

Local food initiatives and fashion change: comparing food and clothes to better understand fashion localism

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Abstract

As a movement, local food is well developed and its principles and practices widely appreciated. By contrast, the concepts and activity of fashion localism are far less understood. This essay looks to transfer local food experiences to the fashion context by reviewing a number of food-related initiatives and deliberating about ways in which the insights they contain may lead to smaller-scale and more diverse fashion practices. The article starts with a comparison of some of the similarities and differences between food and fashion and concludes with speculations about knowledge transfer about localism for both eating and dressing.

Keywords: local food, fashion localism, comparison, sustainability, change

Introduction

The principles and practices of local food set a course to change what we eat. As a movement, local food is well developed; a fusion of small-scale regional producers, distinctive gastronomy, celebrated seasonal availability, farmers' markets, foraging skills, celebrity chefs, among others. Following the adage "fibre follows food", where innovations first developed in the food sector are later reproduced in textiles and clothing; in this paper we – one fashion and one food specialist – turn our thoughts to whether local food initiatives lend themselves to application in the fashion sector. That is, we consider whether movements and concepts with their roots in the market garden and on the plate can be extrapolated to the garment and the body, and in so doing give expression to values of localism – resourcefulness, responsibility and sufficiency – for fashion. In this opinion piece, we examine a number of local food initiatives, reviewing their ambition and mechanisms of action so as to better speculate about possible directions of travel of local practices, systems and culture in the context of fashion. But first we employ a thought experiment to test the veracity of the assumption that food and fashion systems inhabit common ground and examine the similarities and differences between the two in order to sharpen the development of place-based understanding about clothes.

Similarities

Food and fashion are a fundamental part of everyday life. They both grace the body. Food in contact with the lips, tongue, oesophagus, stomach and gut; clothes with the skin, eyes, ears and affecting physical movement and posture. Fashion and food both provide opportunities for conviviality, intimacy, pleasure and satisfaction and are arenas of acceptance or resistance to gender inequality. They also satisfy other needs, associated with comfort, control, escape, family provisioning, social interaction and cultural participation. They have origins in agricultural systems, food in an almost total way; and for clothing, natural fibres make up 27% of the global fibre supply (Simpson, 2016: 76). They have physical exertion in common; hard labour - cold, wet, repetitive work; long hours in fields, factories, laundries. They also share knowledge transmission through generations; recipes are passed down in families, as are knitting patterns, clothes maintenance skills and mending habits. The kitchen table is where food is served and garments cut out and stitched. Yet on both counts its role as a site of creation is today challenged: we witness changing family meal systems and home sewing as an add-on to clothes shopping. While the rise of the 'ready-made' in both sectors has altered habits and eased the burden on (mainly women's) labour, it has also removed skills and power over the means of production of everyday products.

Clothes and food are both commodity products, typically manufactured from little valued and indiscriminately sourced raw materials involving a process of intensive commercialisation. Food is cheap because it is assembled from standardised components produced at scale. The same goes for clothes. The price of both food and clothing has reduced in real terms over the last twenty years while the volume purchased has increased for some items (Vittersø et al, 2015; WRAP, 2017: 9). Over-consumption of goods characterises both sectors. In food, the epidemic of over-eating is paralleled with waves of dieting and exercising. Gyms act to curb the effects of over-consumption of food. Likewise for fashion, the epidemic of over-consuming clothes is paralleled with rampant discard, wardrobe streamlining and renting of storage space in which to stockpile excess pieces. The textile bank, charity shop and the rag trader are the equivalent of the health club for management of over-consumption of fashion. In eating, health and a balanced diet are the preserve of those who have knowledge, skill and wealth to access preferred options. Likewise dressing appropriately and with flair requires similar capabilities and resources.

Such commonalities lend credence to the idea that food may be a testing ground for new concepts and ideas applicable to the fashion context, including those pertinent to sustainability change. Certainly, the food sector has a long history of being lobbied to make improvements and try out alternative approaches. The Soil Association (2017), for example, which campaigns for sustainable food, farming and land use, was founded in 1946 and

under its', and others', influence has succeeded in normalising an organic system of production, worked out largely in fields of food crops. By contrast, no groups targeting the improvement of the fashion sector date back more than 20 years, reflected in the relatively recent development of labelling and standards (such as that for organic textiles (ibid)). It stands to reason therefore that ideas of localism in fashion may benefit from the theoretical insights and practical experience specifically from the local food movement and its mix of top down political and market-driven initiatives as well as more small scale, bottom up programmes of change.

