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Elizabeth Chamberlain
University of Louisville

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BUY-IT-YOURSELF

how DIY got consumerized

Elizabeth Chamberlain

Do-it-yourself (DIY), the hands-on darling of the punk era, has experienced a bit of a renaissance in the last seven years. The White House is hosting its second-ever Maker Faire, calling on all Americans to join "a nation of makers." Fortune 500 companies are commissioning yarn bombers to add fuzzy color to steel-and-glass officescapes. More than 50% of homes with broadcast television get the DIY Network.

Why DIY? We've still not loosened our belts in the slow recovery from the Great Recession, and DIY promises to be cheaper. And that frugality is paired with a Luddite-flavored revitalized interest in handmade things: we shout into the void, "We're not just mindless point-and-click automatons! We can make things, not just buy them!" Ideologically, many pair it with the anti-corporate, anti-consumerist messages of Occupy Wall Street and the Black Friday "Buy Nothing Day." It's a movement that, despite its tangible output, was born and has been propagated online, on sites like Instructables and Make.

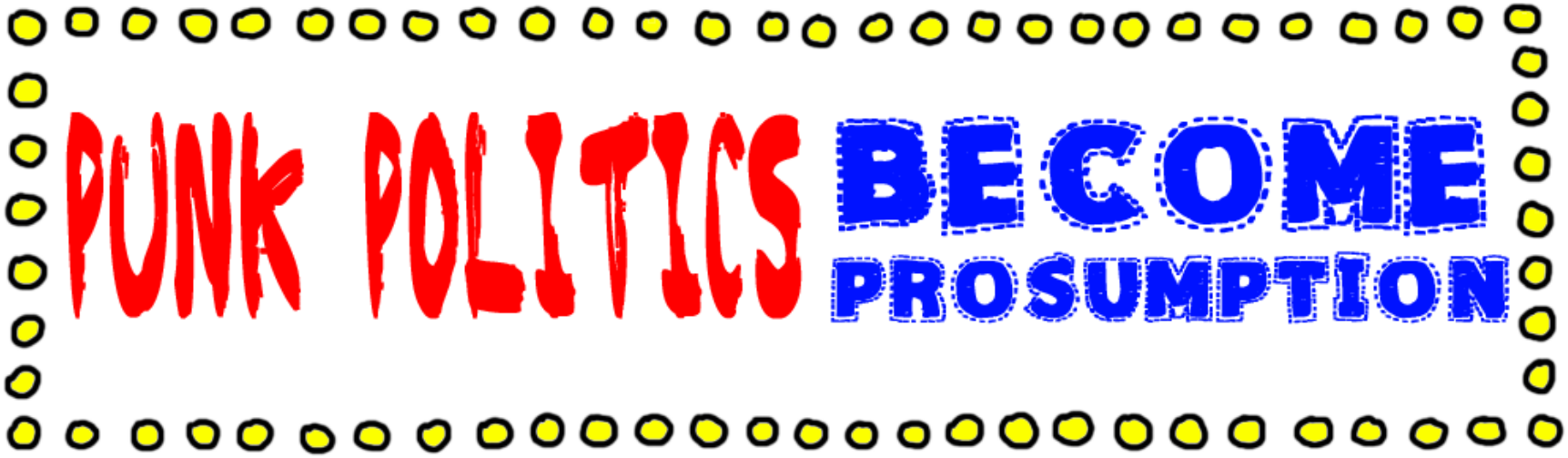
There have been decades of debate about the liberating potential of the Internet: In the '90s and early '00s, when the Internet was new and growing fast, many humanists wondered if (and how) it could be a tool of activism (see Cooper and Selfe, LeCourt and Barnes, and Rhodes in the references list below). Today, although few doubt that the Internet can be a means of resistance—resisting governments, resisting corporations, resisting cultural insularity—we have, by and large, rejected technological determinism. Oppression plus Internet does not always equal liberation. We have come to acknowledge that the Arab Spring, for instance, may not have been as social media-driven as it was first presented in Western news outlets; Jan van Dijk points out that only 5% of Egyptians at the time had any Internet access at all (110).

