

PAWN OR PLAYER?
A CREATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE CONSUMPTION AND DISPOSAL HABITS
OF FASHION RETAIL EMPLOYEES

by
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Abstract

This research project was conducted to assess the potential influence of fashion retail workers on industry sustainability by critiquing the standard practices of brand consumption as required by retail employers. A mixed-methodological approach, with an emphasis on creative exploration, was undertaken to examine employee experience and propose alternatives to unsustainable practices. Creative experimentation was supported by an anonymous online survey and photo submissions by individuals working in the fashion retail sector. Bourdieu's Field Theory was applied to establish a lens from which to view retail employees as actors in the field of the fashion industry that functions as a group according to a unique habitus with specific dispositions. Use of Aesthetic Labour practices by fashion brands encourage the development of this habitus and manipulation of employees for the sole benefit of the company. The modes of interaction as both marketer and consumer are acquired and learned within the job and build upon the employee's existing experience. It is therefore argued that these learned behaviours could be altered in a direction more beneficial to the employees themselves, as well as for improving the industry as a whole. The main finding of this research study was the need for awareness regarding the current economically and environmentally unsustainable expectations for fashion retail employees. Further participant-informed research would be beneficial and assist in broadening awareness. This information brought directly to the employees themselves has the potential to instigate significant change to an industry facing new challenges in both the retail and environmental sector.

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Section 1: Introduction

This research project emerged from personal experience working in fashion retail and the subsequent awareness of an area of fashion consumption that was previously unconsidered. It is perhaps commonly accepted that employees wear relevant brand items to work, but with this particular company, brand consumption was not only expected, it was monitored on a shift by shift basis. While I was alarmed by the inherent volume of accumulation — and spending — none of my coworkers seemed phased by it and, as this was my first retail position, I was uncertain as to whether that practice was standard. I also wanted to know what happens to those garments that are no longer in season and therefore almost useless to employees.

Having any interest in fashion, it is difficult not to be aware of the extensive discussions about improving industry sustainability. It is difficult to not hear about start-ups and developing companies that are seeking to address and provide alternative solutions to these problems, and yet, fashion continues to be susceptible to fast-paced, short-lived trends with little acknowledgment or consideration of the long-term implications. The impact of high-volume consumption and incorrect post-consumption textile disposal are a common subject in the conversations around the lack of sustainability within the fashion industry, and yet here is a role in which consumption is encouraged solely for the sake of selling even more.

According to Morgan and Birtwistle, “sustainable consumption” has been a topic of discussion since the 1990’s, and it is defined in the *Report on the Second Session of the Oxford Commission on Sustainable Consumption* 2000 as consuming in a manner that does not irrevocably harm or destroy functions of natural systems so that current and future generations may be able to meet their material needs (192). Working with the understanding that “consumer behaviour involves pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase components” (Morgan and Birtwistle 192), then this research is interested in how current practices in retail labour influence

these stages as well as how these behaviours may be influenced for the implementation of more sustainable practices.

McNeill and Moore find that while consumers care about unethical behaviour in the fashion industry, there persists a disconnect with individual actions (212). Even with increased availability of sustainable alternatives, consumers are still concerned about being “fashionable” and will discard garments prematurely on the basis of its fashion-irrelevance (McNeil and Moore 213). Despite almost one hundred percent of textiles being recyclable, the Environmental Protection Agency in the United States found that nationally in 2010, Americans discarded 11.8 million tonnes, of which over 9.9 million tonnes ended up in landfills (Joung 530). Laitala states that disposal habits determine the life cycle of clothing, the extending of which could significantly reduce environmental impacts (444). She defines disposal as the simple act of getting rid of something and details a five-tier hierarchy for waste management, the primary step being a prevention of waste actually occurring (Laitala 445). This may be crucial as, although reuse the second-tier in Laitala’s waste management model, thrift stores are approaching saturation points (Morgan and Birtwistle 196). Weber et. al suggest that creating and encouraging alternative modes of “disposal” may shift behaviour away from throwing textiles in the garbage (214). This idea is bolstered by findings in which existing sustainable habits, such as recycling paper, plastic and glass had a positive correlation with sustainable tendencies in textile disposal (Joung 531).

That said, practices surrounding fashion retail employees pose a challenge to these concepts of prolonging the life of garments and encouraging positive disposal habits. It is discussed in McNeill and Moore’s work that prevailing research suggests “that a central issue related to engagement in ethical or sustainable consumption is that of the power dynamics inherent in the social practice norms of the specific market in which the consumption takes

place” (McNeill and Moore 213). These power dynamics are of particular interest in regard to fashion retail workers as they hold a unique role within a sector that “lies on the blurred boundary between production and consumption and hence plays a critical role in mediating between buyers and sellers of goods” (Pettinger 165). According to the Sectoral Profile on Retail Trade in Ontario for 2016-2018, retail positions constituted eleven percent of Ontario’s employment in 2016. While this number does not solely reflect retail figures in the apparel industry, it does reflect the significant size of this group of consumers, which was predicted to grow by 33, 800 retail positions by 2018 (Sectoral Profile). As Leslie states, “[t]he growth of service work leads to a collapsing of the boundaries between production and consumption, as well as the creation of hybrid work identities” (Leslie 72).

There is a considerable body of research that addresses the subject of retail workers from the point of view of both the employers and the employees. Much of this research examines the retail employee as a casualty of the fashion system, subjected as they are to low wages, irregular and inconsistent hours, and a certain degree of embodied exploitation when there is the expectation to wear brand clothing at work. It is this latter area which is of particular interest in regard to understanding the consuming and disposing tendencies of fashion retail employees. A retail employee discusses that “Although the rules vary by store, in the majority of cases employees in clothing stores have to wear at least one current store item on their shift” (Leslie 69). Dress guidelines are regularly under observation by management directly and are at times also monitored by the corporations themselves through the use of “mystery shoppers” who covertly observe and report on whether staff is wearing store clothing (Leslie; Pettinger). Employee perspectives within the extant research offer glimpses into brand requirements, however there is not much that speaks explicitly to this consumption or subsequent disposal.

This seems an oversight by research and industry alike as these individuals have a unique perspective on the workings of the fashion system.

The research aims to investigate the role of fashion retail employees within the fashion system and to determine whether that position may be mobilized for change within the industry. Therefore, the primary aim of this research was to better understand the potential influence of retail employees as stakeholders in the fashion industry by exploring their consumption habits via a creatively-based mixed-methods approach. Studying the habits of this particular group, who have concurrent roles as marketer and consumer, provides insight into fashion marketing, branding, employee standards and industry sustainability issues. A lens of sustainability was a guiding factor for the development of a creative and analytical framework for exploring this subject. This study was conducted via a mixed-methodological approach to the research subject as it would allow for an effective exploration of the convoluted human factors involved. The modular nature of motivations, values and perspectives which influence individuals both as consumers and employees would be most easily explored through methods that provided qualitative results. This method also permitted direct, hands-on engagement with the existing literature and subject matter from my background and skill set as a maker. A combination of creative explorations and participant-informed research was conducted in order to unravel the subject matter and to determine the efficacy of and potential methods for targeting sustainable initiative towards this distinctive group.

