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Sew what for sustainability? Exploring intergenerational attitudes and practices to clothing repair in Ireland.

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Abstract: While a traditional practice, clothing repair has recently garnered more attention from geographers and social scientists examining potential pathways to increase sustainable consumption and contribute to a circular economy. Clothing repair is fundamentally about extending the active life of garments and is a key phase of a closed-loop system effectively reducing the need for virgin resources thus avoiding clothing obsolescence or disposal as waste. Repair as a societal phenomenon in Ireland is an under-researched topic, this paper aims to explore the potential of an experience-centred perspective to advance understandings of current attitudes to and practices of clothing repair.

This research study employs innovative wardrobe studies and practice theoretical approaches to provide a snapshot of lived intergenerational practices of everyday clothing wear, care, and repair in Ireland. The findings reported in this paper relate specifically to clothing repair and arise from empirical in-depth interviews which took place in participants' own homes and in, or in close proximity to, their wardrobes. The paper highlights the complex multidimensional impact that attachment, memories, and materiality play in user decisions to repair, or not to repair, a garment, and associated decisions related to clothing discard. The paper unpacks intergenerational competencies and confidences in undertaking everyday clothing repair, user-repair cultures, and sewing skills. The discussion concludes with a critical consideration of findings in the context of wider debates surrounding sustainable clothing consumption and the circular economy.

Keywords: *clothing repair, practices, intergenerational, sustainable consumption, Ireland*

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Introduction

Repair and alteration of clothing have been practiced for generations, both in a commercial context and in the home with much value traditionally placed on garment materiality and longevity. Lately, however, it is widely understood that the cultural and economic value attributed to clothing items has dramatically altered in today's mass-produced, fast-fashion society, and garment lifespans are significantly truncated. Therefore, it is timely to consider, what attitudes to and practices of garment repair and alteration exist amongst contemporary clothing users? Does value gained through possession, complex clothing topographies, personal histories, geographies, and memory become significant as an instigating factor for clothing repair and longevity in everyday active use? And further, can current clothing repair practices provide any insights to progress a sustainable consumption policy agenda or approaches? Recognising repair as a societal phenomenon and an under-researched aspect of the clothing consumption spectrum, this paper aims to examine clothing repair practices taking place in Ireland. While there is emerging interest in the topic, studies exploring repair practices as part of the sustainability agenda are under-represented in the global sustainable consumption research landscape. Drawing on empirical data gathered in Ireland, this paper will provide a snapshot of approaches to, and intentions, towards clothing repair across three life-stage groups with the potential to understand current barriers and enablers to repair which may have implications for future sustainability policy impact.

The initial section of this paper situates the research within recent advances pertaining to the circular economy, clothing sustainability and repair cultures. It details the necessity to extend clothing lifespan, explores repair as a critical aspect of this and outlines the importance of understanding attitudes to and practices of clothing repair in the content of attempts to advance clothing sustainability. The study is then contextualised by considering the significance of garnering intergenerational, life-stage insights for sustainability transitions and, the place and household-based situation of this work. The methods section illuminates the potential of *wardrobe* methodologies in operationalising practice-centred explorations of clothing repair and provides an overview of the multi-method qualitative approach undertaken. Empirical findings presented demonstrate the central themes arising, reveal attitudes to and practices of clothing repair in Ireland and highlight the generational insights gathered. The conclusion section offers an analysis that situates the contribution of the research in broader practice research and sustainability policy contexts.

The Circular Economy and Clothing Repair Cultures

Recent policy level shifts at European Union level aim to accelerate transition from a linear towards a more sustainable, circular economy (European Commission, 2020; 2019a) and to advance a pathway towards achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015). The Commission has specifically identified clothing and textiles as a priority product category and has presented a new systemic strategy to scale

up sustainable and circular textiles to tackle the impacts of fast fashion and to ensure textiles are increasingly durable, repairable, reusable, and recyclable (EEA, 2022; European Commission, 2019b). Alarmingly, in the last decade, the cost of new garments has decreased relative to inflation, yet each item purchased is worn less, perhaps as little as just ten times (EEA, 2019; EMF, 2017). The adverse impact of such unsustainable textile use is vast; textile have the fourth-highest impact on the environment and climate change over their lifecycle, after food, housing, and mobility (EEA, 2022).

Lengthening and extending product lifespans is agreed upon as a critical aspect of sustainable consumption (Vesterinen & SyrJälä, 2022; Shi *et al.*, 2022; Paço *et al.*, 2021; Van der Velden, 2021). Historically, cloth was considered a valuable commodity, and clothing was regularly repaired and maintained (Brown, 2012) 'shaped by factors such as home economics or material scarcity' (McCorkill, 2021, 1). The potential for (re) engagement with clothing repair and maintenance, is gaining attention as a means of prolonging clothing active life and increasing sustainability and circularity of garments (Gwilt, 2021, Diddi & Yan, 2019; Van der Velden, 2021) although the location of much such research to date is in workshop, community, and institutional settings, rather than in the household. De Castro (2021, 8) endorses clothing repair noting that 'what has made economic sense for previous generations will make environmental sense for generations to come'. Repair is a key phase of a circular economy, as repair extends product lifespans ensuring longer continuous active use, reducing the need for virgin resources, and avoiding product obsolescence and disposal as waste. Moreover, repair enhances the viability of second-hand clothing markets (Cernansky, 2022) and, as most repairs are undertaken locally, generates viable regional enterprise. Currently, a global socio-cultural or activist movement known as 'right to repair' is gathering momentum and is advocating for increased regulation governing repair, together with producer innovation to support easy access to repair services, resources and availability of product spare parts thus avoiding planned obsolescence (EEA, 2022). Further and upstream, at clothing design stage, the capacity to design for repairability or to develop garments that actively facilitate repair, altering, or replacing of components is also being promoted to enable repair be undertaken effortlessly later downstream (McCorkill, 2021; Laitala & Klepp, 2020; Heinze, 2020; Connor-Crab & Rigby, 2019). There appears however, to be some disparity regarding the current prevalence of clothing repair which has been reported as ranging from 'largely disappeared' (Gwilt, 2014, 1) to 'currently fashionable' (McCorkill, 2021, 1).