Yet, I side with Manuel Castells, who reminds us that a utopian vision of a liberating network is useful despite its romanticism. Utopias, Castells says, "are mental constructions that by their existence inspire action and change reality. By advocating the liberating power of electronic networks of communication, the networked movement against imposed globalization opens up new horizons of possibility in the old dilemma between individual freedom and societal governance" (346). Believing in the potential of the Internet gives it potential.

Nevertheless, where people once imagined the Internet to be free of economic influence—truly free press, in that publishing an opinion costs no more than the price of getting on the Internet—it has become increasingly clear that corporate desires and goals drive an enormous amount of what happens online.

And when a resistant online movement goes mainstream, it can become co-opted by corporate forces, even when that movement is originally anti-consumptive. This is precisely what is happening to DIY in general, and it happened specifically to a large portion of DIY fashion blogs between 2008 and 2013.

This essay is a warning tale for online social activism. It will examine how a small handful of DIY fashion blogs flashed in the anti-consumption pan, how that movement became co-opted by corporations through a series of technological and social shifts, and how a small group of bloggers has managed to keep the anti-consumptive vision alive. Corporations have long, sometimes invisible tendrils that snake through online communication. For Internet activists to be successful, they must learn to recognize and resist those tendrils.



It's the age-old struggle of counterculture: subversive movements want to get big, get noticed, get so loud and proud that people at the top start to get itchy. Yet getting popular means getting potentially profitable, and the mainstream likes money.

Dick Hebdige—in his famous 1979 analysis of punk fashion, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*—calls this "incorporation." Incorporation is the melting of subculture into the mainstream, a process that always "ends with the simultaneous diffusion and defusion of the subcultural style" (93).

This is how deviant movements get reconciled: they are first reviled, then situated within dominant culture in a way that's recognizable to everyone. Punk rockers become children playing dress-up. Finally, Hebdige says, "the fractured order is repaired and the subculture incorporated as a diverting spectacle within the dominant mythology from which it in part emanates: as 'folk devil,' as Other, as Enemy" (94). And once the trappings of a counterculture are no longer frightening (just a little avant garde), they become marketable.

Sociologist Lisa Wade has similarly described "the commodification of rebellion." Wade explains, "When tokens of resistance can be bought and sold, rebellion becomes something you purchase and perform [..., which] can actually connect you deeper to the very structures you want to resist." We don't defeat our cultural demons by destroying them; we just call them cute, pat them on the head, and fill our magazines with their "edgy" clothes.

Like punk clothing, DIY products also now line the shelves. DIY kits. DIY tools. DIY guides and handbooks. DIY is attractive to companies in a wide variety of areas; it's a way of adding a human touch to a product, of making us participate in corporate culture. When we participate, we feel better about the things we buy.

There's the famous story of Ernest Dichter, the General Mills cake mix marketer who conducted a survey of 1950s housewives. Women, he found, felt better about using boxed cake mix if the mix required them to add an egg—it was as if they'd made it themselves. If a mix required nothing but water, women were more likely to feel self-indulgent. Of course, as Snopes points out, the triumph of "add an egg" mixes over "just add water" mixes probably had as much to do with the fact that a fresh egg made for a better-tasting cake. Nevertheless, Dichter's point stands and has become practically a marketing axiom: participating in our purchases makes us feel better about them. A 2012 *Journal of Marketing* article reported on three studies, each of which documented this "self-production effect," measuring participants' evaluation of a tikka masala dish they'd made via a kit: in each case, the researchers discovered, "self-production [...] leads to higher evaluations of the self-produced outcome" (Troye and Supphellen 43). Viral marketing relies on a similar kind of participatory impulse—"I found this" is almost as good as "I made this." George Ritzer and Nathan Jurgenson have called this "prosumption," a new Internet-era form of capitalism, in which consumers provide unpaid production labor (or unpaid marketing) for corporate beneficiaries.

