**“It’s like…it’s me”: Exploring the lived experience of clothing attachment during wear**

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**Abstract**

Clothing and its intimate proximity to the body and self, have been widely explored, yet there is little psychological research that explores the experience of wearing items of clothing imbued with personal meanings, memories and emotions. This novel study explores the experience of actively worn items of attachment clothing, from a psychological perspective. *Method:* Due to a dearth of literature within this area, a qualitative methodology was employed. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used as the focus was to explore details of participants’ experience. A homogenous sample of five participants was used. Participants were asked to wear to interview a garment that they felt emotionally attached to and was still in use. Semi-structured interviews were used, allowing for flexibility, thus ensuring the elicitation of rich data. *Results:* Findings demonstrated that clothing attachment is a multifaceted and rich phenomenon. The garments were appropriated and imbued with a symbolic resonance that participants accessed through wearing the attachment garment. *Conclusion:* Results link to and extend previous literature on possession attachment and provide nuanced findings that could impact areas within both fashion literature and psychology literature.

**Keywords**

Clothing, attachment, lived experience, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Wearing attachment clothing involves the intimate proximity between body and material and the intangible meanings, associations and connections formed between the wearer and their attachment clothing[[1]](#footnote-1). The notion of clothing attachment has received great interest with numerous websites, books and artworks exploring the personal meanings associated with specific items of clothing (Fletcher 2015; Heli, Julavits and Shapton 2014; Spivack 2013). In psychology, possession attachment has been extensively studied, yet literature specifically on actively worn attachment clothing is uncommon. Studies that have explored clothing attachment are often linked to garments that are no longer worn (Niinimaki and Koskinen 2011), with researchers calling for the inquiry into attachment garments during the *use* phase (Niinimaki and Armstrong 2013). Thus, by using participants’ own attachment garments, this research aimed to investigate the lived experience of clothing attachment during wear, seeking to build upon emerging research within the area.

**Review of literature**

**Possessions and the self**

Many modern societies are characterized by a strongly held belief that ‘to have is to be’ (Dittmar 1992). Individuals often define themselves and others in terms of the possessions they have or have not acquired. Historically, psychologist William James (1890) posited that ‘a man’s self is the sum total of all that he can call his’. Subsequently, Belk (1988) revisited James’ theory when discussing that possessions are considered as physical extensions of the self. He theorized that possessions enabled a person to exert direct control over their immediate physical and social environment. Thus, it is argued that our relationship with possessions starts from a very early age and the notion that we can possess something as if it were a part of ourselves is grasped by children by the age of two (Freidman and Neary 2008). Interestingly, by the age of six years old, children display the ‘endowment effect’, which is the phenomenon of placing increased value on the object due to the quality of the object being or having been ‘theirs’ (Friedman and Neary 2008; Hood and Bloom 2008; Reb and Connolly 2007). It is purported that as our lives progress, our notion of self-hood and identity are further embodied within our possessions as they become external repositories for events within our lives (Belk 1988). This current research investigates the sub-area of possession attachment - *clothing attachment.* The authors echo the argument put forth by previous scholars; that there is a clear distinction between an object and an item of clothing due to clothing being worn on the body (Sontag and Lee, 2004, 2010).

**Clothing and the self.** There is a wealth of literature from the social sciences that explores clothing and the self. Sociologist Julia Twigg (2010) posits that a person is as embodied by their dress as they are by their body, whilst Kaiser (1990) states that clothing use can reveal both unique and socially shared meanings. Clothing can be used to portray the inner self (Woodward 2005) and researchers have explored the relationship between dress, the body, and the self. For example, Sontag and Lee (2004, 2010) investigated the psychological closeness of clothing to a person’s self-perception through developing the

‘Proximity of Clothing to Self-Scale’(PCS). Moreover, studies have found that appropriateness of dress can affect how a person perceives themselves (Rafaeli 1997; Adomaitis and Johnson 2005; Peluchette and Karl 2007; Karl et al 2013).

Many existing studies on clothing and dress focus on dress associated with a researcher-led, pre-defined cultural meaning. Notably, in their studies, Guy and Banim (2000) and Banim and Guy (2001) explored women’s lived experience of clothing with regards to participants’ self-presentation through clothes. They investigated women’s relationships with their clothing using novel methods such as ‘wardrobe interviews’, which centered on the participants’ personal collection of clothing.

Despite extensive literature that investigates the innate links between possessions and the self, as well as clothing and the self, there is little research around the lived experience of actively worn items of attachment clothing. The lack of psychological literature within this area is surprising, given the well-understood reciprocal influences between body and mind on behaviour. To first explore the notion of clothing attachment, the authors draw upon literature from person-product attachment.

