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Reading patterns: dressmaking sections in women's magazines in the 1960s and 1970s

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ABSTRACT

In the 1960s and 1970s, many women's magazines had special sections for home dressmaking. At a time when ready-to-wear clothing was expensive, the sew-it-yourself pages had an important function to win over competition among female readers. Teenagers read the magazines in search of clothing designs to copy in order to dress according to the latest fashion. Despite the importance of such special sections, they have only been given a marginal place in the history of the popular press and in cultural studies. This article examines and discusses the role of dressmaking sections in women's magazines in Sweden in the 1960s and 1970s. Based on analysis of the two largest Swedish women's weeklies and interviews with readers and editors, the study highlights women's 'utilitarian reading', which combines textual, visual, and material literacy, and thus contributes to an overlooked area within women's studies, fashion and media history.

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Free patterns were an important prerequisite for the expansion of women's magazines that took place in the Western world during the second half of the nineteenth century (Beetham 1996, p. 67). This was still valid a century later: in 1952 the German *Burda* magazine began including free patterns, two years after it was founded, building its success and developing further to become the largest fashion magazine in Europe by 1967 (Szeless 2002, p. 849). Until the 1980s, dressmaking patterns were important content in many women's magazines and a conscious strategy to capture the female target group.¹ Commercial dressmaking patterns have been seen as a kind

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of democratization of fashion; a way of enabling the lower classes to dress fashionably at a lower cost, as discussed by several authors (Walsh 1979, Burman 1999, Moseley 2001, Emery 2014). However, Partington (1992) proposed that women's interest in home sewing could be exploited by many companies as an effective way to produce a market for women's magazines, paper patterns and sewing machines. Democratization was not the main goal for the companies but rather a way to create profit, similar to the industrial mass production of ready-to-wear. The magazine medium was well suited to provide regular and up-to-date information on the latest fashion, adapted to the readership, in a simple and inexpensive way. At the same time, magazines with dressmaking patterns were part of the larger weekly magazine industry and, in the pursuit of readers, publishers needed to adjust their product to sell and survive in a constantly changing market (Ferguson 1983, p. 15, Zuckerman 1998, p. XIV, Gough-Yates, 2003, Tinkler *et al.* 2016, p. 26).

In this article, I examine how dressmaking patterns were used as baits for selling women's weeklies and how the reading and use of them functioned as a creative and cultural practice in Sweden in the 1960s and 70s. By focusing on dressmaking sections I challenge the idea of what is reading material both with an empirical survey of a rarely studied material *and* a new view on reading that along with *textual* literacy includes *visual* (Mitchell 2008, Holsanova *et al.* 2009) and *material* literacy (Dyer and Smith 2020). A combination of all three literacies were necessary in the reading of the dressmaking sections. When reading designs, patterns and instructions, the readers become users and I introduce this kind of reading as *utilitarian reading*. This connects theories of reading (i.e. de Certeau 1988, Chartier 1992) with theories of making and creativity (cf. Gauntlett 2018, Platt 2019). The practical sections, I will argue, were necessary for both producers and consumers of women's magazines in the 1960s and 70s, when ready-to-wear was expensive and there was a cultural expectation that women could make their own clothes. This *utilitarian reading* did not always lead to direct action: it could function as an escape from reality or provide a readiness for future needs. By combining utility with pleasure, the dressmaking pages could justify the purchase of the magazine (Ballaster *et al.* 1991, p. 90, Hermes 1995, pp. 36–40, 145). Home dressmaking was part of a larger do-it-yourself-movement at the time, where women, as I will show, could gain economic satisfaction, aesthetic pleasure and manual skills, as well as create personal meaning. The popular press is one way to study this phenomenon, and together with other media often the only evidence of the activity itself, as stressed by Atkinson (2006, p. 1). By complementing with interviews and questionnaires, my research shows how women could craft an identity in an everyday creative practice (cf. Attfield 2000, Platt 2019, p. 363).

Although dressmaking sections were an important part of the popular press, they have played only a marginal role in media history and the history of reading. Literary theorists, such as Iser (1978) have traditionally focused on

text and fiction, but Rose (2007), among other book historians, has made use of the argument that all media that can be read and interpreted can count as text (cf. McKenzie 1999, p. 13). My study states that a book historical perspective, that is how the market and the media affected what was communicated and expressed, is useful even in terms of instructive images (cf. Törnvall 2017), such as patterns and clothing designs. As de Certeau said (1988, p. 170), a text gets its meaning through its readers who take part in reshaping the text (cf. Holsanova *et al.* 2009, Holsanova 2010, p. 42), even if the act of reading itself rarely leaves any traces. De Certeau characterizes reading as 'a silent production', even if the readers forget what they have read (1988, p. xxi). Likewise, Darnton (2007) has stressed that reading is the most difficult part to analyse in a text's communication circuit; how a text was read, how it was used and what the reader thought of it. In interviews with readers of fiction, Trower (2020) found that it was the reading experience and context that remained in the readers' memory rather than the content. Similarly, Hermes' (1995) interviews with readers of women's magazines drew attention to the fact that it was not possible to distinguish between the magazine text and the reading context. The informants had little to say about the magazines themselves but rather about how reading them fitted into their daily routines and gave them meaning, independent of the text itself. Tinkler's (1995) studies of teenage magazine readers have confirmed that the magazines left only vague memories, despite their great importance, measured in terms of sales figures and contemporary studies.

