Stitching a sensibility for sustainable clothing: Quiet activism, affect and community agency

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Journal of Arts and Communities

Received 01 October 2019

Accepted 07 February 2020

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Abstract

Fast fashion has become notorious for its environmental, social and psychological implications. This article reports on some of the work undertaken as part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded 'S4S: Designing a sensibility for sustainable clothing' project, which sought to combine social science and participatory arts-based research methods to explore how processes of 'making together' in community textiles groups might generate a new ethic, or sensibility, among consumers to equip them to make more sustainable clothing choices. The study develops a novel methodology that responds to the complex demands of participatory working. It required careful management of the combinations of methods, which included various different making workshops; wardrobe audits; interviews; films and journal keeping. The project also raises the question of using multi-modal formats, which generate rich data, but also add to the complexity, highlighting a need for multi-disciplinary teams. The article focuses on participant responses from two series of five-day workshops that explored: (1) hand-making fabrics by spinning, dyeing and weaving thread; and (2) deconstructing and reconstructing knitted garments. The embodied encounters offered in the workshops encouraged participants to reflect on the fluidity of garments, by which we mean coming to view clothing not as fixed objects but rather as open and full of potentiality for change. For example, a jumper might be unravelled and the wool used for a different piece of clothing, or a dress unpicked and the fabric used for some entirely different garment. The resultant affective responses ranged from a deeper engagement with the materialities of the clothing industry to an awareness of the amount of time incorporated in the process of making clothes as participants started to re-imagine clothing through the embodied act of re-making.

Keywords

sustainable fashion

co-production

affect

activism

craft

community

social design

Introduction

Fast fashion has become notorious for its environmental, social and psychological implications (Cline 2012; Brooks 2015). The need to 'fix' fashion is now being taken seriously by policymakers and fashion retailers evidenced by the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee's Fixing Fashion Report (HCEAC 2019). The government's lack of commitment to the HCEAC's recommendations makes it crucial that industry, small enterprises, designers, consumers, crafters and makers work together towards tackling the problems. This article reports on some of the work undertaken as part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded 'S4S: Designing a sensibility for sustainable clothing' project, which sought to combine social science and participatory

arts-based research methods to explore how processes of 'making together' in community textiles groups might generate a new ethic, or sensibility, among consumers to equip them to make more sustainable clothing choices.

The project draws its theoretical and methodological underpinnings from five main research strands. First, it extends work on social design, co-design and the relationship between crafts and material affect (Armstrong et al. 2014; Twigger Holroyd 2017). Second, it contributes to the field of sustainable fashion and design (Fletcher 2012, 2016). Third, it moves beyond dominant approaches to behaviour change (Shove et al. 2012), which have limited efficacy due to the value-action gap (Hargreaves 2011). Fourth, we use the concept of affect to understand how sociopolitical contexts and emotional responses shape learning and behaviour. Ideas, thoughts and emotions literally attach themselves to how we understand and imagine the world around us, impacting action choices (Connolly 2002). Affect is particularly relevant to fashion and consumerism because the current economic system 'mines affect for value' by generating emotional responses to sell products for profit (Clough 2010). This is most notable in celebrity culture (Morgan and Birtwhistle 2009), but it also pervades self-identification with clothing (Guy and Banim 2000) in relation to peer approval (Roper and La Neice 2009). Clothes generate culturally resonant affective markers of popular aesthetics and symbolic meanings that determine how individuals communicate their identities to others (Schofield and Schmidt 2005). Integral to understanding 'affect' is recognition that emotions can be imagined as sticky markers, which attach to things and ideas, shaping how they are absorbed into identities. Understanding how to foster a sensibility for sustainable clothing choices thus requires us to unpick the layers of emotional attachments that underpin human responses to what might otherwise seem to be 'rational' choices and transfer them to more sustainable behaviours.