Various types of clothing repair approaches are evident across literature with repair practices spanning a spectrum of complexity, precision, and effectiveness. Barker (2007) explains that clothing repair may include preventative mending, darning, patching, component replacement, as well as other repairs and general maintenance. Depending on repair complexity, a range of tools and equipment is required to undertake repair tasks, ranging from basic hand sewing tools to sewing machines. Gwilt (2021) classified garment users as possessing either novice or amateur skill levels and highlighted preferences for hidden versus visible repairs, although the latter require a greater level

of technical skill and competence to achieve. Collins (2019, 7) earlier explored the socio-cultural acceptability of visible repair in research amongst youths, as well examining their perceptions of the wearability of older clothing and found these elements 'not inherently undesirable'. While, exploring household object maintenance, but important here from a socio-cultural perspective, Gregson *et al*. (2009, 248) identified a 'spectrum of practices' related to repair ranging from 'the quick fix mask', which may not fully erase object damage, through to complete 'restoration' or 'refabrication'. That research connected repair practices to ongoing consumer-object-value and cautioned that the former approach may devalue a given object, while the latter potentially elevates it higher. Accordingly, repair success or failure may link to item retention or obsolescence and therefore, potentially to further consumption (Ibid). Jain (2021) meanwhile, categorised three types of repairs explaining that; self-repair is undertaken by the garment user (in the home or in a group setting) in possession of a range of competencies and tools; paid repair is undertaken by professional repair services, tailors or by fashion brand services and unpaid repair is completed for the user by a close relative or friend, often a parent or grandparent. Following Diddi & Yan (2019, 3) clothing repair, in the context of this study, is defined broadly as 'tasks undertaken to extend the use period of clothing that is damaged and/or does not fit (e.g., fix rips, sew buttons, altering the fit of the garment)'. Further, in this research, acts of clothing repair, mending, and alteration are largely described interchangeably to identify practices undertaken to enable extension of a garment lifespan for everyday active use and the research focus is on repair at clothing user level, rather than as a fashion industry sustainability tactic (Cernansky, 2022).

Motivations for, and barriers to, repair are important to consider when examining the pervasiveness of the practice. Several qualitative studies noted lack of time and lack of repair competency as barriers to repair practice (Laitalia & Kleep 2020; Cooper *et al*., 2019; McLaren & McLauchlan, 2015; Gwilt, 2014). In research by Diddi & Yan (2019) the key motivations identified for mending clothes included longevity, reduced environmental impact, and emotional attachment to garments; disincentives to mending included the high cost of professional alterations services, lack of repair skills, and time required. Likewise, McLaren & McLauchlan (2015) also identified repair costs and absence of both time and sewing skills as barriers to undertaking clothing repair and moreover added the shameful social stigma of wearing visibly mended clothing as tied to traditions of poverty and hardship, and user detachment fuelled by a vast array of alternative low-cost fast fashion garments as additional deterrents. Furthermore, a lack of knowledge regarding the environmental impact of clothing and fashion was later noted amongst study participants (McLaren *et al*., 2016). Jackson (2014, 228) proposed a philosophy of 'broken world thinking' as a fulcrum point for 'rethinking repair' rather than allowing breakdown and decay. Norum (2013) explored the desire and ability of consumers to perform clothing maintenance activities and raised concerns regarding the transfer and ongoing acquisition of maintenance-related skills with the decrease in inclusion of clothing repair in educational curricula. Earlier, Fisher *et al*.

(2008) claimed that clothing users do not routinely repair items that become damaged except for perfunctory mending practices such as hemming and reattaching buttons. The dearth of repair engagement in that study was attributed to a lack of repair skills, garment attractiveness, easy availability of new clothing (particularly considering prohibitive professional repair costs), and ease of access to professional repair services (Ibid). Memories and emotional attachment to clothing require consideration too, as an influencer or barrier for repair. Literature has highlighted that how much garments are valued has an influence on the level of care and maintenance they will receive and the likelihood of repair occurring (Nazli, 2021). Additionally, different types of garment value beyond purchase price value have been identified, such as functional, aesthetic, emotional, social, and sensory value (Niinimaki & Armstrong, 2013; Fletcher, 2012; Laitala & Boks, 2012), all of which may act as a motivation or barrier for repair and longevity. Understandably, clothing repair activities cannot be examined in isolation as practices directly link to unworn clothing and clothing discard practices. Clothing discard decisions are explained as largely tied to an individual users' perceptions of self (Alevizou et al., 2021) and such decisions are shown to occur at all stages of the (sustainable) consumption process.

