


## Article

# From Wearing Off to Wearing On: The Meanders of Wearer–Clothing Relationships

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**Abstract:** The current patterns of production and consumption of clothes are known for their negative impacts on our planet, and the efforts towards a responsible fashion system must come from industry and users alike. Whereas the fashion industry may focus on achieving eco-efficiency, designers need to engage the wearers in long-term commitment with their clothes to counteract the ongoing increase of textile waste. However, current design strategies for product attachment have proven that it is difficult to succeed at this mission. In this paper we introduce the focus and theoretical framework of a research project that aims to study the relationship between wearers and clothes. We present our research perspective through a literature review that is supported by empirical testimonies of dozens of women, whose words illustrate the complexity of human relationships with garments. When we compare our connection with clothes to interpersonal love relationships, we find that the similarities are significant enough to justify a different approach in design practice, and we suggest a re-focus on the existing wearer–clothing relationships.

**Keywords:** wearer–clothing relationship; person–product attachment; clothing use; clothing longevity; sustainable fashion

## 1. Introduction

Consider your experience with clothes: have you ever fallen in love at first sight with a dress? Have you felt the heart-warming comfort and confidence of wearing the perfect clothes for the occasion? Have you ever grieved over some irreparably damaged trousers? From a toddler ecstatic about wearing his favourite dinosaur-themed underwear to the businesswoman towering over a meeting on a perfect pair of power heels, our relationship with clothes is inherently emotional.

Notice that if wearer–clothing relationships were mostly rational, fashion would not have become a multi-billion-dollar industry, employing millions of people around the world [1]. If people related to clothes the same way they relate to, say, cutlery, then our wardrobes would be much smaller. The issue is important for several reasons: from a global perspective, the clothing industry has a huge negative impact on the planet, as current figures show that up to one hundred billion garments are produced every year worldwide, and unsurprisingly, the equivalent of a truck full of textiles is landfilled or incinerated every second [2]. These figures reveal that we can fall in love with a garment as quickly as we can fall out of love with another, and if the speed at which we change our relationships with clothes were to slow down, the production and waste rate would follow suit.

There is, of course, a need for brands to produce durable clothing. The decreasing quality of fabrics and workmanship that prevailed in high street fashion during the last three decades has led to clothes being less costly to produce and cheaper to acquire, which has profoundly changed the way people relate to what they wear; clothes, once valued and kept in pristine condition to last a lifetime, have become objects of low value, subject to wardrobe lifespans as fleeting as the changing fashions [3].

This growing disregard for the value of clothes and carelessness in their maintenance—paired with the ease of access to new items—has led to a recent phenomenon: wearers discard clothes because they do not fit and are not worth the effort (time or money) of changing; because they are damaged and are not worth the effort of mending; because they went out of fashion and are not worth the effort of re-styling; because they are not to their liking anymore, and are not worth a second chance.

In the meantime, different studies have shown the colossal impact the fashion industry has been having on the planet. Different scopes and results reveal both its growth and complexity—see, e.g., [2,4,5]. Fashion is deeply connected to pollution, resource depletion, biodiversity loss, waste, and modern slavery, which affect the well-being of workers, communities, consumers, animals, and the environment [6,7]. The fashion industry's contribution to climate change is a complex phenomenon with different factors that cannot be tackled in isolation. Despite any eco-efficient efforts that might be pursued by the industry, these alone are not enough to achieve the desired shift towards a sustainable fashion system, as the scale of production and waste of textiles is still on the rise with no signs of slowing down [3,6]. While the current progress towards a circular system for the textile industry is strongly focused on giving waste a new life, we are far from ready to process (i.e., successfully recycle) every component of every unwanted garment. Instead, promoting an extended use of clothes—thus, increasing the first cycle timespan—may be a way forward [8] if we are to align efforts from both industry and consumers.

In this paper, we introduce the focus and theoretical framework of a research project that aims to study the relationship between wearers and clothes. When we compare our connection with clothes to interpersonal relationships, we understand that the similarities are significant enough to justify a different approach in design practice: after all, rather than simply feeling or not feeling attached to clothes, we relate with clothing in a complex and dynamic way; how we think and how we behave towards our clothes changes through interaction and is driven by emotion, similar to what happens between people. The research perspective we present will be supported by empirical testimonies of dozens of women whose words illustrate the complexity of human relationships with garments. It further underpins the need for designers to become more aware of what happens in the huge space between the making and disposal of clothes, as “it is here that fashion as a process can be seen to bolster durability and begin to offer an alternative to the throwaway society” [9] (p. 235).

## 2. Methods

The way people relate with their clothes has an impact on the resource waste and throughput that is associated with the fashion industry. Short-lasting wearer–clothing relationships are therefore linked to the social and environmental issues that arise from growing rates of production and consumption of clothing. With this broader background framing our research, we aim to understand how people–clothing relationships work and how they can last longer in order to revert the current scenario.

Emotional durability of clothing and person–clothing relationships are growing topics that have proved to be challenging to study empirically, as recognised by some authors [10,11]. This is mostly due to the timeframes of research projects that cannot track a long-term relationship with a garment, and the methodology needed to successfully grasp the complexity of the matter. The intimate and private relationships we have with clothes are bound with highly subjective psychological elements. It is precisely this subjectivity we want to look into, as it needs to be addressed to tackle the issue of unsustainable clothing consumption patterns.

While writing from a design theory stance, we acknowledge the value of a multidisciplinary approach [12] and the perspective we present in this paper draws from Beatriz Russo's research on the experience of love for products with a foundation on insights from psychology research [13], a perspective we wish to continue in future stages of our project.

We approached the problem by analysing the people–clothing interaction as a relationship akin to interpersonal relationships. Thus, most of the paper deals with handling sources that converge to this point-of-view; it is mainly a literature review that discusses and connects studies related to people's

interaction with things. However, we found it important for the presentation of this perspective to support it—as much as possible—on empirical data; empirically-based studies provide an essential contribution to a research field that still lacks empirical grounding to its theoretical foundations.

In this first stage of the project, we drew from the themes identified during the literature review and collected empirical evidence from the book *Women in Clothes* [14], in which the editors present a series of first-person testimonies that resulted from a survey sent to more than 600 women on the subject of clothes. From the deductive content analysis of the book, we gathered statements that illustrate the theoretical perspective presented in this paper.

This choice of source material does not come without limitations: being a non-academic book, data collection lacks, for instance, complete demographic details. Nonetheless, we consider it to be a rich source of qualitative data that can contribute to academic research on the topic of wearer–clothing relationships. This book is used in the paper as a source of empirical data and not as a reference critique on the subject. We should highlight that we are not dealing with raw data from the survey, but only with the answers that the editors published. Nevertheless, the sample provides valuable insights and evidence relating to the arguments presented in this framework. Another limitation is the focus on women, the majority of which follow a western lifestyle—indeed, most of the selected testimonies come from US-based women. Thus, while the sample does not reflect the entire diversity of the relationships people have with clothes, the global issues we face due to high rates of consumption and waste of clothes cannot be evenly attributed to everyone on this planet, as it is the western lifestyle in the Global North that contributes to this cycle of fast consumption and devalues clothes as material objects [9]. It is here that habits of consumption of clothes need to be addressed and radically changed if we are to advocate for the same sartorial freedoms for everyone around the world. For these reasons, we find the western female standpoint in the sample presented to be a fitting example of the wearer–clothing relationships that we discuss in this paper.

In sum, while the bulk of the paper is focused on the literature review, we decided to illustrate some of the ideas and concepts with first-person reports from women about their relationship with clothes. We think this bridges the concepts presented at a high level of abstraction with real-world statements that demonstrate how those ideas are connected to the everyday lives of people. Design is fundamentally intertwined with the experience of people with things (material or immaterial artefacts of any kind), and reports of how people engage with designed things provide much needed real-world feedback to design research and design theory.