Our work additionally draws on the notion of a 'quiet activism': a quietly affective activism that is embedded in everyday life (Hackney 2013). This involves processes of (a) creative making, which have been largely overlooked (denigrated as domestic and amateur) and (b) co-produced reflective 'making interventions' (Hackney et al. 2016). Together, both processes build community agencies, assets and affects (Hackney 2014). Recently, interest in amateur creativity in relation to the wider cultural value of voluntary arts and community activism has had a resurgence (Crossick and Kaszybska 2016; Facer and Enright 2016). Stephen Knott, in his history of amateur craft, identifies a mode of creativity operating on the cultural margins yet central to everyday lived experience. Viewing amateur production through the lenses of time, space, and surface, Knott (2015: 96–98) argues that, due to its connected yet differential nature, amateur craft is a permeable category within capitalist production: subversive, that is, with a small 's'. Fiona Hackney (2013: 172), writing about women's domestic crafts as a means of fostering tactics and developing strategies for resistance, draws on Michel De Certeau's la perruque (the wig as disguise or tricksy ruse) to argue for making as a means of 'thinking and acting independently, staking a place in the world, and making one's voice heard'. When, as now, the structures of capitalism are under severe strain alternative and countercultural values and practices move into the mainstream (Castells 2012). Craft that takes place in the shed, at the kitchen table or village hall have renewed potential to shape new quietly revolutionary and ethically sustainable versions of how we might live and work: our values, relationships with others and the environment. Extinction Rebellion's call for a boycott on buying new clothes (Pitcher 2019), encouraging people to make, swap or buy second hand, has given new currency to strategies that Lydia Higginson (2019) from 'Made My Wardrobe' and Jonnet Middleton at Mend*RS (Middleton 2015) have been practizing for some time.

Methodology

S4S recruited around forty participants, mostly amateurs but with a handful who had trained in textiles and fashion in Cornwall and a few in the West Midlands had worked in industry, losing their jobs after fashion manufacturing moved offshore to India and China in the 1980s (Powley 2013). Participants found us through our community partners – arts and community organizations in the Midlands and South West: the Hive (Shrewsbury), Black Country Living Museum (Dudley, West Midlands), Gatis Community Space (Wolverhampton, West Midlands), St. Gluvias Village Hall (Penryn, Cornwall), Chyan Fields (Halvasso, Cornwall), the Poly (Falmouth, Cornwall) and Krowji (Redruth, Cornwall). They were drawn to the project through interest in crafts, stitching and creative making as much as sustainable clothing. A launch event held simultaneously in the two regions (Figure 1), which included a film by Orsola de Castro from project partner Fashion Revolution, demonstrations from sustainable knitwear designer Amy Twigger Holroyd (2019), Lizzie Harrison from Antiform (2019), and others, provided an opportunity to co-produce project research themes, questions and methods with participants.

Figure 1: Flyer for S4S launch event at University of Exeter, Cornwall. © Irene Griffin.

The resulting research focused on practice-based making: an iterative process of developing co-produced knowledges, which enabled processes and findings to be owned by the participants (Strauss and Corbin 2008; Hackney et al. 2014). Following the principles of embodied research (Vachelli 2018), participants engaged in physical, tactile activities to explore and generate knowledges. There were two objectives to the activities. First, to provide spaces for conversation so we could understand more about how participants felt about clothes and their particular learning journeys. Here, the act of doing and being through the material act of making facilitated a more in-depth understanding of how individuals constructed their phenomenological life-worlds around clothing (Mead 1934; Blumer 1992; Goffman 1959). Second, the tasks were designed to enable participants to learn about: the journeys that clothing takes (e.g. making yarn or fabric from raw materials); the kinds of ethical questions that are raised by fast fashion (e.g. the human and environmental costs of mass consumption of cheap clothing) and to learn and share skills to make, mend and modify clothing themselves.

A set of 40 (twenty in Cornwall and twenty in the West Midlands) experiential one-day textile making workshops, or 'making interventions', were devised to replace standard notions of production and consumption with material, sensory and emotional practices generated within communities (Hackney et al. 2016; Clay and Bradley Foster 2007). These were grouped into sets of five around eight thematic strands: Fluff-to-Fibre; (De)constructive, (Re)constructive Knitting; Towards Zero Waste; Vintage Pattern Cutting; Make-Do-And-Mend; (In)Visible Mending; Second-hand and Ethical and Re-make, Re-purpose, Upcycle. Groups in the different regions kept in touch through skype calls, while collectively made artefacts: an apron, a purse and others, were shared, appropriated and passed on to promote a sense of material connection between participants. While the workshops were where the learning-through-making aspects of the research took place, other research tools were developed to capture and track participant thoughts, feelings and reflections. A pre-and-post workshop questionnaire (sample size 28) allowed us to monitor participants' self-reported changes in the ways they think, feel and act in relation to clothing and identify areas of change. Wardrobe audits: semi-structured interviews conducted in an individual's home – often in front of their wardrobe. An additional dimension to the power of the Wardrobe Audits was in the way that the garments in the wardrobe embodied many different choices and decisions, which participants had made, about how they wanted to present themselves to others. They also helped us to better understand the amount of clothes people owned and their relationship with them. Everyone was asked first to estimate the number of garments and then to count them. Estimations,