**Possession attachment.** Kleine and Baker (2004) discuss the complex and multifaceted relationship between an individual and a specific attachment object. Attachment objects are thought to be singularized through person-product interaction and are appropriated and decommodified. Thus, such objects become irreplaceable and often cannot be substituted - even with an exact replica (Kleine and Baker 2004; Hood and Bloom 2008; Grayson and Shulman 2000). Indeed, it is widely recognized that attachment has relative strength, and that an attachment to a specific object can be somewhat weak or strong (Schultz, Kleine and Kernan 1989). Those objects, which are perceived as a more significant part of the extended self, are associated with stronger levels of attachment (Belk 1988). Norman (2004) posits that there are three stages to the attachment process; (1) the visceral, which is linked to perception and appearance, (2) the behavioural, which is the person’s behaviour with the item in which pleasure and use are dominant factors, and (3) the reflective, where a person can reflect upon his/her experience, this may be driven by emotions.

Researchers have studied the phenomenon of forming an attachment to an object,

producing interesting findings including, but not limited to: (1) objects that were closely linked with identity typically encourage higher levels of attachment (Ball and Tasaki 1992), (2) object attachment has been shown to differ between cultures (e.g. Western American cultures were found to have favourite objects which represented a unique personal history, whilst a Nigerian sample displayed shared cultural values for their attachment objects), (3) object attachment has been shown to differ between genders, e.g. women have been found to emphasize social ties through favourite objects, whereas men were found to represent individual accomplishments (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988), (4) the degree of attachment can change over time and may develop new/dispose of old attachments as the self develops (Myers 1985), (5) possession usage may influence attachment and memory (Mugge et al

2005), (6) the strength of the emotional bond with an object is reflected in specific thoughts, feelings, and behaviours toward the item (Schultz et al 1989), (7) when a person becomes attached to an object, he/she is more likely to handle the product with care, to repair it when it breaks down, and to postpone its replacement (Mugge et al 2005).

With specific regards to clothing, Solomon (1986) conducted a novel case study to explore possession attachment to Levi 501 jeans. Results found that many participants attributed feelings about their special Levi jeans to specific romantic experiences; drawing

ties to the construct of experience attachment (Arnould and Price 1993). Experience attachments are defined as being how participation or observation of an experience affects a person in how they feel. They are emotionally complex and irreplaceable (Arnould and Price 1993). Solomon (1986) suggested that the jeans provided evidence or acted as something of a ballast for experiences and therefore it could be said that experiential and symbolic dimensions were intertwined. Similarly, Mugge et al., (2005) reported that experiences during product use result in a shared history; an item can become a reminder of certain memories, thus linking to Belk’s notion of items becoming vessels for memories.

In addition to Mugge et al’s findings (2005), Masuch and Hefferon (2014) presented a eudaimonic dimension of fashion through participants’ nostalgic attachment to certain garments. They suggested that the garments held symbolic meanings containing meaningful memories and so, despite in some cases the items of clothing no longer being worn, the clothing was kept as it had transcended its utilitarian function. Furthermore, Guy and Banim (2000) explored why women may keep clothing that is no longer worn. They found that reminders of past feelings, and links to identity, prevented women from getting rid of their garments. Interestingly, Bye and McKinney (2007) explored women’s reasons for keeping clothes that were no longer worn as they no longer fit the body. They reported that women have a complex relationship with clothing regardless of garment fit. Their findings link to those of Banim and Guy (2001) and Masuch and Hefferon (2014). Further analysis of nostalgic attachment (Masuch and Hefferon 2018) provided additional links between no-longer worn possessions (dress memorabilia), nostalgic connections, and possession attachment - and they called for further research into the area. Overall, the phenomenon described instigates notions of attachment and investment in previously worn clothing pieces, with a need to further extend research to focus on currently worn items.

**Symbolic dimensions of objects.** According to Gelman (2013), psychological essentialism is an intuitive belief that a ‘deep reality’ beyond superficial features exists for certain entities. This is responsible for the item's identity and underlying features. Interestingly, according to Medin and Ortony (1989), it is not necessary to know what the essence is; it is sufficient to know that it exists. Psychological essentialism is instrumental in forming and sustaining conceptual representations, and for many other cognitive processes including reasoning (e.g., Gelman 2003). However, early researchers exploring psychological essentialism were concerned with natural entities, not artefacts, possibly because artefacts, in contrast to natural objects, are mutable and lack the inner essence that distinguishes them from other artefacts (Gelman 2013). However, Gelman argues, ‘like natural entities, individual artefacts are also understood in ways that reflect essentialism, specifically when people think about the core notions of authenticity and ownership’. The notions entail attention to object history; non-obvious, hidden properties which have potential causal consequences. Frazier, Gelman, Wilson, and Hood (2009) found that authentic objects were valued more highly in monetary and personal terms; judged as more desirable to keep and touch. Gelman (2003) emphasizes the fundamental role of object history for the application of psychological essentialism to objects and artefacts, as opposed to natural entities. Consequently, we argue that psychological essentialism, the belief that a particular entity has a set of defining, yet intangible characteristics, which makes it what it is, can readily be applied to clothing to encourage sustainable practice in design and ownership of specific garments. This supports notions proposed by designers and researchers, who have posited that sustainable practices, such as increasing longevity of ownership, can be achieved through the use of design strategies that encourage attachment with objects (Chapman 2009, Mugge et al 2010, Niinimaki and Armstrong 2013, Niinimaki and Hassi 2011).