### 3. Reframing Our Love for Clothes

#### 3.1. Durability as a Human Intention

Since the second half of the 20th century—and similar to other product categories—the clothing industry has embraced several obsolescence mechanisms as a strategy to anticipate product replacement and drive sales [15,16]. This planned obsolescence was soon linked to social and environmental issues and recognised as a bad practice [17,18]. Over the last couple of decades, research on sustainable practices in fashion design shows there is much to be done in all stages of a garment's life cycle, e.g., [19,20]. Meanwhile, the industry is moving towards an increasing use of safer materials and eco-efficient processes, a growing transparency in environmental and social practices, and a circular approach to production [21,22]. For the purpose of this paper, we will not delve into each stage of the clothing lifecycle, and will instead focus on the use phase: its influence in the lifespan of clothes and further resource throughput and waste has led the European Clothing Action Plan to address Design for Longevity as one of their key action areas [23]. Brands are urged to improve their product durability standards in terms of fabric quality and construction, and to test clothes over a significant amount of time prior to production to ensure they withstand extensive use and laundering [24]. After all, long-lasting garments are dependent on the decisions and behaviours of industry and wearers alike. Wearers can only enjoy their clothes for longer if they are made to last.

There are several approaches companies can take to increase garment physical/technical durability [25], with the only limitations being costs—higher quality materials increase material costs and better construction increases labour time—and the short timeframes between first sketch and store rack, which are common in most high fashion retail environments and make it very challenging to ensure high standards. Even so, the industry can engage in all sorts of strategies to increase the physical durability of garments and still fail to avoid clothing waste and early replacement; ultimately, it is the way the user decides to engage with clothes beyond the point of purchase that can make them durable [16].

Some brands are attempting to trigger a long-lasting engagement between wearers and clothes by designing seasonless styles, garments with multiple functions and ways to use, and modular clothing; in sum, items that allow for adaptability to the wearer's changing needs, either in fit, size, or style [20,25]. But while these strategies may change the physical features of clothes, they do not necessarily result in clothes "being worth" keeping and cherishing. Worth is not factual, it is perceived by each wearer based upon what elements are being weighed when making such a judgement. It is misleading to think that the way we judge something to have worth results from reasoning alone—emotion plays a role in decision-making [26].

Back to the drawing board, clothing brands began to develop strategies that could spark this emotional side that influences our view of worthiness: for example, providing more information about the garment (construction and care) at the point of acquisition is seen as relevant to affect the relationship, as wearers may understand all the work involved in the making and also the value of caring practices [10]. Other strategies such as co-design and bespoke garments bring back the experience of going to a tailor or seamstress to have clothes specially made, while promoting user engagement in the creation process [27]. However, Burcikova's research shows that, more than storytelling and craftsmanship, emotional durability of a garment arises from other, "often quite mundane concerns, for example, how easy it is to wash, if it needs ironing and how it combines with other things in the wardrobe" [11] (p. 299). Similarly, McIntyre notes how practicality is more important in the long term to sustain engagement. In her study, participants "may have been affected by certain garments—often dresses—and the dreams that were stuck to them, but when the affect had passed away they were left unused. Dresses made affective promises that the everyday demands of practical and wearable clothing could not sustain" [28] (p. 11).

In their own attempt to create uniqueness, large retailers offer the opportunity of co-creation in the form of mass customization as a way to engage people in a more meaningful relationship with clothes that were made-(to some extent)-to-measure [27]. But is it working? Irene Maldini et al. [29] conducted a study in which it became clear that these so-called "personalized clothes" do not fare any better than ready-made ones, neither in use frequency nor ownership longevity—and it definitely does not lead to fewer wearer-clothing love affairs. In fact, this same study questions the assumption that industry strategies towards the longevity of clothes can reduce further consumption, noting that "wardrobe inflow and outflow are fairly independent," meaning that the reasons for adding new items to the wardrobe are seldom related to the replacement of discarded garments: "New items are often bought without consideration of those already owned, and garments move to the back of the wardrobe because more attractive ones are coming in" [29] (p. 1422). As Valle-Noronha points out, a new garment that enters a wardrobe can expand the potential of other clothes through new and unexpected combinations, while it can suppress the importance of previous frequently used items [10]. All in all, current design strategies are failing to address wardrobe flows.

Even so, it is worth reframing the argument of Maldini and her colleagues: many items are added to our wardrobes not to consciously replace discarded items, but to fill a gap in our sartorial needs. However, there is only so much wear we can give our clothes—we are only one body, living through 24-h days and 7-day weeks, whether we own many or few clothes—thus, in fact, new items may not replace others in immediate wardrobe space, but they claim a share of our wear time, leading to a reduced use of other clothes that end up forgotten in the back of the drawer. If we were to further

enjoy the clothes we already own, we would not feel compelled to let others enter our life and occupy our wear time.

The key question remains: how can users develop a long-term relationship with their clothes? How can clothes pass the test of time in their owner's heart and active wardrobe? How can their worth last? One could argue that clothes with luxury features are more likely to survive: having a high quality, unique, and beautifully crafted jacket makes it an investment item, special and durable. But as fashion sustainability professor Kate Fletcher points out, "expending resources and effort to extend the lives of products pays few dividends unless the users of those pieces take advantage of the benefits provided by their longer life—the extra days—weeks—years of use they provide—and further acts to slow consumption of new items and reduce the totalised throughput of resources" [16] (p. 184). Durable features lead not to a longer service-life of clothes if the wearers opt to dispose of them too soon. Indeed, many donated clothes have hardly any wear marks or defects; they are deemed obsolete and end up discarded even before they look worn, and some are actually discarded without ever being used [30].

It is clear that longevity is not directly related with material or physical properties of an item, but rather from what Borjesson [31] identified as immaterial properties: even if a dress gets ripped at a seam due to low quality materials or manufacture, it may have other characteristics—immaterial reasons—that make it worth mending and thriving in our closet and our lives. Kate Fletcher's *Local Wisdom* research project notably illustrates how the long-term satisfying use of clothes is often motivated by emotional connections, thrift, and memories, not durability per se [9]. Rather than a motivation, durability is an outcome of use practices, hence what wearers choose to do with their clothes is what ultimately influences their lifespans [3].

Notice that purchasing clothes is no more than a choice—and rejection—of items based on the connections that may be created with the garments already owned, how these will assist in the construction of personal identities, and how they may fit in individual clothing practices of daily life [32]. In fact, when we relate fashion with novelty, it does not mean we are dependent on frequent new purchases to satisfy our desire for change. The endless combinations of the clothes already in our wardrobes can provide that same sense of innovation in every outfit—"fashion is not, therefore, in contradiction to the long-term relationships that people have to clothing" [32] (p. 133).

By observing the behaviours around the garments that are already owned, including the habits of wearing and taking care of clothes, we can get closer to understanding how sustainable patterns of production and consumption can emerge. As Fletcher observes, "garments which defy obsolescence do so in informal or unintentional ways, rarely as a result of design planning or material or product qualities. What we see instead is that extended, active use of fashion clothes emerges from strategies of human action and intention: that things last and continue to be used when people want them to" [16] (p. 183).

In sum, we keep garments longer in active use not because we want to increase their durability, but because we perceive them as "fit" for our lives. Durability is only a side effect of our continuous engagement with the clothes we own.

### 3.2. Wearers' Attachment to Clothes

The study of how people relate to clothes during the use phase emerged from the need to promote the extended use of garments already owned, as this can be a significant measure to reduce material throughput and waste [6,30,32]. While designers may adopt strategies to increase the durability of garments, that physical durability is dependent on the will and behaviour of the wearer to actually result in clothes longevity [3,6,15]. In other words, regardless of how well designed a piece may be, if the owner does not care for it, its fate is the landfill.