Google Trends graphs for DIY, DIY fashion blog, and blog

DIY fashion blogs serve as a useful case study of consumerization in part because their moment is mostly over. Thus, the way they have both influenced and been influenced by sociocultural movements in which they're situated is available knowledge. Their rise and fall also existed within the larger rise of DIY and the rise and fall of the blog. They began to show up around 2008, flashed brightest around 2013, and have slowed to a trickle

(with a few notable exceptions, which I'll discuss below). The graphs above—Google Trends searches, which report relative search frequency over time, for "DIY," "blog," and "DIY fashion blog"—demonstrate this timeline: "DIY" peaked around 2014, "blog" around 2008, and "DIY fashion blog" specifically around 2013. DIY fashion blogs are an interesting intersection of the larger cultural trends of DIY and blogs, and the consumerizing pressures on individual DIY fashion bloggers are evident in both the DIY and blog cultures more broadly.

The impetus for the DIY fashion movement came in part from increasing cultural awareness of "fast fashion," which Luz Claudio calls "the clothing equivalent of fast food" (A449), in an *Environmental Health Perspectives* report on the environmental impact of the clothing industry. Through cotton subsidies, import tax breaks, and incredibly low wages for overseas workers, clothing companies can provide products to Western consumers at prices so low we consider clothing practically disposable. Americans alone annually buy about a billion pieces of clothing from China, where workers are paid as little as 12-18 cents per hour—yet 21% of those garments never get worn outside the home (Claudio A450).

Many DIY fashion blogs include some reference to our "fast fashion" culture and express a desire to disrupt it. Given this explicitly anti-consumer bent, it's surprising how many of them are susceptible to consumerizing pressures.

What are those consumerizing pressures? In the first three tabbed sections below, I will examine three forces behind the consumerization of a handful of blogs; in the fourth tabbed section, I'll discuss strategies that may have helped a few blogs stick around and stay true to their anti-consumptive message.

sponsorship

Perhaps the clearest example of consumerization is the corporate sponsorship of Erica Domasek's P.S.- I made this..., a "DIY lifestyle brand" that she founded in 2009. Each of her posts consists of a collage of images from mainstream fashion publications—magazines, websites, and so on—representing a particular style, aesthetic, or trend. She then posts basic pictorial instructions for how to create some fashion item (clothing, accessories, home furnishings) inspired by the first collage. One post, for example, explains how to turn a plain white undershirt into a "ruffle shirt"; the accompanying collage cites, among other things, a Vogue cover, a porcelain seahorse, and a lace-skirted wedding dress.

In 2010, Domasek announced her first corporate sponsorship: Dasani had her create a series of green-colored hats and a Dasani-bottle chandelier in support of Earth Day. (Dasani's attempt to prove its environmental friendliness by supporting so-called "upcycling" of its bottles is a particularly egregious case of greenwashing.) Domasek exclaims at the beginning of the green hat post: "DIY is just another way to live greener!" She then goes on to explain how she hosted an event in which members of the glitterati stitched and glued sequins and beads onto green hats cut from the legs of green lounge pants. How, precisely, turning lounge pants into a hat is environmentally friendly is left as an exercise to the reader.

This Dasani partnership was the first of many: her list of sponsors now includes the GAP, Michael's, and Bloomingdale's. The names of Domasek's sponsors highlight the kind of DIY she promotes, an "add an egg"-style DIY. She'll teach you to sew lace trim on your shorts or coat your Vans in puff paint. That is, she primarily shares ways to make you participate more in your purchases, not ways to make something "from scratch." Thus it is not so surprising that her "DIY fashion" blog is supported by a couple of massive corporate clothing manufacturers. Take something purchased from the GAP, add something purchased from Michael's, and pair it with something from Bloomingdale's. Wash, rinse, don a necklace made from Dasani bottles, repeat.

Few other DIY fashion blogs are sponsored as explicitly by mainstream clothing distributors, but many are sponsored by companies like Michael's and Joann's.

