



---

“You Have to Buy It When You See It”:  
Examining the Stash Practices of Apparel Home Sewers  
Charity Calvin Armstead, Brenau University  
Addie Martindale, Georgia Southern University  
Ellen McKinney, Iowa State University

### **Significance/Usefulness**

Acquisition and storage of supplies needed to produce the craft is essential for participation in most types of crafts. These supplies are often referred to as the crafter’s “stash”. Research on the stash practices of primarily quilters (Gabbert, 2000; Stalp, 2006; Stalp & Winge, 2008) and knitters (Stalp & Winge, 2008; Stannard & Mullet, 2018) has led to understanding of the cultural communication of the stash itself and crafters’ behaviors regarding their stash. Martindale (2017) found that investing in the collection of materials was integral to participation in home garment sewing. This research expands the existing literature to focus on home sewers of apparel and their stash practices.

### **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

In addition to purchasing items needed for a particular project, many crafters find joy in shopping for and acquiring supplies (Gabbert, 2000; Stalp, 2006). Crafters also purchase for potential future needs, due to the limited-time availability of items (Stalp, 2006; Stalp & Winge, 2008; Stannard & Mullet, 2018). Crafters view their stash as their palette from which to draw for future creations (Stalp, 2006). Sale prices can also motivate crafters to purchase supplies (Stalp, 2006), and they often purchase more supplies than they need or could ever use (Gabbert, 2000; Stalp, 2006; Stannard and Mullet, 2018). Crafters vary in how they store and/or display their stash, depending on their needs, preferences, and relationships with others sharing the space (Stalp, 2006; Stalp & Winge, 2008). Quilters, specifically, may keep fabric for several years before using it and hold memories of when and how each piece was acquired (Gabbert, 2000). Due to negative evaluations of the stash by non-crafters, crafters often hide their purchases and stash (Stalp, 2006; Stalp & Winge, 2008; Stannard & Mullet, 2018). Less is known about when and how crafters use items from their stash to create. Stalp (2006) indicates that quilters make quilts using some fabrics from their stash. Stannard and Mullet (2018) studied reasons why yarn users select yarn to use from their stash. These reasons include color, feel of the yarn, yarn weight, and fiber content.

### **Methods**

This study draws from interview data from 23 English-speaking female home sewers who sewed clothing for themselves. Participants ranged from their late teens to their 70s and were interviewed over a period of two years for two separate ground-theory studies. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded by two researchers until interrater reliability was over 90%.

### **Results**

*Purchasing and acquisition.* Scarcity and impulse were major motivators for stash acquisition. Many of the participants lived in areas without fabric stores close by, motivating them to keep items on hand. Sewers of niche apparel like retro or cosplay, particularly, purchased items because of concern that they might not be available later due to limited market availability. As

one participant explained, “You have to buy it when you see it, ‘cause you just don’t know when they’re gonna run out.” Other attitudes were more in line with this sentiment: “I kind of buy a lot of fabric on a whim. I go, ‘That’s cute, I’m buying it.’” Regret and fear also plagued some participants, as one woman noted: “I always kick myself if I don’t buy a fabric and then it’s gone.” Price was also quite motivating for the sewers, who often bought fabric that they deemed to be cheap or on sale, wanting to have fabric to “just stick it to the side” to have when needed without a specific project in mind. Participants also noted that friends, family, and acquaintances frequently contribute to the sewing stash. One woman shared, “Once you get the word out that you sew, it’s almost like everyone hears about it, and people I don’t even know have sent me all kinds of stuff.”

*Hoarding/keeping.* Many sewers referred to building their stash as hoarding or referred to their actual stash as a hoard. Participants also believed this behavior was common: “I think all seamstresses to some extent are fabric hoarders.” Others made matter-of-fact statements such as “I hoard patterns and I hoard fabric” or “I’ve been hoarding this fabric forever.” Some interviewees indicated that preparedness was important to them: “I like having it, just in case . . . I feel like I’m preparing for something, but I never know what it is.” Participants used language indicating guilt or embarrassment about their stash. In some cases, it was about the size of the stash. Others felt guilty about not using things as much as they thought they should: “I would buy all the vintage patterns and *had to justify them*, so . . . I started sewing with them” (emphasis added). Many of the sewers imposed limits on their stash (some more strictly than others) such as limiting fabric stash to one shelf only. Others were less successful in their limits; several participants shared commentary on the size of their stash such as “My fabric stash is massive, despite my efforts to limit my purchases to specific projects” or “It’s ridiculous. Luckily we have the space, we have a five-bedroom house and there’s only three of us.”

*Use and disposal.* The stash is often used to provide options for sewing. Several participants said that they will buy fabric and wait for the right pattern for it, or vice versa. One woman explained “You just never know when something is going to *like* something else.” This often resulted in long-awaited successes; Joy recounted a particular dress she was proud of: “I had found the perfect fabric for it [that] had been sitting in my stash for years. The pattern had been sitting in my stash for years.” Stashes also provide access when fabric stores are closed or otherwise inaccessible, particularly for notions such as thread and zippers. Some participants even touted the benefits of their stash stating things like, “I don’t have to go to the store if I don’t want to. If I see something on Pinterest that I want, I can just oh, okay, I’ll just look in my fabric hoard and pull something out and just sew it up for myself.” For some, the size of stashes can be a barrier to use -- “I walk into my storeroom of fabric, and then I walk out again. I go, ‘Oh, I’m overwhelmed.’” Size of the stash was also linked to limited time to sew desired projects. Sewers additionally mentioned having to discard unused items because of space limitations. Many remarked that they have been “trying to thin out the hoard” because they have “run out of space.” Unfinished projects often remain in the stash, seemingly because the amount of time and effort involved makes the sewer reluctant to throw it away, but the projects remain unfinished because the sewer has lost interest in the project.

### Conclusion/Implications

This research provides additional information on the stash practices of crafters, as home garment sewers had not previously been researched. On a broader scale, this study provides new information about female consumers' acquisition and use of materials for leisure activities. Similarities were found to existing literature on other types of crafting stashes, including scarcity, preparedness, impulsivity, and hiding the stash. A new finding was the tendency of other people contributing supplies to sewing stashes. Additionally, these stashes existed primarily to create end products for the sewer's own use rather than for other people.

## References

- Gabbert, L. (2000). "Petting the Fabric": Medium and the Creative Process. *Uncoverings*, 21, 9.
- Martindale, A. (2017). Women's motivations to sew clothing for themselves. *Graduate Theses and Dissertations*. <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd/15364>
- Stalp, M. C. (2006). Hiding the (Fabric) Stash: Collecting, Hoarding, and Hiding Strategies of Contemporary US Quilters. *Textile: The Journal of Cloth & Culture*, 4(1), 22. <https://doi.org/10.2752/147597506778052449>
- Stalp, M. C., & Winge, T. M. (2008). My Collection is Bigger Than Yours: Tales from the Handcrafter's Stash. *Home Cultures*, 5(2), 197–218. <https://doi.org/10.2752/174063108X333182>
- Stannard, C. R., & Mullet, K. (2018). Consumption of Raw Materials by Crafters: Desired Characteristics of Yarn and Retailers. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 36(1), 17–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0887302X17734644>



