

Accessing Sustainability through the Wardrobe

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Abstract: The two existing surveys on everyday behavior with clothing in Germany are both based on online questionnaires and contain deviations of up to 20 per cent for the same question. In this paper, we propose an ethnographic approach with a material-cultural focus to achieve more precise knowledge about everyday practices inside the household. The range of observed practices includes consumption, care and disposal. The direct presence of garments during the conducted wardrobe interviews inside the household tackles the problem of attitude-behavior gap in surveys: It offers the possibility of comparing the interviewees' answers with their observed actions and addresses the differences between them.

Introduction

Paralleling the rise of fast fashion as an economically orientated textile industry that focuses on profit maximization, awareness of the connected problematic impacts on the environment is increasing in our society (cf. Boström/Micheletti 2016: 367). A growing number of people are concerned with reflecting and refashioning their current lifestyle and consumer behavior. This often includes a re-evaluation of what is needed and appreciated, followed by reducing and changing everyday practices. In the German-speaking area (Germany, Austria and Switzerland) a minimalist lifestyle is becoming popular and the scene is growing significantly. This development is becoming apparent through multiple blogs (Figure 1), video channels and social media groups as well as the number of currently published guidebooks on the topic of minimalism (e.g. Carver 2017; Jachmann 2017; Weiß 2017; Fields Millburn/Nicodemus 2018; Klöckner 2018; Kondō 2018; Raeggel 2018; Sasaki 2018). In these how-to guides, clothing is often addressed as a separate category and it is often recommended to tackle the issue in the beginning of a minimalist process.

However, connected knowledge about the everyday household practices of consumers has been acquired through only two representative surveys in Germany. The first online questionnaire was commissioned by the NGO Greenpeace in 2015 with 1011

participants, the second one as part of the research project "Innovation for Sustainable Behavior" (InNaBe) in 2017 with 2000 interviewees. The findings show significant differences for the same questions: To make room for new clothing in the wardrobe is a reason to sort out old garments for 31% according to the Greenpeace study and for 49% according to InNaBe. The reason that clothing has only been purchased for one occasion was given by 10% of interviewees for Greenpeace and 32% for InNaBe (cf. Greenpeace 2015: 22; Kleinhüchelkotten 2017: 9). The comparison of these findings indicates that further reflection on methodology about everyday practices is needed, especially as it influences circulated knowledge on sustainable behavior through mass media and social institutions such as schools.

The research project "Textile Minimalism. Pioneering Sustainable Action" aims to find out if minimalists function as performers of sustainable textile practices in their everyday life and if they pass on their acquired knowledge as multipliers. The research is based on an ethnographic study in the German-speaking area and started in March 2018. Methodically, we conducted expert and focus groups interviews as well as 45 wardrobe interviews, which were carried out inside the household of the interviewee to ensure the physical presence of the clothing. During the course of this paper, we will illustrate how using methods with direct

presence of material objects can help in the area of material culture research on sustainability.

Textile Everyday Practices and Sustainability

The escalation of a growing number of material objects, from an average of 180 objects in 1914 to 10,000 objects as today's standard in Germany, results in a changing everyday life and the connected practices (cf. Shove 2003: 128f.). Referring to the area of clothing and textiles: In the period of fast fashion, garments are available in such high amounts and at such cheap prices that their lifetime decreases significantly. In combination with an often poor quality it can be economically more rewarding to dispose of clothing after a short use phase. Trying to follow the extremely sped-up fashion cycle of 14-day trends can lead to time pressure and a financial burden for consumers, as well as overflowing wardrobes. On the other hand, the decision to not follow fashion trends and develop individual standards for appropriate clothing instead can lead to stress reduction and financial relief. Adapting a minimalist lifestyle often leads to slowing down and simplifying everyday practices through the value reassessment of resources such as time, money and material objects (cf. Derwanz 2015: 200).



