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Sewing history: Consuming culture

ABSTRACT

The resurgence of home-sewing has led to renewed academic interest in the area. Current research has found that home-sewing is a substitute for purchasing ill-fitting, poor-quality and unsustainable fast fashion. Home-sewers report that they find the practice a creative leisure activity and that home-sewing is an empowering activity. What has been less examined are reasons why sewers make historical clothing, as opposed to making modern designs. This article examines home-sewing via the lens of historical material culture. That is, it seeks to understand the reasons why people sew and wear anachronistic clothing. It does so via an international survey of over 200 participants. A range of complex social and historical factors emerge in this research, which posit that there exist broad cultural phenomena to explain this contemporary trend. Of the recent research conducted into the reasons and motivations of home-sewers, the focus is on the sewing of contemporary clothing. Conversely, this research examines the motivations for sewing and wearing anachronistic clothing. Leading home dressmaking pattern company Simplicity claims that for many home-sewers it is vintage patterns that lead them to undertake home-sewing. This suggests that there are different types of home dressmakers who are motivated by considerations beyond that uncovered by previous research.

KEYWORDS

home sewing
nostalgia
vintage style
retro clothing
re-enactment
consumption
home sewers
clothing

INTRODUCTION

Despite the size and influence of the fast fashion industry¹ and its wide range of affordable clothing, home-sewing is, as Bain notes, 'experiencing a revival in Western countries' (2016: 57). At the same time there has been a surge in the

1. Fast fashion can be defined as the retail strategy of adapting

merchandise assortments to current and emerging trends as quickly and effectively as possible. Fast fashion retailers have replaced the traditional designer-push model – in which a designer dictates what is ‘in’ – with an opportunity-pull approach, in which retailers respond to shifts in the market within just a few weeks, versus an industry average of six months.

(Sull and Turconi 2008: 4–11)

2. McCalls have been variously known as McCall’s and McCall over the years. For the purposes of this article, the name McCalls will be used throughout.
3. Known as the ‘Big 4’ due to their market dominance, the McCalls, Simplicity, Vogue and Butterick brands are now all owned by CSS Industries.

market for both contemporary and reproduced vintage dressmaking patterns. The major pattern imprints McCalls,² Butterick, Vogue and Simplicity³ have all released or rereleased a number of vintage dressmaking patterns (mainly from the 1930s through to the 1960s), often giving them prominent position at the front of their catalogues. This suggests that the major pattern companies have recognized the growing interest not only in home-sewing but also in sewing anachronistic clothing. According to Simplicity, ‘[v]intage fashions are one of the main reasons why many people take up needlecraft in the first place’ (Simplicity 2018). This interest in sewing historical styles is part of the growing trend in vintage clothing. For McCalls, ‘[t]he 1950s silhouette of fitted bodice and full skirt has long been popular for vintage pattern reissues’ (McCalls 2016), and there is evidence that other eras are also in demand by consumers. McCalls do not shy away from claiming that they are ‘very influenced by popular culture when it comes to deciding what patterns to reissue’ (interviewed in Katherine 2014).

While other research has examined trends in the taking up of home-sewing (economic considerations, quality, fit, creativity, leisure, control, empowerment, rejection of fast fashion, etc.) and has noted the reasons for interest in the practice (Martindale 2017; Martindale and McKinney 2016; Black and Idle 2013; Boerema et al. 2010), this article focuses on the interest in, and motivations for, sewing and wearing historical clothing and in identifying and understanding the reasons for the reproduction of different styles and historical periods. In order to do this, an international survey of 229 people who sew and wear historical clothing was conducted in July 2018. The survey had two overarching but related aims: to understand the motivations of those who sew and wear historical clothing and to identify what historical periods of clothing were being reproduced. Both areas are considered to have been under-researched in academic scholarship, with scholarship that is evident focusing on specific aspects such as historical re-enactment activities or cosplay. This research, however, is more interested in focusing on individuals who sew and wear historical clothing as an everyday practice. That is, it is interested in why individuals sew and wear historical clothing on a regular basis, as part of their daily identity. Previous research has shown that, for some people, historical clothing styles present a different shape that is more aligned with their own rather than the current body ideal (Hackett 2019). The clothes then become part of their everyday wardrobe rather than just costumes to be worn at historical recreation events.

As it becomes evident in the following discussion of the survey results, there exist large groups of home-sewers who identify with, and engage in, sewing and wearing clothes from very specific historical eras ranging from the medieval period to the 1980s. It is also evident that the reasons for making and wearing historical clothing are diverse and complex. There exist a number of motivations, including the need for social interactions with others interested in both sewing and history and the need to learn more deeply and experience particular historical periods via the material culture of the era. Clothes prove an accessible and affordable way of doing so. This research aims to supplement existing literature on home-sewing practices and motivations by extending it into the field of historical home-sewing to reveal the complex reasons behind home-sewing as its ability to access material cultures of the past.

The survey was conducted in 2018 and elicited 229 responses. It was conducted online using Qualtrics and included both closed and open

long-form questions. An analysis of the data finds that home-sewers are making and wearing historical clothing in three key ways. The first is for the purposes of re-enactment. These sewers are concerned with authenticity and usability to accurately recreate historical clothing to viscerally engage with history. The second set recreate vintage fashion, usually from the twentieth century, as a substitute for poorly fitting and generically styled contemporary clothing. The final group are those who use historical clothing in a more playful manner, recreating and reimagining historical clothing by changing its use and context. These sewers often participate in subcultural groups such as cosplay or steampunk.

HOME-SEWING TODAY

Home-sewing has enjoyed a resurgence over the past two decades. The Craft and Hobby Association UK claim that more than 3 million people in the United Kingdom took up home-sewing between 2013 and 2016 (Wood 2017). The 2016 Sewing in America Survey found that there were between 25 and 30 million adults who sewed in the United States (Sew News 2016). In Australia, the number of people who used textiles as a leisure pursuit has been growing strongly with 144,300 participants in 2004, which represented a 50 per cent increase on the 2001 results (94,400) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004: 5). By 2007 (the latest report of this kind), this had doubled to 282,400 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007). Despite this rapid uptake, the reasons for taking up home-sewing, or studies of what is being sewn, has garnered little academic attention.