More recently, self-repair practices have seen a move out of the household with repairs instead taking place in formally or informally organised collaborative community workshops, mending clubs, and repair cafés, providing for shared development of participant skills and competencies, social exchanges, and opportunities for overall enhancement of participant and societal wellbeing. Durrani (2018, 1) describes such repair cafés as 'communal repair/mending workshops that seek to provide an alternative to the make-take-waste paradigm dominating the fast fashion industry in most Western countries'. McLaren & McLauchlan (2015, 223) expound this type of 'sharing economy' approach to repair as having social and creative wellbeing outcomes as well as shared skill development potential. Lately, Gwilt (2021, 873), reporting on 'Make, Do and Mend' workshops organised in the UK, further adds materials pooling, advice sharing, participant enjoyment and development of deep social connection as advantages to undertaking garment mending in collaborative repair cafés as opposed to undertaking garment repair as an isolated, chore-based, task in the domestic setting. Meanwhile, Milburn (2017) supports a wider benefit of clothing repair activities as potentially mindful, thoughtful, ethical, and creative practices with the possibility to open discussions on meaning-making and materiality in clothing repair. Rodabaugh (2018, 79) concurs, relabelling hand-sewn repair as 'mendfulness' and extolling the many opportunities for creative expression which repair presents.

2. Research Context

When investigating repair practices, Ireland emerges as an interesting research context for several reasons. Firstly, as highlighted in a previous *Irish Geography* article, there is a dearth of literature examining sustainable consumption in Irish households (Lavelle &

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Fahy, 2016). This paper builds on that work to generate a more comprehensive picture of current clothing consumption and repair practices. Secondly, very little research on repairing as a sociological phenomenon is currently available in Ireland. A notable exception is the current Repair Acts Ireland project, which is engaged in mapping repair histories and activities, initially in one county, and in exploring therein repair services, community repair groups, voluntary repair collaborations and repair cafés. It is recording accounts of individual users repair behaviours with a view to both exhibition output and a practice research focus (for more information see: www.repairacts.ie/). Finally, Ireland has a rich heritage of engagement with fashion, clothing, and textile craft industries (De Cléir, 2011). The data for this study was gathered in counties Donegal and Sligo, in the North West of Ireland, between July 2018 and May 2019 with both urban and rural participants evenly represented (Maguire & Fahy, 2021). Ultimately, attitudes to clothing repair and current clothing repair practices in Ireland are largely unknown at present and there is no current baseline data available on its repair. Consequently, this research study is timely and well placed to support real-life insights into the everyday consumption patterns and social norms of contemporary Irish clothing users.

Alevizou *et al.* (2021) call for more intergenerational research exploring fashion consumption. The lived worlds of different life-stage consumers regarding clothing repair are also unknown with little current literature available and only limited available internationally. For instance, Norum (2013, 2015 & 2017) report on significant gaps in clothing repair skills between baby boomer and Generation X cohorts to millennials and in clothing disposal to trash charity and second-hand stores (Norum, 2015). Meanwhile, Diddi & Yan (2019) reviewed the benefits of community mending events to foster opportunities to share knowledge across generations. In this research, three life-stage groups were selected for investigation, each comprising five participants. The intergenerational groups were delineated as follows: 18-24 years, termed in this study Young Adults (YA); 25-49 years, who represent a group of parents with young children (PwYC); and 50+ years, labelled as older adults (OA).

More recently, the everyday active use phase of clothing lifecycle has been the focus of practice research (Laitala & Klepp, 2020; Saunders *et al.*, 2019; Fletcher & Kleep, 2017) and is believed to be a 'critical fulcrum across which more sustainable practices might be leveraged' (Gill *et al.*, 2016, 33) with examination of user practices at the household scale an important element (Head *et al.*, 2016). Cooper *et al.*, (2019) and McLaren *et al.* (2016) recognised the value of researching clothing use, in-depth, including the immediate experiences, activities and material connections users have in their personal lived worlds. Specifically in relation to clothing consumption, several practice-based, household-based studies have emerged lately, for instance, Evan's (2019) sociological review of everyday consumption patterns as practices, six points or moments of consumption are proposed over the lifecycle of a product: front-end acquisition, appropriation and appreciation (3A's) and latter-end devaluation, divestment, and disposal (3D's). Particularly pertinent here is the connection of the 3D's to opportunities for, and practices of, clothing repair, and user appreciation as a potential driver of

clothing attachment and desire for repair. Nazli (2021) developed a repair motivation and barriers model illustrating the importance of a range of technical, value, and emotional aspects in influencing householder decisions to undertake repair. The work of Strengers *et al.* (2016) exploring changing patterns of householder's energy practices is also useful in this context as how everyday practices interact, overlap, and potentially change is also relevant in overall explorations of clothing repair. It is specifically in clothing consumption patterns and social norm aspects within the household that this research study is situated, as understanding everyday 'clothing practices in a holistic and contextualised manner' is considered vital in providing insights into sustainable consumption (Woodward, 2015, 131).