Distinctions

Yet there is a fly in the ointment. While the similarities between food and fashion are many, so are the differences. Table 1 outlines a small selection of these points of variance, organised thematically.

THEME	FOOD	FASHION
SPEED, FREQUENCY	Subsistence requires the annihilation of food.	Protection requires that a garment remains intact for the duration of its use.
	Rapid cycle of repeating consumption driven by necessity: three meals a day.	Cycle of clothing consumption driven by necessity is slow and episodic.
	Food is one-use, totally expended by the process of eating - future meals need new stocks.	Garments are durable. One use rarely precludes a garment from future additional uses: clothes typically take decades to wear out. Future opportunities of dressing require no new stocks.
	Food waste is an issue that is increasingly on the agenda with statistics published by the government.	Clothing waste is not addressed by retailers head on. Take back schemes not framed in terms of waste.
PRODUCTS, SUPPLY CHAINS, PREPARATION	Food is visible as food in gardens, allotments, fields. It can be picked and eaten directly or used as an ingredient in processed dishes.	Raw materials for clothing don't look like garments when in their natural state. No fibre can be worn without first being processed.
	Many food items can be consumed raw or by themselves (no other components).	Garments are an assembly of many component parts.
	TV programmes about cooking are common. Recipes are included in all mainstream print publications.	TV programmes about making clothing are rare. 'Recipes' for clothes use, making, mending do not feature in the popular press.
ORIGIN	Origin of food is often considered as part of its purchase, a mark of authenticity or quality.	Origin of garments is sometimes important as a mark of authenticity or quality. For clothing, the value chain is long

		and difficult to access reliable information about.
	Local food is often seen as distinct, special, fresh.	Local clothing is often seen as parochial, quaint, non-fashion.
	Local food is celebratory, contributing to global taste.	Local fashion is not much talked about, inward-looking, jingoistic.
HEALTH, WELL-BEING	High status is characterised by <i>moderate</i> consumption of the 'right sort' of food.	High status is typically characterised by the display of the right fashion items. What is 'right' is ever-changing and this flux invokes <i>high</i> levels of consumption.
	Over-eating results in obesity and other chronic health conditions in the eater.	Over-consuming clothing results primarily in obese wardrobes. It is rarely an impediment to buying more.
	'Fat' is a word used as a punishment. Being overweight is often regarded as moral failure and lack of control.	Large ('fat') wardrobes result in little public censure or moralising, perhaps because they are not viewed in public.
POLITICS, CLASS	Pre-prepared tins, jars, 'ready meals' are widely viewed as less preferable than home-made food 'from scratch'.	Ready to wear garments with a factory finish often preferred to hand-made items.
	The UK's national – favourite – dish is Tikka Masala. Tasting food from other countries is typically viewed as a positive and culturally acceptable way to 'meet' others and experience their difference.	The Sari is not Britain's national dress. Those dressed atypically are often seen as socially problematic.

Table 1 – Distinctions between aspects of food and fashion systems

Such comparisons tease out differences between fashion and food and sharpens understanding about both the limits and opportunities for transposing initiatives between the two sectors. Some critical differences include:

- Eating obliterates food, rendering it invisible. Dressing demands that garments endure and are seen.
- Eating requires access to ongoing supplies of new food; dressing to a stock of clothing that rarely needs to be replenished.
- Good practice with food involves knowing when to stop eating. No such scruples exist with clothing.
- Local food is largely perceived as 'good' by producers, diners and the media. Local fashion is not widespread or straightforward.

These distinctions, and in particular those which reveal the dissimilar rhythms of durability and consumption of goods in food and fashion systems, raise essential considerations for this paper. Whereas in the food sector, initiatives typically seek to affect the quality of supply, targeting the production and distribution system, guiding what is grown, cooked and eaten towards 'better' alternatives; in fashion, the challenge is different: to affect the quantity of supply as well as its quality. Change involves both fewer and different garments.

