito, 2022). By giving further meaning to a series of activities, they can be granted supplementary purpose and provide the doer with enjoyment and satisfaction.

Enjoyment is an imperative component in exploring new ways of living and consuming. Joy can serve as escapism or a means to cope with frustration through play. "Thus it is essential to cultivate enjoyment because it is one of the most powerful means to experiment with alternatives to the trap of routine" (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1981, p. 245).

Deriving enjoyment from utilising a skill enhances the engagement in a task and can shape the overall experience, contributing to and concentrating the general flow of the act (Verbeek, 2005). The flow of performing an act can give it intrinsic value, even when the act has no material value (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1981). Consequently, exploring enjoyable and fulfilling routine acts holds significant potential for broadening and disrupting current consumption habits.

CARING ACTS OF THE LAUNDRY

Care is often exhausting labour (DiSalvo, 2022; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), and housework, mainly related to cleaning, is commonly considered tedious. This is primarily because it demands neither creativity nor sophistication, portraying it as a straightforward maintenance act. However, cleaning activities such as doing laundry can provide a subtle sense of satisfaction (Saito, 2017).

Caring for clothes by laundering ensures they can be worn again, maintaining the clothes' appearance and, by extension, the wearer's. Laundry is an essential daily care practice, and when this ritual is neglected, it can become apparent to those nearby, as humans are concerned with the impressions they give others regarding the cleanliness of their clothes (Mendelson, 2009; Saito, 2017). Because of this, we can consider caring for fashion as a form of self-care and care for others.

Doing the laundry demands a multisensory array of skills in everyday domestic practices. It involves embodied knowledge and sensory perception to perform an act that is rarely verbalised but performed without questioning (Pink, 2012). In the purity of this act, an appreciation for the subtle joy of everyday achievement can be rewarded. In that regard, doing the laundry can be viewed as an act that rewards or even affords an achievement. As such, it is a fascinating action-achievement system to explore in the scheme of body-object relationships of care and a means for humans to care for fashion by doing.

LAUNDRY AS DOMESTIC MATERIALITY & SOCIAL PATTERN

Doing laundry involves an array of acts that must be performed in a specific order, ranging from *sorting*, *washing*, and *loading* the machine to *drying*, *folding*, and *putting away*. This series of activities is further entangled with broader associations such as material or garment demands and cultural norms

(Yates & Evans, 2016). Therefore, doing laundry is not exclusively about making things clean but also about putting disorder into order from a broad societal perspective (Shove, 2004).

Over the last century, habits and techniques of doing laundry have changed significantly, with long-term consequences for domestic electricity and water use (Shove, 2004). Therefore, laundry habits can be valuable examples of how household practices can impact consumer behaviour (Yates et al., 2016). Laundry is a resource-intensive domestic activity that has been the subject of systematic change in the name of sustainability (Mylan & Southerton, 2018). Such changes have included washing at a lower temperature (Shove, 2004) or using less detergent per wash (Laitala, Klepp & Boks, 2012). Modifying certain laundry practices and addressing their demands has positively influenced the usage of laundry resources. Because of this, there is a flair for sustainability and change in the meaning and value of acts and human behaviour already linked to the state of the laundry basket and doing the laundry.

The laundering process demands action and movement from the body and has notoriously become repetitive and labelled a daunting chore. However, anticipating feeling good or looking good in freshly cleaned clothes is essential to doing the laundry. This indicates two core pleasures in doing the laundry: the labour of care for the clothes and the result of that labour (Saito, 2017), such as the anticipation for a freshly cleaned and ironed appearance of both garments and wearer. Therefore, there is a cause and effect to doing the laundry, which rewards the carer in multiple ways and, in turn, builds a connection or even a relationship between the garment and its carer over time through repeated encounters.

Washing clothes daily keeps a specific formulation of laundering acts in circulation. Daily laundering becomes routine as a domestic materiality; however, it will only persist if enough carriers propagate it similarly. Patterns of consumption associated with meaning or normalcy require constant reproduction to be sustained (Shove, 2004 & 2010). In this context, a care act must be continuous or repeatable to be persistent and sustained through use.

Viewing laundry through standardised and continuous practices can enable sociological exploration and encourage new perspectives on the environmental effects of routine acts and

the potential for actions to contribute to positive change (Yates et al., 2016). In this manner, laundry can be used as an empirical probe for exploring relationships between performances and practices as socially arranged entities and acts (Mylan et al., 2018).