As Gough-Yates (2003, p. 7) and Forster (2015, p. 6) point out, research of the weekly press has often aimed to investigate female expectations, how magazines shaped women or how the weeklies have changed over time (e.g. Ferguson 1983, Ballaster *et al.* 1991, Tinkler 1995, Walker 2000). Only a few scholars emphasize the importance of the readers and the service departments (Zuckerman 1998, pp. 80–82). One of the reasons why clothing designs have been overlooked is that they have not been considered editorial material (cf. Reed 1997, pp. 141–42). Text has traditionally been valued higher in relation to images, whereby a greater proportion of text represents more intellectual content. Patterns are instructional objects with a special function, similar to construction drawings, which are not considered readable text as observed by Holsanova (2010, p. 44) and Lundblad (2014, p. 32). In research on fashion journalism, there are references to magazines that contain patterns (Nelson Best 2017, p. 7, Van Remoortel 2017, Severinsson 2021), but the focus is on other issues and the readers are not studied. Thanks to the role of magazines as a distribution channel, there are several studies, among international research on home sewing, about pattern magazines and dressmaking sections in women's magazines (Beward 1999, Hackney 1999, Wilson 1999, Moseley 2001, Szeless 2002, McLean 2009). However, the Swedish context has not been investigated so far, although it has briefly been mentioned by Berger (1974) and Waldén (1990).

Due to the format of pattern sheets, they were not generally included in the magazines, but rather offered as order items. The magazines presented a design of the garment – a reproduced drawing or a photograph of the finished, sewn garment as worn by a fashion model. The pattern itself could consist of text, numbers, lines, and dots on paper. Reading the pattern, as well as the sewing description that usually consisted of both text and image, requires special technical knowledge that combines textual, visual, and material literacy. Pre-understanding is vital, otherwise the sewing is completed by trial and error. The practical act of sewing leads to the development of a special kind of skill (Szeless 2002, p. 855, Dyer and Smith 2020, pp. 4–5), a material literacy: It gives a feeling in the fingers for different fabric qualities and an eye for fit. Even judging the image of the design based on how the garment could look in a different fabric, on one's own body and together with other clothes from one's own wardrobe, requires a special kind of knowledge. In terms of reading instructions, patterns and designs, the elusive reader can be studied through the clothes that resulted from reading (and sewing), insofar as they were made and have been preserved, or by photographs and memories of them. This *material* outcome distinguishes *utilitarian reading* from fiction reading. Various studies on home sewing (Buckley 1999, Almond and Evans 2022, p. 80) have shown that users often have strong memories of sewing, linked to specific material and tactile objects. Further, as Hall and Jayne (2016, p. 228) argue: 'The materialities and practices of dressmaking can thus be used to work as a technique, to function for the spacing and timing of memory'. The clothes helped informants to remember different events, and they could recall in detail the colour, texture, and cuts of the garments, as well as their close contact with a friend or a relative in the creative process.

My survey is based on a case study of the two largest Swedish women's magazines in the 1960s and 70s: Aller's *Femina* (1881/1944–) and Åhlén and Åkerlund/Bonnier's *Husmodern* [The Housewife] (1917–88).² The content of the two weeklies was relatively similar, but they had different target groups. In addition to practical sections on sewing, home decoration and cooking, they contained general and fashion reporting, interviews with famous and unknown people, readers' queries sections and advertisements. The decisive difference lay in how the material was edited, angled and presented to suit the respective readership. *Femina* was seen as more fashionable and sophisticated, while *Husmodern* was perceived as more down-to earth (Larsson 2003, p. 121, 128). In addition, I have studied Kooperativa förbundets [the Cooperative Association] pattern catalogue *Vår Mönstertidning* [Our Pattern Magazine] (1940–90), which contained presentations of their own brand 'Vi-mönster' [We-Patterns] and was published twice a year, as well as a few issues of Åhlén and Åkerlund/Bonnier's teenage magazine *Bildjournalen* [The Image Journal] (1954–69). I have also interviewed Stina Norling, editor 1964–71, editorial director 1973–81, and editor in chief 1982–96 at *Femina*, and Britt Darke, editor at

Vår Mönstertidning 1965–69, and designer, collection and marketing manager at Bonnier's pattern catalogue *Stil-mönster* [Style-Patterns] 1970–82. This has been supplemented with literature on the two magazine publishers and the Swedish weekly press. Furthermore, I have interviewed seven Swedish women who used patterns to sew their own clothes in the 1960s and 70s. The women, born between 1938 and 1952, were well-educated professionals. In the cases where they are named, I refer to them under the pseudonyms *Anita*, *Eva*, *Elisabeth*, *Kristina*, and *Inger*. I have supplemented the above with a questionnaire on home sewing, distributed by the Folklife Archives in Lund, which resulted in 29 answers, from men and women born 1923–1986, some of whom had not sewn themselves (Törnvall 2024). The interviews have been compared with studies of home sewing in scholarly literature, as well as journalist Ingela Bendt's (2022) book *Ruths garderob* [Ruth's wardrobe]. Finally, I have liaised with several Swedish museums that house large textile collections, and noticed there are only a few preserved home-made clothes that are linked to specific patterns or stories about them.³ This paper starts with a presentation of the publication of *Femina* and *Husmodern*, before moving on to focus on the readers and users.

The publishers: women's weeklies with dressmaking patterns – *Femina* and *Husmodern*

The period in focus for this study, between 1960 and 1975, was part of what has been called *rekordåren* [the record years] in Sweden; a period started 1950 and characterized by strong and stable economic growth. The expanding public sector led to an increase in gainfully employed women, and a consequent increase in working mothers (Schön 2017, pp. 314–25, 344). Swedish women's ready-to-wear had its breakthrough in the years after the Second World War (Kyaga 2017, Daun 2022), but home sewing was still more economical. Fashion was gradually adapted to a more casual lifestyle, with a looser fit, following standardization requirements of the ready-made clothing industry (Waldén 1990, p. 222, Emery 2014, pp. 159, 180–87). With easier designs, inexpensive patterns and advanced sewing machines, many women considered it a matter of course to sew their own and their children's clothes. However, towards the end of the 1950s, sewing machine and pattern producers were feeling threatened by ready-to-wear. The increasing wages for women meant that housewives were no longer at home when the sewing machine agents came to sell machines. Instead, a new market emerged for them: fashion-conscious teenagers who wanted new clothes every day. To get the right style at an affordable price, teenage girls had to sew themselves (Waldén 1990, p. 228, Margerum 1999, Szeless 2002, p. 851).

