



Why we need clothes

There's a great deal more to what we wear than simple protection from the elements, says

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FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN NEED

MATERIAL NEEDS

SUBSISTENCE
PROTECTION

NON-MATERIAL NEEDS

AFFECTION
UNDERSTANDING
PARTICIPATION
CREATION
RECREATION
IDENTITY
FREEDOM

CLOTHES are a basic need: they keep us warm and give us protection. To meet this need there has to be indeed should - be as many clothes as people. Yet most of us own far more clothes than those necessary to satisfy the fundamental human need of subsistence.

Curbing the quantity of clothes we buy would likely have a significant and positive influence on the environmental and social impact caused by the fashion and clothing sector. But it is not as simple as forgetting about fashion and scrapping everything other than the wardrobe basics. Why? Because in our society, clothes do not just meet the need for subsistence. They hold a raft of other meanings and are used by us as a means to meet other needs, such as identity and participation. This makes the ostensible function of clothing (warmth and protection) often of less importance than its symbolic function (that is, as a sign of wealth; of belonging to a particular social group; of differentiation from that group; of self-esteem etc.). Thus if we want to avoid depriving people of their need for identity and participation, there is no point in discouraging the buying of clothes without putting forward alternative ways of signalling who and what we are to

others. In other words, we cannot radically cut consumption of clothing until we begin to understand its significance as a satisfier of human needs.

Humans possess specific, identifiable, underlying needs which are the same, regardless of nation, religion or culture. These have been identified by Manfred Max-Neef as subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, creation, recreation, identity and freedom. Crucially while these needs stay the same, what changes with time and between individuals, is how we go about meeting or satisfying these needs. Different satisfiers have different implications not only for those involved but also for external factors such as the environment. Where these satisfiers are manifest as products or services, they are the traditional (if unconscious) focus of design.

The nine needs fall into two broad categories: physical (*material*) needs and psychological (*non-material*) needs (see Figure 1). There is plenty of evidence to show that we don't just use materials (such as food, clothes and homes) to satisfy our physical needs (subsistence and protection), but we also use them to satisfy our psychological needs too. This means, for example, that many of us to relate our individual identity to what and how many materials we consume. Here lies a paradox: psychological needs are not easily satisfied, and in some cases are even inhibited, by consuming materials - we are no happier now than we were 50 years ago, even

though we own more stuff. Yet the pressure to consume materials is further intensified by marketing, social competition and the driving forces innate in humans of emulation and envy.

So in order to move towards the dual goal of meeting needs more effectively and reducing material throughput and associated environmental impact, we need to begin to un-pick the relationship between needs, satisfiers and design output. This should then free us up so that we can engage with 'material' problems (like resource and energy efficiency) while at the same time, being aware of other needs and investigating opportunities for non-material satisfiers. Satisfiers, whether materials-based or not, can meet more than one need at the same time. A sense of humour for instance, can simultaneously satisfy our need for subsistence, affection, participation and recreation; and breast feeding can tap into the need for protection, affection and identity.

The questions we now must ask ourselves include whether clothes can and should be an effective satisfier of more than our physical need for subsistence, and whether a better solution can be found elsewhere? The answers are not entirely clear. The current model provides little guidance as clothing, where, locked into fashion cycles, it gives a false sense of satisfying other needs such as identity. Yet we cannot say with certainty that fashion will never provide particular individuals at particular times with the most appropriate way of satisfying needs. What we can say with more certainty is that because needs change with people, the current homogeneous approach to satisfying needs (as represented by fashion clothing) is not best placed to respond to our demands. Diversity and a sensitivity to people's real needs may be a requisite for future ecodesign. ^{eu}

■ For info see: *Ekins, P. and Max-Neef, M. (eds.) (1992), Real-life Economics, London: Routledge.*

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