AUTOMATION AS THE DEMISE OF BONDING

It is reasonable to assume that the more frequently clothes are washed, the more time the carer has to interact with them. However, the increasingly automated laundry approach may have the opposite effect. The washing machine lies at the heart of the laundry process, as we currently perform laundry in the Global North. Washing machines have become common and sought-after appliances for most homes, and as consumers, we expect everything that comes out of the machine to be clean. Thus, the washing machine is the main event of laundry acts and greatly influences how other elements of the laundry are combined (Shove, 2004) and acted out.

Automation is often the task of design to simplify lives by relieving certain chores or efforts. In this way, design can arrange partitions, leading to new ways of building bridges with both things and other individuals (Ávila, 2022). Therefore, by automating one act, another has the possibility of emerging. However, the dominance of the washing machine as the primary event might have taken away the fact that laundry is a delicate human act of care.

Everyday tasks continue to become increasingly automated as machines improve in efficiency and intelligence (Norman, 2013). Yet, technological devices can diminish human involvement and connection with objects (e.g., garments) (Verbeek, 2005). “A machine is not a way of doing something; it stands in the way of doing something” (Carse, 1986, p. 123).

When a machine washes a garment, the care has been outsourced to another, compared to when a garment demands embodied, focused attention through handwashing. Consequently, automation can deprive the hands-on experience central to getting to know something, forming relationships, and bonding. Considering this perspective, the care act of washing in a washing machine is beyond the scope of embodied care because of its almost complete automation in the Global North. Therefore, we must focus on what happens before and after the washing machine.

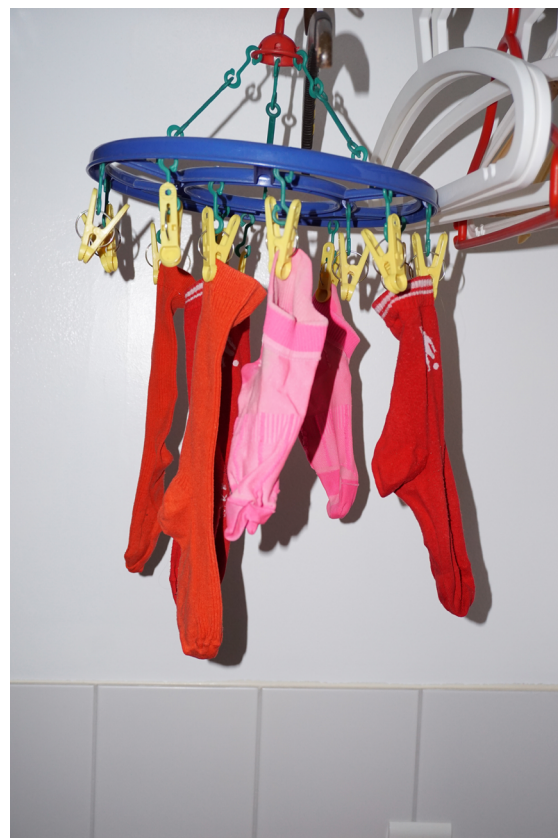


Fig. 01

NON-MACHINE ACTS

Aside from washing, laundering also means collecting, organising, sorting, washing, drying, folding and putting away. These acts involve various sensory skills such as touching, smelling, looking at, dealing with machines, and folding while navigating norms, moralities, and expectations (Pink et al., 2015). Considering a selection of laundry processes that commonly do not occur in a machine can demonstrate how care processes are often better operated by hand:

Sorting: Before placing the laundry in the washing machine, it must be sorted according to colour and care instructions on the garment care label. Failure to sort the laundry according to instructions can damage delicate clothing in the machine (Mendelson, 2009).

Drying (Fig. 01): When the washing machine has completed its chore, the clothes or textiles must be dried (Mendelson, 2009). Various approaches can be taken to dry laundered items. Delicate items, such as dress shirts, should be hung up to dry on a hanger straight from the machine to ensure they dry without wrinkling, while other items, such as cotton sheets, can be



Fig. 02

dried in a tumble dryer or on a line (Saito, 2017). When hanging clothes to dry, paying attention to how they are arranged is essential to prevent marks from the drying line or clothespins (Saito, 2017). Hanging garments up to dry can, therefore, be a careful act of arrangement or an arrangement of care.