The two weeklies in this study, *Femina* and *Husmodern*, had a long tradition of offering dressmaking patterns. *Femina* had started as a pattern

magazine in 1881; a Swedish edition of the Danish *Nordisk Mønster-Tidende* [Nordic Pattern-Journal], founded by the lithographer Carl Aller and his wife Laura Aller in 1874 with the German *Der Bazar* as a model.⁴ In 1944, the pattern magazine had been incorporated into the more glamorous and elegant *Femina*, with foreign *Elle* and *Mademoiselle* and other similar magazines as models. As in corresponding women's magazines, both more exclusive clothes and more modest designs with patterns for the home seamstress were offered (cf. Breward 1999, p. 23). In the mid-1950s, *Femina* invested in four-colour offset printing and became a model for the Scandinavian weekly press industry with its attractive colour images. *Femina* increased from 100,000 to over 250,000 copies in the 1960s. The target group was the urban woman interested in culture and fashion.

Husmodern was founded in 1917, by the *hemkonsulent* [domestic science consultant] Thora Holm and the journalist Elsa Nyblom, as a trade magazine for housewives during the First World War.⁵ In 1920, it was taken over by the large popular press publisher Åhlén and Åkerlund, which was bought by Bonnier's publishing house in 1929. The new publishers invested in producing a more elegant magazine, with colour images, fashion reports and regular home sewing projects. By 1924, *Husmodern* had become the largest women's magazine in Sweden, with a weekly print of almost 250,000 copies, a position it held with a few exceptions until 1971. *Husmodern's* dressmaking department had launched Åhlén and Åkerlund's *Stil-mönster* in 1941, which soon became the largest producer of individual pattern packets in Sweden, primarily sold through fabric stores. In the 1960s, *Husmodern's* main target group – the housewife – was replaced by the working mother, usually residing in the countryside.

Both *Femina* and *Husmodern* offered home sewing projects almost every week throughout the 1960s, for women or children and sometimes for men. The publishers adjusted their magazines to working women's limited time, diminishing sewing skills, and the competition from the ready-to-wear industry. To facilitate home sewing, *Femina* and *Husmodern* started to offer ready-cut fabric, which was followed by other weeklies.⁶ By 1948, *Husmodern* launched their first *mönster på tyg* (patterns drawn on fabric), and from 1966 they offered ready-cut fabric parts. In *Femina*, ready-cut fabric was offered in 1956, and their designs could also be ordered as paper patterns. [Figures 1 and 2] Both magazines presented their ready-cut designs as an inexpensive way to get the latest fashion, as a special service to the readers. It was pointed out that even beginners could sew the garments easily and quickly because sewing markings were made on the fabric and a detailed description was included. *Femina's* mail order service had a large audience in the suburbs. The women knew from magazines what was 'modern', but did not have the money or time to shop in better stores in the big cities. *Femina's* ready-cut offering gave them what they wanted: reasonably modern, high-quality fabrics and well-cut designs.⁷



Figure 1. *Femina* offered clothing designs with ready-cut fabric under the heading ‘We cut – You sew’. Here is ‘a good-dress’, by Ulla Skjöldebrand in *Femina* 1969, (16), 70–71. © Courtesy of photographer Lisa Kallos and Lund University Library. Reuse is not permitted.

As commercial weeklies, *Husmodern* and *Femina* were dependent on their readers for survival and the publishers tried to involve them in various ways. Dressmaking departments maintained important contact with readers by offering patterns according to the requests of the readers. For example, in 1965 *Femina* emphasized that they met the demand for clothing designs in larger sizes: ‘Are you curvy or do you have completely normal ready-to-wear measurements? We cut the dress just in your size’.⁸ A skilled home seamstress could adapt patterns and clothing designs to her own body. One of the women interviewed said that because she was short, she always had to adjust ready-to-wear, and it was easier and more economical to sew herself. In *Femina*, the home sewing designs were often highlighted as sales bait on the cover, and inside the magazine they had their own spread, separate from other fashion news. [Figure 3] Great effort was put into the ready-cut designs, and they were presented by skilled fashion photographers and professional models. However, *Femina*’s fashion journalists did not think that the ready-cut was real fashion. It ought to be simpler to be managed by home sewers.⁹ In *Husmodern*, clothing designs were presented together with ready-to-wear in the regular fashion spread. Readers could get better fabric quality and at the same time they could save money by buying ready-cut fabrics from the magazines. [Figure 4]



Figure 2. Ready-cut fabric to the 'good-dress' with sewing started in white cotton jersey with brown flower print, with trimmings and sewing description from *Femina* 1969, (16), 70–71, Kulturen in Lund, KM 61575.15. This is a rare example of a home-made dress and its design found in a Swedish museum collection. © Courtesy of photographer Nelly Herberg and Kulturen in Lund. Reuse is not permitted.

In the mid-1970s, both *Husmodern* and *Femina* replaced their ready-cut fabric service with easy dressmaking projects and patterns in special appendices or via mail order. [Figure 5] Small diagram patterns that could be

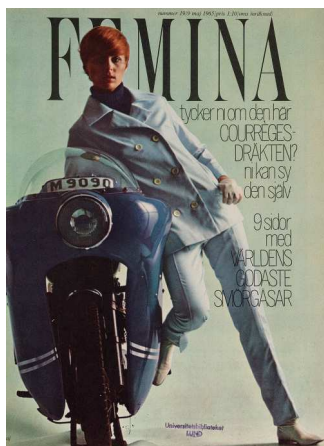


Figure 3. In *Femina*, the ready-cut fabric designs were often presented on the cover. Here a suit inspired by the popular French designer André Courrèges, adapted by Ulla Skjöldebrand. The heading says: 'do you like this COURRÈGES-DRESS? you can sew it yourself', *Femina* 1965 (19), front cover. © Courtesy of photographer Olle Bogren and Lund University Library. Reuse is not permitted.