Marisa Lynch of New Dress A Day, where she made a new item of clothing from $1 thrift store finds once a day for a year, similarly has been sponsored by the fabric store Jo-Ann, sometimes posting projects made with gifted items and sometimes hosting events for them.

sustaining

Like New Dress A Day, a number of other DIY fashion blogs are centered around a self-conscious time-delimited project with a socially and/or personally transformative goal. Many of these bloggers talk about sustainability. Yet the projects themselves need sustaining, too, and some sell the things they make. There is, for instance, Sheena Matheiken's The Uniform Project, for example, which she describes as "essentially a statement against overconsumption." Matheiken describes her project thus:

> Starting May 2009, I have pledged to wear one dress for one year as an exercise in sustainable fashion. Here's how it works: There are 7 identical dresses, one for each day of the week. Every day I will reinvent the dress with layers, accessories and all kinds of accouterments, the majority of which will be vintage, hand-made, or hand-me-down goodies.

The uniform suggests blandness and conformity—a message the project subverts entirely, instead preaching a message of individuality and creativity. But for Matheiken, the uniform was also symbolic of her childhood in India, where her uniformed peers found ways to express themselves outside of school-mandated bounds and where she saw "the spirit and resilience of children in the slums thriving through inopportune circumstances." The project raised over $100,000 for an Indian grassroots organization called The Akanksha Foundation, which subsidizes educational expenses—including school uniforms—for impoverished Indian children.

For the eight months following the end of Matheiken's year, the blog hosted one woman each month from around the world doing her own month-long version of the uniform project: designing her own dress, wearing it and posting pictures each day, and soliciting donations for a charity of her choice.




Natalie Purschwitz of MakeShift similarly blogged for a year (September 1, 2009, through September 1, 2010) about her self-imposed yearlong challenge: to wear, for a full year, nothing that she had not made herself—including underwear, bathing suits, and shoes. In her self-conscious and academic explanation of the project, she says,

> MakeShift is an art and research project that examines the relationships between 'making', 'clothing' and 'living'. [...] Beyond being a nail-hammering, speed-sewing, room-pacing, hair-raising, life-enriching personal challenge, I hope to gain some understanding of the limitations of clothing and how they affect the development of ideology. Ultimately, I would like to examine the role of clothing as a form of cultural production.

Her clothing itself makes the bulk of this critique. Her hems are often deliberately uneven and asymmetrical. She combines "garish" colors and patterns. She aims at "form-obscuring" as often as "form-fitting." This deliberately abnormal design is, perhaps, a slightly tamer version of what punk fashion designer Vivienne Westwood called "confrontation dressing," a term for the punk practice of clothing designed to provoke.

Purschwitz demonstrates how clothing can turn the personal into an ideological statement, how by dressing strangely she can make people uncomfortable and perhaps even change their notions of clothing.

She calls attention to the fact that her clothing isn't off the rack, which in turn calls attention to the production realities of most clothing: most of it is made, of course, in factories like the one in Bangladesh where over 1000 garment workers died when an overburdened building collapsed in 2013. And we're so inured to that reality that someone in clothes that are clearly made outside a factory will draw our stares at an airport. Clothes are tied to culture.

Intriguingly, though, both Matheiken and Purschwitz sell items on their sites to sustain the projects. Matheiken sells the "little black dress" she wore, and dresses worn by many of the "pilot" project participants (sold with an

"optional donation" to the wearer's cause). Purschwitz currently has just one item listed online—a vinyl bag—though she also has sold via a brick-and-mortar store.

To be clear, in pointing this out, I do not mean to undermine the sincerity of the projects' ideologies; rather, I mean to emphasize the complexity of anti-consumption. Even the sincerest of anti-consumption projects often have a consumer-facing side.

accessorizing

A number of DIY fashion bloggers who have written against fast fashion have nonetheless been willing to purchase accessories and other accoutrements. (Purschwitz is the exception here, wearing only items made herself, down to her wooden sunglasses.)