Thus, product attachment has become a crucial area of research to connect physical durability of clothes with the life that garments go through.

Ruth Mugge, an influential author researching on product attachment, defines it as "the strength of the emotional bond a consumer experiences with a specific product." [33] (p. 12) and distinguishes



it from product satisfaction by highlighting the special meaning that an item must convey beyond satisfactory utility to trigger said attachment. After all, satisfaction with how a new piece fits does not grant our attachment if there is nothing more to it.

Mugge's findings [33] show that we are prone to take better care of the products we are attached to, as well as being less likely to want to dispose of them, an idea that is echoed by Niinimäki in relation to clothing attachment [12]. We tend to handle with better care the clothes that are important to us and endeavour to extend their longevity, be it with careful laundering practices or with mending when necessary. It is this perception that some clothes need and deserve our attention that makes us carefully fold or hang some items away between uses, while others are carelessly thrown wherever after wearing.

In many occasions, not only may this attachment lead to an extended lifespan of the clothing item, but it could also contribute to less waste and resource throughput if it kept us from buying new items. However, the case for apparel attachment is not easy: for several reasons, many people keep clothes they feel attached to but no longer wear [28,34,35], which means new items are still bought to be worn, while others are left piling up at the back of the wardrobe, however special they may be.

The intricate question arises: how can attachment influence an extended active use?

It has been observed that people assign different types of value to objects that influence their regular use and commitment in caring practices [6,30,36]. How does this happen? Values are highly subjective and linked to our individual perceptions, so they relate to the qualities that each person sees in clothes. These values are reassessed with every meaningful interaction; they can exceed, meet, or fall short of the user's expectations for the garment on each occasion, influencing the wearer's behaviour towards that item from that moment on. As clothes move back and forward to occupy different spatial positions in our wardrobes and lives, "the meanings and values attributed to clothes are also in flux" [34] (p. 32).

Thus, it is clear that our affection for products is influenced by the interactions that we have with them through time [26,33,36]. Valle-Noronha reinforces the importance of time for the development of strong relationships between wearers and clothes, and identifies wear and care (washing, ironing) as moments when the wearer can gain more knowledge about the item, which can range from a physical level (i.e., how the garment is constructed) to a perception level (i.e., the importance and potential the garment has in the wearer's experience with the outside world) [10]. This view is aligned with Hazel Clark's "slow" approach to fashion, in which users can move away from experiencing fashion solely through the act of consumption and begin to truly appreciate clothing as they take the time to get to know and like—and unveil the potentials of—the clothes they own [37]. Notably, Valle-Noronha speaks of the importance of time to allow wearers to regain the missing agency [28,38] in their relationship with clothes; that is, to overcome the seemingly "closed" nature of mass-produced garments that undermines user engagement in alterations and personalization [6,10,39]. Time and interaction may confer wearers with intimate knowledge about their clothes and confidence to undertake new explorations, adjusting to personal needs and attempting repairs.

Ultimately, it is worth emphasizing that product attachment is not an end goal we achieve as a guarantee for longevity. On the contrary, it is a dynamic state which develops and evolves, and while it can often endure, it can also be short-lived [15,33]. As stated in the beginning of this paper, we can fall out of love with clothes as quickly as we fell in love with them in the first place. To better understand the complexities of women's emotions regarding clothes, Burcikova echoes Woodward [34] and Niinimäki [12] to define four areas of influence: (1) sensory experiences, related to the perception women have of their clothes through multiple senses; (2) enablers, related to the way clothes enable women to lead the lives they live, concerning practicality and appropriateness; (3) longing and belonging, related to the personal histories, memories and family ties that often influence women's wardrobe choices; and (4) layering, highlighting that clothes do not have a linear lifespan, and instead have ups and downs in different phases of women's lives [11].

While many studies focus on the relation between users and clothes, important insights may rise when we fully accept wearer–garment connections as relationships. Many authors use the words *relation* and *relationship* interchangeably when exploring our connections to clothing, thus it is important to clarify that the use of *relationship* in this argument implies a direct comparison to interpersonal love relationships.

“Relationship with clothes?”, one may ask, “like relationships between people?” To some extent, yes. The way we relate to objects is as complex and unstable as the way we do with other people; in both cases, mutual evolution and a “symbiotic exchange of reliance and need” [15] (p. 81) are important to the lifespan of the relationship. As Burcikova points out, “our relationship to clothing needs to be an investment from both sides” [11] (p. 305). How does that happen with an inanimate object?

In the following sections, we will attempt to provide a perspective on this phenomenon and will be using some testimonies from the book *Women in Clothes* to illustrate our views.

### 3.3. Wearers’ Relationship with Clothes

In his book *Emotional Design*, Don Norman tells us that “emotion is the conscious experience of affect, complete with attribution of its cause and identification of its object” [26] (p. 11). Affect—which results from the capability of affecting and being affected during interaction with someone or something—is the condition from which emotions emerge [28].

Acknowledging the difference between *affect* and *emotion* is important to understand the relationships we nurture with clothes. Ruggerone argues that, in many studies on the subject, the body is seen as a passive element, a possession of the mind, which controls, shapes, and dresses as it finds suitable to convey a certain identity and express a specific personality [40]. However, we need to recognise the affective capabilities of the body and what the body can do and become through the encounters with other bodies (human or not)—more importantly, we need to recognise that the mind cannot control these embodied encounters, it can only receive signs of the body affecting and being affected by the interactions with other bodies. “The outcomes of these encounters are variations ( . . . ) that may be positive (or healthy) or negative (or unhealthy) and will surface in [the wearer’s] consciousness as different types of emotion” [40] (p. 584).

As Ruggerone explains, a woman can find a dress beautiful and create expectations as to how it is going to fit and the possibilities it can unlock in her life, but she cannot actually foresee the result of the act of dressing. The mind cannot anticipate the bodily encounter. Affect, or what directly results from the interaction of the body with the dress, unfolds at a pre-cognitive level. Only after the physical encounter can the woman sense whether it is the right or wrong choice. As the woman puts the dress on, she may find it does not fit her body and cease to like it. We could say that the dress is not suitable for her. A different perspective tells us that the body does not fit the dress, so the woman is not suitable for that clothing item. It is important to note that this judgement is situational: in the future, the encounter between body and dress may be fruitful (e.g., as the woman finds herself free of a bloated stomach), and the effect of that encounter will be consciously perceived as a positive emotion. “The affects produced in the situation stir up some deep, pre-cognitive feelings that only become describable emotions if and to the extent they surface in the conscience and are thus re-appropriated by language and culture” [40] (p. 585).

Emotions that underpin human relationships appear to have a similar role in the way we relate to clothes. When prompted to think about it, people tend to describe their relationships with clothes with emotionally charged language:

*There is something about the fit of a one-piece swimsuit—the way it hugs the stomach, hips, groin, and heart—that is akin to swaddling. I feel safe in a swimsuit, like nothing is going to fall out or get out of control . . .* —Lenae (p. 277).

Norman elaborates on how attribution of cause and identification of object influences the emotions that surface from the affecting encounter: hope and anxiety—the expectation of something positive or

negative, respectively—can transform in remarkably different emotions depending on the outcome and the perceived cause for that outcome. First, a positive outcome will transform anxiety in relief, while a negative one will turn hope into disappointment. But then, if we attribute a cause, emotions evolve differently: a positive result caused by us will trigger pride, while the same result credited to someone else triggers gratitude. A negative result, on the other hand, when blamed on us will result in shame or remorse, while if it is blamed on someone else it will trigger anger or reproach [26].

