

Wear & Care

RESEARCH PROJECT SUMMARY



Acknowledgement of Country

RMIT PlaceLab acknowledges the people of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the Eastern Kulin Nations on whose unceded lands we conduct the business of the University.

RMIT PlaceLab respectfully acknowledges their Ancestors and Elders, past and present, as the original and continuing Makers of Place.

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RMIT PlaceLab is an urban initiative connecting community, shaping place and taking a radically different approach to doing research.

Designed to free research from the campus and bring researchers street-side to connect with local government and groups, RMIT PlaceLab facilitates site-based research to support the co-creation of new ideas, partnerships, and systems that grow positive community impact.

Dynamic, actionable and accessible, RMIT PlaceLab Research Projects are bite-size and community-engaged, generating insights, ideas and solutions that can be implemented together with our government and place-making partners.

Wear & Care Research Project

Long Story Short

RMIT PlaceLab's 'Wear & Care' Research Project was an exploration into methods of fashion "rewilding" in Brunswick, Melbourne. It has gathered locals, retailers, makers, creators, and researchers to learn about and encourage practices that mend, repair and share clothing, to build a local response towards a new fashion system.

What We Explored

We considered Brunswick's future as an existing creative fashion district by exploring methods of fashion "rewilding" accessible to the community. The changing fashion landscape depends on shifting values and approaches to transform how we produce and consume, to consider new positive ways of experiencing fashion that aligns people and planet. Local fashion "rewilding" supports new cultures around how we better use, make and recreate clothing.



Figure 1. Community Clothing Repair Guide Booklet, as part of the 'Wear & Care' Activation Kit. Image: Vanessa Duque.

In Australia, the clothing and textile waste streams have been recognised as a significant focus area by the Australian Fashion Council (AFC and Consortium 2023) and Sustainability Victoria (Sustainability Victoria 2023). Despite the creative and economic value of fashion to our society, clothing overproduction and overconsumption that defines the dominant Western fashion industry has caused detrimental effects on our environment globally (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2017). Therefore, there is an urgency to establish effective end-of-life solutions for garments to “tame” the excesses of the industry from within the existing fashion system (Payne 2020). However, there are also opportunities to support different ways of participating in and experiencing fashion that challenge the growth-focused model and occur outside of this fashion system (Payne 2020).



Figure 2. 'Wear & Care' Community Forum. Image: Vanessa Duque.

Other modes of fashion engagement do exist in communities where “rewilding” actions, like sharing and mending clothes, are embraced. When exploring the Brunswick community’s engagement with fashion “rewilding” actions prior to launching the **'Wear & Care'** Research Project, there was limited information available about the community’s practices in the home and in local neighbourhoods. Yet, Brunswick has an historically rich connection to Australia’s textile and garment manufacturing industries (BDD 2024a). The suburb is also now home to the Brunswick Design District (BDD), which advocates Brunswick’s positioning as a national hub for creative industries, and supports its flourishing creative community and economy (BDD 2024b). Sydney Road, one of the main channels through the suburb, is also renowned for its second-hand clothing stores.

Despite this lively creative ecosystem, there were also few opportunities for the broader Brunswick community to engage with RMIT’s School of Fashion & Textiles, which also calls Brunswick home. Therefore, we sought to encourage and assist in making practices that “rewild” fashion more accessible to the wider community, by collaborating with RMIT fashion and textiles academics through activities and research emerging from the School, and developing a community-accessible Activation Kit of resources and community book (see Figure 1).

The objective of the **'Wear & Care'** Research Project, therefore, was to bring together local people to learn, cultivate conversations, share knowledge, and identify practices of fashion “rewilding” occurring within our neighbourhood of Brunswick.

Our hope was to uncover insights into the ways in which people, through their actions toward fashion “rewilding”, are reshaping values and practices to engage with their clothing and experience fashion differently here in Brunswick, Melbourne, departing from the predominant mode of consuming new fashion products.

While the rising ecological crisis surrounding clothing and textiles waste may have been the broader catalyst for **'Wear & Care'**, the Research Project did not focus on the systemic response that is needed to address it. Rather, using fashion “rewilding” (Payne 2019) as a conceptual lens, the project focused on actions embraced in the home or collaboratively in the community at a local level, that may contribute to building a new, more sustainable fashion paradigm.

Fashion “rewilding” describes actions that support new cultures in how we better use, make and recreate clothing that can expand beyond the boundaries of the dominant Western fashion system (Payne 2019). Within this current system, the most prominent way we experience fashion is through a lens of commercialisation and industry demands. “Rewilding” in a fashion context endeavours to release fashion from the grip of fashion industry codes of constant change, newness, and profit motives, to build more diverse, inclusive and community-accessible experiences of fashion (Payne 2019).

According to Professor Alice Payne (2019:14), Dean of the School of Fashion & Textiles at RMIT University, “rewilding” actions ‘are those that make wild spaces for fashion to flourish beyond the dictates of the fashion industry’. On a broad scale, Payne (2020:159) explains, ‘rewilding fashion may mean producing far less clothing, shifting to regenerative agriculture methods, re-localising supply chains, as well as activism’. On a human level, it creates space for more people to experience fashion as cultural expression and as a creative practice of making, wearing and caring in new and different ways, not confined to the sole experience of fashion as a “consumer”.



Figure 3. **'Wear & Care'** Community Repair Series. Image: RMIT PlaceLab.

The **'Wear & Care'** Research Project included various methods such as, a series of community repair workshops, a research survey on "rewilding" fashion for the community, a student second-hand clothing redesign display, a research survey for Brunswick-based second-hand clothing retailers, several garment-led group conversations, a community forum in collaboration with RMIT's School of Fashion & Textiles, and finally, our **'Wear & Care'** Exhibition (see Figures 2 and 3).

Our research with the Brunswick, Merri-bek and wider Melbourne community occurred over five months: May – September 2023. We adopted a mixed methods approach, using workshops, online research surveys and face-to-face group interviews. This approach reflects evidence that most research methods, used in isolation, have limitations that impede or restrict inclusive participation (Kingston, Carver, Evans and Turton 2000).

3.1 Research Methods

3.1.1 Community Repair Series of Workshops

Across May and June 2023, we held our **'Wear & Care'** Community Repair Series, with six weekly, hands-on mending workshops in collaboration with the 'Repair Café at RMIT', delivered by academics from RMIT's School of Fashion & Textiles and local repair expert and textile artist, Tamara Russell.

