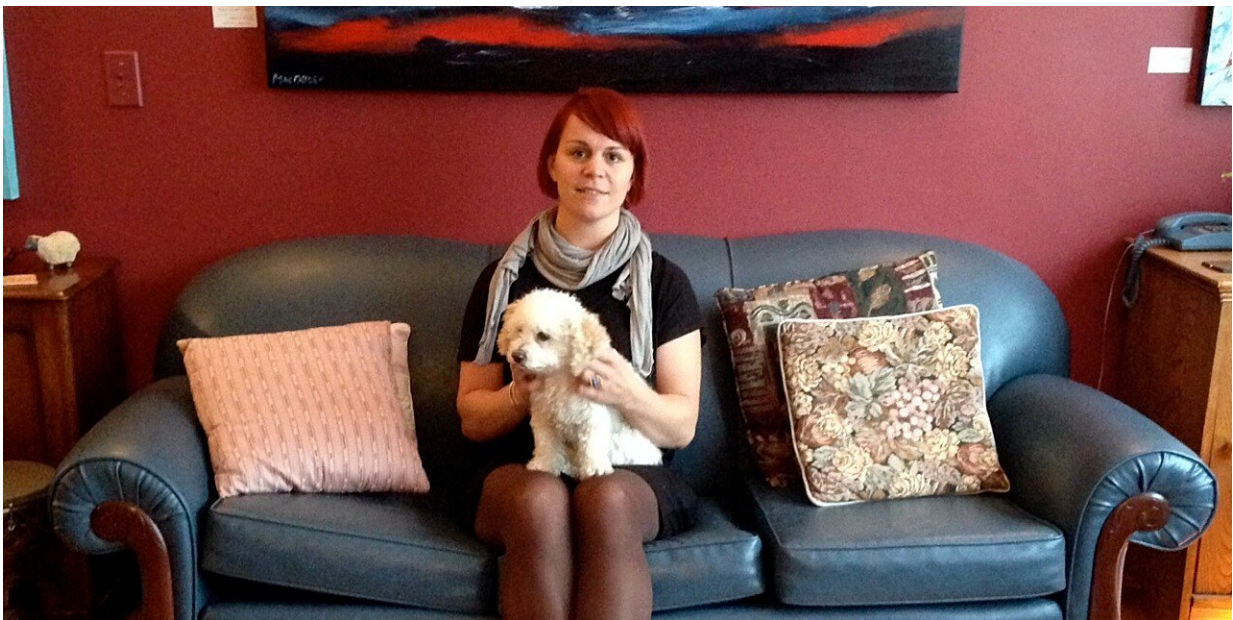


Our relationship with our stuff is mutual, says researcher

June 16 2020, by Bev Betkowski



Writer Elizabeth Withey wearing Laverne, the black dress she wore every day for a year. U of A researcher Jessica Kennedy says Withey's account of her experiences reveals how much we rely on the things we own, and how much those things rely on us. Credit: Elizabeth Withey

When you exclaim "I love that!" about a favourite possession, do you really mean it?

A University of Alberta study based on a [fashion](#) blog is asking people to

think more deeply about what they own—and whether they really need to buy more.

A year of reflections in *Frock Around the Clock*, a blog about a little black dress, reveals the "fascinating web of entanglement" people have with material objects, said Jessica Kennedy, whose findings appear in the journal *Fashion Studies*.

The online blog, created by writer [Elizabeth Withey](#) in 2015, detailed how she wore the same dress, named Laverne, every day for a year, and how she came to depend on it, said Kennedy, a master's student in the U of A's human ecology program who did the [case study](#) for a class project.

"It was interesting to see how her relationship with the dress grew as other things shifted in her life; her marriage ended, she moved, her child started kindergarten. A lot of changes happened, but the one consistent thing is this dress. She makes this reference about the dress being a cocoon, a protective layer, and I thought that was beautiful. Every single blog post she did illustrates the interdependence we have with our things."

Objects are so much a part of our lives, they're almost invisible, Kennedy added.

"We have no idea how much we rely on certain things. From the time we wake up, they are all around us. We wear them, transport them, use them to communicate."

But those things—like the dress—also rely on us for their survival, she noted.

To show that relationship in terms of fashion, Kennedy—a textiles

student who has 10 years of experience in the clothing retail business—analyzed the [blog](#) through the lens of a theory by British archeologist Ian Hodder that there's a mutual reliance between things and their owners, and was able to support his observations.

In this case, to keep Laverne wearable, Withey had to "problem-solve," Kennedy said.

"The dress needed washing and repairing, so it forced her into action. There are these interdependencies we rely on but don't always acknowledge in our day-to-day existence."

The year-long relationship between Withey and her [dress](#), though a bit unusual, should get people thinking about their own wardrobes—and other possessions—in terms of sustainability, Kennedy suggested.

"Because she invested so much time and energy and developed a relationship with this garment, she was more inclined to extend its lifespan. Many people would have given up on it when it started to fade or get worn out. But the more likely you are to invest in an object, the more likely it will stay around and be loved."

Developing a conscious appreciation for the items we truly adore encourages "new" materialism: a reverence for our things, Kennedy said.

"It's about realizing that these objects carry our stories and are part of our identity, so we should go out of our way sometimes to hold onto them," she said, adding it's not about shaming anyone who does shop frequently for clothing.

"Not everyone can afford slow fashion—which can be more expensive—or can make their own clothes, but it's good to reflect on how we can build the [relationship](#) to the clothes that are already in our

closet. It's also important to ask ourselves why we might be pining for something new. Do we really need it? Or are we trying to fill some gap?

"We can challenge ourselves to buy less. It could be that the more clothing we have and the more we buy into fast fashion, it's less likely those clothes will carry meaning for us."

More information: Entanglements of a Dress Named Laverne: Threads of Meaning between Humans and Things (and Things): [static1.squarespace.com/static ... n+Humans+and+Things+%28and+Things%29.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b1d11e1-4000-4000-9000-000000000000/n+Humans+and+Things+%28and+Things%29.pdf)

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