Section 2: Literature Review

There is a significant gap in existing research on the subject of employee brand consumption. As such, the literature collected and reviewed comprises a cross-section of peripheral research that was identified following initial research relating to the expectations for retail employees and data on textile waste. Gathering key concepts and reoccurring references enabled a well-rounded perspective from which to address the existing gap.

Arts-Informed Research

The theoretical framework for this study is that of an arts-based exploration, drawing particularly upon Graeme Sullivan's *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in the Visual Arts*. This work speaks to the validity of artistic practice as a means of conducting research. This discourse provides a clear and rational explanation of how creative methods are comparable to traditional academic methods. Sullivan's work is useful for buttressing a creative structure within academia and for reaffirming my own methods of creative practice as way to understand a research problem. Sullivan, pondering the general aim of research states that "the capacity to create understanding and thereby critique knowledge is central to the visual arts and that artists are actively involved in these kinds of research practices" (73). Creatively-informed investigation is advocated on the basis that both artistic work and traditional research methods employ a "process of 'theorizing'" as a fundamental aspect of production (Sullivan xvii). He goes on to say, "[a]n accepted role of theorizing is to use conceptual problem-solving strategies to analyze and synthesize things in order to explain them in ways that help to implement new practices" (Sullivan xvii).

This research necessitated a fair amount of 'theorizing' as Sullivan describes it, in order to further the existing research as well as to understand outlying issues entwined with the main

focus of study. This theorizing involved a range of explorations from word mapping to various manipulation of textiles. In order to carry-out these creative explorations Sullivan's method of *transcognition* was employed. This method involves the combination of different ways of "knowing" within arts practices and consists of three ways of thinking: thinking in a medium, thinking in a language and thinking in a context (125). *Thinking in a Medium* refers to "the consequence of thought and action that is given form in a creative product" (Sullivan 126). When *Thinking in a Language* "the focus is on language and narrative construction with images and objects seen as texts that carry forms of cultural coding" (Sullivan 126). Process and product inform one another with *Thinking in a Context* and "this process is ongoing in a constructivist way, and strategic in nature, as meaning is encompassed and negotiated" (Sullivan 127). Using arts-informed research practices enabled the research project to be as dynamic as the research subject.

Aesthetic Labour

This is a prevailing term within the extant research regarding retail employees working in the fashion industry. It refers to the practice of brands hiring employees whose physical attributes and social mannerisms are then put to use for the purpose of selling the company's product (Pettinger; Warhurst et. al; Witz et. al; Williams and Connell). Brands rely heavily on their image as a method of perpetuating the type of product they are selling, compelling customers to see their items in a particular light (Pettinger 170). Williams and Connell argue that this is increasingly important in a saturated industry of mass production where different brands may sell garments from the same factory resulting in only subtle differences. As such, brands emphasize their connection to particular "lifestyles" (354). Pettinger describes this concept of lifestyles as "a combination of social and psychological concepts" underscored by differences in

social class and status (171). If the selling of product is so dependent upon brand image, it stands to reason that companies would hire only those individuals whom they perceive best to promote their ideals; employees are as much on display as the actual garments (Warhurst et. al; Williams and Connell; Pettinger; Leslie). This is why the concept of aesthetic labour is most visible at stages of hiring and recruitment (Warhurst et. al 11). While the physical characteristics of a prospective employee may have no correlation to their competency as a worker, brands are aware of the sales advantage of individuals who seem to embody the company aesthetic (Warhurst et. al, 5). Subsequently employers will use interviews and other aspects of the hiring process to determine candidates who embody the appropriate “dispositions” in keeping with Bourdieu’s framework (Warhurst 6). Bourdieu elucidates this idea, a key aspect of habitus stating, “it suggests a *way of being, a habitual state* (especially of the body) and, in particular, a *predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination*” (Grenfell 51). Employees who have a predisposition towards the aesthetic ideals generated by the brand, are likely to be a good fit for promoting the product (Warhurst et. al; Witz et. al; Williams and Connell; Leslie).

The literature makes it clear that these embodied characteristics cannot be categorized as technical skills; rather, they qualify as soft skills and subsequently reduce the type of training necessary when hiring new staff (Williams and Connell; Witz et. al; Leslie). Williams and Connell make a discerning statement about this strategic practice saying that, “[i]n hiring workers with the right aesthetic qualities — who look good and sound right — retail stores are mining and exploiting the product of social hierarchies” (352). Not only does this deployment of cultural tendencies entrench social divides as Williams and Connell point out, but it also enforces the power inequity within the retail environment; power shifts which may propagate industry change.

According to Bourdieu, capital comes in many forms, but in regard to aesthetic labour, it is cultural capital that is most often addressed. This form of capital refers to “the value associated with culturally authorised tastes, consumption patterns, attributes, skills and awards” (Webb et. al. 2002, x). The concept of aesthetic labour legitimizes brands’ appropriation of the cultural capital possessed by their employees to increase the economic capital of the company (Pettinger 179). Aesthetic labour commences with the selection of candidates based on particular embodied traits, such as middle-class mannerisms or vernacular, however once individuals are hired for retail work, “employers then mobilize, develop, and commodify these embodied dispositions [...] *transforming* them into ‘skills’ which are geared toward producing a ‘style’ of service encounter that appeals to the senses of the customer” (Witz et. al 37). While employees are expected to maintain a certain degree of cultural capital, for example, in the form of current fashion knowledge, the actual dispositions for which they are so employable are appealing precisely because they are malleable and able to be adapted for the specificities of a particular brand’s ideals and target customer. It is also interesting to acknowledge brands’ increasing draw on the cultural capital of customers through a growing reliance on virtual brand communities as source of consumer-brand knowledge exchange (Kim et. al). In this case, the mobilization of cultural capital presents as mutually beneficial to both brand and consumer (Kim et. al).

Witz et. al, posits that organizations have deployed brand imagery in the form of embodied employees since the 1980’s, however exploration into the history of retail work, particularly in the context of early department stores, depicts facets of aesthetic labour in action (34). While in the case of department stores service reputation was promoted rather than any particular brand, certain cultural dispositions were encouraged for the sake of sales (Porter-Benson 6). In the late 19th and early 20th century, almost all sales staff in department stores were individuals from the working class, however in order to appeal to the target bourgeoisie customer

base, “[e]xecutives set out to change the class-based characteristics of their salespeople (Porter-Benson 128). Employers worked hard to subdue working-class inclinations, it became clear that “the class gulf between saleswoman and customer could be bridged by the shared aspects of women’s culture” (Porter-Benson 5). Even though stores sought to imbue saleswomen with false cultural capital, “the traditional female role and mannerisms suited the managers well and they encouraged women to bring concepts from home life” (130).