Arguably, the proliferation of social media sites dedicated to sewing contemporary fashion has reinvigorated sewing generally. Social media sites dedicated to sewing vintage clothing has also led dressmaking pattern companies to release or rerelease vintage patterns. The WeSewRetro blog, for example, boasts of having 'over a thousand contributing sewing bloggers' (WeSewRetro 2018), and dedicated groups on Facebook, such as '19th Century Sewing' and 'Vintage Sewing Pattern Nerds', have memberships that often run into the tens of thousands, demonstrating just how widespread vintage sewing is becoming. The popularity of sewing is also found in popular culture, in programmes such as *Project Runway* (United States) and *The Great British Sewing Bee* (United Kingdom). Yet, research (when conducted) into these programmes has tended to focus on their role in increasing the sales of dressmaking patterns and sewing machines (Wood 2017). It is no surprise that McCalls are 'very influenced by popular culture when it comes to deciding what patterns to reissue' (Katherine 2014). Almost all studies into contemporary sewing practices have focused on women, yet the British Heart Foundation (2017) found that 55 per cent of UK men were at least willing to learn how to sew. Male sewing blogs, such as Male Pattern Boldness and Quilt Dad, have significant followings. While this is not the focus of this study, it is a reminder that sewing research is limited, and its focus even more so.

Research into sewing practices tends not to examine the motivations in the sewing and wearing of historical clothing. In some cases, the assumption is that home-sewers are making contemporary-styled clothing. This was the case for research undertaken by Martindale and McKinney (2016) when they asked why sewers were choosing to 'use their free time and money to make their clothing, when ready-to-wear clothing is cheaply accessible'. This research's focus is on unearthing consumer practices in relation to affordability

and time and so did not neatly unearth the motivations for sewing. Further, this 2016 research assumes that sewers are making contemporary clothing when, in fact, sewers are practising both contemporary and historical sewing. Other research conducted independently by Martindale (2017) did seek to examine the motivations of female sewers in the United States and Canada. In unearthing the motivations for North American sewers, Martindale (2017) notes the lack of studies into why people engage in home-sewing, claiming that there have only been twelve surveys and six qualitative studies conducted during the twentieth century into the reasons for home-sewing.

An analysis of these studies by Martindale (2017: 15, 109–11) has found five main reasons for home-sewing: home-sewn clothes were better valued than off-the-shelf, ready-to-wear purchases; home-sewn clothing was of better quality; home-sewn clothing fitted better; sewing was an avenue for creativity and sewing provided leisure. Martindale (2017: 100) found that in the new millennium a shift in the reasons for home-sewing was evident with women today sewing for investment (in contemporary clothes), control (over fit, quality, style and design) and empowerment (liberation from mass-produced fast fashion). Martindale's research in the field of home-sewing and its motivations, however, is limited to the making of contemporary fashion.

Other research conducted on home-sewing includes an 2010 analysis of the sewing practices of immigrant women in Australia, which found that sewing allows migrants to connect with cultural traditions as well as that home-sewing is an outlet for creativity and contributions to family life (Boerema et al. 2010). This study, however, did not examine the nature of what was being sewn, instead focusing solely on the motivations for sewing. Black and Idle's (2013: 38) interviews with a small number of Australian women similarly focused on the reasons why women sewed. In that research, the focus was on sewing in the 1960s when sewing was considered a normative part of household management: 'It was just something you did'. While this was a study of the motivations for sewing in the past, the 2013 research found that there was a sense of pride as well as it being an economic necessity. While Black and Idle's research also examined the sewing of contemporary clothing, it did not consider the possibility that the sewer may be making historical garments. Moreover, studies such as this confirm the shift from home-sewing to the consumption of ready-to-wear clothing, positing the end of home-sewing as a normative aspect of household practice. Even further, it is reasonable to suggest that home-sewing – after the introduction of mass-produced, affordable, ready-to-wear clothing in the 1960s – came to signify economic hardship. While this is not the focus of this article, it does help to contextualize why home-sewing became a marginal activity until recently.

This research, as opposed to the studies already noted, deviates in that it seeks to understand the motivations for both sewing and wearing historical clothes as well as what styles and periods of historical clothing are being reproduced and why. One reason for this divergence is to examine how lived experience and history can be accessed via material culture. Implicit in this study is that there does not exist a market in readymade historical wear; hence, wearers are required to make it themselves or purchase it from a sewer who has the skills to make the specialist garment. In some ways, it is Bain's 2016 empirical research into the politics of contemporary sewing that more closely informs this research. Bain's study focused on how sewing today functions within the context of feminism, specifically considering the 'historically challenged relationship between domestic cultures [such as knitting and sewing]

and feminism' (2016: 58). In attempting to bridge this tension, in terms of the motivation for home-sewing (considered to be time-consuming and likely requiring more economic outlay than an off-the-rack garment), Bain found for 'contemporary sewists, the empowerment experienced appears to offer a way of transcending fashion and gender norms' (2016: 64). Bain's research rejects the idea that the resurgence in home-sewing or dressmaking is closely rooted in austerity. Bain also rejects the idea that the resurgence in home-sewing is rooted in nostalgia.

Informing this approach is the research of Maldini and Manz (2017), who compared the sartorial practices of Dutch women in the 1950s and the 2010s. The research has found that women sewers in the 1950s did so as an affordable, hence cheaper, alternative to buying off-the-rack fashion. That is, this cohort would seek out fashionable designs of the period and imitate the styles into their own productions. For this group, sewing allowed them to 'fit' into social norms by wearing popular fashion without the cost (Maldini and Manz 2017: 76–77). The second group, women in 2010s, saw sewing as a way of creating a unique look from off-the-rack fast fashion (Maldini and Manz 2017: 78). Here home-sewn clothes point to practices of creating a unique look that allows an individual to express a distinct identity independent of the fashion trends and demands of fast fashion economics. In considering this position, in relation to the sewing and wearing of historical fashion, it is logical to suggest that it is not nostalgia for the past that is the primary driver for the practice of home-sewing, but rather seeking to express a distinct and unique identity is the primary driver. This position more closely follows the arguments of Martindale and McKinney (2018), who claim that women who make their own clothes today do so beyond issues of style, fit or quality. Home-sewing today offers women the ability to create clothes that more adequately reflect their personalities and tastes. A similar claim is made in this research regarding the making and wearing of historical clothing. The desire to differentiate rather than imitate may, in fact, be due to the dressed body being a site of a person's status in society (Entwistle 2000: 73–75; Rall et al. 2018: 274). Individuals with a need for uniqueness may seek to dress differently, employing practices such as wearing historical or vintage clothes to achieve this (Cervellon et al. 2012; Hackett 2019).