needless to say, were often revealingly short of the mark. 'Clothing diaries', which participants kept throughout the project, recorded their lived experience of making, adapting and thinking about clothes, and the vicissitudes of their behaviour change. Short video films were integral to the research, promoting in-project reflexive learning. Connecting participants with their experience of the project, they also serve as resource for individuals and groups to go on to develop their own methods for engendering behaviour change (Hackney et al. 2019a). Over 30 films are available on the S4S YouTube channel and through the project website (S4S 2020). All workshops were photographed and participant semi-structured interviews – which accompanied the workshop process – were recorded and transcribed together with the group reflection sessions that took place at the end of each thematic strand.

A central aim of the project was to design a methodology and an analytical framework whereby participants could become involved in the analysis as well as the research process, allowing reflective makers to become reflexive makers. To this end a conceptual framework was developed around processes of thinking, feeling and doing – 'think, feel, act' – which was embedded in the project's research evaluation tools. All data, additionally, was inductively thematized following the principles of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006; Strauss and Corin 2008) looking specifically at the ideas and affective emotions (Ahmed2004) that participants attached to clothes, the various aspects of the clothes making process, the materiality of clothing and how participants felt about clothing choices. These themes were then coded for further analysis, clustering around: how they shop; clothes and ethics; the process of making, mending and modifying clothing; and creating behaviour change. This article analyses only a sample of the interview, group discussion and visual data generated within the workshops, but it is indicative of project outputs and outcomes and the ways in which participants sometimes used the research tools in ways we had not anticipated.

Making to think, feel and act sustainably: The workshops

The workshops were designed to mimic and rework the lifecycle of clothing by enabling participants to re-imagine their relationship with the fashion system through processes of engaged, participatory making (Barthes [1967] 1990; Kaiser 2012). Conceptualized as spaces 'in between' the flow of fast fashion, they aimed to short-circuit it through creative interventions that foregrounded the quality, skill, labour and environmental impacts conventionally hidden in mainstream discourse. This paper focuses on data from the first two workshop series: Fluff-to-Fibre; and (De)constructive, (Re)constructive Knitting.

All cloth begins life as a raw material. The Fluff-to-Fibre workshops enabled participants to engage with some of the processes involved as wool is transformed into fabric. The workshops embodied this through offering hands-on spinning, weaving and natural dyeing experiences. A tour of the Launceston-based wool mill, The Natural Fibre Company, which is owned by Sue Blacker of Blacker Yarns, demonstrated how fleece is sorted, graded then mechanically washed, carded, combed, spun and dyed to produce beautiful yarns. Audrey and Bob Durrant of Hawthorn Fibres then demonstrated hand-spinning using wheels (Figure 2), and drop-spindles. Participants tried 'teasing', 'carding' and 'rolling' the raw fleece into the 'rolags' to hand-fed to the wheel or spindle. Working with natural dyeing expert Irene Griffin, they then experimented with preparing, extracting and fixing natural dyes – using metal salts ('mordants') to bond the colours to the fibres. The workshop series ended with the Durrants returning to deliver weaving workshops using basic, rigid heddle, four shaft table looms. The group dyed some natural cream wool from the mill and wove it into a single piece of cloth (Figure 3), which was sent to the West Midlands group who embellished it with crocheted flowers, turning it into a beautiful clutch bag. Two key interlinked themes emerged from

this process – fluidity and temporality. By fluidity, we recognize that a garment is comprised of a complex fabrication of fibres and that the form of the garment is only temporary. The fabric and fibres can be unmade and re-made into very different objects. Temporality encapsulates the way that a garment embodies many different processes over an extended period of time, which includes (but is not limited to) making and dyeing the yarn, weaving and cutting and stitching the object. Further, once formed, a piece of clothing is both imbued with memories recalling particular periods of time, and it can persist for a lengthy time, often having a life beyond that of the original purchaser.