This historical context further reinforces an idea presented by Witz et. al, that “embodied subjects are open to being remade, manufactured or ‘made-up’ within specific institutional fields of action” (41). The term *field* in this context refers to what Bourdieu defines as “a ‘social microcosm’ informed by specific rules of functioning which shape the trajectories and practices of the agents that belong to it” (Rocamora 243). Bourdieu’s also states that fields – and their inherent dispositions – are governed by *doxa* or “core values and discourses” (Grenfell 28). The argument made by Witz et. al, is that “the corporate production of aesthetic labourers involves the inculcation of a corporate ‘doxa’” befitting the ideals of the brand (40). This results in the compelling argument, “that the production of and engagement in aesthetic labour implicates the body in this transformation of the self; in other words, new regimes of the body are equally likely to lead to the development of a different relation to what the aesthetic labourer comes to think of as himself or herself” (Witz et. al. 38)

Employee Perspectives

By hiring individuals who embody a particular habitus - one that is often reflective of the middle class - companies are also able to select workers who are not dependent upon the financial support from their pay cheques (Williams and Connell 360). Most employees interviewed for their research had other sources of income, without which “they could not embody the lifestyles that made them desirable employees” (Ibid.) While much of the research

suggests that employees in turn work for a brand that is in keeping with their lifestyles (Witz et. al; Warhurst et. al; Williams and Connell), Misra and Walters find that instead individuals will accept any job that will hire them (307). This is an interesting observation to note in that it would suggest that individuals are able to negotiate predispositions enough to be hired by a brand with a particular type of candidate in mind. Even still, the offering of an employee discount provides enough incentive to consider working in the retail environment and is seen as the best part of a terrible job (Misra and Walters 309). Williams and Connell see the employee discount as “one way to identify workers whose principle motivation is the desire to be associated with a cool brand — not the conventional worker concerns of decent pay, working conditions, future opportunities, or benefits” (360). The ability to have these priorities speaks again to an employee embodying a certain cultural standing, but also suggests someone who seeks to consume product and accumulate cultural capital; their dispositions align with the power balances of the field. This capital acquired as a retail employee is really only of value outside of the workplace. Association with a brand as an employee or by owning products benefits the employee only within other fields of action, for example among social peers (Williams and Connell; Misra and Walters). In the actual environment of the retail store, employees are rarely permitted input into any aesthetic aspects of the stores (Williams and Connell; Leslie) which, considering the embodied dispositions preferred, further exacerbates the exploitation of employees’ cultural capital.

This again can be viewed through Bourdieu’s theories, in particular the concept of *Symbolic violence* and its perpetuation of *illusion* which is “the more or less unthinking commitment to the logic, values and capital of a field” (Webb et. al 26). According to Webb et. al, symbolic violence occurs when, “agents are subjected to forms of violence (treated as inferior, denied resources, limited in their social mobility and aspirations), but they do not

perceive it that way; rather, their situation seems to them to be ‘the natural order of things’.” (Webb et. al 25). Along with the mobilization of employees’ capital, brands also encourage the existing illusion within the field by paying minimum wage, controlling hours to keep staff from full time benefits (Misra and Walters 296; Williams and Connell).

Department store executives were aware early on in the field of retail work that “to the public, our corporation is the girl behind the counter” (Benson 137) not only in terms of the literal aesthetic of their employees, but also the optics of the company’s labour regulations. The work’s visible toll on employees resulted in pushback from customers (largely out of a sense of irritated inconvenience), however it encouraged managers to make moves towards improving the lives of their saleswomen (Benson 126). Welfare Work programs were established with the purpose of upgrading employee facilities, providing social service programs and essentially exposing working-class staff to experiences and knowledge intended to help them understand the customer base (Benson 142, 145). While this may seem out of context, the significance lies in the motivations of these managers. Welfare work not only elicited goodwill from their customers but also increased profits by creating more “loyal and effective saleswomen” (Benson 126). These training techniques furthered domination in that managers were clear that the company was the source of the self-enhancement, not the women themselves and the saleswomen were aware that they were “to adopt the veneer of a higher class without receiving any of its rights and privileges” (Benson 5, 141). While the current practice of hiring workers who already embody the correct disposition ameliorates the need for such welfare optics, it does allow for the application of formulaic training onto new employees (Misra and Walters 303). Minimal training and therefore little investment in employees “renders workers relatively disposable” (Misra and Walters 303) and reinforces illusions within the field.

Dress codes have been common practice since the 1920's where they provided a means of reducing the risk that a saleswoman may expose any offensive style predispositions (Benson 139). The guides encouraged a subdued, innocuous appearance with acceptable styles being displayed outside employee lunch rooms (Benson 139). It was also a "a subtle way of controlling employees' behaviour" (Benson 140). Dress codes persist in the field of fashion retail with employees commonly expected to wear brand merchandise (Misra and Walters; Warhurst et. al; Witz et. al; Williams and Connell; Pettinger; Leslie). As Leslie says, "[w]orkers are more than just representatives of the company, they are models of the product for sale. Clothes cannot simply be displayed on hangers. They are dependent on human bodies to give them life in a way that other products are not" (70). The struggle with this expectation is that the majority of onus lies on the minimum wage, easily disposable employee. As one participant states in the research by Warhurst et. al, "...we've all got to present the company now. We're not workers as such we're ambassadors now" (13). Not only is that ambassador status enforced by corporate regulations and manager observation, but also by the perception that breaking away from expectations means letting down or being judged by colleagues (Warhurst et. al 13). Participants in Misra and Walters' study "also state that prohibitive costs create problems when the dress code requires that workers wear full-price items" (310) and this struggle is apparent in much of the extant literature, even with the considerations of employee discounts and access to marked-down items (Williams and Connell; Leslie).

Fashion Consumption & Disposal

The challenge in reviewing fashion consumption and disposal within Canada is the lack of nationally produced and accessible data. While some of the existing literature regarding this topic was produced by Canadian researchers, the statistics referenced are either

contemporaneous with the publication of the paper and therefore no longer numerically relevant, or they are reliant upon the information collected within other (arguably comparable) countries, as seems the case with more recent literature. While this makes for a slight disassociation from practices at home, the existing literature nonetheless presents striking statements regarding issues of consumption and disposal.