Figure 4. The dress on the far left was offered ready-cut in woollen flannel in three colours with complete sewing accessories for a total of SEK 34 (equivalent to ca. SEK 364/32 euro in 2023). The white dress next to it is made of polyester and cost SEK 79 at the low-price department store *Epa* (equivalent to ca. SEK 846/75 euro), *Husmodern* 1968 (11), 38–39. © Courtesy of photographer Svante Sjöstedt and Lund University Library. Reuse is not permitted.



Figure 5. Three designs from *Husmodern* 1976 (21), 40, with a simplified over-lay pattern in a separate appendix, by: Mi Grandinson, pattern: Gun Jonasson. Here bound together with the magazine in the copy at Lund University Library. © Courtesy of photographer Ralf Turander and Lund University Library. Reuse is not permitted.

printed on a regular magazine page became common. [Figure 6] Although the magazines emphasized that the designs were easy to sew, the demands on sewing skills and material literacy were relatively high. The instructions could say: 'Measure and cut a waistband that you sew in the usual way'.¹⁰ In 1976, *Husmodern* claimed that their lined wrap skirt with buttoning at the side, illustrated with a diagram pattern, could be sewn in two hours.¹¹ Here it becomes clear how the editors built on an implicit understanding of the readers as competent seamstresses. Simply enlarging and transferring a diagram pattern to paper takes quite a long time and for the uninitiated it can take several hours.¹² The pattern must then be laid out and the fabric cut, before pinning, sewing, pressing, fitting, and finishing. Even an experienced home seamstress would have difficulty completing this in two hours. This confirms that the reading was not only meant for practical execution but also for aspiration and dreams. It can be compared to 'unrealistic cooking' in lifestyle magazines; complicated cooking from scratch which is not possible for the majority of readers (Halkier 2016, pp. 156–158).

When the *record years* in Sweden ended in the mid-1970s, the textile and clothing industry had largely moved to countries outside Europe due to lower production costs (Schön 2017, pp. 408–415). The entry of Swedish low-price brand H&M into the market at the end of the 1960s became a clear marker for



Figure 6. Small diagram patterns became common in the 1970s in both *Femina* and *Husmodern*. Here is 'Femina's sewing school: For you who think you can't', a diagram pattern and sewing description for a skirt in four gores with a waist band, *Femina* 1977, (10), 86–87. Design: Gunila Axén. © Courtesy of Gunila Axén and photographer Lisa Kallos and Lund University Library. Reuse is not permitted.

the pattern industry.¹³ Also, the rise of international brand culture in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Gråbacke 2015, pp. 199–201) diminished the value of home-made clothing: 'It became modern with designer clothes and that was simply what you wanted', as stressed by one of the questionnaires. The fact that the market for cheaper, ready-made garments increased did not immediately mean that home sewing declined. It was not until the early 1980s that sales of sewing machines and fabrics decreased in Sweden (Nyberg 1989), as well as in other Western countries (Schofield-Tomschin 1999, p. 102, Emery 2014, p. 178). At the same time, the magazines' dressmaking sections were transferred to specialist magazines and pattern catalogues. In 1981, Bonnier's *Stil-mönster* began a collaboration with the German brand *Neue Mode* at Modeverlag Arnold GmbH, that ended design production in Sweden.¹⁴ The decline in circulation for women's magazines had already started around 1973–74. In 1970, *Femina* had a circulation of 256,000, which dropped to 156,000 five years later and in 1981 fell to 80,000 copies. During the same period, the circulation of *Husmodern* dropped to approximately 150,000 by 1981 (Larsson 2003, pp. 116–128). Several readership surveys and restructurings were undertaken to deal with the problems, but for *Husmodern* it did not help. The magazine ceased publishing in 1988. *Femina* was redesigned in

1981 into an exclusive monthly magazine when it also ceased to offer dress-making patterns.

The readers: women and teenage magazines as inspiration

Aside from the magazine producers; what role did women's magazines play for home seamstresses and what do they remember about the reading of them? In the book *Ruths garderob*, Ingela Bendt, born in 1951, writes about her fashion-conscious mother born in 1904. Her mother was mayoress and thus belonged to high society in the small country town of Mjölby in Sweden. She usually had her clothes sewn at the dressmaker, but she also sewed herself with inspiration from fashion magazines and had her patterns cut by a local pattern maker. Bendt describes how her mother sat in her reading corner with *Bonniers månadstidning* [Bonnier's monthly magazine] (1930–68), an elegant fashion magazine from the same publisher as *Husmodern* but without patterns. It was a festive time when a new issue arrived. Her mother started by flipping through the magazine from the back. Then she continued from the beginning, pencil in hand, marking, cutting out, gathering details and information about the cut of clothes (Bendt 2022, pp. 54, 163). Only a few of the women I interviewed recounted similar memories of magazine reading and the selection of design inspiration. Above all, they remembered the choice of fabrics, the sewing, and the clothes they wore on what occasions. Here is a clear parallel between readers of fiction (Trower 2020) and women's weeklies (Hermes 1995). It was not the content that remained in the memory, but the reading experience and the reading situation, that is, the joy of reading as well as where and whom they were with. *Eva*, who later trained as a psychologist, did not remember reading women's magazines as *textual* reading, but as *visual* reading. She pointed out that those are the kind of memories we keep the longest, even though there are individual differences. For her, the reading was *subliminal*, with an unconscious influence and awareness. The reading formed her vision, through the colours and shapes, which was later complemented by a tactual sensation through the fabrics. This gained her *material* literacy.

Another interviewee *Anita*, who remembered the actual reading situation, and was also a trained psychologist, always sewed from the English edition of the monthly *Burda* magazine. She told me how she sneaked into the newsagent's and flipped through each issue, browsing and judging if there were any interesting patterns. If so, she bought the magazine, otherwise she put it back. At home, she collected the magazines in a pile, for future use. If she needed a new dress, she would flip through all the issues to see if there was a design that would fit. She also looked in *Femina* and the competitor Bonnier's *Damernas Värld* [The Ladies' World] to keep up-to-date with fashion, but at home they did not subscribe to any weeklies. *Burda* was

similar to *Femina*, for Anita, but with free patterns. Buying individual pattern packets did not stimulate her inspiration in the same way. She thought they were not creative, but dull and amateurish. In *Burda*, she could see more of what could be made from a pattern, even if she didn't exactly copy the design. Likewise, *Elisabeth* described how she bought *Femina* and the German women's magazine *Brigitte* in upper secondary school and became influenced by current fashion and what she thought was pretty. Like *Femina*, *Brigitte* was a general women's magazine, with the difference that it also had a full-scale pattern supplement. *Brigitte* was quite expensive but *Elisabeth* and her mother bought it often because the patterns were good and offered many different variations and combinations. The patterns could be trusted: if you followed them and the instructions, it turned out just as shown in the magazine.