**Symbolic dimensions of clothing and sustainable design.** Within the fashion / design literature, researchers have sought to explore the symbolic meanings or intangible values that individuals place on their clothing to explore longevity of ownership (Fletcher

2015; Fletcher 2012; Niinimaki 2011; Niinimaki and Armstrong 2013; Mugge et al 2010). For example, Chapman (2009) suggested designing clothing using the theoretical framework of ‘emotionally durable design’- increasing longevity of ownership through designing to create a connection between the wearer and their garment. Moreover, in their recent study,

Armstrong, Niinimaki and Lang (2016), explored using product-attachment as a design strategy to aid the sustainable consumption of clothing. They posited that designers need to aim at enhancing long-term product relationships through understanding consumers’ needs, and thus reduce levels of consumption. Further, not with specific regards to clothing, Casais, Mugge and Desmet (2016) have developed a toolkit for designers to use to create designs with symbolic meaning for user happiness. Despite these interesting developments, there is still little research that specifically explores the experience of attachment clothing and the effect of the item(s) on the wearer. This research aims to contribute to knowledge within this area. The authors posit that a greater understanding of clothing attachment may contribute to literature around designing for attachment, for example; emotional design practices.

**Symbolic dimensions of clothing and the effect on the wearer**. Dress has been found to systematically effect the behaviour of the wearer. Research from social psychology has explored how meanings associated with an item of clothing can affect the wearer. For example, in their study, Frank and Gilovich (1988) noted that the colour black is associated with evil and death in many cultures. They studied the extent to which football players wearing black were judged more evil than players wearing other colours. Wearing black affected both the behaviour of the wearer (who was more aggressive) and the perceived behaviour of the wearer (who was perceived as more aggressive). Similarly, studies have explored the effect of wearing, and the effect of perceiving the colour red. Roberts et al (2010) demonstrated that clothing colour can affect the perceived attractiveness of males as well as females, affecting both the wearer and those perceiving the wearer. Elliot, Greitemeyer and Pazda’s (2013) research demonstrated that participants were able to ‘take on’ the symbolic associations surrounding the colour red (attractiveness and sexual receptiveness). The phenomenon that an item of clothing can be imbued with symbolic meaning is strengthened by the findings of Adam and Galinsky (2012), who coined the term *enclothed cognition*. This phenomenon stems from the research area ‘embodied cognition’, in which researchers deemed that cognitive processing is deeply dependent on the physical body (Damasio 2000; Shapiro 2017). Thus, enclothed cognition is the systematic effect on the wearer’s psychological processes through the simultaneous occurrence of the physicality of wearing a particular garment and belief in the garment’s symbolic significance (Adam and Galinsky 2012). Adam and Galinsky (2012) found that when a participant wore a lab coat described as a “medical doctor’s lab coat”, they performed better within attention tests than if they wore their own clothes or a lab coat described as an “artist’s overalls”. From their study into enclothed cognition, Adam and Galinsky (2012) demonstrate the potential effect the symbolic meaning of a piece of clothing may have on an individual. Similarly, in their study, Gino et al (2010) studied the effects of wearing Chloe (a luxury French fashion house) sunglasses that were described as either counterfeit or authentic. They found that participants wearing the counterfeit sunglasses were more dishonest than participants who were wearing the authentic sunglasses.

Within the aforementioned studies, the systematic effect on the wearer’s psychological processes occurred when wearing items infused with socially constructed resonance (Frank and Gilovich 1988; Roberts et al 2010; Elliot et al 2013; Adam and Galinsky 2012; Gino et al 2010). There is little literature that explores the personally constructed, as opposed to the socially constructed, meanings of clothing and how that may affect the wearer. Moreover, previous studies have highlighted limitations that can arise when investigating the complex construct of attachment through using methods such as scenarios (Mugge et al 2010). Thus, this research aimed to investigate the complexities of wearing attachment clothing (Kleine and Baker 2004; Niinimaki and Armstrong 2013) by employing an interpretivist approach to generate rich detailed findings.

**Method**

**Design**

Due to the under-researched area, the subjective nature of attachment (Niinimaki and Armstrong 2013), and the need for rich exploratory detail, a qualitative approach was used (Shinebourne 2011). The aim of qualitative research is to describe and explain an experience (Willig 2013). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was deemed the most appropriate for the novel research question, due to the researchers’ concern with exploring the lived experience of clothing attachment at an individual level. The IPA method is flexible and involves rigorous investigation of the idiographic subjective experience (Smith et al. 2009). IPA is participant led and utilises a small sample size (e.g. 3-6) in order to capture the in-depth, personal lived experience of the phenomenon in which researchers are interested (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Drawing on phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography, IPA is an approach that aims to understand the intricacies and nuances of a little known or misunderstood phenomenon (in this case, clothing attachment during wear) and is not utilised for the aim of generalisation or model making. IPA and the results produced are valid in their own right, as they offer an idiographic exploration of a particular sub group from the participant’s own perspective. (Smith, 2017). Thus, the methodology was deemed the most appropriate in allowing researchers to investigate the under-researched phenomenon. **Participants**

Participants were selected through the ‘snowball’ sampling method. In line with IPA, the homogenous sample consisted of five female participants, (Smith, 2017; see Table 1 below) adhering to sample size numbers recommended by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) when conducting IPA. Participants were all living and working in London and were either working within a creative or fashion environment, or those with a creative or fashion background, who owned an item of clothing that they felt emotionally attached to. Each participant identified as being interested in clothes and fashion. As previously noted, attachment can be associated with relative strength (Schultz, Kleine and Kernan, 1989), however due to the subjectivity this may have for different participants, the researchers did not define the specific strength of attachment. Participants were selected on the basis that they would grant access to the phenomena of being attached to a garment. The authors have used aliases to ensure participant anonymity (Smith et al., 2009).