Methods

For some time now a turn towards practice theoretical approaches has been recognised as useful in explorations of everyday sustainable consumption patterns, enabling a refocusing from individualistic or systemic paradigms and allowing 'practices, instead of individuals, become the units of analysis' (Spaargaren, 2011, 815). Shove *et al.* (2012) clarified that practices are comprised of a trio of elements (material, competence and meaning) facilitating a distinct lens through which to explore everyday life. Practice theories and practice-focused studies have been increasingly employed to explain how and why particular forms of everyday human behaviours are adopted, popularised, changed, and influenced (Reid & Ellsworth-Krebs, 2019) and have also been applied in repair specific investigations (Durrani, 2018). In focusing on practices as dynamic, socially constructed everyday actions encompassing meanings, competences and materials enlightening understandings may emerge (Shove *et al*., 2012). However, experience-centred, practice-centred inquiry can present considerable methodological challenges, many of which relate to operationalising a practice-theoretical frame (Greene & Fahy, 2020). Such challenges are particularly intensified by the fact that the practices being explored are typically so routine and ingrained in the user's subconscious that full consideration needs to be given to selecting methods that are appropriately adroit, inventive, and entirely embedded in the milieu/locale of participants.

In this research a practice-based, wardrobe approach was selected to investigate clothing repair within households. Employing innovative, multifaceted, quantitative wardrobe methods (influenced by Fletcher & Kleep, 2017; McLaren *et al*., 2016; Whitson-Smith, 2018) the study generated an extensive and richly layered intergenerational dataset on repair practices as part of the active use phase of clothing. Gregson and Beale (2004, 690) explain wardrobe studies as 'pivotally positioned in the practices of clothing consumption' valuing the approach to unpack consumption practices. The methodologies employed here involved in-depth wardrobe interviews comprising a partial wardrobe audit undertaken in participants' homes, self-reported clothing diaries of a selected garment, and participant narrated household tours. The interview data was further supplemented with still photographs taken during the tour and of garments identified by the participant as having been previously repaired or altered (either personally or

via a professional repair service). The diaries, photo-elicitation, and household tours, while providing valuable data (cf. Maguire & Fahy, 2021), were also vital to encourage and prompt participants to fully narrate their practice. This range of engaging, multi-sensory, and reflection stimulating wardrobe methodologies combined to motivate participants to uncover and thoughtfully review normally hidden and taken-for-granted everyday clothing repair practices.

Non-probability, purposive sampling was employed to engage five participants for each intergenerational group from across the population, and participants were recruited via college student unions and local community groups. Importantly, selection criteria were based on targeting participants of the three selected age and life-stages across the generational spectrum (following McLaren *et al.*, 2016) rather than centered on user repair capacity, activity or sustainability inclinations. Thirteen female and two male participants were recruited in total, the overall cohort therefore, was not gender balanced and gender was not an investigative focus. As illustrated in Table 1 below, which details the sample group, each participant was allocated an identifier to protect anonymity.

Table 1: Profile of study participants across three selected generational/life-stage groups

Group	Participant	Sex	Location		Occupation
Young Adult (18-24 years)	YA1	Female	Sligo	Urban	Full-time College Student
	YA2	Female	Sligo	Urban	Full-time College Student
	YA3	Female	Sligo	Urban	Full-time College Student
	YA4	Female	Donegal	Rural	Full-time Hospitality Industry
	YA5	Male	Sligo	Urban	Full-time College Student
Parents with Young Children (25-49 years)	PwYC1	Female	Donegal	Urban	Full-time Homemaker
	PwYC2	Female	Donegal	Rural	Part-time Social Work
	PwYC3	Female	Sligo	Urban	Full-time Lecturer
	PwYC4	Female	Sligo	Rural	Full-time Homemaker
	PwYC5	Male	Donegal	Rural	Full-time Teacher
Older Adult (50+ years)	OA1	Female	Donegal	Rural	Part-time Self-Employed
	OA2	Female	Donegal	Rural	Retired Teacher
	OA3	Female	Donegal	Rural	Part-time Community Development
	OA4	Female	Donegal	Urban	Full-time Healthcare
	OA5	Female	Sligo	Rural	Part-time Farmer

We acknowledge that the findings of this study are qualitative, local, and limited; they are not representative of the wider Irish population yet do provide rich data about user clothing repair practices across a spectrum of life-stages, of which relatively little is known to date. Further, due to the selected approach, findings here are a snapshot, providing a lens into given life-stage moments, rather than a life course approach as biographic interviews were not undertaken and therefore, this research cannot ascertain whether the practice of clothing repair in Ireland has changed or indeed lessened over

time. Ethical approval for this study was detailed and robust, particularly due to the intimate location of the research in participant's bedrooms and wardrobes (Maguire & Fahy, 2021).

The overall study analysis of primary data relating to participant's individual cases involved vertical analysis, exploring each specific case followed by an examination of the themes of *wear, care, and repair* across cases (horizontal analysis), within the life-stage groupings. Following transcription of all interview material and collation of still photographs and researcher reflections, a comprehensive three-phase strategy was adopted for analysing data generated by problem-centred interviews, in line with Witzel & Reiter (2012, 102). For the purposes of this paper, data analysed is drawn from each of two interviews undertaken with the fifteen participants (an initial problem-centred interview and a second in-depth wardrobe interview, n=30 interviews) when discussion focused on repair practices together with the partial wardrobe audit of various garments in their wardrobes.