CONSUMING THE PAST

One significant aim of this research is to unearth the reasons why people sew and wear anachronistic clothing. Research on sewing historically styled clothing is largely embedded into the wearing of historically styled clothing, where self-making is but one mode of attaining a historical garment. Research conducted by Jones (2007: 204–05) has found that re-enactors, for example, often make their own clothes either due to the lack of availability or because of the high cost of commissioning specially sewn historical clothing. Other research conducted by Miller (1998) has found that only five (four females and one male) out of a study of 216 re-enactors indicated that they made their own re-enactment garments. The other point of interest in the Jones study is that re-enactors participate in a variety of eras, either concurrently or longitudinally as their interests evolved (2007: 194–95). Research such as this focuses primarily on the engagement with historical activity – the US Civil War re-enactment, for example – and, only as a secondary concern, focuses on the motivations for making and wearing historical clothes.

Studies of historical re-enactment tend to focus on gender rather than the clothing. Jones (2007: 239) found that approximately 90 per cent of US Civil War re-enactors were male. Miller's (1998) study found that 57 per cent of those who engaged in activities that required the wearing of historical clothes (including US Civil War re-enactors and Living History re-enactors) were men. The gendered dimension of re-enactor studies likely points to the gender roles evident in the period being re-enacted. That is, the role of men in many historical civic events is often the primary focus in re-enactments, whereas the role of women in historical civic events is often ignored, silenced or secondary. This is generally the case in military re-enactments. A small proportion of events are, however, female-dominated; Jane Austen enthusiasts, for example, are overwhelmingly female (Kiefer 2008). Emma Vossen termed the concept 'cultural inaccessibility' to describe the ways 'women are made to feel unwelcome in spaces of game play and games culture, both offline and online' (2018: iv). Although Vossen was specifically referring to the game culture, the concept might also be applied to the re-enactment culture.

There are two other avenues for accessing historical clothes, depending on the era. Some historical eras have a commercial market, meaning historically styled clothes can be purchased off-the-rack. Review Australia, for example, is a popular fashion brand that heavily references 1950s vintage styles. The other is the second-hand clothing market. Second-hand clothing markets have thrived in periods where clothing is expensive or scarce, or during periods of economic downturn. Wearers of vintage or second-hand clothing argue that the clothing embodies values that are lacking in fast fashion: they are usually cheap, better quality, unique, environmentally friendly, emotionally exciting and of historical value (Portman 2014; Fischer 2015; Hackett 2019). Historical clothing, it should also be noted, is often appropriated (Hebdige [1979] 2012) and is not always authentically reproduced. This can be seen in the various clothing styles of subcultural groups such as Teddy Boys, Goths, Hippies, Lollitas, Steampunks and Rockabillys. As Cumming notes, it is 'quite rare for clothing from an earlier generation to be worn in an unaltered state because it offered an alternative construction of identity' (2004: 109). Cervellon and Brown's (2014) study of Burlesque culture in France found that the appropriation of historical clothing added to the performance of parody with the purpose of subverting gender inequalities; hence, it is intentionally and consciously altered. Feldman-Barrett (2013) found in one study of Gothic, Lolita and Steampunk subcultures in Australia that the adoption of Victorian-era fashion was a way of 'correcting' various aspects of Victorian life, including class and gender divides (Gothic), the role of the child (Lolita), and to challenge the mythology and chronology of 'progress' (Steampunk). The sewing of historical clothes, even when appropriated, demonstrates how the maker and the wearer can engage in practices of controlling and subverting elements of historical style and its embedded discourses. Similarly, Nicolle Lamerichs's research into cosplaying communities found that the creation of an outfit is an important part of the process, allowing participants to solidify their 'relation towards the character and game', with costumes often undergoing a process of evolution and refinement between wears (2015: 147).

The wearing of anachronistic clothing for pleasure rather than economic necessity only began in the mid-twentieth century (Cumming 2004: 108) when the wearing of second-hand clothes shed its shabby image and became mainstream (Palmer 2005: 197). Yet, there is an ever-diminishing stock of authentic vintage clothing, particularly from the 1940s through to the 1970s,

meaning wearers need to turn to other means to acquire these historical styles. This was the case for female members wanting to recreate the '1960s Scene' in Germany, who turned to making their own anachronistic clothing to overcome the shortage of quality, original clothing (interestingly, none of the male participants in this research indicated that they thought of home-sewing as a means to attain their clothing) (Jenss 2015: 119). Hence, home-sewing is clearly an affordable avenue for historical clothing enthusiasts to access reproduction historical clothing.

METHODOLOGY

The survey that underpins this research was designed using Qualtrics, with both closed and open-ended questions, and an invitation to participate was placed on several Facebook groups dedicated to the creation and wearing of historically styled garments. The post was further voluntarily shared amongst individuals on their own pages and in other groups. The aim was to get as wide a group of respondents as possible. The survey was open for three weeks in July 2018. In total, 229 individuals completed the survey. This is considered an exploratory survey because there was no pre-existing research specifically into sewers who make historically styled clothing and why. The aim of this research design was to uncover the range of motivations people had to sew historical clothing and the range of eras that they sewed in.

