



Share, don't shop: exploring value, sociality and the 'alternative' at clothing swaps

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ABSTRACT

Since the 2000s, second-hand clothing consumption has increased rapidly in acceptability, visibility and fashion-ability in the UK. Diversifying from informal, domestic sites like charity shops and car-boots, second-hand channels now include more formalised, profit-driven retail spheres, including vintage boutiques, chain stores and online marketplaces. Clothes swaps, events where people exchange clothes for free, are perhaps less visible due to their informality and ad-hoc organisation. However, within local communities swaps have begun to proliferate—from student union free-for-alls, to swap parties, to 'gender swap' events—and there is now at least one dedicated clothes swapping app.

This article analyses the growing activity of clothes swapping as material-cultural practice. Drawing on interdisciplinary theories spanning cultural geography, anthropology and feminist theory, I explore three case studies in Norwich, UK. Exploring different types of swap widens our view of swapping practices: the interplay of space, exchange, and sociality, and the diverse journeys or flows which garments take. I consider clothing "mobile" matter, rather than merely the accumulated possession of individuals (Gregson and Beale 2004, p. 692). I examine how swaps sustain collective negotiations of identity and style. At private swaps, for example, clothing's inalienability from previous wearers can prove problematic, blurring boundaries between self and other, whereas at public swaps, the opportunity to experiment with style can be liberating. Finally, I examine swapping's relationship to wider fashion systems, both dependant on and challenging first-hand consumption. Swappers' attitudes often suggest opposition to mainstream fashion, although this is complicated by the flow of clothing into swaps and the volume of clothing acquisition. Nevertheless, this article explores how, in circumventing the pressures of shopping and ethical issues of the fashion industry, swappers may find space in which to question and challenge dominant modes of consumption.

KEYWORDS

secondhand, fashion studies, cultural studies, clothing swaps, clothes exchange

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INTRODUCTION

Clothing swaps are events or parties centred around exchanging clothing for free. Although clothes swapping in its current form dates back to at least the 1980s (Stanton 2018), in the past decade or so it has emerged as a popular practice in the UK, partly due to increasing concerns around sustainability and ethics in fashion production and consumption (Rathinamoorthy et al. 2017). There is currently no literature on the history of clothes swaps, although swapping of childrenswear was practised in the Second World War, as evidenced by a painting at the Imperial War Museum (Gibbs 1943). Sometimes referred to as 'swishing' (perhaps to elevate the glamour of swapping [Futerra (no date)]) the activity began to enter the mainstream in the UK around 2007. Although there is no statistical research on swapping, the leading online platform for arranging swishing parties, swishing.com, estimates that 7000 women per year engage with their affiliated events, suggesting the total number of people swapping clothing is much higher (Shea no date). The increasing prevalence of clothes swapping is also evidenced in the swathe of online blogs and articles on the subject since the late 2000s (eg Van der Zee 2014; Calarco 2014).

While several academic articles examine clothing swaps from a consumer-research perspective (Long and Fain 2015; Matthews and Nelson-Hodges 2016), these are rather cursory and there is—as yet—no published socio-cultural work on swapping. Two articles from the early-2000s examining other forms of second-hand clothing circulation, however, were instrumental to my research. Firstly, social anthropologist Alison Clarke's (2000) study of 'nearly-new' childrenswear sales; secondly, research by cultural geographers Nicky Gregson and Vikki Beale (2004) into circulation of used maternity wear. Both articles highlight the significance of clothing exchange in strengthening female networks; a theme which my research builds on. These authors, however, focus on the specific meanings of particular, bounded "clothing economies" (Gregson and Beale 2004, p. 395) linked to household provisioning, which they consider distinct systems of provision set apart from other clothing practices. My research, on the other hand, suggests that clothing swaps form the centre of multiple clothing flows and are therefore intrinsically related to other clothing channels, including first-hand, with which they are in a complex relationship of dependence and opposition.

Since the late-1980s, second-hand objects and exchange have emerged as subjects of academic enquiry, partially through an imperative to challenge prevailing narratives and ideas about production, consumption and consumer culture. Anthropologists such as John F. Sherry made considerable strides in shifting this body of work away from the purely economic and market-oriented towards the cultural and anthropological. Analysing an American flea-market, Sherry (1990) posits second-hand sites of exchange as the late-

twentieth century's equivalent of the fair or carnival. The flea-market's position in relation to mainstream commodity capitalism is significant since it "produces a decentring and recontextualising experience for consumers, permitting the re-embedding of market relations in social relations". A "liminal" place, the market allows subversion albeit within a highly specific and bounded context. For consumers, its operation outside typical structures of exchange is "exciting" and even "dangerous" in its extension of agency to buyers (Sherry 1990, p. 27-28). However, its unpredictability—when compared to formal, first-hand retail—unsettles those expecting clear value determination and buyer/seller boundaries (Sherry 1990, p. 18).

These early observations of the dynamics of second-hand spaces continue to be relevant to contemporary configurations of so-called 'alternative' economies. In particular, the tensions Sherry (1990) observes between order and disorder, structure and anti-structure are echoed in varied interdisciplinary work on second-hand through the 1990s and 2000s to the present-day. Studies of second-hand exchange—though by no means comprehensive—have since explored car-boot sales, charity shopping and the rise of 'retro' or 'vintage' fashion. This reflects the diversification and increasing visibility of second-hand consumption in the UK and North America which, accelerating in the late-2000s, now encompasses a vast array of sites, as second-hand consumption shifts from the margins towards the mainstream. In the UK, popular second-hand channels now include online peer-to-peer auction sites and apps, vintage boutiques and chains, alongside the more traditional channels jumble sales and charity shops.

But, as geographers Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe (2003, p. 52-53) write, these spaces and practices remain controversial and ambiguous to both buyers and sellers and are often neglected in studies of consumption. The centrality of second-hand to everyday consumption, however, mean that these 'alternative' practices are surely critical to understanding our material culture. Recent research by Fashion Revolution (Ditty 2018) suggests around 38% of consumers in Western Europe consider ethical and environmental issues when buying clothes, while a 2020 Mckinsey report indicates younger consumers increasingly intend to buy garments second-hand. Contemporary concerns around over-production, labour issues and environmental damage suggest second-hand fashion must surely be subject to greater scrutiny by scholars, in addition to greater attention from consumers.