The women I interviewed felt that there was always a need for new clothes. They all sewed a lot during their teenage years in the 1960s and most of them continued later in life, with short breaks when particularly busy with education, small children, and career. For many of them, *Femina* was the leading inspiration for those who wanted to dress fashionably at the time, although it was mainly their mothers who subscribed or bought the magazine. For several interviewees, the successful teenage magazine *Bildjournalen* was of significant inspiration. *Bildjournalen* had fashion pages as well as dress-making sections, but the content was dominated by reports on pop groups and other famous or unknown young people. Bendt describes how she was inspired by the clothes in *Bildjournalen*, but that they could not be bought in Mjölby. The variety was better in the nearest larger city, Linköping, but above all it was Stockholm or London that counted. Therefore, in order to realize her ideas and with the support and encouragement of her mother, she began to sew clothes for herself in the ninth grade and continued throughout upper secondary school. Bendt started reading *Femina*, but she had the patterns cut at the local pattern maker. She made constant visits to fabric stores, became increasingly fashion conscious and always wanted the latest look. Together with two friends, she carefully studied the fashion spreads and they sewed what they wanted to have but could not buy (Bendt 2022, pp. 150–154).

Through the magazines, the young women picked up ideas from the international fashion world and, thanks to their handiness, they were able to acquire garments before their peers did. The clothing stores were far behind so if you wanted what you saw in *Femina* and *Bildjournalen* you had to sew it yourself. For example, Bendt (2022, pp. 152–154) and two interviewees describe how they were first to wear clothes at school inspired by the French designer André Courrèges, which they sewed themselves. *Kristina* told me that on the first day of upper secondary school she wore a light-blue suit in a Courrèges cut: 'It was never on the agenda that you would be able to buy

something like that'. It relates to what Cortez (2016) highlights in her study of the American *Ladies' Home Journal*, that reading women's magazines is not about confirmation of who you are but to see what you can become, which did not mean that the readers uncritically received the messages of the magazines. Women's magazines could show the possibility of creating a better world for themselves and provide tools to realize their dreams (Loughran *et al.* 2016, p. 50), even if, in this case, it was about dressing up Paris- or London-style at school in a small town in Sweden.

Kristina picked up designs from *Femina* and *Bildjournalen*. It could be Courrèges and Mary Quant from the fashion spread, but she also took inspiration from pop music: the Beatles and the Stones, Marianne Faithfull and Cher. However, the patterns she used were mostly *Stil-mönster*, which she bought at the local fabric store. *Stil-mönster* is the pattern brand that is recalled most in the interviews and questionnaires, along with mentions of *Burda* pattern packages, which were more expensive, as well as American *Simplicity* and *Vogue*. Two interviewees also mention the Swedish Cooperative Association's *Vi-mönster*. *Stil-mönster* were offered cut to specific sizes, while *Vi-mönster* were printed in several sizes on the same sheet and had to be traced onto tissue paper or cut out to the appropriate size. The free patterns that *Burda* magazine was so successful with in the 1950s and 60s – an overlay pattern sheet with a web of black lines interspersed with numbers and symbols – was offered by *Femina*'s predecessor, *Nordisk/Allers Mönster-Tidning* since it began in 1881 and well into the 1930s. However, as early as 1902, upon requests from readers, they had offered ready-cut patterns on tissue paper (Törnvall 2023). [Figure 7] With a few exceptions, overlay patterns were not popular among the interviewees. Nor were diagram patterns, as they found them difficult to enlarge. Several interviewees had tried ready-cut fabric from *Femina*, *Husmodern* and the family weekly *Ica-kuriren*. The ready-cut designs had mostly been used for dresses at special occasions and their parents had been involved in the purchase.

Following a pattern is by definition non-creative, but both the pattern producers and the home sewers highlighted dressmaking as something that gave an outlet to creativity. By altering and combining patterns, choosing fabric and trims, they created unique garments (cf. McLean 2009, pp. 78–79). Inspiration did not only come from the magazines, but could also be drawn from shop window display, or an admired garment worn by someone in town or at school. Through home sewing, ideas were transformed into a unique outfit that brought creative joy and a sense of pride in being nicely dressed or first at school with the latest fashion. As Kristina said: 'I think it was quite a lot about creating your own style as well as to stand out, to show that you were fashion conscious'. The fashion of the 1960s suited those who wanted to sew themselves, quickly and easily. Fabrics were cheap and all the interviewees confirmed that it was easy to

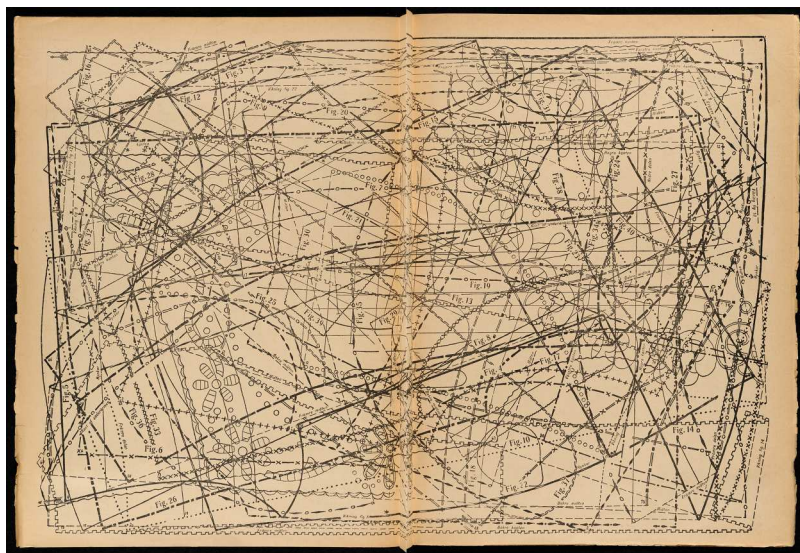


Figure 7. Overlay patterns in *Femina's* predecessor *Allers Mönster-Tidning* 1917, (1). © Courtesy of Lund University Library. Reuse is not permitted.