Notice how we tend to have feelings towards and attribute responsibilities to everyday objects such as clothes, as if they were humans. We recognise their agency, as we see clothes being capable of enabling, forcing, confronting and betraying us [34]. In her book *Why Women Wear What They Wear*, Woodward notes how the clothes that a participant gathered as an outfit “articulate together in such a way as to impede her own intentions and create unwanted effects” [34] (p. 70). Our emotions emerge from the affect that results from our interaction with clothes: we are delighted with the dress that earned us a nice compliment on a first date; we get frustrated with our outfit when a bouncer denies our entrance at the club; if a garment helps us blend in our new school, we are pleased with it, we praise it and we know we can count on it for further occasions; if, on the contrary, a garment fails to help us impress a prospective employer, we get disappointed and are unlikely to count on it for future interviews.

As Guy et al. argue, “we should be able to ‘get to know’ our clothes and be able to predict how they will behave. Personal experience, however, tells us that clothes often have minds of their own and seem to enjoy deliberately or mischievously thwarting our intentions. We have remembered to iron our ‘best’ dress and put it away carefully, so why, on an evening when we really need it, does it come out of the wardrobe looking like a rag?” [41] (pp. 3–4).

Our behaviour towards clothes, what we expect from them and how we retrospectively reassess our experiences with them—and how, in turn, that changes our expectations and behaviour towards those clothes—is very similar to what we do in our interpersonal relationships.

#### 4. The Things That Our Love for Clothes Is Made of

##### 4.1. The Components of Wearer–Clothing Relationships

On the less satisfying end of the spectrum of these relationships, we come across clothes which we immediately think are us, only to find they neither fit nor flatter in the changing room, a bit like that person who appeared to be likeminded but turned out to be on the opposite wavelength as soon as you started chatting. Other clothes we take home, and they fail us on the first wear or wash, like a first date that goes terribly wrong. There are even those we keep holding on to so dearly year after year, however unreliable they prove to be. Some clothes are offered and never really get a chance to be worn, like that blind date a friend was so excited to arrange and we promptly managed to avoid:

*Once my dad gave me this very furry Elmo-ish red chenille sweater. It was hideous, but I knew he had tried, and when I opened the box, I just cried because it was so ugly and I felt so bad for hating it.*  
—Ariel (p. 480).

On the more satisfying end of the relationship spectrum, we own clothes that we use all the time. We remember when we first saw them and how we “fell in love.” We keep reaching out for them because they never fail us. We rely on them to go out and help us be the best version of ourselves. We feel betrayed the day a seam breaks on our way to work; we feel hopeless when a stain survives the washing; we feel sad in the morning when we are confronted with a zipper that refuses to close on our fuller waist; we feel the rug pulled from under our feet when our favourite item is suddenly unwearable:

*Once I needed a new coat and [my sister and I] went out together and she helped me find a good one. It was the most expensive item I ever bought, \$130, on the sale rack at Macy’s. I wore this wool coat every winter day for years and, maybe this is lame, I cried when it got moth holes.* —Mairead (p. 287).



Our interactions with clothes generate feelings that influence how much we want to care for them, and for how long we want to keep them in our lives. They make us go that extra mile to learn how to reinforce a seam, or try a trick to take away the stubborn stain. We wear them despite the threadbare elbows, because even with a top layer we can still sport that collar that perfectly frames our face. When, on the other hand, our relationship with a garment goes wrong (or never really started quite right) our attitude towards that garment becomes undermined and we raise our awareness of existing alternatives that can provide the comfort, security, and excitement we seek in our lives:

*I finally bought a new winter coat, after six years of wearing my old one. I found the old coat in a lost-and-found bin at a fancy restaurant where I worked as a hostess, and I spent weeks painstakingly altering it to meet the standards I had for beauty (sewing patches of floral silk onto the edges, painting a pattern with acrylics onto the back, even trimming the fur hood with mink pelts, and sewing in small jewels in geometric patterns). Over the years, I stopped feeling that these adornments had anything to do with me, and every time I put on the coat I kind of cringed, though I could barely admit to betraying my former self. —Sasha (pp. 250–251).*

Despite the intimacy Sasha developed with her old coat by altering it to her aesthetic standards in the beginning of the relationship, when the adornments ceased to meet her changed standards, she decided to buy a new coat instead of undertaking further changes in the old one, possibly as it would imply a much longer confrontation with the feeling of “betraying her former self.”

So, what makes us keep our clothes for longer? What makes us care? Can a long-term relationship with our clothes be actively nurtured?

Mugge finds a parallel in interpersonal attachment literature to define the main function of experiencing attachment: we tend to feel attached to a person who helps us satisfy our psychological need for autonomy—feeling free to be ourselves—, relatedness—feeling connected and taken care of—and competence—feeling curious and challenged [33]. However, talking about the “function of experiencing attachment” is focusing on an underlying purpose of something for which there is no reasoning, as attachment is clearly related to emotion.

Further to this point, Beatriz Russo drew from theories of love to find that person–object relationships can be compared to interpersonal loving relationships in the sense that in both, people will experience similar “rewarding thoughts, feelings and behaviours” [13] (p. 38). Experiencing love results from the balance of three components: intimacy, passion and commitment, as identified by Sternberg in his *Triangular Theory of Love* [42]. Russo found these components of love in several users’ relationships with varied objects, and we can also find them in our relationship with clothes:

*I once found this little girl’s dress, and having fallen in love with it, I took it to a seamstress who has a shop in Kensington Market ( . . . ). I had fabric added to it so I could fit into it. Years later, when I weighed less and lived in Buenos Aires, I took it to a costurera from Armenia ( . . . ) and had some fabric removed. It goes without saying that it’s my favorite dress. —Clare (p. 251).*

Clare’s testimony is an example of the three components at play: passion made her buy the dress she fell in love with, even though it was the wrong size. Committed to wearing it, she had it altered. The dress is still around “years later,” labelled as her favourite, and it was altered again, which shows signs of the intimacy built over the years that made it worth to invest in re-adapting it to Clare’s new body shape so as to maintain the relationship. It is worth analysing the components individually.

Passion refers to what drives the romance, the physical attraction, the need to be with and feel close to the loved one [42]. It tends to be more intense than other components, as well as more sensuous, or what Burcikova [11] defined as a sensory experience.

*When I got home I washed the dress, then put it straight back on. I wore it the next day to get an ice cream with a friend. And the day after that, to a show in Brooklyn and a late dinner. On both of these occasions I felt good. The good of knowing I had on something that was attractive to me. —Leanne (p. 434).*

Passion tends to play an important part in the early stages of a relationship, sometimes referred to as the “honeymoon period,” but passion alone cannot support a promising future. The amount of textile waste we produce every day is an obvious sign that we “have become serial honeymooners, and today subject-object relationships are less marriage, more one-night stand” [15] (p. 74). This further supports the argument that attachment cannot be seen as a goal to reach through special features in objects, but a bond that needs to flourish and will evolve over time.

Intimacy refers to feelings of being bonded and connected with the loved one, of trust and understanding. It also includes the feeling of being emotionally supported and taken care of (to count on not being let down); intimacy promotes the desire to take care of the loved one and to spend time experiencing happiness together; and to give back the care and support the other one may need, as his/her presence in one’s life is highly valued [42].

*When I opened the box and saw Dress 3 staring up at me, tears came into my eyes. ( . . . ) I wore it everywhere, at least three days a week. And when I finally started dating, I wore it for dates. I was wearing it when I ran into my ex and his new girlfriend. I was wearing it when I had my first kiss with the guy to whom I would later become engaged, and also when I first met his family. It never failed me. —Sadie (p. 60).*

Intimacy takes time to develop and it is a component of love that needs regular nourishment (i.e., interaction), but also the one that is detrimental for a long-term bond.

*People say, “I love your shirt.” I thank them and sometimes proudly add, “I made it myself.” Ten years on, it’s still the best-loved thing in my wardrobe. It’s my go-to for formal and semiformal events, costume parties, and on days when everything about my body screams wrongness. When I made it, I had no idea how important it would become. —Hel (p. 250).*

While we can see the making of a garment as a work of love and dedication, Hel’s account tells us that, in the beginning of the relationship with her shirt, she could not predict how intimacy would grow and evolve. The use through time was the ultimate enabler of such a long relationship.