This article is structured as follows: firstly, I present the key theoretical concepts informing my research: clothing flows, sociality, transforming the self through style, and constructions of the 'alternative' and value. Next, I illustrate my research approach and methodology: a multi-sited ethnography of three distinct swap settings over time. In the following sections

I explore my case studies, examining swapping-as-practice through the lenses of clothing flows, sociality, and self-exploration. I also consider the varied ways in which value is constructed and understood through swapping, and swapping's potential as 'alternative' consumption. I conclude by reflecting and expanding on these themes, identifying distinct value-systems and relationships with the economic marketplace across the swap settings.

KEY CONCEPTS

Clothing flows

Gregson and Crewe (2003, p. 142) describe the movement of second-hand goods as fluid and "circuitous", challenging conceptualisations of these objects which mirror first-hand goods, which are transformed into "possessions" at the final stage of a linear "commodity chain". Instead, second-hand object journeys are "non-linear, unpredictable, fortuitous and subjective" (Gregson and Crewe 2003, p. 142). Objects are in flux, their meanings and value shifting through space and time. Likewise, I suggest the value and significance of clothing continues to evolve as it is shared, swapped and discarded. Social anthropologist Sophie Woodward (2007, p. 112) introduces the term "flows" to describe the ongoing movement of clothing exchanged between housemates, reflecting the dynamic movements of garments which may not be understood to "belong" to any one individual. Gregson and Beale (2004, p. 690-692) similarly conceptualise the wardrobe as a "temporary holding space"; the locus of multiple "clothing flows". They argue that while recent work examining the centrality of clothing to everyday lives has focused on clothing consumption "as accumulation", there is value in approaching the wardrobe "as practice" (Gregson and Beale 2004, p. 699).

My research considers swapping "as practice", as negotiation and exploration, linked to other clothing practices, transactions and "flows". Considering swaps as the nexus of "clothing flows" reveals clothing as "mobile" matter, not necessarily the possession of an individual but a resource shared through and between swaps (Gregson and Beale 2004, p. 692). Following both Gregson and Beale (2004) and Woodward (2007), I suggest clothing journeys do not end at the point of swapping. Rather, the future movement of garments is often actively negotiated at a swap; some return to their original owners, while others are passed to new wearers, only to be swapped again. Clothing also enters swaps with a variety of "biographies" (Kopytoff 1986) and through various (first- and second-hand) channels. Swapping's reliance on and proximity to other channels can be illuminated by considering swaps as the confluence of various "flows".

Unique Sociality

The sociality of sharing clothing is, according to both Woodward (2007) and Gregson and Beale (2004), inextricably linked with clothing flows. In other words, pleasure and social value derived from swapping relies on the actual practice of exchanging clothing, rather than any value attached to the clothing itself. Woodward (2007, p. 113) suggests that friendships are created and sustained “in the processes of exchange”. Sharing clothing is linked to ritualistic processes of getting ready and going out together—and this “is in part how [a] shared life together is constituted” (Woodward 2007, p. 113). Similarly, for Gregson and Beale (2004, p. 693) “socialities of women and key social identities are formed” through circulation of maternity wear.

In public spaces, too, the exchange of second-hand consumption generates particular socialities. Clarke’s (2000, p. 93) ‘nearly-new’ childrenswear sales—with an echo of Sherry’s flea market—exhibit a “bazaar-like atmosphere [...] a unique arena of consumption bounded by friendship, ethics, expertise, solidarity and pleasure”. Sharing clothing here elicits sharing of personal stories and reflections, ultimately forging friendships: “as mothers swap anecdotes about cast-off items, formerly intimate parts of the material culture of their everyday routines and social relations, they generate a unique form of sociality”, bonding women through the discursive practice of “mother-swapping” (Clarke 2000, p. 89). Clarke (2000) suggests the goods acquired at these sales could easily be bought through other channels for similar prices, but the sales offer a break from everyday routine and opportunities to socialise. I suggest that swaps are equally ‘unique’ in their sociality, fostering bonding and community in ways not typically possible through shopping.

The majority of swappers are women and, as such, the forms of sociality I describe here are specifically gendered and—I suggest—inextricable from the centrality of clothing to women’s everyday experience. Feminist social theorist Iris Marion Young (1990, p. 184) comments on the bonding power of clothes: “Women often establish rapport with one another by remarking on their clothes, and doing so often introduces a touch of intimacy [...] into serious or impersonal situations”. Clarke (2000, p. 91) also describes how clothing becomes a conduit for sharing experiences and anecdotes, in turn enabling “the gradual development of friendships”. In Young’s (1990, p. 184) view, women use clothing as a conduit to understanding and “let[ting] each other into” their lives. While a notably positive—possibly optimistic—view of clothing’s mediating power, I find Young’s comments useful in illuminating the unique sociality of swaps.

Selfhood, style and transformation

In this article I refer to the negotiation of self/selves through clothing not as the external representation of an inner ‘true’ identity, but to recognise the potential of clothing to

transform the body and afford exploration of an ever-shifting sense of self. Thinking of identity in terms of “becoming” rather than “being” posits the self as variable and iterative rather than static (Kaiser 2012, p. 20). This also reflects how negotiations of self do not occur independently in the mind of the individual: rather they are navigated within and through a shifting network of social relations, memories, experiences and associations (Kaiser, 2012).

Following Woodward (2007), this article challenges the simplistic view that exploration of the self/selves through clothing is an act of individual agency—instead, I argue that clothing choices are bound and guided by relationships—especially those between women. As Woodward (2007, p. 102) highlights, there exists a tension between dependence and autonomy in negotiations of dress in relationships, particularly in fashioning the self, where “connectivities and dependence” underlie an ostensible culture of individualism. For example, when considering outfits for a special occasion, women may consult friends for advice, leading to greater confidence and a positive sense of “being and becoming” (Kaiser 2012, p. 20). Conversely, they may find a gifted garment inhibits their “being and becoming” and yet feel obligated to wear the item as the materialisation of an important relationship (Woodward 2007, p. 110). In clothes swapping identities are negotiated through a nexus of associations with others, and moreover, this tension between dependence and autonomy occurs at different levels—including personal relationships, but extending to the wider structures of the fashion system.