The multiple-choice and open-ended questions asked (twenty in total) included demographic questions (gender, age, location) followed by a number of questions regarding their sewing practices, including how often they sewed, where they sourced patterns and materials, where they wore the historical clothing that they sewed, what social groups they belong to and what motivated them to sew historical clothing. Participants were asked to indicate what historical periods they sewed. They were able to select more than one historical period. In order to ensure some uniformity in responses, participants were shown seventeen historical clothing silhouettes. The Kent State University Museum's Fashion Timeline, which shows silhouettes from the 1750s to 2000s (2012), was selected as a uniform representation of the different eras. Some additional eras were chosen to expand further back in time. The medieval era was chosen for the earlier cut-off, and the 1980s for the most recent. Naming of the historical fashion eras is problematic as fashion developed separately in different countries and geographical regions. Here there is little uniformity in how historical epochs are named in terms of fashion or re-enactment studies. For example, what is referred to as the mid-Victorian period in England can be referred to as the Civil War period in the United States. Despite these issues, participants appeared to accept the demarcation of periods and styles and were given opportunities via open-ended textboxes to clarify their historical era preferences. Some, for example, offered very specific historical interests, such as Italian Renaissance (participant 16) or the Japanese Heian Era (participant 87). Others clarified what they called an era; for example, 'I occasionally also do Renaissance (there after all being no Tudor period in Scotland)' (participant 92). While this is considered an exploratory study, the model for the survey was based on previous contemporary sewing surveys so that meaningful comparisons could be drawn between this group of sewers and those researched previously (Martindale and McKinney 2016; Martindale 2017; Black and Idle 2013; Boerema et al. 2010).

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

There are various terms used for defining clothing from another era, including vintage, historical, retro, antique and anachronistic (McRobbie 1989). These terms are variously used to describe clothing styles that are from, replicates or references the past. Thus, clear definitions of what these terms mean can be contested. 'Vintage' and 'retro' are often used interchangeably in literature; and despite efforts to clarify the terms, there is no scholarly consensus (Guffey 2006: 9). The terms are often used interchangeably by clothing retailers, furthering the debates and contestation. Given that a similar debate may exist amongst the cohort being studied in this research, a deliberate decision has been made to not define exactly what these terms mean. Despite this, a small group of the 229 participants of this survey entered into a debate on Facebook (where details about accessing the survey were posted) about what is meant by 'vintage' and what is meant by 'historical': one participant even went so far as to write an e-mail regarding the lack of definition in the survey.

DATA RESULTS

Demographics and frequency of sewing

Of the 229 respondents, the majority were located in North America with 60% (138) located in the United States, 6% (14) in Canada, 14% (31) in Europe and 18% (41) in Australia and New Zealand. One participant was from Russia and one from Brazil. Four participants did not answer this question. The cohort ages ranged from 18 to 72. The mean age of the respondents ($n = 224$) was 43 years. Of the 229 respondents, 214 (93%) identified as female, 7 (3%) identified as male, 3 (1%) identified as other and the rest declined to answer. The mean number of styles a respondent sewed was five, suggesting that interest in historical clothing was often not located in a discrete era. Most participants ($n = 171$) sewed between one and six different eras, with 58 respondents sewing more than seven historical eras. The survey results indicate that the respondents are generally frequent sewers, with 43% (97) sewing at least three times a week, 18% (41) twice a week, 15% (35) once a week, 12% (27) twice a month, 3% (6) once a month and 10% (22) on an occasional basis.

Data from this survey was analysed by themes with trends noted. Presented first is the data on why participants sew historical clothing. This is examined via three aspects: the aesthetics of historical clothing (how the clothing looks, makes them feel and fit), historical aspects (immersion in the history and culture of a particular period) and social aspects (how the clothing allowed them to access social networks with like-minded people). This is followed by the data on what historical periods are being sewn.

What are the motivations for sewing historical clothing?

This research asked participants why they chose to sew historical clothing. The 216 participants who answered this part of the survey provided rich insights. For the majority, the drivers were aesthetics (59% or 128), specifically the look and feel of historical clothing, followed by historical interests (33% or 71), an ability to wear the garments in their everyday lives (25% or 54), interest in construction techniques (18% or 39), to participate in re-enactments (15% or 32), to achieve a well-fitted garment (11% or 24), for fun and/or social interactions via activities like cosplay (10% or 21) and because they were inspired

by representations of history or historical clothing in popular culture, notably literature and television (8% or 17).

When asked deeply about their motivations to sew historical clothing, 51 per cent (117) of respondents said they were seeking individuality in how they looked; specifically 73% (167) indicated they were motivated to dress in a particular style or to achieve a particular look. Cost was a factor for 30 per cent (69) of historical sewers, it being cheaper to make historical clothing than to have it made or purchased. Many (67% or 153) felt a sense of achievement in making their historical garments; 65% (149) wanted to learn new sewing and construction techniques. Nostalgia for over half of the respondents (56% or 128) was a significant motivating factor. Better fit and better quality were also factors. Other reasons were expressed by participants, including a dislike for modern fashions, a desire to recreate museum holdings, to repair and on-sell vintage clothing and social connection to other sewers.

Aesthetics

A significant number of respondents noted that the historical styles they sew suit their body shape and, therefore, had for them aesthetic value. Participant 74, who indicated an interest in late Georgian, mid-Victorian, Edwardian and 1950s styles, for example, commented that 'later styles are mostly small waist/full skirt that flatters my plus size figure'. Participant 103, who sews Georgian and mid-Victorian styles, similarly commented: 'It's all about the shape. I'm naturally a very straight up and down. I like playing with the volume of skirts and the stays/corsets that make me look like I have a figure'. The visual appeal of the clothing was a significant factor for more than half of the respondents (128), with many explicitly stating that the anachronistic clothes they sew held a visual appeal for them. Many of the responses noted the difference in body shapes from that of today, and this appears to be of appeal to many. This may explain why some are drawn to sewing and wearing historical clothes: 'I've always thought the very early time periods had more classical shapes' (participant 70). Aesthetics were invoked in relation to the physicality of wearing the finished garment either psychologically – as in 'I like how pretty they make me feel' (participant 130) – or in terms of physicality:

I like the silhouettes. Especially the ones with fuller skirts (like Rococo, Crinoline, 1950s), because much fabric around the legs, in at least two layers, is like heaven. I move totally different in wide skirts. It feels so pretty and princess-y.

(Participant 58)

The ability to wear their historical-styled clothing as part of their regular wardrobe was important to 25 per cent of the respondents. Participant 50, who sews early, mid- and late Georgian styles, commented: 'I love long skirts, and I can wear those pieces [...] regular without looking like a reenactor'. Similarly, participant 22 responded that 'the 50s styles suit my figure and I wear that style on an everyday basis'. Here we can see that the styles are worn as part of their everyday clothing, not just for cultural events.