In her book *Craft of Use: Post-Growth Fashion*, Kate Fletcher shares the tale of the “Three stage Jacket” [16] (p. 108) that had been used for around forty years. In that time period, the jacket (which started as a waistcoat) went through several alterations, so as to evolve and keep up with the wearer’s changing body and life habits. Mending and altering contributes to the intimacy component of the relationship, as the wearer is taking care of the garment, so that the garment can keep on taking care of the wearer.

Last but not least, there is commitment, which refers to the long-term investment in the relationship. Firstly, it is about making the decision to establish a relationship.

*A week and a half later, after thinking about the dress in an abstract way on a regular basis, I ( . . . ) bought it. —Leanne (p. 434).*

Many people decide to establish a relationship on the act of purchase. They weigh the potential of the item in their future lives, both alone and in addition to other clothes already own, but they also weigh the investment needed for maintenance versus the one they are willing to make; a person may steer away from “hand-wash only” items due to lack of time for such tasks, or avoid “dry clean only” clothes as there are no professional cleaning services nearby. However, many purchases are made on impulse and the commitment level in these cases is very low.

Further down the road, commitment may be strengthened and it is about the willingness to maintain the relationship:

*By this time [fifth day of possession and wear] the dress felt like part of me. I’d forgotten about it, which I took to be a sign of its true integration into my wardrobe. —Leanne (p. 438).*

Before the proliferation of cheap clothing during the second half of the twentieth century, commitment to maintain a relationship with clothes was mainly led by financial reasons: clothes were an expensive commodity. Loved or not, they had to be well kept to last for a very long time so as to avoid the burden of acquiring new clothes. Similarly, many loveless marriages have stood the test of time due to financial issues. Even now, we may feel more inclined to maintain a relationship with an expensive garment that has been bought as an investment piece. However, clothes can be so cheap that, in many cases, their financial cost to the wearer is unlikely to increase commitment. In the end, it is the balance of passion, intimacy, and commitment that affect the relationship through time [42].

Woodward observed in her ethnographic research how a participant talked about a petrol-blue silk shirt she had had for almost twenty years: “she strokes it fondly, telling me how it brings back so many memories ( . . . ) she remembers the excitement she felt at buying it ( . . . ) how the soft fabric caressed her skin” [34] (p. 55) and stroked her body in movement. She still loved the shirt but rarely wore it now, as it was ripped and torn due to intense use and she was afraid it would fall apart completely [34]. This account of a long-term relationship reveals a strong presence of passion in the sensuous experience and long-lasting feeling of love, intimacy in the memories it holds throughout the life they had together, and commitment, not only in wearing the item for almost twenty years but also in rarely wearing it now so as to avoid the end of the relationship with the full disintegration of the garment.

#### 4.2. The Dynamics of Wearer–Clothing Relationships

In her doctoral research, Russo [13] showed that the relationships between person and object change and develop over time and depend on continual interaction, as recognised by other authors on product attachment [15,26,33] and specifically on wearer–clothing relationships [10–12]. On a superficial level, we can understand that these changes in the relationship result from changes in the item, changes in the owner, or changes in the context [33].

Russo goes deeper in her analysis and suggests that these relationship dynamics are due to the outcomes of two evaluation processes that occur during person–object “relationship events” through time. On the moment of interaction, affect occurs and translates into our consciousness as emotions [40], and a first appraisal of the product unfolds: have the factual or perceived qualities of the item changed with the interaction? How do they compare with the expectations the person has for the product qualities that grant them a rewarding experience? This first assessment “can result in a positive or negative affective experience, depending on what happens during the interaction and how the interaction changes the product or the person’s perception of the product” [13] (p. 141). When this evaluation results in a positive outcome, the person–object interaction is rewarding and strengthens one or more components of love: intimacy, passion, and commitment, as we previously discussed. This in turn contributes to a long-lasting relationship:

*The first time I wore it [my favourite dress], I interviewed one of my musical heroes, and he complimented both the interview and the dress. Another time I wore it the first time I was in the same room as a guy I ended up dating. Later he recognized me because of the dress . . . —Miranda (p. 328).*

From Miranda’s account, we can recognise that these experiences with her dress were rewarding and contributed to the longevity of the relationship. If, on the other hand, the evaluation results in a negative outcome, the person can cope with the negative experience by “fixing the problem that caused the negative effect” or by “adjusting the importance of that product quality to fit their standards of love” [13] (p. 127), but this implies an evaluation of their willingness to do so. Thus, a second assessment occurs: can the product keep providing a rewarding experience through other qualities in the future? If so, the mechanisms with which a person can cope with the negative experience can end up resulting in a positive experience and strengthen the relationship:

*I had a yellow sundress in my late teens that I wore every warm New England day for probably three years. I remember going on a very long bike ride to a friend’s wedding in a park and collapsing on*

*the ground when I finally arrived. I landed under a tree that shed staining berries, and later spent hours sewing heart-shaped patches of silk onto every smudge since I didn't know how to do laundry effectively. I was in a band then, and in every picture I have of our summer tour, I'm wearing that dress. —Sasha (p. 148).*

In this report, we understand that Sasha was able to cope with the negative experience of having stained the dress by sewing patches on it. This enabled her to strengthen and extend the relationship with the dress, which was worn frequently throughout her band's summer tour.

However, as happens with interpersonal love, it is the succession of negative experiences and consequent assessments that, sooner or later, makes a person reduce efforts to maintain the relationship:

*Last week, I gave so many clothes away to my maid for her daughters as I couldn't afford to just look at them sitting unused in my closet, making me feel miserable and helpless and without any control over the basic right and freedom to wear what I want, when I want. —Farah (p. 427).*

On the dynamics of person–object relationships, Russo [13] draws a parallel to the five phases that Levinger identified in interpersonal love—attraction, building, continuation, deterioration and ending—to identify the ups and downs of the way we relate with objects. We can also recognise them in wearer–clothing relationships:

In the attraction phase, we encounter a garment that we feel physically attracted to based on its appearance and how we perceive it may fit our needs. Our first emotional response—or judgement—will naturally be dictated by prior sartorial experiences and cultural background, which comprises our collective experience [15]. Attraction is very much dependent on the passion component, but passion alone is often not enough to sustain a relationship. In McIntyre's study, participants passionately justified their purchases with “not being able to resist,” “I had to,” and “I fell in love.” However, “once the affect has dissipated, ( ... ) certain pieces of clothing were left hanging in the wardrobe, bereft of any use value” [28] (p. 11).

In many cases, wearers begin their relationship with clothes before purchase, as the interaction may start visually with shop windows, magazines, advertisements, online browsing, and even when one sees passers-by:

*I saw a dress on a woman at a party and wanted it for myself. It was a long, printed dress. It looked comfortable and light and cool and inscrutably chic. ( ... ) I did something that surprised me: I leaned down and picked up the edge of her skirt and touched it, marvelling aloud at the light, smooth fabric. I have never touched another woman's dress like that before ( ... ) I never had that grasping, clutching impulse. —Leanne (p. 433).*

If the encounter takes place at a physical shop, we can try the garment on to further assess its potential to fit our lives before committing and buying. Woodward recalls a story in her study of a participant who went shopping with her father and was coerced to try on a greenish grey trouser suit: “Contrary to her expectations, she loved the shape of it ( ... ) her lacklustre trying on of the item was confounded by the flattering shape on her body ( ... ) when she first tried it on, it transformed her ( ... ) Once her dad saw her in it and saw the optimism it had invigorated, he bought it for her” [34] (p. 63). No wonder that hassle-free returns have become crucial for fashion e-commerce to thrive, as online buying does not entail the same commitment as physical shopping, only a bigger expectation on the first date.