Fashioning the 'alternative'

My research suggests many swappers feel critical of the fashion system, particularly around the ability to choose clothing that fits or enhances their sense of self. Whilst individuals have agency to explore style, this occurs within the wider economic, political and cultural landscape, producing “an ever-changing interplay between freedoms and constraints” (Kaiser 2012, p. 31). Amy Twigger-Holroyd (2017), in her book *Folk Fashion*, explores this interplay as regards the high-street, which she deems a space of “enclosure”. Whilst capitalism leads us to view the plethora of cheap, mass-produced goods as productive of choice, Twigger-Holroyd (2017, p. 53) suggests high-street fashion is “deceptively homogenous”—a feeling echoed by many swappers. As a metaphorical vision for the potential future of fashion, Twigger-Holroyd (2017, p. 59; p. 67) presents the “fashion commons”: an open space through which wearers roam, drawing on a “diversity of options” to re-establish fashion as a “life-enhancing resource”. Despite the limitations of this rather utopian vision, the idea of the “fashion commons” is useful in understanding how displacing the power structures of the fashion industry might contribute to individual wellbeing. Although swapping’s position as ‘alternative’ is debatable, I suggest that it may provide greater freedom in experimenting with clothing choices and, by extension, benefit self-

exploration.

Constructing value

Clothes swapping's most obvious departure from conventional consumption practices—both first- and second-hand- is the absence of monetary transactions. Anthropological theories of exchange usually turn on the distinction between two categories of goods: the commodity and the gift. These oppositional categories are rooted in the dualisms of economic/domestic and public/private. James G. Carrier (1995, p. 21) usefully summarises the distinction between “gifts” and “commodities”:

[These categories] echo the ways that many people in the West understand different parts of their lives. They [tend to consider] the household, family, friends and neighbours as defining an area of life characterised by gift relations. Conversely, [...] work and the store, and economic activities more generally, [are] characterised by commodity relations. Furthermore, they [...] understand these two realms in ways that stress and even heighten the differences between them.

This opposition is problematised somewhat by second-hand exchange, which is often more informal than typical market exchange and may elide the domestic with the economic—as with ‘nearly-new’ sales. In second-hand spheres buyer and seller are often brought into closer contact than in market transactions and the seller is less likely to be “divorced” from the goods exchanged, in the manner of commodity relations (Carrier 1995, p. 21).

On the other hand, central to the ‘ideal’ gift is inalienability from the giver. Put simply, inalienable objects are significantly “associated with a person, a possession” such that they continue to bear something of the giver (Carrier 1995, p. 24). Together with the notions of personal obligation and reciprocity, the gift's inalienability constitutes an ongoing, binding relationship between giver and receiver. In this article I use the notion of inalienability as an indicator of how value is constructed and experienced in different swap settings. I suggest that clothing swapped in private/domestic settings is more likely to be imbued with sentimental value and therefore inalienable from the giver, whereas clothes swapped in more public spaces are likely to be valued as commodities.

Swapping's relationship with shopping is also illuminated by the concept of thrift. Miller (1998 p. 56; p. 61-62) argues that—rather than achieving monetary savings—thrift is a discursive means by which individuals demonstrate “reticence towards expenditure”; performing thrift is “the end in itself”. This complicates any understanding of swapping which emphasises financial expediency; instead, it may be about “the thrill” of the bargain, a way to demonstrate “clever” consumption (Miller 1998, p. 61). This valorisation of swapping as

'thrift' may be embedded in women's relationship to shopping, too, particularly for those also performing mothering and household provisioning roles.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, SETTING AND STRUCTURE

Setting and case studies

Through participant observation in three swap case studies, I explored the diversity of swapping practices and the various, sometimes opposing, forms of exchange and sociality at play. The three settings chosen represent points on a spectrum between private and public, informal to formal and the following discussion moves through the case studies in this way. I limited case studies to one geographical context—Norwich, a city in the East of England. Besides being my home, this location is significant since Norwich's cultural and historical atmosphere and reputation may be particularly conducive to swapping. Known for its independent shops and markets, Norwich has prolific charity, vintage and antiques trades, meaning second-hand consumption is very well-established. In 2018 the opening of a charity-run swap shop, New-U, explored later in this essay, enhanced awareness of swapping and brought the practice to a wider audience. Additionally, in 2019 Norwich became the UK's first accredited Sharing City, committing to developing sustainable growth and sharing best practice with other international Sharing Cities (Norwich Sharing City, 2019). Being a small city, Norwich also lends itself to comparison between swaps, since I encountered some of the same participants at different events. Initial research across the sites suggested a swapping community exists within Norwich, and certain swappers therefore appear in more than one case study. Looking across these swaps also mirrors the ongoing material flows of garments, which may be discarded, swapped, worn and swapped again in a different context.

Swap One was a semi-regular swap held privately between friends, attended in April 2018. At the time of my research, the friends had been swapping clothes together roughly every 6 months for the last 4 years, taking turns to host swaps at their homes. The swaps were very informal, each friend bringing a bag of clothes which were emptied into a pile from which clothes were picked, tried on and discarded according to whim. Swap Two was a public event run monthly at Biddy's vintage-style tearoom in Norwich. Marketed as a 'swishing' event, the swap was small-scale with between 6 and 12 swappers attending each month and involved a fee which included refreshments. Swappers received points for unwanted clothes, which could then be 'spent' on other items. Many swappers I spoke to were 'regulars' at Biddy's and used this swap in conjunction with other second-hand channels, including other clothing swaps. Finally, Swap Three is New-U, a charity-run swap shop where customers exchange clothing for points in the form of vouchers. Points can be accumulated and 'spent' either in-store or at occasional large swap events. Much more formalised than the other settings, the shop is open 5 days per week and is arranged in the style of clothing retail, using branded

tags and signs.

Methods and approach

I utilised ethnographic and autoethnographic methods to enable exploration of the complex, social nature of both clothing generally and swapping itself. Reflecting the inseparability of clothing from emotion, sociality and lived experience, these methods afforded a situated and nuanced investigation of swapping as practice. Taking part in swaps as participant-observer allowed a deeper understanding of their sociality and forms of exchange: Gregson and Crewe (2003, p. 212) note the importance of immersive field work to “examine the production of [...] spaces through practice”.