Findings and Discussion: Insights into clothing repair practices in Ireland

The participants involved in this research directly and indirectly discussed three significant emergent themes: *Repair know-how, Procurement of professional repair services,* and *Repair decision-making*. Repair know-how ranged from minor hand-sewn repairs to more advanced adjustments to garment fit, style changes and in some cases, machine worked garment upcycling or alterations, comparable to earlier research (Gwilt, 2021; Gregson *et al.*, 2009; Barker, 2007). Know-how here relates solely to practices undertaken by participants personally and denotes possession or lack of clothing repair skills and competencies. The procurement theme describes access to, and use of, professional sewing services for garment repair and alteration; professional repair/alteration services (hereafter PRS) include all commercial repair or alteration services paid for by participants including local tailors, dressmakers, the nationwide Zip Yard franchise and clothing remodelling services. The final theme emerging across responses, Repair decision-making, denotes participants' underlying beliefs and values surrounding their decisions and actions to repair a clothing item as well as barriers cited to extending a garment's everyday active use lifespan.

Repair know-how

In the sample explored here, personal clothing repair competency ranged from a basic capacity to assume simple garment repairs using hand sewing and basic tools to very competent technical capacity to undertake advanced garment repairs, alterations, and style detailing utilising a sewing machine. Further, the spectrum of practices from 'quick fix mask' to 'restoration' (Gregson *et al.*, 2009, 248) were observed in use across the cohort. Such variations in repair know-how in the group are reflective of previous studies (Fisher *et al.*, 2008). Most participants in this research (11 out of 15) possessed

sufficient skills to enable them to undertake, at a minimum, rudimentary hand-sewn garment repair practices (as defined by Barker, 2007) and expressed the confidence to do so. The level of skill of these participants can most accurately be identified as equivalent to 'novice' status, as delineated by Gwilt (2021), with two of the eleven possessing more proficient 'amateur' repair competencies. Four participants admitted to possessing no sewing skills (one YA and three PwYC), of whom one was a male participant and three were female.

All but one participant identified having learned their sewing competency skills in school and the post-primary subject Home Economics was predominantly mentioned as the direct curricular source, reflecting Norum (2013; 2015). Only one male participant in the YA group (YA5) did not attribute skills development to school and instead explained learning basic sewing skills from his mother; however, there was no opportunity to further explore curriculum subject uptake and choice within the research scope. Additionally, several participants (7 in total) attributed close family members to further contributing to their sewing skills development non-formally, within the family unit (mentioned by all participants in this regard were their mothers, plus in one instance a grandmother). Interestingly, all the OA participants identified learning to sew in school, reflecting the prevalence of sewing as a core component part of earlier education curricula (NCCA, 2016).

While possessing repair skills and capacity is important, practising such skills to undertake clothing repair was a key focus of this research. Congruent with earlier studies (Fisher *et al.*, 2008) findings indicated that day-to-day implementation of repair skills was scant amongst some participants. OA participants were most likely to engage in everyday repairs while the other two groups (YA, PwYC) were inclined often to turn to close family members, particularly mothers, when an everyday clothing repair was required. This reflects a networking practice also recognised and favoured in earlier research, labelled 'private repair' (Laitala *et al.*, 2021) or 'unpaid repair' (Jain, 2021). Uncovering a corresponding networking repair culture and practice amongst two of these groups in the North West of Ireland is remarkable, and within a sustainable consumption agenda it is important to consider how such networking practices may evolve in the future as repair competencies of the wider population change, or potentially diminish. Participants in this study mainly reported striving to achieve repairs that were invisible or hidden and therefore, succeeded in returning a garment to its original aesthetic state, in so far as possible, comparable to Gwilt (2021). While, in the case of alterations both self-performed and outsourced, there was consensus among the participants in their expressed desire for the modification to improve overall garment wearability.

Procurement of professional repair services

Participants agreed that they highly valued PRS, both for convenience and for the professional level of finish achieved. Twelve out of fifteen participants who regularly, or occasionally, availed of PRS agreed that they considered such services provided good value for money. This finding contrasts with outcomes of previous research where the

cost of PRS was viewed as prohibitive and was regarded as a barrier to repair (Cooper *et al*., 2019; Diddi & Yan, 2019; McLaren & McLauchlan, 2015). Moreover, there was a consensus amongst this cohort, that it was easily possible for participants to access PRS in their locale, perhaps indicative of a strong level of repair culture in the North West region which makes way for such services to exist and to remain viable businesses. This outcome conflicts with previous research in the UK which indicated that convenient access to PRS was challenging (Fisher *et al*., 2008) although several participants here acknowledged the lengthy timeframe needed for PRS repair work to be completed. PRS were employed by all but three participants in this cohort overall; PwYC3 and OA5 were both self-proficient in repair and did not need to outsource the task, while PwYC4 had access to unpaid repair via a competent relation. It must, however, be acknowledged that use of PRS among YA participants was frequently linked to alterations of occasion wear items e.g., debs or prom clothing, perhaps indicating that rates for PRS are more easily justified for high-cost garments and special events, and that such services are not used routinely for everyday repairs. Moreover, within the OA group some interesting insights emerged on the use of PRS, with participant opinions quite varied on the value for money provided by such services. OA1 believed PRS very reasonable and worthwhile in increasing a garments overall value and lifespan making it more wearable, unique and well-fitting. OA3 agreed musing that she often adds an extra tip when using PRS as she feels the fee for such a skilled service is low and wondered how PRS businesses can remain profitable. However, OA2 and OA4 both disclosed avoiding PRS; OA2 explained specifically avoiding purchase of clothing that required adaption aiming to circumvent the cost of PRS and OA4, who acquired most of her clothing second-hand, deliberated: 'it's just never really worth my while… it might cost more than the item cost me to buy… they [clothes] would probably go if they needed repair…'.