**Data collection**

Ethical clearance was granted from the authors Graduate School Ethics Committee. Individual interviews took place at a mutually agreed public space (e.g. coffee shop), thus providing a comfortable and familiar setting for the participant and a safe environment for both the researcher and participant (Smith et al. 2009). The participants were asked to wear to interview their attachment garment. It was made clear to participants that the attachment clothing must be suitable to wear in public, ensuring the comfort of both participant and researcher. It is important to note that whilst most participants wore their attachment garments; two did not. In one case, it was because the attachment garment was a faux fur coat and, as it was summer, it would have been too warm to wear. Additionally, one participant did not wear her attachment top for fear of it falling apart as it was extremely delicate. All participants did bring their chosen attachment garments to interview. Asking participants to choose and wear their attachment garment was inspired by Wallendorf and Arnould (1988), who talked of participants’ active engagement with the research process through choosing their attachment possession. Furthermore, the active wear was thought to allow insight into

the effect of the attachment garment on the wearer, rather than have the participants practice introspection (Adam and Galinksy 2012).

(Place Table 1: Participant table about here)

The interview schedule was formed from the literature, for example some questions linked to aspects of Norman’s (2004) process of attachment. The schedule consisted of open-ended questions such as ‘Can you tell me about the attachment garment you have chosen to wear?’ to allow for expansion, meaning the participant could talk at length about their experience (Smith et al. 2009). The semi-structured interview method used, and the participants wearing their attachment garment to the interview, allowed for the development of rich exploratory data. On completion of the interview, participants were verbally debriefed.

**Analysis**

The data was analyzed by the first author and discussed in detail with the second. The essence of IPA is within its analytic focus (Smith et al. 2009), and search for meaning. The objective is to try and understand content and complexity, rather than to measure frequency within the data (Smith and Osborn 2003). Analysis called for the researcher to engage in an interpretative relationship with the data (Smith and Osborn 2003). The process began with the transcription of the audio data and then re-reading of the data, allowing for the researcher to become immersed in the data (Smith et al. 2009; Willig 2013).

The second stage of analysis consisted of line by line exploratory coding, at the descriptive, nonverbal and conceptual levels. From there, the next stage of the analysis process consisted of looking for emergent themes, whilst retaining particularities within the exploratory comments. During this stage volume and detail were reduced through looking back to sections of the data, viewing the data as a whole, then reviewing the line by line exploration, before proceeding to view the whole (Smith et al. 2009). The final stage of analysis involved identifying patterns within emergent themes and developing an ‘umbrella term’ that communicated the particular cluster of themes (Smith et al. 2009). Once the process was complete for one transcription, it was then repeated until all transcriptions had a revised list of emergent themes. The themes from each transcription were appropriately clustered through analyzing connections. In order to demonstrate the complexity and depth of major themes, the authors chose to focus on one major theme and three subordinate themes (see table 2). Overall, the detailed in-depth analysis process demonstrated the authors’ rigorous approach and a commitment to IPA (Smith 2011).

(Place Table 2: Master theme and subordinate themes about here).

(Place Table 3: Participant extracts used to illustrate themes about here).

**Results and discussion**

The format of this section consists of the presentation of findings, followed by a discussion of findings alongside existing literature. Please note that within accounts, participants sometimes reflected on and discussed other attachment possessions that were not those brought to interview. Where this was the case, it has been discussed.

**Symbolic resonance during wear (1).** One of the most prominent findings was that participants imbued their attachment clothing with a symbolic resonance. Drawing on the work of Norman (2005), namely the notion that a person’s attachment to an object is complex and is often indistinguishable to the relationship, the meanings and feelings that the item represents, the term *symbolic resonance during wear* refers to what wearing the attachment clothing represented, implied and allowed the wearer to experience*.* Each participants’ symbolic resonance was a personal construction, and so unique to them. The term *symbolic resonance during wear* provides differentiation, adding to the notion of enclothed cognition (Adam and Galinsky 2012) and psychological essentialism (e.g., Gelman 2003), indicating that a garment can have symbolic significance that is unique to its wearer. Therefore, wearing that specific garment would not have the same resonance for another person. The authors extend this notion to posit the term ‘personal enclothed cognition’ in an attempt to extend Adam and Galinsky’s enclothed cognition (2012), to better represent the notion that enclothed cognition can occur when garments are infused with a personal resonance. Further research is needed to explore this concept.