These methods also require consideration of my position as both researcher and researched. My scholarly interest in clothes swaps cannot be separated from my personal enjoyment of swapping and wider passion for second-hand consumption. Additionally, in 2020 I began working in the swap shop explored in this article (Swap Three). In acknowledging my involvement in the topic I aim to contribute to a growing body of research which embraces researcher subjectivity, rather than effaces it. Informing my work—in this and other respects—is Gregson and Beale’s (2004) exploration of maternity clothing, which involves Beale as a participant. The authors consider this “a practice of writing” involving authors as research subjects without celebrating their involvement; similarly, Huopalainen and Satama (2020, p. 103) view autoethnography as “reflexive practice”, aiming to “fruitfully weave subjective experiences with theoretical insights”.

Further, the “shifting and merging” of roles is characteristic of second-hand spaces, which are typically informal and often domestic or reliant on volunteers (Edwards and Gibson 2017, p.73). These spaces are also often feminised and, a woman myself, in this article I am exploring women’s experiences. Arguably, clothing is uniquely central to women’s experience, both personal and collective (Young 1990). I thereby aim to contribute to a growing body of research foregrounding women’s experiences, challenging assumptions about clothing consumption and unearthing ‘alternative’ second-hand economies.

Alongside my own observations and reflections, this research was shaped by conversations with swappers, many of which led to semi-structured, predominantly individual, interviews. Research methods varied slightly between settings, in response to the constraints, atmosphere and sociality of each space. For example, I followed up my observations of Swap One with a group interview, because I was interested in the collective and highly enmeshed ways in which these friends understood and approached their clothing practices. By contrast, this was not particularly appropriate for Swap Three, being a more impersonal setting where

I instead draw on my observations as both swapper and, latterly, shop manager. As such, my research process was iterative and flexible, following other feminist scholars (eg Kawamura 2011), who aim to “bring novel, embodied and personal insights” (Huopalainen and Satama 2020, p.103).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, swaps are almost exclusively the domain of women. While I do not explore gender as constructed through swapping per se—although this would be a fascinating area for future research—clothing swaps are created predominantly by and for women and as such the atmosphere, exchange and sociality of swaps is specifically feminine. I also note the predominance of white-British, middle-class women at swaps but, despite this relative homogeneity, the age range of swappers is more diverse, my research participants being aged 24–55. The extent to which the atmosphere and sociality of swaps is exclusionary to certain groups is unfortunately not within the scope of this research, but further studies could explore issues of inclusion/exclusion around gender, race, class, sexuality or clothing size. In the following sections I explore each case study in turn, introducing the setting, context and key procedures of each swap before examining swapping-as-practice with reference to the key concepts illustrated in the previous section.

SWAP ONE: “WEARING THEIR CLOTHES”

At Swap One, four friends negotiate discursively their individual ‘looks’, bodies and identities through clothing. At the time of my research Flo, Greta and Jane had been swapping clothes together for around four years. I joined them for a swap in 2018 and a follow-up interview in 2019, in which we discussed their past and present experiences of swapping together. The swaps developed as an economic way to refresh the friends’ respective wardrobes during their financially challenging undergraduate days. The group also share a left-wing political standpoint, encompassing concerns about labour exploitation and the environment, and these political and ethical drivers along with economic necessity meant the friends were already keen second-hand shoppers, before they began swapping.

Aside from providing the material benefit of ‘new’ clothing, the swaps offer a novel way to socialise and relax together. Although the friends are now in full-time work and much better off financially, their clothes swaps continue as a social and intimate activity; as Jane states, “it’s a fun thing [to do with] people that you care about”. Beyond this, the fact that invitations are rarely extended to other friends suggests that swapping establishes a level of intimacy exceeding that of most other social events.

“Is this me?”: Collective negotiations of the self

This swap relies on a shared “taste community” (Gregson and Crewe 2003, p. 180) which

encompasses not only openness to wearing second-hand clothes but also a shared aesthetic: in Jane's words, a "crossover of taste" which includes brightly coloured clothing, bold prints and a somewhat "quirky" style. However, within this taste community there remains a perception of style variations between individuals, which are frequently articulated and reasserted. Exclamations such as "that [skirt]'s so Jane!" abound, and occasionally these perceived style differentiations are explicitly outlined, as when Jane explains: "out of Flo's things Greta tends to take [...] hippy-ish stuff and I tend to take the print blouses". The friends thereby attempt to characterise an individual's identity in certain items or styles which they feel convey a sense of that person's unique 'self' in relation to the rest of the group.

However, exchanging clothes also presents the possibility of "expanding the self" through new styles and clothing combinations (Woodward 2007, p. 114). A tension therefore exists between this possibility of expansion and the need to 'fix' a more stable or continuous notion of the self. This tension is perhaps discernible in comments like "I feel like this *could* be me" and "I think this is more *you* than me" which are frequently reiterated as the swappers try on clothing and reflect on the look and feel of garments on their bodies. Crucially, these negotiations occur at both individual and collective levels, with the friends often consulting one another to ask "is this me?", navigating how garments sit with their ostensible style preferences. For instance, Greta convinces Jane to take a jumpsuit which Jane initially feels is not 'her' by emphasising the monochromatic colour scheme and floral pattern which are "so Jane-y", encouraging Jane to assimilate the item into her sense of "being and becoming" (Kaiser 2011, p. 20).

Flo's culottes: a 'troublesome' garment

Indeed, there are some items which pose problems when swapped as a result of their close association with the previous wearer. Second-hand clothing is "troublesome matter" (Gregson and Beale 2004, p. 696) and this swap illuminates the challenges and complexities of gifting and re-appropriating items into a new wardrobe. A pair of culottes (wide-legged mid-length shorts; See Figure 1) swapped from Flo to Greta is one such troublesome garment, provoking ambivalence around its disposal and wear due to its inalienability from Flo.



FIGURE 1 Flo's culottes. Photograph by the author.