get the fabrics they wanted. They bought a lot of fabric and had a stock lying around hoping to be used. Even when it wasn't about following trends, a main goal was the feeling of having something that no one else had. The material object itself, that came out of the reading and sewing, clearly gave the women a personal meaning (cf. Attfield 2000, p. 1). Acknowledgement of the creative outcome by other people could be important, but the internal pride was also crucial. As Gauntlett puts it, creativity can be seen 'as a *process*, and a *feeling*' (2018, p. 24). *Kristina* recalled a purple A-line dress when she was around 15–16 years old in the mid-1960s. She probably adapted a basic pattern, at least by shortening it. The dress was combined with purple patent shoes and purple nails: 'Complete elegance, so I thought. Some were jealous. Yes, it was very successful'.

Several of those interviewed said that when they needed something new, they went to the fabric store and browsed pattern catalogues until they found something. They started with an idea of what they wanted and the fabrics and colours they liked. The design had to be easy enough so that the sewing could be mastered with the skills they or their parents had. *Inger's* family subscribed to *Husmodern*, but she did not remember looking for patterns in it. Instead, she went with her father to the local Cooperative store in the Stockholm suburb where they lived and browsed the catalogue *Vår Mönstertidning* and bought their *Vi-mönster*. She recalled that the patterns were often good and well made. They also shopped for fabrics in finer city stores. She read *Bildjournalen* and checked out the other weekly

magazines that were available, trying to copy what she wanted, even when she did not have a pattern to follow. The interviews confirm Partington's (1992) and Szeless' (2002) observations that home sewing did not mean a watered-down version of haute couture. The home seamstresses wanted to create new, fashionable clothes, but could not afford pret-à-porter. They had a desire for clothes and had inherited the belief from older generations that you should sew yourself. At the same time, clothes that were unique, stylish and well-fitting were the most important. That was something they carried with them later in life, when the need for new clothes according to the latest fashions decreased. *Anita* mentioned that she developed her own kind of aesthetic, which she could not get from the ready-to-wear she could afford. In this way, the magazines and patterns were used as a medium for self-determination and self-realization, as tools to develop individual, fashionable clothes (cf. Szeless 2002, pp. 858–859).

All the women in my survey were part of *the record years*, which, among other things, led to greater opportunities for women to enrol in higher education and a possibility to achieve upwards social mobility. For some, home sewing was directly linked to class (cf. Breward 1999, Burman 1999, Mosely 2001, McLean 2009, p. 74). The women's magazines distributed international fashion to everyone: 'Others who got these fashionable clothes, who got to buy the fashionable clothes, they belonged, as it were, to another class', *Anita* expressed. *Kristina* said that her parents were determined that she should be educated and get a good job. From the teachers' point of view, it was clear in schools that Sweden invested in education and she and her peers followed that train at full speed. Women were attracted from smaller towns to study in Stockholm or other places. This move could in some cases require new clothing. *Anita* had a clear memory of a light pink coat dress in slightly heavy woollen fabric, tailored straight and tight with a zipper in the front. She had sewn it before moving to study at Lund University in the fall of 1966. More than 50 years later, she could still clearly remember how she walked through the central park *Lundagård* wearing that particular dress. She didn't remember the pattern itself, though likely from the *Burda* magazine, but clearly the result gave her a place and a meaning in a new context.

Dressmaking became a way to gain control over one's own clothing, also in relation to the parent generation. The majority of interviewees had parents who sewed for them when they were younger. In their early teens, they began to want to choose for themselves, and the only way was to sew on their own. *Inger* used her weekly allowance to buy fabrics so she could sew her own clothes and decide for herself how they should be. When her father sewed for her, it was need-related and he bought the fabrics. He sewed all the summer graduation dresses for her and her sister every year until sixth grade. *Kristina* recalled that thanks to home sewing she was able

to wear flared trousers, which she was not allowed to buy, although her parents prevented her from making them as flared as she wanted. A skirt she sewed was so short that she couldn't sit down in it and she had to sneak away with it so her parents wouldn't discover it. The memory still gave her a good laugh.

Pattern reading: textual, visual and material literacy

The editors of the dressmaking sections emphasized that their patterns were easy enough for anyone to sew the designs. The women I interviewed had learned to sew from their mothers, in one case a father and other relatives or friends' mothers, and they received encouragement from home in their sewing. They talked about close contact, but sometimes a competitive nature with parents that had sewing skills. *Anita* highlighted a rivalry that fostered her own competence. Her mother had taken tailoring courses and did not use purchased patterns. Therefore, *Anita* used purchased patterns herself because her mother did not understand them. But she still felt appreciation and pride from her mother because she had inherited an interest in sewing. Other interviewees stressed how much fun they had when they sewed together or were in the fabric store choosing fabric with their mother or father. Thus, the importance of affirmation from family and friends raises sewing beyond the material to become something that creates and maintains social and cultural bonds (Mosely 2001, p. 475; Hall and Jayne 2016, p. 227).