Repair decision-making

Interview participants revealed a wide range of reasons that influenced whether they chose to repair a particular piece of clothing, many of which had already been identified in previous research. Some of the key reasons cited included their personal level of repair skill and confidence (Nazli, 2021; Jain, 2021; Gwilt, 2021, 2014; Cooper *et al*., 2019; Norum, 2017, 2013; Fisher *et al*., 2008); the time it would take for them to complete the repair (Laitalia & Kleep 2020; Diddi & Yan, 2019; McLaren & McLauchlan, 2015); and what the garment meant to them (Nazli, 2021; Niinimaki & Armstrong, 2013). An important and unexpected reason for not repairing a garment, as articulated by participants in this study, was disinclination or laziness. When we explored this reason further, we found that it was linked to having a wide range of similar garments available to wear. This illustrates user detachment, a key consequence of fast fashion (McLaren & McLauchlan 2015), and an important challenge to fostering more sustainable clothing practices. Probing further in relation to participants underlying beliefs around garment value, two elements emerged. Firstly, value for some participants related to the memories and emotional attachment they placed on the clothing item in need of repair. Secondly,

in some instances, value was factored into participants decision to repair recalling the initial purchase price of the item and trying to balance this with either the potential cost of repair (PRS) or the time cost required to complete the repair (personal repair). In all cases, the emotional attachment to the garment involved swayed the choice to ultimately undertake the repair. Conversely, for several participants more detached, the value balance resulted in a particular garment not being repaired as it had been acquired for a low investment initially (e.g., a garment originally sourced in second-hand shop - OA4) or the garment was ultimately not sufficiently valuable enough to be considered suitable for repair (e.g., a low cost, fast-fashion clothing item - PwYC4). These insights on the underlying rationales driving user detachment across intergenerational groups, serve to further our understandings of repair cultures amongst contemporary Irish clothing users in this region and are very useful in considering potential future sustainable policy approaches.

Repair practices viewed through an intergenerational lens: a discussion

Detailed within-case and cross-case analysis was undertaken with a focus on everyday clothing repair practices viewed through an intergenerational lens. Noteworthy insights which emerged amongst the three groups in this study are discussed below.

While repair was not a commonplace everyday practice amongst the YA (18-24 years) cohort, this study revealed that wearing clothing that has been repaired is an acceptable practice for this group. Four of the five YA participants possessed basic hand sewing skills sufficient to undertake minor repairs themselves, with only one of the five (YA3) having no sewing skills. The key reasons why repair skills were not often employed amongst this group were cited as lack of time; lack of confidence; and although identifying value in PRS, YA participants admitted to only using professional repair services occasionally. YA1 did not practice repair herself, despite having sewing and craft skills, but revealed instead often using a pin as a temporary 'first-aid' measure (reflective of Gregson *et al.*, 2009, quick fix approach) until her mother can more permanently repair the item later. The same participant did, in contrast, report often engaging in simple garment restyling e.g., cutting off bows, ribbons etc. to simplify a garment or adding a premade collar. YA2 disclosed occasionally undertaking minor hand-sewn garment repairs however, stated that mainly she simply 'does not have the time now to repair', which she acknowledged as 'really bad'. YA3 possessed no sewing skills but identified that she 'will have to learn'. YA 4 disclosed that although she did learn sewing skills in school and still possesses basic skills, she does not have the confidence to repair 'in case [she] would make a mistake'. This barrier of stress and uncertainty in a novice repairer reflects recent research by Nazli (2021) whereby the potential for reversibility was included in a repair motivation and barriers model created. Overall, these YA responses reflect earlier research (Laitalia & Kleep 2020; McLaren & McLauchlan, 2015; Gwilt, 2021, 2014) regarding the barriers to repair which were dominated by cost and lack of time and skills.

When the influence of familial repair culture on practices was examined YA4 explained that there was little culture of clothing repair in her home environment and that while there was 'a sewing box…it's not used too often around here!'. This contrasted with the other four young adults interviewed (YA1, YA2, YA3, YA5) whose parents (all mothers) often undertook clothing repairs for them. For example, YA1's mother resizes items she buys in charity shops and shortens her jeans/trousers. YA5 frequently gives items for repair to his mother who sews them by machine for larger repairs and by hand for minor mending mirroring Fisher *et al*. (2008) where parental and grandparent involvement in repair was evident.