The sessions ran as semi-structured, two-hour workshops, where the community was invited to bring along their garments in need of mending, alteration, or embellishment to learn hand and machine techniques across different themes each week: general repairs, rips and holes, fastenings and alterations, darning and knitwear, denim repair, and altering T-shirts. Over the six weeks, our attendees ranged from 12 people to 27 people per workshop (see Figure 4). Attending menders could also choose to have their repairs documented by the 'Repair Cafe at RMIT' team as part of their research into garment longevity and durability.



Figure 4. Community Repair Series. Image: RMIT PlaceLab.

3.1.2 Online Survey

We explored local clothing wear and care practices amongst the community, and how these actions intersect with “rewilding” or “taming” concepts in fashion. The Survey was delivered online using Qualtrics, RMIT University’s approved survey platform. The Survey was designed to generate quantitative results, with particular responses leading to questions requiring a qualitative response in order to elicit deeper insights from respondents.

The Online Survey engaged 482 people, and was completed by 421 people, with 35% (149) of respondents living in Brunswick. Given the topic of inquiry and patterns within social research, 80% of respondents identified as female. Additionally, the Survey was principally promoted via Instagram, which means that most respondents fell within the age group of 18-29 years. This also reflects a movement towards sustainable change and interest within a younger cohort of people.

3.1.3 Second-Hand Clothing Retailer Survey

We reached out to 16 Brunswick-based retailers to share insights about their second-hand clothing practices, as part of the Brunswick Second-Hand Clothing Retailer Survey.

Across charity, not-for-profit, consignment and for-profit second-hand clothing retailers, six retailer representatives participated in the Survey delivered online using Qualtrics. Five other retailer representatives joined in conversations with our Brunswick team at their retail stores, forming anecdotal research, to help us learn about retail business practices around repair, alterations, or redesign of second-hand clothing in Brunswick.

3.1.4 Group Interviews

The ‘A Garment’s Life: Conversation Series’ was created using a carefully considered choice of research method to cultivate discussions about how we wear and care for our clothing in ways that support a “rewilding” of fashion.

We took into consideration the changing fashion landscape in Australia and shifting social values in Brunswick, Melbourne. We chose to use garment-led interviews and storytelling in a conversational, group setting to establish a safe and supportive environment in which people could share their lived experiences naturally and honestly.

The method used four research tools:

- Individual participant garment stories.
- Group conversations.
- Collaborative portraiture.
- Garment documentation.

The approach to the group conversations gained inspiration from existing community projects and research methods for exploring wardrobes and garment use behaviour, including ‘Worn Stories’ (Spivack 2014), ‘On Mending: Stories of damage and repair’(Pym 2022), ‘Local Wisdom’ (Fletcher 2019) and ‘Craft of Use’ (Fletcher 2016).

The project and book ‘Craft of Use’ by Kate Fletcher (2016) was particularly influential to the method shaped for the Conversation Series. The ‘Craft of Use’ method is a ‘face-to-face interview about how a garment is used and portrait photography of the participant in the piece’ (Fletcher 2017:53). Furthermore, garment-led interview methods included in the book ‘Opening up the Wardrobe: A Methods Book’, such as those developed by designer and researcher Amy Twigger Holroyd (2017), also informed the method.

The result was a series of six small, semi-structured, in-person group conversations across 90-minutes with no more than 5 people per session (see Figure 5). 23 people, predominantly identifying as female, from our Brunswick, Merri-bek and wider Melbourne community joined us over August and September 2023. Our ‘Community Collaborators’ were invited to bring along a garment from their wardrobe that had been mended, repaired, or shared, or a special garment with a story behind it. Each person generously shared their garment-led story, allowing each garment to guide the narrative, before joining in a group conversation facilitated by our PlaceLab Brunswick researchers. While pre-set questions were used as prompts, there was ample space for the ‘Community Collaborators’ to share their reflections, opinions, or related experiences around clothing, fashion, and sustainability with the group.

Local contemporary artist and RMIT PhD candidate Jody Haines joined each session as a collaborator and series photographer. Jody drew upon her method of photography, which she developed and explored in her own practice-led PhD research, to document the clothing through photographs and to create a garment-centred portrait with each of our 'Community Collaborators'. Her process emerges from what she has 'coined as an Indigenous feminist (new) materialism' and engages practices of yarning and collaborative portraiture (Haines 2022:44).



Figure 5. 'A Garment's Life: Conversation Series' group interview. Image: Jody Haines.

3.2 Research Data Analysis

In undertaking a range of research methods, the data gathered from each activity was analysed individually before overarching themes were identified across the 'Wear & Care' Research Project.

- **Community Repair Series of Workshops:** Data was generated through observations undertaken by PlaceLab Brunswick researchers during each workshop, supported by photographs by the team. Written observation notes were then analysed thematically, with themes emerging iteratively over the course of the six-week Series.
- **Online Surveys:** Quantitative survey data was analysed using Qualtrics. Qualitative survey data was coded manually and analysed thematically using Microsoft Excel.
- **Group Interviews:** Individual garment stories and the group conversations were audio recorded with the consent of the participants, while transcriptions were created using an RMIT University approved transcription firm (see Figure 6). Transcripts were analysed thematically, with final themes emerging iteratively.



Figure 6. Community garments at 'A Garment's Life: Conversation Series' group interview. Image: Jody Haines.

3.3 Community and Student Engagement

3.3.1 Display of Student Work

From 3rd to 26th July 2023, our PlaceLab Brunswick Studio was home to a Student Second-hand Clothing Redesign Display exploring concepts of reuse and redesign through a showcase of redesigned second-hand clothing pieces (see Figure 7).

Our PlaceLab Brunswick team collaborated with RMIT's School of Fashion & Textiles to feature a selection of garments produced by students undertaking the course 'Fashion Design Reuse', led by Course Coordinator and our collaborating academic, Dr. Georgia McCorkill. Alongside the redesigned second-hand clothing pieces, we also featured a digital display of video interviews communicating the redesign journeys with RMIT student exhibitors, Dr. Georgia McCorkill and RMIT Tutors Courtney Holm and Ashley Martiniello. The interviews explored the student design brief, the process of redesigning existing garments and the challenges the students experienced along the way.



Figure 7. Second-Hand Clothing Redesign Display at PlaceLab. Image: RMIT PlaceLab.