In being motivated to wear historical clothing for fit, the need for historically appropriate foundational garments was noted by some participants in terms of achieving a very particular aesthetic. Foundation garments can be an integral part of how clothes are worn. A number of participants were intrigued

by the different historical garments; and for them, the importance of achieving the preferred look was reliant on the need of 'specific underwear required to get the perfect form' (participant 83). Foundation garments were important: 'I love the support of the stays [a fully boned laced bodice worn under clothes from the late 16th or early 17th century] and how the "fluff" fills out the look in all the right places' (participant 159).

For others, the appreciation of the garments' aesthetics goes beyond the visual to the techniques needed to create different styles. The challenge of constructing garments using original methods and/or using embellishing techniques that are not normally used today was important and considered a significant motivator for sewing historical clothes. One MA student in medieval history commented: 'I reconstruct medieval clothing to understand how the originals were made' (participant 23). For participant 37 they found historical 'techniques and details more challenging to sew'. The same participant also noted that 'after sewing for 40 years I do still want to do something new, a technique or style I haven't done before' (participant 37). The insight into history and the challenges of learning new skills are two key motivators noted here. Other significant motivators to note are also the feel of wearing historical garments, including foundational garments, and the fit and quality evident in home-sewn clothing, likely historical as well as contemporary, plus the ability to wear it everyday and look 'normal' rather than anachronistic or like a re-enactor.

Just 11 per cent of respondents replied that they are using historical styles as a substitute for contemporary fashion, which in many cases is seen as ill-fitting, of inferior quality and lacking an aesthetic value. Participant 153 considered '20th century clothing' as 'bland'. Similarly, participant 133 stated that 'modern clothes are bland' and, according to participant 149, 'most modern clothing lacks elegance'.

History

The second theme that was evident was the reasons for making historical-style clothing. Many respondents (33 per cent) had a keen historical, social or cultural interest in the period(s) they were sewing and wearing, often attaching strong emotional declarations to an epoch: 'I love the history of these eras' (participant 22). For some, the historical aspect was paramount. For participant 33 (medieval, late Georgian, 1920s and 1930s), 'I need to have some sort of link to the time period, I don't go just by clothing'. Participant 97 took on historical clothing as an immersive way of understanding the 'sociology [and] culture of the period'. Contextualized for this participant, the sewing and wearing of historical clothing allowed them to be immersed in the daily culture of the late Georgian period. It is difficult to think of another way that would allow this to occur in such a material and intellectual way. The ability of historical clothing to generate meaning, awareness and understanding about a particular period was also noted by participant 58, whose interest in history was a consequence of their interest in the clothing styles:

I also enjoy learning about these historical periods, particularly America in the 1860s, and generally enjoy creating clothing for periods I know a great deal about, as I feel an understanding of the culture gives me a better understanding of and appreciation for the clothing.

(Participant 58)

This interest in history was not restricted to an intellectual interest. By recreating the clothing of a particular era, many respondents felt that they were able to connect to the era on a visceral level: 'We can learn a great deal from the clothes they wore through history. The fashions changed rapidly and varied in styles and material depending on location' (participant 15). Sometimes the interest in an era has a personal historical significance. For some participants, there was a family or ancestral connection to a particular time in history (participants 91 and 118). For others, it was a memory of their childhood history that drew them back to the period:

Because they are the fashions of my youth and young adulthood. [It] makes me happy just to see them [the clothes]. The older ones [dresses] from the fifties remind me of my mom and how she was always dressed up.

(Participant 148)

I see the 50's and 60's as a period of fun and extravagance following the wars and lots of memories related to my childhood. The 1980's was my peak sewing period so I have a lot of patterns from that time.

(Participant 217)

For two American-based respondents, US history provides the platform for them to perform history via re-enactments: 'I do Revolutionary War Era re-enactments [of] the Georgian Period' (participant 81), and 'I do historical re-enacting from roughly the time span of Thomas Jefferson' (participant 161). Although less in number, there were re-enactors outside of the United States. One offered: 'I re-enact the 15th century and the earlier part of the 18th century up to the [Scottish] 1745 Rising' (participant 92). For others, the influences can be situated in their exposure to popular culture, either from belonging to an era (as noted above) or by contemporary popular culture that references that era. Participant 32 considers 'especially the clothes from the 1920's, the architectural style and close relationship with contemporary art of the period'. For others it is how popular culture plays (about 8 per cent) with historical representations of different eras that motivates interest in a particular style or era.

My starting point of interest in these silhouettes was in the early 90s (I was born in 1990), because I watched Japanese anime series like *Georgie*, *Lady Oscar*, or several of the *World Masterpiece Theatre* series. These series play during the Rococo period (time of Marie Antoinette), or the mid-Victorian era.

(Participant 53)

Participant 129 commented that the TV series '*Outlander* got me interested in Georgian'. For participant 136, the influence of Jane Austen was significant: 'I do recreate those as well since I admire the works and sphere of Jane Austen who had no recourse but to write about the little power women had left in the realm of relationships and domesticity'. For participant 68 who indicated an interest in late Georgian through to Edwardian styles: 'My favourite literature comes from this period. I am also fascinated by British and European history of this era'.

Although seemingly similar to re-enactment, role-playing differs as it generally takes place in a fictional context albeit within an historical period,

whereas re-enactment strives to recreate actual historical events. The concept of cosplaying is related however, cosplay is often fictional and does not need to be anchored in actual historical events. Thus, historical clothes can be adapted to suit the whims of the creator. For participant 47, 'I also do live action role playing, so I sew for use in this'. Respondents could be fluid in the type of activity they undertook in their historical clothing.

When I started it was due to a performance in our local ren faire [A ren fair or renaissance festival is an outdoor weekend gathering, usually held in the US, open to the public and commercial in nature, which ostensibly recreates a historical setting for the public]. Since then I've discovered I like to dress up with friends, go to local venues, as well as conventions that lean in specific directions (e.g. Steampunk ... and ... [Jane] Austin festival in Bath, UK).

(Participant 82)

Some of the respondents identified with a subculture or attended sub-cultural events for which historically inspired clothing is integral: 'I sew Victorian clothes for myself and friends to wear at steampunk events. My steampunk looks are all very Victorian but with "steampunk elements"' (participant 144).

