

Nobody was Dirty

Disrupting inconspicuous consumption in
laundry routines

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Inconspicuous consumption

- Mundane daily actions conceal the use of water, energy and chemicals (Warde, 2010; Gram-Hanssen, 2007).
- There is potential for significant resource savings through small changes in routine.
- My research suggests that collective conventions have utmost influence on routines.
- Intervening in social discourse and lowering cleanliness expectations may prove effective in enabling pro-environmental default practices.

Cleanliness is a resource consuming social practice

Laundry is one example of inconspicuous consumption, do we wash too much?

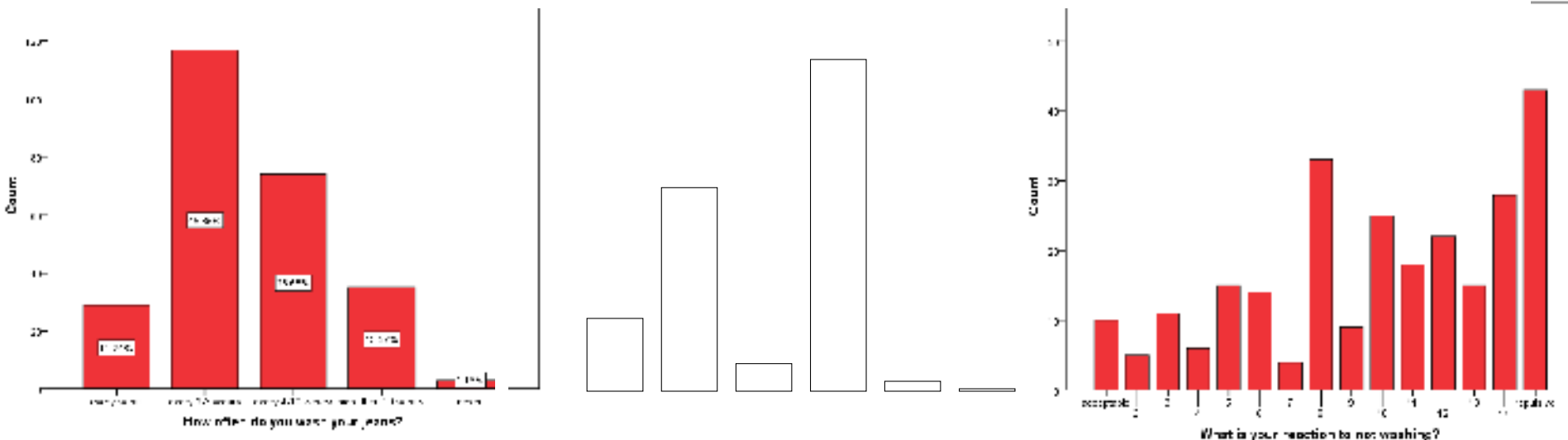
- Josh Le wore the same pair of jeans for 15 months and found similar levels of bacteria to jeans worn for only 11 days.
- *Modern standards of cleanliness are a recent phenomena and go far beyond sanitation, consuming water, energy and chemicals. (Shove, 2004)*
- *Wearing unclean clothes is a social taboo. Yet behind this everyday routine there are some major resource, pollution and social problems. (Rigby, 2009)*

How I investigated the social practice of over-laundering

- **Jeans as a comparison garment**
- **Establish a baseline of current laundry practice**
 - Surveying people on the street
 - Websites
 - In-depth interviews
- **Designed an intervention to see how social meaning is made of changing practice towards sustainability**
 - Engaging a group to participate in a low wash lifestyle, document the experience.

Current laundry situation

263 jean wearing people on the street



Most people

- Washed jeans every 2-3 wears.
- Washed because of 'habit'.
- Felt that not washing was repulsive.

Current laundry situation

263 jean wearing people

“I wash everything and anything after wearing it once, even if I only wore it for a couple hours.”

“Basically washing everything once a week.”

