

Thesis abstract

Doing laundry more sustainably: disrupting everyday practices through media conversations

Holly Kaye-Smith

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This research experiments with a video prototype created to activate user participation in ideas for washing clothes less. Washing clothes can be an extremely resource-intensive process, and only 7.5% of the clothes that we wash are considered 'heavily soiled,' suggesting many clothes are washed unnecessarily. Clothes laundering is referred to as a form of inconspicuous consumption because this routinised activity often goes unnoticed as it melds inconspicuously into everyday life. This is problematic because the routine of the activity can play a greater role in the clothes being washed than the actual need to clean the garments. This research recognises the significant environmental gains that could be met by reducing unnecessary habitual washing. A reduction in washing could be accomplished if clothes users simply questioned whether a garment was 'dirty' enough to be put through a washing machine. If the garment is not, the wearer may implement a less resource-intensive cleansing method, such as airing the garment on a hanger.

This research also responds to the need for social change advocates and people who make media, such as documentarians, film makers, designers and bloggers, people whom I refer to as 'media makers', to foster ground-up interventions and strategies for change that could help reduce consumption-related social and environmental problems.

The research also explores how media makers can incorporate more inclusive approaches that involve their audiences in contributing to social change. The research seeks ways to equip clothes users with ideas and skills that bypass consumer-oriented ventures in order to capitalise on everyday activity as a form of activist intervention. The investigation began theoretically, and then moved on to auto-ethnographic trials that tested 'wash less' methods, before recruiting members of the public for conversational social research in a video shoot, five video screening and discussion groups, and finally laundry trials and interviews. The findings suggest that discussion about alternative laundering techniques can be harnessed as a form of disruption that can be augmented by practice-orientated media.

Dr Holly Kaye-Smith,
Digital Futures,
Western Sydney University,
Penrith NSW 2751
AUSTRALIA

E-mail: h.kaye-smith@westernsydney.edu.au

URL: <https://researchdirect.westernsydney.edu.au/islandora/object/uws:44524/datastream/PDF/view>