Matheiken, for example, never wears just the handmade, sustainable "little black dress"—each outfit is accessorized amply, with items sometimes purchased and sometimes donated. Many are vintage, thrifted, or handmade, but not all. She names and links to designers and manufacturers in her image descriptions: a pair of Sam Edelman shoes, socks from Sockdreams. Some image descriptions clearly advertise corporate accessorizing partnerships: a post on Black Friday ends,

> Our friends at DotheGreenThing have the perfect gift for the biggest shopping day of the year. And the price is right. Shop now.

Lynch, similarly, doesn't include accessories in her $365 yearly budget, though she generally prefers items purchased from thrift or cnsignment stores—one post mentions Marc Jacobs heels, another a Cynthia Vincent tank.

persistence

Intriguingly, even some of the blogs that most explicitly reject consumerism have named sponsors. Zoe Edwards of So Zo, for instance—which includes sustainability in its tagline, "Sewing sustainably with style"—is sponsored by a range of fabric and sewing accessory companies. She has posted about how "damaging and negligent" fast fashion is. She is self-conscious about what she calls the "personal contradictions" of being inspired by the fast fashion industry and worries about how fast fashion purchases can have a "'trickle down' effect to the high street, with its emphasis on turnover and profit." She has written about the value of buying sewing patterns from independent designers rather than big companies (e.g. variety of body sizes represented, personalized help). And the sponsors she's accepted are smaller companies, companies that participate in the textile industry more sustainably. When she writes about companies that have given her products or supported her, she is clear about the nature of the sponsorship and emphasizes that she refuses to be a corporate mouthpiece.

Edwards's sponsorship highlights two key points: First, the anti-consumption bent of the "maker" movement has necessary limits. Making things often means buying things (though different things, perhaps). Second, accepting sponsorship need not mean giving into corporate cultural domination—although not giving in may take a lot of what Edwards calls "politico-philosophical work."