Perhaps of all the many food initiatives that exist, local food has most to contribute to this dual challenge of creating a system that has both a different tenor and a smaller magnitude. Local food, with its specific mandate for place-based adaptation, defines the type and scale of food activity by ecological and community limits (Curtis, 2003). Its rhythms are those of feast and famine: appreciation of harvest bounty, acceptance of lean times, alongside the inventiveness to manage all the while. So, does the local food movement have insights to share with the fashion sector about addressing issues of a sector's quality and quantity? We now turn our attention to a range of local food-related initiatives, examining their goals, key mechanisms of action and venture some views about how experience of them might be transferred to a fashion context to change both the type and flow of goods essential within fashion localism.

Local food-related initiatives

Food miles

Principal goal: To reduce transportation of food.

Other effects: Seasonal eating, support of local economy.

Mechanism: Using the concept of distance travelled as opportunity to promote less carbon intensive eating practices.

What could this look like in a fashion context? It could become a mark of local fibre origins and making, possibly associated with the reshoring of production close to large consumer markets in the Global North.

Useful? Unclear, the nature of garments as highly processed, multi-component products means that few pieces would realistically qualify. Its focus on seasonality has some potential, introducing the idea that 'you can't always have what you want' – items are unavailable for part of the year – and this may lead to a growing acceptance of scarcity and less.

Community Supported Agriculture

Principal goal: To grow food with financial and practical help of the people who eat it.

Other effects: Knowledge of food systems, healthy eating, low carbon food.

Mechanism: A farm grows vegetables which are supplied to members that pay a yearly subscription to receive food. These investors also labour on the farm for a minimum number of hours and sometimes harvest the vegetables themselves. The investment provides stability for farmers, insulating them from volatile commodity price fluctuations, and allows smaller, family farmers to stay on the land.

What could this look like in a fashion context? Wearers would invest in a crop in advance, supporting a local farmer and the subsequent supply chain, and ultimately receiving a garment.

Useful? The concept has already been mooted in the USA for cotton farmers. It has potential to cut consumption if an investor limits consumption of new items to those provided by the scheme.

Foraging and hunting

Principal goal: To gather food for free and from the surrounding area.

Other effects: Knowledge of food origins and seasonality, the natural world, healthy eating, low carbon food.

Mechanism: Wander and gather, fish, hunt. Requires knowledge of what is safe to eat (e.g. plants, mushrooms), some basic equipment and appropriate awareness.

What could this look like in a fashion context? Wearers gather 'free' items (perhaps from friends, relations, textile banks) or hunt and harvest natural textile materials from local surroundings. The latter might include hedgerow wool – small clumps of raw fleece which gathers on barbed wire or fence posts which sheep rub against; nettles – to extract bast fibre from their stems; the trapping of animals for fur (historically an important clothing material); the gathering of natural dye materials.

Useful? It has some potential, particularly for connecting wearers to the natural world through textile origins. It also raises the spectre of difficult animal welfare issues associated with hunting practices.

Labelling

Principal goal: To promote products in the market place with special features such as sustainability (environmental and social (fair trade)) or place of origin.

Other effects: To raise awareness among consumers about quality and origin of products, the production process and impacts on the physical environment, animal welfare, human health, social conditions of workers, fair trade relations etc.

Mechanism: Auditing system made up by a third-party body that certifies the whole or parts of the production and distribution process according to certain standards. Main function is to secure an independent certification process and reliable information for consumers.

What could this look like in a fashion context? Labelling schemes already exist for clothing, although they are not as ubiquitous as for food. As mentioned above, specific labelling schemes for local products are challenging in a fashion context because of the multipart nature of garments and politics. Food has protected status and fall within a legislative framework; clothes are not.

Useful? Yes, it may contribute to a greater awareness among consumers. However, these schemes are also challenged by brands and companies that have long capitalized on place and origin through utilizing the value of national and local symbols such as flags and iconic imagery. The same goes for environmental labelling schemes which struggle against quasi-labels and misleading information on products by producers (Vittersø, et al, 2017). Another challenge faced by product labelling is to get consumers to actively use them in their purchase decisions.