Figure 1. Selection of Minimalism Blogs in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

Pioneers or guiding figures play a central role concerning societal developmental processes (see also Bly et al. 2015). Before a behavior is

adapted by the majority it needs single persons or groups who set an example of their way of living and function as multipliers: They offer inspiration for individuals to change their everyday life and the connected practices and actions. To promote a more sustainable behavior in the area of clothing it is important that single (popular) persons exhibit possible alternative actions. On an international level, Kate Fletcher, Professor for Sustainability, Design and Fashion at the University of the Arts in London, describes herself as a "Fashion and Sustainability Pioneer" (www.katefletcher.com).

The aim of this project, however, is to focus on the level of everyday actions to research how sustainable practices are concretely exerted, appropriated and forwarded inside the German-speaking minimalist scene. Starting point of the research were local minimalist meet-ups in 10 of the 20 biggest German cities in order to gain an overview of the national scene and acquire interview partners. Minimalism bloggers (Figure 1) were additionally addressed to extend the interviewee sample (Figure 2). Apart from the executed wardrobe interviews, we used the methods of participant observation, focus group interviews as well as expert interviews, short questionnaires and textile diaries.

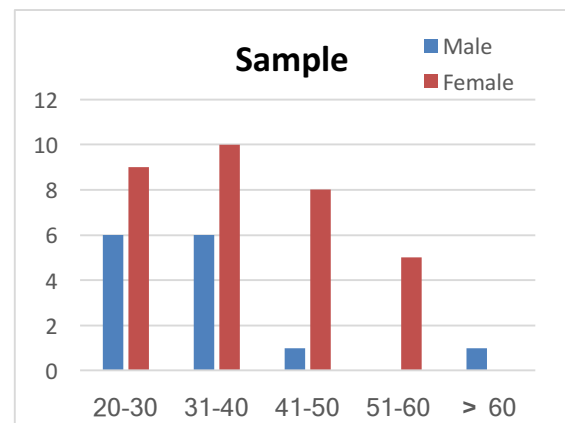


Figure 2. Gender and age distribution of interviewee sample.

Accessing the Wardrobe

On a methodological level, the research project can be assigned to the field of Wardrobe Studies, focusing on the material objects and their relationship to the research subjects. In 2017, the ethnologist Ingun Grimstad Klepp and (the earlier mentioned) Kate Fletcher published *Opening up the Wardrobe*, a collection of 50 different methods from the field of Wardrobe

Studies. They describe that the methods "provide insight into collections of clothes and the garment-related world that takes place in the extended 'space of the wardrobe'. By this we, the book's editors, mean the clothing actions, relationships, meanings and material effects that unfold over time and in the course of life." (Fletcher/Klepp 2017: 3).

The conducted wardrobe interviews were developed in reference to Ingrid Hausgrud's Wardrobe Study methodology in Fletcher and Klepp's book and Else Skjold, who experimented with different forms of wardrobe interviews (cf. Skjold 2014: 5). Hausgrud describes her method as a "semi-structured face-to-face interview followed by photography and additional questions concerning the specific garments identified by the participants as valuable to them" (Fletcher/Klepp 2017: 68). In contrast to Hausgrud, we did not focus mainly on the garments that were especially valuable to the interviewees, but rather on the interrelated everyday practices such as storage, care, laundry, repair, consumption and disposal. Pictures of the wardrobe, of specific garments (Figure 3) and caring tools were taken during the interview.



Figure 3. An interviewee shows her garments with moth paper during an interview.

We consciously decided to conduct the interviews inside the household to provide direct contact with the material garments for mainly two reasons: First of all, the wardrobe interview is a memory-stimulating method. By being able to visualize and haptically interact with the garments during the interview, the interviewees were able to keep a better overview of their collection of clothes and develop answers to the questions in the interview situation itself. When asked about their oldest garment, they usually had to