A very positive finding emerging for future sustainability transitions was the overall acceptability amongst the YA group to wearing clothing that had been repaired. This tolerability aligns with earlier research (Collins, 2019) which concluded that garment repairs, (both visible/invisible) were not inherently undesirable to this age cohort. However of concern, and reflecting earlier studies whereby clothes are often discarded due to minor damage (Alevizou *et al.*, 2021; Cooper *et al.*, 2019), four of the five YAs in this study admitted not even considering repair, in some instances, and instead revealed using the bin to discard worn or damaged items: 'clothing beyond repair would be binned' (YA1); 'if it's ripped, I just throw it in the bin' (YA2); 'then those that aren't in good condition just go in the bin' (YA3); 'It goes to the bin normally' (YA5). These statements demonstrate the urgent need, as government reports have previously highlighted (EEA, 2022; WRAP, 2019), to continue to raise awareness amongst young consumers that textiles do not belong in regular mixed municipal waste streams and to ensure adequate infrastructure for appropriate textile recycling and material reuse. While it is not possible to scale up the approach across the entire population, we proffer that the innovative wardrobe studies and practice-based approaches employed here, has proven effective in uncovering hidden meanings and developing deep connections with household participants of all ages and has furthermore, enabled participants to reflect on their everyday clothing use and repair practices and to reconsider them. One example of interest is a disclosure made by YA 2, in interview 2:

> When we last talked, you got me thinking, like why don't I just mend my clothes instead of throwing them out and so I brought a [sewing] kit up from home…I mean, you don't have to throw it out, just try to fix them…

Considering whether there is potential to positively leverage more sustainable user behaviour and to bridge the knowledge-behaviour gap, it was enlightening that by involvement in the study, YA2 had reconsidered her usual divestment approach and was now willing and prepared to engage in basic garment repair (although, her willingness had not actually been actioned to date at that point).

Amongst the PwYC group, only two of the five participants possessed competent sewing skills to enable them to undertake repair personally. PwYC1 often carried out minor hand-sewn repairs and adjustments to garments for herself and her children (as she did not own a sewing machine) and employed convenience repair aids e.g., wundaweb. She was taught to sew by her mother, as well as learning in school through

Home Economics where she made basic garments. PwYC1 expressed that she would like to learn more sewing and crafting in future to be able to make keepsake items from her children's baby clothes which have an emotional attachment. PRS were valued and regularly employed by PwYC1 for professional-looking jeans hems, more complex alterations and resizing. PwYC3 was also proficient at sewing, having learned in school and from her mother, and has now taught her two children basic hand and machine sewing skills, considering it a very useful life skill. PwYC2, PwYC4 and PWYC5 could not sew and thus, never repair garments personally. Reflecting on data collected from this group, it is evident that a lack of sewing competency, as well as the overall busyness of life for young parents can be seen to hamper decisions around garment longevity as reflected in the following comments: 'if it's got a rip in it, to me it's broken' (PwYC2); 'even then it would need to be an item that is worth fixing…by the time I get around to it, life is just so busy' (PwYC3); 'I don't have the skills to do that' (PwYC4). 'I wouldn't buy something that needs altering, it's too much hassle to get it done somewhere and to pay more for it too (PwYC5). Monetary value emerged in this group as an important factor in influencing PwYC decisions to perform repairs (echoing McLaren *et al.*, 2016), as did social and emotional garment value. However, that research also found repair practices were more prevalent amongst parents and professionals rather than students, which was not borne out in findings of this study.

Although, admittedly, some of the OA cohort do not use repair skills on an everyday basis, all the group sew competently, and all identified having learned to sew in school. These findings correlate with reports of greater sewing skills among older adults (Norum, 2013; 2017) and skills levels contrast compared with other cohorts (YA and PwYC) in which four of the ten contributors had no sewing skills. Some potential reasons for this may include the presence of two male participants in those cohorts who traditionally may not have engaged in school subjects teaching sewing or because of revisions in school curricula that reduced exposure to sewing skills. Remarkably, even though she owned a sewing machine, OA1 mainly repaired valued clothing by hand as she enjoyed the hand-stitching process and could do the repair sitting in front of the TV: 'If I really like them, I repair them, at the minute I have a little dress that I love…I'll sew that by hand' echoing the wider personal benefits of hand craft and sewing (Rodabaugh, 2018; Milburn, 2017). OA 2 and OA4 both also undertook hand sewn repair (OA 2 does not have a sewing machine anymore, having retired and moved house recently, while OA4 would like to own a machine in future). OA3 regularly repaired items both by hand and machine sewing and OA5 undertakes lots of machine repairs/alterations for herself, her family, and neighbours.

The difference between contemporary repair culture and that which existed in their earlier life was commented upon by several of the OA cohort. OA1 recalled a strong repair culture in her home of origin, whereby objects were only disposed of if completely beyond repair and she lamented how difficult it is nowadays to source parts/materials required to repair items. OA5 pondered the importance of knowing when a garment may be worth repairing versus one that was originally cheap or not good enough quality to repair. Several OAs vigorously and ardently linked diminishing repair culture to current

availability of fast fashion; they reminisced on the acceptability and pervasiveness of making/repair culture in the past:

> *OA1: Everything's become cheaper. It's cheaper to buy a new one…everything in our house was repaired or fixed so it wasn't in my mentality, it wasn't in my mother and father's mentality to throw it out until you had tried to repair it - really tried…and then what happened was you started not to be able to get pieces or materials and I think that's a deliberate tactic…*