The imperceptible significance of participant’s attachment garments differed for each individual. Despite this, in many cases the clothing provided feelings of emotional security and protection, a sense of feeling safe and comforted. For example, Lorna discussed her attachment top being aesthetically very similar to other tops she possessed and yet, she believed that the attachment garment retained a unique quality:

I love them all but there is something about this one that brings me back to it, it’s like my fail safe. I wear it to interviews, I wear it, it’s like something that makes me feel, like, yeah like really comfortable […] if things have gone a bit shit with Alex or something…I’m like, I wear it because it’s like so embedded in me it gives me sort of like strength. (Lorna)

Lorna’s account illustrated the richness of symbolic resonance during wear and the possible occurrence of personal enclothed cognition, whereby the attachment item provided and symbolized multiple levels of comfort, strength and emotional security. Moreover, her distinction of the attachment garment from other items of clothing, ‘I love them all but there is something about this one’ suggests psychological appropriation (Kleine and Baker 2004). This finding is notable in relation to previous studies that have discussed the importance of appearance when forming attachment (Niinimaki and Armstrong 2013; Mugge et al 2010). Lorna discussed having aesthetically very similar items of clothing, yet her attachment was distinguished as her ‘fail safe’.

Jo also reported a sense of emotional comfort when wearing her attachment garment, yet she emphasized feeling glamourous, whilst also secure, when wearing her item:

It makes me feel instantly comfortable, it makes me feel glamorous and just cosy and it makes me feel secure in myself. (Jo)

It was poignant that Jo said the piece made her feel ‘instantly comfortable’, suggesting the benefit of wearing the piece was immediate both tangibly (‘cosy’), and intangibly through the essence imbued in the garment. The instant transformative power of the attachment clothing may be of interest to explore further. Previous studies have explored phases of attachment, yet further research could investigate whether the strength of attachment affects the immediacy of the impact on the wearer.

A further contribution to the finding of symbolic resonance was within Niamh’s extract where she also described feeling a sense of comfort and safety when wearing her attachment garment:

I think it symbolizes being young, you know being childish in a way and feeling very comfortable and safe and very happy and it felt a very positive item. (Niamh)

Similarly, to Jo and Lorna, Niamh posited that her piece was imbued with a unique essence, as found by Frazier et al (2009), allowing her to take on this essence when wearing the garment. Participants discussed positive feelings associated with their attachment garment, thus linking to the pleasurable experience of attachment clothing as discussed by Niinimaki and Armstrong (2013). The theme symbolic resonance during wear was used to highlight the distinctions for each individual, as Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) discussed, with special possessions varying for each individual in their symbolic purposes. Participants accessed the positive associations through wear, meaning that the items were separated from items that were no longer worn. Thus, the findings here support and potentially extend the literature on enclothed cognition, leading to the notion of personal enclothed cognition (Adam and Galinsky 2012), demonstrating that it is possible for items of clothing to possess symbolic resonance constructed by an individual that psychologically affects the individual when worn, as opposed to the symbolic resonance of the clothing being a societal construction.

**Empowering the wearer (1.1).** The subordinate theme *empowering the wearer* was chosen to express the participants’ accounts of being emboldened to take on challenges and celebrate their identity when wearing their attachment clothing. Lorna, Niamh and Corrine talked of feeling empowered when wearing their pieces:

I’ve pretty much worn it for every interview that I have gone to, not for like a

good luck thing, just as a…I feel good in it thing and because it’s that…it gives me sort of like strength of like I am from [Area of England], I’m fine this reminds me of like good things and like it doesn’t matter if I don’t get the job […] because I am actually like just me and this is just and this makes me feel good and there is something in it that no other clothing gives me. (Lorna)

I actually wore them to my first interview to try and get into education which was like a massive step for me because it was a big kind of career change and I think wearing them to the interview was a big kind of mentality filler. (Corrine)

Corrine talked explicitly of the piece acting as a ‘mentality filler’, implying that the piece was empowering, enhancing her own ability and providing her with support. Similarly to Corrine, Niamh talked of a hat that she felt empowered by and discussed that:

I tend to wear my hat, as I said, to tend to be more hidden, but I think it makes me feel strong and this idea of protection. (Niamh)

Both Niamh and Corrine’s accounts explicitly detailed their feelings of empowerment and strength when wearing their attachment items. Moreover, within their accounts participants explicitly detailed the psychological closeness of their attachment items to the self (Sontag and Lee 2004; Lee and Sontag 2010) for example, Jo talked passionately about her attachment piece as reinforcing her self-concept:

So, to me this is like…it’s like…it’s me. (Jo)

Similarly, to Jo, Lorna talked of her piece being “embedded in me”; that her top was integral

to her sense of self:

I’m fine this reminds me of like good things and like it doesn’t matter if I

don’t get the job […] because I am actually like just me. (Lorna)

Jo, provided differentiation and talked of her attachment piece as being empowering through its ability to act as a celebration of her:

I think keeping that coat just reminds me that it is a cause for celebration…you know I’m actually getting really emotional…yeah keeping it just reminds me that I am totally worth it. When I wear, it I can celebrate that, I can celebrate myself for sure… (Jo)

Within the account, Jo’s coat seemed highly tied into her identity and her feelings about

herself.