The women supplemented their sewing skills by reading instruction books or simply trying things out. The school subject of *sloyd*, which included textile craft, together with woodwork and metalwork, became compulsory in the Swedish comprehensive education in 1955, although gendered until 1969 (Johansson 2002, p. 10). The Curriculum of 1962 stressed that the textile *sloyd* classes, which included dressmaking, should improve manual skills, material knowledge, creative fantasy and aesthetic education (*Läroplan för grundskolan* 1962, pp. 320–327, Borg 1995, p. 63). In other words: the pupils should develop both a *material* and a *visual* literacy. Some of the interviewed women had fond memories of textile *sloyd* classes at school and sewing clothes there, while others had bad experiences. Boring tasks or the textiles teachers' finicky nature and demand for accuracy had led to poor grades for a few, even though they could sew advanced dresses at home. Moreover, some talked about tailoring courses that were far too thorough, which killed the joy and interest in dressmaking for several years to come: 'There must be a little creativity in the context. That's what was fun when you were doing it yourself', as *Inger* put it. The joy of sewing was important. Sewing was a hobby and provided relaxation, besides satisfying fashion needs at an affordable price. Their sewing was associated with their home

rather than school. *Inger* saw it as a great gift, from her father, to have learned to sew and the material knowledge it gave her.

Once *visual* and *material* literacy were developed, the home seamstresses knew roughly what kind of sleeve, waistband, pockets and so on they wanted. Eventually, they had accumulated a large number of patterns, which could be reused. Some interviewees sewed from the same design so many times that they could cut directly into the fabric. With various trims and alterations, the result was a completely new item. *Elisabeth* explained how she could tell from a design in a fashion spread, a special sleeve for example, if she could master it herself or if she needed to buy a new pattern. It became like a sport to be able to do it yourself. It was something she had learned from her mother, but it was also typical of the 1970s era, the growing of do-it-yourself as a leisure activity (Atkinson 2006, p. 5) and the craft revival (Peach 2013, p. 163), that 'nothing was difficult and you should fix it yourself', as concluded by *Elisabeth*. Since saving money was an important reason to sew yourself, in order to reduce costs as few designs as possible were purchased. With a few basic patterns that were modified, the women were able to sew the style they wanted. *Anita* bought *Burda* magazine because she got many designs at a lower price and the designs were more modern than in Swedish magazines. The same was true for *Elisabeth* who bought the German competitor *Brigitte*. Other interviewees avoided overlay patterns, as they found them difficult to use. *Anita* remembered them as a good way to develop perceptiveness: 'They were completely conglomerated. The perception training – it was magnificent'.

The patterns in foreign magazines had descriptions in German or English and as *Anita* put it: 'The instructions required some interpretation, so to say'. It was not only a linguistic issue but applied to interpretations of sewing descriptions in general. It was both about interpreting the dots and lines of the patterns in order to understand how the different parts, darts, button-holes, and pockets should be placed, *and* deciphering the instructions, which required basic sewing knowledge. Sewing was primarily about getting the garment ready as quickly as possible to be able to use it, although some of the women had high demands of fit and neat seams. *Anita* tried the garment on, changed and re-sewed a lot to get the right fit and thus the right feeling. If it didn't fit well, was uncomfortable and didn't look good she didn't use it (cf. Gauntlett 2018, p. 24). *Eva* pointed out that you didn't need to be handy or patient, on the contrary, you needed a passion and to be goal-oriented. The pattern reading was a means and not an end. Combined with practical and creative skills, it opened up the possibility of realizing the dresses of your dreams (cf. Loughran *et al.* 2016, p. 50).

Although most of the women mainly remembered the sewing, the fabrics and the finished garments, some had memories of particular patterns from the weekly magazines. *Anita* recalled two designs from *Femina*. It was around 1965–1966, when she was in upper secondary school. The first was

a Courrèges dress and she could still describe the sleeveless dress with yoke, pockets, and seams in the front. The dress was complemented by trousers, with Courrèges's characteristic centre front and back seams:

It was so nice. I don't know when I got rid of that pattern and I've regretted it. When it gets to me that I don't have the pattern, it's because I still have the feeling in my body, how beautiful I thought it was.

The fabric was a light, white-pink cotton with a heavy weave. She chose her own fabric, otherwise it would have become too standardized, too '*Femina*-standardized', as she put it. She told how extremely pleased she was with the style. The second pattern was a blue woollen dress which was pleated like a fan and had a belt with a rosette and long sleeves. It was nice, but not her style, so she never felt comfortable in it:

You couldn't always see when you looked at patterns if they were actually something that not only suited your body, but also matched the way you wanted to express yourself through clothes. The blue woollen dress never did that; it was a bit too proper and too warm. But the Courrèges clothes were exactly my style.

Eva remembered two ready-cut patterns. The first was a graduation dress when she was 16 years old: 'It must have been 1965. It was an apricot-coloured, cotton dress with buttons at the front and a sort of flare in it, a bit like a shirt blouse but with more width'. She believed it was from *Femina*, which her mother subscribed to, and recalled the feeling that it didn't quite turn out the way she wanted. There wasn't enough width in the skirt. It was 'fixed and finished' and she was not in charge, even though it was fun to sew it. The other pattern was a white confirmation dress, which her mother sewed. These two designs contrast with a design she chose herself, although the inspiration came from a women's magazine: It was a pair of Courrèges trousers. *Eva* remembered exactly how she sewed them, although she couldn't remember where she found the inspiration, but it probably came from *Femina*. She used an ordinary trouser pattern, likely a *Stil-mönster*, which she cut apart. The seam was moved to centre-front and centre-back, as she had seen in the images: The front and the back pieces were cut in the middle and then taped together so there were no side seams or inseams. She sewed the trousers in a tweed fabric and the result exceeded her expectations: 'Oh, how nice I felt in them. I felt magnificent'. With a design, a pattern and a fabric, as well as a creative mind she had made a dress that gained meaning and self-confidence.