Figure 2: Bob Durrant of Hawthorn Fibres demonstrates hand spinning, Cornwall. © Nina Constable.

The Fluff to Fibre workshops elicited a general affective response of surprise at the number of processes required to create thread and construct cloth. It introduced the realization that garment construction begins long before fabric is stitched together to make clothes. For example, Francesca, while learning to spin said that:

I realise the fact that actually clothes are made up of threads and I always thought the making of the garment to be a laborious thing. But actually, the threads that we use to make the garments are really the hardest thing to make […] it just consumes so much time.

Here, she sees what was previously considered to be an invisible process of generating thread being recognized as a laborious process that involves bringing together other objects. Traditional fashion consumption constructs an affective lifeworld that divorces the participant from the complexity of clothes production. Garments are conventionally presented and thought of as fixed, inflexible and finite objects rather than the latest iteration of the fluidity of matter. Francesca is articulating how the embodied encounter creates a space for new meaning-making.

Figure 3: Cloth dyed and woven by S4S Participants in Cornwall and sent to the West Midlands group. © Nina Constable.

This affective separation between process and object also means that there is little cultural space to consider the easily overlooked time and labour investment required in clothes making. We see this reflected too in debates about ethical clothing, which focus heavily on the lives of garment makers themselves, rather than also considering the growers, spinners, dyers and weavers of the fabric that comes to constitute clothing. The process of learning how to weave encouraged Christine to reflect that:

Seeing the amount of work that is behind all of these things that we have done. I mean, I wonder how on earth they're finding the motivation for doing it. Because it's really, really hard work and definitely not worth the money you get because all the hours required for basically the final product, you will never be paid for all that work.

Christine has started to consider the work of UK artisans and to realize the temporalities embedded in items they make. She begins to see that these are not reflected in the real cost that such products are offered for sale. In turn, this disrupts the ways that she had imagined clothing, allowing new meanings to become encoded in the objects and enabling a space for a deeper examination of the temporalities that are embedded in the things we consume.

How does the affective constellation of knowledges which we inhabit allow us to ignore such a fundamental principle of the objects that we use? Hazel provides us with some insight into this as part of the weaving workshop:

I found it really hard, and really frustrating as well. If you can't do something naturally, you kind of want to pack it in, instead of fighting through, and I wonder, it's sad like our more modern habits, if something's hard, you kind of stop, or you ask someone else to do it, or you Google it, you know, there's a lot of short cuts.

Hazel's claim here is that her cultural learning has constructed an affective repertoire that means that if she finds something difficult to do, she would find someone else to do it in her place. Rather than perceiving it as a difficult problem to be mastered, it is something to be rejected in favour of simpler and easier options.

These cultural contexts provide opportunities, as well as challenges. In the group discussion during the weaving workshop participants shared thoughts about the contemporary clothing industry. Ruby spoke of how 'so many brands are exactly the same now because everybody's churning out so much stuff'. Later, the conversation ended up considering how the shift towards ever cheaper products and online shopping produced the latest iteration of how affect is mined for value to fuel increasing consumption within society. As individuals, participants appear to have reached a point where they no longer associate this process with positive effects. Interestingly, from discussion we learned that many had already been building their own system of knowledges, actively wanting an alternative to easy consumption. The fluff-to-fibre workshops helped participants build on culturally available resistances to fast fashion and provide new ideas and knowledges around fluidity and temporality for them to consider how they engage with fashion and clothing.