Weber et. al, drawing on data from within the United States, present that in 2011 the average American consumer purchased more than one garment per week totaling 62 garments over the course of the year (207; The American Apparel & Foot-wear Association, 2012). According to Deborah Leslie's article published in 2002 which is one of the few found to reference Statistics Canada, clothing retail amounted to 5.5% of all retail sales in Canada. Based on a similar chart compiling information from 2018, clothing sales constituted 5.1% of all retail sales last year (Statistics Canada) though it would appear that this number does not reflect consumption conducted via online shopping. Those are considerable figures especially if as stated by Weber et. al, the average cost of each garment is \$14.60 USD (207).

As McNeill and Moore state, “[c]onsumption across many product categories is influenced by the human desire to express meanings about oneself and to create an identity, but this is perhaps particularly the case with clothing, which is constantly on display” (212). This is elaborated by Deborah Leslie who discusses that with “fashion, we have a commodity whose production is highly globalized, but whose display, marketing and ultimate consumption is localized on the body” (62). While this is specifically in reference to fashion as an object of consumption, the polarity of the statement is useful to bear in mind when examining fashion as a field of action. Dispositions within the field are influenced by a spectrum of values ranging from local ones to global (Park et. al; Juong; Pettinger; Leslie; Morgan and Birtwistle), and this scope complicates efforts of sustainability.

Literature which investigates fashion-minded consumers' interest in sustainable fashion practices seem to concede on two points: one being that this type of consumer is more likely to consume a higher volume of fashion items; and the second being the limited correlation between the desire to be fashionable and tendency towards engagement with sustainably-conscious fashion (Park et. al; Joung; Laitala; Weber et. al; Morgan and Birtwistle). However, they disagree on the extent to which fashion-minded consumers are receptive to concepts of sustainable alternatives. Park et. al, Weber et. al suggest that consumers with a high fashion interest are more open to adopting novel alternatives while McNeill and Moore find that those who place value on being fashionable are less inclined towards sustainable initiatives "as their priorities in fashion lie elsewhere" (220). Participants in Morgan and Birtwistle's work stated that if the social and environmental consequences of clothing manufacturing, consumption and disposal were more widely known, then they themselves as well as brands would be more inclined to adopting sustainable practices (196).

Roos et. al. state that by reducing consumption by half could significantly ease the fashion industry's environmental footprint in terms of both climate change and water consumption (697). This is based on their findings that fabric and textile production is one of the most significant pollutants along the supply chain (694). They are careful to point out that a reduction in consumption would require a significant extension to length of time a fashion item is in use (697). Laitala examines object obsolescence as contributing factor to this life-cycle of fashion items, noting that objects become obsolete due to various combinations of failure to physical or material qualities and psychological disinterest (445). The latter, also referred to as symbolic obsolescence is of particular significance because of fashion's predisposition for constant change (Laitala 445). This arguably influences the material durability of fashion items, what Laitala describes as its absolute obsolescence which "is mainly the manufacturers'

responsibility (durability, process quality and maintenance possibilities)” (445). Addressing this result of current fashion tendencies is an important aspect of sustainability research, as Roos et. al. estimate that – in conjunction with shifts within the habitus – extending the life of garments by times, “the climate change reduction from the T-shirt life cycle is possibly 67%” (697)

The current rate of obsolescence is, perhaps obviously, also causing strain on the waste management systems (Park et. al; Joung; Laitala; Weber et. al; Morgan and Birtwistle). In the United States, the decade between 1999 and 2009 saw post-consumer textile waste increase by 40% (Gopalakrishnan and Matthews 354) roughly totaling 11.3 million tonnes in 2009 and the Council for Textile Recycling estimating that in 2019 that volume will total 16.1 million tonnes (Weber et. al 207). Much of the literature suggests that this number is due to lack of knowledge surrounding the recyclability of textiles as well as limited convenience and accessibility of recycling infrastructures (Park et. al; Joung; Laitala; Weber et. al). Weber et. al. also postulates that as textiles are either composed of a number of chemicals or natural fibres which off-gas during decomposition, they are not perceived as “toxic” in the same sense as batteries or light bulbs and therefore similar waste management systems are more rare (208). McNeill and Moore also cite the idea of the *Fashion Paradox* as prohibitive to efforts of sustainable consumption and disposal. This concept implicates the dynamic global significance of the fashion industry in its relative exemption from having to adapt unethical practices (213).

Understanding this information in regard to fashion retail employees requires a certain degree of extrapolation. For example, employee discounts are regularly referenced as incentive to work in fashion retail and that in fact it is essentially part of their earned wages (Williams and Connell; Misra and Walters; Leslie) which would reasonably lead to increased consumption. However, much of this same research also alludes to the ultimate disenchantment employees feel towards this discount, for instance through an oversaturation with brand merchandise that

devalues the discount (Misra and Walters; Williams and Connell). By interviewing fashion retail employees, Misra and Walters found that while many of their participants commented that they purchased more after getting the job, this was likely due to dress code requirements and the employees discuss brand consumption as a burden (310). It is unclear, therefore, how these conflicting emotions and regulations impact their consumption and disposal habits.

Section 3: Research Methods

The methods employed in conducting this research project took two primary directions, which occurred simultaneously, the research, practices and findings each informing the directionality of the other method.

Participant-Informed Research

There was a limited amount of existing literature that addressed fashion retail consumption habits, and the research that did discuss it only touched on the subject as part of the larger discussions of aesthetic labour or brand identities (Warhurst et. al; Williams and Connell; Misra and Walters; Pettinger; Leslie). Because the question of accumulation and potential for mass disposal was of particular interest, having quantifiable data regarding these practices was worth pursuing as part of this research. Williams and Connell, in speaking with employees about aesthetic labour and discounts, found that among the participants, “[s]ome described becoming saturated and overwhelmed by their purchases” (369). This was about as close as any research came to discussing employee perspectives on consumption beyond the point of the actual spending or purchasing. As such, it felt prudent to attempt to collect employee perspectives on consumption and post-purchase behaviour.

A survey was developed in order to attain primary data that might reveal existing patterns of consumption among retail employees. This branch of the study developed initially from the research pertaining to the experience of the employees themselves. Design and preparation of the participant study drew upon the concepts of aesthetic labour and its implications for retail workers in terms of regulations and expectations. This resulted in survey questions that made further inquiries about participants' average brand purchasing habits as well as the influence of employers on those habits. None of the existing literature explored the potential textile accumulation or the clothing disposal practices of these individuals.

While wardrobe interviews and discussion groups were also considered, it was determined that the online survey method would better fill in the gaps in existing research at this stage in the subject investigation as broad data that was sought rather than information specific to particular employees. Creative explorations of textile accumulation brought about the idea to include a photo submission as part of the survey. The intent of the photo submission was to visually encapsulate the volume of fashion that retail employees consume. These photo submissions would be mobilized within the creative process in the form of visual primary data.