Intriguingly, respondents also included reasons why they *did not* engage with an era. These could be for historical reasons: 'I personally will not do colonial/Georgian clothing because of slavery' (participant 63). The majority of participants selected a period(s) of historical interest to recreate via clothing based on a desire to understand the social and cultural aspects of the epoch, to immerse themselves in that period and to understand how clothes were constructed in the period. Most participants appeared to have strong emotional connections to the periods they sew, reinforced in some cases by popular culture or family or ancestral connections.

Social

For some of the participants in the survey, social factors were a motivating force for their sewing of historical clothing. About 15 per cent indicated re-enactment and about 10 per cent indicated cosplay as a motivating factor for their sewing, both considered to be social events in which they interact with other historical or play enthusiasts. For participant 17, their motivation for sewing and wearing historical clothes was that they could spend time with other like-minded people in re-enacting and recreating the period. For participants in this context, their interest in making and wearing historical clothing allows them to join groups in which to recreate an era in a social setting via formal or informal events: 'I like to dress up with friends, go to local venues, as well as conventions' relevant to the historical era (participant 82). Yet, for others, surprisingly given the time, effort and expense in making historical clothing, one respondent felt social pressure to engage with particular styles: 'Regency is what everyone I know does, so mostly because of peer pressure [I make garments from this era], even though I find the actual style not as attractive' (participant 131).

Yet, for others, sometimes there was evidence of a lack of social opportunity to participate in events reflecting their historical clothing interests: 'I'm also interested in all the Victorian and Edwardian eras – but haven't made

any of that [...] They're a lot of work and I haven't found local friends/events to bond over them' (participant 50). Some participants appeared to be wanting to look for social and community activities that were outside of their own personal or lived experiences. Participant 37 did not want to 'sew vintage after 1960 as I wore that the first-time round', and for participant 186, 'I already wore and sewed the 70s and 80s styles when I was a teen and young adult, so I don't feel like I need to again'. For some, the social aspect motivating the sewing and making of historical clothing was that the clothing could be used to create alternative identities. One participant offered this: 'I have pondered this question before [why I sew historical clothing] and the only answer [...] is maybe it invokes a princess/dress up fantasy from childhood' (participant 56). For those participating in cosplay, the clothing was all about 'playing make believe' (participant 93).

Almost 65 per cent (148) of the respondents wore their historical clothing to social events. Of the 229 sewers who were surveyed, most wore their historical clothing at re-enactments (62% or 142). Some participants indicated that they wore historical clothing to weddings and other special occasions (54% or 124), to work (43% or 98), for cosplay (23% or 53), to school, college or university (14% or 32) and for amateur dramatics (8% or 18). About two-thirds (147) of the participants belonged to some kind of social groups associated with historical sewing practices. Of this, 44% (100) belonged to recreation groups and 27% (62) to sewing groups. The range of social groups was extensive and included dance groups, live-action role-playing groups, horse-riders and gothic groups. Interestingly, a third did not belong to any group, with the vast majority of twentieth-century-only sewers not being a member of any group (79% or 32). This seems to be a reflection of the underlying motivations for sewing these clothes. Many of the twentieth-century-only sewers indicated they were producing the clothes to wear as part of their everyday wardrobe rather than to attend specialized events. Participants indicated that twentieth-century styles, despite being historical styles, 'fit in easier to modern times' (participant 133), where they could be styled to 'look modern or vintage' (participant 147) and 'can be worn daily without appearing to be wearing a costume' (participant 51). For this cohort, the clothes were not considered costumes; rather, they represent a close alternative to contemporary styles. They are modern yet distinctly historical all at once.

Historical periods of sewing and wearing

The mean number of styles a respondent sewed was five, suggesting that interest in historical clothing was often not located in a discrete era. Most participants ($n = 171$) sewed between one and six different eras, with 58 sewing more than seven different eras.

The respondents created clothing from a wide range of eras. The popularity of some time periods was explained through responses to the follow-up question that asked why participants sewed these eras. The popularity of the Georgian time period was in part due to its connection with key events in the US history – the later colonial period (pre-1776), the US War of Independence (1775–83). Victorian dress was commonly associated with the US civil war (1861–65). The Regency period in the United Kingdom, and in particular its association with Jane Austen, was another popular response. The 1940s and 1950s were commonly cited in relation to sewing

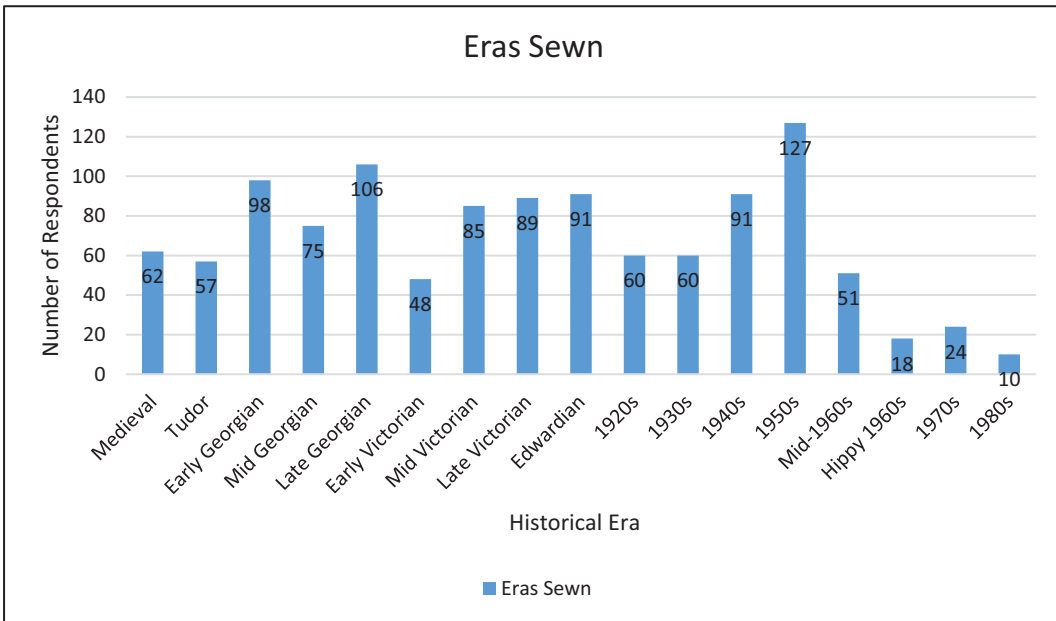


Figure 1: Chart showing how many respondents sewed clothing from each era.

clothing that fit, looked flattering and was still relatively modern in styling to use as everyday wear, as evident in the comments such as participant 22’s reply about being able to wear 1950s style on a daily basis (see above). The drop-off in styles post the mid-1960s was interesting and is worthy of more research.

