

Changing the change

Design Visions, Proposals and Tools

An international conference on the role and potential of design research in the transition towards sustainability

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ARE YOU WORTH IT? CAN YOU FIX IT?

Investigating the sustainability of mundane activities using theories of everyday practice and human/ object interactions

This paper will discuss two processes of everyday life – hair care and the disposal of household goods. Both are universal aspects of our 'ordinary' daily routines which impact on resource consumption and therefore are implicated in environmental sustainability. The problem is that routines are complex and difficult to change when they are set in a culture of individual consumer choice. If Design is to work with consumer habits to produce changes that benefit sustainability, then it must be able to fully understand those habits and the practices of which they are part. Such practices include cultural knowledge, emotions, embodied skill and discrete objects. They are reproduced, and also change, through time (Shove 2006), with design implicated in such changes. Given that all the elements of a practice mutually constitute the practice – they together make it what it is – it is reasonable to assume that changing one element of a practice through design might influence change in the practice as a whole.

Particular 'material interactions' (Dant 1999) that are part of hair care routines and which influence consumers' actions when disposing of goods are here considered. Both relate strongly to the emotional dimension of practices and draw from empirical research. Reference is made to a study of hair care practices that has used in-depth interviews with participants in their homes and with experts at Boots the Chemist. Reference is also made to a study of interactions with plastic goods and the elements of these interactions that affect the decision to throw items away. The first draws on Shove's (2004) history of cleanliness and Dant's (2003) exploration of dirt and explores feelings about greasy and unruly hair. Day to day interactions with hair and hair care products create and draw on standards that govern what is an acceptable feel, smell and look for hair. They often determine when to deal with one's hair or not and the nature of the actions that feel 'correct'. Equivalent 'feeling rules' (Hochschild 2003, Lupton 1998) are implicated in many decisions to dispose of plastic items where surfaces have degraded and become dirty.

The paper highlights that the consumption of resources in hair care and by replacing household goods that are functional but look 'worn' are influenced by the integrative nature of the practices of which they are part rather than the degree to which individuals are dedicated to sustainability. What is considered a 'normal' standard of greasy and unruly hair care (Hand et al 2005) or an acceptable plastic surface could be re-conceptualised and could in turn affect practices to conserve resources.

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