What follows is a phase that is dependent on passion and excitement that comes with novelty to turn frequent interactions into growing intimacy: the building stage is where a safe foundation for the relationship needs to be developed. Sometimes the relationship starts with very low levels of passion, which develops a bit later:

*Gill gave me this suit because it didn't fit her anymore. The skirt was really long, grandma-y, and actually I didn't like it that much, but when I tried it on I thought I looked good in it and I liked it and have actually worn it quite a lot. —Pamela (pp. 317–318).*

Pamela was able to establish a stronger bond with the item she received by trying it on despite the initial negative experience (visual perception). This experience led to many further interactions.

However, it can also happen that no common ground is formed between the wearer and the clothing item beyond the excitement of the first date, leading to a quick deterioration and end of the relationship at the first conflict:

*Here's some Celine jeans that I wanted so badly and I thought they looked great in the dressing room, but I've just never liked how they looked. —Kerry (p. 95).*

If the building phase is successful, our attachment has grown into something worth sustaining. Commitment also grows, as we feel the reward we receive from that relationship are greater than the costs. The relationship then moves into the continuation phase, with regular interactions that allow for intimacy to evolve [13].

*My grandmother gave me cashmere sweaters from Costco. In college, I would wear them every Friday, when I was most tired, because they were so comfortable, yet they would still make me feel put-together and sophisticated. —Catherine (p. 147).*

*I had this dress the way I liked it, and when I would go to get dressed, over and over again it was what I wanted to wear. And over the next five, six, ten years, this was the go-to dress that made me feel so comfortable I never had to think about how I was going to look or what to wear with it. —Michele (p. 407).*

In both Catherine's and Michele's testimonies, we can discern that regular positive interactions strengthened the intimacy and brought a comforting reliance to the relationship with their clothes.

During this phase, the relationship can also go through difficult moments, experiences that are somewhat negative (e.g., the garment gets damaged, the wearer goes through weight fluctuations, the context is no longer adequate for such clothes), and it is the subconscious assessment of the experience that influences the future of the relationship: if the wearer feels that rewards are still greater than costs, or that future rewards can compensate for current costs, commitment is strengthened and the negative experiences are overcome [13]:

*I wore the dress every chance I got. I wore it to parties and lectures—whenever I need to feel pretty or adult or confident. ( ... ) Being cheap, the dress soon showed the effects of wear, and its sleek lines were marred by the lumpy proof of my inexpert repairs. But its magic, to me, remained undimmed. —Sadie (p. 59).*

In her research, Woodward describes different accounts that equally represent wearer–clothing relationships in the continuation stage: one of her interviewees owns a loose long-sleeved cotton top that was given to her when she was sixteen and that she wears every summer on cooler days. “Having worn the top frequently every summer for the last thirty-five years, the fabric has softened, and the colours have faded through exposure to light and persistent washing” [34] (p. 75), clearly showing signs of their long life together. Another participant shares the story of a linen long-sleeve jacket from her working days in the 1980s. She “used to love wearing it to the office because it is relatively loose and ‘doesn’t hug my body too tightly,’” but “it is not suitable for her current lifestyle, at home with the children” [34] (p. 57). However, the intimacy that grew with the item gave her agency to overcome the “down” moment of the relationship by altering the jacket (unpicking the shoulder pads) so as to make it suitable for her new lifestyle, a commitment to keeping the jacket actively present in her life. Similarly, Fletcher's *Local Wisdom* project collected several testimonies that show how the agency wearers gain over time can contribute to overcome the lows of a relationship with their clothes: one example is the case of the girl who bought a sweater she did not know how to use due to it having mother-of-pearl buttons, “but after some years I changed the buttons I knew suddenly how to mix it with different things, how to use it and now I am really happy about it” [16] (p. 96).



If, by contrast, the reassessment of negative experiences results in the feeling—actually, judgement—that costs are greater than rewards, the efforts to commit to the relationship start to decrease, and we enter the deterioration phase. Deterioration can be gradual, for instance, if there is an attempt to overcome the negative experience that unfortunately falls short.

*I had a lovely green batik silk dress with puffy sleeves and a black trim that I paid a bit for. I was once at a party where there was a lot of dancing and I was being thrown around the dance floor and one of the sleeves ripped off. I tried to make it a strapless number by removing both sleeves, but the dress was never quite the same. —Tishani (p. 149).*

Deterioration can also be sudden, when an abrupt negative event makes the relationship almost unredeemable. This will be more prone to happen if there is not enough prior interaction that enabled intimacy to be forged into the relationship:

*That one I bought in a market in Italy. ( . . . ) I wore it once. It's got horses on it, so I wore it when I went to an evening that was about horses—about horse racing. I've never wore it since, because another friend said, 'Oh, you can wear that when you're ninety.' That put me off. —Pamela (p. 317).*

Woodward's work reveals that many kept but unworn garments fall into this relationship phase. Frequently because of lifestyle changes (i.e., from a clubbing girl to a married woman, from an office worker to a stay-at-home mother), women cease to use certain garments, but still keep them in the wardrobe, either because they do not wish to part with the memories of their former selves or because they wish to revive the relationship sometime in the future, such as the participant who moved in with her parents and stopped wearing clothes they disliked, only hoping to wear them again upon moving to her own house [34].

In this view, kept but unworn clothing can fall into two categories. The first concerns clothes to which owners feel emotionally attached despite the lack of practical use; one may not envision a future use for a wedding dress or family baby clothes, but these are kept as “carriers of affects” [28]. In these cases, the relationship has ended, and clothes have become solely memory holders which, due to their materiality, are more vivid than photographs. The second category concerns clothes that relate to former identities (e.g., of a business person or a leaner person) and clothes that were bought but never got the occasion to be worn. These are kept as there is potential for the relationship to be rekindled. In these cases, the relationship has deteriorated but it is not yet lost.

The potential futures we perceive [12] have a very strong influence in the ups and downs of our relationship with clothes, which may confer them the non-linear lifespan that both Woodward [34] and Burcikova [11] recognise in their work. A person that has gained weight frequently keeps old clothes in the hope to fit in them again in the future; the relationship enters the deterioration phase with the wearer realising that body and garment no longer match. However, if the wearer sees the potential qualities of the garment in the future—e.g., being fit for their future body—the relationship does not end, and the wearer will keep those clothes in the hope to save the relationship in time. On the contrary, a person who has lost weight is more likely to throw out clothes from when they were heavier as a means of not being so vividly confronted with the reality that once they had a body weight that did not correspond to their ideals. As they do not see themselves being heavier again in the future, they do not see any future potential in the relationship with larger clothes.

Finally, as we can witness in our life with people and clothes, all relationships eventually come to an ending. In interpersonal relationships, one of the elements of the couple may decide to break up, or an external factor, such as the death of a partner, may be the cause of ending. In wearer–clothing relationships, the wearer may decide to end the relationship when its costs are seen as greater than the rewards due to an accumulation of negative experiences and failed attempts to restore the relationship, or a single and abrupt negative event:

*Dress 2, in short, made me feel like a million bucks. Then one day my boss showed up at work and, after casually saying “I have a new dress”, removed her coat to reveal ... Dress 2. Albeit on a taller and more stunning frame. I was dumbfounded and hurt. I retired Dress 2 and got another job.—Sadie (p. 59).*

From the perspective that clothes build the wearer’s past, present, and future biographies (with past memories and future expectations), Woodward points out that if clothing fails to contribute to the construction women wish for their biography, “the only available option is to throw the item away. If kept, clothing confronts the person with things they may otherwise have wished to forget” [34] (p. 52) only contributing to accumulate negative experiences:

*I bought this beautiful dress once, hoping to wear it for a special occasion with the person I loved, but then he stopped loving me before we had an occasion to go to. Every time I opened the closet and I saw this dress, I was reminded that I wasn’t loved and the occasion I was waiting for never happened. So I threw it away. —Souvankham (p. 319).*

Note that wearer–clothing relationships can also end due to external factors, such as when we lose an item. In these cases, the end of the relationship may be painful to the wearer:

*I had this embroidered purple shawl that my mother bought me on a trip to Copper Canyon, Mexico. An old roommate borrowed it without asking, and later admitted that it had been stolen at a bar. ( ... ) It had been an accident, but I felt sorry for myself. I would have liked to participate in the item’s fate. At the very least, I wanted to be the person who lost it. —Elena (p. 493).*

*When I was six or seven I had this Batman outfit and I would wear these black high-heeled boots that my mother didn’t wear anymore. I adored them.( ... ) Then one day I couldn’t find them and my mom told me she had thrown them out and it broke my heart. —Sherwin (p. 155).*

In human loving relationships, interest in another person can contribute to the deterioration and ending of a relationship. Similarly, interest in other clothes that fill our wear time also play a part in the decline and ending of current relationships, as we lose the interaction that nurtures the components of love.