Participants were directed to gather all of these brand items from within their wardrobes and photograph the collection in any way they saw fit. Assembling the purchases in such a manner had the potential to spark awareness within the participant themselves about their consumption habits in much the same way the photographs were intended to as part of the creative work. Some simple compositional suggestions were presented to participants in the instructions, for example, hanging all the garments on hangers, folding the items in piles or simply heaping them together. While participants were free to arrange the garments any way they desired, the only restrictive guideline was to ensure that they themselves were not included in the image in order to protect individual anonymity and limit any potential consequences for

participating. There was one question in particular which was posed for the express purpose of using the data to inform the creative piece, and that was for participants to estimate the weight of the garments that they had photographed. The driving concept being that this weight could be totaled, and that value could subsequently factor in to the creative outcome in conjunction with the images submitted. Following the photo submission section, there was the brief accompanying survey which included basic questions about their employer's dress policies and their work-related consumption and disposal habits.

In an effort to remain inclusive and receptive to all useful data, participation was open to all fashion retail employees without regard for gender, age, ethnicity or financial status. Fashion retail was described as stores that primarily sold new clothing items. There were no restrictions on length or type of employment in this position for any minimum amount of time. As the intention was to examine the consumption habits of retail workers within the fashion industry, individuals employed in other retail sectors were excluded from the recruitment selection.

In order to recruit participants, an informational poster was disseminated via Facebook and Instagram and subsequently shared on those platforms by friends who felt the subject matter was relevant to their social group. Social media was employed as a tool for recruitment because of the scope of reach it offered in terms of engaging participants. Physical copies of the poster were also placed in locations around the university campus, which targeted an appropriate audience while being removed from their own workplace. The online survey was conducted via *Hosted in Canada Surveys*. This service enabled anonymous, encrypted data collection and storage for both the photo submission component and question-response component of the survey.

Creative Explorations

Based on Graeme Sullivan's framework for arts-based inquiry, research is a cycle which "involves the identification of a design problem that includes criteria for its resolution; the compilation of relevant background research about what has already been done; devising a plan of action; producing an object or prototype; and concludes with an evaluative stage where the product is tested against the problem conditions" (Sullivan 76). Preliminary explorations, in particular, functioned as the space for the dichotomy of creating and critiquing. Sullivan states that the dialogue between the two "are pivotal as they form the basis by which new perceptions are imagined, relevant information interrogated, and alternative conceptions realized" (191). For these prototypes, as well as the rest of the creative process, each iteration was critiqued in the format of a journal reflection, to determine which elements were successful in articulating the concept and those that fell short, guided again by Sullivan's structure. These early explorations fostered a better understanding of the research and had the most influence upon the participant facing study.

Following approval from the research ethics board and while awaiting survey responses, I continued to delve into the subject matter through a variety of creative explorations. Much of this exploration involved engagement with the materiality of textiles and garments as well as various techniques used to mould them into different forms. This type of exploration yielded results in relation to my own comprehension of the subject, and creative articulation of the subject matter to an audience that might not be aware of the existing research. As the focus of this research project is consumption and disposal of fashion garments, textiles and clothing were the primary materials explored in the creative process. My concern for consumption and waste was also considered in the development of the arts-based inquiry. The creative exploration process has the potential to inherently contradict those concerns due to the acquisition of materials or tools as

well as through trial and error in the construction of prototypes that may ultimately become nothing more than a by-product of the experimentation. These concerns influenced the exploration process in that every attempt was made to minimize the need for purchasing new materials and wherever possible initial prototyping was done in the form of diagrams or sketches.

The creative process involves an element of retrospection “as the research process first challenges the artist by the need to create and then uses this new awareness as the critical lens through which to examine existing phenomena” (Sullivan 191). A lot of the creative process was conducted to expand my own grasp on the field of research, however the intent was to create a resulting piece that would communicate the research subject to an audience outside of just myself. As such, this critiquing stage was particularly useful in keeping me from just being a creator where “the artwork embodies the questions, ideas, and images” but also to examine the prototypes from an analytical perspective that would enable the work “to advance new realms of interpretive possibility” (Sullivan 188). The creative piece was constantly evolving because acting as both artist and critic furthered my understanding of the subject matter and elucidated potential readings by audiences.

The practice of weaving offered an effective avenue for exploration. The practice was new to me and therefore permitted a beginner’s freedom for mistakes and experimentation. My extensive education in sewing, while ultimately useful, makes it difficult to employ the practice for any project not fully formed, and therefore ineffectual in early stages of creative inquiry. Weaving offered the opportunity to engage with the textiles so fundamental to the research subject without the restrictive rules embedded from my sewing practice. I was inspired by the investigative practice of Sheila Hicks, who would carry around a small loom in place of a sketchbook and create pieces via this portable studio (Westfall 89). Too novice to literally

imitate her methods, it was the idea that “these exploratory works act as physical manifestations of the artist’s personal reflections or reactions to given places, events, feelings or as a dialogue with particular materials and techniques” (Westfall 89) that really guided my inquiry. One such prototype was constructed using garments acquired from thrift stores, cut into strips and woven into a different form such that it might work in dialogue with the survey-submitted images. The most significant reflection from this process was in regard to the degree of impact possible from the chosen material. Hesitant to produce hypocritical creative work, the garments used were those that the thrift store has deemed unsellable rather than a functional garment purchased off the floor. During a “looking back” critique this material choice seemed to soften the impact of any potential statements.

Another group of explorations took the form of photographs and short video clips in which I attempted to distil the research subject down to its simplest form. The idea being that the volume of accumulation and disposal could be represented through the repetition of a basic act. The clips captured actions such as removing items from a rack of clothing while the photographs depicted sale signage or cramped clothing displays. The explorations into the printing of photographs were of particular interest, as these techniques could be utilized for the processing of participant photo submissions.

The creative explorations illuminated that the difference between consuming fashion as a retail employee and consuming as a customer is minute. These consumption congruences provided insight regarding the limitations of existing research, and the employee-centric gap. It also validated that the figures reflecting consumption and disposal habits are at least equally applicable to those who work in fashion retail. The subtleties made it quite difficult to articulate in a form that could be easily differentiated by an interpreting audience. However, not specifying that the creative work pertained to fashion retail employees specifically, ran the risk of the piece

encroaching on a prolific body of artwork that addresses issues of fashion consumption. The piece would be redundant in its message and therefore may not spark the kind of heterodox conversations it was intending.