3.3.2 Community Forum



Figure 8. 'Wear & Care' Community Forum. Image: Vanessa Duque.

We held a '**Wear & Care**' Community Forum to discover and share methods of fashion "rewilding" and "taming" with our local community. We brought together RMIT fashion and textiles academics with community, industry, and local council representatives to share knowledge and experiences in garment mending, second-hand clothing, upcycling, remanufacturing, redesign practices and more.

It was an opportunity to hear from a collection of knowledge experts in conversation, exploring the evolving local response to new and shifting systems of fashion, and how these actions align with research emerging out of RMIT's School of Fashion & Textiles. During the conversation, our Forum Facilitator, Dr. Harriette Richards, drew upon questions to prompt a panel of five speakers to share

from their practice or from their organisation's experiences of "rewilding" or "taming" fashion (see Figure 8). Our Facilitator also invited audience members to comment and share insights from their own experiences in response to what was discussed.

3.3.3 Exhibition

To wrap up our RMIT PlaceLab Cycle 02 Research Projects, from 6th to 20th December 2023 we presented the RMIT PlaceLab Brunswick Exhibition showcasing outputs for our two Brunswick-based Research Projects. Visitors from across community, local council, industry, local media and RMIT discovered how we delved into local fashion "rewilding" actions from a community perspective.

The '**Wear & Care**' Exhibition comprised of printed information panels about the Research Project, large-scale portrait photographs from 'A Garment's Life: Conversation Series', a digital screen with an interactive data visualisation from our Research Survey and two key outputs, our printed book 'Stories of Wear & Care: The Lives of Garments and the Stories They Hold' and our '**Wear & Care**' Activation Kit of community-accessible resources to take away and share (see Figures 9 and 10).



Figure 9. '**Wear & Care**' Exhibition. Image: Suzanne Phoenix.



Figure 10. '**Wear & Care**' Exhibition. Image: RMIT PlaceLab.

What we uncovered during the **'Wear & Care'** Research Project provided insights into a way of understanding fashion “rewilding”, the factors that can influence the formation of a fashion “rewilder” identity, motivations that may drive engagement with fashion “rewilding”, the potential resources and infrastructure that could support local fashion “rewilding”, and some of the tensions and ambiguity surrounding fashion “rewilding”.

4.1 A Way of Understanding Fashion “Rewilding”

Our **'Wear & Care'** Research Survey gave rise to some rich insights into how people understand “rewilding”, and the actions and infrastructure that is needed to support meaningful “rewilding” practices in homes and communities. We learnt that there is a need for clarity around the distinction between “rewilding” and “taming” activities to expand the community’s understanding of sustainability in relation to clothing and fashion. This can lead them to consider how their decisions around clothing intersect with these concepts, how they might newly interact with the clothing in their wardrobes, and how they can experience fashion in various ways without purchasing new garments.

Our research revealed that people broadly understand some activities as “rewilding” that might be better categorised as “taming”. It is important to highlight this distinction as the ambiguity surrounding the concepts could, arguably, limit the potential for the community to take action in ways that expand personal clothing and fashion experiences. This indicates an opportunity for education. For this Research Project, we categorised “rewilding” activities as those that involved repair, repurposing and the saving of garments, whereas we viewed “taming” activities as those that focused on selling, swapping and donating garments through established channels and organisations. One way of understanding community-accessible fashion “rewilding” is to consider activities through the lens of the “craft of hands”.

4.2 Fashion “Rewilder” Identity Formation

4.2.1 Family Influence of Women on Making and Mending Skills

As part of 'A Garment's Life: Conversation Series', the stories and conversations about the influence of family overwhelmingly featured women. Mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and neighbours played roles in encouraging, or deterring, teaching, and caring through making, mending, or offering skills and advice. Women in the lives of our 'Community Collaborators' nurtured the learning of Sashiko techniques, taught the art of darning, passed on the skill to sew, and planted the seeds of future creative practice. Early exposure to practices around textiles and learning skills, whether through women in the family or taught at school, led to creating a legacy of embracing these practices in adulthood.

“ My mum mends. So, I grew up with mending, or what we called mending. But she never had the time or energy to really do it, but there was always elastic and socks... We didn't throw out a sock with a hole. I still mend my socks. But my grandmother was a seamstress, and there was always stories of her growing up with, like, my mother said, 'we didn't have any money, but we always looked top-notch.' Because she used to make wedding dresses, and she had, like, incredible skill. And so, my mum and all of her siblings were very, very, very well dressed.

– A 'Community Collaborator' as part of 'A Garment's Life: Conversation Series'.

4.2.2 Skills Development

“ A rare but awesome opportunity to learn a new skill whilst in the presence of multiple experts.

– An attendee at the ‘Wear & Care’ Community Repair Series.

Through our ‘Wear & Care’ Community Repair Series and ‘A Garment’s Life: Conversation Series’, we learnt about the factors influencing confidence, practices and education in developing mending and making skills; from aligning with the actions of a particular community to practices modelled by friends and family.

We also identified the power of small learning opportunities for skills development:

- **Learning to sew on a button:** Learning the simple skill of sewing on a button can create change at an accessible but impactful level. It’s a life skill, but it can also save a garment from landfill. Through our survey of Brunswick-based second-hand clothing retailers, we learnt that everyday garments donated to not-for-profit and charity stores with missing buttons are generally not repaired. The stores don’t currently have the resources and capacity to repair garments – even small mends like replacing a button. Therefore, most of these garments are discarded at the sorting phase, destined for landfill, before even making it into the store for sale. This means that, if you take the time to replace a missing button on an otherwise wearable garment, it has a better chance at another life with a new wearer. If you don’t repair it before donating, the garment can sadly be sent straight to landfill. It’s a simple intervention with big impact.
- **Learning through community repair cafes:** We acknowledged the power of putting a needle and thread in someone’s hand and teaching them a small stitch as a way of building confidence through community repair. Encouraging people to learn how to mend and practice skills in a communal repair setting, aids in preserving and growing skills, and creates a space to nurture visible and invisible mending (Durrani 2018). Across our ‘Wear & Care’ Community Repair Series, there was a notable shift in engagement from our regular attendees as they grew in confidence and developed their skills across the sessions. Where some attendees may have started by watching and learning techniques to mend their clothes, they were soon confident in discussing repair techniques and mending their own clothes as the series progressed.