Overall, the extracts illustrate that the pieces become a tool which participants wore to positively affect their self-perception (Kwon 1994; Rafaeli 1997; Lee and Sontag 2010), thus the theme links to and extends Niinimäki and Armstrong’s (2013) notion of pleasure during use. This finding also links to Guy and Banim’s (2000) concept of *the women I want to be*, with the attachment garments being identified and used to enhance or take on positive notions of empowerment. The attachment garments also reinforced self-concept. Self-concept is a term used to describe an individual’s ideas, thoughts and feelings about their self (Rosenberg 1979; Sirgy 1982). Notably, the effect on each individual was nuanced and thus the attachment garments were empowering for differing reasons unique to the individuals. This links to findings from Kaiser, Freeman and Chandler (1993), who posited that a ‘favourite’ item of clothing can influence the way in which a person expresses themselves and interact with others. These findings further contribute to and extend the notion of personal enclothed cognition and offer interesting avenues for further research.

**Endowment effect (1.2)**. The theme *endowment effect* was chosen to illustrate the notion that participants wanted to preserve their - and only their - specific attachment piece; an exact replica of the attachment piece would not be the same. Within participants’ accounts it became apparent that the physical qualities of the attachment garment seemed key to perceived authenticity. The term *authenticity* is used here to portray participants’ sentiment that an exact replica of the attachment item would be perceived as if it were a counterfeit item (Gino et al. 2010). Jo talked explicitly of the wear and tear of her attachment garment:

I like its state of disrepair, I like that it’s old and knackered and a bit, you know, rough around the edges and the fur has seen better days, I like it. To me it enhances it completely [...] have you ever heard of psychometry when a psychic will take a piece of your jewellery and read its vibrations – to me it’s that…I don’t want to make it something that it’s not. I don’t want to make it a new coat. (Jo)

Jo seemed to suggest that the ‘wear and tear’ of the physical garment was vital to the authenticity of the piece. The reference to psychometry, which is the supposed ability to discover information about an event or person by touching inanimate objects associated with them (Merriam-Webster Dictionary n.d.), suggested that the damages the garment had endured gave voice to the intangible meanings associated with it. Jo seemed to suggest that altering the coat would distort the coat, not only physically but also symbolically. Jo also stated that the worn aesthetics of the garment ‘enhanced’ the garment for her. The worn features encapsulated the symbolic resonance for Jo in that ‘this is like…is like me…. it’s getting older’.

To add to this, Sophia and Niamh talked of the dismay they would feel if someone thought that their attachment t-shirts were generic t-shirts recently bought.

You could now go into a shop and buy something that is quite similar and not old and it’s meant to look like you picked it up at a flea market […] I can’t let somebody think I had just walked into Topshop and just bought it, so in a way it becomes more like a memento in that I don’t want to kind of, it would feel like sacrilege for it to be seen in that light. (Niamh)

The use of the word ‘sacrilege’ seemed highly poignant. Sacrilege is typically associated

with violating something that is sacred and is associated with religion and committing a sin. The word demonstrated the significance the top held for Niamh, for her the perceived originality of the attachment piece would be desecrated if someone thought the top were from a high-street shop. Sophia shared a similar sentiment:

If people thought it was just a generic thing that would really aggravate me…no one has ever gone so far as to say but if they did I would be like well it is actually vintage and it is actually from my Dad’s business [...] I would immediately separate it […] I would immediately establish why it’s better and different. (Sophia)

Thus, both Niamh and Sophia’s accounts implied an inherent superiority to their items, thus linking to notions of the authentic over the counterfeit item (Gino et al

2010). They both viewed their items as entirely separate and incomparable to other garments through complex appropriation and personal symbolic resonance. Their attachment items were deemed irreplaceable (Grayson and Shulman 2000).

In their study, Mugge et al (2005) proposed that attachment may be stimulated through using materials that age gracefully and, that when a person is attached to an item, they are more likely to repair it. Yet, the *Endowment effect* demonstrated that the worn or aged properties of the attachment clothing reinforced the symbolic resonance of the item. Participants did not indicate that the items needed to age-well, moreover, repair may have altered the emotional significance of the item. This finding supports Schifferestein and Zwartkruis-Pelgrim’s (2008) suggestion that designers could use materials that retain

physical marks, to promote attachment. For example, a scratch on a leather jacket may evoke a memory, thus also linking to Armstrong et al’s (2016) notion of continual engagement with the attachment item.

Overall, the perception of authenticity was subjective and was due to the resonance that the attachment item held for the individual. Yet, it was interesting that participants constructed their own notion of authenticity. The appearance of the attachment garment reinforced the symbolic resonance of the item and the authenticity of the attachment item.