Greta describes the culottes as “the Flo-iest”, reminiscing that Flo was actually wearing them when they first met: “I remember seeing this girl with amazing purple culottes with net over them, a purple top and pom-poms in her hair”. She adds: “I was like ‘this is a cool girl! She wears big purple culottes and I like that!’”. Intriguingly, according to this recollection it was Flo’s appearance which attracted Greta to Flo and ostensibly initiated their friendship. The significance of this memory provoked Greta to claim the culottes when Flo decided to swap them, as she felt they were too strongly associated with Flo to be discarded—in her words, “I was like ‘the Flo culottes can’t go! We cannot let [them] go! They mustn’t leave our orbit!’”. Not only are the culottes—for Greta—so inalienable from Flo, in saying “We cannot let them go!” [my emphasis] she invokes a collective responsibility that suggests shared ownership of the garment. As Carrier (1995, p. 24) asks: “Where does this relationship between possessor and possession reside?”. It may in fact “exist in the minds of several people and so be a social understanding of the object”. This truly “social understanding of the object” renders the culottes inextricable from Flo, Greta’s and Jane’s friendship and with their present sense of “being and becoming” (Kaiser 2011, p. 20).

Despite her attachment to them, the culottes’ inalienability became problematic for Greta upon wearing them. She recalls going out wearing the culottes with a top also acquired from Flo but, finding she felt “too Flo”, returning home to change. She reflects that perhaps her memories of Flo wearing the culottes inhibited her from assimilating them as her own possession, reflecting the liminal status of clothing “kept-while-given” (Clarke 2000, p. 88). Eventually, through repeated wear with other items, Greta partially overcame the culottes’ inalienability. The culottes approximate the “ideal” gift; Flo’s presence remains attached to

the garment, forming a material link between giver and receiver (Carrier 1995, p. 24; Woodward 2007, p. 116).

Greta acknowledges that she would likely reject other clothing so strongly associated with a friend since “I would always feel like I was wearing their clothes.” However, some garments are an exception since their close entanglement with a relationship or embodiment of the giver can positively contribute to her “being and becoming”. Greta remembers Flo’s outfit seemed “super bold” and part of her attraction to Flo was feeling “I’d like to be that bold”. Thus, Greta feels she is ‘channelling’ the boldness that she admired through wearing the culottes. The culottes collapse aspects of both Greta’s and Flo’s identities and of their relationship, “dissolv[ing] to a degree the unique and independent identity of the possessor, merging it into a group identity” (Carrier 1995, p. 26).

Giftgiving the self

Clothes exchanged at this swap, then, often bear strong associations with the previous wearers, approximating gifting, which “regenerat[es] the relationship between giver and receiver” (Carrier 1995, p. 24). Pleasure-in-gifting is intrinsic to the swap’s sociality: the friends describe the “nice feeling” of seeing their old clothes being re-worn. However, exchange theory emphasises not only the pleasure but also the discomfort felt by the giver, who is “mak[ing] a present of some part of oneself” (Mauss 2002 [1954], p. 12). At swaps this discomfort is partially absent since a recipient is not usually selected by the giver—swappers are able to assess the items for themselves without the obligation of the gift. However, Flo reveals there is at least an obligation that each friend “has to be [...] ready to try on my dirty old t-shirts” even if they are undesirable or unlikely to fit. In a sense the swappers “make a present” of themselves simply in contributing items to the swap; Flo’s comment suggests an anxiety that her clothing might be rejected and, by extension, the scope of her friendships will be limited.

Flo’s quote also demonstrates how reciprocity is valued at these swaps in terms of *willingness* to take part and *openness* to sharing, rather than reciprocal swapping of items. Very rarely do the friends mention the quantity or quality of garments contributed. Swapped clothes are rarely framed as like-for-like *exchanges*, similarly their economic worth is never mentioned. Rather, it is the swap’s atmosphere of reciprocity and potential for bonding which are significant and must not be infringed. Willingness to share something, whether ‘dirty old t-shirts’ or the comical image of oneself squeezing into a garment three sizes too small, is central to the swap’s intimate sociality.

SWAP TWO: BIDDY'S AND FREEDOM THROUGH CLOTHING FLOWS

Whereas Swap One is noteworthy for the significance of individual items, central to the friends' understanding of themselves and their relationships, my discussions at public swap settings did not often place individual garments centre-stage. Instead, the flexibility of ongoing clothing flows appears to be more significant at Swaps Two and Three. I conducted research at Biddy's tearoom from August 2018, ending in March 2019, when the monthly swap was cancelled in favour of larger biannual events, reflecting the precarity of these sites of exchange. As a participant-observer, I accumulated experience of the swap's procedures, noting my observations and conversations with other swappers, and following these up through individual interviews. By attending regularly, I built a network of participants who provided rich insights into their experiences of swapping, and who connected me with other swaps.

The Biddy's swap operated a points system largely based on subjective judgements by the organiser as to the clothing's desirability. On arrival participants handed over their clothes and would chat politely, enjoying refreshments, before receiving a handwritten card showing their allotted points. In a curious mix of the formal and informal—arguably characteristic of many swaps—despite implementing a 'pointing' system the organiser was often lenient when balancing points accrued and spent at the end of each swap. There were also no (spoken) rules regarding the number of items one could swap.



FIGURE 2 Clothes laid out for swapping at Biddy's. Photograph by the author.

Crucial to my understanding of this swap is its location in a vintage-style tearoom. Biddy's

confers a general air of 'pastness' and 'Britishness' through its interior design, furnishing, branding and catering, connecting visitors to idealised visions of recent history which include wartime rationing and 'make-do-and-mend'. This may help to position clothes swapping as slower, conscientious consuming and a resourceful act of provisioning. Swapping is held in a small, dimly-lit lounge with mismatched coffee tables and comfy sofas. In this cramped environment, there is no space for clothes rails, so clothing is laid out on tables, sofas and draped over chairs in groups according to their assigned points value [see Figure 2]. Evocative of other informal, ad hoc second-hand exchange, this arrangement encourages rummaging and searching. Such "regimes of representation" allow swappers to peruse clothing "for themselves", avoiding the "overtly mapped-out" spaces characteristic of formal retail (Gregson and Crewe 2000, p. 53-54).