Of the 228 participants who indicated what historical periods of clothing they sewed, only 41 (18%) sewed exclusively twentieth-century styles, and 68 (30%) only sewed pre-twentieth-century clothes. The remaining 119 (52%) sewed clothes from both before and after the twentieth century. This suggests that a significant number of people who were intrigued by historical clothing for reason other than everyday wear were also seeking historical styles to wear in their everyday wardrobe.

Sewing one’s way through historical time periods can be an ongoing and evolving process. The average participant sewed clothes from five different eras, with many expanding into adjacent eras as they developed their hobby:

These periods are all very different in style. I started my more recent sewing endeavours with renaissance styles then dabbled with medieval and early American, then I found Steampunk and Victorian fashions. The wealth of information about Victorian fashion and all of the amazing types of trimming just sent my imagination on fire.

(Participant 124)

Material and pattern access

In terms of historical sewing, accessing patterns and materials is a factor because of limited availability. It is likely that the internet is allowing

historical fashion construction to advance. Although the original impetus for this research was the observation that the 'Big 4' pattern companies were prominently advertising vintage patterns, this study revealed that historical clothing sewers were more likely to source patterns from books that use paper patterns. For the historical sewers surveyed for this study, 59% (135) indicated they used original vintage patterns, 64% (145) used reissued patterns, 57% (130) used modern patterns with a vintage look and 77% (176) used books. Sewers appear to be more reliant on books with historical patterns in them when it comes to creating styles from before the twentieth century, whereas those who are only sewing twentieth-century clothing find that there is more availability of patterns. Additionally, many commercial paper patterns based upon styles prior to the twentieth century tend to be costume patterns, and a significant number of sewers may be searching for more than just a superficial look; they want to get the details right.

Sewers in this study sourced their patterns from a number of different places, including books (68% or 156), vintage pattern websites (43% or 97), charity shops (42% or 95), online (Etsy: 41% or 93; Ebay: 34% or 77), exchanging with friends or groups (28% or 64) or using heirlooms (18% or 41). Almost half of the respondents (45% or 103) indicated other sources to find patterns, including blogs and social media (9% or 20), big box stores (7% or 16) and specialist historical pattern-makers (4% or 9). A number of participants indicated that they drafted their own patterns (17% or 39). In relation to the fabric required to sew historical clothing, 85% (194) of participants bought new fabric, and 70% (160) bought new reproduction fabric. A lesser, although still significant, proportion bought original vintage fabric (32% or 73) or reclaimed fabric from old clothes (48% or 109).

Table 1: Participants were asked where they sourced their patterns. The table shows the range of sources used by each cohort.

Types of pattern used	All respondents (229)	Pre-twentieth century only (41)	Twentieth century only (68)
Original vintage patterns	59% (135)	30% (12)	74% (50)
Reissued patterns	64% (145)	40% (16)	60% (41)
Modern patterns with a vintage look	57% (130)	33% (14)	70% (48)
Books that include historical patterns	77% (176)	90% (37)	16% (11)

Table 2: Participants indicated that they used several types of sources for patterns. The table gives a breakdown of the sources.

Number of sources used	Original vintage patterns		Reissued vintage patterns		Modern patterns with a vintage look		Books that include historical patterns	
One source	7	16%	2	5%	7	16%	28	64%
Two sources	30	50%	24	40%	25	42%	41	68%
Three sources	44	65%	66	97%	43	63%	51	75%
Four sources	52	100%	52	100%	52	100%	52	100%

DISCUSSION

Although 60 per cent of respondents were based in the United States, this survey attracted an international cohort, the majority of whom were based in Europe or Australia. Just one participant identified as being from a South American country. This could be reflective of the language the survey was written in (English), the demographics of Facebook and the social disposition in some countries towards sewing. For example, Indians made up the largest national cohort of Facebook users, some 170 million in the month of July 2018 (Statista 2018) when the survey was open, and yet no one who defined themselves as Indian replied despite many Indians being able to speak English. US users make up the second largest cohort at 210 million (Statista 2018). Consistent with previous findings into home-sewing, the respondents were overwhelmingly female. This suggests that home-sewing, even in a different context like historical styles, remains a predominantly female pastime.

Participants make styles from an average of five different eras, suggesting that interest in historical clothing leads to further explorations into other eras. The most popular eras were the 1940s and 1950s, followed by the Georgian and Victoria eras. Least popular were those that were more recent, with interest waning significantly for styles past the late 1960s. This is supported by responses from the motivational questions where 33% of participants indicated an interest in history and 18% were compelled by the different construction techniques required. This is also consistent with Gordon Jones's (2007: 194–95) finding that re-enactors often shift between eras as their interests develop. A strong trend was for participants to sew two or more eras adjoining each other; for example, someone who sewed mid-Georgian was more likely to sew late Georgian styles as well. This suggests that many participants expanded their range as they developed their interests and skills. This may be partly due to boundaries between styles being fluid as many fashion styles went through a process of evolution to the next, rather than drastically changing overnight.

When it came to the types of patterns to make clothes, the participants used a range of sources. However, when the data was broken down to which sources they used, a more nuanced response was found. For those only using one source, books were the most vital (64 per cent). This suggests that for many people, books that include historical patterns are a gateway into sewing historical clothing; from there they expand evenly into other sources. Perhaps because books have the potential to be more detailed and to include more photographs of the process and the finished garment. It must be noted here, however, that patterns, especially those of earlier historical periods made by the 'Big 4' pattern companies, are often costume/fancy dress style patterns rather than historically accurate, and some, but not all, makers are concerned with accuracy and will only use historically accurate patterns.