'It's not just clothes that have been embellished': (De)constructive, (re)constructive knitting

The knitting workshops ran in a small room with sofas and round tables that can be grouped or kept separate so that people can work together or on their own. A participant later remarked on the distinctive dynamic and community ethos generated by the smaller size space and the more intimate nature of the knitting process, allowing for concentration and conversation. Pat Dillon (Figure 4), an experienced knitwear designer and retired design lecturer, facilitated the sessions which were grouped in three sections: (1) 'Ice-breaker': knitting a square; (2) skill and technique sessions: stitches, crochet, felt-making, how to unpick and reconstruct knitwear, 'cardiganizing' (turning a jumper into a cardigan), adding cuffs, collars and pockets and embellishment and (3) Individual projects using garments that the participants had brought from home. The deconstructive/reconstructive techniques were drawn from Amy TwiggerHolroyd's (2019) 'Reknit Revolution' website. Following Pat's example, participants used their clothing diaries as sketch books to visually design and develop ideas (using collage and fabric samples) as well as recording their thoughts and feelings, an approach that became an important reflective device. This piece builds on the previous section by focusing in-depth on the experience of one of the participants, Marie, for whom fluidity and temporality became major factors in shaping behaviour change. Involving a new processual engagement with fabric, whereby making took on new meanings, these making encounters were also framed by a temporal factor of a personal kind; the project, as she put it, 'came at the right time'. It seeks to consider how and why change happened and its potential long-term effects.

Figure 4: Pat Dillon facilitating the West Midlands knitting group, ice-breaker activity. © S4S Project.

While claiming not to have given much thought to sustainable fashion until she attended the project launch, like the Cornwall participants, Marie was clearly building on her own system of knowledges.

Acutely aware of the damaging effects of fast fashion, her diffidence signalled frustration in framing a response. Like many participants, she habitually buys from charity shops according to the principles of reduce, re-use and recycle. More unusually, she also makes a lot of her own clothes, partly due to her sewing skills and work with historical costume (at the time of the project she headed up the costume department at a museum). As a Girl Guide leader, Marie endeavours to raise awareness about the exploitation of those making clothing within fast fashion supply chains and encourages the girls who, as she noted, 'love their Primark' to make their own clothes. A keen interest in the 1940s and how clothing was managed on a national and household level has inspired a novel approach to sustainable clothing as, taking the 1941 Civilian Clothing Regulations as her model (Figure 5), she has restricted herself to a 60 coupon spends on clothing for the year.

Figure 5. Marie's clothing diary showing her 'ration system' for restricting clothes purchases. © S4S Project.

Marie, nevertheless, is sensitive to dressing in ways that do not conform. Citing the powerful symbolism attached to war-time make-do-and-mend a time when wearing a dress 'made from table cloths or handkerchiefs or patched together from a suit' was celebrated as a patriotic act she wonders how these values and emotions might be transferred to current practices of up-cycling and repair now that we have not only lost the skills, but also identify ourselves as consumers rather than makers. Additionally, as she acknowledged, there are important class elements at play. In group conversation, Primark was often deemed the 'enemy', despite it being where those with less expendable income shop. Like Ruby in the Cornwall group, Marie pointed out that the real problem is over-production in service of so-called 'choice'. She used her diary to think through ideas about clothes as a marker of social distinction and the values and emotions we need to attach to clothing to provoke real change, as well as taking inspiration from some fabulous 1940s outfits.

While these ideas were bubbling under the surface it was 'feeling', in terms of an emotional connection with the materiality of the work, that emerged as the principal driver of her knitted project. Marie selected a 6-year-old lambswool jumper bought from Primark for renovation. Modifying it into a cardigan by cutting a section off the bottom, adding a welt in grey alpaca and a long piece of Shetland lace she had made – a time consuming business – Marie encountered the extended temporalities of making experienced by the Cornwall group. As she worked, a sense of attachment to and investment in the cardigan grew, together with an awareness of and confidence in the fluidity of knitted garments, and their openness to being reworked:

When I first chose the jumper, I chose it because although I like the jumper I wasn't massively attached to [it …] Over the weeks […] I have got increasingly attached to this cardigan […] it's gone from being something semi-sacrificial that I was having a bit of a play with and a bit of a practise on to something that I have quite deeply invested in now. It's become part of my soul'.

I now feel confident to take the scissors to knitted garments. I always thought, you know, you take scissors to a knitted garment, they'll fall to pieces. But they do have this integrity and I've learned a little bit more about that. I've become a little bit more intelligent in when I think about […] fibre content'.

Figure 6: Midlands participant displays creative textile embellishment technique. © S4S Project.