#### 4.3. The Dimensions of Wearer–Clothing Relationship Experiences

Through Russo’s findings we were able to recognise, on a broader sense, the dynamics of wearer–clothing relationships and how they resemble the several stages that interpersonal love relationships go through. On a second level, we were able to understand the process that occurs during each meaningful experience. When analysed individually, these “relationship events” may seem unimportant, but each of them contributes and further shapes that relationship through time [15], for better or for worse. On yet another level, we can begin to identify what seems to be three tightly connected dimensions that make up the relationships we develop with our clothes: Interaction, Perception, and Emotion.

##### 4.3.1. Interaction

Interaction is clear to discern, as it relates to the physical/sensorial experiences we have with clothing, which in time allow for meaning to build up; this happens mostly through our sense of touch. We try a garment on for the first time and decide whether we put it back on the rack or buy it—or, considering an online purchase, we decide to keep what we bought or decide to return it to undo the poor match. After passing the first test, clothes are subject to several physical contacts that include picking up, putting on, wearing, taking off to the laundry pile, washing, putting to dry, ironing, sorting, and storing. But notice how other senses such as vision and smell play an important role in feeding our brain the emotional stimulus of this relationship. We look at clothes before choosing to act further on them, be it the first or the 100th time. We like the smell of fresh clothes and will

proactively steer away from that synthetic t-shirt that will begin to stink half-way through our gym class. As Woodward points out, “this sensual relationship to items of clothing means that often women are unable to verbalize why it is that they love an item of clothing so much” [34] (p. 32). While we can expect a specific outcome from an interaction, our mind cannot foresee the affect that results from that interaction. The evaluation process of the relationship event occurs as affect translates into emotions. Thus, interaction refers to moments of affect.

#### 4.3.2. Perception

We have seen that clothes are more than physical items we interact with. Clothes are expressions of ourselves; they are memory holders, charged with feelings, full of symbolic meaning [26,34,43]:

*There was this peachy sweatshirt I adored ( . . . ) it was comfortable and worn. It was a gift from my mom’s friend Terry. She was so cool, and that coolness extended to this sweatshirt.*—Allison (p. 148).

If a product holds so much of a person’s happiness, chances are that the object will be cherished and well kept, as discarding it would mean discarding the “happiness trigger” and the memory that is attached to it, and a sense of emotional loss would take over [28,43].

However, it is important to note that this psychological component is not something that can be designed into clothes, as the special meaning any garment may have will be always in the eyes and mind of the beholder—or the holder, for that matter. Who would say that a blue silk dress has been bringing the fond memory of walks in the park in the early Spring ever since it was shipped out of the factory? “Clothing acquires its significance as worn on the body” [34] (p. 25). Clothes are bound to become expressions of ourselves; to become memory holders, whether they are good or not; they are prone to be charged with positive or negative feelings and bound to become symbols from the moment we start relating to them, from a transient look at a shopping window to an enduring companionship. “Personal experiences and emotional meanings complete the image of the object whose appearance and functions are but initial cues as to their broader meaning” [44] (p. 79).

*After I finished my first marathon in 2000, I wore the finisher t-shirt as a nightshirt for about a month. I rediscovered the shirt in August as I was training for my tenth marathon, which also was my first one in five years. I wore it to sleep every night for about a month before the marathon, to remember that first one and to inspire and psych up myself.* —Himanee (p. 133).

The finisher t-shirt only gained importance after Himanee concluded the marathon, as it became a symbol and physical memory of the accomplishment. The positive charge of the t-shirt was then used as inspiration for upcoming challenges. In essence, the more we interact with our clothes—the more we live with them—the more the chances are of meaningful events to get embedded in them and the more stories they get a chance to hold. As Norman explains, “long-lasting emotional feelings take time to develop: they come from sustained interaction. ( . . . ) what matters is the history of interaction, the associations that people have with the objects, and the memories they evoke” [26] (p. 46).

To put it simply, it is the continual interaction that allows for positive experiences to build up, for expectations to settle, and for the relationship to strengthen.

While it is relevant to address the symbolic component—or values—of clothes, it is important to consider that this only results from the individual perception that we have of the garments we relate to, which leads us to suggest it as another dimension of people’s relationship with clothes. When we refer to value in clothes, it is our perception of value in clothes. We do not mean factual qualities: it is not about whether that jacket is mid-length and made of a thin yellow cotton twill; we are talking about the perceived qualities of those clothes and the expectations we create as we perceive those qualities—how that jacket is beautiful and fresh and perfect to go out with friends on a breezy summer night.

Perceived value and constructed expectations appear from the start of the relationship with clothing, from the moment we are deciding whether to buy it or not—will it be suitable in predicted types of occasions? Warm enough for winter holidays, professional enough for the job interview,

classy enough for a night out? Every time we restart the cycle of wearing: will it be suitable for a new occasion? Cool enough for a party with college friends? Modest enough for this first date? Formal enough for that business meeting? Will it still fit after pregnancy? Of course, we must equally consider the meaning that derives from social circles. Depending on our context, we look at a tailored suit and may see responsibility and reliability; we look at a generously low neckline dress and may see sexiness. Those perceived characteristics derive from a collective experience with those generic types of garments. That is why we will be prone to feel serious in a suit and sexy in a low neckline dress. But imagine we receive a negative comment on our dress: we may cease to see any sexiness in the dress, or any capability of it to provide us with a sexy aura when we desire to. Therefore, it is important to note that our continued interactions with clothes do not necessarily lead to an accumulation of values, as these values and meanings that we individually attribute to our clothes also change over time [34].

In sum, our perception of clothes exists previous to any interaction, concerning what our mind envisions, and this influences the interaction; however, as affect is out of the mind's control [40], it is only considered and assessed after it occurs. Thus, interactive experiences (or moments of affect) change perception. Both are dimensions of our relationship with clothes that influence each other through the third dimension of this relationship: emotion.

#### 4.3.3. Emotion

While researching on emotion and industrial design, professor of psychology Gerald Cupchik argued that “emotional processes involved in generating and using industrial design objects ( . . . ) begin with an initial impression of the object [perception], continue through actual experiences utilizing it [interaction], and culminate with degrees of emotional attachment to it” [44] (p. 75). What we do and what we think influences our emotions. Emotions, in turn, influence the way we think and how we act [26]. Thus, emotion emerges as the third dimension of wearer–clothing relationships: shaping and being shaped by interaction and perception. Emotion is what emerges from affect (interaction) coupled with our previous expectations (perception), resulting in feelings that further influence our future expectations and interactions. It relates to how we feel towards our clothes on every interaction—how we fall in love at first sight and feel let down with a missing button on an important day—; how those feelings evolve over time; how our clothes become memory holders and how they become meaningful to our lives.