"You can always swap it back": Embracing clothing flows

Here, swappers frequently mentioned the ease of selecting clothing which could be taken home, tried on, kept and worn or re-swapped if deemed unsuitable. Of course, most retail channels (even charity shops) allow clothes to be returned—the difference here is that no money is spent, with no restrictions on returns and 'no questions asked'. Expenditure—alongside other constraints of formalised shopping, as we shall see—is experienced as a barrier to acquiring clothing and a cause of stress and indecision which is alleviated in a swapping environment.

As explained by Lisa, in her early twenties, reflecting back on Biddy's swaps: "because I wasn't really spending any money it didn't really matter what I picked up and if it didn't fit I could just bring it back, and [swapping avoided] anything too stressful—like trying to decide" whether to purchase. Becca, a committed swapper in her late twenties, is more explicit in contrasting swapping with shopping: "I find it a hassle to shop [...] Swishing is easier as you can always take stuff back to [Biddy's] or another swap. You can always swap it back". Thus, swappers embrace swapped clothing as "mobile matter" flowing into and between swaps. Their pleasure-in-swapping comes in part from the continual movement of clothing between swappers, with swap events central nodes in this network of flows. There is no financial obligation to keep an item because no money has been spent, and therefore decision-making is much less of a burden. Thus, swapping is contrasted positively with shopping; it is flexible, "guilt-free" and pleasurable, rather than "a hassle".

Testing on the body and taking 'risks'

The flexibility of these clothing flows means swappers feel able to take more "risks" when choosing items and often explore new styles—for instance, before attending swaps Becca stuck fairly rigidly to a uniform of jeans and t-shirt, but now wears dresses and skirts. This is

especially significant since Becca feels she is “not good” with clothes; she finds it difficult to judge the appropriateness of certain garments and often worries about how her choices will be perceived. Despite this, through swapping she now has “the confidence” to wear a much wider range of garments. Swapping’s potential to expand an individual’s sense of “being and becoming” is therefore twofold: first, it increases the options available and second, it removes certain barriers to exploring unfamiliar styles within those options, enabling increased confidence in clothing decisions.

For Greta, the flexibility of swaps allows for more thorough testing of clothing’s suitability and assimilation with the self. Her comments also highlight the centrality of the body to feelings about clothing and, ultimately, decision-making about what to wear, keep and discard:

[I found] I could bring clothes home, keep them for long enough to [...] try them with a couple of different things [...] see how they felt—*really* see how they felt—and then guilt-free just give them back. And technically a lot of shops say they provide that [...] but it's very hard when keeping a label on something to feel whether you're actually comfortable in it—to go out and about wearing it when you're worried you might not be able to get your refund at the end.

Negotiating the body in and through clothes is central to Greta’s experience of swaps, since she began attending Biddy’s directly after a period of weight gain. She explains that for several months she experienced pain from wearing too-small clothing, feeling that “getting new clothes would be giving up”. Of course, financial expense was another barrier—for Greta, the idea of spending so much money on replacement clothing felt like a punishment for gaining weight. Swapping therefore enabled Greta to come to terms with her changing body shape through trying new styles and sizes “guilt-free”.

Cosy sociality

This is not the only way in which swappers juxtapose shopping and swapping. Like many swappers, Becca is explicitly ‘anti-shopping’, challenging herself to a full year of not buying clothes. She discusses her growing concerns regarding over-production of clothing and unethical labour practices but, typical of many swappers, her avoidance of conventional retail is also motivated by a dislike of the atmosphere and product offerings of high-street shops. She disparages the busyness of shops, the sheer volume of clothing on display and feels that different shops often sell very similar items. Further, she feels alienated by the clothes on offer, which are “never what I want”—the styles are “too young” or the wrong season. For Becca, swapping is comparatively pleasurable and relaxing; almost a tonic to the stress of shopping.

The sociality of swapping is also identified by Becca in contrast with her experience of the high-street. At Biddy's "you can have conversations", unlike when navigating a busy store. Becca explains that she is unlikely to go shopping with friends nowadays because they are all so busy; many of her friends have young children and, in any case, it is no fun to accompany a friend "on a mission" for a particular item. In contrast, Biddy's is felt to be a stress-free chance to socialise as well as to select new clothes—indeed, it seems that for some swappers the sociality of swaps is at least as important as acquiring clothing. The particular space and atmosphere that Biddy's constructs is of course significant here, evoking feelings of comfort—in Becca's words, "it's like going into somebody's living room". This cosy sociality, enhancing the swap's perceived divergence from first-hand channels, offers a "safe space" for clothing consumption, whereby the "mission" of shopping is replaced with leisurely browsing and rummaging.

Thrifting and use-value

Becca also suggests economic motivations for swapping, explaining how she is keeping to a strict budget and saving money which she would previously have spent on clothes for travelling. She often sources items for holidays at Biddy's, and at other swaps she acquires items for her male partner. Becca's pragmatic use of swaps is common among Biddy's swappers, some of whom even bring their (female) children along to choose clothing. Here, swapping is a form of provisioning partially motivated and valorised by thrift. Applying Miller's understanding of thrift as rarely concerned with measurable savings, we might interpret swappers' thriftiness as the "end in itself"—in other words, swappers perform thriftiness, perhaps influenced by the café's associations with wartime resourcefulness.

Of course, in this context clothing is free and so there is very likely some level of monetary saving for swappers; however, this assumes a previous regular pattern of spending and a change in shopping behaviour as a result of swapping. The idea that swapping saves money is also questioned by the volume of garments obtained at Biddy's: it seems unlikely that Becca, for instance, was previously buying at least four or five new items a month. Thus, the 'freedom' of acquiring clothing at Biddy's may translate into acquiring more clothing than would otherwise be bought, rather undermining the association of swapping with 'alternative' consumption.

For Miller, "the thrill" of thrift is "in the bargain", but at Biddy's the thrill may be more in the use-value of an item. In other words, rather than the perceived monetary value, it is the perception of an item's suitability and potential for wear that signals a "good find". Becca describes a "really nice, summery" yellow dress found at Biddy's which she is "saving for

best". Tellingly, she says "when I saw it I knew I'd use it". Without overstating the significance of the word "use", this is characteristic of the way Becca talks about swapped clothes—in terms of their practicality and suitability for specific occasions. In capturing value through the usefulness of a garment, swappers like Becca are valorised both as thrifty, 'clever' consumers and conscientious rejectors of the values of the fashion industry.