Folding (Fig. 02): After the garments have dried thoroughly, they are folded according to specific systems and traditions depending on the type of garment and material. This is done for optimal storage and to keep the garment in ready-to-use condition (Mendelson, 2009) while awaiting human attention in the closet. In addition to being a practical act of storage, folding can function as a vital point of quality checking. In that sense, it is an intimate, hands-on process of handling garments, allowing the handler to become more familiar with the garments through touch and feel.

Considering these non-machine laundering acts, drying has been largely automated through tumble dryers, whereas sorting and folding still rely entirely on human involvement. Sorting and folding can be time-consuming acts and must be performed manually by the caregiver,

demanding specific attention to the object and act. Consequently, objects requiring hands-on interaction can be a foundation for exploring alternative body-object relationships and expressions of bonding. This suggests that the fundamental aspect of caring for clothes as objects of character lies not in the machinery itself but in the hands-on moments before and after the machine. Therefore, it is essential to consider the abstraction of physical acts of care as a means to explore broader implications within body-object engagement. To further investigate this concept beyond a sole focus on garments, a non-fashion object can serve as an ideal starting point by emphasising the expansion and focus of the care act.

ALTERNATIVE ACTS OF CONSUMPTION: FOLDING BECOMES HOLDING

Inanimate objects are vital tools for developing self-awareness through nonverbal embodied intentions. An excellent example of a basic inanimate non-fashion object that embodies intention is the *ball*. A ball has a limited vocabulary confined to four expressions: it can roll, rest, fly,

or bounce. However, elaborate communication between body and object can be composed of these seemingly simple expressions because they also afford acts such as throwing, squeezing, kicking, catching, and so on (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1981; Norman, 2013).

In the following design examples, I have focused on the ball's ability to roll as its perceived affordance (Gibson, 1977; Norman, 2004 (a) & 2013) while simultaneously considering it as an object of assembly through social gatherings such as ball games. In those instances, the object holds the game and the gathering together. Thus, from the object's perspective, everything and everyone arranges itself around its presence, "the subject moves around the sun" (Schiermer, 2011, p. 83), or the body moves around the object, such as when performing acts of laundry.

Looking back at the dependency garments place on their human carer in their need to be folded, I have extended folding to holding as a form of embodied and demanding care act. Every day, we hold various things in our hands, often without recognising the significance of this act. Whether carrying groceries or a coat, cradling loved ones, or simply holding someone's hand, these gestures of function, affection and care are essential to everyday life in a similar manner to doing the laundry. Furthermore, choosing a familiar non-fashion object, such as the ball, assists in separating the act of holding from wearing. Therefore, I have attempted to merge a perceived affordance of rolling with the care affordance of holding so the object may lend itself to nurturing behaviour and demand to be held.

These examples of balls on wheels (Fig. 03, Fig. 04) play with the notion and function of rolling and what materialises when two rolling agents, such as the ball and the wheel, are combined. The dual agents create a dependency by cancelling out each other's ability to roll. Consequently, the object demands constant human support as a form of exhausting labour to get the ball rolling. In this manner, the care act becomes the protagonist in the body-object relationship, bestowing it with greater agency and significance, allowing it to potentially evolve into a product of its own.

These challenging objects offer a speculative approach to how complicating and thus decelerating body-object engagement can positively influence the relationship. This is akin to how folding clothes demands a more intimate and



Fig. 03

time-consuming care than merely pressing a button on the washing machine.

IMPLICATIONS OF DESIGNED-IN DEPENDENCY

Focused interaction between humans can occur when people agree to sustain a single focus of cognitive and visual attention for a specific time, such as in a (ball) game, a joint task, a conversation, or constantly having to hold a ball so it may roll. A focused gathering can, therefore, be viewed as an encounter or a "situated activity system" (Goffman, 2013, p. 8). In this case, the focus of the gathering between the ball and body has been made compulsory and constant. The body-object relationship becomes codependent and complex in movement and use. This grants the object the agency to frustrate, surprise, fail, disrupt routines and engage interest for an extended time.