4.2.3 Educating Others

“ I can’t tell you how many people I’ve taught how to sew on a button. Random people find out that I can do it. And I’m a hack! I don’t have any kind of formal training. I’m absolutely a hack, but I can sew on a button.

It’s just one of those things that everyone should be taught from grade four! It’s just one of those things that you should be able to do. It’s such a life skill.

– A ‘Community Collaborator’ during ‘A Garment’s Life: Conversation Series’.

Across the ‘Wear & Care’ Community Repair Series and ‘A Garment’s Life: Conversation Series’, we observed interactions and listened to stories of how our attendees and ‘Community Collaborators’ expand upon their own practices and engage with “rewilding” fashion by passing on their skills and educating others.

4.3 Motivations to Engage in “Rewilding” Fashion

4.3.1 To Find Community and Social Belonging

A community of peers, who all identify with particular values and are collectively building an ethical framework for decision-making, can be a motivating factor in supporting personal “rewilding” actions.

“ I think she’s – she belongs to a very distinct tribe. There’s no question about that. But there are many of them. She’s not unique within that tribe. They’re more aware. They’re making intentional choices.

– A ‘Community Collaborator’ during ‘A Garment’s Life: Conversation Series’.

Community repair cafes and self-organised repair groups not only empower citizens with skills and knowledge but can grow communities, aid well-being and strengthen social inclusion (Bradley and



Figure 11. Community Repair Series. Image: RMIT PlaceLab.

Persson 2022). Those who attend also connect to a wider global network of repairers, creating a unique form of environmental activism for a circular future (Moalem and Mosgaard 2021). Across our ‘Wear & Care’ Community Repair Series, we observed a shift in familiarity and growth in attendee interactions (see Figure 11). We learnt from one attendee that a small monthly repair group had formed externally after meeting at our workshops, and although individually they may not have all the mending skills they need, collectively they might.

Across the Repair Series and the Conversation Series, attendees and ‘Community Collaborators’ expressed a sense of connection to designers, sewers and menders they discovered on social media, but also shared stories of hyper-local communities they belonged to with shared values.

“ I think, we’re always moving in bubbles, you know? I’m within a bubble of people that are very much like-minded. My partner is a real maker, and I feel like we come from these different places. They make to make, and I make to have made, if that makes sense. And that’s where my mending comes from as well. I’m not so interested in producing. I stitch so that it’s mended, not because I want to be stitching. But we are often crafting together and sharing those skills, which is very nice.

– A ‘Community Collaborator’ during ‘A Garment’s Life: Conversation Series’.

4.3.2 To Engage with Sustainability and Address the Ecological Crisis

Experiences of climate anxiety, as a result of the global ecological crisis, or a desire to engage in sustainable clothing practices can empower people with agency and motivate personal, micro actions that “rewild” fashion.

During the Conversation Series, one ‘Community Collaborator’ shared that their son experiences extreme climate anxiety. In response to this, their daughter became more aware and informed about the fashion industry, and now finds small ways of implementing changes at a family level. In doing so, she also influences the actions and attitudes of others within her social network.

Some of the motivations that attendees brought to the ‘Wear & Care’ Community Repair Series included:

- To align values with practices.
- To reduce their own environmental footprint. To repair not replace or to extend the life of their clothes.

Two of the themes that emerged from ‘A Garment’s Life: Conversation Series’ included:

- **Valuing the materials.** The stories revealed values centred around materials and their worth. There was a desire to protect, reuse and restore materials and textiles. Our ‘Community Collaborators’ created garments to make use of leftover fabrics and threads, made ‘new’ garments using worn clothing and repaired pieces in their wardrobes to extend their useful lives.
- **Resourcefulness reflecting values or family influence.** A sense of clothing and material resourcefulness was revealed amongst the stories and conversations. Alongside the practice of using leftover materials and worn clothing, there were also intentions to mend and embellish clothing to prolong their use. This not only revealed the values of our ‘Community Collaborators’, but at times also reflected the influence of their parents or grandparents in sustaining behaviours introduced while growing up.

4.3.3 To Embrace Thriftiness

Actions that “rewild” fashion can also be motivated by a desire to be resourceful in the form of ‘thriftiness’. We found that behaviours were newly embraced individually, influenced by personal social networks, or adopted through family values due to:

- Economic factors.
- Attitudes of ‘make do and mend’.
- Cherishing clothes to completion, to not waste them.
- Desire to create and make, over purchasing new.
- Respect for the materials, time and labour in creating the clothes.
- Repairing to make something wearable again and keep it in use for longer.

4.3.4 To Engage in a Creative Practice

Learning the skills to repair provides an outlet for creativity alongside the practical skills to extend the useful life of clothes. Our ‘Wear & Care’ Community Repair Series taught attendees visible mending techniques, such as Sashiko, and embellishment styles using iron-on patches and alteration techniques. We found this approach encouraged playfulness and experimentation with clothes, giving people an opportunity to elevate garments they may otherwise have not worn as often or removed from their wardrobes altogether.

Furthermore, as part of 'A Garment's Life: Conversation Series', a selection of garments symbolised a deeper connection to creative practice, from Sashiko stitching and tapestry crafting, to garment making, pottery and painting. These pieces were either worn while creating or formed the final creation. Connections were also drawn between creativity and meditation, emphasising mending, or stitching as a meditative practice where the craft delivered calm and comfort.

4.3.5 Personal Motives

Engaging in practices that "rewild" fashion, whether consciously or not, can be deeply personal. Some of the themes we gathered across 'A Garment's Life: Conversation Series', amongst the garments and stories shared, included:

- **Memories and embedded stories in garments.** The strength of memories was held by the pieces embedded with personal stories, both visible and concealed. We saw garments with visible mending; organic markings of use over time; and hints of hobbies, craft, and creative practice. We heard stories about significant life events, birthdays, weddings, holidays, graduations, homes sold and friendships faded. These were both recollections attached to the garments and future imaginings of memories yet to be made.
- **Valuing the garment or object.** It was clear in the stories shared that garments and objects can hold value in diverse forms. The garments were cherished for their representation of creative pursuits, their connection to key life moments, the quality of their fabrics and fibres, their fit for purpose, and their prolonged lives in the wearers' wardrobes.
- **Mood.** We learnt about the role garments play in influencing moods. Some items in the collection were embraced to generate confidence, to symbolise optimism, to align with the climate, to boost happiness or to assert a particular emotion through clothing.
- **Relationships and storytelling through garments passed on.** Some garments in the collection formed pieces passed between wearers in acts of care, that represent the relationships of our 'Community Collaborators' with loved ones, friends, and mentors. The pieces told stories of successive garment lives, why they were passed on, and the meaning they now hold to their owners and wearers.