**Anthropomorphism of attachment clothing (1.3)**. As previously discussed, participants viewed their attachment garment as inherently unique and personal to them. Thus, anthropomorphism of clothing refers to the participants partial anthropomorphizing of their chosen garments, in which people see objects as possessing human traits, but they do

not view the entity as human (Aggarwal and McGill 2007). The expression was used to explain the ways in which participants attributed human or life-like characteristics to their attachment pieces. Participants often remarked and laughed at the “ridiculousness” of implying their clothing was alive. For example, Jo was the only participant to talk of her attachment item by name:

My chosen item is a brown short fake fur jacket; it’s ‘The Bear’ as it is known. (Jo) Naming the coat suggested anthropomorphic attributes and a great level of affection for the piece. It is also interesting to note that Jo, said ‘The Bear as it is known’ implying others, possibly family members, know the coat as ‘The Bear’. This could lead to potential areas of research around those who are within proximity to the attachment garment, for example, are those who understand the significance of the attachment garment able to access the personally constructed resonance through closeness and empathy with the wearer. Notably, Jo proceeded to refer to her coat as ‘The Bear’ throughout her account, and when discussing where she kept the coat she said:

Bear is kept nestled; actually, I do put the old parka over the top. (Jo)

The word ‘nestled’ implied that the coat was seen as life like; nestled typically suggests a human or animal characteristic of becoming comfortable by settling next to something. By giving her coat life-like qualities, Jo suggested the significance of the coat, almost conveying a reciprocal relationship with the piece. In addition, it is interesting to note that when discussing ‘The Bear’, Jo did not hesitate or laugh about how she had named her coat. However, when talking about other items of clothing she laughed at her own suggestion that clothes were living:

It is what you give it by making it look good and what it gives you. Definitely a two-way thing [...] Haha I sound like I think clothes are people or something and I don’t really at all. (Jo)

There seemed to be a clear distinction between “The Bear” and other items of clothing, again suggesting the appropriation and decommodification of the attachment piece. Furthermore, the reciprocal relationship implied suggests a complex and emotional level to the experience of personal enclothed cognition.

Unlike Jo, Sophia discussed her attachment piece as possessing a quality of her family, as though the piece was like a family member:

When I look at it I think of both my parents and if I’m ever missing them […] I’ll put it on, but I think it adds to the comfort […] I think it adds a level of comfort

that you know there’s a level of your family…haha…funny because I know it’s just like an object…haha. (Sophia)

Sophia talked of feeling connected to her family when wearing her attachment garment, signifying strong symbolic resonance of comfort. She, like Jo, laughed at her own observation, yet she attributed human characteristics to her garment, which allowed her to feel comforted when wearing it.

Notably, Lorna’s account gave a more implicit notion of anthropomorphism; Lorna

discussed the connections imbued within her top:

I think the connection is like massive…and also… it’s… you’ve kind of …I haven’t really thought of it in that much depth… but it does feel like it’s really kind of ridiculous…to have something like …err that connection …you know you can’t control that stuff, can you? (Lorna)

Lorna’s use of the word ‘ridiculous’ suggested the enormity of the emotional connection imbued within her top. She paused frequently within the account, deliberating, as though searching for a coherent explanation of her clothing attachment. She seemed to illustrate that imperceptible qualities within her top were so pertinent, and almost reciprocal, that they were innate and thus uncontrollable ‘you can’t control that stuff, can you?’

With each participant, the anthropomorphic attributes were unique to the individual. Corrine discussed the potential of her attachment piece, as starting a life:

Maybe the idea with these shoes is that they are at the start of their life. (Corrine)

Corrine had previously discussed another attachment item:

You just think about the life it has lived and it’s an amazing idea that it’s a

piece that will probably keep going. (Corrine)

Corrine talked as though the attachment items were alive and suggested the notion that they would continue on a journey. Similarly, Lorna discussed her top retaining multiple memories through the wear and tear of it, suggesting that as she progresses through life the top also does:

It’s wear and tear isn’t it…it shows I have worn it a lot…it’s had a journey it’s

quite nice in a way… (Lorna)

The worn aesthetics of the top allowed for Lorna to trace the “journey” of the top. The tendency to attribute human characteristics when discussing attachment pieces suggested the great emotional closeness that the participants had with their chosen items. Solomon (1986) discussed anthropomorphic attachment in which participants had requested their 501 Levi jeans be buried, thus these findings add to the notion that, through appropriation, attachment possessions can be attributed human characteristics. Furthermore, the anthropomorphism was complex. Participants acknowledged that it seemed odd to attribute human characteristics to their inanimate possessions and yet, despite the awareness, they seemed to display a relationship with their attachment items that was reciprocal, as though the items were alive. This complex relationship could link to Norman’s (2005) highest level of the attachment process, with participants reflecting upon and driven by emotive responses to the attachment item.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the findings provided within this study were rich and exploratory, contributing to the literature in the under-researched area of actively worn attachment clothing. The research findings presented within this study illustrate that the phenomenon of wearing attachment clothing is a highly complex construct. The findings explore the richness of the clothing attachment experience, contributing to and extending existing literature. Results demonstrate connections to previous literature, with actively worn attachment clothing linked to positive experiences and memories (Masuch and Hefferon 2018). Attachment clothing is intertwined with the self and, as such, strongly connected with self-perception and self-image. Unlike previous studies, the findings presented suggest that enclothed cognition (Adam and Galinsky, 2012) can occur through a personal constructed resonance and not just through a socially constructed resonance. Attachment garments contain an intangible personally constructed essence that systematically affects the wearer, yet further research is needed in this area.