“I don't have a routine, once I run out of underwear I do laundry.”



Intervention participants

A group of approximately 30 people are seated in a circle in a large, ornate room with high ceilings and stained glass windows. They are facing a whiteboard in the center of the room. The room has a classic architectural style with wooden beams and decorative elements. The participants are dressed in casual to semi-formal attire. The whiteboard is currently blank.

Age 18 -56

Average age 30

16 female 16 male

Urban dwelling, socially mobile

A woman is standing in a public square, wearing a black quilted jacket, a black scarf, blue jeans, and black boots. She is holding a pair of white earbuds. In the background, there is a large Gothic building with many windows and a few seagulls on the ground.

Experience of participants

“They kept remarkably clean.”

“I can't make mine look dirty!”

“I am amazed at how little they smell and how clean and brand new they look.”

“I felt a little bit dirty, but not really that dirty.”

“They were so dirty. I just knew they were dirty.”

Alternative practice

“I didn't air my jeans or anything at all.”

“I wore them on alternate days, to hide the fact from my work mates.”

“Made sure when I took them off, that they were hung up.”

“As long as you keep wearing it, it smells fresh.”





Motivators of practice

Laundry norms are emotional, and intangible yet entrenched in the lives of the people I spoke to

Motivations:

- **Habit** – “I haven't washed those for a while maybe I should throw them in the wash.”
- **Convenience** – “You throw things in, push a couple of buttons and hey presto we've got our wonderful clean things.”
- **Family** – “There was something nice about her washing it and folding it and giving it to me.”
- **Status** – “I don't want to be mistaken for a homeless person.”

Motivators of practice

Collective conventions

- Smell is socially delicate subject not readily discussed. *“Every care is taken by the person who is affected, to prevent the perpetrator from knowing.”*
- People rely on unspoken signals to set the standard on cleanliness. *“People at work are usually quite clean.”*
- Female Enforcers – mothers, sisters, female friends and partners were expected to tell people if they smelled.





Motivators of practice

Interpretation and application of collective conventions

- Double guessing social expectations and hyper-cleaning “just in-case.”
- *“It's just ... that could be a bad smell to somebody.”*
- *“Even a look and then your imagination runs wild.”*
- *“I don't like to feel like I'm standing out.”*

Sphere of influence

- **Within the wardrobe** - “this has turned into a slippery slope with other clothes.”
- **Within social networks** – “He's so proud of himself going: ‘It's great, I wash so much less now.’”



A person wearing a white zip-up hoodie, blue jeans, and white sneakers. They are holding a stack of papers in their hands and have a colorful patterned bag slung over their shoulder. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Role of practice interventions

Opportunities

- Allowing alternative ways of being to emerge.
- Setting up showcase of environmentally ideal practice.
- Exploring the intersection of motivations.

Limitations

- Mindful engagement is time and energy intense.
- Niche practices rarely recruit mainstream populations required for significant environmental benefits.
- Endurance of adopted practices.

Role of collective conventions

Opportunities

- Social practices result from the interpretation and application of collective conventions.
- Normalise pro-environmental practice.

Limitations

- The relationship between mindful engagement and shifting collective conventions needs further consideration.



Intervening in collective conventions

- Little known area with significant potential.
- Injecting expectations of cleanliness into culture that align with sustainable resource consumption.
- Potential in social media.



Oxfam Fashion @OxfamFashion
 Nobody Was Dirty: The Environmental Impacts of Over-Laundering: Most people are aware that over-using the washing... [t yXkL:1kL](#)
 Retweeted by Tullia Jack



How is this useful?

Cleanliness is resource intensive

- Clean is a collective convention rather than a physical state.
- Reducing cleanliness conventions provides potential to save water, energy and chemicals.
- Understanding collective conventions that shape practice, leads to effective interventions into social discourses, across disciplines.
- Inconspicuous consumption can be disrupted.





Thank You

Ideas? Questions? Comments? Please email me
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