Resulting Work

Two garment patterns were drafted for the purpose of creating a canvas on which representations of employee consumption could be depicted; they represented the field of fashion retail employees. I chose to construct a pair of pants and a t-shirt to embody this field because it is arguable that those two types of garments can be found amongst most brand's collections and therefore are likely to be consumed by their employees. To maintain the work's comprehensive reflection of the employee experience, the two garments were designed to be gender neutral. That is not to suggest that there are no gender issues at play within the field, but as they were not the primary focus of the research, a gender-neutral approach aimed at inclusivity was adopted. Although the trousers were drafted using the directions from Masaaki Kawashima's book, *Fundamentals of Men's Fashion Design: A Guide to Tailored Clothes*, they were sized smaller so that they would appear less masculine. The required measurements were collected from the sizing chart in the drafting book and corresponded to those listed as standard for a men's size 36 chest. Perhaps the most recognizable contextual measurement is that of the waist, which in this case equalled 30 inches. This measurement seemed an appropriate middle ground for creating a garment that was intended to have few to no gender affiliations. The shirt was designed to have a straight silhouette and crew neckline reminiscent of an average t-shirt. This made the drafting process more straightforward than that of the pants, however an online tutorial was used as guidance, particularly in regard to measurements.

Once the patterns were drafted, the garments were constructed. There were no fittings or adjustments required to ensure the efficacy of the drafted patterns as neither the pants nor the

shirt were intended to be worn by any particular individual. The fabric used in the finished work was selected for three primary reasons. Firstly, as previously stated, every attempt was made to avoid consumption solely for the sake of the creative inquiry process, therefore I chose two fabrics that I had acquired as a result of my background as a seamstress. The second reason for this fabric selection was that of its neutral colour. Both fabrics were off-white which not only furthered the gender-neutrality, but also offered the best starting point from which to depict accumulation be it directly onto the fibres of the garments, or built-up on top of them. Lastly, the fabric selection came down to its interpretive potential for articulating key concepts. There is nothing particularly special about the fabric used, and for that reason it is reminiscent of the muslin mock-ups used during the process of garment construction. As briefly referenced above, when a new pattern is drafted its design and fit are critiqued through the construction of a “test” garment that is made out of inexpensive cloth, commonly unbleached cotton. This allows for any necessary changes to the pattern to be encountered, accounted for and adjusted prior to applying it on the fabric chosen for the final piece. The allusion to muslin mock-ups was ideal for reinforcing this study’s critique of existing practices and suggestion that there is potential for informed alteration.

Low survey participation, which posed an unforeseen challenge to the progress of the research, was nevertheless useful. The development of the survey provided valuable perspectives into retail worker experience which could then be applied to the creative explorations, in particular the understanding of the employee as a consumer. The small-scale nature of survey responses mandated the inclusion of another form of acquiring visual data. Instead of using the participant-provided photographs of consumption in the creative work, the images used on the garments were collected through a brief ethnographic exploration as time spent in fashion retail stores. While immersion in this type of environment had occurred in the early stages of the

creative experiments, the exploration of this subject at that stage was centred more on the items and specific actions within the stores. Since that time, the participant-based methods had evolved the research to incorporate the dispositions of the employees. Therefore, this time the focus was on comparing the clothing that employees were wearing, to what was on display in the store. This was in order to determine whether employee consumption was visible from the perspective of a customer. It is important to note that no specific questions could be asked of the staff regarding company policies or their own purchasing habits. It quickly became apparent that in almost all stores, the staff was in fact donning current brand merchandise for their time at work. The limitations of this finding included that there was no way to know whether this was a requirement, if individuals were purchasing these garments themselves, and of course, what happens to those garments no longer considered current. That said, criteria were developed for collecting images, whereby clothing displays were photographed if two or more garments for sale in the store could also be seen on store employees. In one store visited, the upcoming round of stock had yet to be unpacked, and this provided the opportunity to photograph another stage of fashion consumption, in the form of stacks of cardboard boxes.

This ethnographic research also confirmed the existence of a unique field of action in which retail employees operate. By overhearing employees speak with customers as well as through asking general, customer-informed questions, a number of employees demonstrated a distinct set of dispositions. Their consumer tendencies were evident in the sharing of personal experience with or knowledge about a particular garment, relating to myself and other customers via the values of consumption, such as fit, value or if the garment changes during wear. Simultaneously the field of branded selling was apparent, for example in assuring a customer that the store receives new items regularly, while encouraging another option in the meantime. The fact that these two identities can become so naturally embodied, reinforces Bourdieu's idea

that the habitus can adapt (Webb et. al 2002; Witz et. al 2003; Leslie 2002). On this note, and in reference to aesthetic labour Witz et. al find, “that embodied subjects are open to being remade, manufactured or ‘made-up’ within specific institutional fields of action” (41).

The images collected from retail stores, along with the few photos received from participants were combined with select statements from the research and printed onto 4x6 inch panels cut from the remnants of fabric used for the garments. Printing the images directly onto the fabric gave a similar tone to photos that had been taken in varying retail environments. Along with providing an aesthetic uniformity to the collection of photos, this method furthered the concept of the work critiquing or questioning the field and its habitus, as it allowed for the consumption tendencies and illusions to be impermanently tacked onto the garments. Printing the images directly onto the fibres of the pants and the shirt would have insinuated a degree of permanence that would counteract the intention of the piece. The statements on the text panels were selected from the literature reviewed and reference statistics about fashion retail employment, the historical construction of the habitus in the field of fashion retail or are drawn from Bourdieu’s Field Theory, in particular how habitus and dispositions may be changed. There is a total of twenty-two panels tacked in a grid formation onto the back half of each garment; thirteen image and three text panels on the pants, four image and two text panels on the shirt. This side constitutes the field as it stands at the time of this research and its design was intended to evoke conversation regarding retail employees as both consumer and industry members, and whether the canon of practice within their field can be or should be improved. It is this side of the creative work that is intended to be seen first by a viewing audience.

This work was entitled “The *Weight* of Fashion Retail Work: Must They Owe Their Souls to the Company Store?”. The word “weight” references the measure of consumption that is prevalent in the research as well as the potential influence that employees may have upon the

industry. The subsection of the title is intended to evoke the commonly known historical precedent of coal miners being indebted to their employers by means of the method of the company's methods of employee compensation. Miners were not paid for their work in federal currency accepted by any establishment, but rather in "coal scrip" printed or distributed by their employer, and subsequently only of value within their employers' other businesses. As a result, coal miners had little option but to use their hard-earned pay cheques to purchase necessities like food, clothing and equipment from the very company they worked for (Fishback 1011). This concept took the form of well known, often covered song called "Sixteen Tons" written by Merle Travis. It is strikingly similar to the current tendency for fashion brands to provide their retail employees with a store discount to supplement their minimal wages. The colloquial nature of this historical idea in conjunction with the similarities to the retail employee experience would hopefully elicit a critical perspective of the subject from the audience.