Terroir

Principal goal: Terroir, a French term that denotes how specific agricultural products are characterized both by physical and environmental aspects related to the soil and local climate in combination with local know-how and practices (Berard and Marchenay, 2008). It also form the basis for labelling schemes all over the world aimed at protection of geographical origins (GIs), including for marketing purposes.

Other effects: As for labelling in general, GIs may raise awareness among consumers about local production and cultural heritage, but face the same challenges in the market as to get consumers' attention and using the labels as tools in their purchase decision making.

Mechanisms: The GI tag ensures that none other than those registered as authorised users are allowed to use the product name. It also means that sellers must provide proof of provenance and give a guarantee to customers that they are buying the genuine, premium localised product.

What could this look like in a fashion context? While GI has chiefly covered food and drink, in some countries non-foods such as fibre and garments have also been registered. These include Kancheepuram Silk Saris from Tamil Nadu in India and different types of shawls and woollen carpets also from India (Kashmir) (Mir and Ain, 2010). Organic wool from Shetland is the first non-food or drink product that has received Protected Designation of Origin accreditation in the UK and EU (Vittersø et al, 2017).

Useful? It has the potential to raise awareness of local origin and heritage and strengthen local production of clothing and other garments.

Slow food

Principal goal: To emphasize the link between taste (quality) and food culture.

Other effects: To bridge the gap between gastronomy and 'lay' food-related skills and practices. Also to collect, and by cataloguing, take care of and preserve little known or fast-disappearing local products and bring them back into commercial circulation and common use (Berard and Marchenay, op cit).

Mechanisms: By organizing food fairs, exhibitions and other food related events gathering small scale producers from all over the world, the Slow Food Movement set the agenda for a greater interest in food quality and food culture. In addition to strengthen the culinary link between taste and food culture it also aims to encourage the development of production as well as consumption practices that sustain local ecosystems. Slow Food also works towards strengthening of small food businesses against the overall globalization of food production emphasized through fair trade relations and socially acceptable worker conditions among others.

What could this look like in a fashion context? Multiple attempts have been made to transfer principles and practices of slow culture into the fashion sector. Chiefly this has been through a literal adoption of more time-intensive and hand production practices. Reframing slow fashion as activity that sustains local ecosystems could help nuance the relevance of slow culture to fashion localism, tying it regeneration of small and diverse producers and skills and practices of garment use.

Useful? Yes, but work would need to be done to foster a new wave of local ecosystem-sustaining activity.

Discussion and conclusion

As this short review of initiatives suggests, local themes are well developed in the food sector and taken up by producers, consumers and the media, often with the support of nation states and regions (like the Nordic countries). We suggest that contained within them are useful insights to support a local fashion movement, specifically understanding ways in which to redirect what is made and bought, bending it towards more diverse practices and small scale producers with regional supply networks. This could lead for example towards: developing better information and labelling of garments to support regionally diverse production, perhaps through schemes like Food Miles or GI; reacquainting wearers with new (old) understanding of how foraging and hunting could be co-opted for use in clothing; or exploration of ways to sustain local ecosystems through slow culture, among others. Transferring local experiences from food to fashion, and extrapolating them to finesse their fit in a clothing context, is a promising exercise in developing the nascent field of fashion localism. Indeed it appears that even in the few paragraphs outlined above, there are a number leads worthy of further investigation.

Yet food initiatives only take the development of fashion localism so far, and specifically up to the point that food and fashion differ. On the challenge of reducing the scale of a sector's activity, local food initiatives are largely silent, as they are on fostering the ongoing, repeated use of the same product (neither issue, after all, is their chief concern). This suggests that while fashion localism can benefit from transferring knowledge and experiences from local food; it also needs bespoke initiatives shaped by the specific characteristics of the sector. Awareness of the unique traits and particular challenges of a sector is vital in this regard, as is the confidence to strike out in new directions and take localism into uncharted ground, including into the wardrobe, the laundry, to questions of ownership, exchange, skills and invention, thereby shaping localism by a broad spectrum of activity beyond provenance of raw materials and manufacture of goods. At this growing edge, the exchange of localism expertise may begin to reverse its flow. Here food might look to fibre to guide it into new terrain carved out by the dynamics of living with garments over time and with it bring the prospect of change to communities and ecosystems.

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