All artefacts behave in accordance with their design, which forces the body or user to move with the design (Ross & Wensveen, 2010; Janlert & Stolterman, 2017). In this case, the aim was to study the implications of constant holding as a form of care for an object and whether holding can



Fig. 04

be a demand for the function of rolling. Constant holding turned out to be highly important in moving the body and thereby engaging the body in persistent care.

Objects are embedded in complex practices and use, and an object not in use does not have the same agency as an object in use. Therefore, the dynamic use of objects can be shaped by their past practices, which are linked to a given situation's contextual and social implications (Wakkary, 2021). Awarding an object the ability to be in contact with the body continually can grant the object a more robust agency as a player in encounters with bodies. Thus, objects can act as proxies or stand-ins for the innate human desire to connect in a literal, physical manner.

Some artefacts are meant to be only partially understood, and this challenge can breed new expressions and behaviours as we get to know them. Human perception of objects is immensely flexible, and objects can alter or even change human practices and behaviours (Wakkary, 2021). This indicates that humans are predisposed to understand and accept change in material objects and expect or display a willingness to serve the objects' new demands, such as bending over

constantly to get the ball rolling.

In addition to being susceptible to serving demanding objects, humans have a general desire to be challenged and pushed in material engagements. Or, as Harper further elaborates:

Can a sustainable expression be so complex and challenging that it demands a sustained interest in exploring it (for an extended period of time)? Is the most aesthetically sustainable object a thing of such elevated complexity that the user is immediately (and time again) challenged and forced to consider its provenance in relation to the surrounding world? Perhaps the pleasure of sustainable objects lies in their ability to disrupt the users' comfort zone (Harper, 2018, p. 3).

To keep humans interested in caring for material objects, further ways to develop caring acts through surprise, wonder, and some degree of ridicule must be explored. The balls on wheels succeed in this rather well because the body needs to give it constant attention for the ball to roll. This connects the body and object in a permanent and sustained relationship because of a

physical dependency and the fact that the object is consumed through a demanding embodied act.

CONCLUSION

Given the significant time we devote to our clothing, we ought to be practically obsessed with their care. Yet, this fixation has largely been outsourced due to the automated nature of laundry. By designing alternative and borderline ridiculous objects of care and human interaction, we can begin to reevaluate care practices and routines through an alternative lens on consumption.

Laundry is an ongoing, practical human activity, and as such, it comes naturally to most garment users (Pink et al., 2015). New supporting care acts can emerge by examining these current and standard embodied care practices of laundry, such as sorting, drying, and folding. Focusing on the act rather than the object can grant a more comprehensive perspective on the object as an independent character to engage with instead of viewing it as a direct extension of the wearer's identity. This allows for considering alternative acts of consumption in fashion rather than wearing.

While social norms are often considered the drivers of human behaviour, the role of needs and aspirations is frequently overlooked as a significant player in societal transformation (Shove, 2010) such as consumption patterns. By understanding the everyday implications of the acts of the laundry, we can begin to recognise the impact of such (care) practices and intersubjective relationships (Pink et al., 2015).

Changes in behaviour often require breaking old habits to establish new ones (Shove, 2010). By breaking the habit of the ball's ability to roll and implementing a constant demand for human assistance to consume the product through an act, a new relationship of dependency is created and repeatedly encouraged.

This paper introduces a basic yet compelling example of a body-object relationship built on dependence as an alternative expression of bonding between body and object. By disrupting a convenient and comfortable consumption pattern, consumers are more likely to rethink and reorient their consumption from things to acts. Consequently, objects must encompass a sense of ridicule to spark wonder, surprise, and even scepticism, which increases the object's potential to evolve alongside its handler over time.

Extending the intimate, hands-on laundry

act of folding to holding has allowed a new product category to emerge. By exploring the care act of holding through a non-fashion object, or a ball, this object has been granted independence from the core act of fashion, wearing. Therefore, by bending over and holding the ball to roll it, an alternative expression of bonding is found, suggesting a new and complex expression of sustainable consumption. Still, this area requires further exploration by studying other care acts and how to integrate the emerging alternative acts of care into the design and consumption of fashion objects.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Arrangements of care.

[Fig. 02] Folding, an intimate, hands-on act of care.

[Fig. 03] A ball on wheels affords rolling only when held.

[Fig. 04] When in play, the ball demands the body's complete attention to function, creating a dependency between body and object while granting the care act further agency.

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