One of the motivations that influenced some of our 'Wear & Care' Community Repair Series attendees to repair their clothes was:

- **Restoring Self with, and through Clothing.** 'Satisfaction flows from what we succeed in being and doing with the garments we have available to us. It is a dynamic relationship between what could be done and what we actually know how to do and be' (Fletcher 2016:225). The act of mending reflected an experience of self-affirmation and reward in repairing clothes for themselves and also for others to return a favour (see Figure 12).



Figure 12. 'Wear & Care' Community Repair Series. Image: RMIT PlaceLab.

4.4 Resources and Infrastructure

We discovered that an array of community-accessible fashion “rewilding” and “taming” actions occur in Brunswick, Melbourne. However, in order to operate, many rely on infrastructure and resource support from community and educational institutions.

4.4.1 Community Repair

We asked participants during our ‘Wear & Care’ Research Survey, ‘how do you wear and care for the clothes in your wardrobe?’ We identified that respondents are actively engaging in clothing repair and repurposing practices, as the highest response, with 73% of responses, was ‘I mend and repair my own clothes’, while the second highest response, at 49%, was ‘I alter my own clothes to fit me better’.

Furthermore, we asked survey participants, ‘can you tell us about any other local fashion “rewilding” practices or activities that you know are occurring in Brunswick?’ (see Figure 13). Responses that were categorised as community infrastructure and initiatives around mending, repairing and repurposing, produced the highest results, which sheds light on the importance of these resources when engaging the community to grow and nurture existing repair and repurposing practices.

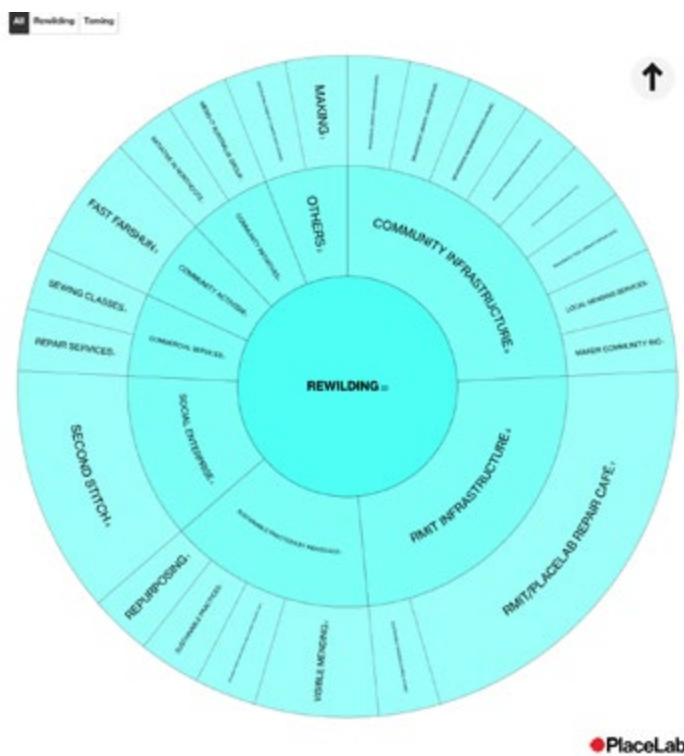


Figure 13. ‘Fashion “rewilding” practices/ activities in Brunswick’ Flourish Data Visualisation.

Why community repair matters?

It builds local community. Community initiatives, like repair cafes, are powerful interventions that do more than repair clothes, but have been evidenced as ‘building social relations and practicing non-consumerist forms of citizenship’ (Bradley and Persson 2022:1321). Through our ‘Wear & Care’ Community Repair Series, we looked to foster new community relationships, with some workshop attendees going on to self-organise a repair group beyond the initial ‘Wear & Care’ project activity.

It grows sustainable practices. Key goals of the repair café movement are to ‘reduce waste and actively engaging the public in sustainability at a local level’ (Keiller and Charter 2018:210). Repair has the capacity to extend the life of clothing, as it allows otherwise unworn garments to return to active use and avoid

disposal (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2017). This is associated with an increasing community awareness of the human and environmental impacts of the fashion industry.

It communicates clothing value. These practices offer a communication tool in themselves, as ‘the simple fact of making repair visible in the public space helps to transform the social norms around this practice, gradually making it acceptable and standardized’ (Madon 2022:546). Through conversations at our sessions, we found that people’s appreciation of the labour and materials that made their clothes, grew as they interacted with repair processes. Furthermore, we identified small fixes, like sewing on a button, can make a big difference in the perceived value of a piece of clothing as it moves through cycles of resale and reuse.

4.4.2 Second-Hand Clothing

As part of our 'Wear & Care' Research Survey, we asked participants 'what makes up the clothing in your wardrobe?' (see Figure 14). Interestingly, the 'second-hand clothing' and the 'new clothing' percentages were very similar. This reflects an embrace of second-hand clothing as part of people's everyday wardrobes. Although it may indicate engagement with practices that lean towards the concept of "taming" the excesses of the dominant fashion system, it does show that people are connecting with more sustainable, community-accessible clothing practices. Those who indicated having second-hand clothing in their wardrobes were also asked where their second-hand clothing was from. The highest response was from charities or not-for-profit organisations.



Figure 14. 'What makes up the clothing in your wardrobe?' Flourish Data Visualisation.

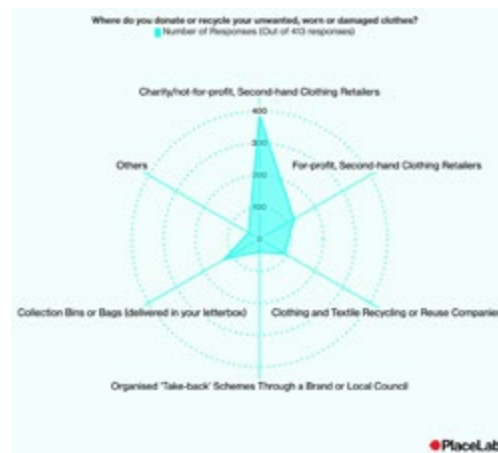


Figure 15. 'Where do you donate or recycle your unwanted, worn or damaged clothes?' Flourish Data Visualisation.