SWAP THREE: NEW-U, SWAPPING OR SHOPPING?

The third case study is the most formal: New-U is a charity-run swap shop in Norwich city centre, allowing customers to exchange clothing for tokens which can be 'spent' in the shop. Initially trialled through 'pop-up' shops, the project was awarded funding to establish a permanent site in 2018. Now a registered charity, New-U also runs a series of events to fundraise and raise the profile of the store. Through my research I attended two 'Style and Swap' ticketed evening events in addition to conducting participant-observation within the shop. In 2020, I was employed as a Shop Manager, allowing me to build on my existing research through new insights as an 'insider'. The following discussion weaves together observations from both my initial research in 2019 and from my experiences as a staff member between 2020 and 2022. Following Edwards and Gibson (2017, p.73), this allowed me to expand my perspective to capture "the spectrum of participation" in New-U.

The formalisation of swapping

New-U is arranged similarly to conventional clothing retailers, with clothes neatly arranged on permanent fixtures according to colour and garment type. Visual merchandising is simple, utilising re-purposed materials such as wooden crates, aspiring to appear boutique-like, avoiding associations with traditional charity shops [see Figure 3]. Items are 'priced' with tags signalling their points value and branded points vouchers are used as currency [see Figure 4]. Thus, clothes swapping is formalised in and through this space and swappers are re-modelled as customers. Customers here are more diverse than at other swaps, particularly in age, with regular customers ranging from teenagers to pensioners.



FIGURE 3 Interior of the store (New-U, 2022). Photograph by the author.



FIGURE 4 New-U Points tokens (New-U, 2019).

Despite the resemblance to conventional retail, once customers are aware of New-U's function as a swap shop they often interpret it as a community space, with comments like "it's a really good facility!" and "this really makes a difference". New-U's location in Norwich's

Castle Quarter shopping centre is key to this understanding of the space, since in recent years a number of empty shops have been re-purposed as free 'amusement rooms', including an honesty library, now also run by New-U. Particularly since Norwich attained 'sharing city' status, New-U is promoted alongside other sharing services and partners with Norwich council to provide clothing for vulnerable people. Thus, swapping is formalised in another way; legitimised as philanthropy, swapping becomes a way to 'do good' in the community.

Regulating and (re)assessing value

As Gregson and Crewe (2003, p. 83-84) discuss, the efforts of second-hand retailers to translate into space appropriate forms of exchange and relations between objects and transactors remain open to subversion and "rupture" by consumers. Indeed, at New-U many would-be customers struggle significantly on entering the store to situate it in relation to other channels, first thinking it an independent boutique, before being informed of its charitable aim and finally grasping the swap shop concept. Even then, as Shop Manager I often have to explain the concept in detail several times before the process of swapping is fully understood.

This may reflect the uniqueness of New-U's concept, but also underlines how swaps, as second-hand spaces, operate outside the confines of 'typical' (first-hand) exchange practices, and as such can be sites of ambiguity and confusion for consumers. Sherry (1989) highlights this instability in his analysis of a flea market: despite the difference in form and a distance of 30 years, the potential for ambiguity and anxiety for consumers still inheres in second-hand spaces. It also perhaps explains New-U's attempts to regulate and formalise transactions: aligning itself with forms of exchange which customers recognise and understand, and ruling out undesirable practices associated with less formal second-hand spaces, such as dumping bags of junk, or bartering. However, in regulating swapping in this way, does New-U undermine its appeal—particularly to seasoned swappers? Perhaps surprisingly, given their apparent aversion to shopping, many Biddy's regulars also frequently visit New-U. However, they tend to consider these sites as different versions of swapping, with different atmospheres, socialities and quality of garments available.

Beyond the increased convenience, availability and choice presented by a permanent shop which takes in approximately 200 items per day, New-U's appeal rests on the perception that higher value and better-quality clothing is on offer. Becca, a thrifty provisioner at Biddy's, lists from memory designer dresses acquired from New-U; Greta similarly was thrilled to find a Laura Ashley dress and "brand new—still with the labels on—very nice Italian designer trousers". Here, the attributes which signal value parallel those typically associated

with first-hand purchases—namely, brand name and status (i.e. high-end; designer), and newness. This is in part established and reinforced through New-U's 'pointing' policy, which values items according to their brand—e.g. a Primark top receives two points, whereas a Fat Face top receives ten. Challenging swapping's claim to the 'alternative', New-U here approximates first-hand retail much more closely than other swaps. Appealing to Miller's bargain-hunter, garments remain valued as branded commodities but the fashion system is 'played' by gaining apparently high-value items for free.

Certainly, at New-U the reliance of the second-hand trade on first-hand channels is much more visible than at other swaps. With many items being swapped brand-new, complete with original price tags, the trajectory of clothing flows into the shop is often far from Gregson and Crewe's (2003, p. 142) "non-linear", "circuitous" journeys. As a steadfast believer in reusing clothing, it can be somewhat disappointing when a customer donates a bag full of brand-new Primark dresses. However, the fact that these items return to circulation, rather than languishing in a wardrobe, seems positive to me. Further, when customers are rewarded with points to spend in store, this signals not only that their unwanted clothes have value, but also encourages them to acquire second-hand clothes in return, extending the trajectories of other people's donations.

Sharing style and a "touch of intimacy"

In fact, the majority of items donated are not brand-new, and many garments pass in and out of the shop as customers acquire, try, wear and decide to 'swap back'. Still others are swapped between customers, who browse and 'spend' together before a 'trying-on session' at home. There are several family groups (typically a mother and two grown-up daughters) who shop together, acquiring perhaps ten items per visit, explaining how they will later negotiate who keeps which item and commenting "it'll fit one of us!". This demonstrates how swapping in this much more public context still relies on the shared "taste communities" (Gregson and Crewe 2003, p. 180) evident at Swap One. Further, clothing choices are similarly negotiated within, and serve to reinforce, close relationships and family/friendship dynamics.