> *OA5: I learned in school, in home economics, I used to make a lot of my own clothes, my sisters did too…I'd make something new for the weekend no problem. I made clothes for the children too, for occasions mostly. Clothes for children were so expensive then and only my husband was working but nowadays there is Pennys and it is just not worth it. I wouldn't make for the grandchildren now, children grow so fast and you can access clothing so cheap now, some of it is so cheap it is hard to understand how it is possible.*

As the above statements illustrate, there was a clear appreciation amongst OAs of the value in lengthening and extending product lifespans aligned to a 'right to repair' movement as a critical aspect of sustainable consumption (EEA, 2022; Shi *et al.*, 2022; Paço *et al.*, 2021; Van der Velden, 2021) although, this fervour was not evident in either of the younger generational groups in this study.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper presented useful insights into garment repair and alteration practices and user-repair cultures as uncovered amongst an intergenerational sample of contemporary Irish participants applying wardrobe studies and practice theory approaches. This study, albeit limited in scale, has been useful in supporting a greater understanding of how, when, and why participants personally undertake garment repairs and/or employ PRS to prolong the lifecycle of garments. In extending clothing use via repair there is potential to reduce both consumption of new items and needless discard of worn but still usable garments. In the context of increasing pathways to more sustainable lifestyles, extension of clothing lifespans must be a key emphasis of any effective closed loop system, and an enhanced understanding of current everyday practices can provide valuable signposts for future sustainable policy, research, and practice. The priority and policy for textiles and clothing as set out by the EU (European Commission 2019a, 2019b, 2020) provides an overall supporting framework for accelerating transition from a linear to a more sustainable and circular economy. However, broadening the socio-cultural acceptability, implementation, and visibility of clothing repair everyday in households and in communities, amongst users of all generations, genders, and skill levels, is an integral aspect of the solution. Future scaling up of the level, and consequently the beneficial impact, of clothing repair requires involvement of a broad spectrum of intergenerational clothing users possessing competent repair skills, a keen desire to engage in everyday clothing maintenance and thereafter a willingness to wear repaired clothing proudly.

As with earlier research (Gwilt, 2021, Norum, 2015, 2013, Fisher *et al*., 2008) this study revealed a strong variation in *repair know-how* amongst the cohort, ranging from four participants with no sewing skills (all four were YA or PwYC) to eleven others who possessed a spectrum of skills extending from basic sewing competency to advanced proficiency. All but one participant with repair skills had learnt to sew in school, and some had additional familial support in skills development. Notwithstanding a good level of sewing competency overall, the day-to-day application of skills for clothing repair was inconsiderable amongst the two younger cohorts (YA, PwYC) who were more likely to enlist family members to undertake repairs required, while OA participants were seen to have more advanced sewing skills and to practice self-repair more regularly (reflective of Jain, 2021). *Procurement of professional repair services* was evident amongst twelve of the fifteen participants, with all those believing such services good value for money and accessible, in contrast to previous studies (Cooper *et al*., 2019; Diddi & Yan, 2019; McLaren & McLauchlan, 2015). The overall acceptability of wearing repaired items was a positive finding, nonetheless reflecting Gwilt (2021) the preference was for hidden repair with minimal impact on garment aesthetic, rather than visible or creative repair (McCorkhill, 2021). To foster a viable repair model at scale in the fashion industry poses practical and business challenges, as recognised by Cernansky (2022) however, localised, shared, community repair approaches can still be worthwhile in advancing future clothing repair culture in Ireland, with valuable additional collaborative, social and creative benefits also a potential outcome (Gwilt, 2021; McLaren & Mc Lauchlan, 2015). There is further possibility too for encouragement of visibility and support for pockets of right-to-repair activism or craft movements emerging (Durrani, 2018), but not yet visible in this sample group.

The new understandings of repair practices amongst intergenerational groups of Irish clothing users provided by this paper are important as there was heretofore a dearth of information on individual clothing repair activities. Examination of participants *repair decision-making* revealed a range of barriers and enablers for repair that were consistent with previous research, including, time involved, self-repair competency, perceived garment value as influenced by memories/emotional attachment, and initial monetary value. Noteworthy, a deterrent to repair emerging in this study was disinclination/laziness, which did not arise in previous research. These insights signal considerable potential for extending everyday implementation of clothing repair practices, particularly amongst younger generational groups. Possible future approaches include mainstreaming sewing skills in educational curricula, promoting repair how-to widely via virtual demonstration videos and blogs, and endorsing the socio-cultural acceptability of mending, not as a traditional, thrifty, or frugal activity but rather as a trendy, creative, revolutionary and political act of sustainability (de Castro, 2021; McCorkhill, 2021). Regularly experiencing and engaging in the intimate care and repair of valued garments, as evidenced by some of the participants here, has potential to also enhance user appreciation of broader clothing materiality, quality, and composition, with wider benefits possible for clothing longevity and for more sustainable garment selection in future.

While this study represents only a small-scale qualitative investigation of clothing repair practices, there is enormous potential for geographers to engage in future research avenues in the repair arena. For example, gathering information on the history, scale, and size of the repair sector in Ireland, would allow future improvement for users, practitioners, PRS etc. and would also provide a clearer picture of the performance of repair, which can then be contextualised fully within the sustainable consumption agenda considering overall material flows, consumption rates, and waste arisings in the clothing arena.

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