Additionally, we asked survey participants what they do with their unwanted, worn or damaged clothes that they want to remove from their wardrobes. The highest response indicated 'donate or recycle'. When asked where they donate or recycle their unwanted, worn or damaged clothes, we found that most of those garments end up with charity and not-for-profit organisations (see Figures 15 and 16). These organisations are directly experiencing the enormity of Australia's textile waste, as it is estimated that 190,000 tonnes of clothing is received by charities (Sustainable Resource Use 2022). This is critical when we consider

the scarcity of resources (time, people) to repair garments, even small mends like replacing a button, as communicated by Brunswick-based second-hand clothing retailers. We asked the retailers what might foster the growth of repair, alteration, or redesign activities for second-hand clothing retailers. The respondents recommended having more volunteers in the team that are willing to mend and also, developing repair knowledge through education amongst staff and the community, could help foster these activities in their businesses.

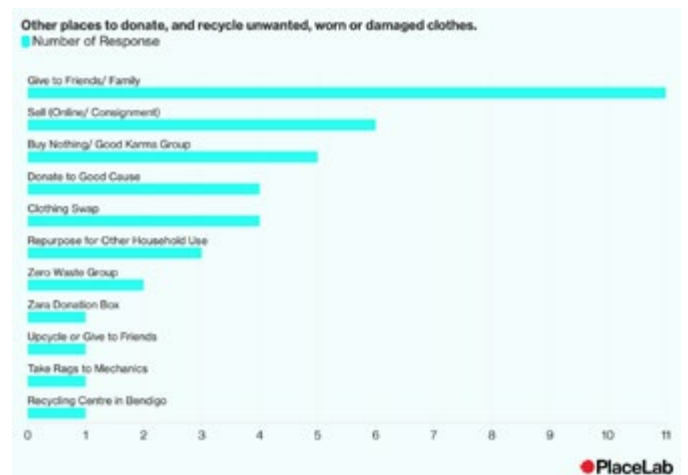


Figure 16. 'Other places to donate or recycle unwanted, worn or damaged clothes' Flourish Data Visualisation.

4.5 Tensions and Ambiguity

The activities undertaken as part of the PlaceLab **'Wear & Care'** Research Project raised a series of tensions, conflicts, and ambiguity to be considered as part of the local response to "rewilding" fashion that builds towards a new fashion system.

4.5.1 Women Driving Sustainable Clothing Practices



Figure 17. Community Repair Series. Image: RMIT PlaceLab.

Amongst the conversations, survey results and repair workshops there was a strong acknowledgement of the relationship between women and practices of making, mending, or sewing. The emphasis on 'women's work' was raised by participants, attendees, and 'Community Collaborators' throughout the Project, and we recognise that so much of the weight of driving individual and community action towards more sustainable clothing practices is carried by women, too often in the form of unpaid labour related to making, mending or teaching skills (see Figures 17 and 18).

“ Doing things at the grassroots level, it makes a difference, but the burden sits with certain individuals. And that tends to be – a lot of the time – women.

– A 'Community Collaborator' during 'A Garment's Life: Conversation Series'.

As mentioned earlier in this report, 80% of the respondents who completed our **'Wear & Care'** Research Survey identified as female. This demographic result is strong evidence of the fact that the task of addressing fashion sustainability, or interest in engaging with it, continues to fall largely to women, in ways that are historically reflected in the case of duties in the home. Tensions between terms, such as 'seamstress' and 'tailor', were also raised



Figure 18. Community Repair Series. Image: RMIT PlaceLab.

due to their differing embedded value, with a perception of a 'tailor' possessing greater skills than 'seamstress', and how it shifts perceptions of the work they create.

Expanding on this recurring theme throughout the Research Project, acknowledging that the work of sustainable fashion change is mostly the work of women, we observed conversations on the social movement around gender that is shifting and resisting the tendencies of the past that focused learning opportunities for mending and making by gender. Emerging attitudes to gender mean that young people are less constrained by gender norms. It is also important to emphasise that during the group conversations as part of 'A Garment's Life: Conversation Series', while doing little to shift this gender imbalance, it did generate evidence that this imbalance is being addressed through the actions of young people who are reshaping understandings and perceptions of gender (see Figure 19). Furthermore, the 'Community Collaborators' and attendees who teach mending and making in the community shared that their workshops are increasingly filling with more male participants, even up to 50% male at times.



Figure 19. 'A Garment's Life: Conversation Series' group interview. Image: Jody Haines.

“ **It's wonderful to celebrate and encourage the sewing on buttons, but is it going to be predominantly women who are sewing on the buttons?**

– A 'Community Collaborator' during 'A Garment's Life: Conversation Series'.

4.5.2 Maker Invisibility

In the 'Wear & Care' Project, we observed that those who recognised the time and labour involved in making and mending were motivated to celebrate and preserve the garments made, particularly the garments made by women. While there are hours and hours of labour in mending and making clothes, there is also beauty and joy in the work at the same time. However, women who make at home and in garment factories for brands generally don't sign their work, leaving clothes unmarked, unbranded and undated by the hands of the maker. This feeds into discourse we experienced around the value we put on some garments over others.

During 'A Garment's Life: Conversation Series' and the 'Wear & Care' Community Repair Series, discussions also highlighted the relationship between the acquisition of sewing skills, and an increased awareness of the labour involved in making clothes, which has the potential to affect a shift in attitudes towards mending over discarding, and to change the way people generally value clothes.

4.5.3 *Tricky Topics and Attitudes*

A number of complex topics and attitudes were raised in the conversations throughout the '**Wear & Care**' Research Project, which could indicate areas for further consideration on a local scale, beyond the scope of this Project. Some of these include:

- The difficulty surrounding transparent valuations of clothing, as there is complexity in spreading awareness of clothing value in relation to the fashion system.
- Buying clothing ethically is far more complex than simply choosing not to purchase clothing made in a particular country. Many people rely on jobs within garment industries in countries that manufacture clothes for the global fashion industry.
- There tends to be a 'bubble' mentality amongst those who are heavily immersed in social networks with shared values, whereby perceptions may be skewed, such as the acceptance of second-hand clothing or celebration of visible mending.
- There is ambiguity around the language used in mending, making and manufacturing clothes that distorts the accessibility of certain practices, such as 'custom-made' or the idea of clothing passing through the hands of makers. Subsequently, it alters the value placed on 'handmade' clothing over what might be considered 'machine-made' garments. This makes it difficult for people to recognise that all clothing is made by someone's hands.
- Recycling textiles and donating clothes to charity retailers are complex solutions to fashion waste that rely on the actions of community members to best support this system of "taming" fashion. For example, washing and mending clothes before donating them allows for the best chance of a another life with a new wearer.