Marie was ‘impressed by the creativity of the other participants: the colours they used; how they incorporated new materials’; their ‘thought processes’ rather than their knit skills (as illustrated in Figure 6). As Pat observed, they were thinking like designers. The meeting place was also important, providing a conducive space for making new meanings and for Marie, who was going through a distressing period at work, this also meant making serious life decisions, not only about sustainable clothing but also about the ‘self’. The process of relaxed, convivial making was vital (a lifeline even): ‘just relaxing into your making […] When you’re making something, the ideas flow’.

Conclusion: Tools for living a sustainable clothing life

In this project, we sought to contribute to the fields of behaviour change and sustainable fashion using social design, co-production, the relationship between crafts, materials and affect. Our study invited participants to develop an embodied relationship with clothing and the processes and materials involved in making clothing, and we sought to understand the affective changes made as part of the ‘quiet activism’ of everyday life. Our aim was to work with participants to co-design a framework to produce and critically interrogate a ‘sensibility for sustainable clothing’ that engenders behaviour change by using collective making processes and a set of research tools developed from arts and social science methods.

What we found, is that the embodied act of re-making clothing enabled the participants to start to re-imagine clothing. The workshops provided a space of possibility for them, collectively and individually, to critically explore their own perceptions about clothing. It is impossible to say that x workshop enabled participants to arrive at y conclusion although there are some common threads and themes. We appreciate for example, that the embodied encounters offered in the workshops, encouraged participants to reflect on the fluidity of a garment, and that an item of clothing is not a fixed object, but is full of potentiality (Hackney et al. 2019b). The affective responses that this engendered ranged from a deeper engagement with the materialities of the clothing industry, and an awareness of the amount of time incorporated in an item of clothing and encouraged and supported participants to consider their own lived practices.

The reflections that participants had as individuals were facilitated through supportive, group-based learning. The fact that there was a like-minded group to learn new techniques and ideas from and with, and to help-out when anybody got stuck was important for providing a safe and encouraging learning environment. Additionally, the workshops meant that there was a space for people to talk about their reflections through their embodied encounters with making, mending and modifying clothing, creating a community of shared ideas. People were able to ‘bounce’ the new knowledges that they were creating off each other, which also helped in the journey of how to ‘normalize’ and incorporate these knowledges within their lived practice. As the examples discussed here show, each had their own way of doing this.

Our research has produced a very rich bank of qualitative data on a small (by social science standards) sample size. Nonetheless, our evaluative tools suggest that the project did make a significant impact on the ways in which people think, feel and act about clothing (Saunders et al. 2019). The workshops had impacts beyond what we had anticipated: not only were participants thinking more about sustainability and trying to reduce the environmental and ethical impacts of their clothing choices, but they were also learning new (and regaining old) skills and confidence, and forging new friendships to help them in this. Some went on to develop new making and mending networks, others have begun to establish their own small-scale enterprises. There are, however, limits to this approach related to the composition and size of our groups. Most of our participants

were women, and it would have been nice to reach out to a broader demographic. Additionally, we worked with a relatively small group of around forty participants. Our next research steps involve trying to find ways to mainstream a sensibility for sustainable clothing, so that the sorts of activities we undertook are evident on the high street. The strength of the work lies in the extent to which the project connected with participants' existing interests and needs: to live more sustainably, be creative, and have agency in their communities, for instance, and it did so almost viscerally through embodied engagement with people, processes and things. The challenges are in providing the sort of hard-and-fast evidence policymakers will want to know about in terms of prompting pro-environmental behaviour change, and in providing the generalizable evidence that would work for broader demographics.

For future research, craft process, co-production and 'quiet activism' offer a useful set of tools with which to encourage deep reflection through processes of collective making. The combination of learning and reflecting through making and story-telling in a group environment enables an understanding of participants' phenomenological life-worlds in a deep and meaningful way. In terms of a means to facilitate a sensibility for sustainability, the workshops could only build on the affective cultural contexts from which participants drew. They relied on their willingness and readiness to think critically and openly about their everyday practices, and to consider the kinds of changes that would fit into their lives. But for those who are ready, for whom engaging in this kind of work has 'come at the right time', the project activities, methods, and research outputs (films, artefacts, exhibitions, publications, website etc.) provide much needed tools for living a sustainable clothing life (Ahmed 2017).

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council [AH/K005243/1]. We would like to thank all our project participants (who are anonymized in this paper), partners and advisors for their valued contributions.

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