The front side of the piece was reserved to present an idyllic concept of what this field may look like, if changes to the existing doxa were instituted. On this side, the shirt and the pants are free of images or text, emphasizing the muslin mock-up reference to the early stages of garment construction, a structure that functions but has yet to be stylized. The generic nature of the pants and the shirt in this state act as a blank canvas which could be imbued with any seasonal, trending, or indeed branded configuration. Inside the pocket of both garments there is a small 'Borrower's Card' evocative of the ones used inside library books to track their loan from a collection. In this idealistic scenario, employees would be able to borrow from a library of their brand's current collection and wear those items while working their shift. While the use of a cardstock and pen loan system would be unlikely in execution, its reference explained the entire concept succinctly and effectively. Again, all with the intent of initiating conversation and thought about a subject that seems to be generally overlooked.

Deborah Leslie states, “[e]mployees offer the customer a map for making sense of the clothes available in the store and the advice they give plays a role in framing the choice of consumers” (68) and this rental model would allow for retail staff to continue to embody brand ideals in encouragement of sales. This would require a shift in practice within the field as currently, “[s]tore discounts constitute a portion of the wage that many employees receive. Part of the employee’s income is thus realized through consumption” (Leslie 72). Based on existing research, this shift would be welcomed by retail staff, who become oversaturated and disillusioned from the initial lure of the employee discount (Christine and Connell 369; Misra and Walters; Leslie). The concept for the brand library was inspired by research surrounding models of fashion libraries or collaborative consumption, a concept in which business enable the sharing rather than owning of commodities (Gopalakrishnan and Matthews; Roos et. al). According to a 2011 *Time* magazine article by Bryan Walsh, the idea of collaborative consumption was one of ten ideas that would change the world (Gopalakrishnan and Matthews 355). Though perhaps not as prolific as was estimated in 2011, this concept is becoming more mainstream as is evident in the success of fashion rental companies such as *Rent the Runway* and Toronto’s *Fitzroy Rentals* or even *American Eagle*’s newly-launched rental subscription service (though this is only in the continental US and is not widely promoted). The low-key implementation of this new service may reflect the challenge of shifting dispositions; the concept of a brand renting their garments to consumers is new and its full implications unknown. These rumblings of change seem to support this employee rental theory in so far as brands would have the opportunity to utilize their employees to draft and mock-up a system that make future changes smooth, while simultaneously benefitting the retail staff.

Section 4: Conclusions

Results

The mixed-methods approach to investigate this research subject was, overall, successful, though, admittedly, there were some methodological challenges throughout the course of the research process. The primary issue being the limited number of responses to the survey that was circulated, and the subsequent inability to draw on data directly pertaining to employees' consumption and disposal habits. While this did not prohibit the continuation of the work, it was an obstacle in ensuring whether the outcome could or would successfully convey the appropriate subject and elicit critical discussion. The combination of arts-based inquiry and traditional research methods proved invaluable in negotiating an understanding of the subtleties of this subject. The main finding that arose from this research was the need for awareness of this subject matter and the implications of the current regulations and expectations for fashion retail workers. Without this initial awareness of a problematic practice, there can be no movement towards change and improvement.

The participant-based segment of the research methodology was useful not only in the development of new subject knowledge, but also because the degree of response provided insight into retail employees as a group and opportunities for future research. Conclusions may be drawn from the lack of response, though they pose new questions within this field of research. The limited participation may speak to the extent of repression experienced by retail workers, or at the very least the presence of subjective dominance as described by Bourdieu. The habitus of the retail employees within the field of fashion retail is built upon their lack of authority in the work environment, and therefore were disinclined to participate in research associated with their jobs. Future research into this group of workers needs to consider this disassociation with employment in order that further insights and improvements may arise. On a similar note, this perception of

the power balance needs to be addressed for the sake of enabling employees to accept their weight within the fashion industry, to adapt new practices, and to demand more economically and environmentally sustainable practices. If, however, the poor participation was indicative of the lack of initiative within this working population, that would significantly alter the directions of this research subject. In either case, there is the need for further study to confront the question of employee participation.

Although the resulting work was uncomplicated in form, it was the multiplicity of creative exploration and critical reflection that really informed the direction of addressing the research subject. The work was successful in drawing awareness to the potential of fashion retail employees by means of eliciting analytical reflection on the status quo. When the work was presented to an audience for the first time, it was the front side of the garments which seemed to inspire the most productive and interesting discussion. The notion of a staff library of brand garments, though idealistic at this stage, was, as a concept or framework, enough to instigate a critique of the largely unquestioned norms of fashion retail work. This was a crucial response to the work, considering the main finding of the research was the need for awareness. By encouraging the viewing audience to question the subject being visually presented, and the inherent repercussions, the work enabled consciousness of the textile accumulation of this one subset of the consumer population. Going forward, it would be beneficial to present this completed work to a diverse audience in order to determine how the subject is perceived and if the discussion would yield different results and recommendations.

Future Directions

This research project was effective in developing an understanding the various factors at work within the field of fashion retail employment. Considering the limitations of existing research, this preliminary research process was crucial in order to move forward with potential

future research. That said, one direction is to adapt and improve the methodology for acquiring the type of primary data that the survey sought to collect. In particular, there is much potential in the continuation of the photographic elements and the possibilities for the creation of a comprehensive body of work from the images assembled which may further inform the discussion on employee fashion consumption. One key element in the continuation of this research direction will be to determine the reason for the limited responses. If it was the result of issues in the dissemination process that can be rectified with simple adjustments to the survey methods design. Perhaps other methods of primary data collection would be useful for developing the understanding of employees, for example conducting focus groups or workshops involving creative exploration.

Another research projection is to conduct a social media campaign designed to inspire questioning of the ingrained systems within the field of fashion retail work and promote awareness about issues of textile consumption and disposal. Drawing again on Graeme Sullivan's *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in the Visual Arts* as guidance for developing a creative-based theoretical framework, social media would function as the exhibit space for the developed critical work. This preliminary concept derives from peripheral concepts found within the literature reviewed for this project and its results. Morgan and Birtwistle recognize that young consumers are consistently presented as the majority of fashion leaders who not only consider fashion as central to their lifestyles and consume more regularly, but also are heavily influenced by fashion media and celebrities (191). From a sustainability perspective it was found that "members of the millennial generation are concerned about environmental issues" and that these "influential young consumers" may be inclined towards "socially responsible apparel disposal behaviour" (Park et. al 338). Those findings are of particular interest, in conjunction with the fact that retail work employs a significantly higher proportion of youth than the rest of

the workforce (Sectoral Profile 1), as it would suggest that they may bear at the very least similar perspectives. If factors that hamper the adoption of sustainable fashion practices include lack of consumer awareness, availability, economic resources, retail environment, social norms and the perception of low aesthetic value (McNeill and Moore 215), then at least a few of those obstacles may be reduced by the right marketing campaign (Park et. al 338). As McNeill and Moore state, “the focus these individuals have on social norms, mass and social media could prove to be a valuable medium to create awareness amongst this market” (McNeill and Moore 221), particularly by mobilizing fashion media and celebrity to “influencing the influencers” (Morgan and Birtwistle 196).