4.5.4 *Barriers and Disincentives*

Various potential barriers and disincentives to community engagement in practices of fashion "rewilding" were identified throughout PlaceLab '**Wear & Care**' activities, including:

- Challenges around second-hand clothing in relation to issues of hygiene, particularly for international students, where the acceptance of wearing second-hand clothing is not as prevalent in their home countries.
- The tension for many people around balancing sustainable practices and engagement with current fashion 'trends' or offerings.
- Resistance to embracing small sustainable practices due to feeling disheartened by their true impact, or frustrated by the inaction towards broader systemic change in the industry.
- The changing capacity in people's lives to realistically engage in mending, making or repurposing practices, due to time or financial constraints.
- The perceived affordability of clothing today can disincentivise repairing clothes. Is it too easy to replace rather than repair?
- The relationship between perfection and creativity reveals a potential disincentive to engagement, as sources of inspiration, either in person or online, may present unrealistic expectations based on highly skilled mending and making outcomes. This was identified amongst discussions around:
 - Sewing machine use versus hand sewing.
 - Higher skills don't necessarily mean greater confidence in mending.
 - Aspiring to perfection can inhibit freedom and creativity.
 - People with lower skills might be able to access creativity more easily.

The research activities undertaken during the **'Wear & Care'** Research Project provided insights into the opportunities and considerations for local fashion “rewilding” in and around Brunswick, Melbourne.

5.1 Opportunities for “Rewilding” Fashion

The Research Project revealed three potential opportunities for “rewilding” fashion that emerged from the activities undertaken, and are reflected in the project outputs that were produced. These opportunities relate to community initiatives and activations, support for community “activators”, and storytelling and experience sharing.

5.1.1 Community Initiatives and Activations

Supporting highly-accessible and widely encouraged community initiatives and activations that influence, share, or demonstrate fashion “rewilding” in practice (even as simple as those using humble materials and modest techniques) can inspire and nurture broader adoption of more sustainable clothing practices.

To contribute to change interventions in the community, we created our **'Wear & Care'** Activation Kit providing a collection of insights, ideas, and inspirations from RMIT PlaceLab's **'Wear & Care'** Research Project to assist with fashion “rewilding” practices within the home or local community.

Our **'Wear & Care'** [Activation Kit](#) includes:

- [1x Community Clothing Repair Guide Booklet \(A4\)](#) - This compilation was designed to help participants activate clothing repair in their community. It is not a definitive guide, but rather a collection of our insights to help empower individuals to bring their community on a repair journey.
- [1x Clothing Repair Decision Tree Poster \(A3 folded\)](#) - The team created this 'decision tree chart' based on the community's vote at our **'Wear & Care'** Community Forum. Among the three resource options to vote on, producing the 'How to Engage in Clothing Repair' decision tree was determined by the community to be the most useful addition to the kit.
- [3x Community Initiative Flyers \(A5\)](#) - This set of three Community Initiative Flyers reflects some of the passionate organisations, community activities and solo practices we learnt about throughout the **'Wear & Care'** Research Project. The aim was to inspire others to create and participate in their own local community initiatives.
- [10x Activation Cards \(A6\)](#) - The Activation Card collection was inspired by the local actions and insights we learnt from our community of wearers, repairers, creators, and retailers throughout the Project. The community can use these cards to build their own methods and mindsets around how to better wear and care for clothes in their wardrobe, home, and neighbourhood.

5.1.2 Community 'Activators'

By encouraging 'activators' in the community to share their personal practices and experiences, and by providing opportunities for 'community activators' to educate others, there is potential to shift attitudes and actions amongst their social networks, communities and beyond. Throughout the **'Wear & Care'** Research Project, we were exposed to the different ways community members become 'activators' in their families, neighbourhoods, schools, social networks, and peer groups by modelling personal or family “rewilding” practices, and disseminating knowledge gathered, to activate others.

“ I say this to my students, no one's addressing the elephant in the room. And it's just like, you need to consume less. Like that's the no-brainer. You just need to consume less.

– A 'Community Collaborator' during 'A Garment's Life: Conversation Series'.

5.1.3 Storytelling and Experience Sharing

Encouraging garment story sharing can strengthen clothing connections and celebrate shared experiences through established or new networks, for example when passing down family heirlooms or through second-hand clothing channels. Bringing wider community attention to the lives of garments in our wardrobes and sharing the stories they hold, beyond local sewing circles and mending groups, can help us to understand our connections to clothes, how we care for them, and how we experience fashion in personal and diverse ways.

To encourage this practice, we created the book, '[Stories of Wear & Care: The Lives of Garments and the Stories They Hold](#)', to showcase a collection of 24 garment-led stories gathered during 'A Garment's Life: Conversation Series' and to share with the wider Brunswick, Merri-bek and Melbourne communities (see Figure 20). The clothing textures, tatters, embellishments, stains, markings, and mends featured on the garments shared are illuminated by stories of loss, change, connection, joy, optimism, and reclamation in the book.

Worn, crafted and cherished garments from homes, wardrobes, neighbours, and loved ones were celebrated at the heart of the Conversation Series, with the stories shared catalysing broader conversations. The garment-led method not only allowed for meaningful conversations around daily practices of wearing, repairing, and laundering to emerge, but also encouraged reflections on the deep and complex interconnections between fashion and sustainability, and topics including gender, societal values, language and authorship.

Although we began with an open but simple proposition of what to bring along, the stories themselves expanded to encompass far more than what flaw, spill or general wear and tear may have been mended, or how a garment was shared and with whom. The stories alongside the group conversations revealed intricate weavings of values, influences, motivations, memories, relationships, and practices. The garments formed markers of moments in life, statements of values, tools to signify care and to nurture relationships, and connectors between siblings, grandparents and grandchildren, mothers and daughters.