Conclusion

During the 1960s and 1970s, many women's magazines had dressmaking sections for home sewers. This study of home dressmaking in the two largest

Swedish women's magazines has highlighted these sewing sections as important parts of women's reading and creative meaning-making, of what I have introduced as *utilitarian reading*, which required and developed a unique combination of *textual*, *visual*, and *material* literacy. The importance of the designs and patterns as reading material, for pleasure and utility, aspiration and practical execution, has been emphasized and thus established a place for them in media history, the history of reading and cultural studies. The readers could keep track of fashion, gather ideas and details that could be used to create their own garments, both fashionable and unique. At the same time, the survey confirms previous studies of reading, concerning either novels or weekly magazines: that the content itself is not preserved in memory to a particularly large extent. What the pattern readers remembered above all was the feeling of the finished garment and the sensation of wearing it. The reading of designs, patterns, instructive images, and technical descriptions was primarily *utilitarian reading*, a gathering of ideas and an execution of them. The pattern-reading led to action, a clear result and to something unique and tactile. It helped Swedish young women to make their own clothes for both aesthetic pleasure and economic satisfaction. Also, it created personal meaning and self-confidence.

The dressmaking sections picked up new clothing lines from haute couture, adapted and developed them for their target group. By doing so, they created new designs, which were then further reshaped by home seamstresses. For the fashion-conscious teenagers of the 1960s and 70s with limited finances, home sewing was the easiest way to dress the way they wanted. Swedish teenagers found the fashions in weekly magazines, either their mothers' women's magazines or the teenage magazine *Bildjournalen*. Although ideas and sought-after designs were in the weekly magazines, many chose the pattern packages that could be bought in the local fabric store. Then, with their gained combination of textual, visual and material literacy, they created something unique, that matched their lifestyle, and fitted their own body. The women who introduced Courrèges at school with home-made copies remembered the grandiose feeling this brought. Their home sewing did not mean a degradation of haute couture, but rather an independent creation by fashion-driven teenagers who wanted their individual, yet highly modern style. They strived to be unique in their creations or first with the latest style, while at the same time created functional everyday fashion that suited Swedish teenagers in the 1960s and 70s. The sewing women confirms de Certeau's theory on readers/users as silent producers. They were not moulded by the media, or merely 'making something similar'. A choice had to be made, and they made 'it one's own, appropriating and reappropriating it' (1988, p. 166). The magazines and patterns can tell us what the producers thought about proper dresses, while interviews, photos and clothes can show how the users transformed them.

This study of *utilitarian reading* has revealed knowledge that was important in the past: to interpret patterns and to create one's own clothes. The dress-making sections bear witness of a do-it-yourself-movement that have leaved few other traces. Several interviewees said that it was only through my research that they understood that their sewing, which they saw as a private and individual concern that had given them a clear identity and special skills, was in fact part of a larger culture. It confirms that home sewing is something that has been forgotten in general cultural memory, but which binds different generations of women together (cf. Buckley 1999, p. 59, Hall and Jayne 2016, p. 228). They had not reflected on the connection between patterns and women's magazines. The same characterizes collections of home-made clothing in Swedish museums: they lack the connection between idea/design, pattern, and finished garment. The magazines and the patterns helped women shape how they wanted to look and who they wanted to be during a formative period of their lives. The piles of patterns they saved over many years no longer exist. Occasionally the resulting efforts are saved in family photos, but only in rare cases have a few designs, patterns and items of clothing been preserved. What remains are, besides printed magazines in Swedish libraries, the women's clear memories of cuts, colour and fabric quality, as well as the feeling of pride when they wore their self-made garments.

Notes

1. This essay is a part of my research project 'Reading Patterns: Women, Clothes and Print Culture in Sweden 1881–1981,' financed by the Swedish Research Council, registration number 2018–01632. (See Törnvall 2022, 2023). All translations in the text from the magazines and interviews are by the author. Written informed consent was provided by the research subjects. This research follows the guidelines of the Swedish Research Council for Research Ethics at all stages of data collection, analysis and management of data. All data gathered is archived in accordance with the requirements of GDPR 2016/679.
2. I have examined a minimum of every ten issues of *Husmodern* and *Femina* 1950–1981, and all issues in 1965, and in 1980/1981. The magazines have been studied at Lund University Library, where most issues are saved thanks to the Swedish law for legal deposit.
3. I have been in direct contact with the Nordic Museum and Skansen in Stockholm, the Textile Museum in Borås, Kulturen Open Air Museum in Lund and Kalmar County Museum. I have also made an inquiry to Swedish textile conservators through Svenska föreningen för textilkonservering [The Swedish Association for Textile Conservation], in September 2022. With special thanks to Textile Conservator Maria Franzon, National Historical Museums.
4. On Allers, *Nordisk Mønster-Tidende* and *Femina* (see Berger et al. 1979, Lundström et al. 2001, Petersson 2001, Engblom et al. 2002, Lindskog 2004, Oscarsson 2005, Damgaard 2013, Grølsted 2015).
5. On Åhlén & Åkerlund/Bonniers and *Husmodern* (see Berger 1974, Hancock 1977, Nilsson 1985, Waldén 1990, Lundström et al. 2001, Engblom et al. 2002, Larsson

- 2003, Oscarsson 2005; *Husmodern* 1917, (1), *Husmodern* 1924, (51), 1832–1833, Meiland 1983, pp. 4–5, 2).
6. I have observed ready-cut fabric in *Damernas värld*, *Ica-kuriren*, *Bildjournalen* and *Vecko-Journalen*.
 7. According to S. Norling (personal communication, 21 April 2023, 24 April 2023).
 8. *Femina* 1965, (11), 92. See also *Femina* 1966, (28), 62–63.
 9. According to S. Norling (personal communication, 21 April 2023). On *Femina*'s fashion photographers, (see Lewenhaupt and Lewenhaupt 2009, pp. 100–106).
 10. Applies to the waistband of a wrap style kilt, in *Husmodern* 1980 (1), 40–41.
 11. *Husmodern* 1976, (11), 24–25.
 12. This is according to my own attempts to enlarge the diagram pattern for the wrap skirt, as well as my students' attempts, in the Bachelor Programme in Fashion Studies at Lund University, to enlarge five different diagram patterns from *Husmodern* and *Femina*.
 13. According to B. Darke (personal communication, 31 March 2022).
 14. According to B. Darke (personal communication, 31 March 2022).

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