Conclusion

Leslie states, “there is a uniquely intimate relation between the body and the product being sold, such that changes in the product have far-reaching consequences for the bodies of employees” (69). Fashion retail employees have the potential to be a receptive audience to sustainable initiatives insofar as they appear to be disenchanted with the status quo. The challenge lies in disrupting what Bourdieu views as the symbolic violence that occurs within a field, in this case the practice that suppress and exploit the embodied capital of the employees for the benefit of the brand. Retail employees, existing as they do in a field formed by the overlapping of consumption and production have a unique and advantageous perspective on the workings of the fashion industry. Pettinger argues that as the customer becomes increasingly involved in the development of fashion, the lines is further blurring between “the field of retail, production and consumption” and subsequently fashion consumers are more directly responsible for what goes on in the industry (Pettinger 168).

A change within the habitus of retail employees, who mediate between fashion consumers and fashion producers, may be facilitated by the shrinking gap between those two

parties, and shifting of power balance within the field. However, they still need to be recognized as significant players in the larger field of fashion in order for a significant industry shift towards sustainability to occur, as environmental targets and interventions need to be addressed according to the values and dispositions of each actor in the field (Roos et. al 691). Referencing the various actors in the fashion industry McRobbie states, ‘if we consider these one at a time, demonstrating their mutual dependence as well as their apparent distance from each other, it is possible to see a set of tensions and anxieties which in turn provide opportunities for political debate and social change’ (1997, p. 85). Overlooking this key actor with both consumer insights and brand understanding could potentially offset initiatives of other actors in the field. Roos et. al elucidates this saying that “[b]y including the entire industry sector, rather than separately considering the manufacturing industry, the consumers, the brands, or the authorities, this approach can assist to create a common understanding of the potential for different actors to intervene, and avoiding “blame-game” situations where actors try to put responsibility on others” (Roos et. al 699). Presenting fashion retail employees with curated information and strategies for sustainable practices has the potential to support a shift in mentality for both the fashion consumer and producer.

Appendix



Figure 1: Shirt Back



Figure 2: Pant Back



Figure 3: Close-up, Shirt Back



X

“the most crucial aspect of habitus, then, is that it naturalizes itself and the cultural rules, agendas and values that make it possible.”

Figure 4: Close-up, Pant Back Right Leg



Figure 5: Close-up, Pant Back Left Leg

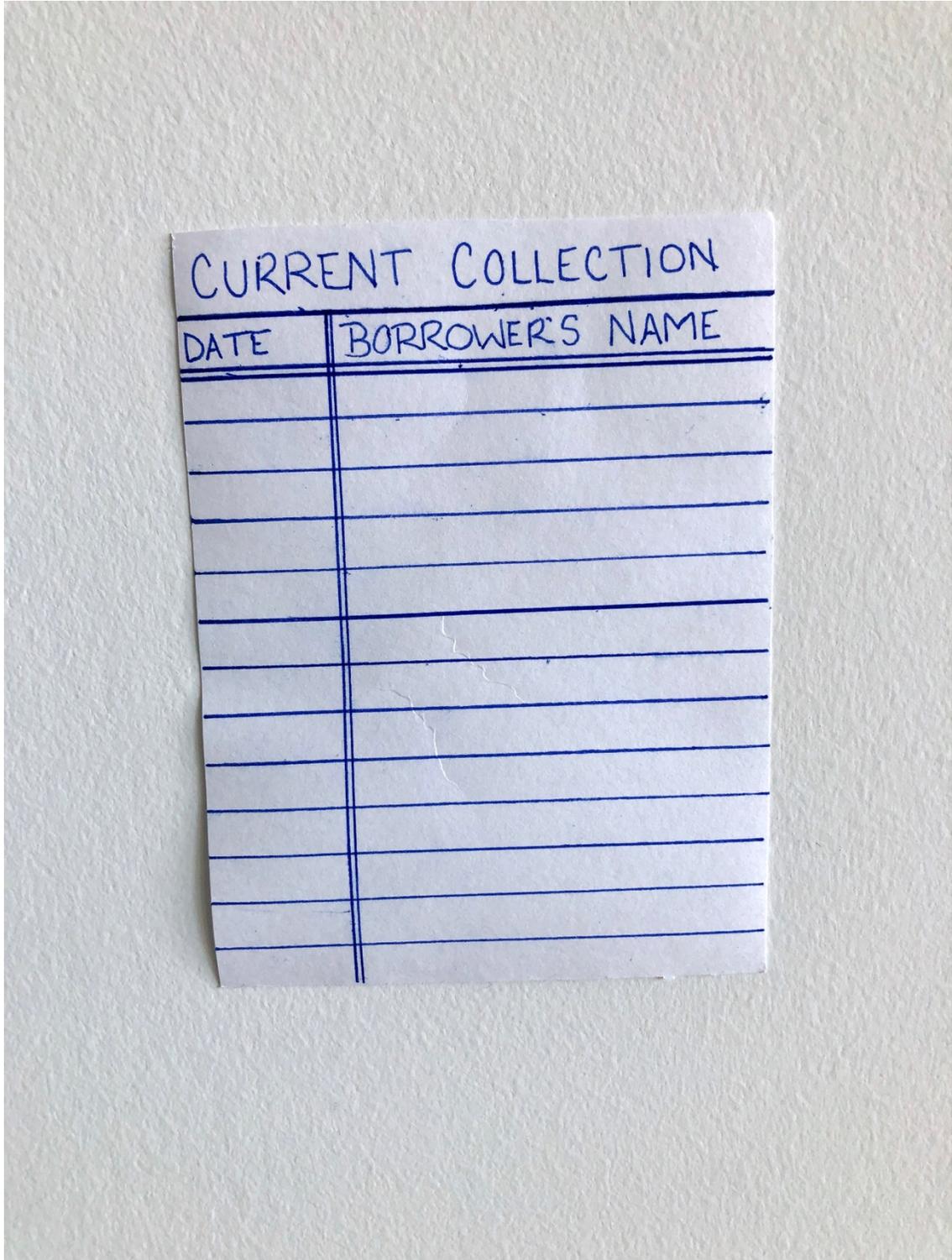


Figure 6: Borrower's Card



Figure 7: Shirt Front



Figure 8: Pant Front

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