These themes emerged out of conversations that spoke to both the complexity of our connections to clothes, and contemporary understandings of fashion explored deeply in academic fashion discourse far beyond the intent of the book.

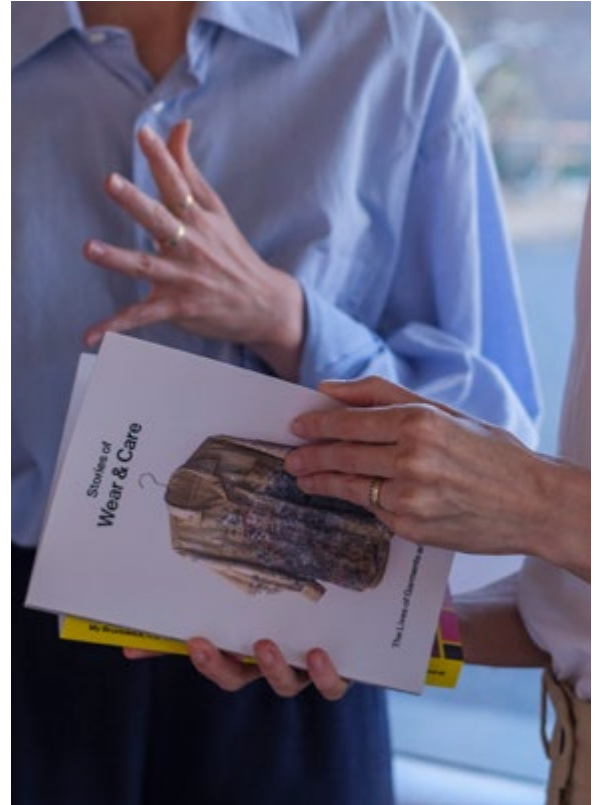


Figure 20. 'Stories of Wear & Care: The Live of Garments and the Stories They Hold' book shared at PlaceLab Exhibition. Image: Suzanne Phoenix.

5.2 Considerations for “Rewilding” Fashion

The ‘**Wear & Care**’ Research Project uncovered three potential considerations for “rewilding” fashion, in relation to funding and support for community repair initiatives, fashion “rewilding” practices existing on a continuum, and the need for both micro and macro level interventions.

5.2.1 *Funding and Support for Community Repair Initiatives*

The recognised value of community repair workshops was indicated by participants in our ‘**Wear & Care**’ Research Survey, with references made by respondents to our ‘**Wear & Care**’ Community Repair Series in collaboration with ‘Repair Café at RMIT’ from the School of Fashion & Textiles. This provides a research example of the meaningful impact of such initiatives amongst the community, presenting a case for increased funding and support for new and existing initiatives and organisations supporting and teaching mending, repair, alterations and upcycling skills.

5.2.2 *Fashion “Rewilding” Practices Exist on a Continuum*

We have come to understand fashion “rewilding” and “taming” practices as existing on a continuum, connecting activities across the local fashion ecology in Brunswick, Merri-bek and the wider Melbourne area. It was clear throughout the ‘**Wear & Care**’ Community Forum conversation that fostering both “taming” and “rewilding” practices, wherever they are positioned across this continuum, is necessary to further build a local response towards a new fashion system. Making these practices, such as clothing repair, more accessible to more people within the community is a significant next step.

“ I am not a mender. The people ... that know how to beautifully and seamlessly fix the knit so that it looks like there was never a hole are the menders. Those are the true menders, and I just want to keep wearing my clothes. And I think that not recognising the continuum can kind of downplay my place on it.

– A ‘Community Collaborator’ during ‘A Garment’s Life: Conversation Series’.

5.2.3 *Interventions at both Micro and Macro Levels*

We recognise that the potential to effect change can be generated from both micro and macro levels, positioned in local (or personal) networks and in larger systemic structures. However, it can be difficult for individuals to maintain momentum for change at the micro level when it is perceived that systemic structural change is not progressing. Actions and activism at all levels are necessary. Individually, actions might appear small and inadequate, but collectively they can be powerful amongst communities. How might we honour all the small actions that people take in a myriad of ways? How might we then best support micro level interventions of fashion “rewilding” in our community?

5.3 Afterword

The outcomes of the PlaceLab ‘**Wear & Care**’ Research Project strengthens our understanding of the community-accessible methods of fashion “rewilding” happening in the neighbourhood of Brunswick, that also expand into wider Merri-bek and Melbourne areas. We have uncovered insights into the ways people contribute to “rewilding”, but also “taming”, fashion through their humble actions of mending and sharing clothes, developing their repair skills, educating and activating others, embracing thriftiness and resourcefulness and engaging in creative practice, while building community in the process. In doing so, we have also begun to identify some of the opportunities and considerations that arise in supporting a “rewilding” of fashion at a ‘hyper-local’ level. Through these small but impactful actions, individual activators, families, social networks, and communities are nurturing values and practices that transform how we experience fashion locally and how we can better recreate, redesign and re-enhance our clothing to align people and planet.

RMIT PlaceLab proves what is possible when local community knowledge and expertise informs research. Together, we’ve tackled real-world, urban challenges and sought innovations that look to improve liveability, community resilience and connection.

Project Acknowledgements

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- '**Wear & Care**' Community Repair Series Attendees: Our attendees ranged from 12 to 27 community members at each of our six workshops.
- '**Wear & Care**' Research Survey Participants: 482 people contributed to our Community Survey.
- Student Second-hand Clothing Redesign Display Exhibitors: Olena Merrin, Ineska Harrison, Gina-Karlotta Magdaluyo, Zhen Chen, Sai Fan (Mario) Cheng, Dan Zhu, Muhammad Danish Bin Saiful Rizal (Danish), Madelyn Lie, Lavanya (Lav) Rawat, Stephanie Rahardja, Laura Kimie Tomanari Ignacio, Maria Alejandra Romero Fernandez, Laura Scurrah, Rebecca Lee and Lutao (Jill) Ban.
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Ethics

This Research Project has been assessed and approved by the RMIT University College Human Ethics Advisory Network (CHEAN). Ethics Reference Number: 25586.

Research involving human participants is consistent with the guidelines contained in the Australian National statement on ethical conduct in human research and Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research.

Conflicts of Interest

There are no declared conflicts of interest associated with this research project.

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We hope this report sparks more important conversations.

**We'd love to hear your thoughts via:
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