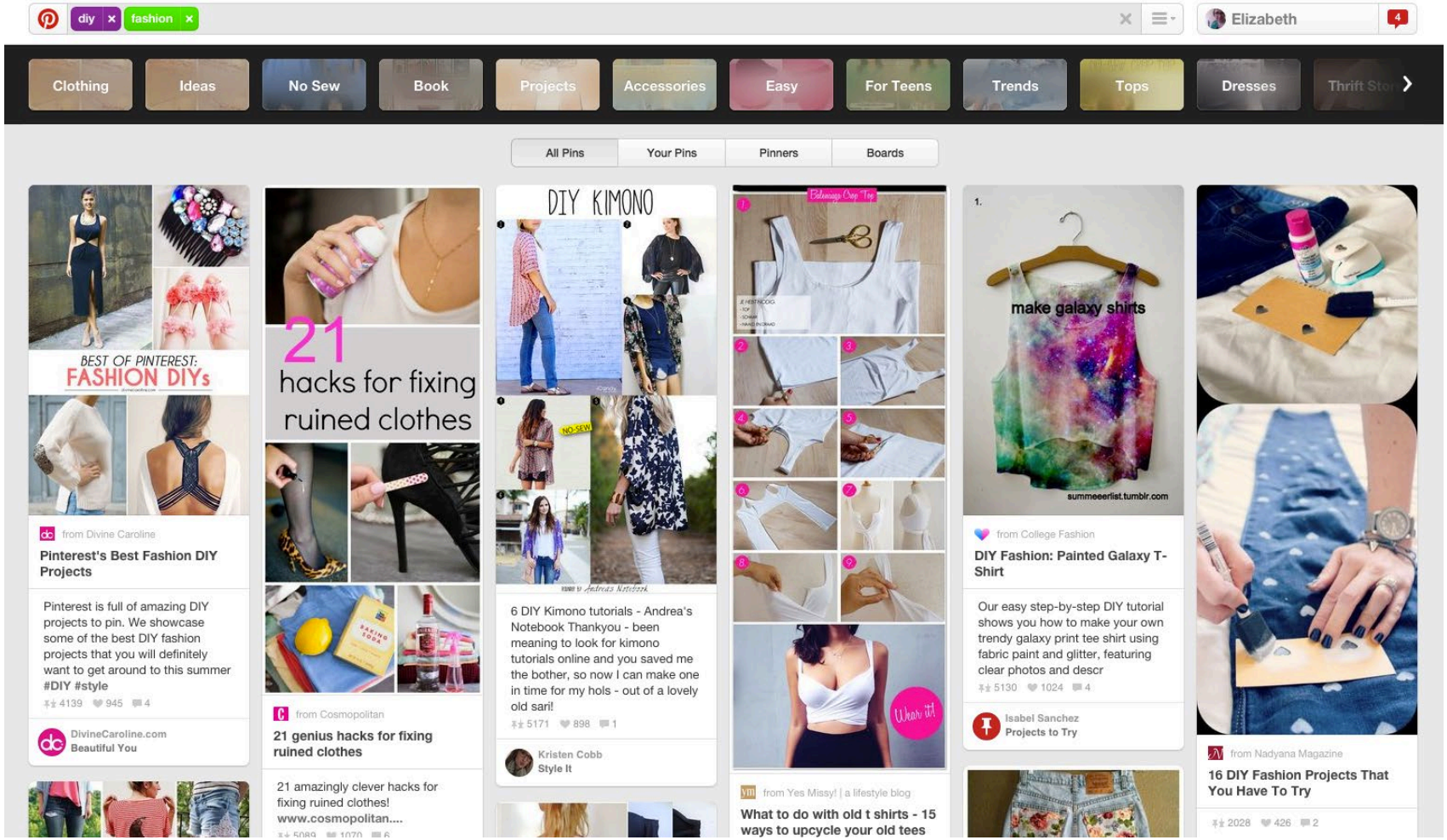
Edwards's success at continuing to push the message of anti-consumption seems to come from a few key factors: she's persistent, she's connected with both national organizations and an international community, and she's self-conscious and thoughtful about the ways she necessarily participates in the corporate culture she rejects.

Her persistence is evident in the consistency and frequency of her posts: she has posted regularly since 2008. She has partnered with international groups that challenge fast fashion practices, such as the Swedish environmental research organization, Mistra Future Fashion. She also has founded a number of community

projects that encourage participation from her readers, including "Me-Made May," in which participants wear only clothing they've made for one month of the year. She started "Me-Made May" in 2010, and in 2015, it's still going strong.

A shifting Internet zeitgeist probably accounts some for the decline of DIY fashion blogs: the dissolution of the personal blogosphere into social media (Facebook, Twitter, Reddit), bloggy news media (Huffington Post, Slate), and image-based curation and diary media (Pinterest, Instagram, Snapchat). Many might chalk it up to the rise of Web 2.0—but that's maybe a little oversimplified, since blogs were hailed as the original "user-generated content" of Web 2.0. Collin Brooke, in the 2009 book *Lingua Fracta*, describes a shift from static content to constantly-updating interfaces.

Like Brooke, I don't think that shift was necessarily ideologically neutral. Much DIY fashion content today is posted on Pinterest, and most of it is text-free imagistic step-by-step how-to guides. The DIY aesthetic is boiled down into something that's easily digestible, usually purchasable. When DIY is condensed to an image, it gets harder for individuals to compete with corporations—they've got better cameras and paid designers. Consider a Pinterest search for "DIY fashion" today:


diy
fashion
Elizabeth
Clothing
Ideas
No Sew
Book
Projects
Accessories
Easy
For Teens
Trends
Tops
Dresses
All Pins
Your Pins
Pinners
Boards
BEST OF PINTEREST:
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from Divine Caroline
Pinterest's Best Fashion DIY Projects
Pinterest is full of amazing DIY projects to pin. We showcase some of the best DIY fashion projects that you will definitely want to get around to this summer #DIY #style
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Beautiful You
21
hacks for fixing ruined clothes
from Cosmopolitan
21 genius hacks for fixing ruined clothes
21 amazingly clever hacks for fixing ruined clothes!
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DIY KIMONO
6 DIY Kimono tutorials - Andrea's Notebook Thankyou - been meaning to look for kimono tutorials online and you saved me the bother, so now I can make one in time for my hols - out of a lovely old sari!
Kristen Cobb
Style It
Wear it!
from Yes Missy! | a lifestyle blog
What to do with old t shirts - 15 ways to upcycle your old tees
make galaxy shirts
summeeerlist.tumblr.com
from College Fashion
DIY Fashion: Painted Galaxy T-Shirt
Our easy step-by-step DIY tutorial shows you how to make your own trendy galaxy print tee shirt using fabric paint and glitter, featuring clear photos and descr
Isabel Sanchez
Projects to Try
from Nadyana Magazine
16 DIY Fashion Projects That You Have To Try

The page is filled with pictures of sequins, fabric paint, and lace trim—things you can add to clothing, not ways to make clothing from scratch. Things that make us feel more involved in our purchases. This is more like the "P.S.-I made this…," "add an egg"-style DIY.

While Pinterest started out with mostly user-submitted, user-created content, as it's gained widespread popularity, it's become an increasingly popular marketing tool. In an article for this publication, Matthew Vetter cites research that reports Pinterest has become the top traffic driver for women's magazines. He calls Pinterest a "medium of a reductive production of gender and gender binaries." Because its population is so overwhelmingly female and it is so involved in the production of women's fashion trends, he says, its representation of products and brands "ultimately has ramifications for the static gendering of all kinds of consumer products and markets."

Where DIY fashion bloggers like Zoe Edwards can interrogate their own corporate associations, DIY Pinners get grouped in tag searches alongside big companies that are also posting "DIY fashion." Target, of course, has a DIY Pinboard. So does Anthropologie. And Urban Outfitters. Even the fabric store Jo-Ann interprets "DIY fashion" mostly this way, heavy on the embellishments and glitter and scissors and dye. In representing DIY fashion in an easily purchasable form, corporate Pinboards redefine it as something you buy.

A similar flattening is taking place in the DIY world at large. Alessandro Carelli, Massimo Bianchini, and Venanzio Arquilla have called this "the Makers contradiction", explaining that the rise of the Maker movement hasn't led to less consumption (as its proponents have often claimed it would) but rather a new DIY-themed version of consumption.

DIY has become popular for a lot of reasons, some of which are pragmatic and some of which are ideological. But when a counterculture becomes incorporated into the mainstream, people have a tendency to pick up the pragmatic pieces without investing in the ideological bent. And companies often find ways to turn those pragmatic pieces into something that can be bought and sold, even when that practice is directly opposed to the original movement's ideology.

DIY fashion blogs are a microcosm of the larger DIY movement: They appeared on the scene at a time when people were receptive to the idea of anti-consumptive ideology. They gathered steam as people embraced the idea of buying less, getting crafty. But they also opened up a market space, a space that is now mostly filled by corporations that wear DIY fashion blogs' clothing but don't have its heart.

This shift has come along with—and perhaps was precipitated in part by—several major technological shifts: the movement to Web 2.0 has pushed people away from static content blogs and toward dynamically generated social sharing feeds.

The interface of dynamically generated content favors quick consumption of large quantities of posts, particularly favoring image-based posts. And especially on sites like Pinterest, which aggregate content in part by tags, corporations have a leg up on "average" posters; they've got professional photographers and paid content marketers who push new things out all day. Other companies recruit user input, by asking people to get engaged in their products. This user engagement marketing is not new, of course (consider write-in campaigns, for example). But it happens at a scale and with frequency that would've been unimaginable twenty years ago.

What happened to DIY fashion blogs can easily happen to any other social movement that starts off a little counterculture and begins to pick up steam. Resistance, these blogs suggest, may not be entirely futile—but it takes a lot of work.

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