Going back to Russo's findings on how meaningful events occur, we can recognise these three relationship dimensions at play: the *interaction* itself; our *perception* of the qualities of the product (which comprises what we perceive before and after interaction); and our *emotion*, which is the translation of “the confused embodied feelings we perceive into a code of communication that at the same time expresses and rationalizes the affections produced by the live encounters between bodies” [40] (p.584), enabling us to judge whether we just had a good or a bad experience with the item. These appear to be the basic structural elements of the experiences that build love (or attachment) in our relationships with clothes.

## 5. Discussion

The way we connect with clothes is more emotional than we might have guessed. Analysing it from the perspective of an interpersonal relationship reveals how similar our relationships with clothes are to the ones we have with people [13]. Such a bond goes beyond the satisfaction with the item's utilitarian performance [33]: we need to nourish passion and develop intimacy, which requires continued interaction. This demands commitment, as we would dedicate to a loving relationship. After all, clothes have agency of their own; they are no more suitable for the wearer's body as the wearer's body is suitable to them. As Guy et al. observe,

*The unpredictability of clothes, the ways in which they misbehave, sometimes in collusion with our bodies, continually surprises us. We cannot take their ‘performance’ for granted; we need to build a*

*robust relationship with them, get to know them well and understand their eccentricities. And, as in all relationships, we need to work at it. Building up a reliable set of clothes involves expending not just money and time but real energy and almost an emotional commitment* [41] (p. 4).

As objects of our love, clothes are challenging to deal with from an academic point of view. If we think of other objects, such as a sofa or an appliance (say, a coffee machine), the relationship is more straightforward. People have one or two coffee machines, one or two sofas. We may own fifteen coffee machines and sofas throughout our lives, but our interactions/experiences are focused on one or two items at any given moment in time. The relationship is mostly utilitarian here. Even if a kitchen appliance is acquired on a whim, the relationship endures as long as the object's performance is adequate. Further to this point, when buying another sofa or another coffee machine, it is likely that we plan to substitute the older one, regardless of its state: our current beloved sofa may be full of irreparable holes, or it may simply be too big to fit a new, smaller apartment; our coffee machine may be broken or perhaps we are tired of burning our fingers while using it. Either way, we are replacing the object in our home and in our lives.

Clothes, on the other hand, accumulate throughout our lives, as we have seen that the inflows and outflows of our wardrobes are fairly independent [29]. Thus, we simultaneously manage dozens of relationships with clothing items, and may experience love at similar or different levels with each of them. We are open to start new relationships with clothes despite the ones we already have. Moreover, the relationship one starts with a new garment that disrupts and affects the relationships with other items [10]. This in itself would not be an issue, but clothes amass in our wardrobes at unprecedented amounts, and as our wear time is limited, we end up deteriorating our relationships with older clothes for the excitement of a new item, thus inevitably ending the relationship with clothing that could have, otherwise, made us happy for many moons more. As Fletcher suggests, “durability in fashion is mainly a product of nurture not nature” [9] (p. 231).

This explains why most design strategies to stimulate product attachment are likely to be unsuccessful [15,33]. After all, attachment—or should we say, love—is not a goal to be ticked off a to-do list, it needs to be nourished, whether we are talking about our relationships with people or with clothes. In the end, clothes are only durable insofar as the relationship with the wearer lasts. In turn, this active relationship can only last if there is a continued interaction that will shape both the wearer and clothes, enabling a mutual growth through time [15].

The parallel that has been established between wearer–clothing relationships and interpersonal love relationships stretches beyond the illustrated analysis presented in this paper. It is a field of study to be explored—and the boundaries of this comparison must be identified—so that we understand to which extent the knowledge we have on human relationships can help us improve the way we relate with clothes.

By their social nature, clothes pose a complex challenge that needs to be addressed: people's relationship with clothes are influenced not only by the wearer's and garment's agency, but also by the relations wearers have with other people [6,12,34]—as we have seen in the various testimonies throughout the paper, a compliment on what we are wearing grants us satisfaction with our sartorial choice, while criticism could dissuade us from wearing a garment in the future; a gifted or inherited item or an item bought in good company strongly influences the way we feel towards it, as it becomes a tie to that specific human relationship.

Nonetheless, the analysis we introduced here aims to provide a better understanding of how wearer–clothing relationships work. By drawing a comparison to interpersonal love relationships, we begin to understand that our efforts to extend wearer–clothing relationships may benefit from a refocus. Firstly, design practice is traditionally focused on the stages prior to the beginning of the relationship, with a focus on the attributes an item should have to trigger the attraction phase. Strategies to stimulate attachment that result in features embedded in the product overlook the fact that each person experiences the same item differently. Secondly, design research often moves to the opposite end, focusing on the why the relationship with an item ended. But as we have seen, the



end of the relationship between wearer and clothes may be caused by an abrupt event, or due to an accumulation of negative experiences that deteriorate the relationship through time. The same can happen when considering reasons for a divorce: a couple may identify a few reasons that account for an abrupt ending, or even a single reason that sums up how the relationship deteriorated in time, but these do not explain how the relationship reached the point of rupture.

Further research should delve into the complexities of our relationship with clothes to understand how designers can act, not to avoid negative experiences altogether (as to a certain extent, they are impossible to predict), but to help wearers overcome the negative experiences that deteriorate the relationship with their clothes. In other words, to move the focus from the end of the relationship to a stage where the relationship still exists. Moreover, we support the argument that designers must think beyond the initial period of wearer–clothing connections [45], as understanding use can be part of a systemic solution for unsustainable patterns of consumption, besides opening the space of design intervention [30]. There is much to learn from the building and continuity phases: it is likely that looking into the positive aspects of these stages could provide insights on how to avoid deterioration and ending of relationships, as if unveiling the secrets to a life-long, happy marriage.

## 6. Conclusions

The current clothing consumption patterns in the Global North are one of the biggest challenges we face in our path towards a sustainable fashion system. While the industry is focusing on eco-efficient production and resource management, attention must also be given to the use phase: unmindful maintenance habits contribute to clothes' overall environmental impact and, most importantly, the short lifespans of garments in the wardrobes contribute to a growing flow of resource throughput and waste.

Even though many Westerners are aware of the reasons and ways to make more conscious clothing choices, this awareness has little impact on their buying and using habits [28]. Kate Fletcher's *Local Wisdom* project shows that people engage in satisfying and long-lasting relationships with clothes for several reasons, but rarely due to environmental or social concerns [16]. Similarly, Burcikova found that, despite recognising the need to be eco-conscious, women are more likely to keep and use garments for longer for rather mundane reasons that are felt with more immediacy, such as practicality of wear and care and appropriateness to their lifestyle [11]. Thus, designers should seek ways to promote an extended use of clothing by addressing the wearer's real needs throughout their relationship with their clothes, while understanding that sustainable consumption patterns will be the outcome of this process, but not necessarily people's main concern.

This paper seeks to expand the knowledge regarding the use phase by presenting a framework that compares the way we relate with clothes to the way we do with humans: it is focused on how wearer–clothing relationships unfold over time, as well as the elements that contribute to and influence their development. How can this framework contribute to longer wearer–clothing relationships? This paper aims to encourage designers to experiment with a different lens through which they can look at this issue, and to frame our connection with clothes as interpersonal relationships. They can tackle the short-term relationships issue by considering: which component of the relationship do I want to strengthen? Passion, intimacy, or commitment? In which stage(s) of the relationship am I going to intervene? Which dimension of relationship experience will be influenced at that stage? Interaction, perception or emotion?

Fashion design has been generally focused on making new clothes, thus limiting its scope of action to the clothing lifecycle stages prior to use. Through this framework, we invite designers to expand their field of activity and explore ways to intervene in the use phase of clothes. Designers can act as mediators of existing wearer–clothing relationships, providing both wearer and garments with agency that can contribute to satisfying long-term use of clothes.

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