Participants’ experiences reflected upon appropriation of the attachment item (Kleine and Baker, 2004) through the intangible symbolic resonance, thus linking to Norman’s (2005) highest level of the attachment process in design (the reflective level). At a reflective level, a product has a meaning for a person that that moves beyond the aesthetic and functional qualities of the item through connecting with a person’s notion of; self-image, personal satisfaction and memories (Norman, 2005).

Importantly, preserving the authenticity of the clothing seemed integral to the symbolic resonance of the attachment garment, and thus connects to findings from Hood and Bloom (2008). In their possession attachment research, Hood and Bloom (2008) reported that children would not accept a toy that was an exact replica of their toy, instead, they insisted on keeping their original toy. The children failed to explain why they wanted to keep their original item, yet their findings suggested that the children believe their toy pertained an intangible essence that would not exist within a replica. This corresponds with Gelman’s (2003, 2013) work on psychological essentialism. Participants in this research did not wish to alter or repair their attachment garments, despite the garment’s ‘wear and tear’, as they believed that would detract from the garment’s intangible value. Although participants were not asked explicitly to comment on historical aspects of their attachment garments, it is clear from the analysis that inherent historical elements implicitly influenced their symbolic resonance, and consequently their perceived value. These findings may be particularly applicable when considering material choices and designing for attachment (Schifferestein and Zwartkruis-Pelgrim, 2008), for example considering materials that age with the wearer. The notion that the attachment garment ‘ages’ with the wearer links to the finding *Anthropomorphism of attachment clothing*,yet further research is needed to explore this novel finding. In sum, the findings of this study demonstrate the rich complexity of the relationship between the wearer, the attachment garment and the multifaceted experience of wear.

Although the findings of this study are novel, there are some considerations when interpreting the results. Firstly, the study was conducted in London with a homogenous sample that all had an active interest in the arts and fashion, and thus it could be said that participants had a greater connection to or love of clothing than those not involved with the arts or fashion. Additionally, the sample consisted of five female participants. Despite these numbers being consistent with IPA recommendations, and the sampling required for IPA and a homogenous subset, (Smith et al., 2009), the authors acknowledge that whilst generalization is not possible, the sample chosen allowed for rich, rigorous analysis of expert participants and allowed for the authors to become immersed in the data and engage fully with IPA (Smith et al. 2009). Further research could explore the lived experience of attachment clothing with specific regards to the role of gender in forming attachment. Moreover, a diverse group of participants and a different research site would be extremely beneficial.

The authors highlight some prominent areas for further research. Firstly, greater research is needed to explore the notion of personally constructed enclothed cognition. For example, the strength and phases of attachment could be investigated with regards to personal enclothed cognition. Research could also investigate whether the strength of attachment affects the immediacy of the impact on the wearer. Extending from this, further research could explore the possible well-being implications of the extended notion of enclothed cognition, namely personal enclothed cognition, and could thus contribute to the areas of; positive design (Desmet and Pohlmeyer 2013), designing for symbolic interaction (Casais, Mugge, Desmet, 2016) and emotional attachment (Chapman, 2009; Niinimaki and Hassi 2011; Niinimäki and Koskinen 2011). Despite there being some limitations within the study, the researchers’ findings contribute to the under-researched area of actively worn attachment clothing through unravelling some of the rich and nuanced areas of the phenomenon.

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|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Name** | **Age** | **Gender** | **Nationality** | **Occupation** | **Attachment garment** |
| Lorna | 30 | F | British | Teacher | Stripy top |
| Jo | 43 | F | British | Teacher | Faux fur coat |
| Sophia | 31 | F | American | Artist Assistant | Slogan t-shirt |
| Niamh | 38 | F | British | University Course Leader | Slogan t-shirt |
| Corrine | 29 | F | Irish | University Lecturer | High heeled shoes |
| *Table 1: Participant demographics table.* | | | | | |

**Tables 1, 2 and 3**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Master theme** | **Subordinate themes** |
| 1. Symbolic resonance during wear | 1.1 Empowering the wearer |
|  | 1.2 Endowment effect |
|  | 1.3 Anthropomorphism of clothing |
| *Note.* The numbers used are the numerical order of the themes, with 1 being the master theme and 1.1,1.2,1.3 being the subordinate themes. | |
| *Table 2: Master theme and subordinate themes.* |  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Master and subordinate themes** | **Participant extracts used to illustrate themes** |
| 1 Symbolic resonance during wear | Niamh, Lorna, Jo |
| 1.1 Empowering the wearer | Niamh, Lorna, Corrine, Jo |
| 1.2 Endowment effect | Jo, Sophia, Niamh |
| 1.3 Anthropomorphism of clothing | Jo, Sophia, Lorna, Corrine |
| *Table 3: Participant extracts used to illustrate themes.* | |

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1. This article uses the terms attachment clothing and clothing attachment interchangeably, to refer to emotional bonds formed with items of clothing (Schifferestein and Zwartkruis-Pelgrim 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)