Sewing appears to be a serious occupation with this cohort, the clear majority sitting down at least once a week to work on their creations (76% or 173). This may be a reflection on the method to source participants from online sewing groups. About two-thirds of participants belonged to some kind of social groups associated with historical sewing practices. Further, 44% (100) belonged to recreation groups and 27% (62) to sewing groups. The range of social groups was extensive. The majority of twentieth-century-only sewers

not being a member of a social group may indicate that the motivations for wearing twentieth-century styles lie more with internal style motivations rather than as part of a social activity.

Motivations to sew their own historically styled clothing reflected some of the concerns found in twentieth-century studies into home-sewing, including the relative economic cost, fit and quality. However, this study also highlights the sense of achievement and opportunities to learn new techniques that sewing historically styled clothing can bring. Sewing clothing has evolved over the last millennium as new styles, techniques and technology have all contributed to its change. These give sewing enthusiasts the ability to explore and develop their skills in a way that may be largely lacking if they sew modern clothing. The role that nostalgia plays in motivating this cohort to sew historical clothing represents a significant difference from Bain's findings that contemporary dressmakers are not motivated by nostalgia. This may be due in part to the garments being made; for the sewer who makes historical clothing, nostalgia is a key motivator. Nostalgia was often noted to be a result of personal connection; for example, one participant noted that it was 'mostly nostalgia of an era I have only known in pictures and stories from my parents, grand-parents and movies' (participant 172). One participant expressed a spiritual connection underlying their nostalgia:

Medieval ages, the 12–13th centuries to be precise, is time when European people were closest to God, and the society itself was based on principles of sacred harmony. That is what missing from modern life and that is what I am looking for.

(Participant 36)

For this participant, the nostalgia is explicit. This is echoed by others who are seeking a full immersive experience in the past, such as participant 204: 'Did you see the Time Warp Wives documentary from a decade or so back, about families who choose to live in another era full time through their clothes, houses, technology etc? That's always been a life goal of mine'. For others, their nostalgia is tempered by less desirable social norms of the era, with one clarifying that they 'would not like to live in the 20s/30s. Awful for women, people of colour, LGBTQ, etc. (although better than some eras) but I love the music, art scene, literature' (participant 165).

CONCLUSION

The rise in popularity of sewing historical clothing can be seen as part of the broader cultural phenomenon of current interest in historical material culture. This is evident in the proliferation of consumer goods bearing labels 'retro', 'vintage' and 'classic' on anything from clothing to cars, music, events, furniture, food and interior decorating goods (Baker 2013: 1). As Bain put it:

Revivals of formerly 'lost' domestic crafts are not uncommon in contemporary popular culture. The last decade saw knitting surge in popularity, as it was reclaimed from its grandmotherly image and transformed into a 'hip' funky craft often deployed for political purposes.

(2016: 57)

Recent trends in nostalgic consumption see the commodification of material culture from the past, belying the modern drive for ever-new goods. Historical sewing patterns are now collectors' items. An original 1940s dress and jacket mail order pattern sold on eBay in 2013 for USD 2025. While this pattern may be an outlier in terms of price, historical patterns regularly sell on online shopping sites in excess of USD 100 (personal communication) (Landau 2018). But collectors are not just buying historical sewing patterns as cultural commodities; they purchase and use them to assemble historically accurate clothes to wear in the present.

Home-sewing, for centuries, has been an important occupation needed to dress the family and the home and has been an important source of income. The rise of ready-to-wear clothing has seen the role of domestic sewing evolve to become a skilled hobby, providing pleasure and creativity to its millions of devotees. Freed from the physiological needs of having to sew for the family or home, sewers are using their skills to explore social and historical phenomena and periods through creativity. The sewing of clothes from bygone eras offers sewers an opportunity to more deeply experience the social practices of the past via making and wearing historical clothing. In doing so, sewers may be challenged by the social conditions that emerge when making and wearing historical clothing. One example of this may be a woman in contemporary western society making and wearing a dress styled on a 1950s fitted bodice and full skirt only to be confronted with examining the unequal social, economic and political roles of women in the 1950s and the social conservatism of the period around women's roles (Hackett 2020). Similarly, in making and wearing civil war clothing, the maker is challenged to think about issues of race.

Historical clothing presents the viewer with alternative versions of constructing and presenting the human form. This provides an outlet for people who may feel constrained by current fashion and social values placed upon the human form. Our current age of fast fashion means that we have more clothes than ever, but these clothes tend towards loose, simply made garments that lack the structure and tailoring found in many historical clothing styles. Concerns over adequate fit is also a contentious area that mass production has been unable to adequately solve through standardized sizing despite ongoing attempts to address it. Home-sewing, and home-sewing of anachronistic styles, is perhaps a reaction to fast fashion, its poor quality and its continuation with a flawed sizing system (Hackett and Rall 2018). This means that for many, the attraction of historical clothing is found in alternate silhouettes. The aim of this research has been to both supplement the existing literature on home-sewing and extend the field by revealing the complex motives behind using sewing as a tool to access material culture of other eras.

One of the aims of this survey was to open up the discussion of sewing historical clothing styles along lines that had previously not been explored. Whilst previous surveys had focused on the practice of home-sewing, little had been done on exploring the practice beyond sewing as a substitute for purchasing clothing. This study addresses this omission, and there are clear avenues for further research. More detailed surveys could be produced, perhaps targeting subgroups in isolation, to reveal richer data about the sources, techniques and social aspects of making and wearing historical clothing. What also became clear in the responses to this survey is the dedication to learn the techniques needed to recreate clothing authentically. This social

knowledge warrants further investigation and is the subject of the researcher's follow-on research.

This research was carried out in 2018, using Facebook as a vehicle to find participants. The social media space is fluid, and there has been a trend towards the use of YouTube and Instagram as platforms for costumers and other sewers to share information, which may change the demographics of the cohort. The survey, if administered today, may yield different results. The COVID-19 pandemic has likewise changed many aspects of social life, with social distancing and lockdowns impacting how we interact at home, work and socially. Many events were either cancelled outright in 2020 or shifted to online, changing the dynamics for many enthusiasts. Likewise, lockdowns and the shift to working online have likely had an impact on our sartorial practices. The increase in unemployment and underemployment may mean that many are unable to engage with hobbies such as the ones mentioned in this study. The long-term effects of these social changes have yet to be seen.

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