This interdependency between styling the self and social connections also plays out in customers' interactions with relative strangers. At work, I am often asked for my opinion on items and frequently customers share with me their style preferences or issues they have with certain shapes and sizes. Customer-to-customer relations are often convivial and generous, with women swappers commenting positively on items they like and offering opinions on those being considered by other women, introducing, as observed by Young (1990, p. 184), a "touch of intimacy" into an impersonal context.

Clothing pools and “agency to hone”

While avoiding the overabundance of the high-street, public swaps clearly offer greater variety than swaps between friends. For Greta, New-U “hugely opened up what’s available. And [that] gives you more agency to hone what you want”. Importantly, this “agency to hone” is potentiated by a varied pool of clothing which, while the confluence of varied clothing flows, holds at bay the threat of excess. Another customer likened New-U to a “giant wardrobe”, from which swappers can select, try and return clothing at their leisure. As Greta explains, “there’s sort of a balance between having... more to choose from than just literally what your nearest and dearest can give you—which may just not be very suited to you—but less than the crazy amounts [...] available to you in Primark”.

Thus, the tension between freedom and constraint that Twigger-Holroyd identifies is apparent in swappers’ experiences of fashion consumption. Thinking of New-U as one iteration of the “fashion commons”, Twigger-Holroyd’s (2017) ideas gain greater traction. Particularly interesting is the statement that “we need space to move around the commons, to identify with and differentiate ourselves from” particular styles and possibilities of expanding the self (Twigger-Holroyd 2017, p. 67). Thus, New-U’s position at the nexus of multiple clothing flows, coupled with the ease of returning items to this “giant wardrobe”, potentially allows individuals to explore their “being and becoming” with greater freedom.

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Through this article I have aimed to demonstrate the variety and complexity of exchange at clothing swaps, building on conceptualisations of clothing as “mobile” matter, belonging not to one individual but moving in ongoing flows between different wearers. The journeys of individual garments can both aid and hinder swappers’ self-exploration, through too-close embodiment of a friend, or by seemingly opening up new style options. Often, women’s fluid stylistic self-formation is bound and guided by relationships and decisions around trying or keeping clothing are often made collectively at swaps.

From private to public: sociality and value

Sociality is enmeshed with the space of each swap and its resemblance to conventional retail. At private swaps, the setting is intimate and sociality is key to the swap’s value, incorporating pleasure-in-gifting and bonding through reciprocity. At Bidy’s Tea Rooms, a public swap approximates a private setting in its evocation of the domestic, and swappers politely socialise, discussing their objections to shopping and the fashion system. Finally, at New-U, which visually closely resembles conventional retail, swappers are re-modelled as customers

and are much less associated with one another. Despite this, a sociality persists which exceeds the entirely 'impersonal' character of commodity relations, suggesting that, even at its most formalised, swapping remains distinct from shopping.

As swapping moves from private to public, the value of clothing is understood differently. I suggest that the three case studies demonstrate three distinctive value-systems operating through different dominant measures of value: namely, sentimental value, use value and exchange value. Clothing swapped between friends is most likely to be valued for its embodiment of a relationship or inalienability from the giver (notwithstanding the issues that may arise from this), while at Biddy's clothing is typically valued in terms of practicality and suitability for a particular situation—for example, holiday clothes. Finally, clothes acquired from New-U tend to correspond with more 'typical' understandings of fashion, with value determined by brand and perceived 'quality'. At both public swaps, clothing is usually alienable from previous wearers and exchange thereby approximates commodity relations more closely than gifting.

Swapping, clothing flows and 'alternative' consumption

Despite the insistence of swappers on their disillusion with mainstream fashion retail, almost all clothing at these swaps originated in high-street stores. However, many of these garments take convoluted journeys before and/or after swapping—through wearing, storage, 'swapping back' or gifting. At Biddy's and New-U swapping's subversive potential is complicated by the speed of clothing flows and the volume of acquisition. While swappers experience this as 'guilt-free'—simply returning unwanted items and thus ostensibly avoiding the wastefulness of fast-fashion—much of their talk around the "ease" of acquiring and discarding clothing is reminiscent of the supposed benefits of fast-fashion. For example, Becca reflects that while attached to some swapped garments, she is happy to discard others since "there's no need to get my five pounds worth or make the most of it as I essentially got it for free". Swapping therefore does not necessarily enhance appreciation of the *value* of clothing or represent a 'slowing' of consumption. As Heike Jenss (2015, p. 99) observes, second-hand fashion circulation may resemble first-hand consumption in being "kept afloat by the constant desire for the new".

At New-U, I see first-hand the contradictions of a 'sustainable' fashion enterprise which takes in around 30% more clothes than it 'swaps out'. Customers frequently donate the maximum 10 items per day following a wardrobe clear-out and rarely claim as many items in return. While of course it would be antithetical to New-U's aims to encourage swappers to acquire more items, this leaves the charity with a large surplus of items, which, for a small organisation with limited resources, is challenging to distribute to those who need it.

With these contradictions in mind, swapping exhibits a tension between dependence and opposition in relation to mainstream fashion. Distancing themselves from the immediate pressures of negotiating both anxiety-provoking shopping and an industry with complex ethical implications, swappers find swaps a safe space for exploring fashion without *necessarily* altering their relationship to clothes as commodities. Swapping may allow participants to construct themselves as conscientious, resourceful consumers—removed from the guilt of buying new—without actually addressing the drive to acquire clothing which is rooted in consumerist society. That said, acquiring second-hand rather than new *does* seem to be a more environmentally-friendly choice, and swapping perhaps allows consumers to question and begin to adjust their behaviours. Becca's self-imposed challenge to only acquire clothes through swapping is an example of this, and the general critique of shopping which proliferates at swaps is perhaps another indicator of consumers "thinking hard" about "exchange, about value, [...] use and need" (Gregson and Crewe 2003, p. 107). While there may remain a gap between discourse and action, swappers are attempting to make sense of their place in a system at odds with the imperative to consume less and re-use more.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This article draws upon research conducted from 2018-2022, initially as part of my MA History of Design & Material Culture at the University of Brighton. As discussed in this article, later research took the form of observations in my role as Shop Manager at swap shop New-U. I worked at New-U until September 2022.

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