visually search through their wardrobe. On the other hand, it was made possible to correlate given answers with what we observed. Interviewees who stated that they reject non-organic material for clothing, for instance, could present them. In this way, it became possible to observe the actions rather than just relying on the interviewees' answers. This difference is expressed in the attitude-behavior gap, meaning that people do not necessarily show a practical behavior that matches their attitude and values (Niinimäki 2018: 50). This possible difference between the psychological mindset and actual behavior can either be consciously chosen in order to show desirable or socially accepted behavior (e.g. to act sustainably) or unconsciously adapted while not recognizing that there is a difference between thought and action (cf. Klepp/Bjerck 2014: 383). In Skjold's words, an advantage of methods with direct access to the wardrobe is that "through observing people's emotional and physical interactions with what they store, dress objects can be regarded as material evidence of lived lives that are immediately accessible at the site of the study, and can lead beyond people's own rationalisations." (Skjold 2014: 33).

Sustainable Everyday Clothing Practices

To explain our findings, we developed the scheme of a typical minimalist process specifically associated with clothing:

- 1) Removal and transfer of the superfluous clothing and reorganization of the kept items (using concepts / rules)
- 2) Extension of the life cycle of the kept items through repair, care and further utilization
- 3) Conscious consumption of required garments through circulation / sharing / do it yourself / eco fair consumption
- 4) Optional: Knowledge transfer & multiplication

A minimalist process most often starts with obtaining an overview of all clothing currently owned and

- (1) *sorting out the redundant items by reducing and (re-)organizing the remaining clothes*

There are different techniques to identify superfluous clothing, like the KonMari method, which works with the question: "Does it spark

joy?”. Ways of (re-)organizing one’s wardrobe can be setting rules about the number of clothes or restricting the repertory to a specific range of colors, shapes or materials. These rules/concepts have the aim of reducing the complexity of outfit formation. A typical rule is to choose clothing that is combinable in a variety of ways, which for instance applies to the concept of a Capsule Wardrobe (cf. Jachmann 2017: 91). Even more simplification can be reached through establishing a uniform in terms of a consistent wardrobe.

After sorting out the superfluous garments, these are often passed on to other people or converted for further utilization.

The next step is the

(2) *extension of the life cycle of the remaining garments through repair, care and further utilization*

Repairing clothes requires knowledge about reparation techniques and the corresponding skills. The appropriate care for clothing starts with material literacy, meaning the knowledge about how durable a material is and with what treatment it lasts longest. This includes knowledge about appropriate washing, storing and other care techniques like using a lint shaver or an iron. At the end of the garment’s life cycle it can be processed for further utilization, by passing it on for further usage or up-, down- or recycling it, for example by transforming it into a different kind of garment or cleaning rags.

(3) *Conscious consumption of the required/needed clothing*

is located at the end of the chain, as practices of anti-consumption (rejecting, reducing and reusing) display a form of sustainable behavior (cf. Black/Cherrier 2010: 443). But if consumption is necessary, some interviewees use alternative ways of purchase through second-hand or free shops, clothes swapping parties or digital groups. Sharing clothes through collective use or lending services would be another option, but this was not practiced in our sample. Buying ecologically produced and fair-trade products is of high importance, unless the knowledge and skills for creating the needed garment one one’s own are available. Two of the interviewees were even professionalizing that practice and opening up their own fashion business.

Conclusions

The paper underlines the importance of conducting interviews that deal with material objects in direct presence of the items. The few

times we met people outside of their households the interviewees often strayed from the topic of their clothes and the connected practices to topics they were currently engaged in or minimalism in general. Even though it is usually more challenging to find access to the private sphere of the household and especially the wardrobe of a person, it also led to a closer connection between interviewee and interviewer and a deeper level of communication and responses. It became clear that everyday textile practices cannot be researched from a distance, because of their mostly unconscious exertion and the diversity of practices. It is necessary to pose questions individually, adjusted to the present situation and to clarify unclear expressions. An example is the classification of functional clothing like sports garments, which many interviewees did not include in their clothing collection in the beginning of an interview. Furthermore, when researching sustainability and clothing, it is important to not only focus on consumption and disposal practices but to take everyday practices in the household into account, as they have a significant impact on both consumption and disposal, for example through extending a garments lifecycle by repairing and appropriate material care.

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